

## THE UNDERGROUND PRESS AS A CRITICAL PRIMARY SOURCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN MCMILLIAN

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*The amount of alternative press produced by the U.S. social movements during 1960s and the following half-decade, the so-called underground press, has no parallels in any other country, for the number of newspapers, issues and the great range of different grassroots and political groups represented. In your opinion, what is the underground press' unique contribution as a primary source for writing the history of the "Movement of movements," as Van Gosse defined that long protest wave?*

Underground newspapers are valuable as primary sources for a number of reasons. As I said in *Smoking Typewriters*, they can give us insight into a wide range of issues. Way back in 1968, Allan Katzman, a co-founder of the *East Village Other*, said as much. "In the future, people will be able to look back and understand this period, get a good feel for what it must have been like, by reading EVO." Later, literary critic Morris Dickstein wrote, "The history of the sixties was written as much in the *Berkeley Barb* as in the *New York Times*." Also, for a long time, the most influential writing on the 1960s was done by New Left veterans who were basically sympathetic to the idealism that anchored their activism during the Port Huron Era (I'm primarily thinking of Todd Gitlin, James Miller, and Kirkpatrick Sale). Also, their work focused heavily on the institutional history of SDS—especially in its early years—when in fact much of the decade's political energy arose from the grassroots. And it wasn't until the late 1960s that the New Left became a mass movement. SDS played a major role in the Sixties but its strategic and intellectual debates, which scholars have written so much about, must have seemed removed from the concerns of many grassroots activists. By contrast, underground newspapers engaged local, hot-button issues, and sometimes inspired devoted regional followings. Moreover, since these papers were interconnected—whether through the Underground Press Syndicate (UPS) or Liberation News Service (LNS)—they also became the Movement's primary means of internal communication. So, when we look at underground newspapers as primary sources, we can learn a lot about what went on in the New Left and counterculture, while also correcting for some of the distortions in the most influential writing on the New Left.

*In your personal experience, how has the underground press become a research interest?*

Well, it became a research interest of mine simply because back when I was a graduate student, I wanted to write about the New Left. My political views were quite a bit different then (I styled myself as a “radical,” whereas nowadays I’m a lonely centrist). And I wanted to write about the New Left’s “movement culture” (a bit like the historian Lawrence Goodwyn had written about agrarian populism). So, that led me to look at underground newspapers, which (I quickly realized) were a greatly neglected trove of valuable source material. Then, somehow, I came to the idea of making the underground press the subject of my dissertation. I don’t mean to brag (in fact, I’m not sure whether I’m even responsible for this) but it has been gratifying to look back and see that since the publication of *Smoking Typewriters*, many others have begun researching and studying the underground press.

*In the last fifty years, which original features of the underground press have been reused or co-opted by the mainstream press?*

Well, a while back it seemed to me that a lot of what we were seeing on the Web seemed to resemble what underground press journalists tried to do. With the proliferation of new tools for gathering, recording and transmitting news, we started seeing a collapsing of private space and a diffusion of power around knowledge and information. The left-wing blogosphere was briefly credited with helping to democratize the media. It could rapidly circulate information, influence the agenda of the mainstream press, and build communities among like-minded groups. All of that was resembled what, on a smaller scale, underground papers did forty or fifty years ago. In recent years, though, I’ve really soured on blogs, social media, “participatory journalism” or “citizen journalism,” and so on. There are profound downsides to all of this. I wish we could go back to the time when, for the most part, people read the same newspapers and magazines. We need responsible editors and publishers to make good, prudential judgments about what should be reported, and how much weight, shape and proportion various stories should have. One last thought: Nowadays, “establishment” or “mainstream” newspapers are far less stuffy and uptight than they used to be. They are quirkier, their staffs are far more diverse, and they make an effort to appeal to a wider range of readers. These are all welcome changes.

*Since underground papers were often rooted in local, political, or professional communities stressing the readers’ participation, do you know any case of papers still operating in the same town or by the same group after four decades? If yes, did it maintain the same anti-establishment identity?*

The *Austin Rag* was one of the first and greatest underground papers. It went through various iterations and then went defunct for a while. But now it’s back, as a digital publication. And it’s run by some of the same people who staffed the *Rag* in the 1960s. There’s a

longstanding, enjoyable, tight-knit community of countercultural activists in Austin who've stuck together for a long time.

