

# Introduction

## An Unruly Medium

Comic books used to be one of the most popular media in America. In 1954, publishers issued one billion of them, around ninety million copies each month.<sup>1</sup> This meant that for every one book published in this country, there were two comic books. And each issue passed on to an average of three readers. Even more impressive than the sheer volume of units moved was the remarkable breadth of their reach. Market surveys conducted in the 1940s reported that 93 percent of kids consumed at least a dozen every month. Nearly half of adults under age thirty read them, with more female readers than male, and as many as one-third of adults over thirty read them too.<sup>2</sup> All told, the medium boasted seventy million fans, half of the entire U.S. population.<sup>3</sup> Before television irreversibly altered popular culture, Americans of all educational backgrounds, men and women alike, were reading comic books—a lot of them.

And then, the comic book market crashed. In 1955, sales plummeted by more than half, to just thirty-five million copies each month. Over the next several years, twenty-four out of twenty-nine active publishers closed their doors.<sup>4</sup> Just like that, comic books went from being one of the most popular forms of entertainment in America to a medium struggling for its survival. It would continue to struggle for decades, with sales steadily and persistently declining decade after decade. In 2017, sixty years after their peak popularity, fewer than eight million comic books were sold each month.<sup>5</sup> More concerning than sales, however, is the size of the audience. Fifty percent of all Americans used to read

comic books. Industry insiders estimate that today, that audience likely stands at fewer than two million people, or one-half of one percent of the U.S. population. That readership has also been infamous for its lack of diversity—specifically, the scarcity of women, children, and people of color.<sup>6</sup> Comic books began as a mass medium. Today, they attract but a tiny niche audience, a demographic so narrow that the health of comic book publishing has been under sustained and significant threat.<sup>7</sup>

And yet, comic books are more respected today than at any time in their history and *seem* about as popular as ever. Comic book stories and characters dominate the summer box office, they fill up the fall television schedule, they pervade streaming platforms, and they consume entire aisles of the toy store. Comic properties account for five of the ten most profitable film franchises of all time, including the top slot, for the Marvel Cinematic Universe. It has earned more than \$15 billion at the box office in just the last decade.<sup>8</sup> In 2017–2018, television networks aired more than a dozen ongoing live-action series based on comic books, with another nine appearing exclusively on major streaming services.<sup>9</sup> These higher-profile programs join a full roster of original animated and interactive projects, including superhero-based series for Cartoon Network and Disney XD, direct-to-video films, and hundreds of comic-book-based video, mobile, and computer games. Appealing to many different age groups and demographics, these products reach a wide swath of the population, creating a broad and lucrative market for licensed merchandise of all kinds, from action figures to T-shirts to iPhone cases. The abundance of cross-media comic book adaptations and licensed goods has strengthened the properties' trademarks, making the logos of characters like Superman some of the world's most recognizable icons.

These two sides of comic book culture—the popular and the esoteric, the mass and the niche—originate in the interdependence between publishing and licensing that has long defined this particularly American art form. Adaptations between various media (e.g., from books to films, or films to video games) are ubiquitous today, and have in fact been common throughout recorded history (e.g., from poetry to pottery, or the Bible to painting). But the aggressive, consistent, and particular way in which comic books extend into other media texts and cultural goods is unique, and perhaps the medium's most distinctive characteristic. Comic book adaptations and merchandising are never incidental, and they are rarely an afterthought. The future potential of these derivative products and their historical existence have long shaped comic books' production, distribution, consumption, interpretation, and recirculation.

Producers have so frequently adapted comic books to other media that comics are really only “books” in a very narrow sense; this cultural form has expanded beyond its physical limits to influence a wide range of consumer products and media texts. This phenomenon has created a bifurcation in comic book culture. As Henry Jenkins notes, “comics are increasingly a fringe (even an avant-garde) form of entertainment, one that appeals predominantly to college students or college-educated professionals. While few read comics, their content flows fluidly across media platforms, finding wide audiences in film, television, and computer games.”<sup>10</sup> A fundamental tendency to spread across media has allowed comic books to be at once one thing and simultaneously its opposite. This is a structuring paradox that defines the medium.

