



Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America

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How did the New Left uprising of the 1960s happen? What caused millions of young people-many of them affluent and college educated-to suddenly decide that American society needed to be completely overhauled? In *Smoking Typewriters*, historian John McMillian shows that one answer to these questions can be found in the emergence of a dynamic underground press in the 1960s. Following the lead of papers like the Los Angeles Free Press, the East Village Other, and the Berkeley Barb, young people across the country launched hundreds of mimeographed pamphlets and flyers, small press magazines, and underground newspapers. New, cheaper printing technologies democratized the publishing process and by the decade's end the combined circulation of underground papers stretched into the millions. Though not technically illegal, these papers were often genuinely subversive, and many of those who produced and sold them-on street-corners, at poetry readings, gallery openings, and coffeehouses-became targets of harassment from local and federal authorities. With writers who actively participated in the events they described, underground newspapers captured the zeitgeist of the '60s, speaking directly to their readers, and reflecting and magnifying the spirit of cultural and political protest. McMillian pays special attention to the ways underground newspapers fostered a sense of community and played a vital role in shaping the New Left's highly democratic "movement culture." Deeply researched and eloquently written, *Smoking Typewriters* captures all the youthful idealism and vibrant tumult of the 1960s as it delivers a brilliant reappraisal of the origins and development of the New Left rebellion.

Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America Details

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From Reader Review Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America for online ebook

Steve Kemple says

I knew going into it that the ending would be sad, that the flourishing of the underground press was brief, and it ultimately would fizzle out along with the era's idealism. I expected I would geek out on the scholarly treatment of counterculture bibliography & that I would probably find myself compelled to spend some time with the Alternative Press Index. What I didn't expect was to find emotional attachments to the characters. McMillian treats Raymond Mungo and Marshall Bloom, co-founders of the Liberation News Service, with careful nuance. They come across at once as icons of radical discourse and as polemic fuck-ups. Perhaps it was through this display of contradictions that I was tricked into caring for them. Whatever the case, I enjoyed tagging along to the shenanigans and rallies.

Nick says

Having lived through the later part of the era covered most intensively in this excellent and well-researched history, I did not find a lot of situations where I could provide first-person verification. But I love it when books I read quote friends of mine, and there were plenty. By the time I got to DC to run the College Press Service in 70, the upsurge of underground papers was peaking, the reaction was beginning. Nevertheless, I felt waves of nostalgia and recognition as episode after episode of history which our generation made unfolded. I liked the later chapters too on the aftermath of underground papers, namely the alt-weeklies and the web. In that spirit, I do think the author might have more fully explored the impact and interchange of the underground press on college papers (and radio, and later video).

Dale Brumfield says

A brilliant and scholarly look at the New Left Movement in America from 1964 into the early 1970s. Some would argue McMillian belabors points to death but I found the duplicating documentation necessary, with so much of the movement dependent on human memory. Engaging and smart. Highly recommended.

Jay Hinman says

I guess I'd hoped that an academic history of New Left alternative 60s newspapers would have been more engaging. I'd recommend a skim through this one, and a thorough read of the RAMPARTS book instead.

Vince says

Decent history of the genre. Too much emphasis on the LNS and the national connection. WOULD have been better with more input from local writers and artists. Outside of a brief mention of Crumb and a few others

the art end is completely forgotten.

Mandy says

while it is well researched, it is too academic and sterile to connect to non-scholarly readers.

Oriana says

From Kirkus: "Like the best concert posters, the jacket to McMillian's account of the underground '60s press makes us want to start a band, break something or set something on fire. In short, it's a fitting image to a riotous decade that kicked off one of journalism's most useful little bastards—the alternative press, which is sadly dying a painful death as we speak. Lest we only get our news from CNN or gossip sites, let us remember there was a time when hardscrabble rabble-rousers pissed off city hall."

The American Conservative says

'Smoking Typewriters is a smart effort but a disappointing one, a history that increases our understanding of alternative media by small increments rather than large leaps. I understand how a publisher could look at McMillian's academic scholarship and see the seeds of an interesting book. Now that the book's been published, though, I still don't see much more than seeds.'

