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NOT FOR KIDS

ANYMORE

COMIC BOOK-THEMED PRIME-TIME
BROADCAST NETWORK PROGRAMMING
UNSAFE FOR CHILDREN





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Decapitation. Dismemberment. Serial killers. Graphic gore. *Hey, Kids! COMICS!!*

Since the release of *The Dark Knight* film series and the 22 movies in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, comic-book characters have become wildly popular in other forms of entertainment, particularly television. But broadcast TV's representations of comic-book characters are no longer the bright, colorful, and optimistic figures of the past.

Children are innately attracted to comic-book characters; but in today's comic book-based programs, children are being exposed to graphic violence, profanity, dark and intense themes, and other inappropriate content.

In this research report, the PTC examined comic book-themed prime-time programming on the major broadcast networks during November, February, and May "sweeps" periods from November 2012 through May 2019. Programs examined were Fox's *Gotham*; CW's *Arrow*, *Black Lightning*, *The Flash*, *Supergirl*, DC's *Legends of Tomorrow*, and *Riverdale*; and ABC's *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, *Marvel's Agent Carter*, and *Marvel's Inhumans*. Research data suggest that broadcast television programs based on these comic-book characters, created and intended for children, are increasingly inappropriate and/or unsafe for young viewers.

In its research, the PTC found the following during the study period:

- In comic book-themed programming with particular appeal to children, young viewers were exposed to over 6,000 incidents of violence, over 500 deaths, and almost 2,000 profanities.
- The most violent program was CW's *Arrow*. Young viewers witnessed 1,241 acts of violence, including 310 deaths, 280 instances of gun violence, and 26 scenes of people being tortured. They also heard 492 profanities.
- Fox's *Gotham* featured 35 explicit, gory scenes of beheading or dismemberment, 144 deaths, 13 scenes of torture, and over 1,100 acts of violence.
- In only eight episodes, CW's *Black Lightning* featured 19 deaths, 111 profanities, and 212 acts of violence.
- The CW series *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* included 77 instances of sexual content, 785 instances of violence (including 67 deaths and 11 scenes of torture), and 368 profanities.
- Violence on the Disney-owned ABC network programs *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, *Marvel's Agent Carter*, and *Marvel's Inhumans* included a combined 1,194 instances of violence and 115 deaths. Also heard were 254 profanities. Most episodes of the ABC series were rated TV-PG.
- The CW's series *Riverdale*, based on Archie Comics, featured 78 instances of sexual content, 242 instances of violence, 153 profanities and scenes of casual drug use – especially disturbing, since every main character in the series (including Archie, Jughead, Betty, and Veronica) is a teenager still in high school.

With decades of scientific research demonstrating the harm to children from their consumption of graphic violence, profanity, and sex in entertainment, it is of great concern that the broadcast networks have chosen to use comics characters appealing to children, such as Batman, Green Arrow, Black Lightning, Archie, and Jughead, in programs with extreme adult content. All of the content examples referenced above were rated by the television networks as appropriate for children aged fourteen or younger.

The PTC warns parents that shows featuring Batman, Green Arrow, and Archie are no longer safe for their children; and we are calling on television's executives and creative artists to reverse this disturbing trend towards graphic gore using characters created for children. Where comic book characters with vast appeal to children are involved, parents should be able to expect prime-time broadcast television programs about the same characters to be child-friendly. Unfortunately, the age-based content ratings assigned by the broadcast networks for these programs largely serve only to reinforce the notion to parents that all these programs are appropriate for their children.

The broadcast networks should rededicate themselves to providing family-friendly entertainment for all viewers, and to act "in the public interest" as required under the terms of their broadcast licenses. TV network executives should act with greater responsibility and concern for the young audiences attracted to comic book characters by more carefully considering their networks' unique ability to reach large audiences – especially at times when children are watching. And creative artists and writers should remember that it does not require graphic, adult content to tell compelling stories using comics characters...as comic books themselves have demonstrated for over 80 years.



INTRODUCTION

For thousands of years, pictures and words together have been used to convey meaning, information, and entertainment. From the hieroglyphics of the Egyptians and other ancient cultures, to the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages, to editorial cartoons in early newspapers, the combination of pictures and text has been commonplace.

But the rise of the artform now recognized as “comics” belongs largely to the early 20th century. Beginning with humorous cartoons, soon adventure comic strips like Hal Foster’s *Prince Valiant*, Alex Raymond’s *Flash Gordon*, and Milton Caniff’s *Terry and the Pirates* marked the widespread use of the comic form for mass entertainment involving adventurous plots, fantastic settings, and characters possessed of unusual abilities. This trend was enhanced by pulp magazine heroes like Doc Savage and the Shadow, and Lee Falk’s seminal newspaper comic strips *The Phantom* and *Mandrake the Magician*. But it was the premiere of Superman in *Action Comics* #1 in June, 1938, that sparked an entire new industry – that of comic magazines featuring colorfully-clad heroes possessed of powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men – and which set off an industry trend that took American popular culture by storm.

Over the course of the 1940s, brightly-clad comic book “superheroes” became a major phenomenon in American popular culture, and reading comics became an accepted part of childhood (and a lucrative source of income for comics publishers; at one point, comics featuring Superman were selling over two million copies a month). Other media were quick to adapt comic-book characters, from the movie serials and radio programs of the 1940s, to the television series *The Adventures of Superman* in the 1950s, to the “Batmania” surrounding the Adam West TV series *Batman* in the 1960s, and on through various Saturday morning animated TV series, the *Wonder Woman*, *Spider-Man*, and *Incredible Hulk* live-action TV series, and *Superman: the Movie* in the 1970s, to the films, live-action, and animated TV series of the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, culminating in the wildly successful films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

But even as comics-themed and -inspired media expanded in popularity (often retaining the colorful and outlandish elements that had made comics popular with children), superhero comics themselves were changing. In the early 1960s, under writer/editor Stan Lee and artists like Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, comics began condemning racism and promoting brotherhood across racial and ethnic lines. In the wave of “relevancy” which struck media in the early 1970s, comics like DC’s *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*

explored issues such as drug addiction, racism, slumlords, and the like. The use of increasingly “mature” themes culminated in 1985, with the release of the graphic novels *The Dark Knight Returns*, Frank Miller’s dark and violent take on Batman, and *Watchmen* by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, a deconstruction of the entire superhero genre. This in turn launched a wave of “grim ‘n gritty” comics which dominated the 1990s. Eventually, these influences found their way into other comics-themed media as well – most obviously, in Christopher Nolan’s film trilogy *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Dark Knight Rises*.

The critical acclaim achieved by Nolan’s films, together with the massive popularity of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, were evident to the CW television network. With a new network president seeking to broaden audiences beyond females 18-34 which the network had previously targeted with programs like *Gossip Girl*, the network fixed on superheroes as a trend likely to draw in a young male demographic. Its first program along these lines, *Arrow*, proved tremendously popular; and soon CW was awash in comics-inspired programming, based both on DC and Archie Comics. Wanting to capitalize on the same trend, Disney – owners of both Marvel Comics and the ABC television network – soon followed suit; and Fox joined in by licensing the TV rights to Batman, and crafting a series centered around Batman as a teen, and the early years of the villains who would challenge him in adulthood. Today, television programs adapting or inspired by comics are a key component of the broadcast programming lineup.

Unfortunately, while these characters were created specifically for children, the current comic book-based programs created by and for the broadcast networks were not. Children are fascinated by and attracted to comic book characters; but the network programs today make no accommodation for a prime-time audience including a sizeable percentage of children.

The broadcast networks’ desire to appeal to adults, rather than to children for which they were created, has resulted in “dark,” “edgy” programming often inappropriate for children. This is of concern for two reasons: firstly, children are still attracted to these properties. Networks and showrunners may protest that theirs is a “more adult” take on the material, and “isn’t for kids;” but the kids watching don’t know that. What kid *wouldn’t* want to watch a TV show about Batman, Black Lightning, or Betty and Veronica?

Secondly, as comic book characters have been associated with and intended for children for decades, it is entirely legitimate for parents to assume that a TV show based on those characters is also safe for children. While many, perhaps most, parents today are likely aware that more violent and adult-themed comic books and graphic novels exist, they also reasonably assume that TV series based on such concepts are confined to cable or streaming services, not the broadcast airwaves. Further, such adult-themed material typically has a title indicating such; parents might be reluctant to allow their young children to watch a program called *iZombie*, but what could be wrong with *Black Lightning* or *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*?

