TARGET AUDIENCE CHILDREN: AN ANALYSIS OF U.S. PROPAGANDA THROUGH THE COMIC BOOK MEDIUM

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ABSTRACT

In the fall of 1996, the U.S. government, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and DC Comics produced a landmine awareness comic book for distribution during peacekeeping operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Superman – Deadly Legacy became the first of several comic books designed to address the hazards of landmine remnants found in war-torn countries during such peacekeeping operations. The designers hoped to reach teenaged children to educate them on lifesaving measures. The American propagandistic misinformation no matter how benign its intentions about proper landmine risk education techniques embedded into the storylines calls into speculation the effectiveness of using the comic book medium on a foreign target audience.

The historical integration of comic books as propaganda and education by both civilian and military organizations such as the Committee on Public Information (CPI), the Office of War Information (OWI), and Psychological Operations (PSYOP)/Military Information Support Operations (MISO) provides background into understanding how printed items are used to transmit messages that “win hearts and minds.” A review of commercial U.S. comic book methodology and construction reveals the power of the
medium and its influence on readers. *Superman – Deadly Legacy*, and *Superman and Wonder Woman – The Hidden Killers* were evaluated for content and design involving propaganda and education. Case studies from the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) conducted between 2002 and 2005 involving Bosnia, Nicaragua, and Kosovo were also reviewed for lessons learned regarding the these specific books. Finally, studies conducted over the course of comic book history for use in classrooms as an education tool were analyzed to determine if comic books are an effective medium for teaching a target audience.

The analysis of the two comic books and the GICHD studies reveal that the superhero design and educational messages did not effectively reach the target audience as originally intended. The superhero concept was not easily identifiable by a foreign target audience in remote areas, such as Nicaragua, and if distributed to children that were too young, the intended message had countering life-saving effects. Studies reveal that the comic book medium can be an effective teaching tool, but its use requires incorporating research about the target audience during the development phase of the product. By applying lessons learned from previous operations which utilized comic books, it is clear that comic books have the capacity to be an effective part of the U.S. government print arsenal for both propaganda and humanitarian/peacekeeping operations if they are properly used with an awareness of the daily concerns and the cultural assumptions of the target audience.
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INTRODUCTION

PROPAGANDA, EDUCATION, AND EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATING TO THE TARGET AUDIENCE

In March 1996, the United States Army sent me to Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina to print leaflets, posters, handbills and other products in support Operation JOINT ENDEAVOR as part of NATO’s Implementation Force (IFOR) and its mission of maintaining peace. Over the coming months and years the print team produced millions of items disseminated all over the country. Newspapers with information regarding public interests and anti-landmine awareness campaigns were just two of the major themes of many items that were developed. The printed materials created undoubtedly left a positive impact on the country and also gave the team a proud sense that we had made a difference for thousands of people who were trying to rebuild their lives following armed conflict.

Over the course of several months, many of our products went to the schools and the children in the country. During that time, I remember asking myself about how different growing up in a country at war was from my own white picket fence in the Pacific Northwest. Activity and coloring books containing landmine awareness hazards were a foreign concept for me. Important as they were for children in Bosnia, I could never have imagined growing up in America receiving classes on how to be watchful for anti-personnel mines while walking in wooded areas. The images contained both in these books and other products we produced stuck with me.
Several years later in 2002, I was on another print team in Afghanistan. While performing rotating guard duty, I remember seeing a small local boy, younger than twelve, riding his bicycle on a dirt road with an AK-47 on his back. By this time I had children of my own, and could not fathom handing them a weapon at such a young age. These experiences opened my eyes to show me that I had lived my life in a bubble detached from the realities that face many people all over the world.

A few years later in 2005, I was placed in charge of printing comic books for Iraq that were part of yet another campaign supporting Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. Comic books were not a new medium for the United States Government to disseminate, but this was the first time I could recall that our unit had actually printed them. During the IFOR campaign from previous years, Superman comic books were published by DC Comics, supporting anti-landmine awareness education. Of the many types of printed materials the military develops, comic books are by far one of the more interesting in the print arsenal due to their quality when compared to standard posters, handbills and leaflets.

All these experiences eventually culminated to university studies geared toward gaining an understanding of communication in providing information and shaping human values. As someone who has printed and disseminated millions of items in support U.S. missions all over the world, it is hard not ask various questions about the impact of what we produce and how it perceived on an audience. Narrowing the scope to campaigns that opened my eyes to the world beyond U.S. borders, I have opted to
take a closer look at Superman comic books produced in support of demining operations all over the globe. To begin this research, however, requires a quick look at an essay written by George Orwell in 1944, “Propaganda and Demotic Speech,” proclaiming that all too often messages are lost in translation because the agencies that issue them are detached from their audience.

This well-known author of *1984* writes that even “posters, leaflets and broadcasts which are intended to give instructions, to tell people what to do in certain circumstances, often fail in their effect.”¹ To support this statement he cleverly describes the scene in England littered with war posters offering instructions on how to respond to air raid sirens during World War II. Orwell said that they were completely ineffective because people could not determine if the warbling sound meant “Alert,” or “All Clear,” since “few people attach any definite meaning to the [warble] word.”² This loss in meaning is then applied and discussed in length regarding speeches spoken to an audience which is unable to decipher the message; politicians use language that simply has no merit to the ordinary citizen.

Orwell was right on the mark when he made his observations. He underscores the importance of not only learning about the target audience, but how to reach it in a language that it understands. The comic books produced by and for the U.S. Government have a specific target audience in mind when they are created. As will be

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² Ibid.
discussed, the medium itself is not something like a poster trying to explain air raid warning signals; instead it becomes an entire experience for its readers that will take them on a journey of discovery. The studies presented in this paper are from peacekeeping operations which, by and large, would appear to have little to do with U.S. government propaganda. Alternatively, because these are products created in the United States for a foreign audience, then perhaps propaganda still exists in thematic underlying messages not as overt as their educational covers.

Orwell also writes that “revolutionary propaganda is incredibly ineffective . . . . At present propaganda only seems to succeed when it coincides with what people are inclined to do in any case.”3 This statement bears merit when dealing with the topic of education on demining because during the mid 1990s a major push developed for the complete destruction of landmines in former war-torn countries. This is not, of course, calling for a revolution within a foreign government, but rather a revolution within a mindset. The United States is actively engaged in demining operations around the world, but if the host nation is not actively pursuing a common goal, then it would appear that the America would fail in its endeavor. This raises questions on how to effectively aid in the education of a foreign audience on the dangers of landmines while also moving forward to clear the country on the mines themselves.

In order to gain a better understanding of whether or not comic books are an effective form of education, research will be conducted and then applied to the military

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3 Ibid., 140.
model. Afterward a determination can be made if this type of product is indeed something that needs to be continued, or perhaps shelved and regarded as nothing more than a lesson learned.

Since that trip to Bosnia more than fifteen years ago, I have contributed to other major print campaigns supporting theaters in Afghanistan and Iraq. Though other comic books have continued to be created for those missions, nothing has been as memorable as products produced the IFOR campaign. I hope our military presence made a positive difference for the citizens in Bosnia, as I know that the impact that their country left on me will never be forgotten. Orwell’s message regarding demotic speech and the importance of effective communication is an essential part of speaking to a foreign audience. It is applicable to all the mediums, whether print, broadcast, or face-to-face, that the America chooses to use to accomplish its goals. Ultimately, effective communication is the foundation needed to gain both trust and help in making the world a better and safer place in which to live.
CHAPTER 1

WINNING THE HEARTS AND MINDS

We did not call it propaganda, for that word, in German hands, had come to be associated with deceit and corruption. Our effort was education and informative throughout, for we had such confidence in our case as to feel that no other argument was needed than the simple, straightforward presentation of facts.

– George Creel, How We Advertised America

The dissemination of propaganda has been debated since its inception. Education and propaganda should not be confused as interchangeable terms, but when the military is involved in disseminating messages to foreign audiences, there is a possibility that American ideologies permeate the medium. A review of propaganda and its integration into military operations offers insight into understanding how the U.S. military is constantly seeking new ways to interact with foreign audiences in the hopes of winning hearts and minds overseas.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines propaganda as a term first coined in 1622 by the Catholic Church in an attempt to propagate the faith. In light of world religious events occurring during seventeenth century, Pope Gregory XV formed a committee to “regain the faithful in all those parts of the world where Protestantism had been established, and to bring the light of the true faith to heathen lands.” Over the course of the next 300 to 400 years, that definition evolved. For purposes of this

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research, propaganda as defined by Randy Duncan and Paul Smith, authors and comic book scholars, will be used:

Propaganda is a series of related communication acts that propagate, or spread, a particular interpretation of an event. Propaganda tries to reach a large audience through the use of mass media and attempts to create a uniformity of interpretation among audience members by using what are arguably manipulative techniques. ³

Manipulation in this definition plays on emotions, attitudes, or behaviors which invoke a response from the recipient that changes his frame of mind. Though the definition is not all inclusive it does capture the sentiments and basic understanding of how propaganda works.

**Civilian Propaganda**

Propaganda has arguably been around since the beginning of mankind, but the modern understanding and study came into being during World War I. Like other leaders of nations during the Great War, President Wilson recognized the power of propaganda in a world where public opinion was becoming increasingly important and established the Committee of Public Information (CPI) led by journalist George Creel. The CPI was charged with “mobilizing the mind of the world so far as American participation in the war was concerned.”⁴ Creel, a master manipulator, as well as a close friend of the president, could easily be dubbed one of the founding fathers of modern efforts of propaganda. He would later write about his experiences with the CPI in *How

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⁴ Creel, *How We Advertised America*, xiii.
We Advertised America: The First Telling of the Amazing Story of the Committee on Public Information that Carried the Gospel of Americanism to Every Corner of the Globe. The book’s significance through the historical lens of gaining an understanding into today’s modern propaganda cannot be understated as he writes:

There was no part of the great war machinery that we did not touch, no medium of appeal that we did not employ. The printed word, the spoken word, the motion picture, the telegraph, the cable, the wireless, the poster, the sign-board – all these were used in our campaign to make our own people and all other peoples understand the causes that compelled America to take up arms.5

Based on Creel’s statement, the evidence of the lengths to which America fought to produce messages to win the hearts and minds, both at home and abroad, during the war effort is all too apparent.

Not everyone was supportive of Creel’s ideas for propaganda. Walter Lippmann, a Wilson advisor and journalist, felt that Creel and the CPI had manipulated the news to bolster war support at home.6 He became a staunch advocate for identifying problems with “patriotic” news censorship, marking it as a detriment to U.S. citizens and their government.7 From his own U.S. military intelligence experience, Lippmann fully understood the power of manipulation and the profound effects that propaganda can have over the people. Eventually, the overreaching efforts of the CPI caused a backlash of purported propaganda misuse, the consequences of which resulted in its closure on

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5 Ibid., 5.


7 Ibid., 65-66.
June 30, 1919. The lessons learned from the CPI experience caused two fundamental changes regarding propaganda operations during later periods of armed conflict. First, because of the actions taken, not just by the United States but also by its allies, the term propaganda became stereotyped for having a negative connotation associated with deceitful messages that manipulate the public. This led the U.S. government to be more cautious when dealing with propaganda activities. Secondly, lessons learned from the actions of the CPI taught future political leaders to better control propaganda efforts during times of conflict. Finally, the extensive use of propaganda by totalitarian regimes in the 1930s led democracies to become increasingly suspicious of it, even when its leaders felt they had no choice but to employ it as a weapon of warfare against ideological enemies.

The evidence of change was clear when President Roosevelt oversaw the creation of the Office of War Information (OWI) during World War II. The function of the OWI was much the same as the CPI in its missions to inform Americans and the world about U.S. war aims and the values of the United States. Greater oversight and transparency were implemented into the OWI’s structure, which was far less centralized than the CPI. Another major important difference that emerged from a broader OWI

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8 Creel, How We Advertised America, ix.

program was the organization of military efforts that would eventually be coined “psychological warfare.”

