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Media Culture Society 1984; 6; 95
DOI: 10.1177/016344378400600202

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The alternative press: The development of underdevelopment

COMEDIA¹

Introduction

This article is written from the perspective of our experience of working in various sectors of the alternative press in Britain over the last ten years. Much has been written about the material determinations of the marginalization of this sector—external factors such as the simple lack of capital, exclusion from mainstream distribution channels, etc.² While we, of course, recognize the importance of these factors, we would argue that they have also functioned as a smoke-screen behind which the internal weaknesses of this sector have gone unexamined. This article focuses on what we see as these internal weaknesses: the absence of a clear conception of target audiences and of marketing strategies to reach new audiences; the failure to develop necessary skills in the areas of administration and financial planning; and the commitment to an inflexible model of collectivity as the solution to all organizational problems. Our argument is that these failures derive from the ‘blind spots’ in the libertarian political perspective which has dominated this sector over the last ten years.

Alternative to what?

The term ‘alternative’ has been used to encompass all manner of publications, from hippy magazines to alternative versions of specialist magazines on particular subjects, to publications expounding the world-views of different political parties. Rather like that over-used term ‘community’, it contains within itself a whole range of fuzzy, unexplained definitions and objectives. When alternative has been defined it has been in terms of what alternative is *not*. It is not the established order; it is not the capitalist system; it is not the mainstream view of a subject—say in social work or educational practice; or it is simply not the conventional way of doing something. Rather than attempting to resolve the conceptual issues involved in establishing any precise definition of the term alternative, we shall use it here for its common-sensical meaning—as a ‘blanket’ term describing publications which are out of the mainstream of commercial publishing; publications which otherwise might be described as radical, progressive, socialist, feminist, anti-racist, community-based, etc. Our argument is concerned with problems which are, on the whole, common to publications across all of these sub-sectors. At this point it may be useful to consider briefly the basic economic outline of the sector in order to get some perspective on the scale of the problem.

Estimates of the exact scale of the various sectors of these industries, of course vary, but the paper, printing and publishing industries employ somewhere in the region of 500,000 people and have a combined turnover which is probably well over £3 billion. The alternative printing and publishing industry employs approximately 2000 people, and has a turnover of somewhere near £10 million.³

The fact that the sector is so small has various consequences: first, there is a very small amount of money in the sector. Those involved in the production chain (from conception to writing to design to layout to typesetting to printing to publishing to distributing to retailing) do not produce enough money to be able to afford to pay reasonable wages; this constrains the kind of person who can be employed—usually a young single person without commitments. Moreover, with so few job opportunities in the sector it is very difficult for people to extend the range of their skills, and those with aspirations to do so, or to achieve an income above subsistence level, tend to leave the sector.

From our perspective the central issue concerns the ability of the alternative press to survive economically in the capitalist market-place, and the difficulties of reconciling the contradictory demands of economic survival and political ambition. Thus, for example, it has to be recognized that the kind of collective models of working which the the alternative press has developed, in its concern with pre-figurative forms of organization, are on the whole relatively expensive (in terms of the use of time and resources) as compared with the forms of organization used by their commercial competitors. The question then is one of how much 'collectivity' or 'participation' an organization can finance at a given moment and still survive in the market-place—rather than an issue to be decided by reference to moral or political absolutes: as in 'X' is a politically regressive mode of organization and must be avoided at all costs; 'Y' is politically correct and thus must be done at all costs. In this respect the alternative press faces many of the same dilemmas as do Third World countries. Deciding on political strategies is only the beginning of the story—the problem is how to avoid dependence on external finance which will prevent the development of autonomy; how to juggle contradictions so as to create an inch or two of space in which to operate autonomously; how to ensure long-term survival and development.

We make this point forcefully because, on the whole, this sector has failed to pay anything like enough attention to developing its economic base.⁴ Indeed these kinds of questions have usually been relegated to the bottom of the agenda of political discussion within the sector, as merely 'technical' problems, to be dealt with, if there's time, after the editorial meeting, and otherwise left 'till the next meeting'. Too often, the creditors have arrived before that meeting.

