
Beyond the Mainstream: Examining Alternative Sources for Stock Selection

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Introduction

There are thousands of small publishers, small presses and individuals in Britain currently producing textbooks, monographs, novels, poetry, journals, newspapers and other, non-standard, publications. Their output ranges from the stocklists of such long-standing political publishers as Pluto and Verso, to the more idiosyncratic and erratic publishers of *The Bug* and *Mark's Little Book about Kinder Eggs* (of which more later). Political and social commentaries; humour and satire; poetry and drama; environmental issues; sexual politics: every topic that might be encountered on the shelves of any library will have its counterpart in the alternative press. Furthermore, the small presses will often provide publications on topics never found on library shelves or, for that matter, never even dreamed of by many people.

Towards a Definition of "Alternative"

Before we can proceed to a definition of what we mean by "alternative", we must first define to what these publications are an alternative. I use the term "mainstream" to refer to the major publishing houses whose logos are as familiar to us as their titles: Penguin; Longman; Harper Collins; Cambridge and Oxford University Presses and their like. Publishers that have a high profile in our high street bookshops, who have acquired reputations for quality and authority, who are generalist publishers across a range of topics. Publishers you can rely on: but for what? It would be unfair to expect any publisher to feel responsible for addressing all sides of the questions raised in its publications. Writers and publishers have the right to be partisan. Yet by limiting ourselves to the publications of the mainstream we might be unwittingly sustaining a status quo, fostering an information élite, restricting access to aspects of culture and politics that tend to be disregarded by mainstream publishers and the mass media in general. It is in this light, that is as counters to such limits, that the alternative presses should be seen. Two of the most prominent distributors of alternative presses are AK Press and Counter Productions[1,2].

Two Alternatives: AK Press and Counter Productions

It is impossible to consider the entire range of alternative publications in such a short space: even the diversity of publications carried by these two eclectic distributors is hard to summarize, yet a brief summary of their catalogues will provide some indication of the current state of the alternative press in the UK.

AK Press describes itself as publishing “everything from poetry to parapolitics and most in between”, a description that serves also to describe its distribution arm, specializing in thousands of small press and individually published titles covering anarchist, libertarian and situationist material, in addition to much poetry and prose. Its most well-known authors include Noam Chomsky, Tom Leonard, Murray Bookchin and James Kelman. But AK’s strength lies in the equal space it gives to the unknown (that is the unpublicized), anonymous and collective authors of titles that offer insights into the cultural and political life of our country (and indeed, of the world); tracts and polemics such as *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, *Dear Motorist...*, and *Vote: What For?* Alternatives to our increasingly ideologically-determined educational system (an ideology that is dictated by Government) might also be found: *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* by Ira Shor is now a classic of libertarian education, where he seeks to find in formal education a relevance and a value to people’s lives outwith school and college.

No Master High or Low, John Shotton’s history of libertarian education in Britain is a book rare among mainstream publications: an educational work that has no pretensions to academia, that can be as easily and as profitably read by parents and children as by academics. Indeed this is a salient feature of much alternative literature: that it is often written in plain language, easily comprehensible. Alternative need not mean élitist or obscurantist. Despite this, much of the literature – particularly politically controversial titles such as those distributed and published by AK – is often treated by mainstream reviewers as the province of the specialist and the fanatic.

Nowhere is the élitist argument better put to flight than in AK’s poetry, prose and comic collections. Tom Leonard, Benjamin Zephaniah and Henry Normal sit alongside the violent fiction of Stewart Home (described by one critic as having “no literary merit”) and *End Time*, the apocalyptic first novel by G. A. Matiasz. Leo Baxendale, Robert Crumb and Clifford Harper are some of the better-known names that populate the comics corner.