Yet, since 2012, the broadcast networks have aired multiple prime-time series based on comic books which are replete with content inappropriate for, and even potentially harmful to, children and teens. This is especially important not only because children are innately attracted to comic book characters and programs (and therefore, are more likely to view – and be influenced by – them), but also because children younger than eight years have much greater difficulty discerning the difference between fiction and reality. As a result, they are particularly vulnerable to the violence and language used in such programming.¹

It is no longer in serious dispute that children are influenced by the media they consume. Children learn by observing, imitating, and adopting behaviors, including those seen in entertainment.² So well-established is this fact that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently proposed that movies containing tobacco use be rated R, stating that, “there is a causal relationship between depictions of smoking in the movies and the initiation of smoking among young persons. The more youths see smoking on screen, the more likely they are to start smoking.”³

But the influence of media on children has harmful effects beyond those of tobacco use. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, “clear and convincing” evidence demonstrates, and over 98% of pediatricians agree, that media violence is a causal factor of real-life violence and aggression – and that prolonged exposure to media violence results in increased acceptance of violence as an appropriate means of solving problems and achieving one’s goals.⁴ The American Psychological Association agrees, stating that children who watch many hours of violence on television in elementary school tend to show

higher levels of aggressive behavior when they became teenagers.⁵ Further, research shows that exposure to media violence is correlated with a variety of physical and mental health problems in children, including aggressive behavior and bullying, fear, depression, nightmares, and sleep disturbances.⁶

Even the entertainment industry itself admits the influence they have over young viewers. In July 2019, Netflix announced that it would no longer include portrayals of smoking or e-cigarette use in its new programs rated TV-14 or lower; days later, the company also announced that it had re-edited an episode of its series *13 Reasons Why* to eliminate a graphic depiction of a teenager committing suicide. Both actions were taken, Netflix stated, out of concern for the mental well-being of teens, and an acknowledgement that what teens and children see in media can, and does, influence their behavior. (This was borne out in research by the National Institutes of Health, which linked *13 Reasons Why* to a 30% increase in suicides among children ages 10-17.)⁷

This study examines recent prime-time broadcast network TV programs based on comic-book characters (mostly, though not exclusively, “superheroes”), and evaluates their content and appropriateness for young viewers. The research deliberately omitted programs based on comics or graphic novels specifically intended for mature audiences, such as *Hellblazer*’s spin-off TV series *Constantine*, *Lucifer*, and *iZombie*. Such graphic novels and comics are not intended for children, and also rarely feature the bright costumes, superpowers, and fantasy-style adventures of the stereotypical “comic book,” to which children are attracted.

Children are innately attracted to comic-book characters; but in today’s comic book-themed programs, children are being exposed to graphic violence, profanity, and other content inappropriate for their age group. This is not to say that all comics storytelling must return to the simplistic, child-centered style of the past. But when characters with an innate appeal to children – indeed, which were specifically *created* to appeal to children – are used in dark, dismal stories featuring graphic violence, dismemberment, torture, sexuality, and adult language, and when such stories are deliberately shown in prime time on broadcast television, in full view of even the youngest children, there is cause for concern...and need for reform.

METHODOLOGY

PTC entertainment analysts recorded and documented every instance of violence, sexual activity and dialogue, profanity, and the content ratings assigned to each episode, of comic- and superhero-themed programming deemed appealing to children, during the November, February, and May “sweeps” periods on prime-time broadcast network television from November 2012 to May 2019.

Analyzed were episodes of the CW network’s programs *Arrow*, *The Flash*, *DC’s Legends of Tomorrow*, *Black Lightning*, and *Riverdale*; the series *Supergirl*, which debuted on CBS, then moved to CW in its second season; ABC’s *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, *Marvel’s Agent Carter*, and *Marvel’s Inhumans*; and Fox’s series *Gotham*. This resulted in a total of 293 episodes, and slightly more than 300 hours of programming analyzed (a few episodes were two-hour specials).

Of these programs, *Gotham*, *Arrow*, *Black Lightning*, *DC’s Legends of Tomorrow*, and *Riverdale* were nearly always rated TV-14. Despite their violent content, *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and *Marvel’s Agent Carter*, airing on the Disney-owned ABC network, were more often rated TV-PG than they were TV-14, implying that their content was appropriate for younger pre-teen audiences. CW’s *The Flash* and *Supergirl* were also typically rated TV-PG, though given these programs’ general lack of graphic violence, such a rating was appropriate.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Gotham, *Arrow*, *Black Lightning*, and *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* featured frequent, intense, and often graphic violence. *Arrow*, *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* and *Gotham* featured frequent profane language (often by the "heroic" protagonists). Overall, comic book-themed programming featured little sexual content, though *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* and *Riverdale* contained substantially more of such content than the other series.

- In the comic-themed programs analyzed in this study, young viewers were exposed to 6,397 instances of violence, including:
 - 504 instances of gun violence
 - 57 depictions of decapitation or dismemberment
 - 59 instances of torture
- Viewers also heard 1,912 profanities.
- CW's *Arrow* was the most violent program, with 1,241 instances of violence, and 300 deaths.
- Fox's series *Gotham* was nearly as violent, with 1,160 instances of violence, and 144 deaths.
- ABC's *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* was third, with 933 instances of violence, and 66 deaths.
- *Gotham* also featured 35 scenes featuring decapitation or dismemberment.
- *Arrow* had 280 scenes of gun violence (scenes in which someone is actually shot and/or killed by firearms).
- *Arrow* had 197 scenes of graphic bloodshed, while *Gotham* had 125.
- Scenes of characters undergoing graphic torture were included on *Arrow* (26), *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (14) and *Gotham* (13).
- CW's series based on Archie Comics, *Riverdale*, had the most sex, at 78 instances of sex openly depicted or discussed. *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* had almost as much, with 77 instances of sexual content.
- *Arrow* contained the most profanities (492), followed by *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* (368).
- Of all the comic-based programs analyzed, 61% were rated TV-14; 35% were rated TV-PG, acceptable for young children.

Note that these numbers are only from programs aired during "sweeps" periods. This means that the incidences of violence, torture, and other content, for all episodes over all seasons is much higher.

Comic book-themed programs can be sorted into three broad categories as regards content:

DARK AND EXTREME

Content on these programs is explicit and not appropriate for children or young teens. Violence is frequent, graphic, and explicit, with emphasis often placed on "dark" elements such as pain and the torture of protagonists. Some episodes feature explicit violence such as decapitation and dismemberment, with copious amounts of blood shown. Foul language, while not rising to the level of explicitness heard on cable, is frequent. Shows in this category include *Gotham*, *Arrow*, *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, and *Black Lightning*. *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* was rated TV-PG almost twice as often as it was rated TV-14, even though the violence on the TV-PG rated episodes was equivalent to that on the TV-14 ones. By contrast, *Gotham*, *Arrow*, and *Black Lightning* were always rated TV-14.

A special mention should be made of the program *Riverdale*, based on the characters from Archie Comics. References to and depictions of sexual activity are frequent; early in the program, Archie underwent statutory rape by his teacher, and members of the Archie gang frequently “hook up” with one another. Some episodes have also depicted teens (including Archie) using drugs, with no ill effects. While violence on *Riverdale* is less frequent than on the superhero programs, when it does occur it is gruesome and gory, often involving serial killers, violent gang activity, and a focus on the pain and suffering of the protagonists. Archie has become a semi-pro boxer, and so is frequently and explicitly beaten bloody in the ring. These facts are of particular concern, since every main character on *Riverdale* is still a minor and a high school student.

INTENSIFIED REALITY

On these programs, violence is frequent and intense, if less graphic than in the above programs. “Superpowers” are deemphasized in favor of gun battles and more realistic hand-to-hand combat. Sexual innuendo is frequent, though depictions of sexual activity are still rare. Language is more explicit (“ass,” “bitch” and “bastard”). Parents would likely be uncomfortable allowing children to see these shows but may allow teens to watch. Programs in this category include DC’s *Legends of Tomorrow*, Marvel’s *Agent Carter*, and Marvel’s *Inhumans*.

RELATIVELY SAFE

Content on the programs in this category conform most closely to that associated with a traditional “comic book.” Emphasis is on colorful costumed identities and battles with unusual or fantasy-style villains, with both hero and villain using unrealistic fantasy “superpowers.” While action is frequent, explicit violence is rare, blood is infrequently shown, and little emphasis is given to characters’ pain or suffering. Profanity is limited and mild (“damn” and “hell”), and sexual content is barely hinted at, and usually is absent entirely. Parents may feel safe allowing teens and even children to watch these shows. Programs falling into this category are CW’s *The Flash* and *Supergirl*.



GOTHAM (FOX)

Over the past half-century, the character of Batman has become a huge icon of popular culture. When his parents are murdered in front of him in childhood, orphaned heir to millions Bruce Wayne vows to spend his life warring on all criminals, and obsessively trains himself in the many skills he will need to do so. In adulthood, while outwardly posing as a lazy millionaire playboy, Wayne uses his skills and inherited wealth to create an identity that will strike fear in the hearts of criminals: The Batman.



Soon after his creation by artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger, and introduction in *Detective Comics* #27 in May 1939, Batman became DC Comics' second-most popular character behind Superman – a position he maintained until the mid-1960s, when the premiere of the comedic TV series *Batman*, starring Adam West, made Batman a pop phenomenon. In fact, the “campy” aspects of that series reverberated throughout popular culture and continued to influence portrayals of comic-book superheroes in general, and Batman in particular, until the release of the 1989 film starring Michael Keaton.

Since the 1980s (with a few exceptions), the Batman character has become increasingly dark, grim, and gritty in its portrayal, through the Emmy award-winning *Batman: The Animated Series*, and culminating with the Christopher Nolan-helmed *The Dark Knight* film trilogy starring Christian Bale.

It is this “darker than dark” portrayal of the Dark Knight which heavily influenced the Fox series *Gotham*. The series supposedly told the story of a teenaged Bruce Wayne in the years before he became Batman; in fact, however, the program's main focus was on the origins and backgrounds of the many bizarre villains Batman would face in the future, with figures such as the Penguin and the Riddler portrayed as ultra-violent mob bosses and psychotic serial killers.

Gotham was the superhero series least appropriate for young viewers. Episodes contained extremely graphic violence. Grisly scenes of torture, dismemberment, decapitation, cannibalism, and bloodshed were frequent and intense.



Gotham premiered in November 2014 at 8:00 p.m. ET, a timeslot it retained throughout its run. Frequently, *Gotham* contained more graphic content than the Fox programming which followed it in the later 9:00 p.m. hour. The program concluded its run in May 2019.

