

# Opinion: Californians suckers for superheroes

By Joe Mathews

With Superman, Spiderman, and Batman all living in New York (or its fictional doppelgangers), Californians have failed to grapple with our own superhero problem: we've become dangerously dependent on them.

This peril is most obvious in Hollywood. The film industry could collapse if the public gets tired of superheroes – two dozen such films, most with huge budgets, are scheduled over the next five years.



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But California's problem goes beyond the cinematic glut. Superheroes – and our desire to await one to save the day – have taken over our culture, our industry, our politics, and our schools.

You can see the phenomenon in Silicon Valley, where the success of start-ups too often depends on the blessing of elite superhero investors, and where too much focus is devoted to searching for the next Mark Zuckerberg or Steve Jobs. Nonprofit advocacy interests nearly all seek a superhero celebrity spokesperson and funder. And our politics are now

driven more by individual superheroes than coherent political parties or associations.

We chose our last two governors on superhero logic; Arnold Schwarzenegger was supposed to transfer his cinematic superpowers to Sacramento, and Jerry Brown (himself a sequel) was sold to us as a superhero wizard (bloggers call him Gandalf, like the "Lord of the Rings" character) capable of conjuring a way through the state's thorny budget messes. Any ambitious change in California now requires expensive ballot initiatives, which creates a need for other superheroes (or supervillains, depending on your politics) like Tom Steyer, Charles Munger Jr., or the Koch brothers to provide the cash to lift very heavy things.

I may be extra sensitive to superhero-centrism, as the father of three young boys. This month, my 6-year-old's summer camp and my 4-year-old's preschool both had superhero weeks. The latter produced a brand new superhero for California's pantheon: Super King, who shoots fire and ice, fights "bad kings," and won't clean up his room after his adventures.

Why do superheroes have such a hold over us? The director of my son's preschool, in an email to parents, argued that "there is something innate in a 3- and 4-year-old that craves power" and so the preschool "will be building on this innate need to control things by tying in superheroes to experiments with science and projects to broaden their view of the world and explore various artistic ways to channel these needs."

In California, it's easy to see how that craving for power extends beyond the preschool set. In San Diego for a reporting trip that coincided with Comic-Con, I rode the San Diego trolley with Batman and three ninjas (I've never felt so safe on public transit). In San Mateo earlier this year, I happened upon Draper University of Heroes, a residential program to train entrepreneurial superheroes that was founded by venture capitalist Tim Draper, best known for his plan to divide

California into six states.

The school's theory: entrepreneurs must think of themselves as superheroes in order to take bold risks. Students at Draper University even take a Superhero Pledge that includes an Evangelism Clause ("I will help prepare the next generation of Superheroes").

This hunger for superheroes in business reflects concern about the slowing pace of innovation. Why are our companies giving us more texting apps instead of big new technologies?

Perhaps that's why we're drawn to Elon Musk, the Space X founder and Tesla CEO, who is seeking superheroic advances in space flight, electric cars, and batteries. Musk, although often mentioned as an inspiration for Robert Downey Jr.'s portrayal of Iron Man, is no superhero, as Ashlee Vance's bestselling new biography makes clear. Musk is merely a gifted leader of teams of engineers determined to make new things. In Vance's account, Musk's companies get into trouble (and lose key employees) because of resentments bred by Musk's unreasonable demands for superhero-level devotion to work, and his need to be portrayed in the media as a superhero deserving all credit.

Our devotion to superheroes is understandable, given our collective sense of powerlessness in an age of political gridlock and economic inequality. But superhero devotion is a form of delay, a way of avoiding the inconvenient truth that progress, in any realm, requires bringing many different people together behind a common goal.

And superhero dependency feels like desperation. It's instructive that "Superhero" – the hit from L.A. rock band Jane's Addiction that became the theme song of TV's "Entourage" – is really an expression of desperate, unrequited love.

Be a superhero if you want. But do it someplace else.

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