But it is in the profusion of journals and magazines that the small presses so often make their presence felt. There are the investigative journalism and parapolitics of *Covert Action Quarterly* and *Lobster*, the environmental activism of *Earth First! Journal* and *Green Anarchist*, the uncategorizable *Casablanca* and *The Bug*. This is to leave aside what are almost veterans of the alternative press scene: *Anarchy*, *Black Flag*, *Troops out*, *Z Magazine*. And on and on: for every left, Communist, anarchist and libertarian political persuasion; for every single-issue cause; for every area of concern and research there is a journal, be it glossy, photocopied, perfect-bound, stapled, loose-leaf; weekly, quarterly, or (the serial librarian’s nightmare) the wilfully irregular. Chances are that AK will stock it or will at least have heard of it.

Counter Productions

Less explicitly “political”, yet its stocklist must rank as one of the most enlightening and curious of the small press distributors: it claims as its own such

areas as “dissident, surreal, *outré*, pataphysical and anti-authoritarian”. The recommendations in its catalogue impress with a degree of honesty that is rare in the world of publishing, where everyone vies to be first, biggest and best. I first came across Counter as the distributor of Aporia’s series of reprints of the works of Gerard Winstanley, Thomas Paine, Abiezer Coppe and other English radicals. Otherwise I would not have come across the Loompanics series of “how to” monographs on such life-saving topics as how to do your own investigative reporting, how to start your own country and how to “disappear completely and never be found”. I would not have stumbled on *Mark’s Little Book about Kinder Eggs*, which is just that: a 28-page A7 booklet documenting part of the author’s mammoth collection of Kinder Egg toys. Social revolution, subversion and absurdity, side by side in a wholly natural way. Again, if alternative publishing shows us anything it is that such aspects of literature can co-exist quite happily, just as laughter, sadness and boredom do in everyday life; they do not need the artificial compartments of fiction/non-fiction, serious/humorous, classic/modern, conservative/experimental, intellectual/ populist.

The Value of Alternative Publications

The overriding point to make here is that, since the material has been published, should it not therefore enjoy equal consideration with the publications of the mainstream? Many – probably the majority – of these publications are marginalized owing to their inability to compete in the marketplace with the conglomerate, international publishing houses. By choosing to ignore or by remaining ignorant of such publications we cannot but disadvantage our users. By denying them even the opportunity to become aware that such literature exists we are surely failing those who, in the words of Maurice Line, “browse as a means of articulating half-identified needs or simply for curiosity” [3].

Alternative Publications vs. the “Dominant Paradigm”

But it is in their content, inevitably, where lies the most powerful argument for their acquisition, in the extent to which they provide an alternative to the orthodoxies and doctrines of the mass media. The distorting influence of all mass media (and I include “mass publishing” in this) has been demonstrated for many years in the work of such as Noam Chomsky, John Pilger and the Glasgow University Media Group[4]. Time and time again the “dominant paradigm” of democratic capitalism, fuelled by a free market economy, has been shown to be sustained by the channels of the mass media. In the film *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky identifies a number of ways in which the mass media operate:

- by selecting topics,
- by emphasis,
- by the framing of issues,
- by filtering information, and
- by the bounding of debate.

By these methods the mass media determine, select, shape, control, restrict. The controllers of the mass media set the framework within which the reporting and the discussion of issues will take place. One current example will suffice: the recent visit to New York by Sinn Fein's president, Gerry Adams. The radio, television and newspapers told constantly of a "propaganda coup" by the Sinn Fein president. The word "propaganda" is most commonly used of subversives, of terrorists: rarely is it used to describe the publicity relations of the British Government. As I write, John Major is visiting President Clinton in the White House; but there is no talk of "propaganda" there. It is easy to forget – and the broadcasting ban makes it even easier – that Sinn Fein is still a legitimate British political party.