In the study period, *Gotham* contained 1,160 instances of violence. Among them were 81 instances of gun violence, 144 deaths (with 79 scenes depicting corpses, many of them mutilated), 125 instances of blood or wounding, 35 scenes containing decapitation or dismemberment, and 13 scenes containing torture. There were 15 instances of sexual content (innuendo, dialogue, or depictions or implications of characters having sex), and 273 profanities. Of the 38 episodes analyzed for this study, all were rated TV-14.

CONTENT EXAMPLES

A surgeon stands over a woman who has been bound and gagged. He begins to cut into her face with a scalpel. Barnes enters the room and aims his gun at the surgeon. He sees a face that has been surgically removed and pickled in a jar.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 11/07/2016, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

Mob boss Falcone opens a box sent by rival Maroni. Inside, he finds Connor's bloody, severed head. Flies crawl over the head.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 4/27/2015, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LSV)

Nygma forces Tabitha to choose between losing her hand or electrocuting Butch to death. Tabitha refuses to kill Butch. Nygma triggers a guillotine. The blade drops and cuts off Tabitha's hand. Tabitha lifts her arm. Blood gushes out of the stump of her severed hand.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 11/21/2016, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LSV)

Murderface, wearing a spiked helmet and spiked gauntlets on his hands, headbutts Solomon Grundy in the face, then punches him several times. Enraged, Grundy rips off Murderface's arm and beats him with it repeatedly, until Murderface bleeds to death.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 11/09/2017, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLV)

A man turns around and reveals that his eyes have been gouged out. Only his bloody eye sockets remain.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 2/29/2016, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

Gordon and Bullock enter a building. The walls are covered with blood. Dismembered body parts are strewn across the floor. They find a bloody, severed head.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 11/07/2016, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

Members of a biker gang single out one of their own who betrayed them. They torture him by holding his face against a motorcycle tire as the engine revs and the wheel spins. Blood sprays out of the man's face and across the floor.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 11/02/2017, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLV)

Professor Pyg kidnaps Gotham City's wealthy elite and forces them to eat meat pies made from the corpses of homeless people.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 11/16/2017, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

Detective Bullock enters an exclusive party. People are dressed in bondage outfits and skimpy leather lingerie. A man in boxer shorts wears a rabbit mask as a woman feeds him a bottle. A group of partially-nude people on a large circular sofa are lying on top of one another.

The hostess walks onto a stage and introduces the next act. We hear a woman moan, a chainsaw rev, a whip crack repeatedly, a man scream, and a pig squeal. The camera shows Bullock's expression of shock and revulsion.

Bullock: "Oh, Hell no."

(*Gotham*, Fox, 4/27/2015, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LSV)

Gordon and Bullock enter Barbara's home. The butler's dead body lies in the foyer. Gordon finds Barbara's parents' dead bodies on the couch, covered in blood. Bullock searches for Jason, who sneaks up behind him and knocks him out, causing him to fall down the stairs. Moments later, Jason attacks Gordon. They trade blows and fight over a knife.

Jason takes Barbara hostage, threatening to slit her throat. Bullock comes from behind and startles him. Gordon fires a bullet into Jason's forehead. But as Jason falls dead, his knife cuts Barbara's throat. Blood gushes out.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 4/27/2015, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LSV)

Police officers drive into a frozen corpse. The corpse's head flies off and smashes through their windshield.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 2/29/2016, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

Police officers exchange gunfire with Victor and his henchmen. Gordon is shot in the stomach. He looks down at his bloody wound and staggers into a garage. A patrolwoman sees Victor and reaches for her weapon, but Victor's henchmen shoot her. Gordon tries to flee, but Victor shoots him again, in the leg.

Officer Montoya drives into the garage and provides covering fire as Gordon hobbles into her car. They escape. Victor sneers at the patrolwoman on the ground with the gunshot wound. She begs him for her life.

Patrolwoman: "No, no. Please."

Victor fires directly into her chest, murdering her. He rolls up his sleeve, revealing scars up and down his arm, one notch for every law enforcement officer he's killed. He takes out a box cutter and slices a new notch into his arm.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 11/03/2014, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLSV)

Two office workers fight to the death. One man puts the other in a headlock, but his opponent bites his finger off. He pulls away and uses the blade of a paper trimmer to chop his opponent's neck.

Later, police investigate the crime scene. A bloody corpse lies nearby as Nygma inspects it. In bloody close-up, he pulls out a dismembered finger from the victim's mouth.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 11/10/2014, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLV)

Oswald and Ivy are tied to chairs inside her greenhouse. Ivy uses her mind control power to order one of the thugs to shoot the others. He turns and shoots all of them except Gabe. Ivy orders the thug to untie them and give his gun to Oswald. He does.

Oswald shoots the mind-controlled man in the head, then gives the gun to Ivy. She holds the gun aimed at Gabe. Oswald picks up a gardening tool and stabs Gabe in the chest with it. Blood sprays all over the windows.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 5/01/2017, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

Police enter a building with guns in hand. Bullock sees a man in a pig mask waving a knife at him. Bullock shoots him dead.

Upon inspecting the man's corpse, Bullock discovers that it was actually a female police officer. Her leg had been shackled to the floor, she was gagged beneath the mask, and the knife had been taped to her hand.

Bullock: "Damn it!"

(*Gotham*, Fox, 11/02/2017, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLV)

Tabitha uses her whip to strangle a man who is tied to a chair. The sound of a blade hissing through the air and a man screaming are heard. Barbara aims her gun in the direction of the sound.

A masked man holding a sword walks out of the shadows. Barbara's henchmen shoot at him, but he blocks and dodges all the bullets. The masked man slashes and stabs Barbara's henchmen, killing them all. Barbara and Tabitha flee. The masked man walks over to the tied-up man and decapitates him. Blood spurts out of the man's severed neck.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 5/01/2017, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

Oswald stabs Headhunter in the neck with a knife. Oswald pulls out the knife, then stabs him in the chest. He walks away, leaving Headhunter to bleed to death.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 11/02/2017, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLV)

Teenager Selina has already been hospitalized after being shot. Jeremiah pulls out his knife and stabs her in the leg. He climbs on top of Selina and prepares to stab her in the chest, but Oswald shoots him in the back, killing him.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 5/17/2018, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

A montage shows a crime spree by all the criminals in Gotham City:

- The Penguin shoots Butch, killing him. Penguin then shoots Tabitha, and his men drag her away.
- Mr. Freeze uses his freeze gun to turn a man into a frozen corpse.
- Firefly and her followers light fires throughout the city.
- The Scarecrow sprays a man with his hallucinogenic gas, then uses his knives to decapitate the man. Blood sprays out.
- Barbara orders her assassins to murder all the men in a room. A little boy is shown using a hatchet to hack up a corpse. He turns toward the camera and is shown to be wearing a blood-covered mask.

(*Gotham*, Fox, 5/17/2018, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)



ARROW (CW)

The Green Arrow, co-created by DC Comics editor Mort Weisinger and artist George Papp, first appeared in *More Fun Comics* #71 (November 1941). The character was inspired by the Robin Hood legend, as well as by the now-forgotten 1940 movie serial *The Green Archer*, which was based on a novel by Edgar Wallace.



For the first 30 years of the character's existence, Green Arrow was a second-string character used in short back-up stories in various comic books published by DC. During this period, Green Arrow was essentially "Batman with a bow;" his headquarters was the Arrow-Cave, he had an Arrow-car, an Arrow-plane, a sidekick who dressed in bright red and yellow, and in his other identity, he was a millionaire playboy (Oliver Queen).

In 1969, the character was reinvented by artist Neal Adams, who gave Green Arrow a darker costume and a beard, and writer Denny O'Neil, who gave him a distinctive personality. Under O'Neil, Oliver Queen lost his fortune and became an embittered cynic, an anti-authority rebel, and a passionate liberal who tackled street-level criminals like slumlords and corrupt businessmen, while often condemning his fellow superheroes as "fascists." In the decades that followed, Green Arrow comics became progressively darker and grimmer; in Mike Grell's graphic novel *The Longbow Hunters*, Green Arrow witnesses the torture and rape of his girlfriend, and deliberately kills the rapist in revenge.

But once again in the character's history, Green Arrow has followed the path forged by Batman. The increased popularity of superheroes at the box office – particularly the dark, gritty *The Dark Knight* film series – served as the most obvious inspiration for the CW series *Arrow*.

The program altered the Oliver Queen character, reducing his age to that of a young man in his early- to -mid-twenties, while largely eliminating his passion for progressive politics. In *Arrow*'s early seasons, "The Hood"/"The Arrow" was a lone, murderous vigilante, who frequently flashed back to his origin story of



undergoing torture and brutal combat training on a remote island, then working as an assassin for the Russian mob. In later seasons, the character (and program) lightened slightly, as Green Arrow became the leader of an entire team of weapon-wielding vigilantes devoted to protecting his home of Starling City.

The TV series *Arrow* combines *Dark Knight*-style storytelling with heavy doses of sexual and romantic entanglement. This formula has proven successful in moving the CW network away from its previous female-targeted *Gossip Girl* style of programming, to capturing a wider demographic by capitalizing on the popularity of superhero-themed entertainment.