Other government agencies were created and then later dismantled as new conflicts emerged and concluded. The United States Information Agency (USIA), for example, was created in 1953 to deal with the ideological aspects of the Cold War, and once the war was over, it was merged with State Department in 1999. In the United States, however, the founding principles of print, broadcast, and face-to-face dissemination of information on a large scale can be attributed to the actions of the CPI, as these methods continue to be sustained throughout every conflict since World War I.

**Military Propaganda**

Dissemination of propaganda products overseas has typically involved a military counterpart. In World War I, for example, Walter Lippmann, serving as a captain in military intelligence, helped to “prepare propaganda leaflets to be dropped behind the German lines.” If the words “public relations” would eventually replace the term “propaganda” on the civilian front and soften its negative stigma, then “psychological warfare/operations” equaled the switch for military terminology. The full power of the

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11 Stephen Vaughn, “Prologue to Public Opinion: Walter Lippmann’s Work in Military Intelligence,” *Prologue, Quarterly of the National Archives and Records Administration* 15, no. 3 (Fall 1983): 151.

military usage for propaganda was not fully embraced until World War II. While making preparations to invade Northern Africa, General Dwight D. Eisenhower wanted to integrate propaganda into his TORCH operation.\textsuperscript{13} “To that end he incorporated OWI and [Political Warfare Executive] PWE personnel as well as those from the American Office of Strategic Services and the British Ministry of Information into a new Psychological Warfare Section, soon known as the Psychological Warfare Branch, of Allied Force Headquarters.”\textsuperscript{14} Its mission was to develop, control and integrate propaganda into an organized psychological warfare campaign.\textsuperscript{15} Author Allan Winkler captures the methods they used to accomplish these goals:

As the campaign got underway [Psychological Warfare Branch] PWB “psychological warriors” moved to seize North African media facilities that could be used for Allied publicity. They took over newspaper plants, radio studios, and movie theaters that they could use for their own messages to Europe and Africa. In time they set up propaganda shops with contained publications and pictorial displays lauding the Allied cause . . . .\textsuperscript{16}

Their techniques worked and the overwhelming success of its use in the TORCH operation permanently sealed the marriage of propaganda and the military.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{13} Winkler, \textit{The Politics of Propaganda}, 114.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. The Political Warfare Executive (PWE) was the British propaganda arm.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 115.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 117.
As World War II progressed, psychological warfare continued to evolve, and by the time the Cold War had started it had incorporated some major changes. Author Kenneth Osgood captures the new methods of fighting a war with nonmilitary action:

Covert operations, trade and economic aid, diplomacy, the threat of force, cultural and educational exchanges, and more traditional forms of propaganda were all seen as important instruments of psychological warfare. . . . It was often interpreted synonymously with “covert operations,” including all unorthodox and unofficial measures employed in the Cold War effort. Psychological warfare had become, in essence, a synonym for cold war. 18

This new type of warfare would not be limited solely to the military; other agencies within the federal government saw its potential. Though the USIA and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) shared a role as the primary drivers of propaganda during this time, it was not limited to these organizations. 19 Osgood reports that “dozens of agencies participated in Cold War propaganda campaigns, including the National Security Council, the White House, the State Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Department of Defense, the Army, and foreign economic assistance agencies . . . .” 20 As the Cold War waged on, efforts by those organizations would continue.

The 4th Psychological Operations Group (Airborne), formally created in November 1967 in the Regular Army, was created to support operations in Vietnam. 21


19 Ibid., 87.

20 Ibid.

The infrastructure of this new organization ultimately became a pool of regional global experts and linguists who understood the political, social, and religious aspects of the major theaters of the world.\textsuperscript{22} It also contained experts in message dissemination who understood print, broadcast, and face-to-face mediums in order to reach their respective target audiences. This new unit created a highly efficient element that could be used not only for war, but also aid in global peacekeeping operations and humanitarian assistance relief. Any location around the world that required American intervention is likely to have been studied or actually impacted by military personnel involved with this group.

Over the past several decades, the 4\textsuperscript{th} Psychological Operations Group (Airborne) has gone through several spurts of growth and transformations to meet the demanding changes in global conflict and peace operations including but not limited to:

- Operation URGENT FURY – Grenada, 1979
- Operation JUST CAUSE – Panama, 1989
- Operation DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM – Kuwait/Iraq, 1990
- Operation UPHOLD DEMOCRACY – Haiti, 1994
- Operation JOINT ENDEAVOR – Bosnia - Herzegovina, 1995
- Operation ALLIED FORCE – Kosovo, 1999
- Operation ENDURING FREEDOM – Afghanistan, 2001
- Operation IRAQI FREEDOM – Iraq, 2003\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
The varied missions assigned to the unit prove the flexibility to conduct military operations, counterterrorism, noncombatant evacuation operations, foreign internal defense, unconventional warfare, humanitarian assistance, and other support operations.²⁴ Throughout the course of each unique assignment, fundamental tools, such as print, broadcast, or face-to-face/loudspeaker mediums, are used to get messages out to the various populations.

Lessons learned from U.S. personnel through many global conflicts are continually applied to rules governing the use of propaganda by U.S. military personnel to include:

- United States public law. Title 10, United States Code (USC), Section 167
- Presidential executive order S-12333
- Geneva and Hague Conventions
- Treaties in force
- Host Nation statutory constraints
- Rules of engagement
- Domestic laws
- Fiscal laws
- Communications – to include agreements between the United States and Host Nations²⁵

²⁴ Army Field Manual (FM) 3-05.30, Psychological Operations (April 2005), Section 2-11 – 2-23.

²⁵ Ibid., Section 1-26.
The U.S. military is not authorized to conduct psychological operations within the borders of the United States, or against any U.S. citizen abroad.\textsuperscript{26} With all of these regulations and orders in place, it is important to recognize exactly how seriously and carefully operations such as these are viewed and conducted today.

In the summer of 2010, Psychological Operations (PSYOP) was renamed Military Information Support Operations (MISO), a name better suited at capturing actual mission focus while officially dissolving the words “psychological operations” and the negative Cold War connotations associated with that term.\textsuperscript{27} The United States Army Special Operations Command official web site quotes: “MISO is the dissemination of information to foreign audiences in support of United States policy and national objectives.”\textsuperscript{28} The 4\textsuperscript{th} Military Information Support Group (Airborne) continues to be a mainstay in the military arsenal for persuading audiences of “enemy, neutral, and friendly nations and forces to take action favorable to the United States and its

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\item \textsuperscript{26} “Presidential executive order. DOD implementations policies of Executive Order S-12333, \textit{United States Intelligence Activities}; DOD Instructions S-3321.1, (S) Overt Psychological Operations Conducted by the Military Services in Peacetime and in Contingencies Short of Declared War (U); and National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 130, \textit{U.S. International Information Policy}, direct that U.S. PSYOP forces will not target U.S. citizens at any time, in any location globally, or under any circumstances.” Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Kevin Maurer, “Army Renames its Psychological Operations Unit,” \textit{The Wichita Eagle}, July 3, 2010, News section.
\end{enumerate}
Though MISO has come a long way from Creel’s CPI, winning the hearts the minds through non-forceful means is still a founding principle.

Similar to efforts used during World War I and World War II, leaflets, handbills and posters continue to be the primary products used to reach target audiences through the print medium. The mass appeal of these products stems from the visual interest they create through graphic images. Over the years MISO has produced other specialized products to reach a variety of people through many different types of campaigns. One of the more interesting developments was the use of the comic book medium.

It is no secret that the government has, at times, produced its own series of comic books to deliver persuasive messages. In the 1960s the CIA distributed *Mr. Ba’s Family and the Phoenix Operation* to the Vietnamese countryside hoping to gain intelligence on Viet Cong activity.\(^\text{30}\) Later in 1984 it also produced *Grenada: Rescued from Rape and Slavery* which supported U.S. military operations and depicted Grenadians cheering at the fact that communism was ending.\(^\text{31}\) Other more recent comic book campaigns have continued to be developed for the Global War on Terrorism supporting military operations in Iraq. Collaborative developments such as these continue to demonstrate the integration of the civilian sector with military assets to produce products used to the win the hearts of minds of people all over the world.

\(^{29}\) Ibid.


\(^{31}\) Ibid., 255.
CHAPTER 2
COMIC BOOKS, THE SUPERHEROES, AND HOW THEY ARE MADE

The birth of modern comic books\(^1\) coincidently exploded into circulation around the same time that the CPI was saturating the world in Americanism during World War I.\(^2\) Its earlier roots stem from comic strips published in newspapers during the latter half of the nineteenth-century, which “satirized the foibles of domestic life, social relations, and ethnicity in the tradition of vaudeville routines. Because of their humorous qualities they became known as comic strips or ‘funnies.’”\(^3\)

Comic strips are “narrative in the form of a sequence of pictures – usually, but not always, with text. In length it can be anything from a single image upwards, with some strips containing thousands.”\(^4\) People became accustomed to comics in newspapers, so when pulp magazines began to emerge with similar stories and images in the early twentieth-century, a readership base was already established. “Most of the early comic book publishers, in fact, came from the pulp magazine industry.”\(^5\) Not all of the pulp publications were humorous in content, but because the pages used sequential

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\(^1\) The term modern comic books refer to items similar to what can be picked up at newsstands today.


\(^5\) Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 2.
art like that in the newspapers, the word “comic” became firmly attached to the medium regardless. In January 1929, as pulp fiction merged with the pulp heroes, strips featuring Tarzan, Buck Rogers and others became the norm.

Later, the 1930s bore witness to some of the most iconic comic book figures known today: Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, which appeared in 1941. Accounting for the initial attraction to the medium requires only a quick look at the national setting during their creation. The characters were evolving out of the era of the Great Depression and included patriotic and morally upright crime fighters who helped those who could not help themselves. The superhero icon thus became a unifier in American identity. “By the summer of 1941 comic books were selling at the rate of 10 million copies a month. There were more than twenty-nine comic book publishers, and over 150 different titles were being published.”

Because of its popularity, logic yields the obvious conclusion that the medium would be used as a vessel to promote American propaganda. Perhaps one of the more memorable characters to evolve from World War II would be the unforgettable red, white and blue hero named Captain America, whose exploits to take down Adolph

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6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., 3.

8 Ibid., 14-19.

9 Ibid., 11.

10 Daniel Stevenson, Year by Year Title Listing, Unpublished Index, July 24, 2008., quoted in Randy Duncan and Paul Smith, The Power of Comics: History, Form and Culture (New York: Continuum, 2009), 33.
Hitler sprang forward a whole year before the U.S. entered World War II. Even more importantly, however, superheroes began reflecting the national sentiment of getting everyone involved in doing something for the war effort. “Superman urged readers to give to the American Red Cross. Batman and Robin asked boys and girls to ‘keep the American eagle flying’ by purchasing war bonds and stamps.” The writers and publishers of these iconic figures were using their medium to promote unity and American ideologies. According to Danny Fingeroth: “A hero embodies what we believe is best in ourselves. A hero is a standard to aspire to as well as an individual to be admired.” The appeal then becomes that heroism, which lies within the individual, supports the team at large. If everyone is doing their part, then everyone can be a hero. Fingeroth concludes:

[The hero’s values are society’s values. That’s not to say that the hero is a Republican or Democrat, a Christian or a Jew. But the rules both spoken and unspoken, that we live by – the ones that say, “Our society isn’t perfect, but it’s pretty damn good,” are the rules on which superheroes agree. They believe that democracy is the best form of government. They believe in racial, religious, and gender parity; judge each individual on his or her own merits. In other words, without being overtly ideological, superheroes champion the consensus views of most residents of Western democracies.]

It would be hard to dispute that the ideological Superman falls outside of this realm.

Once World War II was over, however, comic book readership dramatically declined.

11 Wright, Comic Book Nation, 30-31.
12 Ibid., 34.
14 Ibid., 160.
Items that had been rationed by the government, such as paper, were no longer limited; new publishers attempted to enter the marketplace, throwing supply and demand off balance. Most strikingly of all, however, was that the public had deemed it no longer needed its superheroes to conquer the Japanese or the Germans; Americans had been victorious and healing from the war had begun. In just a few short years nearly every superhero startup had been cancelled.

Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman survived the lean years of the early 1950s after public interests changed to crime and western themes. Fingeroth’s observation of the superhero ideology posted above offers a partial understanding to the survival of these three icons. Also entwined into their particular survival is recognizing how the publishers addressed these superheroes’ abilities to change with society. Superman, for instance, has gone through decades of reform since his first appearance in *Action Comics* in 1938. Fingeroth accounts for this transformation by recognizing that “the superhero . . . has to represent the values of the society that produces him . . . . In the 1950s [Superman] may have been hunting commies. In the 1970s, he may have been clearing a framed peace activist against a corrupt judicial system. Either way – the

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15 Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 57.
16 Ibid., 58.
hero does the right thing.”\textsuperscript{19} Hindsight has proven that evolution of the character is clearly an essential part to survival and longevity.

Regardless of Superman’s transformations, there is another element about the revitalization of popular superheroes that movie director Jon Favreau has observed: they offer escapism from reality.\textsuperscript{20} Favreau, who directed \textit{Iron Man} in 2008, notes that in a post 9/11 world, America was searching for something familiar that could help it deal with difficulties of world affairs.\textsuperscript{21} This concept sounds utterly familiar to the difficulties facing the nation during World War II, when iconic figures helped people deal with struggles in the world around them.

Moving forward past other conflicts such as the Korean War and the Vietnam conflict, comic books peaked in their readership during the early 1990s as new titles, such as Todd McFarlane’s \textit{Spawn}, emerged into the market place; the opening issue sold 1.7 million copies.\textsuperscript{22} But just as the boom had started to hit, it almost immediately slumped less than a few years later because “publishers simply went over the top in exploiting their market.”\textsuperscript{23} Mila Bongco notes that the industry had also attempted to satisfy investments rather than develop good storylines that carried the fight scenes and

\textsuperscript{19} Fingeroth, \textit{Superman on the Couch}, 17.


\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 19.

\textsuperscript{22} Bongco, \textit{Reading Comics}, 192.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 194.
art form of 30 years prior. Additionally, with the introduction of computer technology and the internet, the printing business, in general, has been forced to drastically change. The new trend appears to be a revival from Hollywood to remake former comic book superheroes into large screen productions. Movie titles such as Batman, Spiderman, The Incredible Hulk and most recently Captain America, have provided blockbuster blowouts based on the stories of old. Only time and a review of history will unveil the complete story of the future of comic books and the effective delivery of the medium.

Much like the attraction to the graphics and short messages found on leaflets and posters, comic books are first perceived through the visual attraction of their illustrations rather than their words. One essential feature this medium has over its handout style cousins, as Mila Bongco suggests, is that comic books generally contain stories and plots. Posters, handbills, and leaflets are limited in their messages because their creators only get one still shot to make an impact. “Reading comics involves the pictures and their meanings in relation to the language, and the key to understanding comics does not lie in the words or pictures themselves but in the interaction and relationships between them.”

24 Ibid., 194-195.
25 For a complete analysis on each movie release see the Internet Movie Database, http://www.imdb.com.
26 Bongco, Reading Comics, 46.
27 Ibid., 53.
28 Ibid., 49.
ideas, but exposure to an ideal for a longer period of time that is more than just a quick look at one graphic image. Picking up a comic book and thumbing through the pages might have initial appearances of being simplistic and childlike, but the reality is that it is much more complex.

Basic comic book construction is composed of panels, gutters, words and images. Although there are more parts that make up a complete book, these items and their combinations are pivotal elements to the comic book genre. As previously mentioned, comics have been defined as a series of sequential art. Though comics’ expert Scott McCloud agrees with the principles of this definition, he offers a narrower version: “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.” The medium itself is not just about the stories of the superheroes already mentioned, but is in fact an unlimited outlet confined only by the bounds of imagination. The definitions presented here do not do justice for the possibilities that can be created through an artist’s vision. Superhero comics offer just one category in the hundreds of available storylines that can be pursued.

Panels in a comic book are responsible for limits or time frames, and they come in all shapes and sizes. Good writers know that to convey time through static images requires both thought and manipulation of art itself. If text is needed to support the image, it will usually be found within the same frame, or attached to, the image. Panels

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usually follow a sequential flow on the page. “One of the principle skills of comicbook narration lies in selecting, from the potentially infinite number of choices, the most effective points and moments to match the thematic movement of the story.”

Panels help define the creation of those effective points. Using comic books produced for Western audiences as an example, readers are naturally conditioned to read from left to right, top to bottom; most Western comics follow this logic, though there are always exceptions. The transitions between panels are important because they help with both the flow of reading and processing of information that make the story coherent. If a reader is unable to make the transition to the next panel, it disrupts the comic book experience. Mila Bongco accurately sums up what a panel represents:

> [O]ne frame interacts with other frames to create a sequence which constitutes the syntagmatic discourse of the story. The panel is the smallest unit of “comics grammar” in which the complex interaction of text and picture operates. It is a process of organising sensory impressions into intelligible patterns wherein the panels’ lines, sizes, and shapes offer cues or criteria for perceiving meaning as intended by the artist.

Most important to understand is that every panel is specific in its creation and has unique function in telling the story that the author is trying to convey.

While panels create the frames for telling the story, the gaps that separate them also play a significant role in connecting the scenes. These gaps, called gutters, are

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30 Bongco, *Reading Comics*, 63.

31 McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 86. McCloud emphases that even “seasoned pros” sometimes have problems following panels on a page.

32 Bongco, *Reading Comics*, 58.
unique to the comic genre and make readers “guess at the missing elements in order to
reconstruct the flow of the story.”33 McCloud calls this “closure.”34 As we grow and
develop from early childhood into adulthood, our experiences continue to teach us to fill
in missing information as necessary. The numbers 2, 4, 6, for example, might be
perceived to be followed by 8, 10, and 12. Watching two people kiss in a movie while
the scene plays romantic music and fades to black might presume that the couple is
about to engage in sex, even though it is not physically in the film. Our minds are
geared towards closure in performing everyday tasks, some of them more complex than
others.35 The importance of knowing this fact is fundamental to the creation of making
effective comic book messages that are understood by readers. Though the gutters are
blank spaces within the book, they contain learned elements of life lessons unique to
each person as they piece the story together.

With closure comes another element that correlates with egocentrism. McCloud
surmises that because of the simplistic nature of cartoonish figures it is easier for
people, not only to identify, but also insert themselves into the scenes.36 The human
mind is constantly processing visual images through whatever the eyes see and applying
the concept of closure appropriately. Thus, when we see a stick figure with a baseball


34 McCloud, Understanding Comics, 63. Closure: “[T]he phenomenon of observing the parts but
perceiving the whole . . . .”

35 Ibid., 64.

36 Ibid., 36.
bat, for example, it is not hard for the mind to draw upon images of a player in a striped uniform with a Louisville Slugger getting ready to swing. Assuming the batter hits the ball, the roar of crowd can also be silently heard within the mind. Pictures, however, are the representations of real things, but not the real things themselves. This associative imagery and experience is the basis for the power of comics. The reader can easily insert himself into the baseball uniform and immediately transform the scene into a game in which he scores the winning run. This is because, as McCloud states, “We humans are a self-centered race. We see ourselves in everything.” Thanks to closure, the mind fills in the blanks of the cartoonish figures. Conversely, backgrounds in comics tend to be more detailed oriented; scenes and landscapes offer new worlds in which readers can submerge themselves. Keep in mind, however, that when it comes to comics hard and fast rules are never applicable. What is offered here are simple observations of the norm. McCloud states:

The comics creator asks us to join in a silent dance of the seen and unseen. The visible and the invisible. This dance is unique to comics. No other artform gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well. This is why I think it’s a mistake to see comics as a mere hybrid of the graphic arts and prose fiction. What happens between these panels is a kind of magic only comics can create.

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37 Ibid., 27. Images can represent: “ideas and philosophies, science and communication, and pictures-images designed to actually resemble their subject.”

38 Ibid., 32-33.

39 Ibid., 42.

40 Ibid., 92.
Another highly important piece of the puzzle is people’s obsession with iconography. Think about a power button on any common appliance; in the past the word “power” used to be printed on the unit. Today there is more commonly only a symbol with a circle and a line: one indicating the unit is “on,” the other “off.” Comic books embrace the world of icons much the same way because of the power of the messages contained within them. A men’s room, for example, might show a universal symbol of the outline of a man in pants; the lady’s room would, of course, be wearing a skirt. These symbols break language barriers and project meaning without ever having to write a single word. The examples provided here are simplistic; McCloud asserts that icons “are the images we use to represent concepts, ideas and philosophies.” From this perspective, his definition demonstrates the true power of graphic images. He states that: “Pictures are received information. We need no formal education to ‘get the message.’ The message is instantaneous. Writing is perceived information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language.” When graphics and words are used in concert, they draw on both received and perceived information. Combine this with the concept of closure, and the sky becomes the limit on the ability to relay a complex story line to a reader through what is generally thought to be two separate mediums: words and images.

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41 Duncan, *The Power of Comics*, 256. This text offers a similar example expressing it as an oversimplification of the actual depths that icons in comic books can obtain.

42 McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 27.

43 Ibid., 49.
All of these ideas suggest that comic books have a unique power to entertain, educate, and influence an audience. It is a medium that continues to evolve to meet both the worldviews of their creators and also the demands of their readers. Part of being a superhero incorporates a moral obligation to uphold ideal human values of goodness, honesty, and truth. Indications of America’s receptiveness to the values embodied by superhero characters, such as Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, are evident in the over four generations that these comics have remained in pop culture. Summing up the continuing interest in comics, Scott McCloud states that “in comics, the cycle begins all over the world, as young readers discover comics for the first time and in a few cases, begin to develop a love for comics that will last a lifetime!”

44 Ibid., 172.
CHAPTER 3
CASE STUDIES

The process of rebuilding a nation that has been virtually destroyed by years of armed conflict is a slow one that generally benefits through the aid of international assistance. Conglomerates such as the United Nations (UN) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) provide examples of institutions which sponsor sovereign nations working together toward such a purpose. However, the noble endeavor of helping another is not always easily attainable as differing ideologies and cultures create difficulties for states in finding common ground. Fortunately, peacekeeping operations generally bring about positive humanitarian impacts despite these differences.

One imminent danger affecting soldiers and civilians alike in war-torn countries, regardless of their nationality, is the leftover remnants of buried landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO). Humanitarian demining operations are not novel concepts, but were in fact first taken up by the United States in 1988 after sending assessment teams to address the aftermath of military operations in Afghanistan.¹ One decade later, America “had provided more than $250 million to 24 countries for various humanitarian demining efforts such as deminer training, mine awareness, mine clearance, and orthopedic assistance to, and socio-economic reintegration programs for,

¹ Madeline Albright, To Walk the Earth in Safety: The United States Commitment to Humanitarian Demining, United States Department of State, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, Office of Humanitarian Demining Programs (April 1999), 1.
landmine accident survivors.”2 With the dedication of these major resources, non-
governmental organizations (NGOs) began working in cooperation with military
resources to start information campaigns in the hopes of saving lives. One unique
medium that would eventually be developed to promote land mine education and
awareness was the comic book.

**Bosnia**

In the early 1990s, Slovenia and Croatia declared their independence from the
former Yugoslavia, which charted the course towards a four year war.3 After multiple
interventions by the UN, a Bosnian Peace Agreement was finally agreed upon and
official documents ending the war were signed in Paris on December 15, 1995.4 Through UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1031, NATO was then mandated
to “implement the military aspects of the Peace Agreement. The NATO-led
multinational force was called the Implementation Force – or ‘IFOR’ – and the
operation, code-named *Joint Endeavor*, began [the next day].”5

Military members from every NATO country, in addition to several non-NATO
member states, immediately began sending ground forces to Bosnia, Hungary, and

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2 Ibid.