Because of the concern with 'pre-figurative' forms of organization, a great deal of energy has been focused on the internal problems and relations of the sector, to the neglect of strategies aimed at winning more space in popular markets. This has meant that this movement, speaking largely to itself (given that it is numerically small) has been unable to provide a large enough market to ensure the survival of its own institutions, and so remained dependent on various forms of subsidy.

We would suggest that coming to terms with the fact that we do, in fact, exist in a capitalist market-place, and begining to understand how the market works, in order to survive in it, is the crucial issue facing the alternative press. Juggling the contradictions between commercial necessity and political ambitions may be an uncomfortable experience, but the only other option is either collapse or an existence so marginal as to be irrelevant.

In order to make this argument fully, we would need to consider the actual publications in this sector as only part of a much wider network of distributors, bookshops, printers, typesetters, designers, etc. We do not have the space to do this here, except in a very schematic way, and will in fact have to restrict the bulk of the argument to the alternative press simply in terms of its economics, its modes of production/organization, and its audience.

Economics

The money that was used to launch many of the original alternative publications (such as *IT* and *Oz*) came from their links with the music business, where sympathetic groups who had achieved commercial success in that field were happy to act as patrons to these publications. However, as the publications in the sector became more overtly politicized, from 1968 onwards the connection with the music business as a source of finance began to break down.⁵

When we look at the more political versions of the 'alternative' press which emerged after 1968 a new pattern emerges, where the lack of capital was made good by the input of self-exploited labour. Typically, a publication was produced by free labour, which, in combination with donations from supporters in steady jobs, was just enough to get it over its recurring financial crises. The workers were usually volunteers, whose economic needs were low, given their commitment to squatting and claiming as a way of life. This allowed some kind of economic survival at a very low level but the publications tended to generate no surplus from which the workers' labour might be paid.

For party political publications, where publishing was openly recognized to be an extension of the party's overall work, the problem of finance was seen differently. Subsidy was assumed to be necessary, and self-sufficiency was deemed desirable but unattainable. The 'fighting-fund' approach is best exemplified by the *Morning Star's* campaigns, over the last 15 years, to keep the paper alive. It involves a recognition that, in an advertising-based press system, left-wing political views have to be paid for in another way. A paper like *Newsline*, the daily of the Workers Revolutionary Party, uses a more disguised form of subsidy (aside from its various cash donations), in that the production workers, whilst paid the union rate for the job, return part of their wages as a donation to the cause.

In the last few years however, some lessons do seem to have been learned. Rather than producing publications first and thinking about the losses later, which has been the predominant pattern in the past, attempts are increasingly being made to think through the problems of launching a publication in advance. Thus the *Leveller* and *New Socialist*, for example, created structures of supporting subscribers, who provided launch capital; and the *East End News* raised over £20,000, predominantly from the trade union movement. But, as the story of the *East End News* makes clear, such launch capital itself is not enough, if little or no market research has been done, and insufficient attention given to creating a sound commercial infrastructure.

Overall, the alternative press, over the last 15 years has failed to create any secure economic foundation for its continued existence: publications in this sector have usually been short-lived, with one or two notable exceptions, and they have almost all been based on short-term finance (loans, gifts, donations, etc.) with little or no thought given to the long-term economic base. This lack of an economic base has

been obscured at various times: in the early period by an earlier input of free labour, based on a particular low-cost life-style; and most recently, by political favours that could be extracted from the national or local state authorities in the form of grants. The common thread however, is the precariousness of the economic base of the sector.

