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Justice by any Means: The Relationship Between Societal Stress and the Rise of
Vigilantism in Comic Books

by

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Abstract

The following study used sales data to ascertain the presence of a link between current socio-political tensions (as measured by the *Bulletin of Atomic Sciences'* Doomsday Clock and national crime statistics) and the prevalence and acceptance of so-called “vigilante justice” portrayed in the top-selling comic books during the period between 1989 and 2001. The purpose of this study is to understand what, if any, relationship exists between dark times and desperate measures; between a feeling of powerlessness in world affairs, and the belief that justice outside of the system is acceptable when that system, at home or abroad, fails to keep people safe.

Keywords: Vigilantism, Anti-hero, Crime, Comic Book, Doomsday Clock

Justice by any Means: The Relationship Between Societal Stress and the Rise of Vigilantism in Comic Books

Since the 1930s, comic books have been an entertainment mainstay for all ages. Children and adults alike have sought comfort and escape in the colorful pages, tales of adventure, and new shades of the oldest story ever told: battles between good and evil. More than just mindless, corrupting entertainment (as is the criticism most often leveled at the medium), comic books and graphic novels are works of art that rival “high-brow” media in poignancy and cultural impact. Embedded in and woven through these stories are threads of the times in which they were written; the fears, the hopes, the humor, the morals, and a dozen other facets of their day that are often overlooked until the era is passed. *Citizen Kane*, long held aloft as the pinnacle of cinema, is often explored for its thoughts on the world in which it was created; Batman’s never-ending and ironically symbiotic struggle against the Joker is little different.

To gather comic book sales data and assess the general attitude toward a massive body of heroes across an expanse of time as vast as the lifespan of the Doomsday clock is a large, complex, and expensive undertaking. Additionally, research in this field can easily be muddied by scandal, cultural shifts, and references that can be misinterpreted or forgotten. Fortunately, the clock’s “safest” and “most dangerous” points, 11:43 and 11:58 respectively, occur between 1989 and 2001. Rife with statistics, sales data, and a modern perspective, this 12-year span is the most obvious focal point for research into the relationship between the level of concern within the Society of Atomic Scientists the time on the clock represents and the consumption of an increasingly popular medium.

By 1989, the long-standing Comics Code Authority (CCA) had become nearly vestigial. Fewer and fewer series complied with the code, and even those who still submitted their works found their leash lengthened. The boundaries of the comic book were opening with each passing issue. Long considered a medium for children, while paradoxically being restricted in subject and content, comic books were about to make their big break, becoming another art form entirely.

The Berlin Wall would fall in that same year, and as it did, the death of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War loomed in the near distance. The threat of nuclear war seemed a far more remote possibility than it had in 50 years, and the palpable feeling of safety that had not been felt for two generations naturally led to an increased focus on skyrocketing crime and drug problems at home. Despite the many market crashes in the early years, 1989 marked the beginning of what has been dubbed “the long nineties,” a period of idyllicism and cultural, technological, and financial progress that came to a terrifying halt on September 11th, 2001 (Wegner, 2009). This interim witnessed the highest and lowest points of the infamous Doomsday Clock, and the highest and lowest points of violent crime since the 1960s as recorded by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

The newly unfettered comic medium began to explore the emergent themes of these changing times, and from this experimentation and pushing of envelopes came new and memorable characters that further expanded what could be displayed in their colorful pages. Far more adult topics and stories - explicitly expressed - emerged, with necessarily complex relationships, stunning language, and blood-soaked cels.

This study explores the link between vigilantes and other anti-hero characters in comic books and their popularity in high times of these various stressors. To accomplish this, the trajectory of three popular touchstone characters—as measured by monthly sales volume, as well as their position within those sales charts—will be analyzed. These three characters embody the archetypes of the modern vigilante character: Batman, whose dark reinvention by Frank Miller led the way for superheroes to grow in complexity; Spawn, whose supernatural, meteoric rise early in the decade near-single-handedly helped Image Comics become a powerful competitor of the “Big Two”; and the Punisher, whose tortured past and unflinching love of violence made him a revolutionary character that fully embraced the anti-hero trope rarely seen in comics during the time of the CCA. Through these character and content analyses, the study will seek to answer whether the average reader believes that desperate times call for desperate measures.

