Printer Protest

Amy Jackson, February 20, 2020

Prologue: In Which a French Guy Thought American Journalism Was Too Unified and Boring, Which Retrospectively Is, Suffice It to Say, Ironic

In 1831, Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville visited America. He wasn't impressed. In *Democracy in America,* he noted that "although America had a vibrant print culture[…], it was bounded by self-interest[1]." Printers only expressed political opinions if they believed enough people agreed; minority factions suffered "difficulty finding a publisher willing to print their opinions[2]." Ultimately, Tocqueville concluded that, in America, "Disbelief finds so to speak no organ[3]."

Over a century later, a similar print culture proliferated, in which "by 1962, twelve managements controlled one-third of the circulation of newspapers in the U.S." As a result of this culture of "consensus" and "conformity," everyday Americans—a la Tocqueville—grew tired of the "ubiquity of increasingly bland, cautious, and professionally-balanced journalism[4]." So, in defiance of the journalistic status quo, underground newspapers cropped up and got rowdy. And they owed their influence to the "organ" that gave them a platform and a voice: the printer.

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[1] James L. Baughman, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, and James P. Danky, *Protest on the Page: Essays on Print and the Culture of Dissent* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 3.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Adlard and Saunders Broadway; George Dearborn & Co Gold Street, 1838), 245.
[4] John Campbell McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 8.

Capitalism + Dope = Genocide

> *The underground press, […]local and grassroots[…], yet flourishing for a half decade in the United States, is one of the great wonders of modern politics. The creativity of editors, artists, writers, and[…] naturally, the millions of longhaired readers[…]—changed journalism, battled repressive laws, and had a mighty good time in the process.* ***Looking back, it was the best time of our lives[5].***
>
> —Paul Buhle, *Radical America* (1967–1999)

The underground press was sexy. Marijuana was in, the Vietnam War had broken out, and the communists were up to no good. Amidst it all were protest papers, printed "in garages, cellars, cramped flats[…], and even college dorms[6]." Authors wore long hair, played rock and roll, and had great slogans: CAPITALISM + DOPE = GENOCIDE[7]. TO LOVE WE MUST FIGHT[8]. SCREW US AND WE MULTIPLY[9]!

Protest papers first trickled into existence as satirical magazines at colleges, lampooning "literature, college deans, sexual behavior" and "depend[ing] upon unpaid writers and artists[10]." They wrote anonymously, therefore withholding visibility of their flesh-and-blood yippie authors from the narrative; subsequently, the hot seat remained on the cops, capitalists, and Congressmen they insulted, caricatured, and doxxed.

But you can't conceal the ink, the paper, the glue. Printing was *foundational* to this revolution, which "took place at[…] a period of rapid evolution in printing technology[11]". Without printing, publishers have no platform. No audience. No voice. At the end of the day, you can hand-copy as many leaflets as you want, but you won't win a showdown against an offset printing machine.

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5 Sean Stewart, *On the Ground: An Illustrated Anecdotal History of the Sixties Underground Press in the U.S.* (Oakland: PM Press, 2011), ix.
6 Gwido Zlatkes, Paweł Sowiński, and Ann M. Frenkel, *Duplicator Underground: The Independent Publishing Industry in Communist Poland, 1976-89,* (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2016), 47.
7 "Native Movement Newsletter," accessed February 5, 2020, https://en.everybodywiki.com/Native_Movement_newsletter.
8 Stewart, *On the Ground*, 130.
9 Stewart, *On the Ground*, ix.
10 Stewart, *On the Ground*, xxi.
11 Stewart, *On the Ground*, 5.

Our Founder: The Mimeograph

> *In the underground you needed a place to sell, that's one pillar; you needed a publisher, that's another pillar; and you needed a guy to print it. That's another pillar*[12].
>
> —Ron Turner, *Flagrante Delicto* (1965); Last Gasp

An unmade cot. Several laundry bags. A jar of instant coffee. Nude posters. Yet what most captivated one journalist who, in the 1960s, visited the Students for Democratic Society in Chicago's West Side ghetto, was a picture of a mimeograph taped to the wall—underneath which someone had scrawled the words 'Our Founder[13].'