For individuals involved in the comic book industry, this paradox creates a number of complications. Creators must produce content that will retain their most loyal fans and simultaneously appeal to the uninitiated mainstream, and while editors and employees work to navigate corporate environments, they also push on both ends of this spectrum.<sup>11</sup> Scholars have been similarly vexed, and comic book studies have wrestled with finding the right approach to the field. Some have used the popularity of comic book adaptations and the medium’s broad diffusion through American culture as a justification for more research; intellectuals write volumes on comic books and movies, comic books and philosophy, or comic books and religion. Others reject this approach, arguing against the study of any and all “comics-related phenomena” in other media, preferring instead to treat the medium as a discrete form with firm artistic and narrative boundaries.<sup>12</sup> Both methods unfortunately allow an unacknowledged slippage between the immense popularity and cultural relevance of comic book *properties* and the rather limited reach of the *comic books* themselves. To focus on comic books without considering their extensions into other media is to ignore the actual context in which comics are produced, circulated, and consumed. Conversely, to treat comic book adaptations as interchangeable with comic “books” is to gloss over the complex dynamics that make comic book culture so appealing in the first place.

So what happens when the symbiotic tension between publishing and licensing and the paradox it creates moves instead to the center of our focus—not an inconvenient reality best overlooked, but the actual nucleus of comics books’ power? A different picture of the medium emerges, one rooted in a complex history rife with contradiction. This book tells *that* story. It is a seventy-year saga in which comic books maneuvered a path

not just between publishing and licensing, but between autonomy and dependence, and between the fringe and the mass.

While there are ups and downs and a few unexpected turns, by and large, this evolution has been relatively coherent and predictable, its historic arc bent in a particular direction: the medium's development was characterized by a gradual structural containment. Like many other new media, comic books began as a disorganized, lowbrow, and brash mass medium, reviled perhaps even more than it was loved. Over time, it transformed into a heavily exploited, corporate-financed, well-branded, and highly esteemed niche art form. In short, the entertainment industry brought an unruly medium into the fold. Examining the material details and everyday practices that bore witness to that process, this book explains how and why it happened—and how and why comics declined in popularity so profoundly while mass media took them up so aggressively.

The transformation was incremental and slow, but it helped set the stage for the relatively sudden explosion of large-scale, multimedia comic book adaptations that constitute the new core of mainstream film and television production in the twenty-first century. At the heart of this history was a process whereby multimedia producers incorporated comic book properties *and* comic book strategies into their business models. This approach, which spanned the second half of the twentieth century, was the entertainment industry's logical response to a dynamic set of political, economic, and social shifts.

This evolution toward multimedia did not occur at a distinct moment in time. Comic books moved fluidly across media from the very start, and their ability to do so was foundational to both the art form and the industry that produced it. Furthermore, at no point in history did comics develop in isolation; they were both deeply informed by and deeply impactful on the culture industries writ large. More specifically, conglomerates emerging in the middle of the twentieth century gradually adopted the operating logic employed by the comic book industry, transforming that much smaller business in the process.

It can be tempting to ascribe many emerging trends in film, television, and social media (including transmedia storytelling, niche targeting, the cultivation of fans, and the diversification of distribution channels) solely to new technologies and evolving cultural norms. Tracing the history of these strategies back through comic books, however, reveals that there was a clear industrial precedent for many contemporary strategies in entertainment. Mass media's embrace of comic books and comic book culture has been structural both to comic books and to

convergence-era Hollywood. It is thus hard to imagine either comic books without contemporary multimedia production or contemporary multimedia production without comic books.