Rationale

In her 1941 study into Soap Operas and their listeners, Herta Herzog refers to a behavior she calls “remodeling drudgery.” If the gratification sought by consuming a medium is this “remodeling,” subjects envision themselves not simply as passive listeners, but as protagonists, heroes, of their story (Herzog, 1941). A uses and gratifications approach has often been applied to comics research, as with soap operas and other “low-brow” entertainment, despite the conspicuous difference in depth of content between the two media. Uses and gratifications may neatly answer many questions about escapism with something as straightforward as boredom at home or

youthful lust for adventure; however, opinions on complex issues like socioeconomic tensions and international relations—requisite knowledge in fully understanding the modern comic book—warrant further research. The classic question of “what does the media do for the reader” may not be as easily answered.

Early uses and gratifications research into comic book reading and its effect on those readers was largely inconclusive, doing more harm than good to the public opinion of the medium. Shortly after Herzog’s study into soap operas, Katherine Wolfe and Marjorie Fiske released the findings of their study *The Children Talk About the Comics* (1948), which were an attempt to understand a medium that was experiencing explosive growth. “Although the study clearly highlights the “problems” of “excessive” comics reading, its general conclusions about comics reading are... ambiguous. At the same time that it points to many of the traits of a stereotypical modern fan, it also ... defends [children] reading comics (Serantes, 2014).” It was ambiguity in the time of widespread, public negativity, and *Seduction of the Innocent*, with its incendiary negativity, would be the best remembered commentary of the day.

Even during this formative time, comic books were recognized by some as a visual, easy-to-digest medium, well-suited to capture and communicate to a demographic cross-section, and through analysis reveal hidden desires in the public subconscious. In her 1944 counter-critique against the rising fervor surrounding comics, Sidonie Gruenberg pointed to this ease of understanding, often criticized as the reason comics were discounted as an art form, as a reason why they were culturally and developmentally important:

It is the very qualities for which the comics have been condemned by critics that give them force and make them socially significant. For it is these qualities that enabled them to catch the attention and hold the interest of the children who form so large a part of their reading public; and it is these qualities that today make them more easily apprehended by people of all ages than political speeches or sermons or the most "popular" of newspapers or fiction. (Gruenberg, 1944)

Gruenberg was a prominent writer and child psychologist, and she recognized not only its ability to reach all manner of audiences--especially the young, who benefitted the most from the more visual presentation--but also was among the first authors to recognize that the content of the comics being read could inform onlookers and researchers about their readers. "Comics deserve serious consideration," she adds, "for they reflect what millions are thinking about, what they want, what they fear, and how they feel about matters of social significance. (Gruenberg)"

Despite Gruenberg's commentary, comics would continue carrying the stigma of being written for younger audiences until a half-century later. Market research, captured statistics from the earliest days of comic books, shows most readers of the media at that time were older than 13, and moving into what Wolfe and Fiske called the "True and Classic Type" of comic: true crime, 'based on a true story' tales, generally less fantastic mechanics. Additionally, 35% of the population in the crucial 18-30 demographic were regular readers (Vanderbilt, 1945). But statistics and impassioned articles from respected figures would prove ineffective in shaking the stigma. The backlash from the 1950s would skew public perception regarding the medium until the

death of the very authority that kept them hobbled as technicolor farces. By the early 1990s, the simple comic book evolve into much more than simple good-versus-evil storytelling; they would assume a new life as a bullhorn of the American cultural revolutionaries at their fore. Comics would openly discuss politics, adult topics, and other frowned-upon forms of expression that had nearly destroyed the integrity of the medium in its infancy. Sex, drugs, gore, government corruption, and the ambiguous moralities of the real world rushed back into the medium; and with them came a boom.

Since that time, comics have continued to feature subtle and blatant references to popular culture, current events, and important issues. With their new-found freedom, comics are a reflection of their time, frequently commentating and always changing. The subtext of how society views the heroes within their pages could be equally mutable. When there is more worry in the world, remodeling one's drudgery to acquire superpowers for saving the day is a natural human response at a personal level. Whether or not mass sales reflect this very personal reaction, one that justifies extrajudicial violence for solutions to world issues, is the intent of this study.

