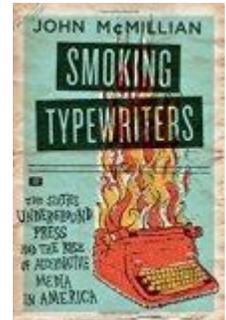


**John McMillian.** *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. xiv + 277 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-531992-7.



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## One Nation, Under a Groove? Assessing the Legacy of the Sixties Underground Press

John McMillian's lively cultural history offers readers a contemporary perspective on the legacy of the sixties underground press, comprising hundreds of cheaply produced, unevenly written weekly/biweekly "rags" (his term throughout the book) from mimeographed sheets to tabloids, which eventually merged New Left politics with a counterculture communal aesthetic intended to connect, reflect, and advance the youth movement. Reading the book during the 2011 Arab Spring, it was almost impossible not to agree with his implied suggestion that the fostering of global connection through the Internet, blogs, and social networking available via today's "new media" was incubated in the "youth-oriented, antiestablishment newspapers" that sprang up on university campuses and in activist communities across the nation during the sixties (p. 31).

Whether that is actually true is not, however, the main point of this book. McMillian's aim is rather to contribute to a "revisionist" history of

the sixties, foregrounding the "grass roots" impact of the underground newspaper writers, artists, publishers, and distributors in forging a national youth consciousness, in the process decentering the "New Left consensus narrative" (discussed more thoroughly below) that focuses on the dominance of such groups as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) (pp. 6, 5). As McMillian asserts, "absent such newspapers and organizations, the New Left could not have circulated its news, ideas, trends, opinions, and strategies without having them 'strained through a mainstream filter'" (p. 6). Poet Allen Ginsberg's colorfully ambiguous metaphor serves the title strategically, bringing together the fiery urgency of the printed word with recreational connotations for imagining altered realities.

In a book that began as his PhD dissertation at Columbia University (and which received an honorable mention for the Margaret A. Blanchard Dissertation Prize by the American Journalism His-

torians Association in 2006), McMillian, who currently teaches American history at Georgia State University, has done extensive archival research into oral histories, microfilm, and document holdings; interviewed and corresponded with former staffers from various newspapers, such as Texas's *Austin Rag*, the *Los Angeles Free Press*, *Berkeley Barb* (later the *Tribe*), *East Village Other*, East Lansing Michigan's *Paper*, and a raft of others; and read a voluminous number of critical and historical writing on the era. As a coeditor of *The Radical Reader: A Documentary History of an American Radical Tradition* (2003); *The New Left Revisited* (2003); *Protest Nation: The Radical Roots of Modern America* (2010); and of the Routledge periodical *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics and Culture*, his knowledge of the New Left and radical traditions is expansive. Having pursued his graduate work at both Michigan State University and Columbia (two key locations in his mapping of underground press history), his perspective fuses a lived sense of place with the historical research, helping him to illustrate the way a region flavors and shapes the development of alternative community. Exploring the variety of cultures that produced the papers as well as documenting how the papers reshaped their communities as they connected young people across the country, McMillian offers fascinating portraits of many colorful characters while also developing a temporal narrative tracing the rise and fall of the newspapers and the youth movement they chronicled. The book is meticulously footnoted and indexed with an extensive bibliography.

McMillian's approach acknowledges his debt to such mentors as Todd Gitlin and James Miller—activists themselves in the events they helped retrieve for a subsequent generation and thus shapers of the “New Left consensus narrative”—by devoting an early chapter to the importance of SDS in fostering momentum on university campuses for a kind of participatory democracy. His contribution to that narrative traces what he calls a crucial change SDS's print culture, when various

“bulletins” deriving from the Port Huron era were transformed into the tabloid *New Left Notes* in January 1966, to better organize the explosive growth of SDS as Vietnam focalized student protest. McMillian shifts his attention slightly from that consensus narrative, however, by highlighting the grassroots effort to build national links and conversations via such networks as the Underground Press Syndicate (UPS) and Liberation News Service (LNS). By retrieving the importance of these early networks, which tended to privilege access to print over polemics, facts, or even good writing, McMillian spotlights those who championed the papers as a countercultural force, among them Art Kunkin, Marshall Bloom, Raymond Mungo, Thomas King Forcade, Thorne Dreyer, Jeff Spero, John Wilcock, and several others. As new papers sprouted up across the country, paralleling the numbers of youth joining antiestablishment organizations, a network such as the LNS seemed “necessary” (p. 91). The LNS and UPS proved their worth during key events, such as the Battle of the Pentagon rally in October 1967 and the April 1968 Columbia uprising over the Morningside Heights project, giving the now-national, several-hundred-paper-strong underground press exclusive access to the protesters but even more important, giving subjective, sympathetic expression to the ideals they fought for.