### COMIC BOOKS ACROSS MEDIA

Comic book culture is probably unique in the extent to which it incorporated other forms—its strength was its ability to nimbly navigate a path forward in the shadows of other media. But popular culture’s tendency to flourish and expand in margins and in-between spaces has long been a feature of the American media landscape. Since at least the 1960s, interindustry relations and business practices—galvanized by mergers and acquisitions, new technologies, changing markets, and eventually deregulation—have consistently produced the most significant forces of change in U.S. cultural production. Political economists Graham Murdock and Peter Golding noted the growth of these interconnections back in 1977, describing them as “indicative of a basic shift in the structure of the communications industry, away from the relatively simple situation of sector specific monopolies and towards something altogether more complex and far reaching.” Unfortunately, they observed, communication research, academic as well as governmental, was often fragmentary; most work focused on a particular sector, a piecemeal approach that “necessarily devalues the centrality and importance of the emerging relations between sectors.”<sup>13</sup>

Forty years later, studies that look across these sectors to examine the relationships and production apparatuses that arise *between* these media industries are more important than ever. The structural convergence that was only just becoming visible back then has continued to intensify through today. As a result, a complex web of legal, financial, and human associations across communication sectors has become a permanent fixture of the landscape. Research that works across media is thus not only historically accurate, but continues to provide important insight into contemporary culture. As industry scholar Jennifer Holt has argued, such an approach can also create “a foundation for more explicitly politicized avenues of research,” particularly when questions about law and policy enter into the analysis. She and other scholars have argued that any examination of industry therefore “must view film, cable and broadcast history as integral pieces of the same puzzle, and parts of the same whole.”<sup>14</sup> Attending to this entire puzzle can be challenging. Media histories typically seek out specificity located in the particular in addition to

a broader context. If the goal is to examine film, cable, *and* broadcast, this toggling becomes virtually impossible.

Comic books are, of course, not included on Holt's short list, and they are rarely included on any other. The comic book business has always been (and remains today) small in size relative to other media industries. Low overall sales volume and an undersized workforce make it easy to overlook, despite the integral role the medium has played in shaping other contemporary mass media industries.<sup>15</sup> Its small size, however, makes it an ideal site for research, offering both considerable detail and an opportunity to weave in and out of a broader structural account to which it is integral.

This history works to take advantage of this unique position. First, it provides a close analysis of the everyday material relations that have constituted the medium's production, distribution, and consumption, and argues that these details are in themselves an important site of study. Second, it allows for a macro perspective by theorizing and tracking movement and change through and in between the media industries. In this respect, transmedia, which in most media literature refers to a mode of storytelling that moves across media, here refers not just to content, but to methodology as well. This book analyzes *an industry which itself traverses sectors*, offering insight into the marginal spaces between media businesses. Finally, this book takes up Jennifer Holt's call to ask the kinds of questions that facilitate more politically engaged media research and advocacy. The comic book industry offers a wonderful vantage point from which to consider important issues like media regulation, media consolidation, intellectual property law, labor struggles, distribution structures, and financial engineering, all of which are considered here.

## INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE CULTURAL NARRATIVE

Despite this well-situated standpoint, a history of comic books necessarily defies easy answers and can prove as unruly as its subject. The paradox arising from the medium's fundamental split between licensing and publishing is more perplexing and multifaceted the closer you look. There is the fact that comic books are both mass and niche, popular and fringe, autonomous and dependent. But there are others binaries too—a whole laundry list of them. While many reproach comic books for their conservative themes and lack of diversity, fans have long celebrated their subversive roots and daring creativity.<sup>16</sup> They point to virtuoso artists like Jack Kirby, inspired writers like Alan Moore, and other creators

whose distinctive voices and visions have made comic books one of the great American art forms. Critics, meanwhile, have for many decades disparaged the medium for being essentially authorless, the product of nothing more than merchandising strategy and corporate branding.<sup>17</sup>

Its success in that corporate sphere and its reputation as a go-to source for big-budget Hollywood projects have made the medium mainstream, a kind of playground for big shots with money to burn. And yet defenders diligently guard its outsider status, pointing to its infamous reputation as the detritus of the lives of geeks, nerds, and other outcasts. Even that which seems undeniable today—that comic books are a kind of safe investment, a reliable and permanent feature of American mass culture—has until very recently been quite uncertain. Throughout most of their history, cultural gatekeepers viewed comics as a source of risk, a volatile form with limited appeal. Depending on the context, then, comic books have brought with them wildly different connotations and associations. They have, as a result, become quite good at being, or at least seeming to be, many things at once.