4 Ibid., 25.

5 Ibid.
Croatia to help implement the new peace strategy. In all, 60,000 IFOR troops participated in the mission making this “the largest military operation ever undertaken by the Alliance” prior to its current role in Afghanistan. The mission, originally limited to 12 months, was extended an additional 18 months and renamed the Joint Guard Stabilization Force (SFOR) after NATO realized it needed more time to maintain stability while slowly extracting its forces from the region. The IFOR not only had several primary military tasks, but was also designed to “create a secure environment for civil and economic reconstruction.” Part of the forces deployed to the region to assist in these missions consisted of members of various U.S. Psychological Operations (PSYOPs) teams tasked with disseminating messages, information and products approved by the NATO commanders.

With the dangers of landmines and UXO impacting everyone, soldiers were issued mine identification cards that could be carried in a pocket or in the small flap inside of their hat to be used as a quick reference guide when stumbling upon UXO or landmines in day-to-day operations. Traveling around the country, even within cities like Sarajevo, could expose troops to serious hazards. If UXO or landmines were

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6 Ibid., 3. IFOR was comprised of a 36-nation coalition force.

7 Ibid., 25.

8 Ibid.

9 IFOR’s primary military tasks included: “1) ensure continued compliance with cease-fire; 2) ensure the withdrawal of forces from the agreed cease-fire zone of separation . . . ; 3) ensure the collection of heavy weapons into cantonment sites . . . ; 4) create conditions for the safe, orderly, and speedy withdrawal of UN forces . . . ; 5) maintain control of the airspace over Bosnia-Herzegovina.” Ibid., 25-26.
discovered, they were immediately reported through military channels to bomb disposal teams who acted quickly to eliminate the threat. With nearly an estimated 600,000 – 1 million landmines buried in Bosnia, and an undetermined amount of unexploded ammunition,\(^\text{10}\) landmine and UXO awareness became a large information campaign for not only PSYOP forces, but for NGOs as well.\(^\text{11}\)

On October 21, 1996, former First Lady Hillary Clinton unveiled a new innovation that addressed the landmine problem for civilians: Superman – Deadly Legacy, a comic book dedicated to landmine awareness designed for distribution in Bosnia-Herzegovina.\(^\text{12}\) PYSOP teams had already been creating and distributing posters, handbills and activity books highlighting the dangers of UXO and mine awareness to the general population and local school children throughout the region. The activity books contained dot-to-dot traceable pictures of mine hazards and other simple puzzles that helped to engage a young target audience, but nothing of the quality and the storyline of the Superman comic book had ever been previously used.

The creation and development of the Superman comic book stemmed from several personal relationships. In the spring of 1996 Madeline Albright was the chief U.S. delegate to the United Nations. Using her connections, she reached out to

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\(^{10}\) Albright, To Walk the Earth in Safety, 21. Statistics are dated from April 1999.


American singer Judy Collins, a United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) special envoy interested in demining and mine awareness campaigns. Collins’ music label and DC Comics were both owned by Warner Bros, and the collaborating result became the birth of the new landmine awareness adventure for Superman in Bosnia. Designed by DC Comics with military input and printed by the U.S. Government, 500,000 comic books were published on the first run and sent to Bosnia to be distributed by the U.S. Embassy and IFOR military personnel, including the PSYOPs teams.

This was not the first time that superheroes had been used as an education tool; DC Comics launched several educational storylines following the slump in sales after World War II. Unfortunately, books of this nature were not well received with their intended audiences in the late 1940s, and serious production efforts only lasted a few years. Now, however, through 47 frames and 10 pages of storyline printed in Serbo-Croatian, Cyrillic, and English languages, Superman arrives in Bosnia in attempts to educate children about the hazards of landmines and UXO.

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14 Ibid.

15 Bradford W. Wright, Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 61. Wright briefly discusses the integration of superheroes and education. He specifically mentions a series called “Johnny Everyman” that addressed issues that may have been considered controversial for its time: race, communism, and the differences between cultures.

16 See Chapter 2, 19-20.
The central plot revolves around three children named Joey, Mike and Lisa on a typical day in Bosnia who face everyday hazards as a result of the previous war. It contains five overt mine education messages and one larger message about war in general:

- look for warning signs of mines – hazards can be anywhere
- stay only in cleared areas
- how to get out of a possible minefield
- tell your friends about mine awareness
- report found mines to authorities
- war is not fair

Through a mine awareness education viewpoint, the messages are particularly clear. Understanding other messages contained in the plot requires more analysis. In the words of Mila Bongco:

The readers know what to expect and why: each genre has its codes and conventions. If we read crime novels, for example, we expect a mystery, an investigator, and a solution. If we read romance we expect a leading man, a leading lady, and true love. In superhero comicbooks, we expect a hero with superpowers, a villain, a confrontation, and a conclusion where the hero wins.17

Superman – Deadly Legacy is a definitely a superhero comic book, but the villain, the confrontation, and conclusion is slightly modified from a typical superhero plot. The villain in this case is not necessarily the landmines, but more problematically the war itself. Landmines then fall into the realm of the confrontation as a remnant of the war.

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and much like the hero identity revealed in Chapter 2 of everyone doing their part, this story ends on the same premise when Superman states: “... [the children] can still be heroes, even without superpowers. The only superpower they need is the power of knowledge.”\(^{18}\) It is a calculated message standing on the premise of landmine awareness, but more subtly announcing that war is a solution with far reaching consequences that should be avoided. It is a message targeted toward the moldable minds of the upcoming generation of Bosnian children. If applied to Randy Duncan and Paul Smith’s definition of propaganda from Chapter 1, it is hard not to overlook the manipulation no matter how benign in intention.

**Nicaragua**

Following the purported success of the comic book in Bosnia, UNICEF and DC Comics released a second mine awareness book just two years later in 1998 entitled: *Superman and Wonder Woman – The Hidden Killer*. Created for a Latin American audience and published in Spanish and English, its release was targeted for Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Honduras.\(^{19}\) “For almost 12 years Nicaragua was involved in armed conflict and civil strife that ended in 1990, leaving it the most mine-affected country in

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Central America.”  Though not as heavily impacted as Bosnia, a little over 100,000 mines were still estimated to be buried in the country at the end of 1998.

Although similar in concept, the Latin American comic book was substantially larger than the Bosnian edition with 33 pages of storyline, stickers, and activities regarding mine awareness education. The largest difference, however, is the noticeable use of Wonder Woman as a main character; but considering Wonder Woman’s background this should not be surprising.

Created by William Moulton Marston, the inventor of the lie detector, Wonder Woman was brought to life out of Amazon dust. After her appearance in 1941, she was immediately caught up with other superheroes in the fight for allied victory in World War II which “threatened her idyllic Amazon homeland on Paradise Island.” Her connection to the Amazon, however, made her appearance in the Latin American version of the mine awareness book seemingly appropriate.

Much like the comic book designed for Bosnia, the Latin American version also centers around three children named Diego, Eduardo and Gabriella living through two typical days at home. With over 125 frames of storyline, The Hidden Killer offers a longer plot, but follows the same basic scenarios as Deadly Legacy. The five major

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21 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 86.
mine education messages listed above are the same, but interestingly *The Hidden Killer* has removed the substantial message regarding war being unfair. Instead, only a narrated mention of the war is addressed. The story ends with the same message about the average child being a hero by doing their part to make everyone safe.

Both comic books also offer a professional visual attraction that would make readers want to pick them up and at least thumb through them. All of the characters are drawn in such a way that children should be able to easily insert themselves into the story. The activities in the back of *The Hidden Killer* mirror some of the early mine awareness coloring books produced by the PSYOP teams in Bosnia, and appear to make the mine awareness information more engaging. One major difference between the two books, however, is that realistic mine awareness signs were used in *The Hidden Killer*, whereas only cartoonish signs were used in *Deadly Legacy*.

**Kosovo**

In 1989, Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic, the man also responsible for the problems in Bosnia, abolished the autonomy of Kosovo and brought it under control of Belgrade, the Serbian capital. 24 “The entire structure of regional administration was dismantled and practically overnight Albanians were dismissed from their jobs, denied education in their own language, and exposed to massive abuse of their human rights

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and civil liberties.”

Eventually, on June 12, 1999, NATO forces were on the move to enforce another UN resolution absolving this armed conflict, bringing peace and stability to the region once again. Though the Kosovo Force (KFOR) was responsible for missions similar to that of Bosnia, it fortunately had the advantage of being able to apply the lessons learned from the IFOR/SFOR campaigns. Like Bosnia, a similar landmine awareness challenge was being faced, and a revamp of *Superman – Deadly Legacy* produced for Bosnia was slightly altered for distribution in Kosovo. One striking difference to the Kosovo experience, however, was that the comic book usage was finally officially studied to determine its measures of effectiveness (MOE).

**Analysis**

Lessons learned from the IFOR campaign in Bosnia significantly helped the development of products for future missions such as Kosovo. Much like the negative stereotype discussed in Chapter 1 regarding the historical usage of psychological operations, connotations of the possible distribution of manipulative products severely limited the PSYOP role and mission in Bosnia. As such, “the PSYOP task force was

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25 Ibid., 16.

26 Ibid., 24.

27 “MOEs provide a systematic means of assessing and reporting the impact a PSYOP program . . . has on a specific foreign [target audience].” Army Field Manual (FM) 3-05.30, *Psychological Operations*, April 2005, Section 5-14.
only allowed to run a limited campaign that relied on true and factual information.\textsuperscript{28} Because there was no enemy to engage during a peacekeeping operation, PSYOP campaigns also tried to stay as neutral as possible; controversial issues like tracking down war criminals, for example, were rarely addressed.\textsuperscript{29}

Unfortunately, even under the premise of trying to create neutral products, some PSYOP ideas still turned out to be too westernized in content. A study conducted by the Department of Defense Command and Control Research Program (CCRP) notes:

Too many printed products, especially the posters, reflected an orientation toward American pop culture rather than the more familiar European traditions. While the development of these products adequately represented the results of comprehensive pre-testing done in the Sarajevo area, many of the products contained themes and symbols . . . that were not familiar to the more provincial target audiences in the areas outside of Sarajevo in terms of audience receptivity and understanding.\textsuperscript{30}

As discussed in Chapter 2, graphic images, themes and symbols all play key roles in getting the right message out to the masses, but it is important to use images that will be understood by the target audience. “In [one] example, [PSYOPs] developed a poster with a chess game to encourage voting. Bosnians interpreted it as the international community playing with Bosnia’s future. Other products did not take into account the local population’s knowledge and were, perhaps, too Americanized.”\textsuperscript{31} Finding the right

\textsuperscript{28} “[It] . . . was under an obligation to always identify itself as the source of the information. It was forbidden to use disinformation for deception.” Combelles-Siegel, \textit{Target Bosnia}, 74.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 92.

\textsuperscript{30} Wentz, \textit{Lessons from Bosnia}, 205.

\textsuperscript{31} Combelles-Siegel, \textit{Target Bosnia}, 95.
products to create proper messages sometimes requires a lot of trial and error, and usually is accompanied with MOE. Unfortunately, teams attempting to measure the success of their products in Bosnia met several major challenges:

- logistic coordination of testing products took weeks from inception to delivery
- little guidance was provided for particular target audiences resulting in products being created for the general population of Bosnia\(^{32}\)
- adequate manpower to conduct thorough assessments of product effectiveness was significantly hindered\(^{33}\)

In the realm of PSYOP activities, the world does not stop to wait for a product regarding any one particular event; instead it is dynamic and constantly changing. The PSYOP teams barely have time to react, let alone get ahead of, their changing environment. They must use their judgment to produce the best products needed within the limited time they have to get them distributed and accomplishing this goal requires lots of manpower. All of these combined factors directly contribute to a lack of thorough documented assessments regarding the effectiveness of the Superman comic book in Bosnia.