By allowing their voices to speak throughout the book, McMillian evidences another aspect of this revisionist history: the acknowledgment that the New Left was “a largely white, broad-based, and male-dominated movement” even while “recognizing the crucial influence of the civil rights movement and the important contributions of women” (p. 12). Such voices as Mungo's or Forcade's “championed a kind of standpoint epistemology,” McMillian asserts, which revealed their passion for changing the “system” even while reflecting their privileged race, gender, and (usually) class; such a standpoint manifested itself in the newspapers as well as on the pages of the underground papers as an ironic double standard (p. 95). While

readers should be indebted to McMillian's research, as well as his subtle analytical efforts to re-contextualize the gaps in "inclusiveness" and "participatory democracy" as practiced in the underground press, some might also question the uneven emphasis he devotes to such important observations.

For example, one particular narrative in the book has generated rather intense playful commentary: the chapter devoted to "the great banana hoax of 1967." (You guessed it: Donovan's famous lyric in "Mellow Yellow" about "electrical bananas" *did* spawn a sudden craze to discover whether the peels had hallucinogenic properties--and apparently they did not. Donovan was interviewed for chapter 3.) McMillian uses the comical story for a more serious purpose, however: to demonstrate the new relevance of the underground press in connecting a "youth revolt ... marked [before 1966] more by fragmentation than cohesion" (p. 73). Even more important for McMillian's thesis that the underground press was not exclusively devoted to the politicians' polemical writings, this story reveals how the underground press exported countercultural values to the more remote outposts of the youth movement, helping them tune in to the alternate consciousness taking shape in the major urban and university centers nationally.

Ironically, McMillian seems to have missed--or declined--an opportunity to truly decenter the so-called consensus narrative of the New Left by not doing more with the homogeneity of the movement's standpoint. McMillian offers early on that while "second-wave feminism was among the most important protest traditions to emerge from the 1960s, strictly speaking, it was not part of the New Left. Very few male radicals developed progressive gender politics in the 1960s. In fact, much of the energy that fueled the women's liberation movement arose *in response to* the patriarchy and sexism they encountered in the New Left--and especially, in its underground newspapers" (p. 12). It

is frustrating (to this reader, at least) to hear him acknowledge the rampant sexism so ingrained in the culture of the underground press but not to pursue this further, nor to analyze how the New Left's idea of participatory democracy was flawed--perhaps doomed--by its blindness to its own race, class, and gender-privileged discourse.

It is worth remembering (though McMillian does not make the observation) that 1963 was a pivotal year for feminism as it marked the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (with a chapter on women and media) as well as the first report of the newly formed President's Commission on the Status of Women, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt. The report "made recommendations for constructive action on employment, insurance, tax laws, and legal treatment, stating unequivocally that women were discriminated against in almost every area of American life," according to Ann Charters. "The report sold more than sixty-four thousand copies and hastened the drafting of new legislation and the formation of a new Women's Rights Movement." [1] It must have been a mind-bending irony for women working within New Left and radical organizations that frequently perpetuated exclusionary politics to hear the "Establishment" Kennedy administration officially condemn women's discrimination. One is thus glad to hear McMillian acknowledge that "with the advent of radical feminism in the late 1960s, many women began railing against the crude sexism and ugly male chauvinism on display in many papers, and in February 1970 a women's collective famously seized permanent control of the [New York] *Rat*" (p. 171). He does not point out that in 1970, another group of women--one hundred women including mainstream women journalists calling themselves "Media Women"--also took over the New York offices of the male-controlled *Ladies Home Journal* for its failure to present the changing views of women or articles relevant to its nearly seven million female readers. Their eleven-hour sit-in produced myriad changes to the magazine's editorial structure and

