

Michael Manahan  
1 November 2016  
Journalism Capstone Proposal  
Prof. June Erlick

My college roommate throws a fat yellow and black book in my lap. "If you want to read *real* comics," he says, "read this first."

It is 2007, I am 20 years old and the book is *Watchmen* by writer Alan Moore and illustrator Dave Gibbons. I read the collected volume cover to cover on our plush college-apartment sectional couch without interruption. When I get up to use the bathroom, I take it with me. My legs fall asleep on the toilet.

Two years later, I am in that same apartment emailing my professor, asking for an extension on my undergraduate thesis. I am examining supernatural characters in Alan Moore's graphic narratives (Dr. Gull from *From Hell* and V from *V for Vendetta*) how their failure to connect with human foils is a criticism of superheroes, comic books as a medium and possibly even Judeo-Christian religions. He gives me an extra weekend. I do well enough to graduate.

Another year passes. I buy around 600 miscellaneous comic books boarded and sealed in cellophane for \$80 from a single mom in Warren, New Jersey. She has two tow-headed sons who gawk at me, an interloper, walking through their wood-paneled den. The collection belongs to the mother's deadbeat husband who said he would come back to get them but never did. She helps me load the boxes into my car even though I tell her she doesn't have to. She says she just wants them gone and fast. On the ride home, I yank random issues from boxes and thumb through them quickly between traffic lights.

Since then, I haven't looked back. Comic books have become a part of who I am.

For my graduate school capstone, I would like to research and report on the industry of comic books: independent publishing, the shifting comic store business model, distribution, licensing, etc.

Why? I believe the phoenix-like resurrection of comic books from the ashes of the 90s and 2000s isn't nearly as beneficial to the industry as an outsider might think.

How could that be? Today, comic books—and I do mean the *books*—are a \$1 billion industry in North America.<sup>1</sup> Of course, the comics market isn't just about the books any more. In fact, money made through comic-adapted movies, superhero apparel and merchandise licensed from comic properties far surpasses profits from literal comic books. *Iron Man 3*, *The Avengers*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Captain America: Civil War* and *The Dark Knight* have each already grossed more than \$1 billion worldwide box office.<sup>2</sup> Combine any two or three of your choosing and break a billion domestic. And what about the collectible toys and apparel? Marvel's global licensing of Spider-Man retail alone raked in \$1.3 billion back in 2013.<sup>3</sup>

Yet even with all that profitability, trouble abounds in the publication and distribution of comic books. Sale and unit numbers might be up after the downturn at the end of the 20th century, but there are undercurrents roiling beneath these small wins that ought to have more press: the possible monopolization of the comic book distribution industry, gateway issues with independent creators trying to break onto the scene, racial and gender inequality, and a broken sales model that keeps comic stores across the country on the perpetually on the brink of bankruptcy. I aim to shine a light on these issues.

**Possible capstone director:** Jeremy Fox

**Possible publishers:** Wired Magazine, VICE, Huffington Post, Tor, The Comics Journal

## OVERVIEW

### I. Comicazi's successes belie comic book industry struggle in Boston and beyond

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.comichron.com/yearlycomicssales.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Marvel-Cinematic-Universe#tab=summary>;  
<http://www.the-numbers.com/keyword/DC-Comics>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/superhero-earns-13-billion-a-748281>

