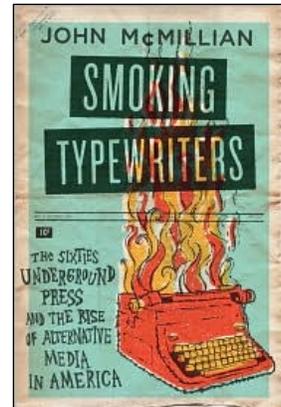


Democratic Media and the New Left's "Honest Subjectivity"

John McMillian, **Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America**, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 304 pp., \$27.95 (hardcover).

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At the end of my freshman year in college, in May of 2000, a friend and I made a decision that would shape our lives for the next three years: we started a radical newspaper. The global justice movement had come to the United States the previous November, with mass protests shutting down the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle in the fall and another large demonstration targeting the World Bank and International Monetary Fund meeting in Washington, D.C., in the spring. Buoyed by those protests and carried along by the exciting activism around us in Florida and throughout the South, we hoped that a quarterly newspaper might help consolidate the efforts and focus the attention of a new generation of social justice activists. Working late nights and long weekends and points in between, we had the feeling of tremendous continuity. We felt as if we were stepping into a great tradition of left-wing media production, of which the sprawling, largely decentralized newspapers that populated the Sixties-era "underground press" were our most immediate and exciting forbearers. Like our predecessors, we set out to make a paper rooted in the political culture of our activist peers. But we benefited greatly from technological innovations they lacked: most of our articles were solicited and edited via e-mail, and all the layout was done on computers. As we put together each new issue, we marveled at people's ability to produce such publications on the same shoestring budget but without the same technologies.

How they did so is the subject of John McMillian's *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America*. McMillian is well-versed in the history of social protest in the United States: He is the coeditor of *Protest Nation* (2010) and *The Radical Reader* (2003), collections of American radicalism across the generations. His specialty is the Sixties era, the two-decade period of social transformation that began in the 1950s and lasted into the 1970s. He is the coeditor of *The New Left Revisited* (2003) and of the scholarly journal *The Sixties*. In *Smoking Typewriters*, he combines an expansive knowledge of the era with a focused accounting of the New Left's media production. This merger is not coincidental. McMillian persuasively argues the underground press was one of the only forums where the New Left's politics and culture coexisted as mutually constitutive elements of youth revolt. These diverse publications functioned similarly to rock music, yet displayed more consistent political avocations. In addition to trying to build an intellectual framework for the Movement's expansion, he writes,

New Leftists imbued their newspapers with an ethos that socialized people into the Movement, fostered a spirit of mutuality among them, and raised their democratic expectations. The community-building work that New Leftists brought about . . . played

a crucial role in helping youths to break away from the complacency and resignation that prevailed in postwar America, in order to build an indigenous, highly stylized protest culture. (p. 4)

While describing the ways New Leftists used their media, he also makes a claim for the papers' importance to Sixties historiography. He sees in the underground press a way to retell the history of the New Left: its political mission and cultural expression, its limitations and struggles with the government, its zeitgeist and enduring influence.

Like the New Left itself, the underground media grew quickly and burned brightly, if briefly. Five such papers existed in 1965, but "within a few years, several hundred papers were in circulation, with a combined readership that stretched into the millions" (ibid.). These papers were scattered throughout the country and united loosely around a politicized counterculture. (Or is it a countercultural politics?) Chronicling their exploits is no small feat. McMillian is up to the task as he details the role of print culture in Students for a Democratic Society, the largest student organization in U.S. history, to snapshots of papers in places as diverse as Los Angeles, East Lansing, Michigan, and Austin, Texas. In each place, the underground press served to immerse a wide range of disaffected youth into a political culture of rebellion. McMillian describes the playful irony at the center of underground media, a subversive sense of humor that, for instance, used rumor to spark a national moral panic over the potentially hallucinogenic qualities of smoking banana peels.

Smoking Typewriters shines most in the second half, where McMillian describes the rise and fall of the Liberation News Service (LNS) and the Underground Press Syndicate (UPS), the wire service and distribution network of the underground press. These chapters provide the best accounts of the frantic pace, exciting opportunities, and bitter contradictions that characterized the underground press. The UPS was headed by Thomas Forcade, a man who stood up to government censorship with bravery and bravado while secretly building a massive marijuana distribution center. (Forcade later combined his loves—pot and publishing—when he started *High Times* magazine not long before committing suicide in 1978). LNS was founded by Marshal Bloom, a graduate of Amherst College and head of the U.S. Student Press Association, and Ray Mungo, editor of the Boston University student newspaper. Mungo turned down "a full scholarship to pursue graduate study in English literature at Harvard" to, as he put it, "join [Bloom] in overthrowing the state down in Washington, D.C." (p. 89). The LNS provided New Left papers with first-hand accounts and cutting-edge reports of assorted political happenings—especially major demonstrations—that were likely to get short shrift from the mainstream press, which either ignored or maligned them.