Research Questions

The following questions drive the proposed study:

RQ1: Which characters from the Modern (“Dark”) Age of comic books best represent the archetypal vigilante?

RQ2: How often do the three touchstone characters appear in the top 20 best-selling issues every month?

RQ3: Do these changes in demand and content coincide with changes in the Doomsday Clock or other societal stressors?

Review of Literature

Comics books are a diverse medium, spanning as many genres as “regular” books.

There are even graphic novels that cover non-fictional characters and events.

Ultimately, the litmus is not the comic book itself, but the superhero contained within.

For this reason, the sample was limited to three characters, important and archetypal for important and different reasons:

Batman

Of the three characters chosen, Batman is the metronome—a steady beat that has waxed and waned through the 20th century, never stealing the show, but always continuing on. Most modern, media-savvy consumers would consider themselves familiar with Batman; the Dark Knight movies of the late 2000s grossed nearly \$3 billion and became cultural sensations in their own right. But the gritty origin story as told in those movies are rooted in the 1986 franchise reboot by Frank Miller, a childhood fan of the superhero, who sought to return his version to the very core of the comic’s mythos, established in the 1940s.

Much like the modern incarnation, the original Batman was born at the grave of Bruce Wayne’s parents, who were murdered in an alleyway. Batman would go on to clean up a corrupt, gritty Gotham City on his terms, much the same as the detectives from the pulp novels of the day that his stories emulated. Following the end of the Second World War, Batman’s world had brightened up some, abandoning the vigilante

grit for what has been called a “bright and colorful fairyland” (Wright, 2001, p. 59). After Fredric Wertham penned *Seduction of the Innocent*, the already cartoonish Batman became little more than a series of slapstick gags and technicolor panels. The corruption that Batman once fought was not only gone, but de facto outlawed by the CCA.

The hobbling of that same authority by 1986 led to an explosive resurgence for the character. Miller’s panels in Dark Knight were dripping with black ink. The corrupt underbelly of Gotham surfaced once more, and the Caped Crusader would once more step outside the law to fix it. By the start of The Long Nineties, Batman had returned to his roots, and was becoming a topic of serious conversation once more as a result.

Spawn

Spawn was the first character created by Todd McFarlane for Image Comics, a company started by former artists from the “Big Two” who wished to retain rights to their characters. Spawn’s rise to popularity was immediate and meteoric. The character was introduced in May of 1992, and it would be five years before the Spawn did not appear in the top five best-sellers’ list. Even when he had temporarily fallen from the top five, he would spend another two years in the top 20 before being swept to the number 50 spot, as the impending X-Men movie caused a run on the series.

Spawn was a character of many firsts, and is a cornerstone of 90s comic books. His storylines were a venture farther into darkness than either of the “Big Two” had yet dared, and he stands in contrast to the other characters in this list in that he is an anti-hero with superpowers.

Punisher

Unlike the other two characters, the Punisher was born during the reign of the CCA. Beginning his arc as a cartoonish, hackneyed “villain with a code” against Spiderman, his novelty as a character with little compunction for lethal and extrajudicial punishment thrust him into his own series. As the CCA faded into memory and comics began to explore the breadth of their new creative boundaries, Frank Castle became less of a trope, and more of what the authors believed to be an illustrated manifestation of subconscious public frustration with the inefficacy of the legal system (Scully & Moorman, 2014). The saga of The Punisher continued its unflinching portrayals of ultra-violence in 2000 and beyond, becoming synonymous with vigilante justice and the limits of acceptable violence in comics.

The most often compared pair of crime-fighters in Marvel’s seedy Hell’s Kitchen are the Punisher and Daredevil. They often work with each other, but “Daredevil seek[s] justice while the Punisher seek[s] vengeance (Allen, 2014).” While different sides of the same street justice, the Punisher’s quick and permanent way of solving the problem of crime in New York dovetailed perfectly with unfolding events at the end of the 1980s. In 1984, Bernard Goetz shot four muggers on a New York City subway. The case received attention nation-wide, with many believing Goetz should be medaled for the event. A 5-issue mini-series featuring the Punisher was released less than a year later, and fans ate it up, in between updates of the ongoing trial (Allen, 2014).