Modes of organization and production

A capitalist publisher, such as IPC, for example, when considering launching a new publication, invests in preliminary market research; a feasibility study; develops a launch plan; and later conducts readership surveys on consumer response in order to shift the publication's 'profile' as necessary. This approach to marketing has largely been rejected by the alternative press; the consequent insulation of publications in this sector from various forms of market feedback has had damaging results. Within this sector there has also been a strong reaction against the techniques and skills of the capitalist publishing industry—even at times a fetishization of the lack of such skills as a 'good thing'.⁶ In our view the rejection of these skills has contributed greatly to the high failure rate within the sector. From the early 1970s a particular perspective on organizational matters has been in dominance in this sector, a perspective which is principally defined negatively—as a rejection of the modes of organization developed within capitalism, based on hierarchies of authority and a complex division of labour. Against this was posed a model of collective organization, without internal hierarchies and without (as far as possible) any division of labour. This issue increasingly came to assume a quite central and determining position in the political culture of the sector. The field of 'politics' having been redefined to include the 'personal', increasingly the politics of the internal/personal matters of the organizations concerned came to be the central, and at many points exclusive focus of debate and energy, to the detriment of any concern with the necessities of survival in a capitalist market-place.

Indeed, we would suggest that the key organizational weaknesses of the sector stem from the fact that the political culture in which they emerged had a number of blind spots—because of which it was difficult to conceive of the genuine importance of skills such as a financial planning, budgeting, credit control, accountancy, entrepreneurship and management. These skills were seen as 'capitalist' by their very nature, and therefore to be rejected.

One simple index of this problem is the way in which, on the whole, accountancy has been seen as merely an external/legal requirement with which an organization has to comply, rather being seen as a vital tool for the internal management of the organization itself. Without proper financial planning, cash flows and forward budgeting, there is no clear target against which performance in any area can be judged. This effectively means that one is operating without a 'compass' or a 'map' for the voyage.

Often, the political perspectives within which these projects were set up had as their priority the establishment of islands of socialist and feminist 'good practice,' somehow immunized or divorced from the capitalist market in which they operated. Unfortunately, economic strategies were not developed to deal with the real effects of the market place—the immunizing factor was grant funding. Once this source started to dry up, in the late 1970s, the underlying economic problems of the sector began to emerge more clearly.

Had these projects been conceived, from their inception, as organizations which were aiming to achieve long-term commercial viability, then a number of economic calculations would have had to be made from the very outset. Notions of property; investment; building a capital base; developing assets against which money could be borrowed in order to finance the business's expansion; all these would have been seen as priorities, which had to be manipulated alongside, and in combination with their political ambitions. In fact this did not happen; rather than taking seriously the economic imperatives deriving from the financial environment within which the organizations functioned, the primary emphasis moved increasingly towards the internal affairs of how the organization operated. Thus, matters of how the operation could be maximally democratic in its internal workings became the dominant and determining consideration. This emphasis also meant that the range of organizations with whom they could easily work was narrowed down to those who conformed to the same internal political and organizational criteria.

In a traditional business organization it would have been the responsibility of management to develop a strategic overview which would have foreseen problems of the kind mentioned above, and to develop strategies for dealing with them. However, the wholesale rejection of management and organization theory (as being part of capitalist ideology) failed to disentangle the essence of management (as a necessary function within any organization, regardless of its political purposes) from the particular 'command-structure' form of management which has developed in traditional business organizations. The collective got on with sharing out the day-to-day tasks of sweeping the decks, but often operated without anyone looking out for icebergs.⁷

The consequent lack of a strategic overview does not only affect the financial and economic side of the organization—it also limits the ability to develop an analysis of the changes in the overall shape and size of the constituent parts of the market in which it is operating, and to adjust policy so as to take advantage of market opportunities as and when they occur.

The commitment to 'progressive' forms of internal organization (e.g. collective decision making) carries within it a range of potential problems, which were often not thought through. No structure was devised to enable organizations to take decisions quickly, so as to be able to respond to changes in the market and to alter their strategy accordingly, before bankruptcy occurred, rather than before the collective could arrive at a consensus. The dominant model of organization in this sector—that of unstructured collectivity⁸—was first developed in the context of small mutual aid groups (such as consciousness-raising groups). Unfortunately this model was imported into other areas of activity without a recognition of the need for flexibility in relating organizational form to activity—in the sense that a choice of organizational form should take into account the activity being pursued. In a consciousness-raising group, or discussion group, only a minimal degree of formal organization is necessary. On the other hand, once involved in publishing a magazine it is necessary to understand to context in which magazines are sold (e.g. the various formats that suit newsagents) and to take on board the skills and expertise needed to ensure that your magazine sells. These skills can be adapted and reinterpreted for the precise context in which the 'alternative' press operates, but, fundamentally, the form of organization appropriate to this task is quite different to that of the small self-help group.

