



Spring 2007

# Printing Fuck: Resistance and Commodification at an Urban Alt Weekly

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## Recommended Citation

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# Printing Fuck: Resistance and Commodification at an Urban Alt Weekly

**Disciplines**  
Anthropology

PRINTING FUCK: RESISTANCE AND COMMODIFICATION AT AN URBAN ALT  
WEEKLY

By

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In

Anthropology

Submitted to the  
Department of Anthropology  
University of Pennsylvania

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2007

## Abstract

*Interest in mass media is increasing as anthropologists not only begin to regard mass media as salient features in their communities of study, but also as researchers begin to examine forms of media themselves as social sites of meaning creation. While older theoretical models tend to view mass media as a 'top down' process which can be used to manipulate or mislead passive receivers, empirical data and newer observations illustrate that mass media are active components of a dynamic social and cultural landscape. Building on this perspective, this study examines the social site of production of a large circulation urban alternative weekly publication. Using a broad based literature review as well as long term participant observation, this study examines the paper's institutional identity as 'alternative' as well its historical relations to underground newspapers and subsequent development into a freely distributed vehicle for advertising. This study ends with a discussion of the implications of the increasing commoditization of cultural production in contemporary society.*

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*All the reporters in the world working all the hours of the day could not witness all the happenings of the world.*

*-Walter Lippman*

### Introduction

Sitting across from me in the booth, Tim sipped at his tea while I asked him about PW's readership demographics. "Media Audit," Tim said without hesitation, "is way fucked up." A minute ago, Tim had listed off the characteristics of the "average" PW reader as was related to him by the subcontractor that the publisher paid upwards of \$30,000 per year to collect demographic data: white, young, affluent and urban. Tim didn't doubt that young white affluent citizens read the paper, but he saw a large gap between the data that the expensive demographic research company, Media Audit, provided and what he considered to be PW's identity within the Philadelphia media market. After all, in a town as racially diverse as Philadelphia, could a paper really survive without having "something for everybody?"

Elaborating a bit, Tim recalled that "on occasion" the audit company had "gone out of their way to point out that covers featuring African Americans don't have the same pick up rate as other covers." As a free urban "alternative weekly" (alt weekly), PW depends on a high pick up rate to ensure that it is reaching a demographic that advertisers will pay to communicate with. Without establishing a discrete readership, then, it is impossible to brand the paper and sell advertising. "For the record," Tim continued, referring to the subcontractor's advice, "I think that's horseshit."

Tim started out as a magazine journalist, but found his way to PW just as it was undergoing a dramatic renovation from an oddball community paper, the *Welcomat*, to the established and newly resurgent alt weekly format that had already proved successful

in other markets. The changes were enacted over the course of a “chaotic” year of massive turnover, dramatic spikes in circulation and some bitter words with former staff. In the end, PW became one of two vibrant “alt weekly” style publications in the city, featuring journalistic news stories, human interest features, music, entertainment and extensive local listings for everything from concerts to massage parlors.

PW combines left leaning journalism with an extensive knowledge of local events to provide a Philadelphia-centric hub of activity in a form that is both colorful and edgy. Through its various incarnations, PW has over 30 years of history, and in the currently tumultuous media landscape of Philadelphia, has been a profitable and steadily growing institution. This contrasts sharply with the widely publicized financial and circulatory malaise at formerly dominant daily print bastions such as the venerable broadsheet *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and the tabloid *The Daily News*.

However, as a social site of meaning creation, PW poses a unique set of questions which can be multiply approached for a holistic view of its peculiar niche. Chronologically, one can ask how its historically specific form originated and flourished, and what economic conditions led to its formation at a given moment in time. As a social site of production, PW also presents a challenging productive and aesthetic dynamic, encapsulated in the set of practices which it uses to create and project its identity as an “Alt” publication. All of these issues can be drawn into a larger discussion of the causal structure of mass media in contemporary society, and approaching these questions from the bottom up, via long term participant observation and personal interviews, offers an excellent opportunity to evaluate certain conceptions of mass media from a different standpoint.

This project seeks to understand both the historical depth of PW as well as the current dynamics which continue to shape the social conditions of production. As Tim's apprehension about the media research sub contractor demonstrates, though the Weekly has developed into and continues to be a profitable publication which depends on a well developed, if abstract, advertising demographic, the tension between economic imperatives and editorial "independence" remains conspicuously unresolved. How did PW come to exist in its current format and why? Who produces PW, and what ideological underpinnings inform their decisions? How does PW fit into a broader media landscape? What can one infer about broader processes of institutionalized meaning making from the particular, local example of PW?

This study combines a year of participant observation with a literature based analysis of both 'Alternative' publications as a historical phenomenon as well as issues of power and hegemony which any discussion of media production invariably entails. From approximately June 2006 to May 2007, I was an editorial intern at the publication, during which time I fact-checked articles, transcribed interviews, did some limited research and updated concert listings on a MySpace page. As time wore on, I successfully submitted several news features for publication and had the opportunity to work with both a senior staff writer and a managing editor. As part of the project, I attended weekly staff meetings during which I took notes on the discussions and in addition conducted formal interviews with the majority of the editorial staff.

This study begins with a broad review of some major developments in mass media theory which contributed to the author's understanding of the issues at stake and moves quickly into an overview of the available anthropological materials dealing with



media ethnography as well as the small number of texts which deal directly with alternative newspapers.

The second section reviews the academic debate surrounding the definition of 'alternative' versus the 'mainstream' publications. Although the notion of the 'mainstream' is not new, no stable definition separating it from its 'alternative' counterpart has yet been articulated. Nor has any one theorist been able to capture the precise nature of 'alt' publications and how they differ from 'popular' or 'mainstream' products. By attempting to synthesize an abstract model of the 'alternative' this author hopes to be able to more effectively analyze a publication that prominently self identifies as an 'alternative' weekly.

The third section discusses the development of alternative newspapers, focusing on the genesis of a particular format, the "alt weekly," which emerged at a distinct historical juncture as the result of a unique confluence of factors. The now popular and widely reproduced "alt weekly" format emerged at a very particular moment in history from a number of identifiable forerunners. Of primary importance was the economic failure of the large number of "underground" publications of the late sixties and early seventies as well as a shift into free distribution and a business model based on advertising revenue rather than subscription.

The fourth section is based primarily on my ethnographic observations and focuses on the peculiar practices of PW as an alt-weekly. Of particular interest are the development of the alt-weekly format as a vehicle for advertising and the distinct strategies of resistance that the editorial staff employs to reinforce its sense of independence from the capitalistic advertising component. Throughout all stages of

production, the staff relies on a diverse range of ideas to reinforce the paper's "alternative" identity despite the fact that many critics with a background in underground publications consider the format to be, generally, a form of "selling out" to capitalist pressures and nothing more than a niche marketing strategy.

I will close the paper with an extensive discussion of the implications of increasing commoditization and strategies of demographically based marketing on the 'alternative' identity of the alt weekly. While many commentators would be quick to condemn this process as a form of 'selling out' to corporate practice and capitalist dogma, I believe it is possible to show that general theories of media 'decline' and associated audience manipulation fail to take into account both the diversity of the media landscape as well as the astounding variability of personal subjectivity and individual interpretation of texts. In all sections, I rely on personal observations made over the course of my field work as well as a great deal of detail which was drawn from personal discussions with the staff.

### Literature Review

Mass media research has been pursued across a wide range of social science and humanistic domains for much of the past century, making any review of the relevant literature necessarily constrained. However, media studies have been broadly influenced by many of the themes first articulated in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century by cultural critics within the Frankfurt school. In their widely influential views, Adorno and Horkheimer theorized a "culture industry" which produced meanings according to a Fordist framework of mass production, thereby creating what they famously termed a "mass culture" (1974:12)

The "culture industry" of Adorno and Horkheimer (Adorno 1974) emphasized the degrading quality of cultural production, embodied in the collapsing hierarchy separating

'high' art from 'low' and increasing commoditization and industrialization of media production. Their mechanistic views of media production suppose an ordered apparatus which "intentionally integrates its consumers from above" while simultaneously "forces together the spheres of high and low art, separated for thousands of years" (12). As a result, "It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves," individuals who are the "precondition for a democratic society" (19).

As Debra Spitulnik (1993:295) noted in her review of the Anthropologic literature of mass media, this "dominant model" of the "mass communication process" distinguished the three phases of production, transmission and reception from each other and isolated each one as an isolated site of study. This model has long been accepted as the basis for the study of mass media and still retains a strong influence today. Indeed, Eric Louw (2001:50) depends expressly on this model to base his hypotheses, and one can easily find the same linear chain of causality and pessimistic attitude towards recent media developments among media critics such as Bourdieu 1998, Chomsky 1988, Fenton 2005, Anderson 2004 and Bagdikian 1997, among numerous others.

Furthermore, media critics, the Frankfurt School pessimists included, almost universally ignore observations made by earlier interested actors within the rapidly growing mass media network at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chief among these writers is the widely cited Walter Lippman, who, in his classic text *Public Opinion* (1922), provides a description and evaluation of the news industry that is both practically attentive to detail and mindful of the mass media's place within a larger social and

cultural structure. Such a view is obviously contrary to the monolithic conception of the power of mass media that nonetheless superseded more moderate positions.

Recently, however, Brian McNair (2006) has mounted a persuasive critique of preceding theoretical approaches, advocating instead a move away from what he refers to as the “control paradigm” which is “that set of critical approaches which views capitalist culture, and journalism in particular, as a monstrous apparatus bearing down on passive populations” and “cultural pessimism” which “asserts a process of backward evolution in capitalist culture [...] towards those [media outputs] defined as debased, vulgarized and dangerous” (2006:vii-viii). Rather, by importing a neutral framework from the ‘chaos theory’ of the natural sciences, McNair supposes a “contemporary communication environment in which, as in nature, chaos creates as well as destroys, generating in the process enhanced possibilities for progressive cultural, political and social evolution, as well as trends towards social entropy and disorder” (2006:xii). Indeed, McNair’s aesthetically and morally neutral approach succeeds in avoiding much of the confusion and alarmism of other media critiques and is able to acknowledge variation and ambiguity in many places where the binary system of “good” media versus “bad” media inevitably breaks down.

To flesh out this transition, it is worth quoting McNair at some length:

The control paradigm stresses the importance of structure, stasis and hierarchy in the maintenance of an unjust social order. It is premised on economic determinacy, whereby ruling elites are presumed to be able to extend their control of economic resources to control of the cultural apparatuses of media, including the mans of propaganda and public relations, leading to planned and predictable outcomes such as pro-elite media bias, dominant ideology, even ‘brainwashing’. These outputs are then implicated in the maintenance of ideological control in the interests of dominant groups, whether these have been defined in terms of class, gender, ethnicity or some other criteria of stratification. [...]

By contrast, the chaos paradigm acknowledges the *desire* for control on the part of elites, while suggesting that the performance, or exercise of control, is increasingly interrupted and disrupted by unpredictable eruptions and bifurcations arising from the impact of economic, political, ideological and technological factors on communication processes. These lead to unplanned outcomes in media content-dissent from elite accounts of events rather than dominant ideology or bias; ideological competition rather than hegemony; increased volatility of news agendas; and this routinely, rather than exceptionally (2006:3-4).

As we shall see, McNair's fresh perspective has some merit in attempting to understand the nature of 'alternative' publications and their place inside the greater media landscape.

Nearly half a century after their formulation, then, the unempirical and largely unqualified<sup>1</sup> assumptions of the Frankfurt school's cultural pessimism are only beginning to be evaluated and questioned. Although many questions of power relations and textual causality as they relate to the "total social fact" (Spitulnik 1993:293) of mass media in 'modern' societies can largely be traced to the alarmist tone of the Frankfurt School, the current theoretical environment is becoming considerably more diverse, in Anthropology as much as in other fields.

A recent wave of media ethnographers brings a bottom-up ethnographical methodology to media studies and is actively reconsidering former conceptions of media causality. This includes a reevaluation of the links between the social spaces of production and consumption, the various social actors in each and the textual objects themselves. Indeed, Spitulnik (1993:296) noted the increasing focus on "the interpretive practices of media audiences" as a counterweight to previously unbalanced attention to processes of hegemonic media production. While Spitulnik lamented in 1993 that there was as yet "no anthropology of media" (1993:293), nine years later Ginsburg, Larkin and

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno admits without dampening his fervor for the emptiness of the culture industry that, "thorough research has not, for the time being, produced an airtight case proving the regressive effects of particular products of the culture industry" (1974:18)

Abu-Lughod (2002) were able to identify a burgeoning subfield in Anthropology which was opening new doors in media studies with ethnographic approaches which were both multi-site and holistic.

Of particular interest to anthropologists was the growing significance of mass media within the societies they were studying, and the discipline's interest in mass media appropriately grew from a global perspective on transnational media flow and mass media's role in individual and community identity formation, especially the development and distribution of 'national' consciousness. Two important theorists in this regard were Benedict Anderson 1983 and Jurgen Habermas 1989, who enriched Anthropology's theoretical framework for comprehending informational flows and senses of identity as they relate to cultural formation and change (Ginsburg 2002:3-5).

In addition to more traditionally anthropologic studies of mass media in non-western societies, a small number of researchers have focused their efforts on fusing together the formerly separate phases of production, text and consumption into holistic studies of the social space of media forms. As Ginsberg and her colleagues helpfully point out, work by Dornfield 2002, Mandel 2002, Davila 2002 and Ganti 2002 highlights cultural interests in the sphere of production of television, advertising and film, respectively. More importantly, this research destabilizes the boundary between production and reception by outlining the intertwined roles of audience and producer, even if the former remains an abstraction. As Dornfield (2002) concluded in his study of a television documentary:

The forms of mediation that result in the production of a television program are socially and historically situated in relation to other public cultural forms. In this sense, television is not just a media form but a format through which complex acts of cultural mediation take place [...] (2002:261).