This bloodlust in the name of peace was not limited to media consumption. A study put forth in 1988 found gun ownership rates inversely correlated to public faith in

the police, a statistic that was at an all-time low as The Long Nineties began (Scully & Moorman, 2014). The Punisher, it seemed, was doing the job everyone wanted threatened to do, but only Goetz and a handful of others had actually enacted. Frank Miller always kept Daredevil on the right side of justice, though the character would often wrestle with the disappointment of the justice system's frequent release of criminals he had caught. The Punisher only made his leap from cartoonish to deathly effective after high-profile vigilante cases like Goetz's garnered nationwide sympathy (Scully & Moorman, 2014)

The moral conundrum faced by Daredevil in the early nineties was far from new territory for Frank Miller. His portrayal of Batman would be much the same as his later take on the Devil of Hell's Kitchen. This was no accident. Miller was inspired to revive his gritty take on Batman by the Goetz case. While far from approving of Goetz's actions, Miller would channel his worry and the stress he believed Americans felt, into *The Dark Knight Returns* (Mann, 2017).

Method

While the same cannot be said for the lifespan of the medium, detailed sales data for both Marvel and DC Comics are readily available for the relevant period. A comic book enthusiast and "data nerd" named John Jackson Miller has spent the last 11 years collecting and aggregating sales and distribution data. His site, ComiChron.com, is recognized within the collector's community as the preeminent source of historical and current sales data for the comic book industry, namely from distributors like Diamond and Capitol City, the two major sellers of comic books to comic stores since 1982.

Diamond Distribution would purchase Capitol City in 1996, gaining their sales data and ensuring a near-monopoly on comic book distribution ever since. Where detailed monthly sales data were not available, annual sales data were used instead. This issue only occurred from 1989-1991, and intermittently in 1994, as distributors shifted, bought each other out, went bankrupt, or simply did not release this sensitive data for that particular year.

Three coders independently analyzed the 360 total data points. Month by month and issue by issue, the popularity of each character was measured by their appearance in the top 20 best-seller list. In order to weight their appearances on the list, a score was assigned, the inverse of their position in the top 20. The number 20 was chosen as it represents a round number closest to the middle of the start of the sales “tail.” Throughout the span of the study, the sales statistics are distributed roughly in a long- or heavy-tailed distribution, with the top 50% of all sales in the top 100 bestsellers are in the top 15 to 25th place. To keep numbers easy to visualize and consistent across months, 20 was chosen as the place to represent the “average” location above which 50% of the sales for that month were likely to fall.

A ten percent sample of the overall data was chosen to test inter-coder reliability. Each of the three coders independently analyzed the same 12 out of the 120 data points from the data with the highest level of expected variation: 2001. Between all three coders, there was a 97.2% reliability. This high level of reliability continued to the full data set, where an intercoder reliability of 96.8% was observed between 2472 total decisions. These data were overlaid with crime statistics from the FBI Uniform Crime

Reporting Database (Uniform Crime Reporting, 2012) and Doomsday Clock historical data (Timeline, 2018), in order to check them for instances of coincidence with the gathered sales data. The FBI statistics are a national standard for tracking changes in crimes of all kinds, and are measured in units of incidents per 100,000 people. Each character was compared both independently and as a whole against the FBI statistics, as well as the “minutes to midnight,” a simple distance from the clock’s midnight hour.

Results

Research Question One asked which heroes best embodied the vigilante spirit this study was intended to examine. They not only had to be the brooding, extrajudicial archetype, but popular enough to be “household names,” with significant draw to a series that starred them in the main role. Characters were chosen based on their presence in the top selling characters of the time period between 1989 and 2001, their “brand recognition,” and the volume of their work that appears in titular comics. The three that were selected with these criteria were Batman, Spawn and The Punisher. All three of these characters had vastly different inceptions and origins; likewise, their trajectories within this study varied greatly.

The Punisher opened The Long Nineties at the top of the charts. He was, by this time, recognized as Marvel’s “bad boy.” His look and violent style helped usher in similar characters such as Cable, or the aptly-named Vigilante. Neither of these characters had the staying power or the brand recognition of the Punisher, but stand as an indication of the early popularity of their inspiration.