Read the full review, "Notes From the Underground," on our website:
<http://www.theamericanconservative.co...>

Brendan says

Fantastic book. Thoroughly researched and engagingly written, if you have any interest in media and the Sixties, this should be in your to-read pile. Arranged more topically than chronologically, the work presented here is fascinating and inspiring.

Kenja says

I love the prose in this book. I am working on taking copious bits and pieces of source materials and transforming them into a smooth read with lush prose like McMillian does.

Bryna says

This book seemed a little discombobulated to me, but it did shine a light on an interesting little part of history that I didn't really know about - the 1960s and the underground papers that tried to be crazy, politically

provocative, and ultimately kind of destroyed themselves. It had a lot of interesting anecdotes about '60s life in general, as you might expect, like a drug scare involving bananas! So this book is fun to read for the nostalgia trip alone.

M.L. Rio says

Informative and written with tongue-in-cheek style, but devotes exhaustive attention to certain papers and persons at the expense of others. For instance, about halfway through McMillian abandons the larger story to focus exclusively on LNS--which was fascinating but left me wondering what every other underground outlet was up to while Marshall Bloom and Ray Mungo were busy smuggling a printing press to a farm in the middle of nowhere. A rare example of a book that could have benefited from being longer.

Wayne says

Got to say this told me a history I knew nothing about If your interested in the new now of Journalism its a must

Jason says

McMillian draws from a range of sources — interviews, correspondence, newsletters and publications and subsequent secondary research — to provide a very readable history of an important period in American print culture, especially with regard to the New Left and radical American politics. An important thread running through the book is the open participation of the writers of the underground press in their Movements, which predates the peak years of zines and of course, Web-based concepts like “participatory culture” or Web 2.0. McMillian traces the rise and fall of several publications and how they encouraged people both inside and outside the Movement to participate in their making, whether through letters (in SDS’s bulletins, examined in Chapter 1), minimally edited essays that were freely distributed (through LNS’s packets, discussed in Chapters 4 and 6), or through the various newspapers that existed through a mutual dependence with their communities (37), whether they were in LA (The Los Angeles Free Press or Freep), East Lansing (The Paper), or Austin (The Rag) — traced throughout the book, but mostly in Chapter 2. Freep founder Art Kunkin even called his paper a “reader-written paper” (74). A key chapter in terms of circulation studies is Chapter 3, “Electrical Bananas,” which traces how the underground press managed to birth and spread one of the more memorable hoaxes of the Sixties through the creation of the Underground Press Syndicate (UPS) in June 1966, which united 25 papers throughout the US allowing them to swap and reprint each others’ stories. One of these “stories” was a recipe on how to smoke banana peels. As such, McMillian recounts it as a key example of how underground newspapers “functioned as vital institutional bases for radical political and aesthetic communities” where “[i]n their pages, they replicated the creativity, zaniness, humor — and the otherworldliness — of the youth movement at large” (81). In his final chapter (Chapter 7) and brief Afterward, McMillian attempts to put this history into context for contemporary activism and its media, differentiating between underground and alternative media (the former are activists first and journalists second), the corporatization of weeklies like the Village Voice, and the rise of zines in the 90s and new media in the 00s. The book is extremely useful for contextualizing and historicizing DIY publishing, for considering some of the affordances and differences between print and digital culture, and for weighing the question of effect when it comes to social movements and their media. A thoroughly-researched and engaging book.

Michael Norwitz says

I've read about the underground press before, but mainly some of the high points (like Krassner's Realist); this is a history of the movement of transgressive journalism that flourished in the 60s and early 70s. It takes the movement from its founding prompted by the popular dissemination of mimeograph machines, through its dissipation into the 'alternative' weeklies and includes a mention of the next generations punk zines. Highly informative and while I would have liked to have seen more actual samples of writing and artwork, a lot of fun to read.
