

The Shared Mission of Journalists and Comic Book Heroes: Saving the Day

Paulette Kilmer
Professor
Department of Communication
University of Toledo
Toledo, Ohio
paulette.kilmer@utoledo.edu

In the 1940s, people turned on their radios to follow the adventures of the brave newspaper editor Steve Wilson, who sent chills of dread down the spines of all who perpetrated evil in the *Big Town*. The intrepid journalist declares, “The power of the freedom of the press is a flaming sword. That it may be a servant of all the people, use it justly — hold it high — and guard it well.”¹ Later, Wilson’s derring-do on the radio program inspired movies, a television series, and a comic book.

Big Town’s newshound was not a superhero. However, Wilson believed his newspaper wielded the flaming sword of truth the same as King Arthur’s Knights of the Round Table championed just causes. In *Big Town* and subsequent comics like *EXTRA!*, real-world journalism intersected with the fantasy realm of comic books. The Entertainment Comics Group launched *EXTRA!* with its trio of noble journalists who were stamped from the same mold as Steve Wilson, in the mid-1950s. Unfortunately, the Comics Code Authority forced the publication to cease after only five issues.² Tom Brislin, professor and chair of the Academy of Creative Media at the University of Hawaii, points out that government officials led this attack on the comic book industry, making it one of the most blatant acts of censorship in American history.³ During its short run, *EXTRA!* introduced the surprise ending as a plot device in comics and remains an artifact of both its genre as well as public perceptions of journalism. With superheroes, comic books celebrated the idealized

function of the newspaper as the conscience of society, the watchdog of government, and the defender of the powerless.

Of course, flesh-and-blood reporters do not always embody the idealistic icons presented in the pulp pages; nevertheless, their professional codes cast them in the role of protector of the public interest and encourage them to embrace the mission of serving the public. Today, investigative reporters win Pulitzer Prizes for bringing injustices to light. For example, in 2004, *Toledo Blade* reporters Michael Sallah, Mitch Weiss, and Joe Mahr earned that coveted award for their series about the military cover-up of atrocities in Vietnam.⁴ *Philadelphia Daily News* reporters Barbara Laker and Wendy Ruderman's expose of wrongdoing of the police narcotic squad won the Pulitzer for investigative reporting in 2010.⁵

Even reporters who do not receive national accolades still uphold a code of ethics that emphasizes their watchdog role. In *The Elements of News Writing*, James W. Kershner, a 30-year veteran of newsrooms, begins his list of "Basics of Good Journalism" with the reminder that journalists' primary duty is to the readers — not to sources, media owners, or to themselves.⁶ Moreover, journalists question the mighty and empower the meek to be heard over the noise of business as usual. They shake up the complacent and point out the need for change. A textbook used in reporting classes concludes that news stories inherently grow from a nugget of conflict involving problems that journalists need to solve or mysteries they must resolve.⁷

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics declares in its preamble that "public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy."⁸ To maintain peace and harmony in the community, journalists, like superheroes in comic

books, joust with “enemies” — those who lie or conceal the facts. They share the mission of saving the day with Steve (“Slick”) Rampart; Keith Michaels; the Fox (Paul Patton); Superman (Clark Kent); and Spider-Man (Peter Parker), as well as other comic book superhero newspeople.

Journalists in comic books do not spend much time performing mundane tasks associated with putting out a daily newspaper. According to Brislin, “The journalist’s news assignment is a device to get the characters close to the action, where they are more likely to solve or stop a crime than report on it.”⁹ In one comic book featuring journalists as protagonists (*EXTRA!*), the characters fight crime while on vacation, but they do not file stories. They hang out with the police or federal agents and play sleuth far more often than they conduct interviews. Newshound Michaels shoots three villains to death and his photographer, Slick Rampart, kills one in the debut of *EXTRA!* When a robber tries to kill *EXTRA!* reporter Michaels, Michaels nabs him, repeatedly exclaiming how great a story it is. Ironically, although Michaels “spends 21 of the story’s 52 panels in the newspaper office,” he is never seen writing a single word of his scoop.¹⁰

This inaugural issue went to press without the seal of approval from the Comics Code Authority and was banned, which forced the publishers to tone down the violence in subsequent episodes. The censors inadvertently forced a modicum of reality into *EXTRA!*’s subsequent plots. In DC’s four remaining editions of *EXTRA!* before publication ceased, only police officers — not reporters — fired guns at villains. In reality, job requirements and professional ethics force journalists to forsake the role of crime fighter, even if they happen to be present when someone breaks the law. They are not allowed to brandish revolvers, let alone blow away bad guys.

