

UNDERGROUND OR ALTERNATIVE

Anne Woodsworth

THOSE “hippie rags”, known commonly as underground papers, were never very far under Canadian ground. To earn the name “underground”, papers should be published out of suitcases and dank basements. They must be secretive as well as in opposition. Perhaps it is because these conditions did not apply that the papers, shortly after they were established, began to call themselves opposition/alternative papers or papers of the counter-culture rather than underground papers.

Although they live short turbulent lives, alternative papers do provide readers with their addresses or box numbers, encouraging feedback, donations and subscriptions. They face libel suits, convictions for pornography and are closely watched, yet officially ignored, by the establishment. Still the papers survive — kept alive by subscriptions from libraries — biting the hand that feeds them.

The papers are most often managed communally. The runs are small, normally four to five thousand. A circulation of 10,000 in Canada bespeaks a well-established alternative paper. In its prime the *Georgia Straight* managed to reach that figure. *The Other Woman*, a relatively new women’s liberation paper, sells perhaps one third of its issues to cover printing costs and uses the rest for promotion.

Many alternative papers live to publish only a few issues. Some disappear altogether after a short time; some merge with one or two others, while others after a year or so will split and become two papers. Often, one or two individuals will start several papers in quick succession. All favour change to varying degrees and by various means; all oppose the political and social status quo, and all question solidly entrenched people, ideas and institutions. For example, Toronto’s *Saturday* called itself “a forum for hip people . . . with one commitment. To

truth." (August, 1968). Vancouver's *Partisan* stated that it "is dedicated to publishing the truth about what is happening in our communities." Being more activist and radical, the latter added "The Partisan Party is dedicated to doing something about it." (June 22, 1971).

IT IS EASIER to state what alternative papers are not, than it is to define what they are. They did not grow out of the socialist papers that flourished at the beginning of the century. Nor are they sprouts of the beat poetry and little magazines of the fifties. The movement from which they grew spread from California and New York in 1964. Underground papers, as they were called, began to appear in most major U.S. and Canadian cities until now papers of the counter-culture are firmly entrenched in most countries of the western world.

By 1966, Canada had its first underground newspaper, *Saturday*, produced in and for the Yorkville district of Toronto. Other cities quickly followed with flower children, and appropriate districts and newspapers. The papers reflected the psychedelic frenzy of the time, with splashing colours, Alice B. Toklas recipes and price and quality reports on street drugs. By 1972 the papers reached a fluid and fairly stable number of two hundred that were alive and publishing.* It seems impossible to arrive at an accurate figure since some publish only one issue and then die; others, through amitosis, will become two (viz. — *Georgia Straight* and *Grape*) and several will merge to become one — such as *Bellyful*, *Velvet Fist* and *The Other Woman* joining forces and publishing now as *The Other Woman*.

Over the past six years, Canada's alternative papers, their messages and their audiences have changed a great deal. Love-ins changed to sit-ins. The counter-culture learned the power of controlled violence and forcible demonstrations. During that period the newspapers were catalysts for social change, a part of the change and a rippled mirror reflecting the changes that took place. They also became a unique source of information about events — future, present and past. Today, they are not only the sole recorders of the underground — alternative — counter-culture movement, but also the harbingers of it.

*For the only listing of Canadian papers attempted to date see *The Alternative Press in Canada; a checklist*. (University of Toronto Press, 1972. 74 p.) compiled by A. Woodsworth. Ed.

ALTHOUGH a few papers in the U.S.A. have become financially lucrative ventures, profit-making is never the aim of an alternative newspaper. They are characterized instead by wanting to change the environment — social, political, physical, etc. Usually they assume a watchdog stance over issues involving deprived segments of their communities. A sampling of headlines will show where they aim their scatterguns:

- “Big business — the real criminal”
- “Compost power”
- “Developers and the Canadian State”
- “Don’t get trapped . . . boycott Kraft products”
- “How to grow psylocybin”
- “Interviews with speed users”
- “Kraft slices Canadians”
- “Organic gardening special”
- “Prison: a mirror of sexist society”
- “Rotten bus service”
- “Sexism in children’s books”
- “Strike busting at Brantford”

In content, alternative newspapers resemble their hated opposition, carrying hard news, editorials, book, music, film and theatre reviews and recipes. Lack of sports and financial sections is compensated for by extensive sections on free things, events — notices and reports on drugs on the market. Decent layout is rare; photographs, comics and other illustrations are largely amateurish, perhaps even deliberately so. Most are produced by cheap offset with the newspaper staff sharing the writing, typing and pasting-up of camera-ready copy. Inclusion of many photos and colour printing bespeaks an established paper with regular advertisers, subscribers or else outside financial backing.

A bare bones 24-page issue with no photographs can be produced at a cost of \$250 for 4,000 issues. It is therefore easy for every mini-movement, co-op house or messiah with a message to spread their alternative messages through the world. With the proliferation of OFY and LIP grants the task of gathering cash for the printer has become still easier.

ALTHOUGH not as bland as the yellow press, alternatives conform with one another by having their own biases and jargon-filled rhetoric.