Premiering in October 2012 at 8:00 p.m. ET, *Arrow* retained that timeslot for most of its run, only in recent years moving to 9:00 p.m., then back again. In the study period, *Arrow* contained 1,241 instances of violence. Among them were 280 instances of gun violence, 310 deaths, 197 instances of blood or wounding, one scene containing decapitation or dismemberment, and 26 scenes containing torture. There were 31 instances of sexual content (innuendo, dialogue, or depictions or implications of characters having sex), and 492 profanities. Of the 68 episodes analyzed for this study, 63 were rated TV-14; none were rated TV-PG; and for five, ratings information could not be obtained.

CONTENT EXAMPLES

Oliver flashes back to his time on the island.

Oliver is grabbed by masked men. They handcuff him and march him into an army tent, where Edward threatens him.

Edward: "I can make it feel like hell...Think of that when you're begging for death."

Oliver is strung up by his hands. A masked man stabs him in the stomach with a knife, then drags the knife up his chest, slashing him. Oliver hangs by his hands bleeding, about to die. Slade enters, kills the masked man, and saves Oliver.

(*Arrow*, CW, 11/07/2012, 8:00 p.m., TV-14)

"The Hood" shoots arrows at Barrera, knocking his cellphone from his hand. They fight hand to hand. Oliver stabs Barrera in the chest with an arrow, killing him.

(*Arrow*, CW, 2/27/2013, 8:00 p.m., TV-14 V)

In a flashback, Oliver, his father, and another man are stranded on a raft after their boat sank. Oliver's father shoots the other man with a pistol, killing him. Oliver's father then shoots himself in the head, committing suicide.

(*Arrow*, CW, 5/15/2013, 8:00 p.m., TV-14 V)

Oliver is chained up. He breaks free and uses the chains to break the necks of two guards, killing them. He stabs another man in the chest.

(*Arrow*, CW, 5/15/2013, 8:00 p.m., TV-14 V)

The Count holds Felicity hostage. Green Arrow arrives and the Count shoots at him, then holds a syringe to Felicity's neck. He prepares to stab her, but Green Arrow shoots multiple arrows into the Count's chest, killing him.

(*Arrow*, CW, 11/20/2013, 8:00 p.m., TV-14 V)

Oliver confronts Merlyn, both using swords. They duel. Merlyn evades Oliver, picks up his bow, and shoots an arrow at him. Oliver knocks the arrow aside with his sword, then cuts off Merlyn's hand.

(Arrow, CW, 2/10/2016, 8:00 p.m., TV-14 V)

A masked gunman opens fire with an assault rifle in City Hall. Multiple people are killed, and Chase is wounded. Rene fires at the gunman with his pistol. His shots hit the gunman squarely, but he is unhurt.

The camera pans over bloodstains on the floor, then focuses on Chase, sitting on a gurney with a bloodstained shirt and bloody shoulder wound. He talks to Oliver and Rene.

Chase: "Catch that son of a bitch!"

Rene: "That bastard was wearing kevlar."

(Arrow, CW, 2/15/2017, 8:00 p.m., TV-14 V)

Vigilante sets up his sniper rifle overlooking the entrance to the courthouse. John, Curtis and Rene enter the building, all armed with guns. Vigilante fires at them repeatedly, then chases them, wounding Rene. Vigilante fistfights with John, then shoots him in the chest, but John's armor protects him. Curtis throws a bomb, driving Vigilante off. Curtis helps carry Rene out of the building.

Rene: "Yo, that was badass."

Curtis: "You mean, no more jokes about my balls?"

Rene: "Hell no."

(Arrow, CW, 3/01/2017, 8:00 p.m., TV-14)

Oliver has been captured and tied up. Diaz beats him, as armed men stand around watching. Oliver challenges Diaz to a fight. They punch and kick each other, both drawing blood.

Diaz: "You think you're so tough, because you spent four years in Hell?"

Diaz stabs Oliver with a knife. They leave Oliver to bleed to death.

(Arrow, CW, 4/26/2018, 9:00 p.m., TV-14)

Armed guards patrol a base. John parachutes in, firing a rifle at them. He kills some, then throws grenades to blow others up. Later, John kills another guard with a knife.

(Arrow, CW, 5/03/2018, 9:00 p.m., TV-14)

Dinah teaches young Zoe how to fight.

Zoe: "It's so cool learning how to kick ass from the Black Canary."

Rene enters and talks to Dinah.

Rene: "Ever since you became captain, you've been busting your ass."

Rene hands Dinah a note.

Rene: "Figured it was some punk-ass pranking me."

Dinah: "Oh, damn."

(*Arrow*, CW, 2/11/2019, 8:00 p.m., no rating)

An unseen assailant injects Collins with a paralysis drug as Collins sleeps. Collins wakes up.

Collins: "What the hell?"

The assailant slashes Collins' throat with a knife. Blood splatters his pillow.

(*Arrow*, CW, 2/11/2019, 8:00 p.m., no rating)



BLACK LIGHTNING (CW)

One of DC Comics' first African-American superhero characters, and the first to have a comic book entirely devoted to his adventures, Black Lightning premiered in *Black Lightning* #1 in April 1977. Co-created by writer Tony Isabella and artist Trevor Von Eeden, Black Lightning is Jefferson Pierce, an Olympic champion who returns to his childhood home to find it riddled with crime. Vowing to clean up his old neighborhood, Pierce assumes a double identity, teaching school by day, and fighting crime at night as Black Lightning.

The current television program picks up the story some twenty-plus years after Black Lightning's debut. Decades earlier, Black Lightning was a mysterious vigilante who fought crime. After defeating albino crime lord Tobias Whale, who murdered Pierce's father, Pierce retired his Black Lightning identity, married, became a respected educator and principal at an inner-city high-school, and fathered two daughters. But when Whale returns and resumes his criminal career, Pierce revives his Black Lightning identity – only to discover that his daughters have inherited versions of his power to throw lightning bolts and want to assume their own crime-fighting identities.



Though individuals with superpowers are common in the show, *Black Lightning* emphasizes brutal hand-to-hand combat, and the torture Tobias Whale inflicts on various opponents, minions, and others, with some instances being fairly explicit. Language is also a concern; nearly every episode has some character using the phrase “my black ass” at some point, in addition to other profanity.

Black Lightning premiered on the CW in January 2018 at 9:00 p.m. ET, where it has remained throughout its run. In the study period, *Black Lightning* contained 212 instances of violence. Among them were six instances of gun violence, 19 deaths, 17 instances of blood or wounding, one scene containing decapitation or dismemberment, and three scenes containing torture. There were 10 instances of sexual content (innuendo, dialogue, or depictions or implications of characters having sex), and 111 profanities (mostly by the villain, Tobias Whale). Of the eight episodes analyzed for this study, seven were rated TV-14. None were rated TV-PG, and for one, ratings information could not be obtained.

CONTENT EXAMPLES

A hitman awakens. He is bound to a chair. Blood leaks from a wound on his head and runs down his face. His hand is taped to a table. Blood pools around it, and two of his

fingers are severed and lie in the blood. Black Lightning's friend Peter Gambi has been torturing the hitman for information. Gambi stands over the bound man, holding a knife.

Gambi: "Last time: who hired you to kill me?"

The hitman says he doesn't know who hired him; it was all done online.

Hitman: "C'mon, man. You know how this is done."

Gambi: "You're right. I do."

Gambi picks up a pistol and shoots the hitman in the chest, killing him.

(*Black Lightning*, CW, 11/20/2018, 9:00 p.m., TV-14 LV)

Tobias orders Khalil to kill Reverend Holt and members of his congregation.

Tobias: "Pop that pimpy-ass preacher and a few of his flock right there in the church."

Khalil says his mother goes to the church.

Tobias: "Why you flapping your thick lips so much? I'm not asking you to kill yo' mama. I'm telling you to kill that sorry-ass excuse of a preacher. Hell, we'd be doin' yo' mama and the world a favor. Bottom line, I don't care how you gotta get it done. Just kill his ass!"

(*Black Lightning*, CW, 11/20/2018, 9:00 p.m., TV-14 LV)

Khalil tells Tobias he couldn't kill the Reverend.

Tobias brutally beats Khalil, punching and kicking him. Tobias punches Khalil in the crotch and kicks him across the room. Khalil falls.

Tobias: "Get your ass up."

Tobias throws Khalil against the wall, then lifts him.

Tobias: "Get your ass up."

Tobias repeatedly punches Khalil in the face until it is bloody.

Tobias: "You will kill Reverend Holt AND yo' mama! Or I will kill you, smartass."

Tobias beats Khalil into unconsciousness, slamming him against a fish tank. The tank shatters.

Tobias: "You done broke my damn fish tank."

(*Black Lightning*, CW, 11/20/2018, 9:00 p.m., TV-14 LV)

Anissa bursts into a gang's hideout. She grabs the gang leader by the throat and slams him against the wall, choking him. Anissa repeatedly slams his head into the wall. The gang leader sprays mace in her eyes.

Leader: "Kill that bitch!"

Various gang members kick and punch her. Anissa uses her powers to create a shockwave, knocking the gang members down. She escapes.

(*Black Lightning*, CW, 2/04/2019, 9:00 p.m., no rating)

Marcus and Cutter enter the medical facility. Guards try to stop them. Marcus knocks them down with his powers, and Cutter shoots them, killing them. Three more guards appear and receive the same treatment. One guard survives. He tries to sound an alarm. Cutter shoots him in the head at point-blank range, murdering him.