In the 60s and 70s, you had as many printing methods as you had papers. Judy Albert of the *Berkeley Barb* cut/pasted on blue-lined sheets[14]; John McMillan, author of *Smoking Typewriters,* waxes nostalgic about ink-smeared fingers and Gestetner mimeographs[15]; Jeffrey Blankfort of *The San Francisco Good Times* paid a photo center ten dollars a year to utilize their sixty enlargers and developing room: "In those days[…] you could buy a box of Luminos paper for five dollars, believe it or not. I could print and print[…] until I got a print I liked[16]."

It's ironic that although "underground papers were highly critical of capitalism, they represented 'some of the greatest examples of practical free enterprise[17].'" Where "before, copy must be set in hot type on a Linotype machine—a costly and difficult procedure[18]," you could now add a competent typist, some scissors, a jar of rubber cement, a couple hundred dollars, and behold: several thousand copies at eight or sixteen pages. Creative manipulations of photo-offset printing abounded:

> Artists exploited split-fountain blending to stretch the color capabilities of four-color presses; they used halftone and pattern overlays to add color and depth[…]; they sculpted unjustified type around the edges of photos, collages, comix, hand-drawn ads[…]—there really seemed to be no limits[19].

It would be remiss to ignore that the protest paper revolution was a global movement. But as press critic A.J. Liebling said, "Freedom of the press belongs to those

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[12] Stewart, *On the Ground*, 76.
[13] McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters,* 13.
[14] Stewart, *On the Ground*, 83.
[15] Stewart, *On the Ground*, xiii.
[16] Stewart, *On the Ground*, 26.
[17] McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters,* 6-7.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Stewart, *On the Ground*, 61.

who own one[20]." In Poland—"the merriest barrack in the communist camp[21]"—censorship was so stringent that printers were forced to "reinvent the wheel, developing technologies from scratch that were obsolete elsewhere[22]." They engaged in hand copying and re-typing. They made "pocket duplicators" by feeding aluminum foil and sandpaper into a typewriter's ribbon[23]; they ran soot-and-vegetable-oil-soaked tampons over stencils[24] made from plastic wrap, onionskin, and ballpoint pens[25]. They employed colloid printing and "the precise, labor-intensive art of Silkscreen printing[26]." With the ingenuity of felons brewing toilet moonshine, they concocted homemade ink from "shreds of gray soap and eau de cologne[27]." While Emory Douglas of *The Black Panther* recalls burning his own plates and jury-rigging a press out of the shell of a Heidelberg[28], the Poles relied largely on parts from the CIA[29]—even as the U.S. often sued its domestic protest printers.

Not all rebels were as fortunate as the Americans, but worldwide, they all shared boundless passion for their causes. Printers worked irregular hours, received little money, angered important people—but they got it done. As said by Emory Douglas: "[The publishers] told me: '[...]Get the paper out every week. That's the Party's lifeline to the people.' And that's what I did[30]."

How to Make Guns and How to Make Printing Devices

> *Q: Why did you take on printing in the first place?*
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> *A: One young historian already asked me this. He thought it was because of my family tradition with the prewar Polish Socialist Party, or something like that. But I told him things were so deadly boring and depressing in the People's Poland that you either had to leave or plot against the communists—there simply was no other choice[31].*
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> —Witold Luczywo Talks about Printing *Robotnik*

