



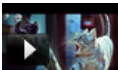
NEWER STORIES...



DEBUNKERY

2:46 PM

How one man's lies almost destroyed the comics industry



MUSIC

2:04 PM

Kittens Vs. Tiny Sock Stealing Ninjas!



HOLY CRAP WTF

1:30 PM

The very best responses to *Safe Haven*'s batsh*t ending



STAR TREK

1:11 PM

It turns out being a Redshirt is less perilous than you think



SPACE

11:50 AM

NASA LOSES CONTACT WITH SPACE STATION AND oh wait everything's totally fine — OR IS IT?



SIMPSONS

11:44 AM

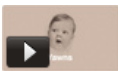
Watch *The Simpsons*' Oscar-Nominated, Hans Zimmer scored short film



SUPERLIST

11:43 AM

11 works of sexology that will blow your mind (with science)



PSYCHOLOGY

10:43 AM

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SECRET HISTORY

10:18 AM

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HOLY CRAP WTF

9:30 AM

A clothing store mannequin that imitates your movements

BOOKS

9:04 AM

China Miéville's recommendations for socialist science fiction fans

DEBUNKERY

How one man's lies almost destroyed the comics industry

Annalee Newitz

For over half a century, the comic book industry has been dogged by the work of one man, the anti-comics crusader and psychiatrist Fredric Wertham. His bestselling 1954 book *The Seduction of the Innocent* convinced parents and politicians alike that comics were a direct cause of violence, drug use, and homosexuality among young people. It led to the restrictive editorial code issued by the Comics Magazine Association of America, and a national movement to keep comics away from children and teens.

Though Wertham claimed his evidence came from thousands of case studies, it turns out that he was lying. A new investigation of Wertham's papers by University of Illinois information studies professor Carol Tilley has revealed that the psychologist fabricated, exaggerated, and selectively edited his data to bolster his argument that comics caused antisocial behavior. Here is what Tilley discovered, and why it still matters today.

Published last week in *Information & Culture*, Tilley's work is based on unprecedented access to 200 cartons of Wertham's private papers at the Library of Congress, which were under seal until 2010. Over a period of roughly two weeks, Tilley pored over everything from Wertham's correspondence with colleagues to the extremely detailed notes he kept on interviews and sessions with the teens he worked with throughout most of his life. It was when she started reading these notes that Tilley realized that there were some pretty big discrepancies between what Wertham recorded in them, and what he wrote in *Seduction of the Innocent*.

What's poignant about Wertham's situation is that he had been a tireless advocate for poor and marginalized children his whole life. Most of the research he did for *Seduction* was at Lafargue Clinic in Harlem — the first psychological clinic in the area — which Wertham set up at the urging of the celebrated African American writer Richard Wright. He genuinely believed that the underprivileged children he worked with were being manipulated into crime by violent and sexual images in comics.

Like many of his fellow anti-comics crusaders, Wertham was particularly incensed by adult crime comics of the era, which often fell into children's hands. Remember, the late 1940s and early 50s, when he researched *Seduction*, came right before the rise of television. At that time, as Tilley writes, "more than 90 percent of children and more than 80 percent of teens in the United States read comics, often avidly."

FEB 19, 2013 2:46 PM

87,155 187

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Wertham was all too happy to blame these comics for violence and other issues his clinic treated, including what Tilley characterizes as "undesirable habits" (e.g., masturbation and nightmares), 'personality traits' (e.g., daydreaming and restlessness), and 'undesirable behaviors' (e.g., truancy and disobedience)." These children were troubled, but few suffered from what we'd call mental illness today.

Some of Wertham's case studies, however, turned out to be stories he'd heard second-hand from colleagues. A famous anecdote about a teen named Dorothy who was obsessed with Sheena was actually cobbled together out of what he'd heard about the girl from another doctor. Writes Tilley:

According to the book and the case notes, Dorothy read jungle comics with strong females like Sheena as well as crime comics, including *Penalty*, which she regretted never showed the criminals getting away with their crimes. Wertham quoted Dorothy saying about jungle comics, "I like to see the way they jump up and kick men down and kill them! . . . Sheena got a big jungle she lives in and people down there likes her and would do anything for her."

In the case notes, Wertham commented that the images of strong women reinforced "violent revenge fantasies against men and possibly creates these violent anti-men (therefore homosexual) fantasies. . . . Sheena and the other comic book women such as Wonder Woman are very bad ideals for them." Yet Wertham omits from *Seduction*—and seemingly from his analysis—a revealing story about Dorothy's everyday reality. In the case notes, she related an incident in which her aunt was accosted by gang members, taken to a rooftop, and robbed of less than one dollar. Wertham also declined to mention in *Seduction* that Dorothy—in addition to being habitually truant—was a runaway and a gang member, was sexually active, and had both a reading disability and low normal intelligence. On the final page of Dorothy's case notes, Wertham instead wrote: "She would be good and non-aggressive if society would let her—Comic Books are part of society."