It is not difficult to think of other forms of mass media along similar lines. If the production of a television program entails such a detailed web of social relations, would we not expect to find a similar network at a newspaper or radio show?

Continuing a bit further into the “final boundary,” a very small number of researchers have sought to internally document and understand the “social worlds of media institutions where ‘dominant ideologies’ are produced” (Ginsburg et al 2002:17). These works tend to focus on the ‘culture’ of news production, primarily in television and broadcast journalism (Gitlin 1983, Pedelty 1995, Silverstone 1985 cf Ginsberg), but there are also some studies which directly address political economy in the newsroom, journalistic attitudes and internal conceptions of ‘news’ and ‘democracy’: Gibbs 2003, Min 2004, Harcup 2005 and Kunelius 2006.

In brief, anthropologic literature on mass media is increasing, particularly in the areas where it intersects with national identity and marginalized indigenous forms in non-western societies, with an emphasis on broadcast media such as television and film. To a lesser extent, print media has been examined in a similar way, although anthropologic studies of newspapers seem to be rare or nonexistent. To the author’s knowledge, ethnographic accounts of the production of alternative newspapers are extraordinarily limited. To date, Gibbs 2003 and Min 2004 appear to be the only studies which directly address the social sphere of production of printed news media with a more or less anthropological methodology.

As Spitulnik commented: “The crucial challenge in studying these alternative media forms [...] is to situate their production, use, interpretation and circulation within the large contexts of available media form” (1993:306). To that effect, scholarly

attention to “alternative” media in contemporary ‘modern’ societies is increasing, although there still remains no solid consensus on what constitutes an “alternative” or even “mainstream publication. If journalism is beginning to be addressed as a site of cultural and social production, it is still plain that the work of observing and evaluating contemporary mass media forms is in its early stages.

This study proceeds from this juncture, wherein an incredible diversification of media production and consumption practices is a given within an equally diverse and fragmented sphere of exchange. Following McNair’s (2006) critique of formerly dominant theoretical forms, this paper will eschew Habermasian and qualitative terminology wherever possible, situating its findings instead around the assumption that in a media environment as chaotic as McNair (2006) describes, nothing must be taken as given, and the only sure way to construct a stable or semi-accurate portrait is from the ground up.

#### Genesis of ‘Alt’

Discussing alternative forms of media immediately becomes a difficult exercise in semantics, as there is no formal consensus on the boundaries between what qualifies as “alternative” or “mainstream” (Harcup 2005:361). Nor is there any other reliable taxonomy which allows us to parse up and structurally comprehend contemporary news media. Instead we are presented with what Campbell (2004) has termed “broad-brush collective terms for a disparate body of practices” (qtd. in Harcup 2005:361). Before discussing attitudes at the weekly, therefore, it is necessary to attempt to disentangle some of the confusion and construct a suitable picture by which we can judge a publication to be a “popular alt weekly,” an infinitely more problematic term than it



would seem. How can we understand the lines between “alternative” and “mainstream” journalism? Similarly, what is “popular” journalism and how does it relate to either or both “alternative” and/or “mainstream” publications? Is it possible for an “alternative” publication to be “popular?”

As Henrik Ornebring and Anna Maria Jonsson (2004:285) have pointed out, Nancy Fraser’s (1992) critique of Habermas’ 1989 *Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere* underlines the fact that the media environment of complex societies is a variegated and complicated exchange between many different interested parties, especially in the case of minority or “subaltern” groups. Thus, while it may be true that, in a modern democracy, public sphere access and exchange is essential, it may exist socially across many different modalities and communities, both imaginary and concrete.

Although a discussion of the evolution of the public sphere entails many salient issues, the topic is far too dense to approach in this section. Rather, over the course of their fascinating appraisal of tabloid newspapers as the “journalistic *other*” (2004:284), Ornebring and Jonsson arrive at a concise, if ad hoc, distinction between the “mainstream mediated public sphere consisting perhaps of the television and radio news and commentary shows and the daily newspapers that have the largest audience and/or are generally considered most important [...]” and “one or several alternative public spheres, where different people debate different issues in different ways” (2004:285), taken to mean “criticism and questioning of the political, economic and cultural elites and the societal status quo [...]” (2004:287). While one is immediately tempted to reject this explanation as circular logic, since ‘alternative’ can only be negatively defined as that

which is 'not mainstream,' viewing this separation as a social dynamic rather than a structural fact makes some sense.

For Ornebring and Jonsson (2004), this distinction is a set of binary oppositions, with morally charged markers delimited by the elite and established faction, which works in tandem to constitute an opposing dynamic between two social groups. Their example comes from the 19<sup>th</sup> century rise of 'popular' tabloid newspapers in England and in the U.S., which often garnered significant criticism from established broadsheets, which accused the papers of foisting all manner of sensationalized pap on an unsuspecting public. However, Ornebring and Jonsson find that this criticism is often unfounded, more the result of an elite group protecting its own interests:

The journalistic *other* of tabloid journalism has appeared throughout the history of journalism, and [...] elements and aspects of journalism defined as "bad" in its own time in many cases did a better job (or at least a good a job) in serving the public good than "respectable" journalism (2004:284).

As a result, in place of a qualitative, binary description of media forms which relies on classifying the nature of the texts produced, Ornebring and Jonsson usefully propose evaluating publications based on the social motivations of the actors involved. They classify the characteristics of an alternative sphere into four types: spatial ("takes place somewhere else"), social ("other participants than those normally dominating media discourse"), topical ("other issues than those commonly debated in the mainstream") and modal ("other ways" or forms of debating and discussing common issues) (2004:286). All of these categories rely on a conscious social opposition in relation to a fixed, possibly abstracted, other, and we can see that much of what might constitute an 'alternative' publication would be no more than a self-definition as such. Such an inclusive definition immediately obscures any view of the mass media that

assumes production can be broken down into two opposing halves, one mainstream and one alternative.

While Chris Atton's (1999b) study of alternative media accepted the idea that it is possible for the alternative press to be conceived of in Habermasian terms as an "alternative public sphere," (1999b:54) where publications, as Tony Harcup (2005:361) observes, "frequently define themselves as existing in opposition to mainstream media" in order to "serve publics who in many cases are alienated from mainstream media," recent work has destabilized this boundary. Harcup (2005) has identified many 'mainstream' journalists with a background in the 'alternative' press and is skeptical about any sharp boundaries which might cast the alternative/mainstream question in what Rodriguez (2001) has referred to as "rigid categories of power and binary conceptions of domination and subordination" (qtd. in Harcup 2005: 370).

Harcup (2005) ultimately concludes that there is some possible "crossover of ideas, content, style, and, not least, people between what may be termed the alternative and what may be termed the mainstream [...]." Rather, Harcup indicates the "existence of what might be termed a continuum, with people, ideas and practices moving along this continuum, in both directions" (2005:370). If indeed the fixed boundaries between 'alternative' and 'mainstream' publications are breaking down, as Harcup's work indicates, ordering the media landscape according to Ornebring and Jonsson's (2004) criteria becomes extremely difficult, since the social actors at alternative publications, which should be separated and oppositional, are in some cases interchangeable.

This is as much true for distinctions between 'kinds' of news as it is for the people and organizations which produce them. In his empirical evaluation of tabloid broadcast

journalism and its effects on the political knowledge of recipients, Matthew Baum (2002) grapples with a similar ambiguity produced by the multiple definition of 'soft' news as a "residual category for all news that is not 'hard,'" "a particular vocabulary," or a "set of story characteristics" (2002:92). Ultimately, Baum accepts an "imprecise" inventory of characteristics to delineate 'soft' news from 'hard' news, but remarks that the "difference between soft and hard news is one of degree rather than kind" (2002:92). If there is little or no essential difference between 'kinds' of news, then, the social and cultural factors which impact news production and reception become ever more relevant.

We should recall at this point the principal complaint articulated by the Frankfurt School pessimists, that media production is an ordered apparatus which "intentionally integrates its consumers from above" while it simultaneously "forces together the spheres of high and low art, separated for thousands of years" (Adorno 1974:12). This media criticism, based as it is on black and white judgments of quality and an indemonstrable but assumed decline, however, quickly shows itself to be problematic in the face of direct observations. If we accept Harcup's (2005) claims that the boundary between 'alternative' and 'mainstream' publications is at best porous, and evidence from Baum's (2002) content-based analysis that there is a similar ambiguity between 'soft' and 'hard' news content, it becomes obvious that we must re-examine the framework we employ to describe the cultural and social products of journalism.

Further complicating matters is a significant overlap between so called 'popular' media and what can be considered 'alternative.' From the outset one would assume that a 'popular' form of media would be more aligned with the 'mainstream,' but this is not necessarily the case. Citing Raymond Williams 1976, Martin Conboy (2007) remarks

that there are three “areas of conflict” which obscure the definition of ‘popular’ cultural products. The term can be seen:

first, politically as denoting culture created from the point of view of the people rather than those seeking power over them; second, it can be seen as inferior to the quality of elite or high cultural products and practices; third, it can mean well-liked by many people (2007:1-2).

As Conboy (2007) notes, Colin Sparks (2000) synthesized this description into the “political, the aesthetic and the quantitative aspects of the popular” (Conboy 2007:2).

Returning to the four part typology enumerated by Ornebring and Jonsson (2004) above, we can see some interesting parallels. The spatial, social, topical and modal features of the “alternative” can be un-problematically absorbed by the first two elements proposed by Sparks (2000), or vice-versa. Politically, actors set themselves apart in “alternative” spaces with “alternative” actors while aesthetically choosing to cover “alternative” subjects in “alternative” modalities. What is left is the quantitative dimension of how many people comprise the actual or imagined readership, which, when compared to the depth of the other categories is more a superficial marker of obscurity than otherness. The number of readers, after all, is a thin criterion by which to separate ‘popular’ publications from ‘alternative’ ones.

Additionally, while at first glance the “popular” journalism of the tabloids would seem to be the antithesis of the anti-mainstream “alternative” press, both self-define via a process of differentiation from a fixed other. In the case of “popular” publications, it is their “elite” counterparts which produce the tension between, in Conboy’s terms, “quality and tabloid,” (2007:1). In the case of “alternative” publications, as we have already seen, their ‘alternative-ness’ is constructed largely in their positioning of themselves in opposition to what is perceived to be ‘mainstream.’

Hence, to say that a publication is at once “alternative” and “popular” is somewhat redundant, as “alternative” seems to overlap all the implied aspects of “popular,” save for the quantifiable numbers of readership, and there is no reason to think that the inverse might not also be true. That is, in the most abstract terms possible, ‘alternative’ can easily imply ‘popular’ and vice-versa. In this case, the only difference of note would appear to be the number of readers or the breadth of circulation. For all intents and purposes, then, this author considers the terms largely interchangeable.

Considering the lack of any stable definition of “alternative” or “popular” based on structural or qualitative features of content, the social conditions of production become the primary dimension of analysis. Despite the fact that actors producing ‘alternative’ media might not be entirely distinct from those who produce ‘mainstream’ forms of media, conditions of production could still differ significantly, regardless of the actors. The question therefore becomes: who is producing what and why?

Atton (1999b) concisely distills this socio-political basis of ‘alternative.’ Building on Michael Traber’s (1985) assertion that ‘alternative’ news was necessarily limited to “[...] alternative social actors [such as] the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized and indeed the ordinary manual labourer, woman, youth and child as the main subjects of [their] news” (qtd. in Atton 1999b: 52), Atton asserts:

Through Traber [...] we can argue that collective methods of organization and alternative forms of distribution are far from mere ideological fixities; instead they spring naturally from the nature of the alternative media conceived as methods of achieving social and political action, rather than merely information resources that have no more than the ‘bottom line’ as their main concern (1999b:73).

Atton goes so far as to produce the following “Typology of Radical and Alternative Media” which covers both qualitative aspects of content as well as social dimensions of production:

1. Content (politically radical, socially/culturally radical); news values
2. Form- Graphics, visual language; varieties of presentation and binding; aesthetics
3. Reprographic innovations/adaptations- use of mimeographs, IBM typesetting, offset litho, photocopiers
4. ‘Distributive use’ [...] - alternative sites for distribution, clandestine/invisible distribution networks, anti-copyright
5. Transformed social relations, roles and responsibilities- reader-writers, collective organization, de-professionalization of e.g., journalism, printing, publishing
6. Transformed communication processes- horizontal linkages, networks (1999a:27)

Two of Atton’s criteria are materially aesthetic (form and reprographics), while the rest refer to social modes of production. We can conclude, therefore, that any differences in news media which involve creating an ‘alternative’ publication rely much more heavily on the social and political motivations of their creators than anything else. Other categorical qualities have shown themselves to be difficult if not impossible to demonstrate, since kinds of news appear to exist on a stylistic and ideological continuum just as journalists themselves do. From this perspective, any argument which posits the ‘decline’ of ‘mainstream’ news or even rests on a stable taxonomy of news production based on content is at best confusing and at worst fundamentally incoherent. As well, it may even be true that the ‘alternative’ press, in any meaningful sense of the term, no longer exists in a relevant way.

As Conboy (2007) explains, “In our contemporary capitalist consumer culture, it is hard to envisage much in the way of journalism which is produced entirely by ordinary people and consumed by sufficient numbers of them to maintain regular production as

journalism given the institutional and financial demands of the genre” (2007:2). Most of journalism is thus professionalized and produced on a scale which renders it “popular” in at least one sense of the word.