[20] A.J. Liebling, "The Wayward Press: Do You Belong in Journalism?" *The New Yorker*, May 14, 1960, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1946/02/23/the-wayward-press-8.
[21] Gwido Zlatkes, Paweł Sowiński, and Ann M. Frenkel, *Duplicator Underground: The Independent Publishing Industry in Communist Poland, 1976-89.* (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2016), 2.
[22] Zlatkes, Sowiński, and Frenkel, *Duplicator Underground,* 2-3.
[23] Szczepan Rudka, "Printing *Kissel*: Printing Technologies for Uncensored Publications," in *Duplicator Underground,* ed. Gwido Zlatkes, Paweł Sowiński, and Ann M. Frenkel (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2016), 191.
[24] Jan Strękowski, "*Łakomiec* (the Glutton) and LEGO: Underground Production of Printing Equipment in Poland," in *Duplicator Underground,* ed. Gwido Zlatkes, Paweł Sowiński, and Ann M. Frenkel (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2016), 207.
[25] Rudka, "Printing *Kissel,"* 192.
[26] Rudka, "Printing *Kissel,"* 196.
[27] Rudka, "Printing *Kissel,"* 192.
[28] Stewart, *On the Ground*, 88.
[29] Zlatkes, Sowiński, and Frenkel, *Duplicator Underground,* 3.
[30] Stewart, *On the Ground*, 89.
[31] "'How Come You're Buying All This Soap?': Witold Łuczywo Talks about Printing *Robotnik*. An interview by Pawel Smolenski, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, August 9, 2008," in *Duplicator Underground,* ed. Gwido Zlatkes, Paweł Sowiński, and Ann M. Frenkel (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2016), 446.

To be blunt: printers took the biggest risks[32]. Ron Turner recalls two printers destroying his negatives of *Young Lust*, afraid of printing nudity; Art Kunkin's near-loss of *The Los Angeles Free Press's* printer almost silenced him:

> I'd published a list of all the narcotics agents with their home addresses, and [California] sued me for $25 million[…]. They got to my printer and said they'd make him a part of my lawsuit unless he wouldn't print my paper (it was a totally illegal deal)[…]. So I'm looking to see if I can print in Berkeley and bring the paper down by train, and I heard of a pornographer, Marvin Miller[…] who had a printing plant and was moving into film[…]. I discovered he was a subscriber; I had his home address. […]I drive out there, and we meet in his kitchen and there's a tank full of piranha, meat-eating fish. […]I tell my story and he'd seen me on television the night before debating the chief of police, [Ed] Davis. So, to this pornographer I was a hero, and he pulled his keys out of his pocket, a big ring of keys, and he said, "These are the keys to my printing plant. There's paper in there, here's the name of the foreman and he'll get you a crew. Go print your paper." So I did[33].

Under Communism, the law outlined life sentences for those who "distribute, prepare, store, or transport prints[…] which [contain] information that can inflict harm to the interests of the Polish State[34]." Everything from wedding invitations to obituaries required approval; "all printing shops, even ones that produced nothing more than restaurant menus and electricity invoices, were under lock and key[35]." Printers were raided repeatedly under martial law[36].

Note that what the authorities targeted—what they feared—was *printing*. Equipment. Smuggled paper and ink. It's said that "the citizens of the People's Poland were supposed to unlearn two skills: how to make guns and how to make printing devices[37]." Ultimately the communists were right to fear:

> The duplicator revolution—breaking the state monopoly on information—was one of the principal factors in our success[…]. The underground presses ran for 14 years, 365 days, 24/7. It took more or less 120,000 "duplicator hours" to dismantle communism in Poland, and per extension, the whole Soviet Bloc[38].

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[32] Paweł Sowiński, "'Printers of the Mind': The Culture of Polish Resistance, 1976–89," in *Duplicator Underground,* ed. Gwido Zlatkes, Paweł Sowiński, and Ann M. Frenkel (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2016), 53.
[33] Stewart, *On the Ground,* 123.
[34] Jerzy Kolarzowski and Gwido Zlatkes, "Social and Legal Aspects of Underground Publishing," in *Duplicator Underground,* ed. Gwido Zlatkes, Paweł Sowiński, and Ann M. Frenkel (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2016), 225.
[35] Zlatkes, Sowiński, and Frenkel, *Duplicator Underground,* 2-3.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Jan Strękowski, "*Łakomiec* (the Glutton) and LEGO," 201.
[38] Zlatkes, Sowiński, and Frenkel, *Duplicator Underground,* 4.