Wertham constantly omitted relevant details about these kids' lives.

In another famous passage from *Seduction*, Wertham suggests that Batman and Robin inspire homosexuality in young readers who identify with Robin. As evidence, he offers the story of a young man who read Batman and basically became gay afterward. Not surprisingly, the reality was more complicated. Tilley writes:

As part of his evidence for this identification, Wertham shared the insights of a young homosexual man who stated, "I think I put myself in the position of Robin. I did want to have relations with Batman."

The young man from the anecdote was actually two men, ages sixteen and seventeen, who had been in a sexual relationship with one another for several years and had realized they were homosexual by the age of ten. Wertham combined their statements, failing to indicate that the seventeen-year-old is the one who noted, "The only suggestion of homosexuality may be that they seemed to be so close to each other," and omitting the



NANOTECHNOLOGY

9:00 AM

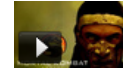
Nanocapsules could take you from sloshed to sober in a matter of minutes



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Weird, Al Yankovic is currently announcing the 2013 Bonnaroo lineup via live stream



TRAILER FRENZY

8:50 AM

Season 2 trailer for *Mortal Kombat Legacy* wants you to "GET OVER HERE"



SPACE

8:00 AM

Incredible details are emerging about Russia's Chelyabinsk meteor



THE THING

8:00 AM

Could this be the official ending to John Carpenter's *The Thing*?

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phrase that followed, "like my friend and I."

Further, Wertham did not make any mention that the two teens had found the Submariner and Tarzan to be better subjects than Batman and Robin for their early erotic fantasies.

In another case, Wertham blamed Batman comics for the "homosexual" crimes of a boy who had pissed in another boy's mouth. What he left out was the fact that the boy had previously been raped by the boy he attacked. He also left out that the boy was actually a much bigger fan of Superman than Batman.

When it came to violence inspired by comics, however, Wertham's greatest informant was a 15-year-old gang member named Carlisle. Wertham had carefully transcribed at least 15 pages of interview transcripts with Carlisle, and in the process of writing *Seduction* wound up attributing Carlisle's words to a succession of fictional young people. He's split into two different boys in one section, and later Carlisle's words find their way into the mouths of two more boys, ages 13 and 14. So one informant became four. This is part of a general pattern where Wertham exaggerated the scope of his research. Though he testified to the Senate that he'd examined 500 young people per year for years, the archival evidence shows that for the 10 years he worked at the Harlem clinic, only 500 people under 17 were admitted.

Tilley also found evidence in the Library of Congress papers that Wertham's observation that he'd seen children "vomit over comic books" was actually taken from a report from the psychologist's friend, the folklorist Gershon Legman. Wertham also claims in *Seduction* that he'd seen comics for sale to children in stores where prostitutes peddled their wares. This was actually from a report given to him by his colleague Hilde Mosse; Wertham never witnessed any prostitutes at comic book stores.

Though the extent of Wertham's lies and exaggerations is only now coming to light, his work has come under suspicion before. Even in the 1950s, critics questioned his research methods — and the psychologist was known for his snippy replies. Writes Tilley:

When the executive editor of *Woman's Home Companion* wrote to inquire about the source of Wertham's evidence for an anecdote in *Seduction* that featured the magazine, his response was a single, teasing sentence: "I'm awfully sorry you haven't kept your records because, as you well know, a physician is not at liberty to divulge his sources."

The debunking of Wertham, many decades after the damage he did with *Seduction of the Innocent*, should serve as a warning. Today, many crusaders make the same claims about videogames that Wertham did about comics. Violence and drug use are routinely blamed on gaming, in part because of the early "research" that Wertham did. But now we know that Wertham buried evidence that his subjects were often violent and sexual long before they read comics. And more importantly, they suffered from social and cultural disadvantages that no doubt contributed far more to their troubles than Batman did.

In email, Tilley told me that she hopes more scholars will go back to Wertham's papers now that they are available:

I would encourage scholars with greater depth in psychology / psychiatry / social work to examine what's available in Wertham's papers, as I think they'll help shed a lot of light on historical practices. My primary goal at this point is to use the materials to help support

my current project examining children's comics reading; in particular I hope to reclaim some of the voices of the millions of kids who read comics during the 1940s and 1950s.