Thus, Conboy (2007) suggests that “previously convenient distinctions between elite and popular culture often no longer apply.” Moreover, he provocatively opines that:

Under pressures from increased capitalization and technological innovation we have seen the beginnings of professional convergence within journalism and following this trend we are quite possibly seeing a corresponding popular convergence in which previously distinct aspects of popular journalism blend and mix with other genres the better to fulfill its purpose of making money and claiming influence by articulating the interests and the voice of the people (2007:2).

Based on this reading of contemporary print media, the creation of opposing categories of media production is a feature of certain social relations and conscious positioning rather than a valid evaluation based on a set of qualitative features. This synthetic manner of parsing up the media landscape is not necessarily a new phenomenon, nor an outgrowth of the increasingly fragmented and large pool of contemporary production, however, as a historical view of the evolution of journalism will indicate. On the contrary, it appears to be a key indicator of the nature of the meta-discourse surrounding journalistic production and further motivation to investigate first hand the social conditions at the site of production itself. If no journalistic practices can properly be divided into corresponding “alternative” and “mainstream” spheres of production, and, as Stuart Allan (1999) has claimed, that all journalism is necessarily ‘popular,’ then it is not a great leap in logic to say, as Peter Dahlgren (1992) has, that journalism has much in common with the similarly difficult to classify cultural



productions of art, literature and language and should be treated as such (Conboy 2007:3).

#### Alt Weeklies in Historical Perspective

As Ornebring and Jonsson (2004), as well as Conboy (2007), illustrate, the socially driven categories of 'high' and 'low' journalism as much as 'soft' and 'hard' news have a historical precedent, and are better understood as historical and political constructions than useful generic markers. Conboy (2007) appropriately observes that "historical perspective also demonstrates that journalism has always been part of a general process of making information accessible to people outside the narrow confines of power-elites and gossip-mongers" (2007:1).

Indeed, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one finds ready examples of this dynamic in the newly invented "tabloid" papers in England as well as the "penny press" of the United States. Tabloid journalism appeared as the brain child of Alfred Harmsworth in late 19<sup>th</sup> century England, mainly as a design innovation, since 'tabloid' in its most literal sense, refers only to the size of the paper. The first "tabloid" to appear by that name was Harmsworth's *Daily Mail* (1896) as part of a broad effort to make papers with "mass market appeal" with a product that was "easier to handle and read on the bus, tram and other forms of public transport" (Ornebring and Jonsson 2004:287)

Before this approach to journalism was dubbed "tabloid," however, "popular journalism" appeared in the US as early as 1830, with Benjamin Day's *New York Sun* (1833) as an example of a cheap newspaper which catered to "a newly literate public that did not have much in common with the newspaper public of a mere ten years earlier." The result was a paper which encouraged a different topical focus and tone, engendering

along the way the birth of the “human interest” story, divorced as it was from an early overemphasis in journalism on political and economic issues of interest only to the “property class.” As these papers began to achieve commercial success, however, existing broadsheets criticized the new publications on charges of sensationalism, as they printed “scandalous tales of sin, the immoral antics of the upper class, and humorous tales of mishaps” in addition to crime and police stories (Ornebring and Jonsson 2004:288).

Ornebring and Jonsson contend therefore, that the characterizations of tabloids as journalistically unsound are the result of an economic rivalry between the newcomers and established, elite interests. Despite the persistence of “binary oppositions, where emotional is bad and rational-intellectual is good, sensation is contrasted with contextualisation and tabloid journalism is charged with meeting complexity with dumbing down,” Ornebring and Jonsson argue that tabloid journalism could constitute an “alternative public sphere” (2004:284), which arose in the face of the “failure of other societal institutions [...] to address adequately issues of vital concern to many members of the public.” Because they increase the spectrum of news coverage and its perceived audience, then, “tabloid forms may provide new opportunities for representation and recognition for groups outside the mainstream” (2004:293).

Although not an unbroken lineage, the early history of popular journalism is paralleled in many important ways by the rise of a wave of radical and underground publications during the mid to late 1960s. These papers, for their part, represented another frenzied generation of publications produced to suit an audience which was not being adequately served. From the first issue of the *Los Angeles Free Press* in 1964 and of the *Berkeley Barb* in 1965, David Armstrong (1981) notes that by 1966, there were as

many as 400 underground newspapers, serving a readership of several million that was “overwhelmingly young, [...] white and middle class” (1981:32). These papers produced what Armstrong terms an “eclectic” mix of topics such that any broad definition would be difficult, but by and large the underground newspapers of the 1960s wrote about liberal political and social topics with an edgier, more aggressive tone which resonated with a large segment of the population (1981:45).

As time passed, however, the increasing popularity and profitability of these publications resulted in significant aesthetic and production changes. To make money, many papers relied on pornographic ads that no other paper would print, along with a smattering of music advertisements from major record labels. However, as the Vietnam War ended, and audiences began to fragment politically, underground papers lost advertising and revenue to newer publications which were politically neutral, but kept the edgy “youth” style of the early underground press (Armstrong 1981:180-84).

Armstrong cites the rise of the *Rolling Stone* as a specific example, but more generally laments that “underground media activists had underestimated the adaptability of mainstream culture” and that the “commercialization that proceeded apace in the late sixties was the complementary opposite of the political suppression of the same era” (179). As a result, more mellow, commercial ‘alternative’ publications emerged to serve the same readers, the “Woodstock Generation a decade later, looking for a condominium rather than a tab of LSD, the 18 to 37 year olds coveted by advertisers” (1981:267). This involved the development of a “core of experienced professionals” who worked to change the confrontational position of the underground papers urging for “revolution”

into the “message that working models of reality substantially different from mainstream culture already existed” (1981:182-3).

Emphasizing this distance, Harcup (1998, 2006) insists on the “demise of the local alternative press,” at least in England. Harcup here uses ‘alternative local press’ to refer to “local newspapers [...] which were independently and usually cooperatively owned; geographically based; and defined themselves as providing ‘ordinary people’ with an alternative to the mainstream media” (1998:106). Leeds Other Paper was such a publication, and while it offered a locally produced newspaper which focused on the ‘ordinary’ citizen, and consistently, in Harcup’s words, “demonstrated that there was more than one way of looking at the world,” “contested the accepted notions of common sense” and “illustrated how news and views relied on social construction as much as the reporting of any objective truth” (1998:113). Eventually, however, LOP was unable to maintain its existence:

[...] despite its journalistic achievements, and its development of a comprehensive arts listings guide, sales of LOP rearily topped the 2500 mark [...] In the quest for a younger, more postmodern readership, it gradually became more of a what’s on guide with ‘lifestyle’ features and fewer hard news stories. Dwindling sales and mounting debts, combined with increasing staff turnover and burnout, a declining number of contributors and chronic under-capitalisation, resulted in the paper publishing its final issue on 20 January 1994 (1998:114).

Broadly, underground papers had succeeded in expanding the news spectrum, as Jean-Francois Bizot wryly comments that the major papers were now “publishing scoops such as Watergate that had formerly been the bread and butter of the UPS [underground press syndicate].” (2006: 227) But, as Armstrong has demonstrated above, many underground newspapers failed to remain profitable enough to survive. As a result, Bizot laments that “Thirty years later, the underground press has virtually disappeared” (2006:

227). However, certain papers, such as the Rolling Stone as well as the Village Voice, succeeding in transitioning from underground publications into profitable organizations, and furthermore tended to market themselves to the same readership. Thus, a broad trend among underground or alternative newspapers was both increasing commoditization of content (more ads and associated entertainment guides and features) along with a reinforcement of the underground aesthetic which allowed them to reach the same young, white, affluent and urban readers who could now be utilized, profitably, as a saleable ad demographic.

A similar example can be found in the specific lineage of PW. PW, before 1995, was the Welcomat, an eccentric local paper that was described by a former editor as “basically one gigantic opinion page.” The Welcomat was established in 1971 and survived, profitably, through the years with a small, if steady, circulation. As Jim Knipfel, a former columnist, reminisced:

[we] transformed the *Welcomat* into exactly what we thought it should be [...] we brought in writers and cartoonists we liked, we ran stories we liked. The office walls became covered with insane posterage [sic], the ceiling a home to a hundred or more species of dangling plastic animal. The air in that room filled with music few people could tolerate (Knipfel 2006:np).

Dan Rottenberg, editor at the Welcomat from 1981 to 1993, describes the paper as “a unique, revolutionary experiment in pushing the boundaries of free speech” whose “willingness to speak truth to power generated a loyal audience that translated into ad lineage and revenues three or four times the size of its closest competitor, the Philadelphia City Paper” (New York 2006: np). However, in 1992, the owner of the paper, Susan Seiderman, brought in a new publisher, Michael Cohen, who decided to revamp the paper into a new format. In a period which a current editor describes as “total chaos,” every

staff member save for two was fired, and in the spring of 1995 the paper was changed “overnight” into an alt weekly.

For some, including Knipfel, who will refer to Cohen only as “Baldy Fuckwad,” this transition was a form of betrayal. Knipfel describes acts of editorial sedition on the part of Cohen:

suddenly he was back there in the editorial office, making suggestions and sitting in on editorial meetings. It became evident that what we were doing wasn’t “commercial” enough for him, and he scheming to take steps to remedy that. [...] a whole new editorial staff was brought in, and the name of the paper was changed, and it became “commercial.” It also became just another one of those bland, predictable weekly “alternative” papers that you’ll find in every major American city, with the same stories, the same attitudes, the same comic strips (Knipfel 2006:np).

Rottenberg is similarly critical of Cohen, accusing him of turning the vibrant Welcomat into “a generic youth-oriented alternative weekly indistinguishable from the City Paper.” The current editor, however, responded directly to these criticisms by claiming that:

Cohen quadrupled the editorial staff and budget [...], transforming what had been a vanity paper run by sycophants into a vital alternative newspaper with a heart and soul that’s launched many writing careers (New York 2006:np).

While the details are admittedly muddy, the trend for the newspapers founded in the late sixties and early seventies as “underground” or “alternative” publications to undergo difficult transitions in order to retain their appeal to a changing and fragmenting readership was obviously widespread. Taking a specific example, figures 1.1-1.4 show a local example, the Distant Drummer, which was founded as an underground paper in Philadelphia in 1966. In the span of 13 years, however, the roughshod, DIY underground political newspaper had become noticeably more entertainment oriented. Interestingly, the listings, which Harcup noted that LOP undertook only as a last ditch effort to save the

paper, have been present in *The Drummer* since the very first issue. Today, one still finds an “8 Days” feature printed in *PW* which is remarkably similar to the ‘8 Days a Week’ of the *Drummer* (Fig. 1.5).

As Armstrong (1981) has pointed out, contemporary alternative publications can trace their origins back to both populist tabloid newspapers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as well as the ‘activist’ journalism of the underground newspapers of the 1960s and 70s (1981:276). While earlier underground and alternative papers may have tended to attack the established political power structure from a more ‘grassroots’ standpoint with writers and staff who were not necessarily formal journalists, as the above examples show, alternative publications began to professionalize and hone their commercial skills in order to increase revenue and survive financially. What seems to have been carried over is a certain aesthetic sensibility, closely linked to the inclusiveness and brash tone of 19<sup>th</sup> century tabloids as well as the same cheeky irreverence and colorful design of the 60s underground publications. Consequently, speaking aesthetically, *PW* is not so far removed from Philadelphia’s singular underground newspaper, the irregularly published *Defenestrator*, both of which can be traced back, in a limited way, to the underground proliferation in the late 1960s. As Figures 2.1 and 2.2 show, both are tabloids which rely on a striking artistic component to text layout and showcase features.

However, much in keeping with the criticisms of Knipfel and Rottenberg, Armstrong considers these publications “alternatives in the broadest sense” since the only ways they differ from the ‘mainstream’ daily newspapers are:

their relative ease of access for unknown or offbeat contributors; their use of the personal voice in writing; their willingness to do in-depth, magazine-style features about issues generally skimmed by daily newspapers and electronic media; their willingness to jab at the local power structure (1981:277).

Indeed, Armstrong accuses the alternative weeklies as being nothing more than “hybrids” of earlier publications which favor “pleasure rather than struggle; status rather than the erasure of privilege; enjoyment of the world as it is rather than visions of the world as it might be.” (1981:279) In more neutral terms, they utilize stylistic elements of the radical and underground press as an environment in which they can commercialize and profit from a demographic rather than mobilize a constituency. In fact, alt weeklies find such a willing pool of advertisers that they are mostly distributed free to readers.

Despite the misgivings of some, the alt weekly has succeeded in securing a large and profitable audience. According to the Project for Excellence in Journalism, the audience for urban alt weeklies peaked in 2001 at 7.79 million, but continues to hold steady at 7.64 million in 2005, up from around 2.5 million in 1989. Furthermore, as the survey data from PEJ shows, the audience for alt weeklies is already old, with a median age of 40.3 years. Contrary to what one might think from their “hip” style, alt weeklies are not necessarily niche publications, as PEJ reports that

The alternative weeklies are well-established papers, entrenched in many communities as more than simply tabloids for the young. As we have mentioned in previous years, weeklies are by no means outsider publications; their readers have an average income of over \$51,000 and more than 40% of them have college degrees. And the rising rate of those who are married with children in the house reinforces their broader appeal (2006:np).

As well, in 1978, alt weeklies banded together to form a trade organization, the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies (AAN), which now comprises 124 “non-daily free-circulation papers.” AAN also brings its members under a national advertising umbrella, courtesy of the Ruxton Media Group, which sells national ads in the network of alt weeklies (2007: np). Thus, while PW clearly reflects the aesthetic and topical



influences of the underground press, the paper has undergone a thorough process of commercialization which has stripped it of any grassroots political motivation. PW now has “something for everybody” because the paper is a capitalistic enterprise which caters to a saleable advertising demographic.

