

Superman: Man of Steel! . . . Or . . . Man of Boycott?

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Boycott an American icon? Superman? The outcry resonated loudly with comic fans. Could comic retailers and consumers really boycott the great “Man of Steel?” Over 16,000 people had already signed AllOut.org’s petition to do just that (Truitt, 2013). And a few comic book retailers had begun refusing to carry DC’s iconic Superman comics (Sieczkowski, 2013). These consumers and retailers were expressing their disagreement with one of DC’s newest, albeit temporary, Superman comic writers on his views regarding a culturally divisive issue – homosexual marriage.

The timing couldn’t have been worse. Just one month before the April 2013 digital publication of a new highly anticipated Superman comic release, DC Comics learned that one of the artists had just resigned from the project (Truitt, 2013). All of this controversy was occurring only three months before the June release of a new Superman movie, *The Man of Steel*, which had offered the potential to be one of the summer’s biggest blockbusters.

DC/Superman Early History

DC published its first comic, *New Fun: The Big Comic Magazine #1* in February 1935 as National Allied Publications. The company didn’t achieve significant success, however, until it introduced its fourth title, *Action Comics*, in June 1938 with the debut of Superman.

The original creators of the Superman character, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, had spent the previous six years attempting to persuade a publisher (any publisher) to publish the comic. Vin Sullivan, editor of what was then known as Detective Comics (later “DC”) finally decided to introduce Superman only after his associate, Sheldon Mayer, had rescued it from the company’s discard pile. Mayer would later write that the syndicated press had rejected the Superman idea about fifteen times before Donenfeld granted Sullivan the decision to print it or not (Jones, 2004).

Siegel and Shuster had patterned the original heroic Superman character after actor Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. They developed Superman's mild mannered alter ego Clark Kent, complete with glasses and an almost nerdish disposition, as a combination of silent film comedian Harold Lloyd and Shuster. The Clark Kent name, however, was based on popular movie stars Clark Gable and Kent Taylor. Superman's beautiful girlfriend, Lois Lane, was a portrayal of model Joanne Carter, who later married Siegel (Mietkiewicz, 1992). Like most comics at that time, Superman was written to appeal to kids seeking stories of adventure.

For their efforts, Siegel and Shuster sold all rights to the character when they signed an agreement on the back of the check for \$125 that they received in payment for the first Superman story in *Action Comics* #1—an exchange that was common in the “work-for-hire” system of the early comics industry. Although it took months for the company to receive reliable sales figures through the newsstand system of distribution, Superman was a super-sensation (Jones, 2004, p. 141).

The Superman character quickly spawned numerous radio, television, and movie adaptations (the TV and movie offerings included both animated and nonanimated versions) and eventually video games. *The Adventures of Superman* radio series of the 1940s and early 1950s was the first to associate Superman with “truth, justice, and the American Way” (Jones, 2004). Superman had become a DC icon that represented the things American culture valued. Through decades of comics, television series, and movies, different writers and producers modified individual details, but they predominantly maintained the central tenets and values of the character.

Later DC/Comic Industry Transformations

The company was typically referred to as DC Comics even before it officially adopted the DC name in 1977. By that time, DC was owned by Warner Brothers (itself a subsidiary of Time Warner) and had introduced numerous additional characters with various levels of popularity (Wikipedia, 2013).

As the comic book industry had advanced into the 1970s, audience demographics and the system of distribution for comic books had changed dramatically. Instead of being sold through magazine distributors to newsstands and other venues, which could easily return unsold copies to the publisher, comic book companies increasingly began to sell their publications to specialty shops that only sold comic books and comics-related products. These comic book stores would receive the newest issues earlier than newsstand distributors, but although comic book stores received a deep discount from the publisher, the comics were bought by the stores on a non-returnable basis. New issues that weren't sold would go into back issue bins for collectors.