Looking to the future, let's hope we don't make the same mistake that people did in 1950s America. Violence among young people isn't caused by comics or videogames; it's caused by a complicated array of factors, not least of which is the violent society that surrounds them. And unfortunately, we can't blame Batman for that. We have to take responsibility for it ourselves.

81 discussions in response to Annalee Newitz

Reply



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MercuryCobra and 14 more [Reply](#) 22 hours ago

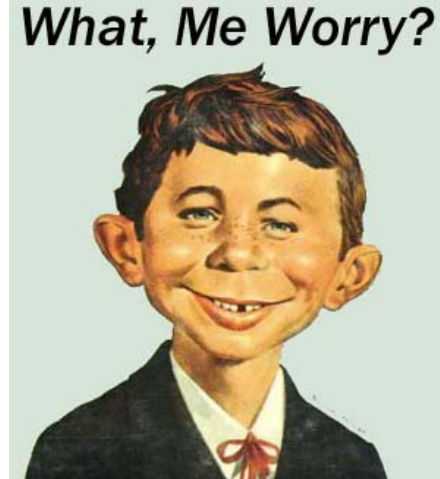
It is incredibly disturbing to me to hear him describe a young woman as having a serious mental illness.



You are following Dr Emilio Lizardos comments

Dr Emilio Lizardo and 4 more [Reply](#) 20 hours ago

This is a bit of a stretch, but I can see how it could be interpreted that way.



Smuffy [Reply](#) 22 hours ago

There is no evidence to suggest more than as weak links to violence from media, even today. There are still bat-crap-crazy studies dribbling out from the bowels of the psychological field at random intervals, like the liquid refuse after a weekend of drinking Payatas' tap water. Until they drop the idea of simply renning the ridiculously antiquated Banduras' model and admit that this type of formative influence has little to do with the decisions one makes as an adult, they will only continue to remind the well-adjusted of just how obtuse this



You are following femmeplaneuses comments

femmeplaneuses and 3 more [Reply](#) 22 hours ago

I don't know what WW meant to girls when the comic first came out, but my first comic was Wonder Woman, post Crisis of Infinite Earths and she was so kick ass to me that I taped aluminum foil to my wrists and wore my red bathing suit to tatters, all while demanding my parents call me Wonder Girl. I've read the old stuff and the new stuff, and nearly everything in between because even as I approach 40, she's still a symbol of that moment I realized girls kick ass. Marston made WW ahead of her time on the suggestion of his wife, which makes it all the more the comic all women should at least look at for its feminist themes (you know before they whored her costume up).



You are following Rotwang2026s comments

Rotwang2026 and 6 more [Reply](#) 21 hours ago

If somebody wrote a book that linked drinking beer, watching football, tinkering with old muscle cars, excessive shopping, addiction to reality shows etc as dangerous, they would be laughed out of town ... but the moment you write that video games could lead to violent behaviour people nod and agree with you.



back is MAD Magazine and the fact that Alfred E. Neuman You are following stars in margins's comments

stars in margins and 2 more [Reply](#) 22 hours ago

I read this book a few years ago - he sites one case where a child, a boy I think, has a record of violence that he attributes to being influenced by comics books, and THEN mentions, and dismisses, the fact that the boy's father was physically abusive. Not exactly psych 101. The wonderful thing is that he predicts that comic books would fade out of society, that our culture would eventually reject them, so the book ends on a good note ;)

I also took a class in college where we watched a PSA from the same time period, possibly influenced by *Seduction of the Innocent*, where some boys sneak out into the woods to read pulp comics. [More »](#)

field has become.
[fightingfit](#) and [6 more](#) Reply [21 hours ago](#)

But hey, I've heard Batman's playboy attitude was added to dis[redacted] rumors of him being hot for Robin. So there's that.

You are following werthams comments

[wertham](#) and [3 more](#) Reply [21 hours ago](#)

All that being said: When was the last time YOU read a comic book from the late 1940s? The fact of the matter is about 90% of the comics were unreadable crap.



You are following FrankN.Stein's comments

[FrankN.Stein](#) and [1 more](#) Reply [7 hours ago](#)

Silly -- it's obviously TV that ruins childhoods!
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io9



An 'alternative universe' will eventually destroy ours, says Higgs researcher

SCAVERBR



The Mystery of Israel's 'Prisoner X'

lifehacker



I'm Pamela Fox, Product Engineer at Coursera, and This Is How I Work

BEARDSPIN



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KOTAKU



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JALOPNIK



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Apple's Upgrade Dilemma