In terms of market shares the impact of the alternative press has been marginal, as the figures quoted earlier imply. Another approach is to look at how many publications have managed to gain strategic ground in an area, and have also managed to survive for more than 10 years. Few publications from within the 'alternative' movement have managed to capture ground in the mainstream (arguably the exceptions are *Time Out*, in the London listings markets, and *Spare Rib* in the field of women's publishing. However in both these cases, much of this ground has been subsequently lost, over the last two years, as the groups' internal problems have come to a head). When we turn to publishers the crop is also very small—Pluto, New Left Books, Spokesman, Merlin. Even here we have to note that (aside from Merlin) the input of inherited private capital is the main reason for their survival. The feminist presses arose later, but again we have to note that the two largest (Virago and Women's Press) have had to join with traditional publishing houses to enable them to meet their aspirations of breaking out of the 'alternative' ghetto. The point is that, in short, the 'alternative' press has neither generated enough turnover from within its own ranks to support itself nor consistently produced materials that are sufficiently attractive to entice floating buyers from outside of its own ghetto, which could make the sector economically viable.

Audience

The major problem of this sector is that the materials are all produced and, on the whole, read by a numerically small group of people. For some of these people, producing particular specialist magazines, their principal self-definition is in terms of gender; for others race; for others a particular specialist area of work; for others sexual preference; for others locality. Clearly the political work done by these groups, in raising new issues to consciousness, which classical Marxist traditions have signally failed to address, has been of vital importance. However, there remains a further problem which most of these groups have on the whole avoided. Despite all their differences, the principal thing which they, and their readers, share is a certain level of educational attainment. In order to consume these products, their readers need an approximately equal level of cultural competence (which it is hard to get outside of the educational system) to that of the producers. The structure of British society being what it is, there are an extremely small number of people with this asset: to this extent the market for these publications is radically circumscribed and is largely co-extensive with that sub-set of people who have passed through the tertiary education sector.

From a different perspective, the economic position of these readers could be seen, in commercial terms, as an asset. In terms of achieving viability through the sale of advertising (and it is hard to see any other route, apart from that of even more specialist/up-market/highly priced journals) the relatively privileged economic position of their readers is attractive to advertisers—who are concerned not only with the number, but also with the purchasing power, of the readers they can reach through a given publication. Many of these publications could, in fact, offer targeted advertising to the ABC1 consumers who many specialist advertisers most want to reach. However this, of course, involves an unwelcome recognition of the limited social base of these publications; a recognition which few, if any, publications in the sector have been willing to make.

These are the kinds of elementary propositions about markets, and marketing, which the world of capitalist market research trades in as a matter of course. It could be that the alternative press has much to learn from the discredited world. Without extensive forms of market research (and not, necessarily, expensive ones) how will the feedback between writers and readers ever be improved? Without a recognition of what types of people currently read, and don't (or can't) read a given publication, and of what aspects of style and presentation of the material people find most difficult, how would it ever be possible to develop more popular editorial policies?

Of course the alternative press has been bedevilled by lack of funds, lack of access to distribution facilities, lack of outlets, etc. and it will continue to be necessary to campaign to change the rules of the game, to redress the effects of these imbalances.⁹ But, these factors apart, how much of the responsibility for the lack of any large readership falls back on the publications, and their producers, for the literally exclusive way in which they have been presented and for the lack of attention to problems of marketing?

Exceptions that prove the rules?