To conclude, examining the history of any publication, much less an entire genre with an uncertain definition and fluid boundaries, is fraught with gaps of information and often necessitates making certain leaps. While it was not the intention of this section to be in any sense a definitive, or even complete, history of alternative publications nor PW, I believe it does show that current media forms have very specific evolutionary links, and that certain themes have remained in the public discourse surrounding journalistic production for nearly two hundred years. The questions posed even then are still relevant, as we are faced with media forms that have moved past socially motivated origins as sites of resistance and otherness and into a new paradigm of commercialization. The next section, which details my ethnographic observations, seeks to understand the current productive environment at PW by questioning its sense of institutional identity.

#### Ethnographic Perspectives at the Weekly

For the staff of PW, the publication is distinct from others in the media environment, especially from the ‘mainstream’ daily newspapers such as the Inquirer and the Daily News. This is well reflected in their comments regarding the nature of their publication, as well as some characteristics of the workplace and the editorial hierarchy. However, much as we would expect from the above discussion, a sense of being radically different is no longer salient for defining the weekly in a world where qualitative

distinctions are collapsing, and market dictates are shaping all publications into capitalistic enterprises dependent on the bottom line. This section relates to the qualities of 'altness' at the weekly both from the responses of the staff to my questions as well as my own observations.

For convenience, I have divided them into sections which correspond to the three broad fields defined by Sparks (2000), though this is no way an attempt to impose an evaluative framework. Rather, these admittedly vague tags are entry points by which we may describe an otherwise fluid and illegible set of deeply enmeshed characteristics. It should also be noted that my analysis is structured very differently from Patricia Gibbs' (2003), and while I will use her work to put my own in perspective, our observations and subjects differ in numerous and important ways, which I will discuss in more detail at the end of this section.

## Political

### People and Hierarchy

In terms of the demographics of its staff, PW does not necessarily fall outside of the 'mainstream.' The staff of PW includes several people with diverse backgrounds, but it certainly does not reach parity on all counts. Of twelve editors and staff writers, six are women, but only one is African American in a city that is approximately 43 percent African American. However, even this is seen as a positive development, as one editor noted that alt weeklies "have a historical tendency to be young and white" and that a prominent column by an African American writer would not have been found in the genre only five or ten years ago. Most of the other editors and writers, however, are relatively young and mostly white.

In the office, despite the relative racial, economic and educational homogeneity of the editorial staff<sup>2</sup>, PW embraces a sense of newsroom democracy that, at least on the surface, is non-hierarchical. According to the Editor in Chief, he pays “little or no attention to established writers” on staff. Instead, he claimed to rely on the “individual character” of each writer to search out the topics that interested them and ensure that the paper remained “edgy” and up to date.

True to form, each large section of the paper is the purview of a single, quasi independent editor. ‘Hard’ news is contained in the “front of the book” in section called “This Just In” and is controlled by the Managing Editor, who works with staff writers, freelancers and interns to shape the section each week. Although the editor can have an active role in selecting or soliciting content, staff writers, interns or freelancers usually submit stories in the form of a short ‘pitch,’ either via email or in person. This same process is used by the other editors who are in charge of Arts and Entertainment (A&E, or the “back of the book”), Film, Food, Music, Listings and the two or so blogs which are written more or less independently by staff members. Once the editor has chosen the pieces for publication, the contents for the coming week are presented to the remainder of the editorial staff in a weekly meeting. Larger projects are often discussed many weeks ahead of time, but in all my observations, I did not see a single heated criticism or rejection of a piece once it had been chosen by its corresponding editor. It should also be noted, however, that most of the senior editors and writers have personal relationships which allow them to discuss content decisions outside of the staff meeting forum. As

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<sup>2</sup> Gibbs (2003:593) notes a similar situation at her site of study, with an alt weekly staff which is “not reflective of the ethnic makeup of the larger population of the state [Hawaii] [...]” and furthermore that “The staff is also overwhelmingly young, with most in their 20s and 30s and fewer, more veteran workers, in their mid 40s or 50s. Roughly 50 percent of the workers are female and 50 percent are male.”

such, it is a possibility that an informal hierarchy of personal relations has a significant influence on content decisions. All the same, these observations are strong indications of a compartmentalized and diffuse sense of authority.

A conspicuous example of internal editorial independence is a “back of the book” editor who often writes about topics and publishes pieces which other staff members are not enthusiastic about. Even the Editor in Chief admitted that he had difficulty “relating” to this particular editor’s tastes, and other staff members reacted ambivalently when presented with his ideas. During the weekly staff meetings, the back of the book editor oftentimes employed a dry, ribald wit which did not always solicit laughs from his front of the book colleagues<sup>3</sup> and often led to desultory conversations about various pop-culture icons. While it is difficult to demonstrate this separation effectively, Figures 3.1-3.4 contains a juxtaposition of ‘line-ups’ for the ‘front of the book’ and the ‘back of the book’ for a given week. Examining them side by side, we can see a significant aesthetic and topical contrast, from which it is not difficult to infer that more than one editorial tone prevails at the weekly.

Another editor, known for his slapstick and unfailingly vulgar columns (exemplified in Figure 4) had no qualms about his literary tone and its place: “I doubt I’d be tolerated for more than five minutes at the Inquirer.” This same writer/editor articulated, in the same speech, both that “capitalism is a bad thing,” and that criticism of the popular media, such as tabloid newspapers, was most often the result of “effete craft snobbery.”

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<sup>3</sup> For example, at a staff meeting the Music Editor encouraged everybody to go see Bobby Conn because “there’s a good chance he’ll take his penis out.” There then followed one of the most lively discussions of the meeting, where the Music Editor debated the rest of the room about the quality of VHI’s series “White Rapper.” He was alone in his praise of the show.

By and large, while it is a stretch to say that the staff of PW is entirely representative of its wider community, it is nothing if not inclusive and open to a different range of political ideas from its staff which are not necessarily represented strongly elsewhere. However, as we shall see from the concrete sense of the readership in the minds of the editors as well as their thoughts on the distinctness of the publication, PW occupies a generally well-defined place in the media landscape.

#### Readership in the Minds of the Editors

One of the few things universally agreed upon at the weekly was its specific demographic. For a senior staff writer, the paper was a “niche publication” for “younger, more affluent and educated” readers. While he acknowledged that PW skewed a little older than other alt weeklies, for him, the primary audience was “college aged kids up to young adults in their early thirties.” For another editor the response was “hip, young and white,” while an intern dubbed the paper the “alternative, left-leaning voice of the young urban population.” Most of the salient characteristics of the paper’s readers (according to the editorial staff) fell somewhere into this vague realm of “young, urban and hip.”

However, this characterization seems to be more a result of well-published media research than of first hand observations, and many editors expressed reservations about its utility. One editor noted that the advertising staff talked a lot about the specific demographics of the target audience, and mused that if it were up to them, the whole of the paper’s content would be tailored to fit that demographic. To the editor, this would only succeed at making the weekly “stilted” and “fake.” While the editor didn’t challenge the correctness of the demographic information, since he was sure “they spend a lot of time and money on it,” he didn’t think that the demographic was really all that “relevant”

to producing quality journalism. Rather, the editor expressed confidence in the paper's strategy, already articulated by a senior editor above and somewhat illustrated by the degree of internal editorial independence, to trust each individual writer's interests to follow the broader interests of the readership at large.

Indeed, there were discrepancies between the widely circulated demographics used to sell ads and editorial opinion. The two most senior editors interviewed both agreed that the paper had "matured" in the 13 years they had been at the helm, and to a certain extent had become more "mainstream," with "something for everybody." Despite this ambiguity, many media guides, such as the Ruxton Media Group, which sells national ads in many alt weeklies across the country, describe PW's readers as "an extremely loyal audience of young, educated and active readers who are difficult to target using conventional media." On the other hand, RMG puts total readership at 336,000 (Ruxton 2007: np).

Regardless of the wide recognition of the existence of this homogenous set of "young, urban and hip" readers, opinion among the editorial staff was largely hostile towards media research. As noted in the opening anecdote, some staff at the paper expressed serious doubts about the methodological validity of the market research, a sentiment which was echoed by another editor, who said that the system was "total bullshit" since it only used landline telephone surveys that probably excluded younger readers, many of whom may only have cellular phones. Without skipping a beat, the same editor asserted that "everybody hates Media Audit." She recounted a hypothetical example based on several actual experiences in which the media research company would tell the editorial staff that pickup rates were dropping due to a lack of interest on the part

of one audience segment, only to come back with the opposite in the next report. In her words:

‘You’re losing the females,’ they would say, and so we would add a female columnist or something only to have them come back the next year telling us that the male readership was dropping off.

Her frustration was echoed by many other staff members, one of whom during a staff meeting discussion of recent cover stories wondered aloud, “Do people really even care anymore?” The question, far from being merely a rhetorical expression of frustration emphasizes an underlying concern at the publication, more explicitly articulated by a senior staff writer as the general problem for all print media: “Everybody is trying to figure out the formula to reach readers effectively.”

This need to ‘reach’ readers was often discussed during staff meetings, and especially in reference to cover stories. A senior writer who wrote features very often contended that stories had to convey a strong sense of a “personality” or character which “makes it easier to follow, easier to get into.” He referred to the amount of reader mail he received for particular stories as a gauge, using his recent series of journalistic criticism as an example: “Nobody responded when we wrote about Knight-Ridder, but Brian [Tierney] is different [...] now people write in.” During staff meetings, he consistently conveyed the same attitude, encouraging a personalized tone for cover stories with a human dimension, citing narrative stories with “compelling characters” which would produce an “emotional bond” with the reader, even while other writers advocated a more thematic approach of “topics from a different angle.”

Interestingly, perceived reader interest was often used as a primary gauge of quality for material. This interest was measured via web hits for the online version as

well as through the volume of mail (emails) to the editor. For example, when a new feature appeared, called “Angry Grammarian,” a key topic of discussion in the staff meeting was the fact that the column had generated more letters than all the other stories put together. Similarly, returning to the above argument over the style of successful cover stories, the senior staff writer explicitly referred to the fact that an article based on a “compelling character” was among the top five most accessed stories on the website. Even more fascinating was the Editor in Chief’s suggestion that since reader pickup rates determined the publication’s salability to advertisers, alt weeklies were indirectly forced to “stay edgy or go out of business,” a situation which he dubbed “capitalism in the raw.”

Generally, two themes emerged over the course of discussing readership demographics with the editorial staff. First and foremost, nobody accepted the Media Audit data without, at best, a healthy dose of skepticism. Editors were unequivocally frustrated both with the quality of the data and its applications to content to boost pickup rates. Secondly, despite these widespread doubts, editors and writers nonetheless had a conception of who was reading the paper, and based content related decisions on whether or not they thought a certain kind of story would increase pickup rates. Therefore, it is fair to say that even though the editorial staff mistrusted the data they received, they still expressed an interest in responding to the readership with content that ‘they’ would find interesting. This belief was strong enough in some cases to encourage a Darwinian analogy in which readership demand determined the survival of the ‘hippest’ publication most in touch with the need and interests of its intended demographic.

### Binary Antagonisms



PW is largely structured according to two sets of extremely distinct divisions. Broadly, the Editorial staff exists somewhat at odds with “the other side” of the advertising staff, which, interestingly enough, is also the source of a biannual softball rivalry. While the entire staff of the paper shares one contiguous workspace, a common reproduction area and two narrow hallways separate the “Eds” from the “Addies.”

As an editor explains it, however, this basic division is essential, and this “literal and figurative wall” should exist in “any newspaper that’s worth its weight in salt.” Four years ago, before PW moved to its current location, the administration, advertising and editorial sections were all on different floors and “we liked it that way,” reminisced one editor. The editor recalled that many people were initially apprehensive about sharing floor space with the advertising section, worrying that the ad people would be “getting all up in our business.” Speaking bluntly, he remarked that “we don’t want them to know what we’re doing.” He gave two main reasons. First, they could leak information to clients in inappropriate ways, which would undermine the paper’s credibility. In the editor’s terms, a newspaper who sold ads directly based on content was not “journalistically sound.” Secondly, since any article can be “changed or pulled at the last minute” he questioned the intelligence of such a “hypothetical” strategy, meaning that even if a publication sold ads directly based on content, it would be difficult to tie ads to specific pieces since they could be changed right up until the last minute. Overall, he emphasized that you “never want even the appearance that the advertisers are affecting editorial content.”

Thus, the Editorial staff operated with an explicit sense of independence from the advertising staff, which, as noted previously, uses an expensive subcontractor to generate

extremely specific readership demographics which they can in turn present to buyers as the audience for their advertisement. All the editors, when asked about the relationship between the two sides of the floor, emphasized the importance of having an “independent” editorial staff, but there is nevertheless a significant amount of overlap between advertising and editorial content.

As we have seen, a distinct sense of who is reading the paper is an important component in the way the editors choose and evaluate stories. Inasmuch as they use this abstraction as a metric for quality, oftentimes editors referred to the advertising demographic as a force which shaped content in significant ways. As one editor said, matter-of-factly, “The guides are vehicles to sell ads” and so “they have to be a cheery, happy thing.” These guides are seasonal and/or thematic issues (eg. “Spring Guide” or “Restaurant Guide”) which focus on particular topics. However, this was not a widely held idea at the weekly, as the other editors seemed to think that the barrier between advertising and editorial was as strong as ever.

Even within the editorial section there are significant separations between those who work on the “hard news” oriented ‘front of the book’ and those who work on the A&E ‘back of the book’ section. Recalling the personal idiosyncrasies of the previously mentioned back of the book editor, the split between news and entertainment produces a similar kind of tension.