As Douglas Wolk stated in *Reading Comics*, “The direct market transformed the comics industry” (Wolk, 2007, p. 41). Because customers at comic book shops tended to be older (and mostly male) readers who had followed favorite characters and creators for years, the content of comic books became more adult too, with more overt violence and sexuality and sometimes with

more sophisticated themes. The two largest industry competitors, DC and Marvel Comics, increasingly began producing stories for long-time fans that featured long-running plot lines. These plot lines were often embedded in years of narrative continuity and they frequently ran through various comic titles (each title typically featured a specific hero/character). Smaller publishers, who were roughly akin to independent film-makers in the movie industry, could also bring out more experimental titles with smaller print runs.

Because of the importance of the direct market, fan reaction to events in popular titles or to the work of popular creators became increasingly influential in determining editorial decisions by the major publishers. Ultimately, the decisions by DC in response to controversies about Superman and other characters would be driven, in a large measure, by the outcry from comic book fans who supported the direct market system.

By March 2013, DC and Marvel (which was owned by Disney Corporation) jointly held approximately 80% of the comic book market (Siklos, 2008). They also each held the rights to a cadre of highly valuable characters (particularly superheroes) that had originated on the pages of decades of comic books.

Silver Screen Superheroes

Superhero Movie Successes

In recent years, Superman movies, television, video games, and licensing agreements had become significantly more profitable for DC than had comic books. Previous superhero movie successes illustrated DC's desire for *The Man of Steel* to be a substantial success among a much broader audience than it could reach through comic books. Between 1978 and 1987 four Superman movies *combined* to gross just over \$300 million in the United States. By comparison, however, Warner's 2006 movie, *Superman Returns* achieved approximately \$200 million within the US and almost \$400 million worldwide (Dirks, 2013). These figures do not include subsequent movie revenues from consumer movie purchases, rentals, or downloads, nor do they include franchising and merchandise revenues related to these movies.

Other movies based on superheroes had also shown the ability to be huge money-generators. DC, for example, had released a trilogy of movies based on Batman (another highly popular DC superhero) between 2005 and 2012. The 2005 movie, *Batman Begins* had grossed \$205 million in US box office receipts and over \$370 million worldwide. Its 2008 sequel, *The Dark Knight*, however, far eclipsed those numbers by earning over \$500 million domestically and over \$1 billion worldwide – all with a production budget of \$185 million. The 2012 *Dark Knight Rises* earned over \$440 million US and also generated over \$1 billion worldwide.

Similarly, Marvel's 2002 release of *Spider-Man* (Spider-Man was one of Marvel's most popular heroes) had grossed over \$400 million in US box office receipts and over \$800 million worldwide. Its production budget was \$139 million. Given its success, Marvel had since released three other Spider-Man movies as well. Each movie had generated between \$260 and \$373 million in US box office receipts and between \$752 million and \$891 million worldwide.

Previous Superman Movie Threat

DC had to consider the potential effects created by the outcry against their hiring of writer Orson Scott Card. The proposed boycott might not only affect comic book sales, but perhaps even more concerning, it also had the potential to affect sales of Warner's *The Man of Steel* movie. Warner had faced threats to its superhero movies before. In 1977, DC had agreed to pay Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster a \$35,000 per year stipend and to credit them as Superman's creators on the first page of every story. Siegel and Shuster had been struggling for years to regain ownership of their increasingly profitable character or to receive what they considered fair compensation for their efforts. With its anticipated 1978 Superman movie release currently in production, DC had reached this agreement with the two men out of concerns about the public relations effects of Siegel's campaign for fair compensation, which had culminated in a 1976 story on the television news magazine *60 Minutes* (Jones, 2004, p. 320).