- A. **SYNOPSIS:** This article will examine the rise and fall of comic book shops in the Cambridge/Boston/Greater Boston area from the 1970s to today as told through the lens of Comicazi, a Davis Square comic shop opened in 2000. Despite climbing real estate costs, Comicazi's General Operating Manager Bob Howard expanded his storefront space this year, thanks in part to Comicazi's unique business model. Others have not been as lucky. Why?
  - B. **INTERVIEWS:** Bob Howard and Comicazi staff, as well as operating managers at *The Million Year Picnic*, *Outer Limits*, *Comically Speaking*, *Comicopia* and *Legends*. *The Million Year Picnic* is one of the—if not *the*—oldest still-running comic book shop(s) in the U.S. *OL*, *CS* and *C* are all struggling stores that have shuttered several locations each. *Legends* is now completely defunct. Howard has agreed to an interview and has offered to help secure interviews with others.
- II. **Spotlight on Diamond Comics Distributors, Inc. Part One: Should the U.S. government reopen antitrust investigations into Diamond Comic Distributors, Inc.?**
- A. **SYNOPSIS:** One controversial comic book distributor (virtually) distributes them all: Marvel, DC, Image, Dark Horse, Boom!, IDW, Dynamite, Titan, Top Shelf, Oni Press, Valiant... I could go on. From humble beginnings in the early 80s, Diamond Comics Distributors, Inc. and CEO Steve Geppi have defined how English-language comics travel from publisher to retailer: *through DCD and pretty much through DCD only*. In 1997, the U.S. Justice Department launched a three-year investigation into possible antitrust violations, but nothing came of it. Regardless, many creators and business owners believe DCD wields too much power over which comics reach audiences. Worse still, many comic store owners call into question the quality of DCD's services in recent years. Habitually missed shipments, damaged goods and wrong orders all point to an organization might be too big for its britches. Is it time to revisit DCD's monopoly on comics distribution in light of these and other allegations? What might happen to the industry if we don't?
  - B. **SOURCES:**
    1. FOIA request for DOJ documents pertaining to DCD's antitrust investigation in the late 90s
    2. Interviews with comic store owners, publishers and independent creators who have/had business dealings with DCD
    3. Representatives from local book publishers (to compare and contrast the publication and distribution requirements for traditional books versus comic books)
    4. HES Prof. Allen Ryan, a former instructor knowledgeable in these matters
- III. **Spotlight on Diamond Comics Distributors, Inc. Part Two: How the biggest English-speaking comics distributor in the world operates and innovates in 2017**
- A. **SYNOPSIS:** A firsthand account of how Diamond Comics Distributors, Inc. receives orders, processes them, ships them, balances dozens of vendors and thousands of retailers as it continues to take on new clients and incorporates digital distribution into its repertoire. [Note: For the last two years, I've worked as a copywriter for businesses in the industrial sector, including distribution. I have written extensively about how the distribution industry operates. I believe this will afford me an "in" with DCD, as I have the experience to examine the company's ability to meet the challenges of rising demand with a strictly logistical perspective.]
  - B. **SOURCES:**
    1. Sources listed in Part One
    2. Interviews with DCD Public Relations Associate Megan Cosman and other staff
    3. Tour of the DCD distribution center in Plattsburgh, NY
    4. *Comics: Between the Panels* by Steve Duin and Michael Richardson (contains a history of DCD)

#### **IV. Book Review: *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* from Boom! Comics**

- A. **SYNOPSIS:** Creating a comic book from licensed property like Saban's *Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers* can go one of two ways. The popularity of the existing franchise could give rise to an equally popular comic, energized by nostalgia—not to mention a blockbuster movie release in 2017. Or the project could saturate an already flooded comics market with more shallow, poorly constructed pabulum printed to earn a quick buck. So which side of the line does *MMPR* from Boom! Comics fall on?

B. **SOURCES:** Issues up to review date, plus the original television series.

#### **V. Trend piece: Representation in comics**

- A. **SYNOPSIS:** Ask a crowd of independent comic creators what issues define the current state of their industry (as I did at the 2016 MICEpo in Cambridge) and you'll probably hear the same answer: Representation, or the lack thereof. So who's underrepresented? That's a more complex question. Women, African Americans, LGBTQ communities, Chicanos, Latinos... the list goes on and on. Absence of these individuals in mainstream comics, though, isn't the only threat to the minority identity. *Misrepresentation* matters too. How have comics underrepresented and misrepresented marginalized people in the past and how do those characterizations affect readers and stories? What are today's independent comic creators doing to fight against these injustices?

#### **B. SOURCES**

1. Comic creators across the country who've already agreed to future interviews:
  - a) Kat Fajardo
  - b) Javier Suárez
  - c) Harvey J. Nett
  - d) Nova Reilly
  - e) Natalie Riess
2. Potential interviews:
  - a) Melissa Mendes, visiting faculty for the Center for Cartoon Studies in VT
  - b) Professors/specialists at Boston College's Institute for the Study and Promotion of Race and Culture