As George Woodcock so aptly put it in writing for *Dreadnaught*, "An underground paper which, like *The Mysterious East*, avoids counter-establishment conformity is rare indeed and to be treasured as evidence that there are people who stand outside the two orthodoxies of our time." (October 1970, p. 5)

Perhaps the adjectives used by the establishment to describe the papers best indicate the variety of their free-wheeling prose. Alternative papers have been labelled amateurish, audacious, blasphemous, boring, colourful, devoid of humor, exciting, humourous, informative, irreverant, libellous, lively, mean-minded, messianic, obscene, psychedelic, refreshing, revolutionary, scatological, satirical, smutty, undisciplined and vindictive. Style within one paper can vary enough to cover all those adjectives and can range from excellent prose and poetry to nonsensical strings of four-letter invectives. Few papers distinguish themselves by been consistently literate.

The rhetoric is usually consistent with the message imparted:

An important thing that brothers and sister who dig Red Morning can be doing is helping us get our paper out. For our people to really serve the people we need to know more about people's struggles around the city. That means rapping with us and writing about what's coming down in your community . . . And it means turning on more people to the revolution by making sure our paper gets out to more brothers and sister. The pigs don't want to see that happen . . . They don't want people picking up on revolutionary ideas because they lead to revolutionary actions. (*Red Morning*, Summer 1971, p. 8)

With slang-ridden, free-wheeling writing they attack — like *Guerrilla*, commenting on the demise of Toronto's *Telegram* and emergence of the *Sun*:

And so the game has been played out, the Telegram is kaput with its subscription list going to the Star, for TEN MILLION? and out of the dust and subterfuge, the dawning of an archaic new day, the right wing rays of a devious SUN. (Nov. 10, 1971, p. 8)

And get attacked:

Guerrilla and the Georgia Straight have come under attack. A man in a small Ontario town was arrested for obscenity after displaying a comic from Guerrilla. Two Toronto lawyers went down and the judge, apparently afraid of another Skopes Monkey Trial, dismissed the case on a preliminary motion.

Meanwhile in Moosomin Saskatchewan a teacher was fired for displaying a Georgia Straight to her students . . . (November 10, 1971, p. 14)

Sometimes the satire is excellent and devastating:

At my school we even grade people on how they read poetry. That's like grading people on how they make love. But we do it. In fact, God help me, I do it. I'm the Adolph Eichman of English 323. Simon Legree of the poetry plantation. Tote that i-amb! Lift that spondee!

(Excerpt from "The Student as a Nigger", originally published in the *L.A. Free Press*, reprinted in many Canadian papers and the cause of censorship in many schools, colleges and universities across the country.)

THE EFFECT of the alternative press on Canadian society is difficult to measure for it is, at once, the recorder and the catalyst of events.

The world, including Canada, has changed much since underground newspapers first appeared and the papers themselves are part of that change. They pounce on the causes and perpetrators of social ills. The members of the small, vocal and often militant groups that the papers represent, practise what they preach. They eat the organic foods they teach people to grow, take the drugs they write about and arrange demonstrations in support of the unemployed, the exiled and the unliberated. Being gadflies, goading naturally everything that moves conservatively and slowly, they elicit strong reactions from the establishment.

Two weeks after Abbie Hoffman's *Steal This Book* was banned by Canada Customs, Toronto mayor William Dennison attacked the free bi-weekly paper *Antimony* for printing excerpts from the volume's guide to shoplifting.

The *Toronto Star* of August 6 quoted Dennison as saying *Antimony* was either a maoist or communist sheet advising young people on techniques to destroy our whole economic system and step back into a collective jungle. They are funded by the federal government and the silent majority just sits back and does nothing to stop it. (*Tabloid*, August 1971, p. 10)

Whom do the papers reach with their messages? Certainly the converted; probably those they attack; and infrequently those for whom they fight — welfare recipients, lower working classes, strikers, Indians, and repressed women.

In short they provide a small segment of our population with a cheap means of expression and communication, albeit often tediously repetitive. It is the personalities of its staff that shape the content, strength and impact of any given paper. The waves made by the papers are sometimes big — sometimes small. If an alternative idea reaches the mass media and the mainstream of society's conscience, then the papers usually drop the issue.

Are the alternative papers really harbingers, running before the major cultural movements? Do they for a brief time present alternatives to the status quo and then, when society absorbs or is changed by the alternatives, seek new directions? Even that varies. Some papers die once their spewings have been swept up by society. Other papers and editors seek new issues and new frontiers on which to fight.

And what of the future? What direction will the alternative press and the movement take? Perhaps some of the current headlines herald it:

“Beyond free schools to critical schools”

“If the structure doesn’t fit we must change it”

“Politics is a no no”

“Towards an authentic Canadian left”

But perhaps these are not the new directions. Anyone can guess and anyone can be right. The strong pro-drug and anti-war messages are now gone, having been replaced by comments on communities, ecology, and labour problems. Whether these issues represent a future direction or a transition period can be determined only retrospectively and in two or three years.

Although the crystal ball is hazy, one thing is certain — in whatever direction the papers choose to move, it will be contrary to, divergent and distinct from that which is and has been. That is because a thing, to be alternative, must by definition be different.