OK Maybe It's Glossy Romanticism but C'mon, Printers Are Super Sexy

> *They worked in fits and starts, at various hours of the day or night in an aura of secrecy, unsupervised. They were independent not just from the system but also from the life of normal people*[39].
>
> —Paweł Sowiński, Polish journalist

A printer was not only a person, but a symbol. Rebellion unified people, and in the miasma of high emotions born from dangerous conditions and shared ideals[40], "a type of dissident hero emerged—a printer-worker who frequented opposition parties, [...]cigarettes in his pocket, [...]jailed but not broken. He handed copies of *Kultura* to excited friends[...], impressed everyone with his contacts[...], and was surrounded by the aura of secrecy. 'Writers would run to him with stencils and bribe him with whisky,' wrote Grzegorz Nawrocki about the underground printer Bogdan Grzesiak[41]." Jan Walc of *The Free Drum'n'Roller Press* recalls the cinematic thrill of sneaking through the city:

> My little son protests, 'Daddy, Daddy, take me with you. I want to print too!' [...]My wife gives me a certain kind of look, and I'm off. Once again I am going into battle. There's nobody suspicious near my house so the way is clear. As a rule, you don't usually pick up a 'tail' on the street; the 'specialized agencies' usually wait in assigned places[...]. From now on, the safety of our printing shop depends on my alertness and vigilance[42].

Significantly, these "dissident heroes" could be *anyone* with "manual skills, technical education, and a knack for handiwork[43]"—a cultural capital attainable even for the uneducated. "[Printers] carried the full weight of the struggle and felt they were on the front lines[44]," and subsequently, it is no surprise that "who was more important—a printer or an editor—was a subject of debate[...] Printers could be loose cannons; they would print without the[...] approval of the rest of the board and decide the sequence of works[45]."

Police, censors, pornographers. The printer faced them all. More than just a cog in the machine, they were mysterious and necessary, dangerous and in danger. And so, concludes Paweł Sowiński, "It was not a very stable group[46]."

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[39] Paweł Sowiński, "'Printers of the Mind': The Culture of Polish Resistance, 1976–89," 51.
[40] Paweł Sowiński, "'Printers of the Mind': The Culture of Polish Resistance, 1976–89," 45.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Jan Walc, "We, the Free Drum'n'Roller Press," in *Duplicator Underground,* ed. Gwido Zlatkes, Paweł Sowiński, and Ann M. Frenkel (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2016), 314.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Paweł Sowiński, "'Printers of the Mind': The Culture of Polish Resistance, 1976–89," 47.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid.

Holy Framing Device, Batman!

Alexis de Tocqueville believed that "in America, political life is active, varied, even agitated, but rarely troubled by profound passion[47]." Perhaps this was true in 1813, when the everyman lacked access to printing. But a free press is not something Tocqueville would have wanted either; he believed "the literature of democracy" rarely exhibits "the order, regularity, skill, and art characteristic of aristocratic literature[48]."

The thing is—Tocqueville was wrong. With the advent of available technology, passions flourished. Printers worldwide were the keys that opened the floodgates to a wealth of different perspectives speaking truth to power. Disbelief finally found, so to speak, an organ.

Perhaps, as Tocqueville feared, these papers "[strove] more to astonish than to please, to stir passions than to charm taste[49]." Yes, free ability to spread ideas is messy—but it's valuable. And today, almost every middle-class household possesses a home printer, with ample access to supplies. Ample space to think. Ample forums to speak—no soot-soaked tampons required.

[47] Baughman, Ratner-Rosenhagen, and Danky, *Protest on the Page*, 4.
[48] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 474.
[49] Ibid.

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