

## Opinion

# For yesteryear's comic book generation, today's big business

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH



Grubaugh

They were the last vestiges of my childhood, and parting with them offered a glimpse into what happens when fond memories of adolescence give way to the realities of adulthood.

It took me 60 years, but last month I decided to part with the comic books I collected as a kid. The titans on their pages had their struggles with good vs. evil, and likewise my decision didn't come lightly.

I had a bin full of "Superman," "Batman," "The Flash" and the like tucked away in a dark corner of the basement for decades, out of sight and mostly out of mind. I always knew I would one day pull the plug. The opportunity came with a comic collectors convocation at the Collinsville American Legion.

The first person I met was a boy around 10, who was wandering from the parking lot into the building.

"Is this the comics thing?" I asked. "Yes," he answered. "I need \$5 for one I was really wanting." He paused before adding: "You think they'll negotiate?"

"You look like the trustworthy sort, I bet they will," I said.

He opened the door for me, and we both entered, unsure of our footing.

Somewhere in the days since I was a teenager, some entrepreneur figured out there was money to be made in comics. Superman, a character that debuted in Action Comics in 1938, is the ultimate example. An original comic in very fine condition was sold for \$1 million in February 2010. Another pulled in \$1.5 million a month later. An almost-mint condition Action Comics No. 1 was purchased for \$3.2 million in 2014. I think that's still the most expensive comic book to date.

Collectibles of all sorts from the Baby Boomer area are widely sought. Beer cans, toys, commercial packaging — you name it, if there is some hint of nostalgia, there is a collector for it.

And I had already missed one chance when my mom threw out my baseball cards. I eventually forgave her, but I carried my comic books along when I left home.

I had about a hundred issues, purchased off the displays that once colored the drugstore aisle. You could spin the rack and find your glee for a month, until the next edition came in. Those days are long gone. Comics started taking a darker turn as I got older, not as much fun to read.

For decades, I always thought about parting with my treasures but never made the final call until basement cleanout forced my hand. I asked my oldest son if he had any interest, and his lackluster response convinced me I was making the right call. My wife assured me I was — she appreciates a clean basement.

As a collector I was a novice. I spent 12 cents for a comic book in the 1960s (about \$1.14 in 2023's market) and I was far more interested in the stories they told than the monetary value they held. I spent hours with them, reading them again and again.

One of the show's vendors agreed to go back out to the parking lot to look over the stash in my trunk.

"A lot of 'Supermans'," the vendor said, slightly disappointed. "'Batmans' are what people are really after."

"I have several of those in there, too," I said quickly.

He aptly noted that they were all pretty worn, and it was obvious how much joy I'd gotten out of them. He asked me how much I wanted. I had no idea.

"How about \$200 for all of them?" he asked.

"For that, I'll let you have the tub, too," I responded.

I followed him back inside and got my first real glimpse of the crowd and the interest level. I also got a load of the prices. Some of the very comics I had in my bin were being priced up to \$40 an issue. And that was the ones I could see.

Was I being taken, you ask? I don't think so. Most of the comics I saw were in pristine condition, in wrapped, plastic sleeves. Most of mine were dog-eared.

I stayed long enough to get a taste of the action. The last thing I saw as I went out the door was the guy to whom I'd sold my comics. He was culling the wheat from the chaff, "Green Lantern" in one pile, "Justice League" in another.

I didn't have the heart to see more. My heart was in the memories. My newfound \$200 was going into the vacation fund. Adulthood was calling.

• *Dennis Grubaugh is the retired editor of the Illinois Business Journal.*

# Fox News: Stuck between a rock and a hard place

By ALAN J. ORTBALS



Ortbals

I don't think that I'm alone in thinking that Ted Turner had lost his mind when he started CNN in 1980. Who in the world would want to watch news 24/7/365? It turns out that a lot of people did, and that success bred imitation.

In the early 90s, NBC and global media mogul, Rupert Murdoch, decided that they wanted a piece of the action. NBC planned to play it straight, adhering to the principles of traditional journalism and even using some of their network talent like Tom Brokaw on their cable station, MSNBC, which they founded with Microsoft.

Murdoch's experience was primarily in print journalism, so he sought someone who had a strong television background. That was Roger Ailes.

Ailes had cut his teeth in TV as a producer for The Mike Douglas Show and he knew how to make talk-television work. But he also had a keen inter-

est in politics and was brought in by Richard Nixon to help on his 1968 campaign. Subsequently he honed his skills on Ronald Reagan's team and later helped elect George H.W. Bush. He was fascinated by the interplay of television and politics and how TV could be used to advance a political agenda.

When Murdoch offered him the job of president of Fox News, he jumped at the chance. Cable news was still in its infancy and the question was, how do you cover the news but differentiate yourself from your competitors? Ailes had a clear vision for where he wanted to go. The country, he said, was divided roughly in half between the left and the right. Let CNN and MSNBC split the left. He'd take all of the right. It's a strategy that worked for a long time.

He tailored his programming to his right-wing viewers and sold it with a tagline of "Fair and Balanced." It had nothing to do, he admitted, with the station's approach to reporting. It was just what he figured his viewers wanted to believe.

He always thought that television could be used to sell a president and, in 2016, Fox was all in supporting Donald Trump and helping him enter the White House. The culmination of Ailes long-term strategy may turn out to be Fox's downfall.

Trump is one of history's greatest liars (more than 30,000 during his term in office, according to a Washington Post analysis) and nothing is out of bounds for him. Fox News fans bought him hook, line and sinker and that put Fox on a collision course with the truth. That collision came in the form of the presidential election of 2020.

Of course, we already knew that Trump had lost in what his own cybersecurity chief called the most secure election in American history. With numerous recounts and over 60 court challenges, it was also the most scrutinized election ever. Nevertheless, Trump and his minions continued to sell the Big Lie that the election was stolen and that election technology companies, Dominion and Smartmatic were in on the plot.

Fox News was stuck between a rock and a hard place—tell its viewers the truth or peddle the lie. They quickly found that their viewers were not interested in the truth as they switched to other stations like Newsmax and One America News that would tell them what they wanted to hear. So, Fox shifted gears and picked up the party line, going full on Big Lie with their nighttime stars: Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham selling it hard and frequently

hosting Trumpist sycophants like Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell spewing their conspiracy theories unimpeded.

Unlike Europe where, if you publish or broadcast something, you better be able to back it up, America sets a very high bar for defamation/libel suits. Here, the plaintiff has to prove that what the defendant broadcast was false; that they knew it was false or had blatant disregard for the truth, and that they harmed the plaintiff through their actions.

As we have seen in recent weeks from the filings by Dominion in its suit against Fox, all of the above appear to be true. As one legal expert said, it's the strongest defamation suit he's seen in his 40 plus years of practice. Smartmatic has filed suit as well. Dominion is seeking \$1.6 billion. Smartmatic wants even more—\$2.7 billion. Suits have also been filed against Newsmax and One America. The net effect of following Trump down the rabbit hole, may be the end of right-wing cable news as we have known it.

It turns out there is fake news, and the penalty for its purveyors might be a death sentence.

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