

Guglielmo Rossi.

[Title] The Collective Production of Radical Politics in Print: Libertarian Culture and Publishing in the 1970s

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Hello — my name is Guglielmo, in this presentation I am going to give an overview of the research produced as part of my dissertation ‘The Collective Production of Radical Politics in Print: Libertarian Culture and Publishing in the 1970s’.

The research topic developed from an interest in the interplay of political ideology and printed matter. Focusing on the role of publications and printing technology in the dissemination and development of political thought, and the role of publishing as an agent of group formation, group identity and coherence.

My research focused on how socialist and libertarian ideology affected the social context surrounding the publications’ production, informing the publishing of two groups: an organisation called Big Flame, active between the early 1970s and the early 80s, and a radical journal called *The Leveller*, published between 1976 and 1982.

The scrupulous critique of capitalist society developed by the libertarian culture of the period considered all aspects of everyday life as a site of political struggle and resistance to dominant views. Hierarchies of power, typically reflected in the organisation of labour in a capitalist system would be questioned with the aim of establishing what was considered to be a more egalitarian and democratic approach to organisation — favouring the development of informal relationships across group members and participatory decisions-making processes.

Crucially, this approach aimed at prefiguring in the present a shared vision for the future, following the belief that [quote] ‘changing your own life and the world about you *now* is an important part of building for socialism in the future’.

This way of thinking and doing, at times determined experimental and original approaches to writing, editing and design. In particular, my research focused on two aspects:

- 1) it considered how political ideology informed editorial and design choices, with the aim of applying political values to group practice
- 2) and considered how these editorial and design processes translated into visual qualities of printed publications.

Showed on screen are the pages of the pamphlet titled *People’s Food Co-op*, produced by a group of women part of Big Flame between 1974 and 1975.

The pamphlet is characterised by the extensive use of extracts from interviews.

To explain how the co-operative functioned, members interviewed each other — interviews were subsequently edited in group and excerpts are used as single blocks of text in combination with simple illustrations.

The aim was to establish a process which was inclusive of all the members, overcoming issues related to skills, confidence, and experience in writing. This approach reflected the democratic organisation of the group, and also describes the prefigurative approach mentioned earlier.

Explaining the process, the authors revealed the intention of [quote] ‘making the pamphlet more lively and real than many political documents’. At a time of economic crisis, rising inflation and civil unrest — the People’s Food Co-op transformed the routine of procuring food for a single household in a collective process, and shopping into an empowering activity. The action of the group against rising food prices emerged as a political act in opposition to the capitalist marketplace.

If in the one hand this publication aimed at ‘democratising’ food shopping — by making it more accessible — on the other hand it revealed a process seeking to democratise the communication system itself — including as many voices as possible within the publication.

Political values emerge across the pamphlet’s content, in the writing and editing process, and also become a visual attribute of the printed publication.

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[IMAGE 4] I’m now going to consider the organisation of the collective publishing *The Leveller*, and how the political vision of the group influenced the production process of the monthly magazine.

The Leveller was published by an open collective that anyone could join. The magazine operated without an editor. And considering the editor an authoritarian figure, the role was replaced by 2 co-ordinators elected every month.

Co-ordinators had no power in relation to the group, their role was to keep contact with contributors, to make sure that content was delivered on time to meet deadlines.

Rotating jobs was considered an important aspect of a non-hierarchical organisation — it allowed members to develop different skills, with the purpose of taking control over the work process.

Responsibilities were shared across the group, material was read and discussed at copy reading meetings, and decisions were taken through collective discussion.

In a similar way, the design of the journal was also handled collectively.

Early meeting notes suggest that the political vision of the group inspired the writing and the selection of topics, it influenced relationships across members, and manifested through the publication’s layout.

[IMAGE 5] The following quote makes this relationship clear

The Leveller should not reproduce the forms imposed by the division of labour under capitalism and its reinforcing ideologies. The magazine cannot formulate critiques of the false separation between ‘the

political', 'economic', 'the industrial' and so on, if it duplicates that typology in its work organisation and layout.

