

Manipulation and Control by Large Corporations in American Society

-- Analysis of Superhero Television Series "The Boys"

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Abstract: This article explores the themes of manipulation, exploitation, and resistance in the TV show *The Boys*, which portrays a world where superheroes are controlled and dehumanized by powerful corporations for profit. Through its compelling storytelling and thought-provoking analysis, the show sheds light on the dangers of unchecked corporate power and the impact it has on society. By examining the parallels between the show's depiction of corporate influence and real-world issues, this essay delves into the broader implications of allowing greed and power to dictate social norms and values. The article highlights the importance of collective action and awareness in challenging corporate dominance, as depicted by the resistance group in the series. Ultimately, *The Boys* serves as a powerful critique of unbridled corporate power, urging viewers to question the role of corporations in shaping our world and remain vigilant against the influence of profit-driven entities. In a society dominated by capitalism and power, *The Boys* is a timely reminder of the dangers of allowing corporations to wield unchecked power over individuals and society as a whole, calling for greater awareness and resistance against corporate interests.

Keywords: *The Boys*, Superhero, Large Corporation, Corruption

1. Introduction

The Boys is a TV show available exclusively on Amazon Prime Video that was developed by Eric Kripke and is based on the comic series of the same name by Garth Ennis. The show captivates audiences with its thrilling and thought-provoking depiction of a world where superheroes exist but are not the altruistic protectors people expect. In this way, the show effectively parodies traditional superhero archetypes commonly seen in Marvel and DC comics and movies by showing a realistic take on the concept. Since DC Comics published the comic "*Watchmen*" in 1986, the portrayal of the main characters' personalities in the creation of superhero comics has begun to conflict with "divinity" and "humanity", and the contradiction between "heroes" and "anti-heroes" personality conflict [1]. In the 1990s, "anti-superhero" themed works began to be produced and released one after another as an extension of the "superhero" theme. This process reflects the changing process of the creator's creative values with the development of the times, and also reflects the impact on society. Rethink and criticize. [2]

Set in a society where these super-powered individuals are controlled and manipulated by large corporations, *The Boys* raises compelling questions about the influence of greed and power in American society. The series serves as a riveting analysis of how these corporations exploit and weaponize superheroes for their gain, exploring the dark side of capitalism and the dangerous consequences of an unchecked corporate influence on the functioning of society. *The Boys* is a representative work on the anti-superhero theme and the core of its popularity are the conception and creation of the script, the in-depth portrayal of the characters, and the true satire of the social environment [3].

This essay will delve into the manipulation and control exerted by large corporations portrayed in *The Boys*, shedding light on the striking parallels it draws to real-life issues and unravelling the broader implications of this pervasive theme in superhero television series.

2. Corporations and the Society

One of the central corporations depicted in *The Boys* is Vought International, a mega-corporation that dominates the superhero industry in the show's universe. Vought is portrayed as a powerful entity that not only controls the superheroes themselves but also manipulates public opinion and political influence to maintain its stronghold. The world presented to the audience exactly depicts the dystopian prophecy of the post-human world in literary works. In the future society, as technology has become the absolute force that changes the world, the technological oligarchs who monopolize technological power will naturally become the actual dominant force in society, and this has gradually evolved into a manifestation of a totalitarian world [4]. Through its clever marketing strategies, Vought presents their superheroes as beloved figures to the public, while behind the scenes, they engage in unethical practices to further their agenda. By exploring Vought's manipulation of public perception and political power, *The Boys* highlights how corporations can shape societal norms and values to serve their interests, often at the expense of the greater good.

Furthermore, *The Boys* portrays a world where corporations like Vought hold immense power and control, unchecked by any regulatory authority. This uncontrolled power leads to a world where the line between hero and villain is blurred, and morality becomes a commodity that can be bought and sold to the highest bidder. As the series unfolds, viewers are confronted with the harsh reality of a world where corporations reign supreme, and the consequences of allowing such entities to dictate the course of society are laid bare for all to see. Like many other types of film, television or literary works, this is a society controlled by big companies. The ubiquitous power of big companies reminds people of the chaotic and decadent post-industrial and de-industrialized wasteland of the contemporary era. It is full of images of collapse, reflecting the post-industrial era [5].

With the above plot, *The Boys* delves into the consequences of allowing corporations unchecked power over society. As best said by Zahrah Ahmad in her article *The Boys: The Abuse of Power in Positions of Authority*, "the portrayal of Vought International in the series as a powerful entity that manipulates public opinion and political influence sheds light on the consequences of unchecked corporate power in society" [6]. As Vought's control over superheroes grows, so does its ability to influence government policies, media narratives, and public discourse. This unchecked power results in a society where profit is prioritized over ethics, accountability is lacking, and where the lives of ordinary citizens are deemed expendable in the pursuit of corporate interests. The show explores how the unchecked influence of corporations can lead to widespread corruption, social inequality, and moral decay, painting a chilling picture of a world where greed and power reign supreme. Vought's influence extends beyond the superhero industry, infiltrating various aspects of society and perpetuating a culture of greed and manipulation.