Nevertheless, unlike real journalists, Michaels and Rampart used their fists more often than notebooks or cameras in gathering the news, despite the censors' condemnation of violence as the corrupter of juveniles, whom critics said were addicted to reading the garish pulp pages. Comic book newshounds took risks and made a living at a job that combined the thrill of chasing crooks with the high of rescuing the innocent — usually at great personal danger.

Certainly, life in real newsrooms virtually never involves such exploits because reporters build credibility through amassing facts from reliable sources. They dig up crucial documents and interview sources who may wish to remain anonymous. On the other hand, the myth of the journalist as super detective appeals to those who find interviewing sources over the phone boring. *EXTRA!* replaced the dull actuality of clacking typewriters and ringing telephones with the drama of smoking pistols, fist fights, and incredible scoops attained by die-hard reporters who risked their lives. In these stories, tough women reporters took care of themselves, punched out gangsters, and smoked cigarettes to exude the macho air required of them for success in make-believe newsrooms. Inevitably, they remained steely eyed, shrewd, and alone.¹¹

Although journalists in comic books are sometimes too busy fighting crime to report the news, they often uphold the same moral code as real reporters. This paper examines comic book journalists as reflections of the crusading spirit of real-life muckrakers and investigative reporters who consider the truth their greatest superpower. Comic book journalists (Superman, the Fox, and Spider-Man) embodied the archetype of the warrior who struggled to make a positive impact on the world. Carol Pearson, who created an archetypal system commonly used in psychiatric and humanities circles, concludes that

warriors aspire to high ideals, fight for things that really matter, and bravely risk their lives to protect the weak. They must face their fears to persevere. In serving others, they increase their strength both spiritually and physically.¹²

To illuminate the spirit of three key superheroes, I have paired them with the precepts that best reflect their experiences and goals. Like living journalists, these paragons of virtue seek to fulfill a quest. For Clark Kent (Superman), that journey involves serving humanity, which encompasses helping the weakest members of the community. Paul Patton (the Fox) devotes his existence to exposing wrongdoers. The confused adolescent Peter Parker (Spider-Man) anguishes over his Uncle Ben's death, which he could have prevented, and subsequently seeks to minimize harm whenever possible.

Superman's Quest: To Serve Humanity

Two Cleveland youngsters, author Jerome Siegel and illustrator Joe Shuster, begin the first Superman comic book in 1938 with a large panel at the top of the page containing a night sky deep in space. The box explains, "Just before the doomed planet, Krypton, exploded to fragments, a scientist placed his infant son within an experimental rocket-ship, launching it toward Earth!"¹³ Instantly, readers know that the baby is an orphan as well as an alien. An elderly Midwestern couple, Jonathan and Martha Kent, find the capsule and take the child to an orphanage. A few days later, they adopt the extraterrestrial waif and name him Clark.

The Kents teach Clark values, instilling within him a desire to use his great powers to help humanity.¹⁴ In the original story, his foster parents die in the summer after he graduates from high school. Clark remains on the fringes of society as an observer, which hones his objectivity, a trait essential to journalists. He cannot fall in love or marry. He must

devote all his energy to making the world a better place. X-ray vision and impenetrable skin complement Superman's incredible powers: "hurdling skyscrapers, leaping an eighth of a mile, lifting an automobile over his head, and running faster than a train."¹⁵

He chooses to write for the *Daily Planet* as part of his resolve "to turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind."¹⁶ When Clark Kent asks for a job, the editor sends him away, but Clark does not give up. "If I get news dispatches promptly, I'll be in a better position to help people," he realizes. "I've got to get that job." He changes into his Superman suit and flies to the top of the building to listen to the editor through a closed window. He hears about a mob attacking the county jail and rescues the innocent prisoner in the nick of time. When the sheriff asks him who he is, Superman replies, "A reporter — Let's get the prisoner back in the cell."¹⁷

