

Woodcock ends with a call for greater corporate investment and sponsorship of the arts. Some regard this as the height of politicization, an integration of the world of art with the world of free enterprise that inevitably leads to both political and ideological control of the ideas expressed, the plays commissioned, the dances, and exhibitions chosen. One wonders just how Woodcock feels about political art, about films or plays that take on contemporary social and political issues, about artists who engage in public and political debate on issues related or unrelated to arts funding. He certainly issues no call to arms - emphasis is placed on art for art's sake *alone*. The artists of the nation must be treated with care and respect, and kept out of the pigstrough of politics. Yet given his antipathy towards cultural bureaucrats and arts administrators, just how does he propose that the goal of improved funding for the arts be reached? Somebody has to write the brief, contact the press, the politicians, garner support for the issue. What does he understand by political?

While this book is a good introduction to funding of the arts in Canada, and is perhaps best suited as a reference text for university courses in related disciplines, it provides little to work with for artists or others interested in the (I dare say it) cultural life of this country. In this year's round of activities to save the Canada Council, the CBC, NFB, etc. it looks like the artists across the country will have to rely, as they always do, on their own inspiration.

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Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press

By Abe Peck
Pantheon, 1985

A Trumpet to Arms: Alternative Media in America

By David Armstrong
South End Press, 1981

What a Way to Run a Railroad: An Analysis of Radical Failure

By Charles Landry, Dave Morley, Russel Southwood, Patrick Wright
Comedia, 1985

Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication

By John Downing
South End Press, 1984

1986 looks like a kind of mirror-image of 1968, and that is how one version of the history of the last 18 years has been written. An important part of this is the story of the under ground press, made possible by the collective work of new social movements and cheap offset print technology. According to a deeply misleading version of this history we have now grown up, got sense, and the Underground Press Syndicate got renamed the Alternative Press Syndicate. Well its true that it got renamed; but in 1973, not in the 80's. The history is complex. Many of those underground papers now exist only in microfilm research collections. But many others have taken their place. We need history, not a mythology. The 1960's is not simply the decade when we "believed," any more than the 1980's is the decade in which we get sold things.

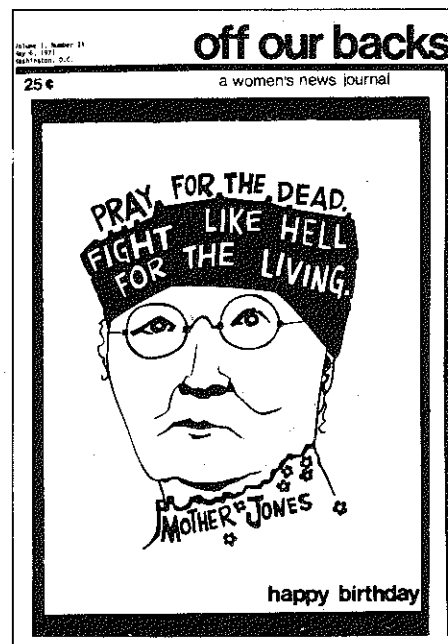
It is odd to read Abe Peck's *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press*. The book is written in the short breathless paragraphs of popular journalism. But in a *book* there is, after all, no need to sell the reader anything. What had seemed a necessity to hold a newspaper reader who is tired, reading on the streetcar, or about to turn on the television, has then become a habit. Not just a habit: a form of writing which pushes an argument in certain directions and makes other questions difficult to address.

Abe Peck wrote (and edited) the *Chicago Seed*, an important underground paper of the 1960's. In the 1970's he worked for *Rolling Stone* and the *Chicago Sun-Times*. He now teaches journalism at Northwestern University. *Uncovering the Sixties* is fair and full of interesting detail. It's organized as a narrative from the 1950s to the 1980s. The assumption is that the Sixties was a unique period (what did you do in the Sixties?). An important part of the book is the discrete presence of the world-weary journalist. Because the book is in part the story of Abe Peck the narrative is one of growing up, growing sensible.