While I argue that the mass/niche paradox I began with is at this medium's core, I believe that many of that paradox's derivatives, the contradictions noted here, actually represent a kind of narrative problem. Like many other beloved media, comic books bring with them a fabled past, rich with lore and intrigue. Stories have been told and retold, dramatized and sensationalized, in bedrooms and basements, in the pages of fanzines, in convention halls, on shop floors, and more recently online—in blogs, comments, and discussion boards. The panoply of voices here and the variety of narratives offered speak to the ecstatic plurality of the current moment in popular culture, when so many people have the means to express so many different views, and so many choose to write about popular culture. But along the way, moments in the medium's history have taken on epic proportions and myth-like qualities.

Much of this storytelling is very insightful, and many voices from across this vast spectrum appear in the pages of this book. In this competitive environment, however, certain narratives tend to rise to the top and gather momentum, snowballing, while competing versions fade away. And more often than not, it is the cultural story that sustains. There are brave heroes and evil villains, battles decisively won and tragically lost, and cathartic instances of retribution and reward. But most notably, within comic book culture, there tends to be a particular and familiar narrative thrust, in which the embattled but worthy comic book, with the help of fans and creators, stands up to those who would

destroy it. Just like superheroes, they restore justice and order and all that is right with the world. In this version of the story, comic books are fundamentally subversive, subcultural, and resistant.

There is a different version of the story, though, one less pervasive and a little less sexy. It sees comic books as fundamentally corporate, a dominant form in a culture built to support its growth. It is a story about regulation and competition, law and labor struggles, demographics and financing. It is about distribution and the networked circulation of comics between sectors, the guidelines that determine how and for whom and for what benefits employees will work, and the flow of balance sheets that give order and meaning to everyday business decisions. These are the infrastructures of comic book culture, and by and large, they belong to and are controlled by the comic book industry.

This book is about these infrastructures. It works to recover their narratives, which sometimes get lost amidst the excitement and noise of a competing discourse. Borrowing from Brian Larkin's anthropological definition, I use the term infrastructure broadly to refer to "built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space. . . . They comprise the architecture for circulation, literally providing the undergirding of modern societies."<sup>18</sup> In the context of media generally, and comic books specifically, these architectures of circulation take many different forms. They can have a physical component, as does the distribution system that moves comic books back and forth across the country. They can be conceptual, as are the legal frameworks that dictate the nature of business relationships and the material working conditions those relations produce. And they can be routine based, as are the standardized, taken-for-granted practices and protocols that give shape to workplaces on an everyday, almost mechanical, basis.

It is immediately clear that these are not infrastructures in the traditional sense. They are not sewers, bridges, power grids, or underground cable networks, nor any other clearly tangible structure, since they often lack a physical presence. But raw materiality is not a requirement of infrastructure, and media is a product unlike any other. As cultural artifacts, they tend to lack physicality themselves. Even before digital technology relegated our media to the cloud, the tangible circular record album and the thirty-two-page floppy comic were rarely as important as the immaterial content they contained (nostalgic collectors may argue otherwise, but the general rule holds true). The value of media is cultural and social, not utilitarian or physical, so it makes sense that the infra-



structures that support its production tend to be less material and more human. There are, of course, still factory lines and radio towers and the like, but more impactful are the ways in which everyday relationships between individuals take on particular patterns, abide by established protocols, and adhere to predetermined networks of communication.

