

CHAPTER

02

The Scarcity of Comic Books in American Research Libraries

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When Marvel launched its second *X-Men* series in 1991, it did so in a booming market. Innovations in printing and papermaking in the 1980s had made comics cheaper to produce, while a new group of speculators became attracted to the comics market for investment purposes. Interest among fans also swelled, and *X-Men #1* was released with both fans and investors in mind. It had four variant covers plus a special collector's edition with a fold-out cover that combined all of the cover designs into a continuous image. Comic shop orders for *X-Men #1* quickly skyrocketed to seven million as collectors bought hundreds or even thousands of copies that they then planned to sell at a profit.¹

Predictably, the speculation bubble burst only a few years later. Hundreds of comic shops closed, small publishers went out of business, and by 1995, the secondary market for comic books had all but dried up. Marvel filed for chapter 11 bankruptcy in 1996. As Susana Polo points out, collectors today are “lucky to get a dollar” for a copy of *X-Men #1*, the best-selling American single-issue comic book of all time, which had a cover price of \$1.50.² (All values noted are in USD.) The *Comics Buyer's Guide to the X-Men* for 2003 puts a value of \$3.00 on *X-Men #1* and states, “The aftermarket price shown should be regarded as quite generous.” As of January 2021,



copies on the comics marketplace NewKadia.com range from \$3 to \$13, with Overstreet values ranging from \$2 (good) to \$15 (near mint). Nearly thirty years after its publication date, *X-Men #1* is still abundant enough to make it a dubious investment for collectors.

However, the same factors that drive down the collectors' market for issues like *X-Men #1*—market oversaturation, hype, and paratextual elements designed to appeal to fans and collectors—may make these issues more interesting to historians of print culture and, at the same time, more accessible to libraries. How many of these millions of issues have ended up in the collections of academic libraries, and what might current holdings indicate about comic collecting in libraries overall? Comparing available sales data from the 1960s and 1990s, this study aims to ascertain the availability of periodical comics in American research libraries.

Background and Literature Review

Libraries handle monographs and periodicals differently, and comic books are released in both formats. This study is exclusively concerned with periodical publications that release issues sequentially, according to a set publication schedule. These are the materials collectors sometimes refer to as “floppy” comic books. Although there are exceptions, in general, they are between twenty and forty pages long, saddle-stitched or stapled, and feature a full-color cover printed on glossy paper stock. These materials are distinct from graphic novels, which are original monographs, and trade paperbacks, which are reprint compilations of periodicals for a given story arc. Trade paperback compilations sometimes contain extra content, but they usually do not contain advertising, letters to the editor, cover variants, and the other paratextual features of the original periodicals. In addition, sometimes editors make changes to a storyline or artwork in order to fit the altered page count of a trade edition. “Floppies”—periodical comics—are the medium and format through which many stories are first released.³

In comics studies, format matters. Whether viewing comics through a literary, formal, or cultural lens, scholars consider physical and digital formats, printing technologies, and distribution as well as their effects on the development of narratives, genres, and artistic styles.⁴ Over the last fifteen years, comics studies, like many other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, has begun to take its own “material turn” in which the role of the comic book as a physical object is interrogated. One of the first to argue for this approach was Charles Hatfield, who examined how underground comic artists subverted traditional comics packaging.⁵ Recent studies on comics and materiality have focused on typography, the formats of alternative comics, and the intersections between comics and media studies.⁶ Scholars have also begun to consider paratextual elements such as advertisements and letter columns—features that are available in periodical issues but not in longer forms such as graphic novels and trade paperbacks.⁷

Although the literature of librarianship has reflected an increasing interest in comics over the past ten to fifteen years, analyses of comics in academic library collections have been few and limited to comic monographs, such as graphic novels and manga. Eric Werthmann

surveyed the collections of ninety-nine American members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and concluded that few libraries had strong collections of Eisner or Harvey Award-winning graphic novels.⁸ In a similar study surveying award lists, Cassie Wagner found that the collecting of graphic novels among ARL member libraries lags behind the collecting of other popular culture genres, such as science fiction.⁹ A 2010 study by Glenn Masuchika and Gail Boldt determined that graphic novels are not well represented in American research libraries and that there is a significant disparity between the collecting of American graphic novels and Japanese manga in translation.¹⁰ Masuchika followed up on this study in 2020 and found that the rate of graphic novel collecting had increased among American research libraries, but the rate of manga collecting had not kept pace.¹¹

The present study differs from the ones by Masuchika, Wagner, Werthmann, and others because it focuses on comic periodicals rather than monographs, but also because it selects titles based on sales data and print runs rather than awards or “best of” lists. Like any other object, comic books can be understood through what book historian Simon Eliot refers to as “countable quantities: reams of paper, tons of type, print runs, and returns on capital.”¹² In this respect, the author aims not only to assemble a picture of current practices in library collecting but also to situate library collecting within the print culture of American comics: to understand not only how many items currently exist in libraries but also how the market affects library collections.