Two magazines provide interesting evidence of the relevance of these questions for publications in this sector: *New Socialist* and *New Internationalist*. The first of these, *New Socialist*, was originally conceived as a specialist internal journal for a small number of Labour Party activists. However, a more ambitious launch policy (including breaking into the mainstream wholesale distribution networks) led to the magazine coming into the market with a circulation of 32,000—which has now settled at about 23,000. This clearly represents a level of circulation which can only be achieved by publications which make themselves, in various senses 'available' to a wider circle of people than those who are already committed activists. The decision facing *New Socialist* now is whether to try to go further out into the general market, or whether to retrench and solidify its base in the Labour Party and Labour Movement.

New Internationalist has a comparable circulation to *New Socialist*—i.e. 25,000. While being a specialist publication in the sense that it focuses primarily on 'development' issues, from an educational and informative point of view, the magazine's editorial policy makes it accessible to the non-specialist reader, as the style of presentation assumes a minimum of pre-knowledge of the area. More interesting still, the 25,000 sales are almost all by subscription (with all the advantages this implies of cash income in advance, and not losing a large percentage of income as discount to the distributor and retailer). This large subscription base has been built up by means of a very positive marketing campaign using direct mail promotions to target sections of the magazine's potential readership.

What these two magazines have in common—and what distinguishes them, on the whole, from other publications in this sector—is a positive approach to business and organizational matters, and in particular a recognition of how such 'capitalist' skills as marketing and promotion can be used to further their political ambitions. From this perspective these publications could effectively be seen as entrepreneurs, bringing a new, and more ambitious perspective, to the sector, by means of which it might just be possible to break out of the 'alternative' ghetto. The question is

whether their initiatives will remain as exceptions, or whether the rest of the alternative press will begin to learn from the example they have set.

Notes

1. Comedia was set up (originally as the Minority Press Group) in 1978 to conduct research into the problems faced by community newspapers, and by minority publications attempting to break into the wholesale distribution market. Our work is now concerned with the problems faced by those attempting to develop critical perspectives and practical strategies for survival across various media. This article was written by Charles Landry, David Morley and Russell Southwood, partners of Comedia.
2. See *The British Press: A Manifesto* (ed. J. Curran), Macmillan, 1978; *Power Without Responsibility* J. Curran and J. Seaton, Fontana, 1982; *Here is the Other News: Challenges to the Local Commercial Press*, Minority Press Group, 1980; *Where is the Other News: The Newstrade and the Radical Press*, Minority Press Group, 1980; and *The Other Secret Service: Press Distributors and Press Censorship*, Minority Press Group/ Campaign for Press Freedom, 1980.
3. These figures are derived from various sources—including P. Curwen, *The UK Publishing Industry*, Pergamon, 1980; *The UK Book Industry*, Jordans, 1983; *The UK Business Monitor*.
4. In this connection, see *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit 1850–1980*, M. J. Wiener, Cambridge, Cambridge University, Press, 1981.
5. For a fuller assessment see the forthcoming book by Miles, *The (Official) History of the Underground Press*, Comedia, 1984.
6. Sheila Rowbotham's, essay, 'The Women's Movement and organising for Socialism', in *Beyond the Fragments*, S. Rowbotham *et al.*, Merlin Press, 1979, raised a number of these questions. Unfortunately there has been little evidence since then of these matters being developed further. See also, for the forerunners of this argument, Newsreel Five Years On, *Wedge*, no. 3, Winter 1978 and 'The Theatre of Red Ladder', Richard Seyd, *New Edinburgh Review*, no. 30, August 1975.
7. For an interesting assessment of the main weaknesses in socialist thinking on matters of organization see *The Unequal Struggle? British Socialism and the Capitalist Enterprise*, J. Tomlinson, Methuen UP, 1982.
8. Many of the problems of collective organization were spelled out as early as 1970, in Jo Freeman's 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 1970 (republished as a pamphlet in this country, by the Kingston Group of the Anarchist Workers Association, in 1972). Regrettably the challenges posed by Freeman were never seriously taken up by most of the groups involved in the alternative press.
9. This is the main work of the Campaign for Press & Broadcasting Freedom, 9 Poland Street, London. W1V 3DG. Tel: 01 437 2795.