In examining the themes of manipulation and control by corporations in *The Boys*, it becomes clear that the show is a cautionary tale about the dangers of allowing corporate interests to run

unchecked in society. According to Screen Rant, Vought International, a mega-corporation that dominates the superhero industry in the show's universe, is portrayed as a powerful entity that not only controls the superheroes themselves but also manipulates public opinion and political influence to maintain its stronghold [7]. By drawing parallels to real-life issues of corporate influence and exploring the darker implications of this theme in a superhero context, *The Boys* challenges viewers to think critically about the role of corporations in shaping our world and the consequences of allowing them to wield too much power. Through its compelling storytelling and thought-provoking commentary, *The Boys* presents a timely and relevant exploration of the intersection between capitalism, power, and morality in modern society. The show forces viewers to confront uncomfortable truths about how corporations can manipulate public perception, twist reality, and warp moral values in pursuit of profit and power. By shining a light on the insidious ways corporations like Vought exploit their influence, *The Boys* urges audiences to question the true motives behind seemingly benevolent entities and remain vigilant in the face of unchecked corporate power. Ultimately, *The Boys* serves as a stark reminder that the battle between good and evil is not always fought by caped crusaders but can often be waged in corporate boardrooms, where the stakes are just as high and the consequences just as devastating.

3. Exploitation and Commodification of Superheroes

Exploitation and commodification of superheroes are prevalent in *The Boys*, as large corporations like Vought International treat these super-powered individuals as mere commodities and brand marketing tools. The exploitation and commodification of superheroes by large corporations, such as Vought International, highlights how these entities dehumanise and objectify superheroes for profit, reducing them to mere assets to be exploited [3]. By controlling every aspect of the superheroes' lives, from their public image to their actions, these corporations manipulate and weaponise them to further their agenda, regardless of the cost to society or the individuals themselves. The consequences of commodifying superheroes in this way are far-reaching, affecting not only the superheroes themselves but also the general public and the fabric of society. The dehumanisation and objectification of superheroes for profit is a crucial aspect of how corporations like Vought International operate in *The Boys*. These powerful entities view superheroes as valuable resources to be used and disposed of at will, with little regard for their well-being or autonomy. By controlling every aspect of the superheroes' lives, these corporations strip away their humanity and reduce them to marketable commodities. The superheroes become objects to be bought, sold, and manipulated for profit, with their desires and needs to be pushed aside in favor of corporate interests. In the article *How the Boys Deepens Its Evil, Corporate-Owned Superheroes*, the consequences of commodifying superheroes in the manner depicted in *The Boys* extend beyond the superheroes themselves to impact the general public and the larger societal framework [8]. This dehumanisation and objectification of superheroes for profit not only serves to further the corporations' agenda but also perpetuates a cycle of exploitation and abuse that has far-reaching consequences for both the superheroes and society at large.

It is worth mentioning that since the 1970s, "anti-superhero" themes in the strict sense have begun to appear. At this time, the themes of American comics have begun to involve a series of social issues, such as politics, economy, culture, class and the gap between rich and poor, etc. Superheroes no longer seem to be the same symbol of greatness as before. The hero may also be an addict, and he will struggle and fight against the tide of the times like ordinary people [9].

As *The Boys* delves deeper into the darker implications of corporate control over superheroes, it also raises questions about the broader impact of such exploitation on society. "Part of this is about money, of course — but it's really power these characters crave: power derived from image, from reputation" [10]. Fairly quickly, we learn that the way this company markets itself is not just

disingenuous; it's dangerous. Commodification of superheroes not only diminishes their individuality and autonomy but also sets a dangerous precedent for how corporations may wield power and influence in other spheres of society. The show serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of allowing profit-driven entities to sway individuals' lives and destinies, urging viewers to remain vigilant against the encroaching influence of corporate interests on our collective humanity.

The consequences of commodifying superheroes in this way are profound, affecting individuals and society in various ways. By reducing superheroes to mere commodities and brand marketing tools, corporations like Vought International perpetuate a culture of exploitation and manipulation that erodes the very fabric of society. The unchecked power of these corporations leads to a society where profit is prioritized over ethics, accountability is lacking, and where the lives of ordinary citizens are deemed expendable in the pursuit of corporate interests. This unchecked influence results in a society where corruption is rampant, social inequality is widespread, and moral decay is pervasive, painting a damning picture of a world where greed and power hold sway. The "anti-superhero" values embodied in the Boys are more strongly displayed here, and will be coupled to the audience's own thinking about society to a certain extent. The audience will also be able to involuntarily substitute and think about the film when watching the drama. Mapping relationship with reality [11].