Bypassing the mass media, in many cases forsaking commercial gain, refusing to play by the rules of the free market: alternative publications can provide us with different perspectives on subjects, even wholly new or hitherto unknown subjects. Much investigative reporting takes place in the pages of small circulation journals. *Lobster*, the British journal of parapolitics, was the first to break the story about Colin Wallace and "Operation Clockwork Orange", the MI5 plot to destabilize the Wilson Government. Well before *The Sunday Times* and *Nature* locked horns, *Open Eye* (another low-circulation magazine, still only on issue two after three years) published an annotated feature on Peter Duesberg and the AIDS/HIV controversy, which also included notes on where to find more on "unconventional viewpoints" regarding AIDS. The US journal *Covert Action Quarterly* published last year an extensive feature on British military tactics to target Republican teenagers in Northern Ireland for harassment and even death. Three stories: two of which were not picked up by the mass media until much later, and then often reported in superficial, sensationalist and partisan terms. The third, to my knowledge, has still gone unreported in the British press.

The value of alternative publications lies surely in their providing interpretations of the world which we might not otherwise see and information about the world that we simply will not find anywhere else. It is precisely because, in Charles Willett's words, "they are not filtered, sanitized, and packaged by the giant corporations that deliver most information we receive" [5] that they are able to achieve this. Alternative publications are at bottom more interested in the free flow of ideas than in profit. They are answerable not to accountants, but to their writers and readers.

Opportunities for Acquisition

The advertising budget of any large publisher will often exceed that of a small press by a hundredfold (at least). Mailshots, newspaper and magazine advertising, television and radio coverage, all will ensure that both librarians and library users will encounter mainstream publications as part of their daily life. Importantly they do not need to seek them out: their presence in the marketplace is pre-eminent. By comparison the alternative title has a number of problems which affect its profile in the marketplace, and therefore its acquisition. These are clearly seen if we consider alternative publications as types of "grey literature", the main features of which are:

- poor availability;
- “non-professional” layout;
- low print runs; and
- poor bibliographic information and control.

Availability and Presentation

As we have seen, the small press cannot compete with the mainstream publisher in bringing their publications to the attention of librarians. Duncan Turner of the library supplier James Askew and Son believes it is “their sales and marketing failures” which prevent them from being identified and acquired by library suppliers, yet he believes this accounts for only “a few titles by obscure experimental publishers” [6]. What precisely he means by “obscure experimental publishers” is left unclear, but there is little doubt that there are far from “a few titles” missed by library suppliers.

Furthermore many titles are excluded from booksellers’ shelves simply because they are not spined, or do not meet other standards of presentation demanded by booksellers. Photocopied and stapled booklets are unlikely to get past a shop’s buyer or a library supplier. In terms of the high street bookseller and the library supplier, alternative publications are not easily available. You need to go well out of your way even to become aware of their existence.

I do not propose to discuss the shortcomings of book selection procedures: suffice to say that the picking list and other forms of recommendation filters (such as approvals collections, *The Bookseller*) can effectively prevent most small press publications from even coming to the librarian’s attention. Low print runs can mean that a title goes out of print quickly, often with no possibility of a reprint, since a small press cannot usually afford to maintain a complete back catalogue. If you are not alerted to a title’s existence on its publication, you may well never see a copy.

Bibliographic Control

At the heart of any serious attempt at acquisition must lie the bibliographic control of the material: just how do we learn of its existence? The often sporadic, personal, “non-professional” nature of many small presses means that you cannot even rely on them using ISBNs and ISSNs. Some distributors, increasingly frustrated by their customers’ difficulties in tracing material, are now encouraging the presses they work with to apply for ISBNs for each title and to include them in their catalogues. The resulting appearance of titles in *The Bookseller* and *British Books in Print/Bookbank* does at least enable library suppliers and their customers to order the publications. This should certainly improve the take-up rate by suppliers such as Askew, although it does nothing to change a supplier’s reliance on sales and marketing “successes” as methods of stock acquisition.

The problem of subject access, of getting a “feel” for such a vast area is very problematic. Hidden from view, not advertised in the trade press, hardly ever reviewed in the “quality” press; how do you find out what is available? Alternative publications do not have the respectability accorded even popular mainstream

fiction by suppliers, bookshops or libraries. Subject bibliographies simply do not exist in most areas. Availability must be pieced together using a variety of methods, among them directories of publishers, publishers' and distributors' catalogues, and the few indexes that can be found.