In 2002, the State Department funded a study through the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) to evaluate effective communication in landmine awareness programs. Three different missions were studied: Cambodia,


\(^{33}\) Combelles-Siegel, *Target Bosnia*, 101. Siegel notes that IFOR and SFOR PSYOP teams did not have adequate resources regarding manpower and qualifications to conduct MOE.
Nicaragua, and Kosovo.\textsuperscript{34} Though comic books were not the sole product of the study, they were incorporated into the research findings. The MOE determined that the comic book medium was making an impact, but interestingly problems using them as education were also now officially documented.

Dennis Barlow, the former Director of the Mine Action Information Center (MAIC), wrote an editorial addressing three primary criticisms of the comic book as a mine awareness educational tool:

- superheroes will come and rescue children from mine fields
- Superman is seen as an American hero
- mine awareness hero comics “have not reflected effective and cultural characteristics of the specific host nation”\textsuperscript{35}

First, Barlow writes that the notion that superheroes will realistically come and rescue children trapped in a minefield is “far-fetched.”\textsuperscript{36} Noting that superheroes have tackled other complex topics, such as drugs, it still does not leave children with ideas of superhero intervention.\textsuperscript{37} Reflecting on this point of view, comic’s expert Scott McCloud notes that, “all the things we experience in life can be separated into two

\textsuperscript{34} Eric Filippino, mgr., \textit{Communication in Mine Awareness Programmes} (Geneva: Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, 2002).


\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
realms, the realm of the concept and the realm of the senses.” With this observation, he is addressing people’s abilities to conceptualize an amalgam of images; Superman falls into this realm of the concept based on the ideological hero principles discussed in Chapter 2. Obviously a cape-wearing icon flying around the world in hopes of saving people from harm is not real, but the mind still accepts the concept even though it is completely fictional. Usually children understand how to separate fantasy from reality, but if they have never been introduced to a superhero concept through their culture, then interestingly the translation between the two becomes blurred.

This surprisingly turned out to be the case in Nicaragua following the study conducted by the GICHD. The Nicaraguan case study reports:

Group participants who had used [the Superman and Wonder Woman comic book] to give talks or classes to children affirmed that their students’ comprehension of the messages was often mistaken, precisely because of the intervention of the comic book characters in the narrated story. In almost every case, children said that they would try to find minefields so as to be rescued and to meet the superheroes. The participants complained that this interpretation had caused significant problems, and its clarification cost them much time and effort.

Other chatter of similar reports can be found regarding Superman in Bosnia, but studies verifying their authenticity have not been conducted. Results from Kosovo revealed that the Superman comic books were suitable for children ages 10-14, but not for ages 7-9,

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40 Ibid., 137.
“who might infer incorrect and dangerous messages.” Mila Bongco suggests that “the superhero figure has developed into a lasting and vigorous presence in American and European popular culture such that the recognition of the Batman or Superman, for example, by millions who have never read a Batman comicbook or seen a Superman film is ensured.” As suggested by both Barlow and Bongco, cultures that have been saturated with the superhero medium would find it hard to believe that their children would try to be rescued by an imaginary figure. In the case with Nicaragua and the younger children of Kosovo, however, the superhero concept may have been taken for granted considering that the books were distributed in rural areas that do not have the media amenities found in more populated regions.

Secondly, Barlow agrees that Superman can be labeled an American hero, though he quickly reports that Superman’s uniform is red, blue, and yellow, not red, white, and blue as might be stereotyped. He does admit, however, that “[Superman] certainly exudes a sense of Yankee pride and displays a particularly white, middle class

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43 Barlow, “Superman – ‘To be or Not to Be . . . .’” Barlow writes that red, blue and yellow are colors found in the flags of many nations, and not reflective of American iconology.
ethos.”

This statement lies at the heart of some of the problematic undertones found in both comic books, particularly the Latin American version. The noticeable obedience of the children to their parents and to other figures of authority in the story lines is reflective of quintessential mid-twentieth century American values. Additionally, as Barlow agrees, “while this is certainly nothing worth condemning, it can be seen as a subconscious effort of U.S. players to set up the American psyche in miniature as the behavior solution to the landmine awareness problem.” The children in the comic books portray American ideals on how to be a good child. Barlow admits: “This is probably the furthest thing from the minds of U.S. officials, who are charged with supporting independent and indigenous mine action programs, but it is a simple fact that many nations in the world are suspicious of American intent and ‘footprint’- even if unintentional.” Whether intended or not, it is hard not to notice the prevalence of American culture throughout both stories. When viewed from a much larger scale the question becomes whether or not the American value system is the best solution for which to live a life. American exceptionalism permeating the pages of the Superman comic book might have negative effects on its readers, which as Barlow suggests, might heartily offend the target audience.

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44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
Barlow, however, feels that the third issue of addressing cultural awareness is a debatable one. He believes that “the attempt to cast Wonder Woman in a Central American venue was an excellent effort to mirror and complement the cultural environment.” Unfortunately, the GICHD study once again proves otherwise, particularly when it evaluated the Latin American comic book:

All those who were familiar with the comic book agreed that they liked the format and the type of information offered about landmines. However, they also expressed disagreement with the characters – especially Superman, Wonder Woman and the OAS representative – whom participants claimed did not correspond to Nicaraguan reality, much less rural reality. This is particularly serious in the case of children, since their lack of access to television means that they are unfamiliar with the comic book and cartoon super-heroes.

Although the background story of Wonder Woman involves her creation in the Amazon, this detail would generally only be known by people who had previously been introduced to the character. Not being previously exposed to superhero concepts thus becomes a lost effort regarding any attempts to reach the audience through an ethnic connection.

The GICHD also agrees that the Deadly Legacy comic book was also viewed with concerns over both “its technical accuracy and cultural appropriateness.” The message that children can police themselves while adults play small roles in the background underscores a child empowerment ethos. This might be an appropriate

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47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Filippino, mgr., Communication in Mine Awareness Programmes, 136.
50 Filippino, mgr., Mine Action: Lessons and Challenges, 147.
message for an average audience, but these books were distributed in countries with serious mine and UXO hazards that could be misconstrued if children actually find themselves in the scenarios featured in the comic books. In *Deadly Legacy*, for example, Lisa is about to walk into a mine infested area when her cousin, Joey, explains to her how to retrace her steps out of danger.\(^5\) Granted, Superman was watching the exchange, but without “real” adult supervision on properly ensuring safe exit from a mined area it leaves lingering questions as to whether or not children should attempt this type of action, or alternatively wait for help. While the scenario tries to educate it also presents mature subject matter toward a young audience. Even though Superman and Wonder Woman are united in their message that they will not always be around to help, doubts about the message’s effectiveness still emerge.

It is evident that using American cultural icons to promote educational interests raises some questions for the international community: a lesson previously learned by the PSYOP teams in Bosnia. Those PSYOP products generally targeted the population of Bosnia as a whole; a non-discriminatory practice that appears to have been included the distribution of *Deadly Legacy*. If the appropriate target audience determination for Kosovo was children ages 10-14, however, then the distribution that occurred years earlier in Bosnia brings possible concern. The comic books have also been touted as a

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cost effective method of information dissemination, but the GICHD, on the basis of the Kosovo research, counters this claim: “A controlled reading in a classroom environment in the presence of a teacher was recommended – hardly a cost effective or realistic approach.”

Fortunately, all of this exposure to Superman, Wonder Woman and landmine awareness education is not entirely negative. When children in Kosovo had been asked if they had personally seen or heard about the Superman comic book and the dangers of mines and UXO, nearly 60 percent of them responded in the affirmative. Even more important is the fact that 85 percent recalled seeing posters, brochures, and leaflets about mines and UXO. Nicaragua reported similar findings with “88.7 per cent of the surveyed children respond[ing] affirmatively, and only 10.3 per cent respond[ing] negatively.” These figures indicate that the target audience was at least receiving the messages, though their interpretation of the products as a whole is somewhat harder to determine. The GICHD reports that in Kosovo, “it is evident that children are better informed than teenagers and adults about mine awareness messages that relate to

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52 Barlow, “Superman – ‘To be or Not to Be . . . .’” Barlow writes that comic books, “offer a popular and cost-effective medium particularly attractive to the market niche to which mine awareness campaigns are targeted.”


54 Filippino, mgr., Communication in Mine Awareness Programmes, 97.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid., 131.
preventive and mine-safe behaviours.” This finding is interesting considering that, “the three most significant sources of news and information are television . . . , daily newspapers, and family. The least significant sources of news and information overall are cartoons, comic strips, posters, brochures/leaflets, and foreign television stations.” Although posters, leaflets, etc. are considered being the least significant, the products being produced and disseminated were still having a positive impact on the local population. When asked what to do about mines and UXO children reported:

- do not touch them/do not step on them/do no play with them
- report to KFOR/authorities
- they are dangerous

These responses align with the overall goals of the Superman comic book and therefore offer some validity for the battle on mine risk education.

The way ahead for distribution of more comic books regarding popular superheroes is uncertain. Over a decade has passed since these products were originally distributed, and the landmine awareness problem is still a major battle. Dennis Barlow concedes in his article that even though the world is aware of the “American hero (Indian Jones, John Wayne, Superman, et al), the expedient of selecting a less

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57 Ibid., 94.
58 Ibid., 85.
59 Ibid., 94.
stereotypical character is the smart choice.”60 He adds that research needs to be conducted prior the distribution of comic books in educational settings.61 The evidence from the studies conducted in Nicaragua and Kosovo supports his statement. The GIHCD was also not able to determine collateral effects of exposure to the American mindset; researchers may never know if the comic books made children change their perspectives on the world at large. But similar to the earlier problems of PSYOPs missing the mark through messages that were too Americanized, like the chessboard product, it still appears that the Superman comic books series may have suffered the same fate.

Regardless, mine awareness programs are still moving forward. “Since 1993, the United States Government has led all international donors in providing a total of nearly $1.8 billion to clear landmines and unexploded ordnance and treat accident victims.”62 The success of the program has also evolved to include the “destruction of at-risk and unsecured weapons and munitions.”63 The development of products to reach these target audiences is ongoing, but one concern that rises from all of this debate is whether or not the comic book medium is, in fact, a suitable tool to be used as an educational platform in this context.

60 Barlow, “Superman – ‘To be or Not to Be . . . .’”

61 Ibid.

62 Andrew J. Shapiro, To Walk the Earth in Safety: The United States’ Commitment to Conventional Weapons Destruction (Timberville: Branner Printing, 2010), 1.

63 Ibid.
CHAPTER 4

EDUCATION THROUGH THE COMIC BOOK MEDIUM

“Traditional thinking has long held that truly great works of art and literature are only possible when the two are kept at arm’s length.”

Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*

It is no surprise that the notion of comic books being serious literature has sparked debate. Randy Duncan and Paul Smith acknowledge that “most people hold a low opinion of comic books. To many, comic books are little more than cheap, disposable artifacts of popular culture that are not worth serious reflection or investigation.” Nonetheless, use of this medium in an academic environment still warrants study, and questions regarding its educational merit deserve to be answered. Determining if comic books are an appropriate format for teaching a target audience requires a review of some myths about the medium and its evolution, as well as a look into some case studies that have been conducted over the years. Many people, including some in the academic arena, have worked hard to validate the medium and overcome negative stereotypes. Duncan and Smith offer four valid reasons for studying comic books:

- originality of the art form – comic books are a unique genre to literature
- the new literacy – iconography and visual literacy continue to grow

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• historical significance – comic books were a dominant medium of the during
  the middle of the twentieth century

• potential of the medium – through words and pictures comic books have the
  potential to offer unlimited messages

As will be revealed, each of these observations will fall into either one or both of the
pro- or anti-comic book education arguments that have occurred over the past 70 years.
The application of these studies can then act as a guide in helping both civilian and
military developers of propaganda and/or educational items for use in humanitarian,
peacekeeping, and other operations.