So while research on tubes and pipes has advantages, many other less concrete systems contribute to the circulation of goods and ideas. As media scholars Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski note, “our current mediascapes would not exist without our current media infrastructures,” wherever and in whatever form they exist.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, according to information scholars Susan Leigh Star and Karen Ruhleder, it can be more useful to “ask *when*—not *what*—is an infrastructure.” So an analysis of a distribution system or a legal framework may ultimately be less significant and informative when we imagine these structures simply as *things*, “stripped of use,” than when we understand them as built on and through networks of actual use.<sup>20</sup> They exist relationally, coming into common use through their adoption by communities of practice (people who learn conventions of use as part of their membership in a group), and subsequently, they sink into the backdrop of everyday life and work.<sup>21</sup> They are human infrastructures, and their strength relies on human activity as well as human consent.

Unfortunately, the study of infrastructure has its downsides. Star and Geoffrey Bowker wryly note that “delving into someone else’s infrastructure has about the entertainment value of reading the yellow pages of the phone book. One does not encounter the dramatic stories of battle and victory, of mystery and discovery that make for a good read.”<sup>22</sup> This feels particularly true with regards to comic book culture, which has so many and such good dramatic stories. But there can be intrigue in infrastructure too, particularly those in focus here (or so I hope)! Of particular interest are four systems that have profoundly impacted the shape and nature of the medium.

First are the distribution networks that have historically moved comic books between publishers and consumers. They include a physical component consisting of trucks, warehouses, delivery routes, and newsstands. But my primary interest is the network of relationships among printers, distributors, wholesalers, and retailers and the standards and practices they developed over time. Second, I consider the legal frameworks that have created the conditions of creation, labor, exchange, and reception, which not only impact the medium but actually help make it legible and meaningful to those who produce and consume it.

Third comes a reader-centered system of exchange and communication dispersed across zines, message boards, conventions, and shop floors. First generated through encounters between fans, publishers, and creators, this community network was later taken up and exploited by multimedia producers building new demographics. And finally, I look at the innovative financial structures that have come to dictate corporate media in the twenty-first century. Basic changes in the way entertainment companies account for and fund their projects brought major shifts to the decision-making process in Hollywood, and that has impacted the ways producers conceive, create, and sell cultural products.

### (IN)VISIBILITY AND INTENTION

A focus on these distribution, legal, corporate, and financial infrastructures ultimately generates a very different narrative about what comic books are, how they came to be, and why they are meaningful in contemporary culture. By emphasizing these elements, then, this history offers a structural revision—a reframing of the prevailing historical account of comic books that reveals a political and economic dimension often lost in the conversation. The impulse here is not to seek out the true story. It is rather to understand how truth or consensus forms in history-telling to begin with. *Why have certain narratives prevailed over others? Why do cultural forces tend to overshadow industrial ones? And why do infrastructures so often become invisible?* This last question has been particularly salient within critical media, technology, and infrastructure studies, and scholars have noted that invisibility turns out to be a fundamental and defining characteristic of infrastructure.<sup>23</sup> Media historian Lisa Gitelman argues that the success of a new medium in fact depends on users' inattention or blindness to its infrastructure. A process of adoption, which ends in imperceptibility, in fact defines most media: each form is really a mixture of technological structures and the social protocols that develop around them.<sup>24</sup>

And yet, our everyday experience with infrastructure is marked by arresting visibility as well, most conspicuously when systems neglect a particular use or population (e.g., a stairway for the person who uses a wheelchair) or break down entirely (e.g., the collapse of a bridge).<sup>25</sup> As Larkin has observed, there are other instances of visibility too, specifically when infrastructures are “deployed in particular circulatory regimes to establish sets of effects.” This occurs when an infrastructure—perhaps a new technology or a project that comes out of a political win—remains

visible to certain populations for its distinct symbolic value (e.g., the Panama Canal or the Hoover Dam). Considering this, Larkin proposes, “the point is not to assert [visibility or invisibility] as an inherent condition of infrastructures but to examine how (in)visibility is mobilized and why.”