The grateful inmate tells Superman that the nightclub singer, Evelyn Curry, murdered a man and framed an innocent rival. Clark phones the editor of the *Daily Planet* to give him the scoop and thus lands the coveted job of reporter. Superman then tracks down the jealous killer who tries to give him the brush off. Meanwhile, the blameless woman, who has been framed, faces execution at midnight unless the governor intervenes. Of course, the caped Man of Steel forces the wily Evelyn to sign a confession, breaks into the governor's mansion, and convinces him just in the nick of time to call off the execution. He ties up Evelyn in the governor's front yard. The following morning, the scoop appears on the *Daily Planet's* front page in the same panel in which Clark arrives for his first day at work for the paper. He is relieved that the article does not mention him.¹⁸

The second page of the first Superman comic book ends with a panel announcing "SUPERMAN" as the "champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to

devote his existence to helping those in need!”¹⁹ Although few reporters have worn capes, newspapers have always sought to help the needy. Even today during the holidays, many encourage readers to contribute to food drives or secret Santa initiatives. Combining editorials with features, which introduce the public to those suffering from poverty, disease, or despair, newspapers have crusaded for changes in laws that affect public health and safety. During the late nineteenth century, a wave of journalists shook up the complacency of high society with a series of exposes that Teddy Roosevelt dubbed “muckraking.” He said the writers were too busy gazing in the mire beneath their feet to view the celestial glories over their heads. Ida M. Tarbell exposed John D. Rockefeller’s unfair labor practices at Standard Oil that had bankrupted small competitors.²⁰ In *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair revealed the appallingly unsanitary conditions of Chicago’s stockyards.²¹ And Lincoln Steffens pointed out municipal corruption in *The Shame of the Cities*.²²

Just as Superman felt called to help the neediest among us, by the late nineteenth century, editors sought to make their newspapers the conscience of their communities and, thus, embody what a historian has called “a positive force for social improvement.”²³ Jacob Riis took photographs of *How the Other Half Lives* in the poverty-stricken neighborhoods of New York City.²⁴ In 1892, a New York City missionary and philanthropist named Helen Campbell became a citizen journalist of sorts in undertaking a study that was published in book form as *Darkness and Daylight*. She described women and children sewing blue jeans all night in tenements where the glare from the beacons on the Brooklyn Bridge made sleep impossible. Shadows immersed their homes in cave-like darkness during the day, so they only saw the sun on the one morning each year that they were allowed to take off from their piecework — Christmas Day.²⁵ No doubt, Superman would have moved the bridge!

In the shadow of Hitler marching across Europe and the Great Depression of the late 1930s, an invincible hero who selflessly served others appealed greatly to folks of all ages. Clark Kent's mild, blundering manner endeared him to audiences because it underscored the foolish tendency of judging too heavily by appearances. In fact, Lois Lane wanted to marry Superman but could not recognize him out of his tights. Perhaps, everybody believes that deep down he or she is wonderful, but most people are too self-absorbed to see those hidden qualities. Siegel, Superman's creator, later explained that he saw himself in the shy, bespectacled weakling who could not impress the girls. Frustration with his own romantic disappointments in high school inspired him to create Superman, who on the surface appeared inept and hopelessly ordinary but underneath was powerful. "It occurred to me — what if I was real terrific? What if I had something special going for me, like jumping over buildings or throwing cars around or something like that? Then maybe they would notice me," Siegel said.²⁶

The Depression Era Superman reassured folks that sheer goodness could rout cruelty, corruption, and other evils. In the second adventure of the comic book series, the editor sends Clark to cover a wife beating at 211 Court Avenue. Of course, Superman confronts the brute. "You're not fighting a woman now!" he yells. The man promptly attempts to stab him. The dagger blade snaps, and Superman snarls, "Now you're going to get a lesson you'll never forget." The bully faints. "Hearing police sirens, Superman hurriedly dons street clothes over his uniform," the narration says. The police find the apartment door torn down and Clark taking notes.²⁷

This kind deed reminded readers that the Man of Tomorrow cared as much about the tormented wife with no one to protect her from her savage husband as he did about

prominent citizens. Journalists today also often write features about domestic abuse, and some have campaigned to inspire their community to build shelters for victims. Since the rise of the women's movement in the mid-twentieth century, journalists have educated their readers about the plight of women caught in abusive relationships. For example, (Lafayette) *Daily Advertiser* reporter Jason Brown and his team won the 2006 DART Award for excellence in coverage of trauma for "The Days After," a 16-page feature, that analyzed how domestic violence had affected the Acadiana region of Louisiana. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma is a global resource for reporters who write about violence and tragedies. *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* won 2008 Dart Award for following Johanna Orozco's recovery in the spring of 2007 after her boyfriend blew off the lower half of her face with a shotgun.²⁸