The Anti-Education Arguments

Ideas that comic books spawn delinquent behavior, specifically for younger
audiences, became a prevalent argument from the end of the 1940s through the mid-
1950s. Scholars refer to Dr. Fredric Wertham’s book, Seduction of the Innocent,
published in 1953, that was comprised of research devoted solely to the problems
created in society as a direct result of comic books. In his book, Wertham reflects on
values embedded into the story lines:

Even more than crime, juvenile delinquency reflects the social values current in
a society. Both adults and children absorb these social values in their daily lives,
at home, in school, at work, and also in all the communications imparted as
entertainment, instruction or propaganda through the mass media, from the
printed word to television. Juvenile delinquency holds a mirror up to society and
society does not like the picture there.4

3 Ibid., 13-17.

This passage offers the crux of his crusade against the comic book medium. Wertham argued that because of their popularity within the youth culture, the negative violence and sexually charged messages were going well beyond just setting a poor example for its readers. Attributing the rampant growth of juvenile delinquency to comic books, however, may still have been a stretch.

Roger Sabin offers some noteworthy criticisms regarding Wertham’s book revealing that “Wertham’s methodology and the use of case histories in particular, was highly suspect. [Wertham’s] logic was that because delinquents read comics, comics led to delinquency.” Sabin also reports that much of Wertham’s examples used to support this theory were then taken out of context, thus providing a stilted view of the actual material being evaluated; “the cumulative effect was to damn all comics by association.” Sabin concludes that, “ultimately, there was no evidence in [Wertham’s] book that comics were a corrupting influence.” If viewed from a broader scope this may be true, but some individual case examples do raise questions and certainly appear to have made some type of impact on the children’s viewpoints.

Wertham’s case against comic books escalated until the federal government actually opted to review the medium and its values. Wertham tried to argue that he was not against all comic books, but instead wanted only to establish regulations regarding

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
material that was appropriate for children while differentiating that for adults. An article published by the Harvard Law Review in January 1955 underscores the difficulty of trying to implement legal regulation of all comic books; the article, however, agreed that U.S. Senate studies revealed that “juvenile delinquency rose more than forty per cent between 1948 and 1953 . . . .” Proving that comic books had a casual connection to delinquency was difficult, and even if proved it still could not justify regulating the entire medium, one bad book cannot justify banning all books.

Regardless, with federal hearings taking place and comic book sales starting to slide due to negative publicity, the comic book publishers opted to join together to create “a self-censoring group – the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA).” Sabin summarizes the purpose of the CMAA:

The Association’s purpose was to regulate the content of comics, and to this end it instituted the Comics Code, to be administered by a review body called the Comics Code Authority (CCA). Hereafter, publishers were obliged to submit their comics to the CCA to be evaluated before publication: if they met the standards of the Code, they were given a stamp of approval. If not (and if, subsequently, appropriate changes were not made), the comic would be denied access to the distribution network.

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8 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 491.
12 Ibid., 161.
The Comics Code offered strict regulation over the medium. James Cowan highlights parts of the code: “The original Comics Code not only barred ‘excessive bloodshed,’ nudity and rape, but also mandated that ‘good shall triumph over evil.’ Depictions of ‘ghouls, cannibalism, and were wolfism’ were prohibited.”13 The CMAA trumped any type of government regulation over comic books, while simultaneously addressing the government’s problem of trying to enforce any type of outside censorship that might violate First Amendment rights. The self-regulation of the industry did not come without its negative effects – censorship only aided industry wide readership decline.14

In 1971, Marvel comics tried to use Spider-Man as a venue for an anti-drug educational tool, but because the story incorporated narcotics use it was not approved the CCA.15 Marvel opted to distribute this special Spider-Man comic book without CCA approval, and the controversy eventually culminated in the permission of comic book “stories that showed drug use—but only as a ‘vicious habit.’”16 In 2001, Marvel comics withdrew from using the CCA and implemented its own rating system, with DC Comics eventually following suit and opting out of the CCA in January, 2011.17


14 Sabin, Adult Comics: An Introduction, 163.


16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.
Although acknowledging problems with the medium, educators have still remained interested in the potential comics may have by supplementing traditional methods of learning. Researchers conduct studies to determine if comic books could, in fact, be of some institutional value. In 1965, for example, a small study was conducted by Florida State University in a third-grade classroom to determine if comics can teach something as simple as how fish learn to swim. Children were given a free choice between a textbook, a comic strip, or an expository paper from which to learn the material. Out of 63 students tested, “each pupil was then requested to select the source he would prefer to read,” and the researchers ensured that each child was tested individually away from the influence of other children. The results from the study were surprising:

The researchers were quite unprepared to learn that third-graders found a typewritten page more appealing than a comic strip as a repository of scientific information. Children like comics for entertainment. They associate comics with fantasy, distortions of reality, and caprice. For authentic information these children still tend to place greater confidence in the textbook. For this purpose they prefer it to cartoons or expository material, even when all three sources contain the same information.

Though several reasons could be attributable to the outcomes of this particular study, three immediate thoughts come to mind:

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19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 82.

21 Ibid.
• children are taught from an early age through standardized textbooks and are more comfortable and conditioned to use them

• cartoons and comics contain so much information that is not educational, it is dismissed altogether as a serious tool for learning

• parents’ influence over their children conveying that it is wrong to read comic books in school

What is apparent is that in 1965, the textbook was a definite contender in classrooms as a dominant learning tool that could be taken seriously by the students.

Building on that research, in 1978 another small scientific study was conducted to determine whether or not comic books actually improve students’ reading abilities. Marshall Arlin and Garry Roth developed an experiment involving 42 third-grade students using time-on-task and time-on-reading techniques through the use of standard books and comic books.22 An article written by John Guthrie commenting on the Arlin and Roth study points out that at the time of this particular study,

[Publishers] assert that comics are inherently interesting. They increase children’s attention. The pictures are eye-catching. The characters are active and familiar. And the words give substance and meaning to the sequences of action . . . . [Conversely], realists . . . point out that pictures are often distracting. Children look at comic books rather than reading them, allowing pictures to substitute for the words. Consequently, while the magazine may seem to sustain attention, it is not attention to printed language, and it cannot improve comprehension of printed language.23

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Guthrie accurately summarizes the raw data provided by the Arlin and Roth study revealing that it supports the views that not only did comic books not improve a reader’s ability, but in fact the poorer readers actually fared worse. “Poor readers gained nearly a year on standardized tests if they were given books to read, but only 1/4 of a year when they were supplied with comics. The good readers made similar gains, about 6/10 of a year, under either comics or books.”24 Arlin and Roth concluded their study with the following passage revealing that the level of proficiency of the reader plays a significant impact:

... [W]e think that comic book programs should be implemented with caution for at least two reasons. First, it is not clear that pictures will increase reading time. The distracting effect of pictures may overpower the motivating effect of comic books, leading to decreased reading time as compared to books. Second, the target audience for the above name programs appears to be poor readers. We suggest that these pupils may be the least able to profit from such programs and that they in particular may spend less time-on-reading with comics than with books.25

With this information in mind, it is evident that comic books in the classroom were not a total failure, but from the conclusions presented not much of a benefit was revealed either. The argument that comic books can help poor readers read better is not supported; the bottom line of the study presented evidence that in the wrong hands with this age group of children, comics may offer little stimulation toward any academic growth.

24 Ibid., 378.

25 Arlin, “Pupils Use of Time While Reading Comics and Books,” 212.
Another problem that has been found in comic books is the prevalence of cultural imperialism. Duncan and Smith define this by stating that, “dominant cultures can supplant native cultures through the widespread use of broadcast, electronic, and print technology.”

Icons and symbols used in comic books are powerful tools that can create influence on its readers. Jason Dittmer wrote a comprehensive article on current geopolitics in a post 9/11 world using Captain America as a prime example of the embodiment of U.S. national identity, and acts as a “critical link that enables hundreds of millions of individuals freely to assume a common identity.”

Specifically it links “American nationalism, internal order, and foreign policy (all formulated at the national or global scale) with the scale of the individual, or the body.” The importance of understanding this concept is recognition of the potential of the power that a medium, such as comic books, actually has over not just its readers, but society as a whole. Dittmer states that “younger readers may even fantasize about being Captain America, connecting themselves to the nation in their imaginations.” With this thought in mind, depending on what message is published in a comic book, there is the potential for positive or negative consequences. For example, if a dominant culture (like the United States) is distributing comic books in a foreign market (like Bosnia), it has the

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28 Ibid., 627.

29 Ibid.
possibility to cause the “erosion of indigenous cultures, as the slicker, cheaper, and more widespread media products provide messages about values, norms, and roles that are different from (if not outright contradictory to) those of native culture.” Dittmer expands on this idea by pointing out that popular culture is one of the fundamental sources that can influence the geopolitical landscape. It is important to recognize that the publishers of popular media, regardless of the culture, have the power to influence. Understanding this concept helps explain the need for the U.S. government to implement so many controls over its psychological operations, as explained earlier in Chapter 1.

Certainly media and times have evolved since some of these studies were conducted. Duncan and Smith offer two possible explanations as to why comic books have generally not been well received in the classroom. First, they deduce that Wertham’s campaign was so highly escalated and visible that it literally left a ripple effect for decades where teachers would be afraid to try and use a medium that had been labeled morally questionable. Secondly, many teachers today may have been trained to embrace the textbook model as the primary tool to engage their students and, thus, fail to recognize alternative forms of literacy. Duncan and Smith acknowledge that today’s students are surrounded by what they call “multimodal culture,” where learning

31 Dittmer, “Captain America’s Empire,” 627.
32 Ibid., 278-279.
33 Ibid., 279.
comes through a variety of sources, such as the internet, and not just prose.\textsuperscript{34} Technology and imaginative thinking cannot be an enemy in a classroom setting, however, and if multimodal culture is going to a permanent fixture youth culture, then support exists for at least trying new educational tools such as comic books.

\textit{The Pro-Education Arguments}

In stark contrast to the studies already presented, many teachers and scholars do embrace the idea of breaking the mold on traditional forms of learning. Comic books are not run-of-the-mill products found in all classrooms, but a valid argument can be presented for the value they can add to some subjects. Perhaps the most difficult hurdle to overcome is the stereotype previously discussed of not wanting to take comic book literature seriously. Teachers, however, have found unique ways around this problem that both satisfy a need for introducing academic material while making learning fun and interesting. Scott McCloud sums up this understanding by saying: “The first step in any such effort is to clear our minds of all preconceived notions about comics. Only by starting from scratch can we discover the full range of possibilities comics offer.”\textsuperscript{35} Jay Hosler validates this point with an analogy he presents in a paper advocating comics in the classroom. Though it is not something that might come immediately to mind, it is something in which most people can relate:

\begin{quote}
A little card explaining how to exit an airplane may not be the most effective means of communicating the information when the plane is heading into the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{35} McCloud, \textit{Understanding Comics}, 199.
ocean. The text has to be perceived and processed. But a cartoon (as most planes have) of someone calmly pulling the life vest out and, with a smile, inflating it not only gets the information straight into your brain, but it just looks fun.36

Hosler offers a good example of breaking down the walls of McCloud’s preconceived notions. Though comics might be a little more complicated than a graphic sign mounted on an airplane door, his observation is accurate regarding processing information faster and differently through a visual medium.

Another example of overcoming McCloud’s preconceived notions materialized as Rocco Versaci, an English teacher at a community college, began looking for new ways to introduce literature to his students. After trying an experiment with comic books in his class, Versaci recalls:

. . . I lit upon a genre that is an ideal way for middle, secondary, and post-secondary school English teachers to accomplish what we need to more of: energize classes and engage students, teach analytical and critical thinking skills, and – most importantly – invite students to develop meaningful opinions about what constitutes literary merit.37

Debunking some myths about the comic book medium, Versaci taught his students that comic books can, and do, integrate very mature subject matter into their storylines. Using a short autobiographical comic by John Callahan, I Think I was an Alcoholic Waiting to Happen, students realized that topics such as alcoholism and overcoming

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debilitating accidents do not have to be presented through words alone. Versaci considers the visual nature of the material in this particular comic book effective because closure allows readers “to sympathize and empathize with comic book characters in unique ways.”