A senior staff writer remarked that in the last five to seven years, PW had gone from “grudgingly” supporting A&E to putting more effort into that section over all others. He noted that there were “more voices” and more “feedback” for the A&E section than for the front of the book. However, for the senior staff writer, this was

primarily a temporary staffing problem that resulted from the recent reduction of the permanent writing staff from four to two. "It's in the nature of alt weeklies. We'll never get the funding for six or eight writers to cover for one another." The result, according to the staff writer, was "blips," or inconsistencies, in news coverage. The turnover of staff writers was also not overly disturbing for him because the paper tends to hire writers "sporadically" to "fill certain niches." He therefore viewed the problem as temporary and cyclical, saying that although there were "wobbly" periods, eventually "we get our shit together."

The difficulty of producing quality, traditional journalism also came up with another editor, who remarked that the primary reasons readers picked up alt weeklies was for their "calendars, movie reviews and show previews." Certainly, it was generally accepted in staff meetings that the largest web hits were generated by these types of articles. Rather than viewing the difficulty of producing traditional 'hard' news as a specific feature of staffing difficulties, however, the editor saw profound changes happening in the way news was consumed that made it next to impossible to present relevant issues in a weekly format. In a newly "compressed, online news cycle," more news was breaking more quickly online, while print publications, and more specifically large metropolitan daily broadsheets, began to rely more heavily on stories culled from wire services. While weekly publications like PW would formerly do a more "in depth analysis" of the "day to day breaking news" in the dailies, the editor lamented the fact that now "by the time PW does a cover story that was significant in the last issue, the news cycle has already moved on." The Editor in Chief articulated yet another

perspective, asserting that readers picked up the paper primarily for its “compelling cover stories” and then were drawn to the entertainment features and listings.

### Aesthetic

PW makes an obvious effort to distinguish itself from other publications in the genre, and ‘mainstream’ publications in particular. Referring to earlier radical publications, one editor made an explicit distinction between the “crusty old hippies” of established alt weeklies and the new, “scrappy” weeklies that tended to “push the envelope more.” For example, this editor had a long background with alternative publications and before coming to PW had worked at one of these “scrappy” publications in Pittsburgh. For her, PW had matured as a paper, and could no longer do stories that risked challenging the readership and/or eliminating the abstract advertising demographic which is so prominent in the minds of the editors. To take a specific example, she reminisced about a Valentines Day issue which featured nothing but death themed content such as a macabre interview with an undertaker. She recognized, regretfully, that while it was no longer possible, economically, to do things that were “experimental,” she realistically remarked that PW still existed, while the ‘experimental’ paper had long since gone under.

At several different times, editors and interns alike proposed that PW occupied an important liberal-leaning niche. Early on in our interview, a senior editor cited the importance of the paper in representing the non-entitled. As a general rule, he proposed, “when in doubt, side with the poor,” something that for him was part of the “alt weekly tradition.” Other members of the ed staff had similar thoughts, with a senior writer acknowledging the importance of “preaching from the left.”

This perspective is blatant within the pages of each and every issue of PW, and only a few examples need be noted. Since the beginning of the second Iraq War, the paper has published a list of civilian and American military casualties that is updated every week. Politically, the paper has unequivocally endorsed Democratic candidates (such as Senator Bob Casey) while vigorously opposing Republican candidates (such as Rick Santorum). Another popular target which has appeared as the subject of a cover story was ultra conservative Philadelphia commentator Michael Smerconish, who has also been depicted satirically with filled in thought bubbles. As well, a staff writer has written extensively over the past year about escalating gun violence in the city and its effect on local neighborhoods, culminating in a recent article in which she dubbed the city "Killadelphia."

Besides this political stance which is notably less neutral than might be expected from a 'mainstream' broadsheet newspaper, PW covers topics which would not ordinarily find their way into large scale media outlets. Perhaps the best example is a recent cover story on transsexual African American fashion shows which happen to have a significant following in the Philadelphia area. As well, the paper's entertainment listings cover a range of underground, independent and local bands which might otherwise only be found via MySpace. Notable sex columnist (and vocal gay rights advocate) Dan Savage also finds his way into the pages, an addition that would likely not be well tolerated in the pages of a metropolitan daily.

A similar distinguishing characteristic of PW which sets it apart from others in the media landscape is its unflinching embrace of profanity and its refusal to censor its writers. While this language finds its way into news features less often, there is no word

that the paper will not print, nor does it stop its writers from making outlandish satirical statements. A good example, reproduced in Figure 5, is the vulgarity ridden “Black Like Me” columns in the A&E section, which, although they have generated a substantial amount of negative feedback from readers, continue to run.

This offbeat and permissive tone extends to the working environment as well, where on various days writers can be heard discussing issues, loudly over the walls of their cubicles, ranging from the coffee in the break room to local politics while the music editor plays various video and sound clips. Other days, baked goods and free items show up on a table which is recognized as community property. At the extreme end of the spectrum, one day saw a game of pickup kickball start between the Editor in Chief and another staff member in the narrow corridors leading to the Ad Staff’s space. Crossing over from one space to the other is to pass from an often noisy and chaotic space strewn with back issues, old copy, books, cds, a piñata, streamers and plastic lobsters left over from two separate birthday parties and pinned up cartoons to a quiet peninsula of “legitimate” office space.

Additionally, some of the greatest efforts to appear “alternative” manifest themselves in the decidedly festive and open work environment that PW tries to foster. Suits and ties are rarely, if ever, seen inside the editorial section, and everybody remains on a first name basis, regardless of position. However, despite the openness of the work environment, it is not clear that this sense of being apart from a typical business environment extends all the way across the Ed/Addie divide, nor does it necessarily guarantee that the produced text itself differs in any significant way from others which are produced in the city and target a specific demographic for a profit.

## Quantitative

PW is, by the standards of alternative weeklies, a large paper, with a weekly print run of roughly 101, 000 distributed via 2500 bright yellow boxes located in and around Philadelphia. This distribution, however, is anything but geographically homogenous. While detailed data on location was unavailable, a brief survey of boxes revealed an obvious lack of distribution points in the marginalized areas of the city, such as public housing complexes, compared to extremely wealthy enclaves such as the campus of the University of Pennsylvania as well as Main Line suburbs such as Wyndmoor. Even if the paper contains “something for everybody,” certain readers have to walk farther from their homes for a copy than others<sup>4</sup>.

While billed as an independent paper, PW is in fact owned by a corporation. Review Publishing, Inc. owns a number of weekly papers, including PW, The South Philadelphia Review and Atlantic City Weekly. However, there is no evidence whatsoever to indicate that the paper’s owner exerts much, if any, control over the paper’s content. He did not attend any weekly editor’s meetings during which such decisions were made, nor does he maintain an office in PW’s downtown space. Nevertheless, fears stoked by recent rumors about the paper’s possible sale to another large corporation reinforced the fact the editors are in control of only the words printed on the pages.

Philadelphia Weekly is a member of the Association of Alternative Weeklies, a national organization which provides a variety of services for its members, including

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<sup>4</sup> Armstrong (1981:294) uses the term “journalistic redlining” to describe a similar situation in which a free newspaper, the *Berkeley Monthly* is delivered door to door in “middle class and affluent neighborhoods.” Armstrong wryly notes that “Poor people in its circulation area are, in effect, too poor to receive this periodical.”

annual awards and, as Gibbs (2003:589), notes, serves as an important umbrella organization which helps alt weeklies consolidate their selling power in the advertising market. AAN describes its role thusly:

The Association of Alternative Newsweeklies (AAN) is the trade organization for the alternative newspaper business. AAN is a diverse group of 125 non-daily free-circulation papers that are distributed in all of the major metropolitan areas of North America. Each paper has a distinct, local identity that sets it apart from the mainstream press in its market.

Since its inception in 1978, AAN's primary mission has been to help its member papers flourish. The association strives for that ideal by focusing on the following activities:

1. Promoting quality journalism and editorial excellence among its members;
2. Facilitating access to information to enable member newspapers to raise their level of professional and business performance;
3. Supporting the marketing and advertising efforts of member newspapers;
4. Increasing awareness of the alternative newspaper business; and
5. Advocating the interests of the industry (AAN 2007: np)

Because these papers are free, however, they rely heavily on advertising. For example, in a single issue of PW, approximately 100 out of 166 pages were ads, and approximately 25 pages were entertainment listings. Although solid numbers were not available to the author, it was generally understood that the paper was doing well financially and had been turning a decent profit for some time.

While PW staff makes a concerted effort to separate Eds from Addies, we must still consider Armstrong's concern that "with advertisers footing all the bills, the temptation to devote space to airy promotional features that will please them and water down items that might offend them is enormous" (1981:294). Indeed, to what extent has the newly commercialized alt weekly format sacrificed a clear political voice for a place in the capitalist ecosystem?

#### Discussion



In her incisive study of the political economy of an alt weekly publication in Honolulu, Patricia Gibbs (2003) concludes:

In fact, the reality of the Weekly is that the 'alternative' label at best only thinly disguises its deep roots in capitalist modes of production. At worst, it is used to justify the hyper-exploitation of its workers in the pursuit of matching upscale readers with niche-market products (2003:603).

Gibbs saw in the alt weekly a small enterprise which made significant sacrifices (ie, cheap office space, meager salaries, outdated equipment, etc.) for what was for some a deeply held idealism, the belief that by working for the paper they were "creating progressive social change and doing so in a way that is not done elsewhere" (2003:592). The paper's strong profit motivation seems to challenge this ideal at least in the sense that it favors a capitalist system of profit-seeking over democratic redistribution.

While InCheol Min (2004) unsurprisingly commented on the presence and importance of a discrete readership in the minds of the editors of the alternative political publication he studied, he added that the abstracted audience was best described as a "constituency," after Eliasoph's (1997) conception: "mobilized, active and needing information to act on an issue that concerns them" (Min 2004:450). Min concludes that the editors of the paper "view their readers as active in their communities: participating in political meetings and interested in public issues. Consequently, the Observer tries to include different voices in society, dealing with labor issues, social movements in other states and national politics, for example" (2004:456). In short, the paper facilitates the activism of a liberal minority in conservative Texas.

PW is, by comparison with both these points, distinct as a large, profitable paper that, while it preserves a certain aesthetic that sets it apart from a broadsheet newspapers,

exists by and large to cater to a demographic which it will in turn sell to an advertising market in order to turn a profit. At this point, it is fair to say that PW does not fulfill more than two of the requirements in Atton's (1999a) "Typology of Radical and Alternative Media:"

1. Content (politically radical, socially/culturally radical); news values
2. Form- Graphics, visual language; varieties of presentation and binding; aesthetics
3. Reprographic innovations/adaptations- use of mimeographs, IBM typesetting, offset litho, photocopiers
4. 'Distributive use' [...] - alternative sites for distribution, clandestine/invisible distribution networks, anti-copyright
5. Transformed social relations, roles and responsibilities- reader-writers, collective organization, de-professionalization of e.g., journalism, printing, publishing
6. Transformed communication processes- horizontal linkages, networks (1999a:27).

If it is accurate to say that Atton (1999a) begins at the surface and works his way down, then we have arrived at the crux of the argument against the alt weekly format: that they only superficially embody (or imitate) previous forms of socially radical or progressive publications which 'actually did something.' True, PW publishes stories which are in some sense outside of the 'mainstream' coverage of large daily newspapers and succeeds in presenting itself as an aesthetically edgy, uniquely manufactured publication. Although much of this aesthetic sensibility can be traced back to the DIY ethic of earlier papers, the comparison cannot proceed any further. PW is produced professionally by experienced staffers, distributed to targeted, educated readers with a large disposable income and operates in order to turn a profit. While it espouses liberal politics, it is unlikely that the paper itself engenders much political or social activism,<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The link between mass media and social activism is not as yet clearly defined. For discussion, see Atton (1999a).

and there is a strong indication that the traditional journalism it prints is of secondary importance to its entertainment component.

Just as Gibbs (2003) questioned the motives of the *Honolulu Weekly*, Conboy (2007) addresses the issue directly by questioning if these “forms of popular journalism [are] simply integrating consumers into patterns of capitalist consumption or do they offer real possibilities of involvement and reflection upon the contemporary?” (2007:3). While Atton (1999a) proposes that the “alternative public sphere is an appropriate conceptual foundation from which to understand the production and reception of autonomously developed accounts of experience, critiques, information and knowledge” (1999a:156), the closer we examine the production apparatus of this particular alt weekly as well as its incorporation of a readership defined in terms of an advertising market, the more we must admit the difficulty of seeing more than a superficial representation of the ‘alternative,’ in its most stable sense, that of a production which establishes its alterity on multiple levels in opposition to a socially constructed other.

Not identifying an alternative weekly as a site of “counter hegemony” has some serious import. Without noting otherwise, it is all too easy to take this as a piece of supportive evidence for an older theoretical paradigm. For, although Ornebring and Jonsson (2004) argue effectively for the social value of the popular press of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Louw (2001) insists that these same publications were the beginning of the “industrialization of western meaning making” and the “institutionalizing of intellectuals [...] within organizations where the organizing principles were hierarchical and mechanistic, and where factories geared towards mass production were the model” (2001:16-17).

As a result of these changes, the “communicator” is able to effectively control the content that the passive “recipient” consumes with minimal or a complete lack of feedback (2001:17). Effectively, “the mass media simultaneously increases the reach of professional communicators, while dramatically narrowing the role of recipients, turning recipients into passive receivers of meanings made by others” (2001:18). Because these media are capitalistic and therefore dependent on attracting a large saleable audience, they become “organized around the lowest common denominator of the middle class with disposable income” (2001:49).