(*Black Lightning*, CW, 2/11/2019, 9:00 p.m., TV-14 LV)



THE FLASH (CW)

The character of The Flash, the lightning-themed superhero who runs faster than a bullet, has long been a popular one. The first comic-book character called “The Flash” was created in 1940, and quickly became a mainstay on the comics racks. When the superhero genre became moribund after World War II, that character disappeared; but a reinvention of The Flash, with a new backstory and costume provided by DC writer/editor Julius Schwartz and artist Carmine Infantino in *Showcase #4* (October 1956), is universally considered by fans to have marked the revival of superheroes, and kicked off the era now known as the “Silver Age of Comics.”

As is common with characters in long-running media franchises, over the decades various characters have borne the mantle of The Flash; but the television series follows, with some modifications, the story presented in the 1950s: Police scientist Barry Allen is working late when a bolt of lightning hits the chemical storage cabinet in his lab. Bathed in the electrified chemicals, Allen gains the power to move at superhuman speeds, and uses his newfound talents to battle a bizarre array of criminals which soon arise.



With *Supergirl*, *The Flash* is the TV series safest for young viewers. The tone is considerably lighter than that found on *Arrow* and other series, a fact remarked upon by the characters in the shows themselves. *The Flash* is primarily concerned with fantastic battles against costumed, superpowered foes, with dollops of light-hearted fun in the mix – one of the Flash’s principal opponents is a talking gorilla, and one of his allies is capable of stretching and bending his body like putty. Though there are a few dark moments, by and large *The Flash* contains little graphic violence, sexual content, or profanity.

Premiering in October 2014, *The Flash* has always aired at 8:00 p.m. ET. In the study period, *The Flash* contained 828 instances of violence, including 65 deaths. There were 12 instances of sexual content (innuendo, dialogue, or depictions or implications of characters having sex), and 169 profanities. Of the 48 episodes analyzed for this study, two were rated TV-14, and 46 were rated TV-PG.

CONTENT EXAMPLES

Cisco talks with Hartley.

Cisco: "This is just another of your lame-ass tricks. How can you speak six languages, and sound like a dick in every one of them?"

Hartley hits Cisco and tries to escape. Cisco punches Hartley in the face, slams him against the wall, throws him to the floor, and tries to kick him. Hartley grabs Cisco's leg and pulls him to the floor. As Hartley moves to escape, Cisco turns on a sonic device. Hartley falls to the ground, writhing in pain.

(*The Flash*, CW, 2/03/2015, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLV)

Barry brings Caitlin home after she has gotten drunk and thrown up. Caitlin has trouble removing her clothes and stands with her bra exposed. Barry uses his super-speed powers to change her into her pajamas.

Caitlin: "Did you sneak a peek at my goods?"

Barry: "I wouldn't be much of a hero if I did that."

Caitlin: "Yeah, but it's okay if you peeked a little. You deserve a peek for all the good stuff you do."

(*The Flash*, CW, 2/03/2015, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLV)

In a flashback, General Eiling shoots and kills a girl who is standing in front of The Flash.

In the present, Eiling has Professor Stein tied to a chair and tortured by electrocution. Ronnie breaks a glass and cuts into his own arm, in order to telepathically communicate with Stein.

(*The Flash*, CW, 2/17/2015, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-PG DV)

Barry, Joe, and Ralph attend Cisco's bachelor party.

Ralph: "Oh my God, you're serious. This wiener fest is your bachelor party?"

Cisco: "This wiener fest is about to indulge in some very fine cigars and a nice steak dinner."

Ralph: "Gentlemen, welcome to the Golden Booty."

Strippers are shown dancing around a pole in the background. During the party, Ralph uses his stretching powers to steal money from the other tables, leading to a fistfight with another man. Barry becomes intoxicated, tells everyone he is The Flash, and ends up drunkenly lying on the floor covered in chicken wing sauce.

(*The Flash*, CW, 11/07/2017, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-PG DLV)

Due to a time warp, the villain Cicadia repeatedly murders The Flash's friends:

- Cicadia has Iris tied up on a rooftop. He throws his magic dagger, which stabs Caitlin in the back and kills her.
- Cicadia has Ralph tied up on a rooftop. He throws his magic dagger, but Nora moves Caitlin out of the way. The dagger hits Ralph in the back and kills him.

- Cicadia has Dr. Wells tied up on a rooftop. He throws his magic dagger, but Nora moves Caitlin out of the way. The dagger hits Cisco in the back and kills him.
- Cicadia has Cecille tied up on a rooftop. He throws his magic dagger. It hits her in the back and kills her.

Nora casts a spell reversing time. Cicadia throws his magic dagger, it reverses course in midair, and stabs Cicadia in the chest.

Ralph: "Maybe after the ass-kicking he just got, he'll think twice about coming after us again."

(*The Flash*, CW, 2/12/2019, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-PG)



SUPERGIRL (CW)

The female counterpart to Superman first appeared in *Action Comics* #252 (May 1959) and was co-created by science-fiction author Otto Binder and artist Al Plastino. Also born on the planet Krypton and sent to Earth when that planet was destroyed, Kara Zor-El possesses the same powers as Superman, and is in fact Superman's cousin (a decision made by DC's editors to prevent their young readers from immediately clamoring for Superman and Supergirl to marry). On Earth, Kara assumes the secret identity of mild-mannered student reporter Linda Danvers.

Over the decades there have been multiple versions of Supergirl, with frequently changing backstories; but the CW television series has largely settled on the classic 1950s background, with two major changes: while she arrived on Earth after Superman was an established hero, she was actually born earlier, and was several years older than Superman when he was an infant on Krypton; and Superman himself rarely appears on the program.

With *The Flash*, *Supergirl* is the most "traditional" of the comic-inspired programs. While action is abundant, graphic violence is rare, language is mild, and sex is rarely referred to and never seen. The program typically has an upbeat tone and emphasizes strong, positive female characters and fantasy-style battles against aliens and "supervillains."



At its October 2015 premiere on CBS, *Supergirl* aired at 8:00 p.m. ET, a timeslot it has retained in its move to the CW network. In the study period, *Supergirl* contained 735 instances of violence, with 35 deaths. There were 12 instances of sexual content (innuendo, dialogue, or depictions or implications of characters having sex), and 92 profanities. Of the 37 episodes analyzed for this study, 14 were rated TV-14 (five in the first year on CBS, nine in subsequent years on CW), and 23 were rated TV-PG (two on CBS, 21 on CW).

CONTENT EXAMPLES

Alex talks with a teen who has been sexually victimized by a teacher.

Josie: "I love him, and he loves me."

Alex: "You are delusional. Mr. Bernard is a grown-up, sleeping with a minor. That is disgusting. And illegal."

Josie: "He's 27. I'm 17. In five years, nobody will care about the age difference."

Alex: "In five years, he'll be halfway through his sentence for statutory rape."

Josie: "Are we done here?"

Alex: "No. Kenny sent Mr. Bernard an email the night before he died. How did Mr. Bernard react?"

Josie: "He was pissed. That nerdy little peeping tom was messing with him. Anybody would be. But he didn't kill him."

Alex: "If he's the kind of guy who would hurt you, he's probably the kind of guy who would hurt someone who found out."

Josie: "God, you so don't get it! No one hurt me."

(*Supergirl*, CW, 11/13/2017, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLV)

The sheriff walks Alex down to the basement, with his gun aimed at her back.

Alex: "You're a scumbag who kills kids to cover his own ass."

Supergirl flies to their location and punches through the concrete wall. A piece of the wall hits the sheriff in the head and knocks him out.

Alex: "So, we found out the douche quarterback was smoking pot, caught a predator, and solved a murder."

(*Supergirl*, CW, 11/13/2017, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLV)

A man's corpse is found next to the crash site of an alien spaceship. The corpse has a large hole in its chest, showing the heart has been removed.

(*Supergirl*, CW, 2/17/2019, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-PG V)

A snakelike alien creature emerges from Pamela's body and stabs a man in the chest, killing him.

(*Supergirl*, CW, 2/17/2019, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-PG V)

Lex Luthor is confronted by his sister Lena. She pulls out a gun and shoots Lex directly in the chest. Luthor bleeds to death.

(*Supergirl*, CW, 5/19/2019, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-PG)



DC'S LEGENDS OF TOMORROW (CW)

Following the debut of Superman in 1938, superhero comics proliferated rapidly, with dozens of publishers entering the field with hundreds of superhero characters, each appearing in their own individual stories. It was inevitable that young fans would want to see their favorite heroes form a team; and the first such team, the Justice Society of America, premiered in *All-Star Comics* #3 (Winter 1940-41). Soon, superhero teams became a common part of the genre, and of adaptations in other media. Superhero teams such as the Avengers, the Justice League, the X-Men, and the Fantastic Four have all been subjects of their own big-budget movies.

DC's Legends of Tomorrow is the only current superhero program not directly inspired by or adapting a pre-existing comic book title. Rather, the "Legends" team was formed out of supporting characters from the CW's other superhero programs who were popular with fans, but insufficiently so to merit their own series: Green Arrow's ninja-trained ex-girlfriend Sara Lance, a.k.a. the White Canary; Green Arrow's ally, billionaire industrialist Ray Palmer, with his armored ATOM suit which allows him to shrink and fly; The Flash's ally Firestorm, the Nuclear Man; and the Flash's criminal opponents, Captain Cold and Heat Wave. Brought together by time-travelling adventurer Rip Hunter, the team wanders through history battling various time-travelling foes – and constantly squabbling with one another.