This is most clearly seen in the first episode of the first season, where Hughie, one of the protagonists of the show, watches his girlfriend Robin get run through by the A-Train, a speed demon who can run incredibly fast and carelessly runs through the streets of his city without caring about the safety of bystanders. After seeing what he had done, the A-Train continued running, and the Vought Corporation provided fifty-thousand dollars in compensation for Hughie not speaking out about what had happened. Furthermore, "Billy Butcher makes Hughie bear witness to A-Train laughing about Robin's gruesome death on the club's cameras. Hughie sees a person who is revered and idolized, a person who just earlier on the news played the part of remorse about Robin's death, who is now crudely telling his friend that he "ran through her so fast that [he] swallowed one of her molars" [12], showing how little care superheroes really have for their actions because of the pedestal they have been put on.

The above plot shows how the corporation is able to manipulate its image by simply abusing its power and money to paint the perfect picture of what superheroes are. This is also an obvious parallel to the modern world, where companies hire large PR teams to address controversies and maintain a spotless image. An example of this can be found in today's world. Amazon, one of the largest e-commerce companies in the world, has faced backlash time and time again for their mistreatment of workers, their questionable working conditions, their business practices that have negatively impacted the environment, and a plethora of antitrust concerns [13]. Despite all this, Amazon's PR team fought ruthlessly to maintain a good image for the company in many different ways. One way was through advertising, where the company highlights their commitment to sustainability, diversity, and worker welfare. Furthermore, the company is known to have legal experts and prominent lobbyists who are there to push back against criticism and defend their interests, effectively swaying their public perception into a more positive light.

4. Challenging the System

With all this corruption, there was bound to be someone who stood up to the large corporation. The series showcases the consequences and challenges faced by those who dare to challenge the system and stand up against corporate dominance [8]. The members of the resistance group, which include Hughie, Butcher, Frenchie, MM and Kimiko, face immense obstacles and risks as they take on Vought and its legion of super-powered "heroes." These characters must navigate a treacherous landscape of deceit, violence, and betrayal as they seek to expose the corporate giant's dark secrets and unethical practices.

One of the key themes explored in "The Boys" is the importance of collective action and awareness in countering corporate dominance. The resistance group in the show exemplifies the power of unity and solidarity in fighting against oppressors. Through their shared mission and determination, the resistance members can pool their resources, skills, and knowledge to mount a formidable challenge to Vought's supremacy.

The show also highlights the need for awareness and vigilance in the face of corporate control. In "The Boys," Vought uses its vast resources and influence to manipulate public perception, suppress dissent, and maintain its grip on power [9]. The resistance group must rely on their cunning and resourcefulness to uncover the truth and expose Vought's nefarious schemes to the broader public. By educating themselves and their allies about the company's true intentions, the characters in the show are better equipped to resist and counter Vought's dominance.

Furthermore, "The Boys" portrays the sacrifices and personal costs of challenging corporate dominance. The members of the resistance face personal tragedies, betrayals, and moral dilemmas as they struggle against the seemingly impossible might of Vought. Their fight for justice and accountability often comes at a great price, both in terms of their physical safety and emotional well-being. The characters must grapple with the weight of their actions and the toll they take on their relationships and sense of self.

5. Conclusion

Depicting a world where superheroes are altered and dehumanized for corporate gain, *The Boys* is a cautionary tale about the consequences of letting greed and power dictate social norms and values. The creators have inherited the core of superheroes and transformed them into anti-superhero themes. Compared with the former, they have more social thinking, direct exposure to reality, and bold criticism [14]. In conclusion, *The Boys* is a powerful and thought-provoking critique of unbridled corporate power and its far-reaching impact on society. The show delves into the darkest consequences of corporate manipulation and exploitation with compelling storytelling and complex characters, illuminating the dangers of putting profit before ethics and responsibility. The series challenges viewers to think critically about the role corporations play in shaping our world and the importance of being vigilant against the unchecked influence of corporations. In a society often dominated by capitalism and power, *The Boys* is a poignant reminder of the dangers of allowing such entities to have unchecked power over the lives of individuals and corners of society in general. Exploring themes of exploitation, manipulation and resistance, *The Boys* encourages audiences to question the status quo and consider corporate dominance's impact on our world's moral fabric. As we navigate a complex and interconnected global landscape, *The Boys* is a timely and essential exploration of the intersection of capitalism, power and morality, calling us to be vigilant against the encroaching influence of corporate interests on our collective humanity.

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