It is not possible to deny this possibility; however, studies of framing effects (Baum 2002, Druckman 2001) have effectively challenged the notion of a linguistic or semiotic chain of causality in mass media, while more recent work (Ghentzgow and Shapiro 2006) has suggested that consumers themselves have a strong influence on the ‘bias’ of the publications they read. This is not to mention the numerous anthropologic studies noted in the initial literature review above which describe the irreducibly complex set of individual and social lenses through which externally generated meanings can be refracted. Louw’s (2001) framework and reasoning, while logically sound and theoretically expedient, therefore, lack an appreciation of the finer detail that is to be found in studies with greater depth and sensitivity to variation.

Another way to interpret the increasingly commercial nature of nearly all large scale publications is through Thomas Frank’s (1997b) intriguing “countercultural idea” which questions once more the binary assertion of the warring factions of ‘control’ and ‘resistance.’ Frank’s meta analysis of cultural commentary is worth quoting at length:

As existential rebellion has become a more or less official style of Information Age capitalism, so has the countercultural notion of a static, repressive

Establishment grown hopelessly obsolete. However the basic impulses of the countercultural idea may have disturbed a nation lost in Cold War darkness, they are today in fundamental agreement with the basic tenets of Information Age business theory. So close are they, in fact, that it has become difficult to understand the countercultural idea as anything more than the self-justifying ideology of the new bourgeoisie that has arisen since the 1960s, the cultural means by which this group has proven itself ever so much better skilled than its slow-moving, security-minded forebears at adapted to the accelerated, always-changing consumerism of today (1997b:34-5).

If we were to heed Louw's warnings, then who exactly would we rebel against?

Where are the people pulling the levers in our heads? Looking once again at the staff producing PW, we can see that they have much in common with their own advertising demographic, in terms of age, ethnicity and class. Is it possible to suggest that this form of commercialization is, as a pessimistic reading of Frank might suggest, the appropriation of radical rhetoric as a marketing device? Or, to suggest an alternate reading, are the "crusty hippies" merely marketing to their peers by referencing a common experience? As a senior editor at PW noted, "It's not some journalistic conspiracy, it's producing what sells, what people want." How much can we separate the editors from their audience, if they fulfill many of the same criteria used to identify the readership? Similarly, how much of the paper is shaped by reader demand, real or abstract?

Furthermore, the negative implications of commercialization or commoditization of the media have been, in some instances, grossly over exaggerated. As Naomi Klein (2002) remarked about her own activism, "In the absence of a clear legal or political strategy, we traced back almost all of society's problems to the media and the curriculum, either through their perpetuation of negative stereotypes or simply by omission"

(2002:108), a strategy which is inevitably doomed “to eventually fall victim to its own narcissism” (2002:109).

Retrospectively, Klein reexamines the basis for her political activism, and acknowledges, with some chagrin, that “many of our demands for better representation were quickly accommodated by marketers, media makers and pop-culture producers” (2002:110). Thomas Frank (1997a ) had earlier termed this transition as the rise of “liberation marketing” which “knows that the culture trust exists, and it knows that business has conquered the world. And it offers in response not just soaps that get your whites whiter, but soaps that liberate you, soda pops that are emblems of individualism, radios of resistance, carnivalesque cars, and counterhegemonic hamburgers” (1997a:177). Added to this list could be perhaps ‘hepcat newspapers for the stylish rebel.’

Taking this critique of commercialization a little further, we find ourselves in David Harvey’s (2006) world, where “neoliberalism<sup>6</sup> has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (2006:3). This mode of reasoning extends to the point where even “the assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking” (2006:5). In light of this perspective, how are we to interpret the PW editor’s satisfied observation that media competition based on reaching and retaining relevant advertising demographics as “capitalism in the

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Neoliberalism’ for Harvey is “in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (2006:2).

raw”? Were Frank and Klein prescient in recognizing, through different channels,

Harvey’s assertion that:

Neoliberalism required both politically and economically the construction of a neoliberal market-based populist culture of differentiated consumerism and individual libertarianism. As such, it proved more than a little compatible with that cultural impulse called “post-modernism” which [...] could now emerge full blown as both a cultural and an intellectual dominant (2006:42) ?

However, it is possible that rather than being sold ‘to’ an external entity like a passive commodity, these values were taken into a new sphere of neoliberal exchange by the very people who held them dear. Rather than default to the pessimistic alarmism of Louw (among many others), is it so impossible to consider that a capitalistic framework has, over the course of cyclical upheavals, produced media which a majority of people find satisfactory and are able to navigate as cognizant actors?

As McNair contends, using the example of the prominent activist Michael Moore, it is not necessarily logical to assume that commoditization automatically produces control:

Simply because the accumulated weight of historical, political and cultural experience means that contemporary capitalism contains within it many individuals who, far from begin brainwashed or seduced into submission to a dominant ideology which is opposed to their own interests (if such a thing as a dominant ideology can be discerned from the diversity and chaos of contemporary media coverage), are fully aware of the flaws of the system [...] (McNair 2006:95).

By virtue of the fact that any media criticism exists at all, does this not mean that the ‘public sphere’ is at least in some sense functioning in a ‘healthy’ manner? Rather than viewing media commoditization as a hegemonic bottleneck of production, McNair insists on the existence of a “meaningful [...] plurality of voices within contemporary capitalism” and that “it is beyond dispute that the system can accommodate and give

mainstream visibility to a more diverse, broader range of opinion.” Furthermore, “This has happened because of, and not despite, the commodification of culture. It is the unplanned and unforeseen consequence of counter-cultural capitalism” (McNair 2006:100).

Thus, McNair, without denying the essential body of knowledge produced by previous work, simply rejects the influence of the same paradigm of binary opposition which, as Klein herself has admitted, has produced considerable myopia with regard to mass media and cultural production more generally. By removing the moral and aesthetic tags from the analysis of media production under the conditions of late capitalism, we can see that the negative consequences implicit in a reading of Louw, Frank or Klein are not at all a given.

### Conclusion

The debate between cultural pessimists and more recent theorists like McNair (2006) positions journalistic production squarely in a field of capitalist practices of production and consumption, neither of which is well understood in relation to cultural production. While we can draw some limited conclusions, we are still left asking what role mass mediated forms of information play in the social lives of individuals. How can we understand the relationship between producers, text and receivers? Can we somehow reconcile critiques based on equal access to the “public sphere” with those that question the nature of cultural commodification? Unfortunately, these questions are, for the moment, beyond the scope of this paper and its necessarily limited site of study.



Conboy (2004) has previously remarked that “Tabloidization<sup>7</sup> may be the extended working out of the process of commercial logic within journalism as it enters its next discursive phase” (Conboy 2004:181). Though we can see this transition both as a function of PW’s increasing entertainment content as well as its unambiguous identity as a profit-driven capitalistic enterprise, there are many factors which obscure a complete analysis, not the least of which is a lack of in-depth ethnographic work which satisfactorily addresses the reader’s role in the interpretation and appropriation of texts.

To conclude, while it is fair to say that PW is less a site of ‘alternative’ media production than a more generic capitalistic organization which uses certain stylistic tropes to appeal to a specific, if abstract, demographic readership, the implications for this finding are less certain. Earlier theorists and commentators have focused on the damaging aspects of the “commodification” of culture, equating the process with a form of betrayal and misappropriation. Looking at this process from a different perspective, however, allows us to see that commodification can in fact be a productive process which increases media diversity and allows greater access to a larger number of participants. Unfortunately, without an extended debate on the dense and contentious topic of the evolution of capitalist modes of production and consumption in the ‘complex’ societies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is not possible to characterize the developmental trends of PW, nor determine whether the neoliberal imperatives of capitalist production are destructive or generative.

Additionally, further research to round out and evaluate the proposed processes of production and consumption is needed to further distance ourselves from the three phase,

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<sup>7</sup> This term is multiply defined, but in Conboy’s sense it refers to the rise of entertainment features and first person style in publications, among other qualities.

mechanistic viewpoint which currently limits much of what is possible to say regarding contemporary mass media. As we have seen above, the number of information sources is multiplying at an exponential rate while media outlets, and print publications in particular, are struggling to adapt to the new environment. Rather than refocus our efforts to redefine and re-catalogue this quagmire of generic pitfalls, however, it may be more prudent to reemphasize the subjective role of the consumer with regards to all cultural production. By conducting wide ranging studies of the media consumption habits and attitudes of groups of individuals with some time depth, it could finally be possible to reconcile our limited conception of mass media with some form of social reality.

### Acknowledgements

The author is eternally grateful to the staff at Philadelphia Weekly for consistently welcoming his inquiries and answering honestly and enthusiastically to every question, no matter how stupid. Furthermore, this project would not have been possible without the gracious support of my friends and family, as well as my advisor, Dr. John Jackson.

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Figure 1.1- First Issue of the Distant Drummer, Philadelphia, November 1967

**Buffy on Hippies**

**John Wolfe on The Rock World**

**Hunter Thompson on Lionel Olay**

15c



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Volume 1, No. 1 - November, 1967 © 1967

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**New Black Strategy:**

**War of the Flea** by Judy Mathis

It felt good to go to a rally to protest the frame-up in the RAM conspiracy and not have to think about how much of this an editor would let us say.

And I guess the Youth Against War and Fascism people were there for the same reason. A YAF.

Youth Against War and Fascism, a New York-based group, had no real evidence to prove that RAM did or did not plan to invade Port Dix, poison 1500 people or plot to kill KKK, Klan, et al. But they had some very real evidence to prove that with a little imagination, power, and some tactics, you, too, should be capable of it.

Continued on page 13.

**Tate / Specter: Voter's Dilemma**

By Hanson Jackson

You expect the best from a city whose contributions to civilization include W.C. Fields, Billy James and the cheesecake. Thus it comes as no surprise that the two leading contenders for Mayor of Philadelphia are outstanding men, men of worldwide stature.

This, of course, is a fact which is occasionally overlooked. There are a few points the chief candidates should know. One is that the Philadelphia voter is a glib tongue and has more to say about the candidates than they do Philadelphia. Two, take all critics, these people just know's the deal enough. A little demonstration of the facts and Specter would show just how great their contributions to the world have been.

Take Specter, for example. Berlin' Ailes made for national headlines when he formulated the single-billed theory to explain the death of President Kennedy. There has been a lot of criticism of this theory, but everyone knows that it all comes from irresponsible radicals and from the Radical Paper Tax Committee.

In Mayor Tate's case, international fame was slower in coming. This was okay with the Mayor, who has always been more concerned with his reputation in Philadelphia and Brownstown. But in the spring and summer of 1967, Jim Tate staged a double-barreled coup which provided eloquent documentation of his skill in both domestic and foreign affairs.

Tate's first major victory came when he wandered over to Tel Aviv and won the Arab-Israeli war for the Jews. Just like that. Before he got there, some Jews were kind of apprehensive about the chances of defeating all those Arabs. But with Tate around, they realized there was no way they could lose. After all, a man the best of Alexander Haigill had to be a Jew.

Continued on page 13.

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**Grace's Views on Urban Schools**

When Grace Kelly left Detroit, Michigan, in 1957, she was the first woman to leave there. Her reaction to the school system was, "The teachers in the schools are the people's affliction for him served for a while as a common denominator across the barriers of age and ideology."

Maybe so, but if there was a very moment at the banquet, it didn't last too long—at least his boss, the establishment Episcopal Church, didn't feel it. "They were glad to get rid of me," he says, "and I was glad to go."

The 42-year-old Episcopal priest has now joined Bishop Robert Dettitt's team at the Episcopal Church House on Rittenhouse Square. He's feeling his way around.

Continued on page 13.

**Honor Visitor Says U.S. Bombs Homes**

By Dan DeSisto

The scene was a quiet courtyard where a small group of people talked quietly, bending over to finger the stones and dirt at their feet. A part of the conversation concerned a house the people were going to see that night.

Possibly, the translator mentioned the damn to dispel the sea of the group. The stones and dirt were just about all that was left of a village called

Continued on page 13.