Along these lines, we can observe in the American media landscape a seemingly pervasive erasure of infrastructure that attributes the architecture of communication systems to individual human actors or cultural forces. These influences perhaps seem more benevolent or appealing than things like distribution networks, legal requirements, and organizational bureaucracy. As such, these latter systems tend to disappear and often remain invisible—until, that is, they become useful as *visible* infrastructures. Take, for example, CBS’s decision in 2017 to briefly black out its programming to Dish TV subscribers; the move intentionally angered audiences by denying them an important football game on Thanksgiving. It was an attempt to put pressure on the satellite service during a tough negotiation.<sup>26</sup> Viewers generally do not care about television distribution or the carriage fees that make it possible. Moreover, the media industries have no interest in asking them to care, except of course when public pressure might benefit their bottom line, as it did then. So to the list of questions posed here, I add these: *Why, in particular moments and in particular forms, do some media infrastructures suddenly materialize? And in general, how is the (in)visibility of media infrastructures mobilized, and why?*

These questions are not rhetorical. The general erasure of infrastructure within comic book culture, as well as its occasional reappearance, served a particular goal. It helped generally to obscure and, when necessary, bolster sources of power, namely big players in the media industries. So while we may know that there is no cabal of executives conspiring in a boardroom to decide what culture will look like, we can understand that those with the most power (via financial capital, political influence, and social standing) have the greatest ability to push a medium toward their own interests. Reflecting on the development of the internet, Christian Sandvig has observed the extent to which the web was “willfully bent” to reflect particular (corporate) visions of the technology’s noblest purpose and best use. As a result, he argues, media infrastructures like the internet usually “do not have the essential characteristics that are often attributed to them.” Rather, these systems form gradually, shaped by the “purposeful decisions” of individuals and organizations with particular intentions and particular “ideas

about what content and which audiences are valuable and indeed how culture ought to work.”<sup>27</sup>

In other words, the intentions and interests of powerful players become embedded within the architecture or infrastructure of most media and communication systems, comic books included. In obscuring or ignoring those infrastructures, we thus obscure and ignore the powers that shape them. Raymond Williams once wrote that “society has a specific organization, a specific structure, and that the principles of this organization and structure can be seen as directly related to certain social intentions, intentions by which we define the society.”<sup>28</sup> In this, he reminds us not only to examine, carefully and closely, these specific structures and organizations, and to understand the logic by which they operate, but also to remember that they exist and come into being, not simply by chance, but by intention. In this historical analysis of the infrastructures that support comic book culture, the intentions that shaped them gradually come into focus, and the everyday workings of the industry and the medium’s course of development become more clear and predictable. We can see what the essential characteristics of the medium became and how they reflected the interests and purpose of certain powerful players.

There were, nonetheless, constraints on that process. Industry does not function in a vacuum, nor does infrastructure act upon itself. As many have noted, including Raymond Williams, infrastructural relations of production may set limits and exert pressures, but “they neither wholly control nor wholly predict the outcome of complex activity within or at these limits, and under or against these pressures.”<sup>29</sup> For this reason, creators, workers, fans, and the general public remain an important part of this story.

Their presence, however, was not in the end potent enough to make comic books a particularly subversive medium. The introduction of corporate control in both publishing and licensing situated the industry at the intersections between film, television, and consumer goods. Once there, it benefited from favorable regulatory and legal regimes, strong financial backing, and also, for wholly unrelated reasons, the support of readers who happened to occupy high social positions. These conditions imbued the comic book industry with power, and as it grew, that power had an increasingly constraining influence. Over time, it marginalized and/or moderated the medium’s more rebellious impulses, reemphasizing a conservative core. To the extent that comic book culture maintained independent or subversive elements, these remnants and outgrowths, more often than not, helped to bolster the medium’s most

powerful players. This last tendency—of the medium’s resistant side to shore up its dominant side—contributes further to comic books’ paradoxical nature; the complex cultural negotiations this dynamic entails make up much of the historical analysis that follows.