When Superman turned 50 in 1986, the *DC* comic team revamped Clark Kent. Interest in the Man of Tomorrow had flagged, and the writers realized it was necessary to update the legend. Superman also changed with the times because over the decades new concerns had arisen. In a highly fragmented, technological society, invulnerable heroes seem too remote to matter. Readers want role models who at least in some ways resemble them. To increase Clark Kent's popularity, the editors have allowed him to join the human race. He is no longer the lonely outsider who watches from afar. The former wishy-washy wimp now lifts weights and exudes virility. The girls like him. However, the transformation from worm to stud has cost the superhero. He no longer always behaves saintly. Occasionally, Superman erupts in angry outbursts, and he has lost his power to move planets, walk around the ocean floor indefinitely, outpace speeding bullets, or see around the globe.²⁹

The new Clark Kent also benefits from the advice his elderly foster parents offer. The editors of the comic book resurrected the Kents as part of the facelift to make Superman's alter ego more compassionate. In the words of two scholars, "They give Clark advice on how to cope with his role as hero, reassuring him that his deeds are worthwhile."³⁰ In short, he must resolve the ambiguities in life that confront all modern citizens living in a complex technological world. He doesn't always win at love, either. Lois Lane breaks off her engagement to him. He is fully human, which means he sometimes suffers just like everyone else.

The Fox's Quest: To Expose Wrongdoers

The *Blue Ribbon Comics* anthology series featured the character of the Fox between 1940 and 1942. Joe Blair wrote the plots and Irwin Hasen drew the scenes. Superman used his extraordinary extraterrestrial gifts to fight crime, but his foster parents taught him to hide these abilities because others would fear his strength. In contrast, the Fox, Paul Patton, is a costumed crime fighter more in the tradition of Batman. The Fox is very intelligent, but he does not possess superpowers. Unlike Superman, who from the cradle was marked for greatness, Patton grows up in ordinary circumstances. However, at Penn State he excels at athletics and science. Upon graduation to satisfy his curiosity about photography, he accepts a job as a photographer at the *Daily Globe* newspaper. Adopting a dual identity as the Fox, he designs a costume and gear to supplement his natural abilities. Like a fox, Patton depends on cunning to survive and develops technological gimmicks to help him save the day. He realizes that he needs a subterfuge after a grim encounter with the nefarious Night Riders, who wear hoods like the Ku Klux Klan and commit despicable acts of vigilantism.

The white-haired editor at the *Daily Globe* gives Patton his assignment: "These men

have terrorized the countryside by whipping folks to death! Take the next train to Fleetsville [West Virginia], and get good shots of 'em, but above all look out for Ruth — Goodbye and good luck!" Ruth Ransom, the paper's star investigative reporter, teases Patton, calling him "Mr. All-American." He expresses concerns about taking a cab by himself rather than with Ransom. Ransom admonishes him, "Don't cry, All-Star! Momma will meet you at the hotel!"³¹ Later, the Night Riders beat Patton, leaving him unconscious on the side of the road. He catches a freight train back to New York, expecting to meet Ransom there.

She has not returned. The editor barks: "I gave you orders to get pictures, but above all to take care of Ruth! Now you come running back like a whipped pup!" Paul tries to explain, but the irate news hawk cuts him off. "Think this over — from now on you're our inquiring photographer — Now *get out!*" (Curiously, although the first panel in the episode notes that "due to his interest in photography, the recent college graduate earns a job as a staff photographer," midway through the story, the author concludes: "Paul gets the most loathsome job on the paper!") At home that night, a song on the radio about a fox — "Yah Yah Said the Little Fox, Yah Can't Catch Me..." inspires Patton.

"*That's it!* Why didn't I think of it before!" he exclaims at that "Eureka" moment.