Figure 1.2- Listings Page of the First Issue of the Distant Drummer

## what's happening

| TITLE  | December 7   | December 13  | December 22   |   |
|--|--|--|---|---|
| <p>is events are throughout the paper and do in the calendar.</p> <p>watercolor by cuphins by Amer-aker Ben Shahn.</p> <p>Free admn- s 9 AM to 1 PM. rt., Parkway and ve.</p> <p>he Entertainer" onrs. 8:30 PM ru Saturdays. Living Art, 334</p> <p>tars of Christ- daly Tuesdays. Fels Plane- h and Parkway.</p> <p>ht: A Four- lled Work, day thru- ocity Hill 377 1/2 Arch St.</p> <p>every Monday why at Gilded t. 21st St.</p>  <p>ember 29</p> <p>r. Benjamine Spock, of Committee for lean policy talks l, Ben Franklin and Chestnut St.</p> <p>ember 30</p> <p>Steve Gillette che Main Point. and 10 PM. 874 Ave., Bryn Mawr.</p> <p>ember 1-</p> <p>c Lane's "Rush to and "Four Days sr." 6:30 and 8:35 r. Bandbox, 30 Armat inpm.</p> <p>2. Danish Gym Team Philadelphia Civic t. 3 PM. Civic Cen- s 84th St.</p> <p>t show: Strawberry ck (see page 5) is ame. 2121 Arch</p> | <p>concert: "Introduction to Brassess," 11:30 AM and 11:30 PM, at the Civic Center, Civic Center Blvd. and 34th St.</p> <p>film: Mark Lane's "Rush to Judgement" and "Four days in November," 4:30 and 8:35 PM. Bandbox, 30 Armat St., Germantown.</p> <p>rock-light show: Strawberry Alarm Clock (see page 5) is at the Trauma, 2121 Arch St.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">December 3</p> <p>draws: Evelyn Williams in "Dylan Thomas Growing Up," 8:30 PM, Irvine Auditorium, 34th and Spruce Sts.</p> <p>movie: "Black Orpheus," 9:30 PM, Arnsberg Auditorium, University of Penna</p> <p>science: First Ten Years in Space. 3 PM. Fels Plane- cartum, 20th and Parkway.</p> <p>film: "The Soviet Hamlet," 9:30 PM, Bandbox, 30 Armat St., Germantown.</p> <p>folk music: Steve Gillette is still at the Main Point, but today is his last day. Shows at 8 and 10 PM. 874 Lancaster Ave., Bryn Mawr.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">December 4</p> <p>demonstration: Stop the War Week opens with a draft card return rally at the Germantown Community Presbyterian Church at 8 PM. Green and Tulpehoker Sts. Further details from the Philadelphia Anti-draft Union, K16-6535.</p> <p>lecture: "The Anti Novel," by Roy Lisker, teacher at the Free University of Pennsylvania. Talk is at The Ethical Society, 1906 S. Rittenhouse Square.</p> <p>art talk: "The Mona Lisa Shaved" by John L. Tancock at Museum of Art, Parkway and Fairmount Ave., 11 AM.</p> <p>concert: Jean Shepherd "The Underground Sacrisis" talks at 8:30. Irvine Auditorium, 34th and Spruce Sts.</p> <p>film: "The Soviet Hamlet," is at the Bandbox, 30 Armat St., Germantown.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">December 5</p> | <p>December 7</p> <p>folk music: Josh White is at the Main Point tonight. Shows at 8 and 10 PM. 874 Lancaster Ave., Bryn Mawr.</p> <p>opera: "Barber of Seville," Philadelphia Opera Company, 8:30 PM, Academy of Music, Locust and Broad Sts.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">December 8</p> <p>rock-light show: Sunshine Company, and Mandrake Memorial are at the Trauma, 2121 Arch St., 9 PM.</p> <p>folk music: Josh White is at Main Point, 874 Lancaster Ave., Bryn Mawr. At 8 and 10 PM.</p> <p>concert: Penn's Glee Club sings at 8 PM, Irvine Audi- torium, 34th and Spruce St.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">December 9</p> <p>exhibit: "Light and Color" at 1:30 and 3:30 PM, Frank- lin Institute lecture hall, 20th and Parkway.</p> <p>concert: Ray Charles in a blues concert at the Spec- trum, Broad St. and Patison Harrison Ave. Time: 8:30 PM.</p> <p>art talk: Claude Monet, by Jacqueline Helaal, 11 AM, Museum of Art, Parkway at Fairmount.</p> <p>folk music: Josh White's next-to-last night at Main Point, 874 Lancaster Ave., Bryn Mawr. 8 and 10 PM.</p> <p>rock and light show: Sun- shine Company and Mandrake Memorial team up at the Trauma. 9 PM. 2121 Arch St.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">December 10</p> <p>demonstration: In conjunc- tion with 19th anniversary of UN Declaration of Human Rights. Call Anti-draft Union (K16-6535) for time and place.</p> <p>hootenanny: 6 PM, Main Point, 874 Lancaster Ave., Bryn Mawr. Also, Josh White sings at 8 and 10 PM.</p> <p>music: Philadelphia Wood- wind Quintet, 3:30 PM, Van Pelt Auditorium, Museum of Art, Parkway and Fairmount.</p> | <p>December 13</p> <p>film: "Comedy Night," 7 PM, Irvine Auditorium, 34th and Spruce Sts.</p> <p>film: "42nd Street" and "Hollywood Hotel." Showing at 8 PM, Bandbox, 30 Armat St., Germantown.</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">December 14</p> <p>film: "Nothing But A Man," 8 PM, The Ethical Society, 1906 S. Rittenhouse Square.</p> <p>folk music: Doc Watson, 8 and 10 PM at Main Point, 874 Lancaster Ave., Bryn Mawr.</p> <p>film: "8 1/2" and "La Fuga" at 7 and 8:40 PM. Bandbox, 30 Armat St., Germantown.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">December 15</p> <p>rock-light show: Clear Light joins Mandrake Mem- orial at the Trauma, 9 PM, at 2121 Arch St.</p> <p>film: "Passport to Hindico," "Weapons of Gordon Parks," and "Great Toy Hobby." Exceptional Films Society, 6:40 PM, Museum of Art, Parkway and Fairmount Ave.</p> <p>folk music: Doc Watson at Main Point. Shows at 8 and 10 PM. 874 Lancaster Ave., Bryn Mawr.</p> <p>film: Fellini's "8 1/2" and "La Fuga" at Bandbox, 7 and 8:40 PM. 30 Armat St., Germantown.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">December 16</p> <p>folk music: Doc Watson's guitar fills the Main Point at 8 and 10 PM. 874 Lan- caster Ave., Bryn Mawr.</p> <p>rock-light show: Mandrake Memorial and Clear Light in their second night at the Trauma. It all starts at 9 PM. 2121 Arch St.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">December 17</p> <p>film: "Women of the Bois De Boulogne," 8:10 PM, Room 100, YM/YWCA, Broad and Pine Sts.</p> <p>art talk: Paul Czanne, by Artum Niespur, 11 AM, Museum of Art, Parkway and Fair-</p> | <p>bank review: "Where D Go From Here," by Mar Luther King, and "Pia Power," by Stokely, The Ethical Society, S. Rittenhouse Square</p> <p>rock-light show: Tim 12y and Mandrake Memo at the Trauma, 2121 A St., starting at 9 PM</p> <p style="text-align: center;">December 23</p> <p>rock-light show: at t Trauma, starring Tam- ley and the Mandrake orial. At 9 PM, 2121 St.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">December 25</p> <p>stay home</p> <p style="text-align: center;">December 26</p> <p>rock-light show: Pva Zappa's Mothers of I tion come to the Tra Starts at 9 PM. 212 St.</p> <p>film: "The Gospel Ac to St. Matthew" and "Shameless Old Lady," and 8:40 PM. Bandb Armat St., Germantow.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">December 27</p> <p>concert: Ravi Shan turns, 8:30 PM, Acac Music, Broad and Loc Sts.</p> <p>rock: Mothers of In appear at the Trauma a post-Christmas tr. At 9. 2121 Arch St.</p> <p>film: "The Gospel A to St. Matthew" and "Shameless Old Lady," and 8:40 PM. Bandb Armat St., Germantow.</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">December 28</p> <p>folk music: Michael 8 and 10 PM. Main 874 Lancaster Ave., Mawr.</p> <p>rock-light show: The of Invention bring Greencheese to the 2121 Arch St., at 1</p> <p style="text-align: center;">December 29</p> |

Figure 1.3- The Distant Drummer, ca. 1979



Figure 1.4- Listings Page from the Distant Drummer, ca. 1979

| <b>EIGHT DAYS A WEEK</b>  |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| COMPILED BY JOSEPH HARRIS AND TAAVI HEINLA  |   |   |
| <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> <p style="font-size: 2em; margin: 0;"><b>10</b></p> <p style="font-size: 1.2em; margin: 0;">Wednesday</p> </div>  | <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;"> <p style="font-size: 2em; margin: 0;"><b>11</b></p> <p style="font-size: 1.2em; margin: 0;">Thursday</p> </div>   | <p><b>POT</b></p> <p>Annual Media Mixed Racquet 0300.<br/>Sweet 9 p.m., Ave. &amp; Roura Aloxan 2027 C 8769.<br/>Mixed Too, 3</p>   |
| <p><b>MUSIC</b></p> <p>Sadie and John Blatz at the Breadline Cafe, 102 E. State St., Media, 8-9 p.m., 588-9911.<br/>Clayton West and Julie Gold at Cabaret, 15 N. Walnut St., West Chester, 436-9589.<br/>Ken Viansey at the Khyber Pass Pub, 56 S. 2nd St.</p> <p>Jack McGann at Le Bistro, 757 Front St., FU9-3855.</p> <p><b>SPORTS</b></p> <p>78ers vs. New Orleans at the Spectrum, 8 p.m.</p> <p><b>THEATRE</b></p> <p>Venities at Theatre 313 Broad &amp; Spruce Sts., 735-4767.</p> <p>Let My People Come at Grendel's Lair, 500 South St.</p> <p>Guys and Dolls at the Riverfront Dinner Theatre, Delaware Ave., at Poplar St., 925-7000.</p> <p>Brigadoon at the City Line Dinner Theatre, 4200 City Line Ave., 879-4000.</p> <p>The Asparagus Valley Cultural Society at Walnut St. Theatre's Theatre Five, 9th &amp; Walnut Sts., 574-3550.<br/>Private Lives at Walnut St. Theatre, 9th &amp; Walnut Sts., 574-3550.</p> <p><b>POTPOURRI</b></p> <p>Annual Boat Show at Granite Run Mall, Media.<br/>Sweet Tuesday vocal and instrumental duo at 9 p.m., Marriott's Firehouse Tavern, City Line Ave. &amp; Monument Rd., 667-0200.<br/>Tennis Everyone at 8 p.m., Tennis Too, 3800 Main St., Manayunk, IV3-0300.</p> | <p><b>MUSIC</b></p> <p>Rainbow at Periwinkle, 115 S. 18th St.</p> <p>Jack McGann at Le Bistro, 757 Front St., FU9-3855.</p> <p>Avila at London, 23rd and Fairmount Avenue.</p> <p>Cafe Ole at Cabaret, 15 N. Walnut St., West Chester, 436-9589.<br/>Heath Allen at the Khyber Pass Pub, 56 S. 2nd St.<br/>Laurie Marks &amp; Eric Jensen at Takers Cafe, 40 Maplewood Mall, Germantown, 9:30 p.m., 849-9884.<br/>Holly Near with J.T. Thomas presented by Echo Productions and WXPN at 8 p.m., Univ. of Penn. Museum and 33rd &amp; Spruce St.<br/>W.S. Kilhour &amp; The Rolling Rockets at 10 p.m., Grendel's Lair, 500 South St., 923-5560.<br/>Phila. Jazz Ensemble at Grendel's Lair, 500 South St., 923-5559.</p> <p><b>DANCE</b></p> <p>Irish dancing at 8 p.m., Watertown Recreation Center, Ardleigh &amp; Hartwell Lanes, Chestnut Hill.<br/>International dancing at 8 p.m., Houston Hall, University of Pennsylvania, 34th &amp; Spruce Sts.<br/>Square &amp; Appalachian Big Circle Dancing at 8 p.m., St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, Willow Grove Ave. &amp; St. Martin's Lane, Chestnut Hill.</p> <p><b>SPORTS</b></p> <p>Flyers vs. Detroit at the Spectrum, 8:05 p.m.</p> <p><b>THEATRE</b></p> <p>The Asparagus Valley Cultural Society at Walnut St. Theatre's Theatre Five, 9th &amp; Walnut Sts., 574-3550.<br/>Private Lives at Walnut St. Theatre, 9th &amp; Walnut Sts., 574-3550.<br/>You Can't Take It With You at Plays &amp; Prayers, 1714 Delancey St., PE5-0630.<br/>Venities at Theatre 313 Broad &amp; Spruce Sts., 735-4767.</p> | <p>Let My People Come at Grendel's Lair, 500 South St.</p> <p>Guys and Dolls at the Riverfront Dinner Theatre, Delaware Ave., at Poplar St., 925-7000.<br/>Brigadoon at the City Line Dinner Theatre, 4200 City Line Ave., 879-4000.</p> <p><b>POTPOURRI</b></p> <p>Tennis mixed Doubles For Singles, Tennis Too, 3800 Main St., 7:30-12 P.M.</p> <p>Annual Boat Show at Granite Run Mall, Media.<br/>Environmental Kaleidoscope at 7:30 p.m., "Sharing Global Resources," Schuylkill Valley Nature Center, 8480 Hagys Mill Rd., 482-7300.<br/>Open Gym &amp; Social Hour at 8:30 p.m., YM-YWHA, Broad &amp; Pine Sts., K15-4400, ext. 28.<br/>Intro to Backgammon &amp; Women's Exercise workshops at 9:30 a.m., YWCA, 2027 Chestnut St., LO4-3430.<br/>Sweet Tuesday vocal and instrumental duo at 9 p.m., Marriott's Firehouse Tavern, City Line Ave., Monument Rd., 667-0200.</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block; text-align: center;"> <p style="font-size: 2em; margin: 0;"><b>12</b></p> <p style="font-size: 1.2em; margin: 0;">Friday</p> </div> <p><b>MUSIC</b></p> <p>The Ella Calado Quartet at Le Bistro, 757 Front Street, FU9-3855.</p> <p>The Joe Camardo Trio, featuring Margain Krawall, at Shippens, 701 S. 4th St., 925-2325.</p> <p>Barbara Reismannyder at Left Bank, 782 S. 2nd, 922-9921.</p> <p>Skyline at the Gray Fox, Lancaster Ave., Bryn Mawr.<br/>Laura Garfield at the Breadline Cafe, 102 E. State St., Media, 8-10 p.m., 568-9911.<br/>Wine and Wood at Cabaret, 15 N. Walnut St., West Chester, 436-9589.<br/>Don Giovanni by the Pa. Opera Theater at LaSalle College, 7:30 p.m.<br/>Carole Lamas at the Painted Bride art center, 527 South St., WAS-9914.<br/>Die Fledermaus by the Opera Company of Phila. at the Academy of Music, 8 p.m.<br/>All Brahms by the Phila. Orchestra at the Academy of Music, 2 p.m.<br/>The Grateful Dead at the Spectrum, 338-3800.<br/>New Carolina at the Khyber Pass Pub, 56 S. 2nd St.</p> <p><b>MU</b></p> <p>Wine Weat Dont 2125 Carl 527.<br/>New p.m.<br/>High Point All I Acat New 2nd John the 1 Left<br/>Street Cafe Chet The Kray<br/>Rain The Fran<br/>Bart 2nd<br/>SP<br/>Ket</p> |