Directories

In the UK, *The Small Press Yearbook*[7] provides the most comprehensive listing of small presses, journals and distributors currently active. While arranged alphabetically by name of publisher or journal, it also provides general subject access and entries often contain descriptions of sample items. Its boast to be the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* of the small press world is not idle: the *Yearbook* also provides much valuable information on independent publishing, including articles on DTP, copyright, marketing and distribution. As a bibliographic tool it is essential. Its sister publication, the monthly magazine *Small Press Monthly*[7], acts as a valuable updating service to the *Yearbook*.

Now sadly ceased publication, *The Radical Bookseller Directory* contained listings of bookshops, distributors and the "major" small publishers and journal titles. Concentrating largely on radical political issues, including gay and lesbian, and environmental publishing, the last edition dates to 1992, but still contains much that is current. (Its sister publication, the quarterly journal *The Radical Bookseller*, has also ceased publication.)

Catalogues

Catalogues are a mixed blessing, whether mainstream or alternative. They range from simple title and author listings aimed at the specialist to illustrated, annotated perfect-bound books, arranged for browsing by subject, and intelligible to the tyro. But, once publishers have been identified through, say, *Small Press Yearbook*, often the only way to obtain material is direct from the publishers themselves.

The very diversity and (often anarchic) fluidity of alternative publishing militates against any comprehensive distribution services. Despite this AK and Counter Productions carry extremely wide selections of literature: we should also consider Turnaround[8], whose endeavours to market titles are more in accordance with the dominant practice. They ensure that all titles have ISBNs and they also deal with most of the library suppliers. Like AK and Counter, they are willing to deal directly with librarians. They also provide a full catalogue of all titles distributed, in addition to holding catalogues of individual publishers.

Finally, one should not ignore the catalogues of the National Libraries and the other legal deposit libraries of the UK. These will contain the most comprehensive collection of alternative and small press publications of any library, outwith specialist libraries such as the Commonweal Collection at the University of Bradford. The *British National Bibliography* will of course discover many such titles, but in my experience even this falls short of being exhaustive.

Indexes

No subject bibliographies or subject indexes of alternative publications are currently published in the UK. The *Alternative Information Record*, which

provided news of publications and library information services on peace issues, ceased publication in 1992. Its publisher, Librarians within the Peace Movement, still exists as a networking organization. Clearly the need for some regular bibliographic access – if only in certain areas of alternative publishing – is sorely lacking. (I believe that AK Press will shortly be publishing a bibliography of situationist material, compiled by Simon Ford of the National Art Library. This is a valuable first step.)

Research Publications publish *The Underground and Alternative Press in Britain during [year]*, a microfilm collection of (at present) 24 titles. I include it here because the printed guide to the collection was formerly known as *A Bibliographical Guide*, but is currently a simple list of titles and issues filmed, with a basic description of each title. I have not been able to discover how the titles filmed came to be chosen for the collection, but they offer a reasonable snapshot of the coverage of alternative periodicals, including gay and lesbian issues (*Rouge*), environmental activism (*Green Anarchist*), art and media (*Variant*) and comics (*Talking Turkey*). Its inclusion of such news-stand stalwarts as *Private Eye* and *Viz* I find less convincing. Unfortunately the collection is not indexed. Although it does not cover even 1 per cent of the periodicals currently published in this country, it would still form the basis of a collection.

But there are bibliographic tools published in the USA which will be of use to the librarian. *The Alternative Press Index (API)*[9] provides subject and author access to over 200 alternative journals, magazines and newspapers, including many published in Britain. Although primarily a research tool, it can also be profitably used to identify primary publications in specific subject areas. It has the added advantage of using subject headings developed by the American Library Association's Social Responsibilities Round Table, ensuring that its subject access employs useful terms, in plain English, often derived from the publications themselves, rather than the often archaic or tortuous headings recommended by the Library of Congress.

The *APT for Libraries: Alternative Press Titles for the General Reader* series published by CRISES Press of Florida[10] does for US books what *API* does for journals (although it also lists journals). This annual listing brings recent alternative publications together under such headings as ecology, economics, gay and lesbian studies, political repression, rights, liberty and justice, and women's studies.