Perhaps due to its origins, *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* takes itself less seriously than other programs of its type. While it does contain science-fiction, fantasy, and superhero plotlines, and each episode has a hefty amount of action (and characterization verging on soap opera), at times the program becomes a light-hearted parody of superhero shows, poking fun at other CW superhero programs like *Arrow*, *Supergirl*, and *The Flash*. The characters deliver knowing asides about conventions of the genre, occasionally even making comments which obliquely acknowledge that they are characters in a TV show.



Particularly in its first season, *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* did have moments of graphic violence; but over the course of the series, as a result of its increasing tongue-in-cheek tone, it has tended to have less than CW series like *Arrow* or *Black Lightning*. It does, however, have the most sexual content of any superhero series, due to its emphasis on character relationships. Members of the team frequently "hook up" with one another or with figures from history, and references to sex are common. After *Arrow*, it is the superhero-themed show containing the most profanity.

DC's Legends of Tomorrow premiered in January 2016 at 8:00 p.m. ET. The series has alternated timeslots between 8:00 and 9:00 p.m., sometimes varying multiple times in the course of a single season. In the study period, *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* contained 785 instances of violence. Among them were 16 instances of gun violence, 67 deaths, 35 instances of blood or wounding, six scenes containing decapitation or dismemberment, and 11 scenes containing torture. There were 77 instances of sexual content (innuendo, dialogue, or depictions or implications of characters having sex), and 368 profanities. Of the 29 episodes analyzed for this study, 27 were rated TV-14; only one was rated TV-PG; and for one, ratings information could not be obtained.

CONTENT EXAMPLES

Savage cuts the throat of Hawkman's corpse, causing blood to pour out. He collects the blood in a goblet and drinks. He passes the goblet to his cultists, who also drink from it.

(*DC's Legends of Tomorrow*, CW, 02/04/2016, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

Sara brings the severed, but still animated, head of a zombie to Grant and slams it down on his desk. The zombie head grinds its teeth.

(*DC's Legends of Tomorrow*, CW, 11/03/2016, 8:00 p.m. ET, no rating)

The demon Malus possesses Nora. It forces Nora to smash her face into a table many times at superhuman speed. Nora is shown with black blood splattering on the table and dripping down her chin.

(*DC's Legends of Tomorrow*, CW, 2/12/2018, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLV)

Sarah throws a knife. It lands in one assassin's chest, killing her. Sarah stabs another assassin in the neck, killing him. She kicks a third away from her.

Sarah battles with a swordsman, flipping and disarming him. She uses his sword to kill another assassin, and then moves to kill the swordsman.

(*DC's Legends of Tomorrow*, CW, 02/04/2016, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

Constantine hurls fireballs at the demon Neron, but misses. He uses a spell to paralyze Neron. Gary enters.

Constantine: "Damn it, Gary, now's not the time for you to be standing around like some hapless idiot. I can't hold this bastard forever."

Neron offers Gary a gift. A small container appears. Gary opens it. Inside is his own nipple and bloody breast flesh.

Constantine: "That part of you belongs to Hell now."

Gary recalls being stabbed in the chest by a unicorn and impaled on its horn.

The dismembered nipple "walks" across the floor, trailing blood. Gary picks it up.
Gary places the dismembered nipple against his chest. It magically reattaches itself.
(DC's *Legends of Tomorrow*, CW, 4/29/2019, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLV)

Constantine has been banished to Hell by the demon Neron. In Hell, Constantine visits Masher at the "Flesh Factory," a strip club. Strippers are shown contorting their bodies in bizarre ways.

Masher: "What are you doing in Hell?"

Constantine: "Neron's finally making his play for the throne of Hell."

Masher: "Be careful, John. Not every demon you've sent to Hell is as forgiving as I am."

Calabraxix and a henchdemon attack Constantine. Constantine smashes a liquor bottle and swipes at them with it. They beat him up and hang him over a railing.

Constantine: "You dim-witted dick!"

(DC's *Legends of Tomorrow*, CW, 5/13/2019, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

Constantine travels back in time and meets his father before he was born.

Constantine: "I've ruined a lot of lives, and that bastard's just the first one to call me out on it."

Constantine vows to give his father a "back-alley vasectomy." He moves to kick his father's crotch, but instead falls flat on his back.

Zari: "Ball-kick paradox. You can't kick your own dad in the junk, because you'd erase yourself from the timeline – which means there'd be no one to kick your dad in the junk."

Constantine: "Bloody hell I can't!"

Constantine tries to kick his father again, and again falls on his back. Constantine's father punches him in the face. Constantine punches back.

(DC's *Legends of Tomorrow*, CW, 11/05/2018, 9:00 p.m. ET, no rating)

In the past, Snart pays a visit to his 10-year-old self. His father comes up behind his adult self, cocking a pistol and pointing it at his head.

Father: "You get the hell away from my boy, you son of a bitch."

(DC's *Legends of Tomorrow*, CW, 02/04/2016, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

Sarah gives Zari relationship advice.

Sarah: "You like him, right?"

Zari: "I think so. But I don't know what the next step would be."

Sarah: "Oh, that's easy. You just jump his bones."

(DC's *Legends of Tomorrow*, CW, 4/29/2019, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLV)



MARVEL'S AGENTS OF S.H.I.E.L.D. (ABC)

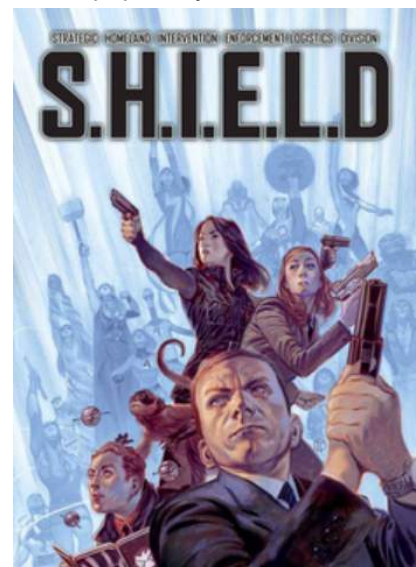
Inspired by the 1960s mania for spy fiction like the James Bond movies and the TV series *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.*, the concept of the paramilitary spy organization S.H.I.E.L.D. (Strategic Hazardous Intervention Espionage Logistics Directorate) was first introduced in Marvel Comics' *Strange Tales* #135 in August 1965, and was co-created by Marvel writer/editor Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby.

Originally, stories about S.H.I.E.L.D. centered on its battles with the evil subversive organization Hydra, which sought to conquer the world. Even after Hydra's defeat, for decades S.H.I.E.L.D. and its leader, Colonel Nick Fury, were mainstays of the Marvel Comics universe, turning up in nearly every title published by Marvel, providing support to various superhero individuals and groups as they battled threats to global security.

Both Nick Fury and the S.H.I.E.L.D. organization have been present or mentioned in nearly all the films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, beginning with the movie *Iron Man* in 2006. The popularity of the character of S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Phil Coulson, particularly his part in the film *Marvel's The Avengers*, led Disney (which owns both Marvel Comics and the ABC television network) to debut a spin-off TV series about Coulson and his fellow agents battling paranormal threats, culminating in the revelation that Hydra had penetrated S.H.I.E.L.D., and had been controlling it for decades. Thereafter, the series focused on Coulson's efforts to rebuild S.H.I.E.L.D. in line with its original principles.

Unlike other programs in the comic book genre, on *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* violence is more "realistic," in that it is centered on gun battles and hand-to-hand combat rather than fantastic superpowers. Sexual dialogue was rare, but profanity was frequent.

Premiering in November 2013, *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* aired at 8:00 p.m. ET in its first season. Thereafter, it ran at 9:00 p.m. ET for its second and third seasons, 10:00 p.m. in its fourth, then returned to 9:00 p.m. for most of its fifth season (though the last few episodes aired at 8:00 p.m.) In the study period, *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*



contained 933 instances of violence. Among them were 66 instances of gun violence, 91 deaths, 80 instances of blood or wounding, 12 scenes containing decapitation or dismemberment, and 14 scenes containing torture. There were 14 instances of sexual content (innuendo, dialogue, or depictions or implications of characters having sex), and 209 profanities. Of the 33 episodes analyzed for this study, 12 were rated TV-14, and 21 were rated TV-PG, despite having equivalent violence.

CONTENT EXAMPLES

Bobbi is tortured while bound to a chair. Kara slaps Bobbi across her face. Ward shoves needles under her fingernails. Bobbi's hands are covered in blood as she gasps in pain.

Bobbi manages to slip out of her restraints. Ward slams her against the wall and punches her in the face. Bobbi kicks Ward through the window and kicks the gun from Kara's hand. Ward beats up Bobbi and knocks her to the ground. Ward steps on Bobbi's leg, deliberately breaking it.

(Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., ABC, 5/12/2015, 9:00 p.m., TV-PG LV)

Coulson snatches up a gem. Mac grabs an axe and chops off Coulson's hand.

(Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., ABC, 5/12/2015, 9:00 p.m., TV-PG LV)

The agents fight against robot clones of humans. Skye kills one clone guard by slamming a door on his head, severing it.

Ghost Rider drills the eyeball out of another clone. Blood pours out of the eye socket. Ghost Rider uses his flaming chain to fling the clone in the air. Skye uses her powers to dismember the clone in midair.

Ghost Rider sets mastermind Aida on fire, throwing her burning body into the air. Aida explodes into a cloud of ash.

(Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., ABC, 5/16/2017, 10:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

Mike and Grant argue after capturing Skye.

Mike: "I saved your ass."

Grant: "You didn't save my ass."

Skye: "Lying bastard!"

Grant handcuffs Skye to a pole. Mike questions her.

Grant: "Damn it, Skye."