The next few panels describe Patton's amazing application of his college education, which his *Daily Globe* peers jeer. He creates an elaborate "syncro-flash automatic camera" that "will automatically move the film for a new shot after each exposure!" He paints a fox head on the chest of his long underwear, which resembles a black suit: "And the lens and flash bulb will fit right behind the fox eyes." Patton attaches a cable to the camera and threads it through his sleeve. The camera rests on his belt. The Fox garb headdress sports huge mitten-shaped ears.³²

The Fox speeds to Fleetsville where he finds a mob grumbling about the Night Riders, who have kidnapped the sheriff and Ruth Ransom. He confronts the villains: “The Night Riders stand paralyzed as the Fox, camera clicking, breaks into view!” The next few panels relate the action:

“Yah Yah Yah Yah Yaaahh!” the Fox barks.

“Shoot ‘im!” implores a Night Rider.

“Don’t shoot. Ye’ll bring every trooper in the county,” warns another marauder.

“Lookout boys, it ain’t *human*!” exclaims a vigilante.

“Don’t hurt me, I’ll do anything you say,” whines the ringleader of the Night Riders.

“You bet you will — I’ve got your picture practically in the paper,” the Fox declares.

The Fox springs into action, rescues the sheriff and Ransom, and drives the ringleader back to town. He takes his pictures and disappears, leaving the townspeople awed by his ability to vanish before anyone has time to thank him. The Night Riders disperse. Patton submits his spectacular photos. In the *Globe* offices, Ransom files her stories, and Patton asks if the enlargements of the photos he took are any good. Ransom is exasperated, but promises to kiss the Fox if she sees him again. Like Superman’s girlfriend, Lois Lane, Ransom does not recognize the hero in street clothes (which is curious since the Fox drove Patton’s car).

The tale of the clever photographer who outwits villains no doubt amused children in the World War II era. Ironically, the Fox’s zeal to nab the wrongdoers parallels an ugly reality in the history of journalism. Occasionally, premature accusations of guilt before the trial have caused miscarriages of justice. For example, in 1932 following the kidnapping death of Charles Lindbergh’s firstborn, news coverage made it impossible for Bruno

Richard Hauptmann to receive a fair trial. He was executed, although to this day debate continues over whether he committed the crime. Two decades later in 1954, the media implicated Dr. Sam Sheppard in the murder of his young wife in an affluent Cleveland suburb and denied the physician the status of being innocent until proven guilty. Dr. Sheppard was convicted and spent 10 years in prison before being acquitted. At least in the Fox's case, it was clear that he acted only in the interest of exposing evil and serving the greater good.

Spider-Man's Quest: To Minimize Harm

The most reluctant watchdog among the comic book superheroes, Spider-Man, combines elements of both the Fox and Superman. Like Superman, he possesses extraordinary powers. On the other hand, his gifts do not render him invincible. Spider-Man relies upon his intelligence to devise tools (similar to the Fox's inventions) to augment his arachnid advantages. Both Paul Patton and Peter Parker excel in science as high school and college students, but whereas Paul shines as a campus all-star athlete and basks in the popularity his good looks and physical prowess bring, Peter's classmates refer to him as "Midtown High's only professional wallflower."³³ They tease him mercilessly. Even his astounding feats as Spider-Man do not win him acceptance. Part of the genius of his creator, Stan Lee (the editor and publisher of *Marvel Comics*), was making an ordinary person grapple with complications that ensue from the sudden development of talent.

The web slinger acquires his abilities through an accident while visiting an exhibit of radioactivity. No doubt, many shy readers related to Peter when the in-crowd roared off in an automobile yelling, "See you around, bookworm. Give our regards to the atom-smashers, Peter!" Peter cries and vows one day that they will be sorry. Variations of this scenario play

out repeatedly. When Peter visits a science museum, a pathetic little spider caught in a radiation ray absorbs a fatal amount of radiation and in its dying act reflexively bites Peter, giving him new powers.

While Superman knows his powers from infancy, Spider-Man must experiment to discover the extent of his new capabilities. He climbs up walls and, with a hood over his head, steps into instant fame in the wrestling ring. A promoter hands him a wad of bills and offers to put him on the Ed Sullivan TV show. He resents the taunting of his classmates and decides to use his powers solely to benefit his Aunt May and Uncle Ben, who have always provided him with a loving home. Newspapers run banner headlines asking, “Who is Spider-Man?” He ignores a fleeing robber because he considers the criminal none of his business. A few nights later, Peter sees police cars in front of his house. The same thug Peter let escape has shot Uncle Ben to death. The story ends with this observation:

And a lean, silent figure slowly fades into the gathering darkness, aware at last that in this world, with great power there must also come — great responsibility! And so a legend is born and a new name is added to the roster of those who make the world of fantasy the most exciting realm of all.

