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Book review: John McMillian, smoking typewriters: the sixties underground press and the rise of alternative media in America

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Book Review

John McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2011.

Smoking Typewriters is an impressively researched history of the emergence of the underground press in the 1960s. McMillian breaks with a historiography, often written by the participants themselves that has hitherto focused on either the leadership of the New Left papers or the broader historical trends behind the rise of alternative media during the decade. Instead, he focuses more on the various communities that collectively comprised the New Left. The end result is a work with remarkable contemporary resonance.

Although McMillian was not a part of the 1960s underground press, his book radiates more than a touch of nostalgia for the “good old days”. His writing is peppered with cultural references (Alan Ginsberg, after all, provided the book’s title) that make for fun reading but which may be confusing for novices in the field. For the more informed reader, however, his skilful storytelling exudes energy and provides rare insight into the mechanics of the movement.

First and foremost, McMillian argues that New Left communities were both a cause and consequence of underground papers: the papers were embedded in communities on the margins of society and were instrumental to the proliferation of these communities. Because of this community-based focus, the papers adopted the national New Left agenda, if there was in fact “an” agenda, only insofar as it had local resonance. For instance, the Los Angeles *Free Press* took on civil rights issues, not because it was a national priority, but instead because it was a major issue in marginalized communities in Los Angeles.

By shifting his lens back and forth from the national New Left situation to local circumstances, McMillian shows how heterogeneous the movement was and how the emergence and waning of underground papers in the 1960s can only be understood by looking at both settings. According to McMillian, the demise of the 1960s underground media had as much to do with power struggles and infighting as it did with broader, national trends.

And this, the importance of internal rivalries and tensions, is the second key point that emerges from the book. On one level, McMillian provides a number of vivid portraits of key actors like Thomas King Forcade, Allen Young, Raymond Mungo and Marshall Bloom. Through these portraits, one gets a sense that the movement was led by strong egos that could be arrogant and self-righteous but nevertheless well-meaning. However, the exploration of their egos makes a more fundamental point.

Marshall Bloom’s story emerges as emblematic of a recurring theme in the book: the collision of the principle of participatory democracy, which was central to New Left thinking, with the reality of conflicting male egos. So many of the organizations of the 1960s underground press never agreed on a

definition of democracy, whether it implied collective and anti-hierarchical action or openness to new ideas within a set hierarchy. From the outset, this tension plagued almost all of the organizations described in this book and eventually contributed to their undoing.

McMillian's contribution comes at an interesting time and gives a sense of just how modern the methods used by the 1960s underground press were. For example, the "Banana Hoax" of 1967, which spread the rumor that banana peels had hallucinogenic properties across the whole of the United States, presages the concept of "viral" phenomena before the word even existed. Even though it predates the internet, the banana hoax demonstrates how well-constructed information channels that incorporate the news and cultural worlds can be leveraged to spread a message, however trivial that message may be.

More importantly, this book contains important insight for movements like the Occupy movements that rally behind a national agenda but with disparate priorities and local specificities. Today's Occupy "movement" is not so much a political program as it is a rallying platform around which a range of issues and anti-establishment individuals can be unified. However flawed, efforts to centralize information flows during the 1960s, notably through syndicated services like the United Press Services and Liberation New Services, are a model for translating these disparate efforts into a national platform.

Finally, the book raises an important point about the blurring of the lines between reporting and activism. Reporters of the 1960s underground press were not just advocates for their positions in print but also creators of events. McMillian's retelling of the 1968 siege of Columbia University echoes the Arab Spring as establishment newspapers were effectively not on the ground. Instead, activists themselves both created and documented the events. This became an important launching pad around which these reporter-activists built their reputations. However, and this is perhaps the greatest lesson, because as organizations, they failed to reconcile their internal tensions, they were also inherently vulnerable when the tides shifted against New Left thinking.

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