Methodology

Data Sources

Sales data for comic books in aggregate are rather easy to locate. In the 1960s, for example, print runs for the industry as a whole ranged between twenty and thirty million per year.¹³ However, little research has been done on sales and circulation statistics for specific comic issues or titles. To compound the problem, there are different sources of data for different eras.

One early source of circulation data is printed in the comics themselves. The United States Postal Service began to require publications to carry statements of ownership and circulation in 1960 in order to determine whether periodicals qualified to be shipped as second-class mail. In addition to other data, publishers had to supply the number of copies distributed, which included the number of copies sent through subscriptions and sold through newsstands and shops. Most of the sales and circulation data published between the 1960s and the early 1990s reside in these publishers’ statements of ownership and circulation. Although these statements were printed in one or two issues of the publications in question each year, they have yet to be completely collected and tabulated. The data that exist are primarily available on the website Comichron.com, which aggregates historic sales rankings for comic books.¹⁴ Subscription and circulation data for periodical comics may also be available through the Audit Bureau for Circulations, a third-party verifier of circulation and demographic information intended to inform and

regulate the placement of advertising in periodicals.¹⁵ However, for most comics, these data are represented at the publisher level, not broken out by individual titles.

On the other hand, for individual comic issues published in the last twenty to thirty years, there is a clearer picture of sales rankings, thanks to pre-order reporting by distributors. Until 1994, the two leaders in comics distribution were Diamond Distributors and Capital City Distribution. By the late 1990s, through industry consolidation, all of the major comics publishers shipped to retailers via Diamond Distributors. Distribution data only include sales from publisher to distributor to retailer and do not reflect sales to customers, but they do represent the initial number of copies shipped into circulation within a given period.¹⁶

Title Selection and Data Compilation

Using data on Comichron.com, the author selected two groups of comic periodicals for analysis based on available sales data for the 1960s, a period of resurgence for comic book publishers, and the early 1990s, the height of the “speculation era” collecting boom. The top-selling comic title for each year between 1960 and 1965 is listed in table 2.1.

Table 2.1. Best-selling comic series titles by year, 1960–1965.

Title	Year	Number of Issues Published¹⁷	Estimated Sales Per Year
<i>Walt Disney’s Uncle Scrooge</i>	1960	4	4 million
<i>Walt Disney’s Uncle Scrooge</i>	1961	4	3.4 million
<i>Superman</i>	1962	8	5.9 million
<i>Dennis the Menace</i>	1963	6	2.9 million
<i>Action Comics</i>	1964	12	6.2 million
<i>Superman</i>	1965	8	6.6 million

Table 2.2 lists the top sellers for 1990 to 1995, which for this period are compilations of the sales charts from Diamond Comics Distributors and Capital City Distribution.

Table 2.2. Best-selling comic issues by year, 1991–1999.

Issue	Publisher	Year	Number of Variant Issues	Estimated Sales Per Issue
<i>X-Men (1991 series) #1</i>	Marvel	1991	5	8 million
<i>Superman (1987 series) #75</i>	DC	1992	7	6 million
<i>Adventures of Superman #501</i>	DC	1993	2	3.5 million
<i>Violator #1</i>	Image	1994	2	Data unavailable
<i>Spawn #37¹⁸</i>	Image	1995	2	172,000

Table 2.2. Best-selling comic issues by year, 1991-1999.

Issue	Publisher	Year	Number of Variant Issues	Estimated Sales Per Issue
<i>DC versus Marvel / Marvel versus DC #4</i>	DC	1996	2	258,440
<i>The Darkness #11</i>	Image	1997	11	357,006
<i>Fathom #1</i>	Image	1998	3	257,087
<i>Tomb Raider #1</i>	Image	1999	8	189,455

It is important to note that the sales data for the 1960s is ranked at the *series* level while the data for the 1990s is ranked at the *issue* level. This distinction will result in slight variations in search strategies and data analysis for the two groups of materials.

Library Holdings

OCLC was the entry point for identifying libraries that hold these materials. There are drawbacks to this approach when searching for periodical publications. Because comic books are periodicals, libraries often catalog them as serials, and this practice can prove confusing for users expecting stand-alone monographic-style records for each issue. In addition, as Culbertson and Jackson note in their description of cataloging donated comics at San Diego State University, not all libraries with comic periodical collections catalog them using MARC records, and, therefore, reliance on OCLC could exclude other sources of these materials.¹⁹ However, for scholars and librarians seeking particular comic titles or issues, OCLC WorldCat remains a centralized hub for enabling discovery of library collections across the United States.

Because this study is limited to academic libraries in the United States, lists of holding institutions in OCLC were filtered to include only college and university libraries. Efforts were made to include the holdings of the institutions included on Randall Scott's list of comics research libraries in order to provide a more complete picture, but for some finding aids and alternative platforms, it was difficult to distinguish periodical titles and count the number of issue holdings at each institution.²⁰ Because of this, only the collections at James Madison University, San Diego State University, and the University of Florida were included in this study, in addition to the collections reported in OCLC.²¹

From there, the author searched each title in each library's online catalog or discovery tool to confirm local holdings of the serial titles. It was necessary to use slightly different search strategies for the two groups of materials, as noted above. The 1960s group was ranked at the title level, not the issue level, so the author counted the number of issues available in libraries for each year, assuming that there were no duplicates unless otherwise noted. The 1990s group ranked specific issues, some of which had several variants, so the author made note of how many libraries reported holding duplicate or variant copies.