Orson Scott Card

Beloved Writer

A lifelong member of the Mormon Church, Orson Scott Card began seriously writing fiction as a theater major at Brigham Young University in the early 1970s. He moved to Salt Lake City in 1976 to be an assistant editor for the church's official magazine *Ensign* before becoming a full-time freelance writer. His highly beloved novel, *Ender's Game*, was first published as a short story in the magazine *Analog* in 1977 before its 1985 release in novel form. The *Ender's Game* novel and its 1986 sequel, *Speaker of the Dead*, had each won science fiction's top two US awards, the Hugo Award and the Nebula Award. Card was the only author to win these two top awards in consecutive years.

By 2013, Card had become one of the US's most decorated writers, having won an impressive list of over 20 awards. As of March of that year, his website listed over 60 books he had published, most of which were in the science fiction genre. *Ender's Game* was scheduled for release in theaters in November 2013 with Card serving as a co-producer. This effort represented the first full length movie based on one of Card's novels. Card's only other movie connection occurred when he was asked to write a novel version of the movie, *The Abyss*, by the movie's writer and director, James Cameron. Cameron's movie and Card's novel each debuted in 1989.

Card also had experience writing comic books. His *Ender's Game* novel series had become so popular that Marvel Comics had created an *Ender's Game* comic based solely on the novels. Card had worked as one of the comic book's writers since the series began in 2008.

Political Activist

As a highly popular author, Card had become a prominent public figure. His open willingness to express his political views, therefore, had received significant attention. Among Card's publicly articulated views, he had expressed his opposition to the legalization of gay marriage. In 2009, he joined the board of the National Organization for Marriage (NOM), a nonprofit organization committed to advocating heterosexual marriages and opposed to the legalization of homosexual marriages (Ray and Hutchins, 2009).

As a resident of Greensboro, North Carolina, Card had written a 2012 editorial for the Greensboro *Rhinoceros Times* explaining his support for Amendment One, a statewide proposal to ban homosexual marriage. This editorial included the following series of excerpts that explained his viewpoint (Card, 2012):

“There's no need to legalize gay marriage. I have plenty of gay friends who are committed couples; some of them call themselves married, some don't, but their friends treat them as married. Anybody who doesn't like it just doesn't hang out with them...

There are no laws left standing that discriminate against gay couples. They can visit each other in the hospital. They can benefit from each other's insurance...

No, legalizing gay marriage is not about making it possible for gay people to become couples...

If there were even a shred of science behind the absurd claims about gender and sexuality coming from the left, there might be a case for allowing this to happen. But there is no science behind it...

In fact, the scientific evidence we have points in the opposite direction: Same-sex attraction is not a strait jacket; people's desires change over time; gay people still have choices; a reproductive dysfunction like same-sex attraction is not a death sentence for your DNA or for your desire to have a family in which children grow up with male and female parents to model appropriate gender roles...

Legalizing gay marriage is about driving all contrary evidence or argument out of the public discussion. That's why the gay-marriage lobby tries to stifle discussion – they have no arguments that stand up to serious investigation.”

Such views drew appreciation from some and condemnation from others as many US citizens felt strongly about the issue. Five days after his editorial was published (May 8, 2012), North Carolina voters approved the Amendment One homosexual marriage ban 61% to 39%. Although North Carolina had joined a list of many states that did not legalize same sex marriages, many other states had passed legislation that did legalize such marriage.

Homosexual Activism and the Comic Industry

DC's "Out of the Closet" Heroes

Marvel had introduced its Northstar character into its popular X-Men series in 1984. In 1992, Marvel revealed Northstar to be openly gay. Marvel writers had Northstar officially become a member of the X-Men team in 2002 and had him marry his long-time boyfriend in 2012 (Clark, 2012).

More recently, DC had also sought to appease homosexual customers and activists by transforming some of its traditional characters. In 2006, DC announced Batwoman (whom DC had ironically introduced in 1956 as a Batman love interest), was a lesbian. Batwoman should not be confused with the more highly known, Batgirl, who was secretly Barbara Gordon (the daughter of Batman's friend, Police Commissioner Gordon) and whom had not been identified as a homosexual.