*One of the practical issues to face working on underground press is that a lot of issues have been lost and both documents and tools of the newsroom disappeared without any archive. When you have to reconstruct the history of a singular underground paper or retrace the network of people behind some publications, which kind of sources do you usually use? Do you also draw information from oral sources? And if yes, how do you let them dialogue with other accounts?*

Of course, a lot of material has been lost. But many underground papers were very transparent with their readers about how they operated; they would bring internal issues to the public's attention. And if you look at the source material in *Smoking Typewriters*, you can find a substantial bit of correspondence between underground press writers and editors, reflecting on all sorts of things. Also, fortunately, when I was researching the underground press in the early 2000s, it was relatively easy to track down various people and interview them. Virtually everyone I spoke with was helpful. Naturally, however, you can't take oral history accounts at face value. Sometimes people's memories fail them. Some may also have reasons for skewing various things (perhaps unintentionally). So, you just have to be diligent, careful, and sensible in your judgments.

*In my own research on underground papers, some traces reminded me of a global network: not only the well-known 1971 Underground Press Syndicate membership list with papers affiliated in Italy, France and Netherlands, but also GI's papers published in U.S. Army bases in Germany, the reports of the contemporary Italian workers strikes in American papers and also the existence of an Italian publication (Collettivo CR) which in the early 1970s gathered plenty of news from the U.S. main underground papers. Besides the evident similarities in graphics between the American most transgressive underground papers and the later papers in France and UK, do you think we could actually speak of a global network of know-how and personal relationships?*

I don't have a great answer for this question. My focus was almost entirely on North American newspapers (the only radical paper outside of the US that I examined was the *Georgia Straight*, in Vancouver). But it is certainly true that underground newspaper journalists were often aware of European papers, like *Oz* and *International Times* (or, *IT*) in England. And American New Leftists drew inspiration from the fact that they were part of a global movement. You ask about personal relationships, and in my research I found a few letters between LNS folk (like Ray Mungo) and underground press writers and editors in England.

Online databases like Independent Voices or Mapping American Social Movements (University of Washington has lately provided free access to digitized issues or metadata of a great number of underground papers. Which are in your opinion the advantages and limits of these way of widening the circulation of the underground press—compared to microfilm or paper collections?<sup>1</sup>

I don't see any disadvantages to this at all. As I've mentioned, underground newspapers are a terrific base of primary sources and they can provide insight into so many things. Until relatively recently, the best way to study underground papers was via the Bell & Howell microfilm collection. And that collection is very poorly organized and hard to access (most university and research libraries did not have it, so a person would have to get individual microfilm reels via interlibrary loan). As you know, microfilm is difficult to read. I think back to when I was researching *Smoking Typewriters*; it was so exceedingly time-consuming and difficult. So by all means, I think it's great if underground papers can be made more accessible.

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**John McMillian** is Associate Professor at Georgia State University. He specializes in 20<sup>th</sup> century United States history, with an emphasis on youth culture in the 1960s, and recent American political history. Previously he has taught in the Committee on Degrees in History and Literature at Harvard University. His most recent book, an edited collection, is *American Epidemic: Reporting From the Front Lines of the Opioid Crisis* (New Press, 2019). His book *Beatles Vs Stones* (Simon & Schuster, 2013) was translated into eight foreign language editions. Other books include *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media* (Oxford, 2011), *The Radical Reader* (New Press, 2003, co-edited with Timothy Patrick McCarthy), and *The New Left Revisited* (Temple University Press, 2003, co-edited with Paul Buhle). From 2005-2015, he also a founding co-editor of "The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics, and Culture," which is published bi-annually by Taylor & Francis. Professor McMillian's writings have appeared in scholarly journals, magazines, and major newspapers. Currently he is writing a book on crime, policing, and the crime debate in New York City from 1963-2001.

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<sup>1</sup> Note of the Editors: Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli in Milan (Italy) conserves one of the most extensive collection of underground papers in paper format at European level.