Guilt, not revenge, motivates Spider-Man. His appeal arises from his connection to readers. Lee and Steve Ditko (the artist who originally drew Spider-Man) set the tone for Spider-Man in the first panel of his debut story:

Like costumed heroes? Confidentially, we in the comic mag business refer to them as ‘long underwear characters’! And, as you know, they are a dime a dozen! But we think you may find our Spider-Man just a bit...different!

In the scene below that announcement, the hip kids make fun of Peter, who belongs to the legion of late bloomers that fills most high schools. Like his readers, he forgets to put film in his camera, scrimps to pay the bills, and sometimes fails to show up for

engagements: “Spider-Man remains Everyman, ‘the superhero who could be you.’”³⁴ He enjoys occasionally donning his costume to torment his detractors. The spider in African-American lore often plays the role of the trickster, and Spider-Man belongs to this tradition. His actions may help everyone around him but do not offer a map for future conduct because, according to one scholar, “he is a projection of desires generally thwarted by society.”³⁵ Villainous spiders terrorize characters in comic books and movies prior to the advent of Spider-Man, who combines the best traits of humanity and arachnids in his crusade for justice.

Indeed, the whiney teenaged Peter matures into an emotionally strong man who understands the limits of his own powers. Despite Spider-Man’s self-knowledge and selfless acts, J. Jonah Jameson, publisher of the *Daily Bugle* newspaper and *Now* magazine, considers him an imposter who preys on the gullible for personal gain. The publisher launches a campaign to destroy Spider-Man. To conceal his identity, Peter insists that checks be made out to Spider-Man. No one will cash them since the superhero cannot prove his identity. Peter’s Aunt May desperately needs the money to pay the rent. Then, the TV shows refuse to put him on air because of a news headline, “Spider-Man Menace.”³⁶

Jameson augments the fiery articles with lectures. “We cannot allow that masked menace to take the law into his own hands,” he declares. “He is a bad influence on our youngsters!” He warns that serious injuries would ensue if children imitated Spider-Man and demands that the “inhuman monster” be run out of town. Nevertheless, Spider-Man puts aside his anger long enough to rescue Jameson’s son, whose space capsule veers off course and drops precipitously through the sky until Spider-Man replaces a defective component in the nose cone, enabling Jameson’s son to manually unfurl the parachute.

Peter nearly falls off his chair with surprise over the next day's headline: "This Newspaper Demands That Spider-Man Be Arrested and Prosecuted!" The editor accuses Spider-Man of tampering with the space capsule to glorify himself. The FBI issues a wanted poster and cautions, "He is dangerous." The bureau offers a reward for his capture. (Even Aunt May worries that Spider-Man will do something terrible before he is apprehended.) These events teach the lad an ugly flaw in human nature, the proclivity to believe the worst about one another. Nevertheless, Peter must earn a living.

When all else fails, Peter realizes that he can sell photos he takes while fighting crime as Spider-Man. Fortuitously, Aunt May gives him Uncle Ben's miniature camera. Peter's first attempt barely succeeds. Still, he manages to snap pictures of the wily Vulture and to sell them to his nemesis, the publisher Jameson. Peter relishes the idea of making his enemy pay him for photos that Spider-Man took. Jameson stops the presses of *Now* to use the sensational close-ups. To protect his identity, Peter insists that the pictures be credited to a *Now* staff photographer. Jameson's willingness to run the photos without caring how they were taken violates the SPJ Code of Ethics. Journalists cannot do anything possible to acquire stories, and in the real world, photographers are not allowed to supply shots without explanations of how they were obtained.

The Fox and Superman worked for principled editors who devoted themselves to serving the public. Peter's boss represents the mongers of sensationalism. "Okay, okay! You can have your little secret! It doesn't matter *how* you got them! The point is, these pictures will make the next issue of *Now* a sell-out! I'll issue a check to you immediately," Jameson tells Peter. He urges Peter to bring him more photos because "we're always in the market for sensational photos! In fact...if you can ever get a picture of that public menace Spider-

Man —³⁷ At the end of the story, Jameson hands Peter a huge wad of bills, and to dismiss the lad who has served his purpose as quickly as possible, suggests he buy some “Twist records.” Peter likes fooling the editor and is relieved that, finally, Aunt May will have enough money to pay her bills. Peter joins the *Daily Bugle* staff and squeaks by on pennies.