Spawn was the next to appear as a major best-seller. With character, content and storyline that could not have been so much as rumored at the height of the CCA, Spawn is the quintessential 90s anti-hero. Despite his long hiatus on the best-seller list, the title remains in the public consciousness, especially surrounding the release of the Black Panther movie. While the character of Black Panther preceded Spawn, it would be Spawn that would break down the most barriers for black comic book characters, and characters in general.

Finally, Batman was the obvious choice for the third entry. He an original anti-hero and vigilante with the staying power only matched by Superman. His rebirth at the pen of Frank Miller is a defining moment for the comic book, and he is known by all who have leafed through the pages of a comic, or turned on the TV. With numerous shows, movies, spinoffs and sidekicks to his name, Batman brought significant history to the otherwise young list in this study.

With the exception of The Crow, a limited series, and Blade, whose popularity only came about after the release of other media, only The Punisher, Spawn and Batman were titular characters with sufficient popularity to justify the creation of their own movies in The Long Nineties. The Punisher premiered in 1989, Spawn in 1997, and Batman was the subject of four movies between 1989 and 1997.

Research Question Two asked how often these characters appear in the top 20 bestseller list. The majority of data gathered pertained to this question:

Batman

Batman's popularity was far more cyclical than originally expected, with large swaths of time where the Caped Crusader failed to make the top 20 at all, let alone multiple entries. His numbers were frequently boosted by his *Detective Comics* titles, but when weighted by rank, these two series combined still had less impact than *Spawn* and its various crossovers. Initially propelled by Miller's reboot, Batman's popularity would fall at seemingly random times. In August, 1996 for example, Batman was riding high in 14th place, in his usual slot a few places behind *Spawn*. By the next month, he had fallen to 34th place, and would remain in the 30s until barely reappearing three years later, bolstered mostly by the return of Bane, Batman's anarchic rival who became infamous for breaking Batman's spine in their last encounter, altering the tone and players within the series dramatically.

Spawn

From his dramatic appearance on the page in May 1992 to the end of the Long Nineties, *Spawn* had at least one title in the top 20. His popularity peaked in April 1996, where four of the best-selling titles were his. His popularity began to wane in 1999, and he had all but disappeared by 2001. Out of vogue and overshadowed by the overwhelming popularity of the X-Men following the release of their movie in 2000, his dark tales experienced no popularity resurgence following September 11th. He defined 90s comic culture - his moral ambiguity, satanic origin, hyper-violent storyline would be the first to produce an adult-oriented movie, was a first big-seller for a new publisher, and blazed a number of paths that newer and older superheroes would later travel.

Spawn, however, would end this new era that he had defined by falling below the number 50 spot on the sales chart, a drop from which the series would not recover, finding a new equilibrium between 75th and 150th place in the sales charts.

Punisher

The Punisher, for all his infamy and brand recognition, rarely showed up on the charts. It is notable that of the three characters, he was the only one to show an uptick in popularity over the span of the study, experiencing a long hiatus between his popularity decline in the early half of The Long Nineties and his sudden resurgence in the Spring of 2000, in the series written by Garth Ennis, whose embrace of the hyper-violent nature of the character saved him from obscurity.

Research Question Three asked if any of these surges of popularity experienced by the various franchises coincided with changes in the Doomsday Clock or violent crime rates within The Long Nineties. To determine this, a “stressor index” was established, which combined the minutes to midnight and violent crime rate. When times were trying at home and abroad, the stressor index spiked as high as 4.67. Conversely, in the tranquil months leading up to September 11th, 2001, violent crime plummeted and the Doomsday Clock stagnated at one of its safest points in years. The stressor index reflected this optimism and feeling of safety with a score of 3.245. As those feelings of safety were destroyed, the stressor index rebounded almost immediately, a change that was reflected in an uptick in aggregate sales in vigilante titles. For September 11th itself, DC and Marvel handled the event and the subsequent cultural shift entirely different. DC Superheroes exist in fictionalized cities; Metropolis

and Gotham are both stand-ins for New York City but are never referred to as such. For this reason, DC chose to keep their superheroes out of the event. For Marvel, there was no getting around the issue. From Stark Tower to Hell's Kitchen, Marvel's heroes are inescapably centered around New York City. For this reason, they met the tragedy head-on in an issue of Spiderman. The tone of that issue was not one of vengeance or anger, but of woe and concern for the future. Neither publisher used their anti-heroes to threaten reprisal.