Findings and Discussion

For each group of titles, the number of copies that the author was able to locate in American academic libraries is summarized in the tables below.

Table 2.3. Library holdings for best-selling comic series titles by year, 1960–1965.

Title	Libraries holding issues	Number of issues held in all libraries	Average issue holdings	Number of Issues Published	Average Percentage of Issues Held
<i>Walt Disney's Uncle Scrooge</i> 1960	5	16	3.2	4	80.00%
<i>Walt Disney's Uncle Scrooge</i> 1961	6	17	2.8	4	70.00%
<i>Superman</i> 1962	10	26	2.6	8	32.50%
<i>Dennis the Menace</i> 1963	1	3	3	6	50.00%
<i>Action Comics</i> 1964	8	44	5.5	12	45.83%
<i>Superman</i> 1965	10	50	5	8	62.50%

Table 2.4. Library holdings for best-selling comic issues by year, 1991–1999.

Issue	Libraries holding this issue	Number of copies held (including variants) in all libraries	Average issue holdings	Number of Variant Issues	Average Percentage of Variants Held
<i>X-Men</i> vol. 2 #1 (1991)	13	42	3.23	5	64.62%
<i>Superman</i> vol. 2 #75 (1992)	14	21	1.50	7	21.43%
<i>Adventures of Superman</i> #501 collector's edition (1993)	15	22	1.47	2	73.33%
<i>Violator</i> #1 (1994)	6	8	1.33	2	66.67%
<i>Spawn</i> #37 (1995)	4	6	1.50	2	75.00%
<i>DC versus Marvel / Marvel versus DC</i> #4	5	5	1.00	2	50.00%
<i>The Darkness</i> #11	2	4	2.00	11	18.18%
<i>Fathom</i> #1	5	8	1.60	3	53.33%
<i>Tomb Raider</i> #1	7	8	1.14	8	14.29%

At the beginning of this article, the author posed a question: How many of the millions of top-selling comic books printed in the 1960s and 1990s have found their way into library collections? The answer: not many. With print runs in the millions, it is to be expected that any percentage of copies in libraries would seem infinitesimal. However, the numbers indicate that a very small number of libraries—in all cases, fewer than twenty—preserve copies of these best-selling issues. For both groups of materials, titles are held in around seven to eight academic libraries.

The age of the comic book seems to play a role in whether libraries are likely to hold them, with the 1990s boom titles held by an average of fourteen libraries, nearly twice the number of libraries holding the 1960s titles, even though the two groups had similar sales numbers. The data also suggest that comics from the boom years before 1994 may be better represented in libraries than those immediately following the market bust; post-1993 best-selling titles were held in an average of only five libraries. The drop in the number of holding libraries seems to follow the precipitous drop in sales following 1993. If top sellers from this era are this scarce in libraries, how scarce are materials that were not on the bestseller lists? These holdings indicate that just about any issue of any comic periodical is scarce in academic libraries.

Libraries also appear to collect erratically. As expected, the fewer the number of variants for an issue or issues for a series, the more likely libraries were to have a complete or nearly complete representation of the print run. For the 1960s, those libraries, on average, hold 3.7 issues each—an average of about 57 percent of all published issues for all titles, with a low of 32.5 percent of published issues and a high of 80 percent. For the variant copies of the 1990s, the gap is wider: a low of 14 percent and a high of 75 percent, depending on the number of variants. Libraries appear to hold an overall average of 49 percent of variants for this period.

The data from the 1960s also suggest that superhero comics may be collected at a greater rate than comics created for younger readers, such as *Walt Disney's Uncle Scrooge* or *Dennis the Menace*, even though libraries that held those titles tended to have more complete runs of them. However, the sample of titles surveyed here is too small to draw conclusions about differences in rates of collection between these two types of materials. Further study of twentieth-century children's materials is needed to clarify this issue.

Conclusion

This study raises questions about the nature and purpose of comic collections in libraries as well as the types of materials collected. As mentioned, library holdings of comic serials are scattered at best. The fragmentary nature of these collections is likely a result of the practice of collection-building exclusively through donations, a practice that ultimately reflects the interests of donors rather than those of the researchers libraries support. Virtually all of the materials surveyed in this study were located in special collections departments or special libraries devoted to comics and graphic formats. Such institutions provide materials for current and future scholarship, but they are also important

repositories for the preservation of the cultural record. For example, much of the reading material of the nineteenth century, mass-produced in the millions of copies using inexpensive materials, can now only be found in specialized libraries, and much of it has been lost.²² This study suggests that comics, and twentieth-century popular culture materials in general, may be headed for a similar fate. Unless more libraries allocate space and resources to the preservation of these materials, even *X-Men #1* may someday be a rarity.

Notes

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