This mythology of "the 1960s" is politically very damaging. The problem is not just that the real interest is in the period 1966-72, or 1956-1979 (depending on the kind of questions you want to ask). The damage is that a version of "the Sixties" is used by neo-conservatives to prove the foolishness and danger of liberalism in the 1980s. The danger is that a version of the 1960s is used to divert attention from oppositional movements that exist strongly in the 1980s and are as lively and more rich in ideas than ever before.

In a wonderfully vitriolic review of Peck's book in *Alternative Media* (Winter 1986), Tom Ward argues that as a "decade" the 1960s are probably less interesting than the German 1840s or 1920s, the Spanish '30s, or the Britain of Morris and Wilde.

Ward also points out that there were more people at the 1982 Central Park anti-nuclear demonstration in New York than at any Sixties demo. It's only because we insist on holding to the mythical Sixties that we object and say that this 1982 demonstration is "not typical" or that the atmosphere couldn't have been the same. In 1982 the arguments are harder, better argued, more intelligent, and more urgent.



Marty Jezer reviewed Peck's book in *The Progressive* (February 1986) and says that it is "the best study of the underground press now available." This is wrong. David Armstrong's *A Trumpet to Arms* is cheaper, better written and more comprehensive. It covers radio, television as well as newsprint. It is a full history of alternative media in the US in the 20th century that continues into the present and the future. It has a good chapter on the state persecution of alternative papers. It doesn't have a fancy cover, though, and it is published by an alternative publishing house. It is probably not distributed nearly as widely as Peck's pop history but it is worth the search.

One of the issues that Armstrong deals with is the relation between skills among staff and democratic organization. This is the main subject of *What a Way to Run a Railroad* which is published by a London firm of radical media consultants called Comedia. They argue that the radical media need to organize efficiently and learn necessary skills (like accountancy) to survive in an increasingly difficult environment. A reliance on collective structure is costly (all those meetings) and "the collective" is not a solution for all problems. It's a healthy argument and I know at least two magazine editors where an earlier version of this argument (in *Media Culture and Society* (1984): 95-102) was carefully read and passed around.

But it doesn't make a good foundation for a serious book on the alternative media. It is in effect another version of "the rise and fall of the 1960s." The argument lacks any real history. The reason there is no serious gay paper in England is not because *Gay News* was run by a collective but because it owned by one person who sold it. Many alternative papers in the US were founded by strong (male) editors and operated with a hierarchical structure until this was challenged in the early 1970s. But much more research is necessary. For example, how many papers would simply not have existed were it not for volunteer labour from collective members? How many people who are now professionals learned their work by volunteering, rather than in journalism school? Isn't this broad educational function often just as important as getting the magazine out?

Comedia also argues that the left needs to organize commercially viable media for a wide audience -- not just the already committed. The idea is to provide forums where debates could happen. At present such debates happen (if at all) in forums controlled by organizations which are hostile to progressive ideas. It is not clear if these media could be collectively operated. What mechanisms would be necessary to prevent such an open forum turning into another *Rolling Stone*?

The arguments of *What a Way to Run a Railroad* could be a lot more convincing if they were backed by a good history of alternative media in Britain over the last (say) fifty years. What is needed is a book like John Downing's *Radical Media*. This is not a general introduction. It is a specialized book of case studies of alternative media in the United States, Portugal and Italy, and Eastern Europe. Downing's main emphasis is on worker-managed projects: papers, radio, film and video. He discusses these enterprises in the context of the broader history and political culture of the countries. The conclusions are complex and difficult to summarize. The alternative media are wild dandelions that split open the pavement.

Downing has an expression for what Comedia call an undue reliance on libertarian collectivity. He calls it "ultra-democracy." Like Comedia he is critical of ultra-democracy when it is introduced for only theoretical reasons. Like Comedia he discusses the existence of *skills* (including social skills) which ultra-democracy tends to ignore. But against Comedia, he argues that genuinely democratic communications almost always have some form of collective organization. If that is the message of the 1960s, it is still valid in the 1980s.

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