Beyond stressing that comic books can be interesting, Versaci also addresses the development of analytical and critical thinking skills, by “help[ing] students read beyond the page in order to ask and answer deeper questions that the given work suggests about art, life, and the intersection of the two.” He asks students specific questions about the comic as a whole:

- How would you describe the style of these pictures?
- How does this drawing style interact with the story?
- Why these particular pictures?

These types of questions help readers not only engage in new understandings of the material, but also build foundations for critical analysis of other graphic literature because they are universally applicable. Versaci admits that his “primary motivation for using comic books in class is to provoke [his] students to think more deeply about how artistic value is accorded to particular works or genres.” With comic books as a unique

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38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 63.
40 Ibid., 64.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., 65.
tool that blends both words and artistic styles together, he feels that he is able to better reach his students in three specific areas:

- “[it] diversif[ies] the voices that students experience in the classroom and suggests to them that literature may take various forms, even comic books”
- “[it] invite[s] students to participate in meaningful classroom discussions precisely because most of them are not already convinced of their literary value”
- “by using comic books in class and treating them seriously, teachers enact a powerful lesson about the dangers of literary presumption”

Versaci’s example of success suggests that being selective with the material found within the comic book medium is the key to making the most impact. The lesson he has incorporated directly reflects the values of being open to new forms of literature by perhaps overcoming negative myths.

Versaci is not the only advocate for comic books as a benefit to literature and language arts. Timothy Morrison, Gregory Bryan, and George Chilcoat encourage teachers to have their students create their own comic books, suggesting that it will directly impact their “writing, comprehension, and research skills in a cross-curricular activity.” Their formula for success does not call for students to create an overly complex product, but still requires some imagination when designing a plot that is integrated with drawn pictures. The goal is to mix language arts with visual arts, while

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41 Ibid., 66.

simultaneously cultivating their research skills. Morrison et al see comic books as an opportunity to enhance three basic areas in the child’s curriculum:

- develop creativity in writing
- aide in expository, historical, and biographical composition
- improve reading comprehension

After projects are complete, it is recommended that they be displayed in a mock public venue where students can review and discuss their creations similar to a professional setting that would be found in the business world. The entire project incorporates a whole host of activities important to the childhood development.

Beyond teaching English and literature to students, teachers have found other ways to incorporate comics. Using them for an entirely different type of analysis, Katherine Aiken has incorporated three superheroes into her history class curriculum: Captain America, Wonder Woman, and Spider-Man. In a recent teaching strategy article she comments on its overwhelming success:

One strategy I have found useful in incorporating Captain America into a wider discussion of World War II is to discuss the comic in conjunction with other efforts to exhort Americans to support the war effort. These include government propaganda posters, feature films, and news reel footage. I have had success comparing Captain America to contemporary depictions of Japanese and Germans. This provides an opportunity to introduce issues of race and ethnicity, as well as to discuss the concept of the “enemy.”

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45 Ibid.


47 Ibid., 45.
As previously discussed in Chapter 2, superhero icons were certainly no strangers to helping the war effort of World War II. Aiken aptly points out that Captain America morphed to the times of the Cold War that followed, similar to the changes incorporated by Superman over the decades.

Studying Wonder Woman requires a different approach, not necessarily as a reflection of fighting in World War II, but more about the changing role of women that erupted during the period. Aiken reveals how she gets students engaged in thinking about these important evolutions in history by comparing Wonder Woman to Rosie the Riveter: “This provides the opportunity to examine traditional families, the impact of World War II on those relationships, and ways in which the end of the war created tensions as women and men sought to return to their previous situations.” Aiken also shows later depictions of Wonder Woman over the years and gets her students to engage in how the changes reflect society’s attitude toward women’s rights. The historical reflections of the comic books with their times has proven to be an effective method of teaching.

One final observation by Aiken is the difference between masculinity and femininity found in comic books. Comparing American with Japanese comics, Aiken writes that “while the popular Japanese Anime features gender ambivalence as many

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48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., 46.

50 Ibid.
characters have both male and female personas, American comics tend to reinforce stereotypical gender archetypes.” 51 This offers a foundation into seeing how Eastern and Western cultures differ and shows how cultural identity can be embedded into nationalism with propaganda found in the print medium. Had Captain America or Superman shown any feminine traits, for example, their success would have ended with the first released issue.

The American gender stereotype is hard to ignore, especially since these superhero characters are so embedded into American history. Aiken agrees that comic books may not be a traditional source of learning in the classroom, but “establishing common ground with students is often the first step to effective teaching.” 52 By using this approach to teach children about culture, the evolution of women’s rights, and other topics, Aiken’s methods underscore the historical lessons Duncan and Smith say comics provide.

Jay Hosler, a biology teacher, also has a different view of using comic books in the classroom. He opted to take the medium one step further by creating his own comic book called Optical Allusions. His hypothesis asks, “If I made a comic in the right way, ‘Could I teach students something’ and ‘Could I make them like it?’” 53 The course of his experiment follows the evolution of the human eye through a mixture of elements.

51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 47.
53 Hossler, “The Argument and Evidence for Comics in the Classroom,” 44.
centered on mythological backdrop.\textsuperscript{54} Intermixed with traditional illustrations, the comic portion of the book helps students grasp complex scientific ideas that make them better prepared to handle the material. Introducing this material to four different science classes, Hosler unveiled that, in fact, all four classes showed improvement regarding learning the material, with the sensory biology class showing the most improvement.\textsuperscript{55} On the larger scale, his research proves that tailoring a comic to meet the demands of the audience has a positive effect. Hosler writes that “the students’ change in attitude [toward the material] is the most important aspect of this study.”\textsuperscript{56} Although his research is ongoing trying to determine whether or not the students’ opinion about comic books changed, he found that providing the material in a language they could understand definitely made a difference and boosted their confidence when working with hard science topics.

Interestingly, the U.S. Army has been using comic books for decades to teach the troops how to properly perform preventive maintenance on military vehicles and weapons systems. Originally produced as \textit{Army Motors} magazine starting in the spring of 1940, the publication offered supplemental information regarding equipment

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 45. Hosler book stars “Wrinkles the Brain. Wrinkles works for the three Graeae sisters (from the Perseus story) who share a single eye and must take turns using it. In this story those three sisters are actually scientists, and ‘Wrinkles’ is their lab assistant, in charge of shuttling the eye among the sisters.” Wrinkles accidentally drops the eye and then goes on many adventures in search of it, all of which provide scientific information.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 46.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
maintenance issues. Though most of its pages were typed information, graphic images were spread throughout the magazine. Over time, the images morphed into drawn pictorials and comic art soon followed. Comics expert Will Eisner had been drafted into the army and eventually took up the reigns of illustrating the publication. Eisner’s use of cartoon characters with a comics-type style made an impact on readers. Inheriting characters such as Sergeant Half-Mast McCanick and female mechanic Connie Rodd, Eisner later introduced Joe Dope, the embodiment of soldier who always screws up. The information, in combination with the graphic images, was able to provide both entertainment and education to the troops through a medium they enjoyed reading.

In the mid-1950s, after Einser had left the military, the army found itself on the brink of the Korean War and realized that some its equipment was at least five years old and not well maintained. Wanting to revamp Army Motors, the army reached out to Eisner; the end result was a new magazine designed with a comic book look and feel called PS Magazine: The Preventive Maintenance Monthly. The first edition was released in 1951 and is still published and distributed on a monthly basis today.

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58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., 13.
The educational information found in *PS* (Postscript) was very much like the supplemental issue of *Army Motors*. Eddie Campbell explains just some of the information available in the pages of the magazine:

[It] tells its readers how to clean a rifle, how to defrost a jeep battery, and the right way to cut down trees, with information provided by military writers and dressed up for the soldiers’ edification in lively and humorous typographical settings. Eisner said that his rationale for the magazine was to take the hard, technical information supplied to him by the military writers and present it in a way the regular GIs could understand.62

Eisner eventually left the publication in 1971, but new editors quickly filled his position. Though the characters have changed over time to reflect the correct political environment of the changing military, more than 700 issues have been created and distributed since its introduction.63

Other venues of comic book education have continued to be published. Duncan and Smith note that “the most enduring of the educational comics came in the form of *Classic Comics*, launched in Fall 1941 and continuing on as *Classics Illustrated* from 1947 until 1971.64 They admit that the first issue of the publication was “crudely drawn,” but that it improved over time and featured stories such as *The Three Musketeers*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and others.65 This comic book genre tried to put a new twist on classic literature by having artists tell the stories through graphic images.

62 Eisner, 13.

63 Ibid., 18.


65 Ibid.
instead of just words alone. One criticism of this type of venture is that comic books take away from the “richness of the content” of the original works by providing readers an abridged version of the stories.\textsuperscript{66} Naysayers disagree, and point out that comic books offer nothing more than alternative form of literature without degrading the classic author’s original intent. Since the 1970s \textit{Classic Illustrated} has continued to be reborn through several different owners. In 2007, Jim Salicrup, an editor with Papercutz, took up the reins and started producing even more adaptations of classic literary works as professional looking graphic novels.\textsuperscript{67} Ada Price dubs this success as finding a balance between the condensing the text and allowing the artwork to speak for the prose, which can be accomplished by finding a good collaborative team.\textsuperscript{68} Reenergizing great novels through a new medium that is tastefully done appears to overpower most of the negative chatter about dishonoring the original text.

Researchers will continue to study the comic book medium and debate its use inside the classroom. Danny Fingeroth respects the power that comic book authors potentially possess:

\begin{quote}
We [the comicbook authors] transmit values through the work, and we have to assess whether, as part of the onslaught of pop culture, we have, as Spider-Man might say, either responsibly or power stemming from what we create. Are we
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 280-281.


\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 29.
creating entertainment or life lessons? Do we reflect or create the society around us? . . . I don’t know if there’s a definitive answer.”

On a general level, as demonstrated in this and previous chapters, comic books have proven to have the potential to have plots that go beyond just their entertainment value. The evidence that the public trend has shifted from an anti- to a pro-education usefulness over the past seven decades is hard to miss. Though the educational attempts by companies such as D.C. Comics beginning in the 1940s were not entirely successful, it has not stopped companies from returning to the medium, giving rebirth to old heroes while providing new stories along the way. Undoubtedly the world of academia will also continue to experiment with the comic book genre, as the multimodal choice of education continues to expand in today’s youth.

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CONCLUSIONS

The peacekeeping mission for NATO troops in Bosnia was an eye-opening experience which left lasting impressions spanning my entire military career. It was difficult to see the children, adults, and the elderly of a war-torn country suffer while laboring through the process of rebuilding. At the same time, it was inspiring to know that the U.S. military was providing assistance, saving lives, and giving them a chance for hope as they rebuilt and moved forward. The role assigned to the military was not an easy one, but if asked if it made a difference the answer would unequivocally be “Yes.”

Propaganda has forever changed the face of war and armed conflict. Founding organizations of modern propaganda techniques such as the CPI and the OWI can be credited with being the first to apply lessons learned in both their successes and failures to missions. The military integration of propaganda operations with the OWI during World War II became the birthplace of today’s sophisticated Military Information Support Operations – consolidating and organizing U.S. military propaganda efforts around the globe. Randy Duncan and Paul Smith offer a good definition of propaganda which provides a basic understanding that winning the hearts and minds of others requires manipulation of emotions, attitudes, and behaviors to change a recipient’s frame of mind.

From the research presented, it is clear that psychological operations are a complex and highly sophisticated military tool employed by civilians and the military alike. They require a great deal of planning and need appropriate manpower to support
assigned missions. Integration into international organizations, such as NATO and the UN, increases operational difficulty for the military, but has proven not to be impossible. In the case with Bosnia, the distribution and use of products were not met with open arms by every NATO country, but concessions were ultimately made.\footnote{Pascale Combelles Siegel, \textit{Target Bosnia: Integrating Information Activities in Peace Operations – NATO-led Operations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, December 1995-1997} (Vienna: CCRP), 82-83.}

Despite these difficulties, PSYOPs still conducted more general campaigns, such as advertising their radio station and promoting general force protection information to the public. Landmine awareness was only one central theme of many where product efforts were focused, created, and distributed. From December 1995 through January 1998, more than 12 million PSYOP products had been distributed in Bosnia, including: “leaflets, handbills, pamphlets, posters, the \textit{Herald of Peace} [newspaper], the Mirko teen-oriented magazine, as well as various radio, television, and miscellaneous products such as soccer balls, coloring books, and IFOR/SFOR logo pens.”\footnote{Larry Wentz, \textit{Lessons from Bosnia the IFOR: the IFOR Experience} (Vienna: CCRP, 1997), 195.}

This broad array of items is a testament to the creativity of the driving forces behind this organization; the lessons learned from that peace keeping mission were able to be applied to other similar missions such as Kosovo.