Mike shoots Grant with a device to stop Grant's heart. Grant appears to die, but quickly revives.

Mike: "You son of a bitch."

(Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., ABC, 4/29/2014, 8:00 p.m., TV-PG)



MARVEL'S AGENT CARTER (ABC)

World War II intelligence agent Peggy Carter first appeared in Marvel Comics' *Tales of Suspense* #77 (May 1966), co-created by Marvel writer/editor Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby. Though Peggy Carter did not appear in the Captain America comic books actually published during World War II, the 1966 story retroactively introduced her as having been Captain America's girlfriend during the war. While the comics quickly sidelined Peggy Carter and introduced younger love interests for the Captain, the Marvel Cinematic Universe movie *Captain America: The First Avenger* strongly emphasized her importance in Captain America's origin and their mutual love.

The popularity of the character (and of the actress Hayley Atwell, who played Peggy) led the Disney-owned ABC network to create a spin-off series set just after World War II. In the series, Peggy Carter is an agent of the Scientific Strategic Reserve (the forerunner of S.H.I.E.L.D.), and battles various subversive threats tied into the larger Marvel Universe.

Like *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, *Marvel's Agent Carter* largely eschewed fantastic "superpowers" in its action scenes, emphasizing fistfights and gun battles instead. While some of the combat scenes were intense, and the suspense sequences were mildly dark and gruesome at times, there was little that was deeply disturbing. Sexual content was extremely limited, and profanity was rare.

Premiering in January 2015 at 9:00 p.m. ET (where it remained throughout its run), *Marvel's Agent Carter* ran two seasons, and was cancelled in March 2016. In the study period, *Marvel's Agent Carter* contained 194 instances of violence. Among them were eight instances of gun violence, 14 deaths, eight instances of blood or wounding, and two scenes containing torture. There were three instances of sexual content (innuendo, dialogue, or depictions or implications of characters



having sex), and 45 profanities. Of the nine episodes analyzed for this study, all were rated TV-PG.

CONTENT EXAMPLES

Dottie flashes back to her childhood in 1937, when she was trained as an assassin by the Soviet Union. Little Dottie spars with another little girl. She wins the fight and breaks the other girl's neck, killing her.

(Marvel's Agent Carter, ABC, 2/03/2015, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-PG V)

Agent Peggy Carter leads Dugan and his commando team into a secret facility. They come across a little girl, who is crying. Dugan moves to comfort her. She pulls out a knife and stabs him, then grabs his pistol and shoots Juniper, killing him. Agent Carter shoots the gun out of her hand. Dugan prepares to throw a grenade at the little girl but changes his mind.

(Marvel's Agent Carter, ABC, 2/03/2015, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-PG V)

Peggy invades Whitney's headquarters. She hits one of Whitney's henchman in the back of the head with a pipe. The man tries to strangle her with a crowbar, but Peggy breaks free and kicks and punches the man, subduing him. She punches Whitney in the face. Whitney grabs Peggy, but she headbutts Whitney. Whitney pushes Peggy off a ledge. Peggy falls onto a piece of rebar, which impales her through her torso.

(Marvel's Agent Carter, ABC, 2/09/2016, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-PG DV)

Whitney has Dottie tied to a chair. She injects Dottie with truth serum, then uses her supernatural powers to torture Dottie. Dottie's throat fills with black goo which strangles her.

(Marvel's Agent Carter, ABC, 2/16/2016, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-PG DLV)

Peggy arrives at her car, only to find that Dottie has murdered a police officer. His corpse lies in a spreading pool of blood.

(Marvel's Agent Carter, ABC, 2/16/2016, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-PG DLV)



MARVEL'S INHUMANS (ABC)

Co-created by artist Jack Kirby and writer/editor Stan Lee and first appearing in *Fantastic Four* #45 (December 1965), the Inhumans were longtime mainstays of the comic-book Marvel Universe; but unlike the ubiquitous S.H.I.E.L.D. organization, the Inhumans were distinctly minor players, mostly confined to guest appearances in other characters' titles. On television, the Inhumans were introduced in *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (one of the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents on that program is secretly an Inhuman). Originally planned for a big-budget movie in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the Inhumans were instead spun off in a TV series.

Genetically modified by the alien Kree, the Inhumans are an ancient offshoot of the human race. Each Inhuman possesses some non-human power or physical characteristic (such as scales, or hooves instead of feet). The protagonists of the program are the members of the Inhuman Royal Family, who are deposed by the king's embittered younger brother, and who must wander the Earth, strangers among ordinary humanity.

However, audiences were alienated by the program's premise. Inhuman society is an absolute monarchy, in which the handsome, human-looking, super-powered individuals form a superior ruling caste, while less human-looking and unpowered individuals are relegated to lower castes, or even to slavery. This had the effect of making the "villainous," unpowered younger brother appear sympathetic, heroically rebelling against an unjust system, while the show's "heroes" were leaders of a racist tyranny. As a result, *Marvel's The Inhumans* proved unpopular with viewers, and was cancelled after only eight episodes.

Marvel's Inhumans premiered in September of 2017 at 9:00 p.m. ET., where it remained throughout its brief run. In the study period, *Marvel's Inhumans* contained 67 instances of violence and 10 deaths. Due to the brevity of the series, there were no instances of sexual content or profanity observed. Of the three episodes analyzed for this study, one was rated TV-14, and the other two were rated TV-PG.

CONTENT EXAMPLES

Triton sneaks up on Maximus' guards and stabs two of them in their backs, killing them. He hurls one blade at another guard. It stabs the guard in the chest, killing him. Triton uses his other blade to slash and cut down the remaining guards. He chases down Maximus, then drops his blade. Triton and Maximus fight, Triton beating him severely with his fists. Triton drags Maximus to Black Bolt, slamming Maximus against the wall.

(*Marvel's Inhumans*, ABC, 11/03/2017, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-PG V)

Armed guards search for Triton. He hurls one of his blades at a guard. The blade stabs the guard in the chest, killing him. Triton slips past the guard's corpse and pulls out the bloody blade, then uses it to cut down the other guards.

(*Marvel's Inhumans*, ABC, 11/10/2017, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-PG V)



RIVERDALE (CW)

For generations of Americans, the names “Archie,” “Jughead,” and “Betty and Veronica” have conjured up images of bright four-color comics depicting an upbeat world of carefree teens having clean, wholesome fun. Initially premiering in *Pep Comics* #22 (December 1941), and co-created by artist Bob Montana, writer Vic Bloom, and MLJ Comics company publisher John Goldwater, the Archie gang proved so popular that the company changed its name to “Archie Comics.” Over time, Archie Comics published other titles with teenage protagonists which became almost as popular, among them *Katy Keene*, *Sabrina the Teenage Witch*, and *Josie and the Pussycats*.

Archie Comics represented a sweet, positive portrayal of happy teenage years. Archie Andrews was the quintessential all-American boy, albeit a red-haired, freckle-faced, and slightly bumbling one. Archie was surrounded by a stable of other characters which soon became just as familiar: Archie’s hamburger-loving, whoopee cap-wearing, romance-averse best friend Jughead; his boorish, self-centered rival Reggie Mantle; and (in a situation the envy of many male readers) two beautiful girls competing for his attention – sweet, blonde, pony-tailed Betty, and wealthy brunette Veronica. Over time, other characters joined the cast, from brainy nerd Dilbert, to dull-witted athlete Moose and his girlfriend Ethel, to Riverdale High educators like the white-haired, sarcastic Miss Grundy to the overweight and beleaguered Principal Weatherbee.



While they were primarily known through comic books, there have also been many adaptations of the Archie gang in other media, primarily animation, from Filmation’s 1968 *The Archie Show* on CBS, to the 1987 NBC Saturday morning cartoon, *The New Archies*.



In keeping with the trends in other comics-based programming, *Riverdale* is a “dark, edgy” reinvention of Archie and company, having far more in common with other teen-targeted CW series like *Gossip Girl* and *90210*. On *Riverdale*, Archie is no longer a fun-loving, freckle-faced bumbler; he’s a brooding teen who, after failing in his attempt to pursue a musical career, becomes a semi-pro boxer, thus allowing him to be beaten bloody multiple times in the series.



Girl-next-door Betty now has a mother who is a snobbish hypocrite, a sister who was confined to mental institution, and a father who is the sadistic serial killer, the Black Hood. Veronica is a conniving businesswoman whose father is a murderous crime lord. And Jughead has been reinvented as the leader of a violent street gang, an aspiring novelist, and an artsy, emo hipster...who nevertheless still wears his iconic whoopee cap.

Riverdale is replete with storylines involving serial killers and murder, and an early storyline involved Archie being seduced and undergoing statutory rape by his schoolteacher, Miss Grundy. All the teens in the series are sexually active, profanity is common, and several episodes have shown the teen characters using drugs recreationally without harm.

Riverdale premiered in January 2017. In its first season it ran at 9:00 p.m. ET, but in its second it shifted to the 8:00 p.m. timeslot, where it has remained. In the study period, *Riverdale* contained 242 instances of violence. Among them were 12 instances of gun violence, 12 deaths, 25 scenes involving corpses (often graphically mutilated), 45 instances of blood or wounding, and two scenes containing decapitation or dismemberment. There were 78 instances of sexual content (innuendo, dialogue, or implications of characters having sex), including six open depictions of sex in the study period (meaning there were more such depictions which did not fall within a sweeps period). There were 153 profanities used in the study period. Of the 20 episodes analyzed for this study, 15 were rated TV-14; two were rated TV-PG; and for four, ratings information could not be obtained.