This idea reflects the intention of avoiding the organisation of content into magazine's sections.

And ideology becomes the rationale to challenge the conventional structure of a publication. [IMAGE 6]

The image on screen show pages from early issues, the lack of a clear hierarchy across the elements stands out — suggesting that libertarian ideology informed the layout of the publication.

This relationship between political values and design, also prompts a question:

— can this interplay of ideology and printed matter produce a functional publication and a satisfying result?

The meeting notes reproduced earlier, arguing that the division of content across sections replicate the capitalist divisions of labour, and should therefore be avoided, continue that [IMAGE 7]

We are opposed to rigid sectioning and regular features that have to appear in every issue. But there are four general areas in which material can be collected for editing and publication. These are news, agitprop, theory, and culture. But we should not fetishise them or present them as separate sections of the paper. [IMAGE 8 this is an early agitprop page]

The back cover of the pilot issue [IMAGE 9] includes a range of elements over three columns of text: founding statement, subscribers' names, an advert about how to become a subscriber, table of contents and a calendar of discussion meetings.

In order to be distinguished from other elements, the text at the bottom left is framed in a box.

And a black line separates the middle and the right-hand column.

The tight space between the lines and between text boxes, define a page where the elements can be hardly distinguished. However, the design reads also as a sign of coherence: because it reflects the intention of avoiding a hierarchical organisation of content.

Pages from the first few issues follow a similar approach: [IMAGE 10]

Thick lines run horizontally, marking where one article finishes and the next begins.

[IMAGE 11] Black marks define the space taken by a particular feature, and in other instances, [IMAGE 12] they highlight the full grid on the spread [IMAGE 13].

This approach relies on the grid to become a readable element.

If in graphic design terms the grid determines the internal divisions of the page, and the layout determines the positioning of the elements — in this case the grid appears as a guide for the reader. Being unable to distinguish the order of the content, the reader needs to see the grid to know where to read.

A few years after the magazine went bankrupt (in 1982) former members of the collective published a severe critique of its strategies — the editorial and design approach of *The Leveller* is described as [quote] ‘a cultural revolution in editorial policy’ that ultimately ‘produced a magazine that looked messy’.

And as members realised that the emphasis given to ideology transformed into a deterrent to the group — slowing down the process of forming consensus on anything, and eventually preventing the group from developing the necessary skills and expertise — the magazine evolved towards a more structured publication.

And regular sections started to emerge.

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Fundamental to the development of this relationship, of political ideology and publications, is a renewed access to printing technology and text composition. [IMAGE 14]

Electric typewriters and small-scale offset lithography, became in the period common office technologies.

Introduced to meet the growing demand for the duplication of documents, they also played a key role in the growth of radical publishing.

Marketed in the UK in 1966, and used for the typesetting of many independent journals (including *The Leveller*), the IBM Selectric allowed anyone able to use a typewriter — to do typesetting on the machine directly.

Typewriters were used in conjunction with offset lithography for making originals to be photographed and printed — bypassing the expensive and more time-consuming processes required by hot metal type — and the figure of a professional compositor.

Using a changeable component called the ‘golfball’ (with characters engraved), the IBM Selectric increased the typing speed and allowed the use of different type styles within the same document.

In 1968 type designer Adrian Frutiger wrote about this machine in the *IBM Journal of Research and Development*.

Using a metaphorical language, Frutiger suggests the impact of the typewriter in increasing access to the means of design and production — suggesting the idea of the typewriter as a liberatory instrument. [IMAGE 15]

with this machine the author can, if he chooses to do so, [...] write his own book without the assistance of specialists. The author could be referred to as a ‘modern calligrapher’ — the Composer type element being the extension of his hand [...] replacing the pen and also the art of writing.

Composition, once again, becomes extremely simple and direct.

Without the need of a printing apprenticeship, the collective publishing *The Leveller* could typeset the journal, share the workload across the group, and apply the group’s political ideas to their practice.

To conclude, as a practicing designer concerned with finding meaningful ways to marry form and content, the publishing of *Big Flame* and *The Leveller*, to me convey the characteristics of compelling designed objects.