The development of \textit{Superman: Deadly Legacy} was unique in that it was a successful attempt for NGOs and the U.S. military to design a comic book created on a landmine education awareness platform. Its expansion to other parts of the world with \textit{Superman and Wonder Woman: The Hidden Killers} proved that a spirit of cooperation...
between civilians and the military can create high quality, interesting, and quite unique products to reach out to a target audience. Taking this product to foreign countries in the hopes of offering education, America did not, unfortunately, experience the same success in information dissemination as it did in its creation which can be seen through the complications which riddled the overall program.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) was not an advocate for the use of Superman as a world-wide landmine awareness educator. In its 2005 “Lessons and Challenges” report, it highlights its disagreement:

[The Superman comic was] an example to many of an inappropriate tool introduced as a result of importing material with little reference to local cultural norms and with little or no field testing. The comic book was used in Guatemala but overall the reaction has been so universally negative that the original version (produced for Bosnia and Herzegovina) was also withdrawn from distribution and a Spanish version was not distributed in Colombia nor a Portuguese version planned for Mozambique.3

Contributing to this hindsight view is the fact that the conflicts and demining campaigns all happened within a few years of each other: 1995-1999. Formal studies to determine any type of effectiveness did not occur until 2002, meaning that statistical data reflecting whether or not the comic books were in fact making a positive impact was either never available or available after the fact.

Comments regarding the universal negative reaction can be found in the GICHD’s 2002 mine awareness program study, particularly under the section involving

Nicaragua. In regards to the reaction of *The Hidden Killers*, the study finds that:

“Participants reiterated that this *type* of material is good and very useful, but it must be adapted to Nicaragua’s cultural reality by using characters that represent the communities, thereby allowing readers to identify with the protagonists and the story.”

Randy Duncan and Paul Smith echo these sentiments as they describe how foreign publishers translate American comic books for distribution in their native countries:

> For the most part, foreign publishers of American material have stuck to the relatively simple (and inexpensive) process of translating the word balloons and captions in American comics from English into their own tongue before releasing them in their home markets. While these translations might adapt to the characters’ dialogue to local language and idiom, they typically don’t adapt to their audience’s customs and values, or consider their taboos, and thus these comics still reflect American iconography and ideals in the presentation of characters and stories.

Granted, the Superman comic book was developed for an overseas audience, but the English version was simply translated into multiple languages prior to distribution. It is evident from the revelations of the 2005 review, and from the study conducted in 2002, that content cannot be overshadowed by the aesthetic quality of a product. Keeping this finding in mind, one can see that the comic book medium itself was an acceptable tool that could be effectively used.

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5 Ibid., 137.

6 Randy Duncan and Paul Smith, 309-310.
Beyond the issue of perceived cultural insensitivity, another major problem with the comic books was the fact that the educational information on proper actions if faced with land mine dangers may not have been completely accurate. The 2002 study offers more analysis commenting on landmine safety guidelines:

In addition, many felt that the Superman and Wonder Woman comic book did not comply with international guidelines and that its safety recommendations were not transmitted correctly. The material caused much confusion and disinformation about landmine dangers, and this was a major factor motivating the organization of the “One Unified Voice” workshop.7

International demining techniques did not fall under official regulations until the fall of 1997 when the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) was created.8 The GICHD was formed the following year and was charged with “supporting mine action efforts of the international community and the United Nations via mine action research, operational support for demining in the field and advocacy of the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention.”9 Later in 2001, the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) were created to standardize mine action programs. This leap forward in the realm of mine awareness and education would have had significant impact on the development of the Superman comic books had it been in place a few years prior.

The question still remains that if Deadly Legacy and The Hidden Killers were not as effective as initially thought, then what could have been done to make a more

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7 Filippino, *Communication in Mine Awareness Programmes*, 137.


9 Ibid.
effective product? It is clear from the research presented in Chapter 4 that comic books can have educational value when they meet certain criteria. The target audience has to be tested and understood in order to gain an understanding for the needed guidelines to maximize product effectiveness. In Bosnia, for example, if the entire population was blanketed for the development of printed products, then the products would need to be designed for everyone, children and adults alike, to understand the information presented and not take it out of context. *Deadly Legacy* may have been too complex for younger readers, and certainly was not targeted for adults. In this case, distribution would have to be monitored, but due to operational circumstances this was not possible.

The same applies for the distribution of *The Hidden Killers*. Even though PYSOP operators had input into the creation of that comic book, they still were not able to foretell of the problems that developed when it was presented to the younger audiences. The GICHD’s comment on the Kosovo comic book being suitable only for distribution in a classroom under supervision\(^\text{10}\) reiterates that trying to place limits on a product’s distribution is counterproductive. It has to be assumed that any distributed printed item could end up virtually anywhere.

The lack of cultural awareness was significant enough to be commented on by several studies involving the Superman comic books. Both *Deadly Legacy* and *The Hidden Killers* contained embedded remnants of American ideologies that would be expected to be found in comic books published for American readers. Katherine

\(^\text{10}\) Ibid., 147.
Aiken’s observation regarding the “stereotypical gender archetypes” discussed in Chapter 4 could be applicable to this argument as well. She remarks on the fundamental issue that “American exceptionalism and ideas of patriotism are recurring themes in United States history, and Captain America and Wonder Woman serve to illustrate both.” Granted, Captain America and Superman are not the same character, but perhaps in the minds of a casual, or perhaps unknowing, reader they become an icon for one and the same. The role of Wonder Woman in the Amazon might possibly also carry a negative message in response to cultural norms of South America when dealing with male and female roles. Because these comic books were distributed to foreign audiences, they may not be received the same abroad as they would by an American who understands American cultural norms. As discussed in Chapter 3, this is probably not the intent of the comic book developers, but it is reflective of a systemic problem of being unable to be completely neutral during the product development phase. Recall that the PSYOP teams in Bosnia experienced difficulty with some products being too Americanized. The Superman comic books appear to have been a victim of the same problem.

This debate brings questions about the importance of being sensitive to the values of other countries. Chapter 1 discussed the pool of PSYOP/MISO experts who spent time studying cultures all over the world in order to figure out the best ways to

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12 Ibid. See also Chapter 3, “Analysis” section.
communicate effectively with a foreign audience. Wanting to avoid cultural imperialism is an important part of trying to mitigate U.S. footprints in other countries, especially during peacekeeping and reconstruction operations. Respect for indigenous populations goes without saying, and incorporating their value systems into items that the U.S. might distribute in their countries is a good practice worth ensuring.

One alternative that might be more effective would be the development of a comic book that acts as a landmine awareness guidebook rather than an actual developed storyline with Superman and Wonder Woman. A good analogy to this concept is comparing *Deadly Legacy* and *The Hidden Killers* to a blockbuster movie. Instead of trying to explain landmine education through a dressed-up Hollywood product, perhaps what was actually needed was more akin to a Discovery Channel documentary. Granted, a documentary style product may not have great appeal to the child target audience, but if created properly it may have better served a broader range of age groups while effectively transmitting mine awareness information. Something as simple as the U.S. Army’s *PS Magazine* is not overly complex, but it is still entertaining and gets the information where it is most needed. Jay Hosler underscored this point with his graphic airplane emergency exit example. In Chapter 2, comic books are described as taking people on a special journey, but in the examples of *Deadly Legacy* and *The Hidden Killers*, the storyline may have detracted too much from their educational value.

Another option could have been to develop a storyline with an indigenous superhero, or other respected official, that would have been more embraced by the local
population. Understandably, this requires a vast amount of resources, and is not always a possibility given the limited funding for mine risk awareness which is an unfortunate reality. The PSYOP activity books that were distributed in Bosnia, for example, contained simple images with hand drawn mazes and clip art, created by PSYOP members working in their respective theaters. With the vast improvements in graphic and printing technology now available, high quality items can be produced in the field, printed on demand, and distributed as necessary.

The pro-comic book education debate heavily outweighs any negative stigma that may still linger around the medium. Teachers are definitely incorporating them into the classrooms and if graphic images have the ability to transcend barriers then plausible reasons for discontinuing comic books as a PSYOP/MISO product do not exist. In 2004, the GICHD produced another report on guidance for improving mine risk education communication techniques – mass media communication tools included the use of radio, television, magazines, comic books, and others. UNICEF also reports that comic books are part of its mass media arsenal to be used as part of a 12-step program toward effectively communicating mine awareness. From these reports it is evident that the comic book medium will continue to be used on an international level.

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15 Filippino, *Communication in Mine Awareness Programmes*, 4-5.
Former Director of the Mine Action Information Center, Dennis Barlow, presents a compelling observation regarding *Deadly Legacy* and *The Hidden Killers* when he asks: “If the attempt was not perfect, then the question has to be, ‘How close does it have to be to be effective?’”\(^{16}\) Not doing anything when it comes to mine risk education is not an option. Barlow points out that it is unfortunate that more funds are not available to conduct thorough assessments of cultural knowledge when it comes to the development of mine risk education products.\(^{17}\) He concludes with a “plea for a common sense approach to the use of comic books as mine awareness materials.”\(^{18}\)

One interesting finding by the CCRP study in Bosnia that goes beyond the comic books was evidence of the effectiveness of the face-to-face medium. Military personnel found that by sitting down and talking to the local people they were able to communicate and offer more information in much less time.\(^{19}\) Though the tactical teams conducting the talks were limited on information they could relay, it still proved to be a powerful tool. This fact directly correlates with George Orwell’s observation on the importance of reaching your audience with language they can understand. Talking to people of a foreign audience on the premise of being nothing more than just another human brings out equality of human values that cannot be transcended through a poster, handbill, leaflet, or comic book.

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\(^{16}\) Barlow, “Superman – ‘To Be or Not to Be . . . ,'”

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Wentz, *Lessons from Bosnia*, 208.
At the present there is still a definite need for the print medium to continue to be used to support PSYOP/MISO missions around the globe. The introduction of social media might be a contender for future information dissemination, but its implementation into psychological operations is difficult due to the stringent, but necessary, legal restraints governing its use. Since the internet is globally accessible, any information posted in support of a propaganda campaign could theoretically be accessed by Americans through the web, thus violating laws and regulations discussed in Chapter 1.\textsuperscript{20} The Kosovo case study, for example, also confirmed that one of the least effective methods for reaching adults regarding mine awareness was the internet.\textsuperscript{21} Future technology will continue to be incorporated into military operations, but only so far as U.S. laws will allow.

It has been more than 10 years since Superman was distributed as an imperfect mine risk educator, but this fact has not stopped the PSYOP/MISO community from developing and distributing other comic books for uses in theaters of Iraq and Afghanistan. Beginning in 2005, I assisted in the production of the first six issues of *The Falcon* comic book series designed for an Iraqi target audience. Producing both Arabic and a small amount of English language versions, the U.S. Army Special Operations Command employed contractors to develop a high quality comic book series that would both entertain and help educate the target audience while Iraq was

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{20} FM 3-05.30, *Psychological Operations*, Section 1-26.
\bibitem{21} Filippino, *Communication in Mine Awareness Programmes*, 85.
\end{thebibliography}
transitioning to a new form of government. The story lines were more aligned with Iraqi culture and did not use superheroes as primary characters. Additional comic book series have been created since I departed the PSYOP community in the spring of 2008, leading me to believe that achieving the Orwellian ideals of demotic speech continues through one of the most unlikely sources – a comic book.