The unscrupulous tyrant who treats his news empire like a cash cow contrasts with the hard-working journalist who dedicates his life to serving the public. Although the SPJ Code of Ethics calls for good taste and not pandering to lurid curiosity, Jameson exploits the worst elements of human nature to increase sales.

Ironically, Spider-Man, whom the obsessed editor Jameson seeks to destroy, behaves morally. He defends the helpless against forces of evil and seeks to minimize harm whenever he can. Despite the widespread perception of him as a menace, Spider-Man still captures the Vulture and a parade of other public enemies whose avarice, hatred, and anger have morphed them into monsters.

Peter reluctantly becomes a journalist. His adventures show him the worst watchdogs, like Jameson, and the best, like Joe “Robbie” Robertson, the *Daily Bugle* city editor who advocates fair and responsible journalism. Peter learns that, in the end, responsible journalists and superheroes share the mission of minimizing harm to protect individuals from the loss of their dignity as well as their lives. It is not a calling for the faint of heart. Often success results in public ridicule for both the ethical journalist and the misunderstood superhero. When reporters feel obligated to tell the readers news they do not want to hear, accusations of bias and malicious intention frequently follow. The polls indicate a clear shift over the past 30 years away from trusting the press, which often affects politics because many people believe that liberals control the major media outlets. The loss

of press credibility may lead to serious problems for maintaining a democracy based on an informed electorate.³⁸

Conclusion: Superheroes and Journalists Share the Mission to Save the Day

When Superman burst into the skies during the Great Depression, his mission to serve humanity paralleled the journalist's goal of serving the public. The Fox came along a few years later and fit the paradigm of catching wrongdoers that many real as well as comic book newspaper editors also embraced (sometimes with tragic consequences as in the Dr. Sam Sheppard case). Superman and the Fox reflect a less complex world where people still relied on newspapers and, for the most part, trusted reporters.

Spider-Man represents the changes that have transformed society into an information hive where messages bombard citizens constantly, diluting news to merely one more form of noise. During the Civil Rights Movement, the press focused attention on the consequences of "separate but equal," which led to meaningful changes of heart as well as legislation. Spider-Man's battles with Jameson reflect the mistrust that begins to fester in the nation as people are forced to confront ugly realities (like poverty, the Vietnam War, and injustice) that they would rather ignore. It is easier to blame the ruthless fat cats in the media than to confront injustice.

The study of journalists in comic books suggests that even in the fantasy world, they struggle to serve the public against bigotry, greed, and other evils. They cannot carry out their mission without community support. Public skepticism about the media erodes journalists' credibility, until like Spider-Man they find themselves Public Enemy Number One despite their unflagging efforts to serve the public.

As people have adapted the quick fix of blaming the messenger to the news media over the past few decades, journalists have struggled to maintain their credibility. In *The Image*, historian Daniel J. Boorstin pointed out, “There was a time when the reader of an unexciting newspaper would remark, ‘How dull is the world today!’ Nowadays he says, ‘What a dull newspaper!’”³⁹ His book was published in 1962, but the glut of messages conveyed on TV and through the Internet over the years has intensified the problem of confusing news with amusement and equating trivia with significance. Perhaps the next generation of comic book journalist superhero will save the day by untangling the web of apathy and misinformation that individuals spin around themselves daily.

Endnotes

¹ “Today’s Word — A Flaming Sword!” *Today’s WORD on Journalism*, October 3, 2008, <<http://tedsword.blogspot.com/2008/10/todays-worda-flaming-sword.html>> (accessed January 2, 2011).

² Tom Brislin, “*EXTRA!* The Comic Book Journalists Survives the Censors of 1955,” *Journalism History* 21 (Autumn 1995): 124.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Michael Sallah and Mitch Weiss published a book based on their reporting, *Tiger Force: A True Story of Men and War* (New York: Little, Brown, 2006).

⁵ Barbara Laker and Wendy Ruderman, “Tainted Justice,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, Philly.com, <http://www.philly.com/dailynews/hot_topics/Tainted_Justice.html> (accessed October 23, 2010).