The use of these aggregates and indices revealed patterns that were hidden within the data when separated. The Doomsday Clock and violent crime statistics were essentially linear while separate, but when the two were spliced together to form the stressor index, they showed a much more cyclic pattern that fit the sales data much more closely than either alone could. When the additional depth of their place within the top 20 was added through weighting this sales data, both the violent crime index and the stressor index became exponentially more effective ($p = .0005$) in predicting the *popularity* of vigilantes, versus their presence alone ($p = .22782$). The difference in these values indicates that while there is little connection in the presence of these heroes in the top 20 - consistently three to five issues between all characters - how strongly people were drawn to purchase these anti-heroes-du-jour was without a doubt tied to the crime rate and current political tensions.

Limitations

Comic books were chosen as a timeless, multigenerational yardstick to which the ever-changing Doomsday Clock and the inherently variable violent crime rate could be

compared. The interfering force of the Comics Code Authority made it necessary to limit the results to after its neutering. In addition to the CCA, the sheer volume of extant and new superheroes forced the focus to a selection of the most well-known, archetypal characters. While the data show a relationship between the buying habits of the average comic book reader and their trust in the efficacy of police, it is difficult to say whether a different set of heroes, a different decade, or a different medium entirely could show a different result. For example, comic book movie adaptations appear more popular than ever, but it would be necessary, with the same Doomsday Clock and violent crime data to determine if this is due to Disney's acquisition of Marvel, or an extension of this thesis. Likewise, with sufficient time and data, the study could be extended to include a spectrum of characters, even within grouped and non-titular superheroes, and measure the "distance from neutral" morality that weighted sales data could show over time.

Discussion

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One of the coders for this study is an avid fan of Superman. Upon learning of the thesis, he was curious why Superman and other morally good characters had not been included. He maintained that when times get tough, people like him looked to paragons and champions of truth, justice, and the American Way, rather than dark avengers with a chip on their shoulder. While outside scope the thesis, it raises an interesting new area of study within the same vein: though people cry out for justice as a mob, perhaps comic book readers as individuals actually want a hero to show them the way. While the prevalence of vigilantes were unrelated to world events, perhaps a similar study into

true, traditional heroes can shed more light on uses and gratifications of comic books in trying times.

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Appendix A**Codebook****Justice By Any Means: The Relationship Between Societal Stress and the
Rise of Vigilantism in Comic Books****Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to determine the frequency that certain characters appear in the top 20 best-selling comics of each month, as described by distributor data.

Part I: Date

Directions: Only code each entry one month at a time, familiarizing yourself with the coding scheme before beginning. When needed, directions will be provided.

A. Coder ID

- (1) Greg
- (2) Jeremy
- (3) Chris

B. Month

- (1) January
- (2) February
- (3) March
- (4) April
- (5) May
- (6) June

(7) July

(8) August

(9) September

(10) October

(11) November

(12) December

(13) No Monthly Data Available

C. Year

(1) 1989

(2) 1990

(3) 1991

(4) 1992

(5) 1993

(6) 1994

(7) 1995

(8) 1996

(9) 1997

(10) 1998

(11) 1999

(12) 2000

(13) 2001

Part II: Character and Rank

Directions: You will be asked to record the presence and position - or lack thereof - of three comic book characters in this monthly sales data.

D. Character Identification

- (1) Batman
- (2) Spawn
- (3) The Punisher
- (4) None of the above

E. Frequency of Appearance

- (1) 1
- (2) 2
- (3) 3
- (4) 4
- (5) 5
- (6) 6+

Part III: Rank Weight

Directions: For each character, and for each appearance on the top 20, add their ranks together and enter it on the sheet (e.g. 1st and 5th, enter 6), if the character does not appear, enter 0.

F. Batman

G. Spawn

H. Punisher

Appendix B**Tables**

Appendix C

Graphs









