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Review

John McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 277 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-531992-7, €22,99.

‘Shoestring papers of the strident left are popping up like weeds across the U.S.,’ *TIME* magazine noted sourly in July 1966, adding that their ‘subscribers represent a curious coalition of hipsters and beatniks, college students and teachers, political zealots and the just plain artsy-craftsy.’ If *TIME* was late in paying attention to a rejuvenation of the American mediascape then already several years in the making, it did accurately identify a contrast at the heart of the 1960s underground press in America: politics vs. culture. In the years leading up to the violence of 1968 a growing rift became visible between the New Left and the counterculture, the politicians and the hippies, between the protest movement and those that followed Timothy Leary mantra to ‘turn on, tune in, drop out.’ This opposition is also the centerpiece of John McMillian’s study *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America*, a new attempt to chronicle a movement that because of its very diversity and

cloak and dagger tactics is difficult to study within the limits of a single volume. Accordingly, McMillian takes a case study approach, which results in a mixed blessing. *Smoking Typewriters* on the one hand fails to be the kind of revisionist history it intends to be, as it lacks a macro approach that provides the reader with an overview of the tightly interknit network of underground broadsheets and other radical publications that were published in the second half of the Sixties. On the other hand, McMillian’s case studies are excellent, delving deeply into the history of smaller papers that received little to no attention to date, such as *The Paper* (1965-1969) that ran at Michigan State University and the Austin-based newspaper *The Rag* (1966-1977).

McMillian is hardly the first to chronicle this plethora of underground monthlies and weeklies. Robert Glessing described the movement as it was still going on in 1970, while Geoffrey Rips discussed the efforts to suppress the underground press by the FBI, CIA and NSA in an extensive 1981 study, from which McMillian borrows the title for his book. The most extensive study so far was *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life & Times of the Underground Press* (1985), written by former *Chicago Seed* editor Abe Peck. Yet, one of the main defects of most of

these academic studies has been the fact that many of their authors actively participated in the movement, resulting in historical accounts bordering on hagiography. McMillian is clearly too young to have been either a politico or a hippie, but admits to sympathizing with ‘the assumptions of some of its activists,’ an affinity that shows throughout this engaging book, but does not mar it overly.

Admittedly a cliché – and McMillian is aware of this – the starting point of this study is the December 1969 Altamont Free Concert, which infamously ended with one concertgoer being stabbed to death by a Hell’s Angel. Coupled with the violence at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago and the murders of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., Altamont has been commonly read as the moment Sixties culture fell apart. McMillian reads Altamont as a media event, one that exemplifies the vast gap that by then existed between the mainstream newspapers and the underground press: in its coverage of the concert the *San Francisco Examiner* seemed blissfully unaware of the violence that had taken place, only belatedly noting that one person was killed, but that, on the whole, ‘all appeared peaceful at the concert.’ But local underground newspaper the *Berkeley Tribe*, which had reporters on the scene, told a different story altogether: Altamont had been violent from the very start, with incessant scuffles between increasingly drunk Hell’s Angels and doped-up hippies pervading the atmosphere. Furthermore, not one, but four people had died during the concert, with numerous others wounded. The comparison between reporting in the *San Francisco Exa-*

miner and the *Berkeley Tribe*, points to an essential trait of the underground newspaper scene. Its reporters, photographers, editors and other staff members envisioned newsgathering as a truly participatory event. In the spirit of the New Journalism underground newspaper reporters freely mingled with the scenes they reported on and considered critical distance a maxim of the Establishment press.

But, as McMillian rightly observes, underground newspapers were much more than simple mouthpieces for the various segments of the counterculture. Locally, these newspapers acted as ‘community switchboards,’ raising awareness on issues that affected university campuses and neighborhoods. But they also functioned as cultural unifiers, as they ‘projected a culture, enhancing identities, affirming social styles, and molding a local avant-garde.’ When interconnected via organizations like the Liberal News Service (LNS) or the Underground Press Syndicate (UPS), underground newspapers transcended the local. The LNS, for example, became a leftwing Associated Press, ‘a kind of lodestar in the late 1960s.’ Together with the UPS, the LNS thus ‘educated, politicized and built communities among disaffected youths in every region of the country.’

The first two chapters of *Smoking Typewriters* delve into the history of the underground press, and McMillian justifiably argues that while many of these newspapers traced their roots to revolutionary age pamphlets and Second World War resistance publications, in reality they had much more in common with labor movement weeklies and abolitionist papers of the antebellum era.

Another influence was the unique print culture of the student activist organization Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), that started circulating news bulletins in the early Sixties. While McMillian also pays attention to obvious precursors such as *Dissent*, *The Realist* and *The Village Voice*, his analysis of the media culture within the SDS is especially worthwhile. Later chapters devote attention to the rise of the Liberation News Service, the underground journalist and activist Thomas King Forcade and the role of the underground press in establishing and perpetuating the Great Banana Hoax of 1967, an elaborate prank that resulted in the widespread belief that smoking dried banana peels had a hallucinogenic effect. While the underground press is central to all these chapters, one at times feels that *Smoking Typewriters* tends to go into too much detail, losing track of a larger narrative. Still, the lively descriptions of everyday life in the offices – if they had one – of these newspapers makes this book a very readable cultural history, an inside view of a bygone era of print culture, nowadays replaced by blogs and internet forums.

In the early 1970s underground newspapers faded as quickly as they had

appeared. By 1978 nearly all of the original publications had either gone commercial or ceased publication and a new generation of what McMillian calls ‘alt-weeklies’ had appeared. More focused on newsgathering and analysis, these publications lacked the participatory approach of the earlier newspapers, which were ‘driven by young men and women who saw themselves as activists first and journalists second.’

Smoking Typewriters is an engaging, detailed study of a medium that has by and large disappeared from the American mediascape. Underground newspapers were not made to last and their brittle paper stock has ensured that few copies have survived. Increasingly, though, digital editions are available, such as New York-based [The Realist](#) and the [International Times](#), the first European underground newspaper. McMillian’s book is a wonderful guide to begin exploring these newspapers in an all new digital format.

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