Batwoman, unlike Batgirl, had made few appearances in the DC Comics since her original introduction. After her sexual preference was revealed, however, Batwoman was awarded a lead role in several issues of the Detective Comics series. The move was met with noteworthy approval from gay rights groups such as the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), who "praised DC for their efforts to diversify their characters" (Hedley, 2009). DC created a new *Batwoman* series in 2011.

Superman's appeal to the homosexual community also became particularly apparent with the 2006 movie release of *Superman Returns*. The Advocate, a magazine targeted toward the homosexual community asked "How Gay is Superman?" in discussing the connection between Superman and the gay community (Duralde, 2006). As summarized by ABC News, "like many gays and lesbians, Superman has a secret life. In the closet or phone booth, as the case may be, Superman has another identity that he doesn't share with anyone" (Tapper, 2006).

Despite its willingness to announce homosexual heroes in comic books, however, Warner and DC were quick to denounce the connection of its iconic Superman hero and homosexuality – particularly in relation to its movie. Before the movie was released, Bryan Singer, director of *Superman Returns* and a homosexual himself, stated that Superman "is probably the most heterosexual character in any movie I've ever made." (Tapper, 2006). None-the-less, Warner did

purchase advertising time on Logo, a cable channel that proclaims itself as “the channel for Gay America” (Horn, 2006).

Further distinguishing DC’s approach to its broadly-targeted movies as compared to its comic books, DC sought to deepen its comics connections with the homosexual community four years later. In 2010, DC confirmed what many comic fans had already suspected -- that one of the characters known as Starman—in this case, a blue alien version—was gay. Although Starman had originally appeared in the 1940s, the character had been largely forgotten until a 1990s series that featured both the son of the original Starman and the gay, blue alien version as a supporting character. Because this version of Starman was a relatively minor character, DC’s announcement of his homosexuality received less attention than its announcement regarding Batwoman.

DC “outed” another gay superhero in June 2012. Having “leaked” that one of its traditional superheroes would be coming out of the closet that summer, DC had already created significant buzz (both positive and negative). In the second issue of a new series titled *Earth Two*, DC reintroduced the Green Lantern of Earth Two (a distinct, yet similar Earth that exists only in an undetectable dimension from the Earth 1 on which we live) as a younger character. Earth Two’s Green Lantern, Alan Scott, was actually the original Green Lantern character of the 1940s (Sacks, 2012). His character should not to be confused, however, with either of the more commonly known Earth 1 Green Lantern characters, Hal Jordon or Jon Stewart.

On Earth Two, Alan Scott had been a middle-aged hero with a homosexual superhero son, Obsidian. When DC changed Alan Scott to be younger, Scott did not have a son. Having sacrificed Obsidian, the writers chose to announce Alan Scott as being homosexual instead (Perpetua, 2012).

As expected, DC received differing reactions. Rich Ferraro, spokesman for LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) praised DC’s decision. “Today’s LGBT young people can see gay characters in comics, movies and many TV shows who show them that they too can grow up to be parents, leaders, or even superheroes.”

Conversely, the One Million Moms group issued a statement expressing concern. One Million Moms asserted that “children mimic superhero actions and even dress up in costumes to resemble these characters as much as possible. ... Can you imagine little boys saying, “I want a boyfriend or husband like X-Men?”

The Threat: Fire Orson Scott Card or Face Superman Boycott

In February 2013, DC announced a special anthology of Superman stories that would be co-written by Orson Scott Card. This book was scheduled to appear digitally in April 2013 before its print version would be sold by retailers in May.

Despite having generated positive momentum with homosexual activists, after DC announced Card as a writer for this forthcoming Superman comic, the gay community outcry began in earnest. AllOut.org's petition specifically called for DC Comics to fire Card from the project – making it clear that if Card did not lose this job they would call for a Superman boycott.