CONTENT EXAMPLES

Reggie greets Archie after summer break.

Reggie: "Hey, Andrews. You tap some cougar ass this summer?"

Archie: "Y'know what? You don't need more fantasy for your whang bang, Reggie."

(*Riverdale*, CW, 1/26/2017, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-14)

In a flashback, Archie remembers teacher Miss Grundy giving him a ride in her car over the summer. They are seen shirtless in the backseat of her VW, kissing, groping, and fondling one another. Archie is bare-chested; Miss Grundy wears a bra. She undresses him, and they have sex.

(*Riverdale*, CW, 1/26/2017, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-14)

In narration, Jughead describes teenage Jason's death, as the camera shows Jason's corpse in the morgue.

Jughead [voice-over]: "But that was before the undeniable, irrevocable fact of his bloated, waterlogged body. A corpse with a bullet hole in its forehead."

A close-up shows Jason's dead, desiccated face. The bullet hole is clearly visible.

(*Riverdale*, CW, 2/02/2017, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DL)

Chuck has sexually harassed various girls at Riverdale High. Betty and Veronica get their revenge, handcuffing him in a hot tub, and drugging him with a muscle relaxant.

Betty, enraged at Chuck, forces his head under the water, then dumps maple syrup on it.

Chuck: "You're crazy as hell!"

(*Riverdale*, CW, 2/02/2017, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DL)

Joaquin narrates finding Jason's body. The corpse is shown with a bloody head wound and a huge gush of blood down the head, puddling on the floor.

Joaquin and FP wrap the corpse in a plastic tarp and stuff it into a freezer. Blood is poured away into a sink.

Joaquin: "We stashed the body in a freezer, cleaned up the mess, got rid of any evidence."

(*Riverdale*, CW, 5/04/2017, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

Jughead, Archie, and their friends watch a video of Jason tied to a chair in the basement of a bar, while gang member Mustang taunts him. Jason's father Cliff Blossom shoots Jason in the head, killing him. Later, Cliff hangs himself. His corpse is seen hanging at the end of a noose.

(*Riverdale*, CW, 5/04/2017, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LV)

Jughead tells Betty he loves her. Jughead and Betty kiss. He picks her up.

Veronica leads Archie into her bedroom. They kiss and disrobe, Veronica revealing her bra and cleavage. Veronica strokes Archie's bare chest.

The scene cuts back to Betty and Jughead removing each other's clothes as they kiss. Jughead and Betty remove their shirts.

The next morning, Archie puts on his shirt as Veronica lies in bed.

(*Riverdale*, CW, 5/11/2017, 9:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LSV)

At a party, all the teens drink liquor. Nick offers "Jingle Jangle," drugs disguised as candy, to the whole teen party. Only Betty declines.

The teens are shown drinking, taking drugs, and making out over a music montage.

Song lyrics:

"It feels good to be runnin' from the devil
Another breath and I'm up another level
It feels good to be up above the clouds
It feels good for the first time in a long time"

(*Riverdale*, CW, 11/08/2017, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DV)

Jughead undergoes his initiation into the Serpent gang by "running the gauntlet." He walks between two lines of gang members. Each member punches him as he walks by. Jughead is repeatedly pummeled. Sweet Pea punches Jughead while wearing brass knuckles. Blood spurts from Jughead's face. Beaten and bloodied, Jughead collapses.

(*Riverdale*, CW, 11/08/2017, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DV)

In a flashback, Betty's mother Alice, then a high-school student, sees that her pregnancy test is positive.

Alice: "Damn it!...I tried to talk to him, and he blew me off for some vixen he's screwing."

Penelope Blossom enters and demands their hall passes.

Alice: "Up your ass, Penelope."

Penelope: "Classy as always, Alice Smith. Just curious: Were you born with that mouth, or is it something Southside mothers teach their bastard babies?"

Alice slaps Penelope.

Penelope: "You trashy bitch!"

Alice and Penelope grapple, wrestling, throwing each other about, and pulling each other's hair.

(*Riverdale*, CW, 11/07/2018, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 DLSV)

Archie lies strapped to his prison bunk, bare-chested. The warden burns him with a branding iron.

(*Riverdale*, CW, 11/14/2018, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LSV)

Cheryl has outed Moose as being gay.

Moose: "What the hell, Cheryl? What do you want?"

Cheryl apologizes for outing Moose publicly.

Moose: "Kevin and I, we're finally gonna do it. Tonight, in some secret bunker."

Cheryl: "Well, Moose. In that case, I'd bring a fresh set of sheets if I were you.

A lot of people have had sex on that cot."

(*Riverdale*, CW, 2/06/2019, 8:00 p.m. ET, no rating)

A montage shows:

Kevin and Moose meet, kiss, and begin tearing each other's clothes off.

A bra-and-panty-clad Veronica straddles shirtless Reggie.

Bra-clad Betty straddles shirtless Jughead.

Lingerie-clad Cheryl and Toni make out.

Kevin and Moose lie in bed together, cuddling post-coitally.

(*Riverdale*, CW, 2/06/2019, 8:00 p.m. ET, no rating)

Archie boxes Ronson. They exchange punches. Archie suffers a small cut near his eye.

Archie punches Ronson's stomach and face repeatedly. Ronson headbutts Archie.

Archie is shown with cuts on the side of his face and on his nose. Blood streams down over his mouth and chin.

(*Riverdale*, CW, 2/27/2019, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 LSV)

Betty sees the Gargoyle King and draws her revolver, pointing it at him. Betty is tackled by the Black Hood, with a hook for a hand. Betty kicks him. He slashes at her with his hook, but misses. Betty runs into another room and finds the corpse of a woman, with graffiti scrawled on it. The Black Hood bursts in, slashing at Betty.

They grapple, and he grabs her throat with his other hand, choking her. Betty grabs something off a nearby table and smashes it on his head. The Hood lets go and Betty runs but finds herself locked in the school.

Betty finds the corpse of another teenager, his throat slashed.

Betty lures the Black Hood into a locker room, where she smashes him over the head with a stick, but without effect. The Black Hood pursues her again. Betty hides in a closet but finds another bloody corpse within.

The Black Hood traps her in the closet. Betty screams.

(*Riverdale*, CW, 5/01/2019, 8:00 p.m. ET, TV-14 V)

CONCLUSION

It is clearer today than ever before that “comics aren’t just for kids anymore.” The use of the graphic narrative medium for more “adult” storytelling has become ubiquitous, to the point where finding comics and comics-themed entertainment that are for kids is almost impossible. And the trend shows no signs of abating; the CW network has already announced more “dark” series based on comics and children’s properties for the 2019-2020 season, including *Batwoman*, *Katy Keene*, and *Nancy Drew*.

Using the comics medium to tell mature stories is of course perfectly legitimate, as is the use of superhero characters to tell such stories. But by focusing so heavily on adult elements in television programs featuring superheroes and other comics-based characters, the creators of these programs are demonstrating little foresight or thought for their own future, or that of their industry. By including graphic content and rating their shows TV-14, they are alienating parents, and implicitly driving away child and young teen viewers.

It is a widely-recognized principle of advertising and marketing that one should appeal to younger audiences. This is especially true when using characters originally intended for children. Don’t Warner Brothers (owners of DC Comics) and Disney (owners of Marvel) want children to watch their television programs – and purchase the action figures and other toys modeled on these characters? And grow up to consume related content and merchandise?

Even if the shows’ creative teams don’t care about attracting child viewers, surely advertisers do. So do parents, who would welcome the opportunity to share their own childhood heroes with their children. And, of course, kids themselves long for fun, light-hearted tales of superheroic adventure...a longing largely denied them by the current mania for “dark,” “edgy,” “grim ‘n gritty” storytelling in comic-themed television.

Comic-book superheroes have an innate appeal to children, who are enthralled by their colorful costumes, superhuman powers, and battles of good versus evil. Indeed, for decades comics were intended to appeal only to children, and the storytelling in them was pitched accordingly.

In urging Hollywood studios and storytellers to exercise caution and concern for child audiences in the products they create, the Parents Television Council is often met with comments like, “Not everything has to be for children!” But in the case of comic book-themed programming, such comments are singularly out of place. Does anyone seriously maintain that children should not be able to watch programs about Batman or Archie and Jughead?

No one objects to sophistication in storytelling, and nobody is calling for a return to Adam West-style camp. But it is possible to tell entertaining, and even deeply serious and moving, stories involving superheroes and other comics characters, without indulging in scenes of decapitation, dismemberment, torture, and graphic gore. This was proven by *Batman: The Animated Series*, which consistently offered excellence in its superhero tales, to the point that the series won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Writing with its episode “Heart of Ice.” No one can credibly condemn that series as insipid or childish in its storytelling. Millions of adults relished the program; yet it was always safe and appropriate for children to watch.



Batman, Green Arrow, Black Lightning, S.H.I.E.L.D., Archie and Jughead...these characters and their fictional universes would not even exist today, were it not for decades worth of children reading the comics in which they first appeared. Is it really asking so much that prime-time television programs, aired when huge numbers of children are in the viewing audience, and featuring characters created to appeal to children in the first place, should show some restraint in depicting content inappropriate for children, like graphic violence, profanity, and gore? Isn’t it time for children – the original target audience for comics characters – to be able to enjoy them once again?

ENDNOTES

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PTC Entertainment Analysts Enrique Aguilar and Brady Nelson contributed to this report.

ABOUT THE PARENTS TELEVISION COUNCIL

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