content.[2] In fact, by the mid-1970s the underground press included as many as five hundred “underground” feminist/women’s papers, but they are not part of McMillian’s focus. Thus, one is rather confounded to read, only two paragraphs down the page from his insightful observation above, how the old “consensus narrative” has seemed to creep back despite his best intentions: “the underground newspapers of the late 1960s were zeitgeist touchstones by which radicals could measure the purity of their commitments to interdependence, power-sharing, and self-rule. In addition to serving some of the same functions as radical papers in other eras—building an adversary culture and trying to countervail the distortions and shibboleths that spilled forth from the mainstream media—most of the New Left’s journalists behaved as unblinkered democrats, determined to usher a spirit of mutuality into their Movement. At the same time that they used their newspapers as platforms to espouse their viewpoints, they transformed the papers into egalitarian communities in their own right. Perhaps there is an irony in this. Just like Marshall Bloom, most of those who worked in the underground press in the late 1960s saw to it that their activism and their lives were all mixed together” (p. 171).

McMillian seems to want to locate the sixties underground press within a historical narrative that arcs from the radical tradition of the 1930s (another critical moment in independent journalism history) to the alternative media of the recent past (which he comments on in the final chapter and in the brief afterword), culminating with today’s Internet-driven “new media,” though he does not state this directly. The book’s importance lies in retrieving the voices of some of the brave risk takers who devoted substantial years of their lives to promoting the underground cause; they frequently spent much of their own personal finances, and suffered harassment, jail, and worse at the hands of police, FBI (COINTELPRO), and right-wing thugs. Its strength also lies in telling the fascinating history of the UPS and LNS; discussing the

efforts to “nationalize” youth culture and sharpen its impact, particularly during the Vietnam era; and describing the violent “Establishment” efforts to destroy the underground press. Those who teach the sixties, protest history, or journalism history are indebted to McMillian for providing a readable chronicle of this critical moment when words fired minds and were, themselves, a form of action.

And yet, there are inexplicable gaps here as well, beyond those referenced above. There is very little discussion, for example, of the impact of the free speech movement at Berkeley on the development of the underground press, a link one would suppose to be crucial for the blossoming of radical youth newspapers. There is not enough discussion of connections deriving out of the black press, particularly in urban centers, such as Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Atlanta, and elsewhere, where the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Black Panthers built on the legacy of publications from the Harlem Renaissance era while also connecting to those of the contemporary black arts movement. Lastly, the book could have been enriched with reproductions of some of the copy and graphics from the publications discussed. Some wonderful period photographs of the primary sources discussed are provided, for example, but there are no reproductions of the LNS distributed packet covers, or graphic examples of full stories, photographs, or artwork from the papers themselves or the UPS. Such additions would certainly have offered a rich supplement to McMillian’s accessible prose and given those of us who did not participate in the sixties as adults a keener sense of the radicality and regional flavors of the underground press. (McMillian does note the effort underway to digitize the LNS archive—see <http://www.lns-archive.org>, where one can see some of the above.) The absence of such a source as Jerry Hopkins’s *The Hippie Papers: Notes from the Underground Press* (1968) also seems a major omission (interested readers can find excerpts from many

of the papers discussed in McMillian's book here, which is available as an online PDF).[3] The book makes a substantial historical contribution to our understanding of the sixties era, yet it does so unevenly. Perhaps that is the true legacy of the sixties.

#### Notes

[1]. Ann Charters, "Introduction to Part Eight," *The Portable Sixties Reader*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin, 2003), 492.

[2]. Quoted in Tobi Vail, "Women Talking to Women: Second-Wave Feminist Underground Press in the Pacific Northwest," <http://academic.evergreen.edu/curricular/ageofirony/aoizine/tobi.html> (accessed June 13, 2011). (This paper was part of a student project by Vail, who became an important musician associated with such bands as

Bikini Kill, and who continues to blog on feminism, music, and more at <http://jigsawunderground.blogspot.com>.) For more information on the feminist underground press, see Rosalyn Baxandall and Linda Gordon, eds., *Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Basic-Perseus, 2000); Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (New York: Dell, 1999); and Judith Hole and Ellen Levine, *Rebirth of Feminism* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1971). While none of these titles appear in McMillian's bibliography, Brownmiller offers a blurb for the back cover praising the book's "meticulous research."

[3]. Jerry Hopkins, *The Hippie Papers: Notes from the Underground Press* (New York: New American Library, 1968), <http://www.hipiji.lv/images/stories/collection/src/hippiepapers.pdf>.

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