

## 'New media' from the good ol' days

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Smoking  
Typewriters: The  
Sixties  
Underground  
Press and the  
Rise of  
Alternative Media  
in America By  
John McMillian,  
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For a brief period not long ago it seemed that a whole new and glorious world might become a reality. That hopeful and high time was often pervaded by intoxicating, prophetic visions of change: Revolution! Transformation! Evolution! You had to get the word out! Like a herald of a new dawn the underground press was born. John McMillian's "Smoking Typewriters" provides a methodical survey of the phenomenon. He states that "most importantly, these newspapers gave sanction to thoughts, attitudes and behaviors that were greatly frowned upon elsewhere. They exemplified a radical culture and articulated a coherent set of values that were an alternative to mainstream ones."

During the tumultuous 1960s many communities in America witnessed the explosion of colorful, controversial countercultural newsletters and papers like Boston's Avatar, Austin's Rag and Seattle's Helix. LA's Free Press got things rolling: "Founded by Art Kunkin in 1964, the Los Angeles "Free Press" (often called the Freep) is wisely considered to be the youth movement's first underground newspaper. Certainly it was among the most successful."

This burgeoning sea of print, photography and graphic art — made possible by new and affordable technologies — fed those ramified streams of independent media trumpeting rebellion and attempting to scry the novel landscape of an emerging society enlightened by a more humane ethos. Of course many sectors of the American population were untouched by these trends. Not a few were openly hostile to the pronouncements of radicals or the precarious promise of psychedelia. But in cities with colleges and universities where many students and young adults abounded, the atmosphere could be electric, seemingly charged with millenarian intimations of wonderful things glimmering just over time's luminous horizon.

"Amplitude and conviction were hallmarks of the underground press: This is where they set forth their guiding principles concerning the unfairness of racism, the moral and political tragedy of the Vietnam War, the need to make leaders and institutions democratically accountable, and the existential rewards of a committed life.

And their success was astonishing."

McMillian begins with the birth of the New Left. In June of 1962 members of Students for a Democratic Society gathered in Port Huron, Mich., at a camp owned by the United Auto Workers. They hammered out the completion of a document originally written by Tom Hayden. The finished piece, known as "The Port Huron Statement," was a well-timed and exigent cry for action on the part of young leftists in the face of teeming crises. Among other concerns "the Port Huron Statement popularized participatory democracy, the idea that people should have some say over the decisions that affect their lives."

But even within SDS, eloquent aspirations of equality and fairness could be difficult to achieve in actuality. Meetings and discussions for clarifying issues were almost always dominated by men — usually white men — who talked louder and who were more confident in communal debates. But various pamphlets, bulletins and eventually the SDS tabloid "New Left Notes" allowed for a more truly collective dialogue. All and sundry were invited — "even if they were not SDS members" — to contribute written thoughts and arguments that would be printed.

Provocative pamphlets and lampoons go back centuries. Some forerunners of the Sixties underground were the broadsides of Tom Paine, abolitionist screeds, papers like "Appeal to Reason" and "Masses." More immediate precursors were "I.F. Stone's Weekly," the journal "Dissent" and even "Mad." "But more than any other publications, lower Manhattan's "Village Voice" and Paul Krassner's satirical magazine the "Realist," helped to pioneer the kind of offbeat and subversive approaches that youthful journalists of the 1960s mimicked and amplified."

The story of the Liberation News Service is detailed: "A kind of radical alternative to the Associated Press, LNS aimed to centralize newsgathering and dissemination in the underground media." On Oct. 20, 1967, LNS "organized the first movement-wide gathering of the underground press, which they held in Washington, D.C., in an abandoned loft on Corcoran Street ... the

day  
before a  
massive rally  
against the Vietnam War  
was scheduled at the Pentagon." The  
meeting was a flop but LNS's in depth  
coverage of the events of the following day  
won it considerable kudos. Later internal  
struggles and personality conflicts caused a  
most tragic and vicious split within the  
organization. McMillian's depiction is  
riveting.

The passage of time witnessed the  
gradual disappearance of the underground  
press. But its legacy lives on in the  
proliferation of street papers, including  
Street Roots and Seattle's Real Change. A  
word of wisdom for all such ventures comes  
from an SDS officer who noted sagely that  
the "early underground papers were very  
powerful because they were generally  
started locally and dealt a lot with what  
people knew, that electrified people."

In our day, global perspectives are critical  
but sight must never be lost of the  
challenges and issues that loom in our own  
backyard. "Smoking Typewriters" is a brisk  
and fascinating piece of media history.

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