### **FROM NEWSSTANDS TO MULTIPLEXES**

Focusing on industrial infrastructure and intersections with other media, this book moves through four critical moments in the history of comic books, ordered roughly chronologically. Taken together, these four case studies portray the evolution of the medium as driven largely by intentional—although not always conscious—strategic thinking by corporate actors. The first of these historical turning points begins with public controversy in the late 1940s and the market crash of the 1950s, events that ultimately strengthened publishing just before the commencement of mass media conglomeration. The story continues through the rise of comic book auteurism and fandom in the 1960s, developments that shaped corporate approaches to the management of intellectual properties. Next comes the reorganization of distribution networks in the 1970s and 1980s, a strategy that modeled niche targeting techniques and enabled the resurrection of comics in quality media of the 1990s. And the history ends in the mid-2000s, when new financial practices opened the door to an explosion of comic book adaptations in mainstream media.

While the historical accounts of these four moments comprise a unified narrative about the comic book industry over the course of eighty years, they also function as four separate case studies. Each revolves around a different topic and takes as its focus a different structural element: respectively, distribution, copyright law, human networks, and financing. Effectively addressing these elements—each of which has both a history that precedes its role in the comic book industry and a story that continues through today—requires a little bit of jumping around. So whenever possible, I include subject headings that distinguish between the different timeframes.

Offering periodizations is always a tricky matter. Events do not generally occur in annual increments, and the patterns, tendencies, and phenomena that constitute this or that period do not shift abruptly, but rather gradually decline as new ones gradually phase in. As such, the eras I define throughout this history should be understood as inherently porous. Along these lines, the dates speckled throughout the book do not purport to constitute a detailed timeline of events. Rather, they are

meant to provide context and to locate the reader within a complex and somewhat irregular chronology.

To provide additional clarification around timelines, chapter 1 gives a brief historical overview, intended to situate the larger narrative within its proper time and place. It is therefore best read before the four case studies that follow. Quick histories of this sort open many books about comics (as well as film, television, and other media). This one is different in a few notable ways. It offers (1) a reperiodization of comic book history, calibrated around licensing instead of publishing; (2) a focus on industry; and (3) an insistence on the form's transmedial nature. Of interest throughout is the process by which the comic book industry gradually enmeshed itself into multimedia production practices, offering up its core elements as drivers of strategic growth throughout the entertainment industry. Pointing to strength of copyright, ease of licensing, and corporate synergistic appeal, it explains why this particular medium was so disposed to emerging trends and how it laid the foundation for media in the digital era. This synopsis works to provide a particular kind of historical context (more political-economic than social-cultural) and a unique historical perspective both for readers who know nothing about comic books and for fans who know everything about them.

From this distinctive vantage point, the first major upheaval in the medium's history takes on a decidedly new significance. In 1954, a morality crusade against comic books (claiming that they posed a threat to the nation's youth) created a public relations crisis for the medium. The industry responded swiftly and decisively, creating a strict code of censorship. But a year later, the comic book market crashed anyway; sales declined rapidly, significantly, and permanently. Most histories attribute the latter incident, an industrial failure, to the former, a social crisis. The assumption is that negative attention from the controversy, followed by misguided changes in content, devalued the medium. Examining the political and economic context of the 1950s, chapter 2 shows that the industry was facing many serious challenges that had nothing to do with content or censorship. Furthermore, self-regulation, implemented for the ostensible purpose of self-censorship, actually helped the industry reorganize and stabilize. Distribution turns out to have been the lynchpin in this transformation. It was the deterioration of distribution networks that had put the industry's overall health at risk, and it was the re-disciplining of these networks that put the business back on firm footing. Through this self-regulation, major publishers gained a competitive edge that they carried into the next era of history, an era they now had the ability to dictate.