⁶ James W. Kershner, *The Elements of News Writing*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2009), 22.

⁷ Robert Lloyd and Glenn Guzzo, *Writing and Reporting the News as a Story* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2008), 30.

⁸ The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics can be found online at <<http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>> (accessed October 16, 2008).

⁹ Brislin, “*EXTRA!*” 128.

¹⁰ Ibid. Brislin also cites *EXTRA!* No. 4, October 1955, 1-8.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Carol S. Pearson, *Awakening the Heroes Within: Twelve Archetypes to Help Us Find Ourselves and Transform Our World* (San Francisco, CA.: Harpers, 1991), 94-95.

¹³ “Superman,” *Action Comics* #1 (June 1938), in *Superman, from the Thirties to the Eighties*, introduction by E. Nelson Bridwell (New York: Crown, 1983), 22. The rest of Clark Kent’s family details also appear here.

¹⁴ In the first story, Pa Kent says, “Look, Mary — It’s a child.” But that was not her official name. In fact, the names of the Kents varied a bit until the 1950s when the creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, chose Jonathan and Martha as their official monikers. However, novelist George Lowther called them Eben and Sarah Kent in his book, *The Adventures of*

Superman. The TV producers accepted Lowther's names. See FunTrivia.com, "Answers to everything," <<http://www.funtrivia.com/askft/Question28651.html>> (accessed October 20, 2008).

¹⁵ "Superman," 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 25-31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Steve Weinberg, *Taking on the Trust: The Epic Battle of Ida Tarbell and John D. Rockefeller* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008) traces one of the most respected pieces of muckraking in the history of investigative reporting from both Tarbell's and Rockefeller's childhoods through their adult lives.

²¹ Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1906).

²² Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989). It was originally published in book form in 1904 after appearing in *McClure's*. Tarbell also published her Standard Oil expose in the muckraking magazine.

²³ James Aucoin, *The Evolution of American Investigative Journalism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 26.

²⁴ Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890).

²⁵ Helen Campbell, *Darkness and Daylight, or Lights and Shadows of New York Life* (Hartford, CT: A. D. Worthington, 1891). Available at <http://books.google.com/books?id=hL8cAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA54-IA5&lpg=PA54-IA5&dq=Helen+Campbell+and+Brooklyn+Bridge&source=bl&ots=M0m75E-HyP&sig=KqOFgabIVPj0JiimqfwcxTR8X-U&hl=en&sa=X&oi=book_result&resnum=1&ct=result> (accessed October 20, 2008).

²⁶ Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1996), 19.

²⁷ This Superman adventure is quoted at comicbookreligion.com, <http://www.comicbookreligion.com/?c=18233&unnamed_wife_beater> (accessed January 2, 2011).

²⁸ The 2006 DART Newspaper Award Winner for coverage of violence, “The Days After,” can be read online at <http://dartcenter.org/content/days-after>. The 2008 DART award winning series, “Johanna Facing Forward,” is available online at <http://dartcenter.org/content/johanna-facing-forward-0> (both accessed January 2, 2011).

²⁹ See Jeffrey S. Lang and Patrick Trimble, “Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow? An Examination of the American Monomyth and the Comic Book Superhero,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 22:3 (Winter 1988): 170-171.

³⁰ Ibid., 171.

³¹ These and subsequent quotes are taken from *Blue Ribbon Comics*, June 1940. See also http://comiccoverage.typepad.com/comic_coverage/gold_nuggets/ (accessed January 2, 2011).

³² In a mid-1980s revival of the Fox, his son, Paul Patton II, would streamline the ears to pointy projections.

³³ This and subsequent quotes are from Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, *Essential Spider-Man, Volume 1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2002); the pages are not numbered.

³⁴ Les Daniels, *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics* (New York: Abrams, 1991), 96.

³⁵ M. Thomas Inge, *Comics as Culture* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1990), 142.

³⁶ This and subsequent quotes are from Lee and Ditko, *Essential Spider-Man*.

³⁷ Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, “Spider Man: Duel to the Death with the Vulture!” in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #2, May 1963, 8.

³⁸ Carroll Doherty, “The Public Isn’t Buying Press Credibility,” *Nieman Reports*, Summer 2005, 47-48.

³⁹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: The Guide to Pseudo Events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), quoted at www.quoteland.com/author.asp?AUTHOR_ID=729 (accessed October 20, 2008).