The news service's short-lived success reveals how quickly people's fortunes changed against the backdrop of the era's mass movements. Bloom and Mungo went from being liberal college students to radical journalists at the helm of one of the New Left's pre-eminent institutions. Yet the same freewheeling openness that allowed their rapid success also prompted their downfall a few years later. McMillian writes that "LNS emerged as a highly influential force within the movement without ever arriving at a shared understanding of how it should operate, or a strategy under which it could expect to develop and thrive in the coming years" (p. 113). This lack of structure hobbled LNS, as struggles over democratic control and

sexism—issues that plagued most of the underground press—prevented the news service from building on its success. As the founders' vision differed from that of the collective of people who maintained it, the disagreement turned violent: Bloom and Mungo ran off with the printing press; others from LNS tracked them down and stole it back after an all-night scuffle. McMillian recounts the fascinating details of this tragicomic episode, a confounding but rarely studied saga of the underground press experience. He argues that such struggles led the underground press to fade out, while "alternative weeklies" grew in prominence because they mimicked the clearly defined hierarchical structures that characterize the dominant/mainstream media: no concern over advertising dollars from pornographers or others, sharp lines between editors and journalists and between journalists and sources.

Perhaps the biggest complaint of the book is also a compliment: McMillian leaves the reader wanting more—more anecdotes and more analysis, even though the book has a great deal of both. McMillian is a historian, not a communications scholar, but his discussion of the underground press touches on many of the themes that have preoccupied journalism scholars: the perils of professionalization and ownership consolidation, the practice of interpretive communities, the role of myth and narrative in journalistic work. McMillian addresses these issues through poignant storytelling. For example, he offers a brilliant comparison of the ways Liberation News Service and *New York Times* reporters covered the 1968 student strike at Columbia University, a study that should be required reading for journalism students, scholars and practitioners. But I often found myself wanting further engagement and fuller elaboration of these themes and what we might glean from the struggles over professionalization and practice, myth and narrative, collectivism and consolidation. He gestures to their continued importance in the afterward, where he notes the influence of zines and blogs as the children, or at least cousins, of the underground press. It would have been nice to have a fuller meditation on these themes, especially in light of his claim that "never again will we see anything like the underground press of the Sixties" (p. 188). The technological differences are indeed enormous, but as we begin to unpack the role media played in the recent revolutions in North Africa, are we perhaps seeing another anti-establishment mediated public sphere? Indeed, it seems that all social movements generate their own media cultures, adapted to the circumstances of their era.

Further, it would have been valuable to hear McMillian's rendering of contemporary media activism, both in the form of those targeting media consolidation and those who labor to build alternative media infrastructure for the 21st century. In the introduction, McMillian notes how the corporate ownership of media institutions in the 1960s sparked New Leftists to start their own media—a valuable reminder of that corporate ownership has *always* troubled radical media producers, long before neoliberal consolidation. But he does not return to this theme at the end of the book, when he discusses the era in which media consolidation continued at a much faster pace. McMillian's take on contemporary media consolidation and issues of journalistic authority would be valuable. The underground press has been largely absent from scholarly considerations of an American radical media criticism, despite the pervasive theorizations within the underground press about objectivity, ideology and what one radical journalist described as the effort to build "an honest subjectivity that will convey a sense of what it's like to be on our side of the story" (p. 94).

Smoking Typewriters is a well-crafted mix of broad-scale analysis of the underground press as genre and detailed descriptions of specific elements of the production process, strung together through a range of delightfully eccentric characters. McMillian's is a crisp tale—190 pages plus end matter—filled with the humor and tragedy of drunken revelry and failed projects, amateurish success and petulant fights, dreams formed and lost. What *Smoking Typewriters* reveals most tragically is the persistent gap between historians and scholars of media and communication. Although McMillian is well-acquainted with various historians who have written about underground media, he does not engage the communications scholars who have written on the subject—people such as Chris Atton, John Downing, Dee Dee Halleck, Andy Opel, Dorothy Kidd and others. Both media historians and communications scholars are asking many of the same questions but have yet to develop a shared language or set of concerns. Hopefully McMillian's book, in addition to filling a gaping hole in the historiography of the New Left and its media, can also advance interdisciplinary adventures into the history and theory of social-movement media.

References

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