With a focus on the 1960s and 1970s, chapter 3 looks at the evolution of the business after the fallout of the 1954 crisis. In order to thrive in tough times, the comic book industry embraced a new business model. Major publishers came under the purview of emerging media conglomerates, and publishing became subservient to licensing. The same era saw the burgeoning of a fan community and the closely related growth of comic book auteurism. At the heart of these simultaneous shifts lay an increasingly troubling paradox. While the rise of fandom afforded more respect to pop culture and its creators, licensing—in relying on corporate-owned intellectual properties and the laws that protected them—tended to exploit these same creators. This uncomfortable tension played out dramatically in the legal struggle of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster to win back the rights to Superman, a character they had invented. With a focus on their complicated tale, this chapter examines the public discourse that praised authors alongside the internal business practices that rewarded owners. Despite ostensible contradictions, both forces were rooted in our deeply entrenched copyright regime. And they both served to bolster corporate interests as the business embarked on its next internal reorganization and push toward multimedia.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the medium's readership narrowed significantly, as comic books moved off of newsstands and into specialty retail stores. Educated adult male fans flocked to these comic shops, forming a loyal and discerning fan community. Chapter 4 considers how this rather distinct demographic transformed into a highly valuable subculture that brought both cultural legitimation and new licensing opportunities to the medium. Structural changes in the media industries resulting from deregulation had intensified the need for quality niche audiences and quality niche media that might appeal to them. A well-educated, culturally savvy, male cadre of industry insiders took this opportunity to exploit comic books, for which they had personal affinities, for a wider audience of consumers. This was especially evident in the success of HBO's 1989 horror anthology series *Tales from the Crypt*, based on a title from the once-scorned publisher EC Comics. The network was able to leverage the show's cult audience and the community network that supported it to rebrand itself as a home for quality television. In the process, it helped transform EC from an emblem of offensiveness into a marker of good taste in less than a generation. Even though the comic book audience had shrunk, its outsized influence helped reopen the door to a wider cultural embrace; the medium was poised for an expansion into products with more mass appeal, most notably the tentpole franchise film.

It took quite a bit longer, though, for mainstream film to turn to comic books as a reliable source of material. For another decade, industry insiders remained reluctant to put major comic book films into production. They associated the genre with a new paradigm in Hollywood that favored large-scale, conglomerate-friendly, multimedia production, and they resisted its encroachment. They also believed that comic book films were not worth the risk their big budgets entailed. Chapter 5 examines how the material conditions of the business in the 1990s helped validate this negative narrative, holding up the development of comic book films, until a new economic paradigm emerged, around 2001, and rather swiftly reversed it. This evolution in Hollywood's financial structure began with speculative buying on the fringes of the film business, and comic book properties were deeply entangled in it from the start. Ultimately, an influx of private capital in film financing, in conjunction with other changes in the business, fundamentally changed the economics of the comic book film. The genre transformed from a highly risky investment into one of the business's safest bets. This shift helped Marvel establish itself as a mini film studio in 2005 and permanently changed the industry narrative about what kinds of projects executives and producers should pursue. The comic book film proceeded to take over franchise film production all over Hollywood and has dominated the cinematic landscape ever since, shoring up comic book publishing in the process.

Notably, a focus on the United States limits the scope of this history. For almost all of the seven decades covered in these pages, the American comic book industry was a primarily domestic business. While publishers did distribute some comics to foreign countries, international sales remained a minor consideration. A number of factors are responsible for this restraint on the industry's international growth, including periodic restrictions around the world on imported comic books from the United States and, more importantly, the vibrancy of regional comic book cultures, particularly in east Asia (where manga was a much larger cultural force than comics were in the U.S.) and in Europe (where *bande dessinée* in France and Belgium and comic books in England largely satisfied local demand). While a comparative or genuinely transnational analysis of global comic book industries would be of great value, such an investigation is outside the scope of this book.

The trends this book does cover, however, are increasingly global in nature. As multimedia production transforms into a transnational affair conducted back-and-forth across various borders (of nations and currencies, of media and industries) by multinational corporations, the



local infrastructures that support these operations expand, overlap, and sometimes collide. Progressing into the future of media industry research, it will be ever more incumbent upon scholars to seriously consider these intersections and to understand what happens in the margins between these corporations, industries, and nations. This kind of agenda will make understanding media infrastructure more important, not less, since it is these often hidden or obscured networks, frameworks, and organizational structures that make these transmedial, transindustrial, and transnational relations possible.