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## Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternate Media in America.

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## Review

*Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternate Media in America.* By John McMillian. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2011, 277p. (cloth) ISBN 0-19-531992-3.

McMillian's book *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternate Media in America* paints a vivid picture of the underground press of the Sixties. Rather than simply focusing on specific events or dates, McMillian provides an overview of many issues faced by the underground press. He offers very rich, detailed context for the topics covered in the chapters. This well-researched approach allows both the Sixties culture novice, like me, and those who have a strong background in the field to better understand the political and social climate surrounding the founding and publication of many of these newspapers. In addition to the contextual details, McMillian offers wonderfully colorful descriptions on key players in the underground press movement. Readers grow to see these players as the grandiose, unconventional characters they were. Drug use, internal conflict, financial strain, news hoaxes- no issue was left concealed.

The opening chapter, "Our Founder, the Mimeograph Machine: Print Culture in Students for a Democratic Society," explores how technological changes opened the door for small scale publications. The move away from typeset pages to offset presses significantly reduced the trade skill and cash needed to produce a newspaper. McMillian establishes the role of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in inaugurating print as a medium for the New Left. A key SDS doctrine, the Port Huron Statement (1962), set in motion a network of distributing print content across the country to SDS chapters. McMillian further frames his approach by stressing that the use of content from organizations such as SDS, local underground newspapers started to be seen as vehicles of activism and protest, not just entertainment.

In Chapter 3, "Electric Bananas: The Underground Press and the Great Banana Hoax of 1967," McMillian illuminates the power of the underground press network with an entertaining account of smoking banana peels. The colorful account of the small band in California who started the myth and the thorough tracking of the story as it circulated through underground papers across the country make the chapter fun and informative. The influence of the underground press at the time is demonstrated when the hoax is taken mainstream with an article showing up in *Newsweek*. This chapter offered an amusing illustration of the Sixties culture and the underground press movement.

The backgrounds of leading underground press figures Marshall Bloom and Ray Mungo are explored in Chapter 4, "All the Protest Fit to Print: The Rise of Liberation News Service." The vibrant description McMillian provides helps the reader to establish a spot on mental image of the characters which is validated in the brief pictorial section of the book. Using a thorough description of the characters and a vetting of the political and social cli-

mate of the time, the scene is set for the establishment of the Liberation News Service (LNS) and the struggles it faced in the early days. The detailed account of the dramatic demise of Bloom and Mungo as LNS leadership and the daylight heist of the LNS press in Chapter 6, “Questioning Who Decides: Participatory Democracy in the Underground Press,” is emotional and factual- very well written.

It is not until the final chapter, “From the Underground to Everywhere: Alternative Media Trends since the Sixties,” that McMillian provides any real ties from the underground press of the Sixties to today’s alternative media. Due to the subtitle of the book, “...and the Rise of Alternative Media in America,” I was anticipating more content addressing today’s alternative media. His impression of the publishers of current alternative newspapers is not favorable. His description of their “suit and tie” mentality and dry annual meetings go to validate his view that alternative media has lost its edge largely due to financial interest. McMillian seems to feel there was a shift in the 1970s from activism in alternative media to a focus on becoming financially stable and successful. Moreover, I feel his relegation of a mention of new media to the afterword minimalizes the role of participatory journalism online today.

In addition to the somewhat misleading subtitle, I found many of the primary chapter titles to be disorienting and not directly related to the chapter content. Granted McMillian has a lot of ground to cover with such a rich topic, but perhaps organizing and titling the chapters as case studies of organizations and people would have been more reader friendly.

There are two primary issues which I found problematic in the book, both of which are questions at the forefront of journalism discussions today. The first is in regards to how McMillian addresses who is a professional journalist. Based on the way McMillian references “professional” journalism in the book, I gather he believes one can only be a professional journalist if he/she receives a degree in the field. With an ever increasing use of electronic and online media more and more people are diving into the pool of journalists- many without formal training. Yet, their contributions are still significant. In the spirit of the Sixties underground press I believe anyone who participated week in and week out was in their own right a journalist.

The second issue of concern is what McMillian appears to feel to be the goal of alternative media. We can address the purpose of alternative media using the spirit of the underground press. McMillian seems to believe that since most of the underground publications of the 1960s went out of business in the 1970s they were not successful. Based on what I learned in this book about the underground press, I would say the goal of alternative media is not to become a long term publication but to raise awareness and activism when key issues arise. Furthermore, the ability to participate in the creation and distribution of news and the production process itself is part of the appeal of alternative media. Based on these standards the underground press of the Sixties and much of today’s alternative media would therefore be considered quite successful.

Despite the organizational issues and the questions I have from the perspective of a Mass Communication scholar, I believe this book provides a comprehensive overview of a unique aspect of the Sixties. McMillian’s writing style and research provide a unique insight into

the cultural artifact of underground newspapers. Overall, I found this book to be engaging and informative and would recommend it to both history and newspaper enthusiasts.

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