Reactions posted online, including news commentaries as well as personal blog sites, varied significantly. The more extreme anti-Card reactions included personal attacks and name calling against Card for his beliefs and against DC for having hired him. Others, such as blogger Joseph Vandehey, however, articulated their reasoning for opposing Card as a Superman writer. Vandehey explained his position as follows (Vandehey, 2013):

What we know about a writer (or director or actor or otherwise) alters our expectations of what we will receive, for better or worse. Someone who knew nothing about Card might pick up "Ender's Game," enjoy it and go searching for other books he's written. For that person, all they need to know about Card is that he writes good books.

But that is not an experience that I can have any more. I haven't read "Ender's Game" yet (in fact, the only book of Card that I have read is his "How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy"). Now however, if I open up "Ender's Game," I will bring to it my knowledge of Card's political views: As I read, I would, in the back of my mind, have to square my agreement to parts of the book with my disagreement to parts of its author's philosophy.

Conversely, other online writers supported Card's rights to his political and social opinions. Those who provided particularly extreme reactions resorted to name calling against anyone supporting the boycott. Others, such as Jeffrey Meyer, verbalized their reasons for opposing the boycott as stated below. Of note, the "Phantom Zone" Meyer mentions in his quote below was the dimensional limbo that Kryptonian criminals were sentenced to before Superman's home planet exploded (Meyer, 2013):

Superman famously stands for "truth, justice, and the American way." Blacklisting someone for his/her political beliefs, regardless of what they are, is patently unjust and un-American. This new McCarthyism is something that needs to be banished to the Phantom Zone.

In mid-February, DC responded to the outcry with the following public statement (Fetzer, 2013):

As content creators we steadfastly support freedom of expression, however the personal views of individuals associated with DC Comics are just that — personal views — and not those of the company itself.

DC's public statement did little to quiet the boycott threats, which prompted retailers' concerns over how it could affect their customers and their businesses. One owner of a Baltimore, Maryland area comic store, for example, said he would not carry a Superman story written by Card because it could lead his many gay customers to think that he (or that someone in his store) supported Card's opposition to legalizing gay marriage (Rosen, 2013).

On March 5, DC received news that artist Chris Sprouse had stepped off of the project – specifically citing the controversy in his choosing to quit. With calls for a boycott, a few retailers refusing to carry DC's Superman upcoming anthology, and an artist having quit, DC faced a significant dilemma. Perhaps even more importantly, Warner's upcoming *The Man of Steel* offered the potential to generate substantial profits – and the production costs had already been spent. Time Warner hardly desired a public relations disaster at this time.

That said, some boycotts had been known to backfire and actually generate increased sales for a company, particularly if a significant percentage of the public supports the views of that company (Glickman, 2012). A recent and somewhat related example of a backfiring boycott had occurred one year earlier regarding the Chick-fil-A fast food restaurant. After Chick-fil-A's CEO Dan Cathy had publicly professed his support of traditional marriage in the summer of 2012, supporters of homosexual marriages called for fast food consumers to boycott the restaurant. In response, supporters of traditional marriage declared August 1, 2012 to be Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day. Chick-fil-A set record sales levels that day as consumers willingly waited in lines that wrapped around buildings just to get inside the door. Some locations ran out of food and were forced to close early due to the enormous sales volumes. Some customers willingly waited in lines for up to two hours (Bingham, 2012).

DC Comics couldn't be certain how Superman would fare if faced with a similar boycott. The most recent national poll of the legalization of homosexual marriage had been released earlier that week and showed an even split on the issue: 46% in favor and 46% opposed (Blanton, 2013), which was similar to polls a year earlier when the Chick-fil-A boycott had been called.

Such an evenly split difference of opinions on this issue didn't make DC's decision any easier. Should DC fire a man over his political and social opinions? Should the company retain Card's services despite the risk of lost comic sales and the potential risk of lost movie revenues? Should Card's highly successful career as a science-fiction author affect the company's decision? With so much at stake and a divided American public, DC had little time remaining to decide how to address this controversy.

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