Other Methods: Networking and Cascading

As with research, regardless of the abundance – or, in the case of alternative publications, the paucity – of bibliographic tools, serendipity plays a significant part. Networking and mutual support are common features of alternative publishing, and there is much mutual advertising, reviewing and listing of publications. A journal like *Anarchy* regularly reviews in excess of a hundred publications in each issue, and the *Alternative Press Review*[11] and *Factsheet 5*[12] are purely review journals: *Factsheet 5* claims to review everything it receives. The readers of such journals are often also its contributors, with no

hierarchical divisions between writers and readers. Once more *Anarchy* leads the field in this, giving over some 30 pages to readers' letters in a recent issue.

Browsing through a single issue of a journal can open up a whole network of contacts, each one branching off and interconnecting at some later stage. Information and ideas cascade from one title to another. *Lobster* is in love with the art of the footnote, its references to one article providing as much material for stock selection about the British security services as you could desire. And that is without the advertisements for specialist book services offering similarly lengthy lists. Then there are the book reviews ... Bewildering though it may seem, once librarians engage in the world of alternative publishing we may come to realize just how much information, how many insights, how many other perspectives on the world we miss by our dependence on the picking list and the approvals collection.

I will not pretend that stock selection in alternative publications is easy: it requires diligence, personal investigation, networking and some good fortune. It may require positive discrimination and special pleading at the outset; our own attitudes to what needs to be in our libraries may have to be changed, widened immeasurably. Let us not forget, as Charles Willett has said, that we "should consider all points of view, not just academic or political orthodoxy ... These books are our *glasnost*, our *samizdat*, our free voice"[5].

Notes and References

1. AK Press and Distribution: 22 Luton Place, Edinburgh EH8 9PE. Tel/fax: 031 667 1507.
2. Counter Productions: PO Box 556, London SE5 0RL.
3. Line, M., "Knowledge Is Power, and Power Is Dangerous", *Library Association Record*, Vol. 92 No. 11, 1990, pp. 829-32, 835.
4. Numerous examples of their work are currently available. Noam Chomsky is especially prolific, but two important contributions are *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies* (Pluto, London, 1993) and *Letters from Lexington: Reflections on Propaganda* (AK Press, Edinburgh, 1993). John Pilger's thought is well-represented in the collection *Distant Voices* (Vintage, London, 1992) and in his regular column in *New Statesman and Society*. The Glasgow University Media Group's latest work is *Getting the Message Across: News, Truth and Power*, edited by J.E.T. Eldridge (Routledge, London, 1993).
5. Willett, C., "Politically Controversial Monographs: Roles of Publishers, Distributors, Booksellers, *Choice Magazine*, and Librarians in Acquiring them for Academic Libraries", in *Building on the First Century: Proceedings of the Fifth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, Cincinnati, Ohio, 5-8 April 1989*, Association of College and Research Libraries, Chicago, IL, 1989, pp. 238-41.
6. Turner, D., "Stock Selection: The Library Supplier's View", *Scottish Libraries*, May/June 1993, pp. 10-11.
7. *Small Press Monthly* and *Small Press Yearbook*: Small Press Group of Great Britain, 11 Ashburnham Road, Bedford MK40 1DX. Tel: 0234 211606.
8. Turnaround Distribution: 27 Horsell Road, London N5 1XL. Tel: 071 609 7836/7.
9. *Alternative Press Index*: PO Box 33109, Baltimore, MD 21218, USA. Tel: 410 243 2471; Fax: 410 235 5325.
10. *APT for Libraries: Alternative Press Titles for the General Reader*: CRISES Press, 1716 SW Williston Road, Gainesville, FL 32608, USA. Tel: 904 335 2200.
11. *Alternative Press Review*: C.A.L. Press, PO Box 1446, Columbia, MO 65205-1446, USA.
12. *Factsheet 5*: R. Seth Friedman, PO Box 170099, San Francisco, CA 94117-0099, USA.