Figure 2.1- Comparison of PW (left) and Contemporary Underground Newspaper (right)



Figure 2.2- Comparison of Contemporary Underground Paper (top) with PW (bottom)



Figure 3.1- Music Lineup by Back of the Book Editor

## Music! 2/28

### *Live!*

3/2 Fucked Up @ FUC (Mookie Lovepump)  
3/6 the Thermals @ FUC (Goldberg)  
3/1 Golden Ball @ JB's (Wallen)  
3/2 Scissor Sisters @ EF (Goldberg)  
3/1 Dalek @ JB's (Jean Luc)  
3/2 Eddie Palmieri @ Kimmel (Adler)  
3/4 Nightingales @ JB's (Jennifer Kelly)  
3/6 Drake & Chroma @ WCL (Adler)

**Unwrapped:** Chris McDevitt

**OPENING RIFF:** Monotonix, AC/DC inspired riff  
rock from Tel Aviv @ JB's 3/3

**POWER OF SOUL:** New labels re-  
releasing old soul

**Hangin' Out His Onion:** X

**Feature:** Clinic @ JB's (Rob Trucks)

Badmaster Records showcase @ JB's (Doug Wallen)

**What up with...** Ooh, wee Tierra (Philly  
soulstress)



Figure 3.2- Image Included with Music Lineup

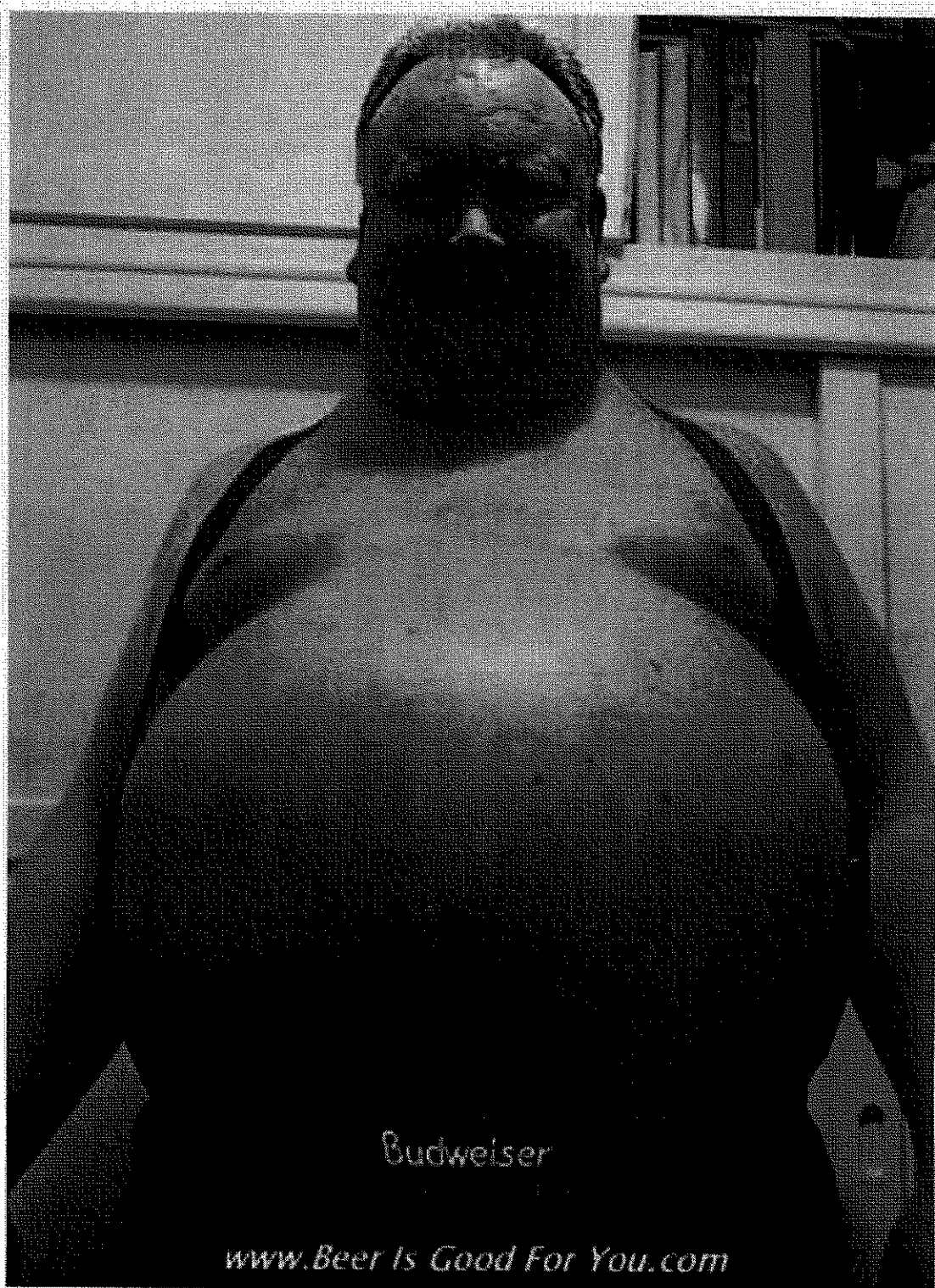


Figure 3.3- Back of the Book lineup

## A+E 28

**A+E COVER:** Beer

### **A-LIST**

Baby Loves Disco (Emily G)  
Philly Craft Beer Fest (Jack)  
Boxing and Kickboxing (Jean Luc)  
Intelligent Design on Trial (Greg Halbreich)

### **8DAYS**

Giant Pinata at the ICA (julie)  
Hard Dance Academy USA (Jack)  
Mini M. Jordans try to catch atom-bombs with their tongues (Roberta)  
"TRUTH, JUSTICE, OR THE AMERICAN WAY?" (Alexandra Chalot)

**ON THE RADAR:** superheroes

**OUT OF TOWNER:**

**KIME AGINE:**

El Gatito

**ART:** as last week

**STAGE:** exciting stuff

### **FOOD SPREAD**

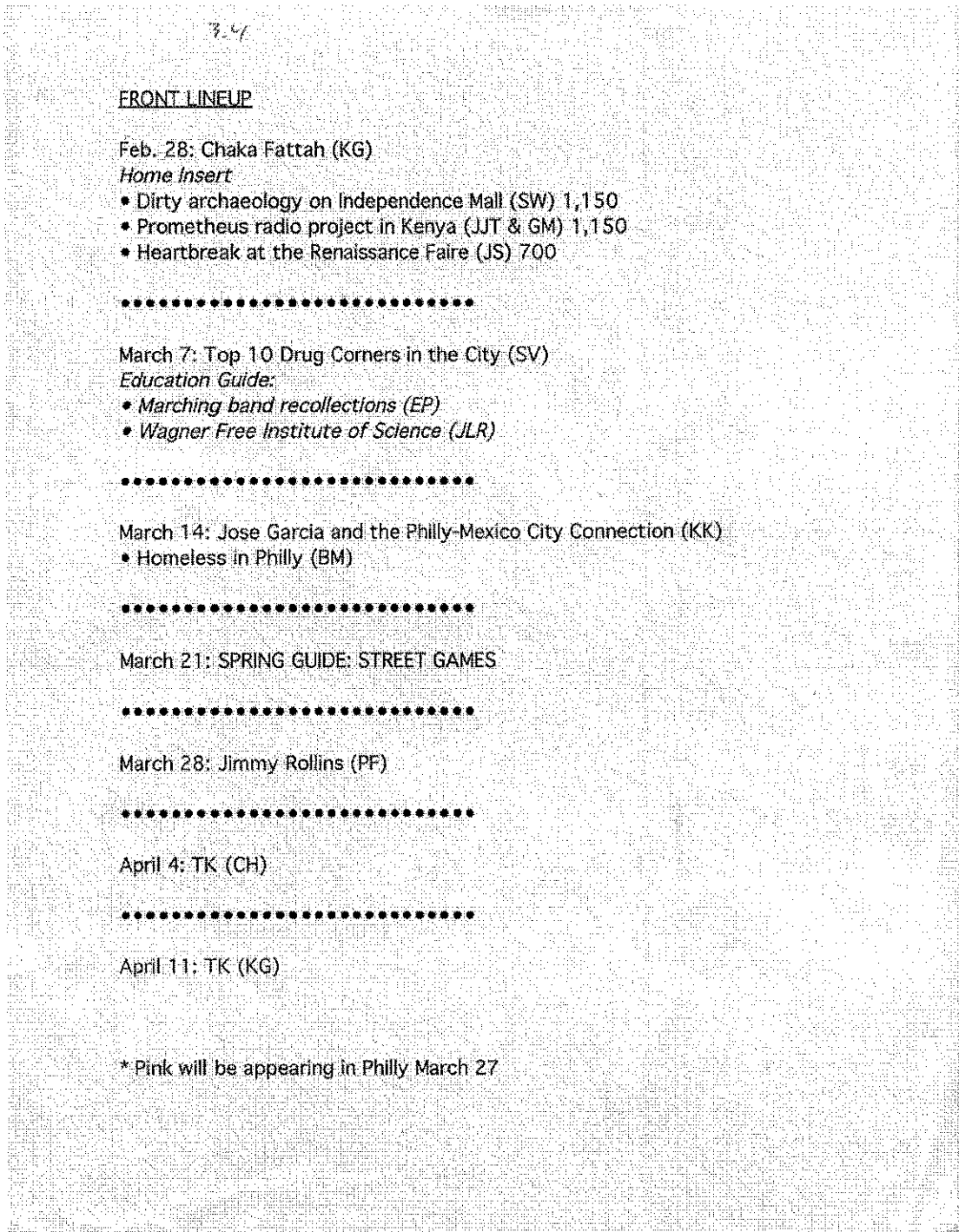
**REVIEW** (K.M. Henri)

Lush Life by Leah

**WHAT pisses off THE bartender**

**Recipe:**

Figure 3.4- Front of the Book Lineup



>> ON THE RADAR

# Real Life Is Not Fugazi

## Philly hipsterdom jumps the shark.

It's been a rough few weeks for hipsters. Larry West—Philadelphia's mohawked "punk candidate" for mayor—appeared on the front cover of the *Metro* naked and priapic, waving a handgun and screaming his plan to replace the city's cops with whip-wielding satanic cheerleaders. Totally punk. Except he didn't. He wore a suit. And waffled on about public access TV. Hey ho.

We've also seen the publication of three books that rip punk's heart out and beat it to death with a stick. *Punk Marketing: Get off Your Ass and Join the Revolution* is exactly what it sounds like and twice as disgusting. *Babylon's Burning* by Clinton Heylin tells the story of alternative rock, from punk to grunge. And kicks seven shades of satanic shit out of rebel rock icons the Clash as it does so.

And then there's *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* by

Hugh Barker and Yurval Taylor—a brutal attack on what professor David Lowenthal called "the dogma of self-delusion," which basically kills the entire concept of "authentic" alternative culture, eats it, shits it, buries it, digs it up, buries it, eats it and shits it out again. And then mails it to a canvas and calls it art.

I intend to carry this last book around with me. And the next time I meet a DJ who looks like he might be about to use the phrase "keeping it real," I shall smack him in the head with it. Repeatedly.

And if all this weren't enough to break the heart of even the most jaded ex-punk, the living god-king of Philadelphia hipsters recently jumped the shark in the most embarrassing

manner possible. You know who I mean. He needs no introduction. Yesterday he was the maraja of Philly cool, the super-groovy gossip blogger, the dude who put the "pst" into hipster. Today he's snot on a crack whore's stocking.

His crime against credibility? In a horrifically badly judged *Philadelphia* magazine advertorial, the god-king posed in the back of a "free" cat—ridiculously resplendent in his trademark ironic girl's coat and not-so-ironic no-sex specs—and gushed about his sponsors' products (go to [www.philadelphiawilldo.com](http://www.philadelphiawilldo.com) for the gory details).

We fat betrayed. Stabbed through the heart. Jesus never sucked corporate cock. But perhaps we shouldn't have been shocked. The god-king's motto has always been, "Real life is not Fugazi" (Fugazi being a punk band from a very long time ago that had politics and principles and stit like that).

And you know what? I think the god-king is right. Real life is not Fugazi. Real life is—oh let me think now. Wait, I have it.


Real life is K-Fed. ■



Figure 4—  
Editor's column which never ceases to be more vulgar than the last. Example taken from March 14-20 2007 issue.

Figure 5- Black Like Me Column from February 14-20 2007 issue

>> A&E | STAGE

 **BLACK LIKE ME**

By   
letters@philadelphiaweekly.com

**The Color Orange**

Love is stupid. It's a ploy conjured up by the Illuminati who run earth from the Hubble Telescope. These evil masterminds devised the concept of romantic love to get men to buy their lovers rings containing diamonds from conflict-ridden areas of Africa, thus supporting the further subjugation and eventual annihilation of the black race.

While Valentine's Day may be a popular cause for celebration in the West, it doesn't mean shit in Africa, where niggas is dodging bazookas and uzis so some dude on this end of the globe can get his pee-pee fellated by his overtanned, orange-skinned bimbo due to his great tacky taste in gifts.

Also, when did it become attractive for white women to tan themselves to the point of turning their skin orange? Is there any race on this planet that's orange in nature? Maybe Italians, but they're more vanilla-pudding-colored. Even when I backtrack through my lame fat childhood memories (more on this in the future), I can't recall a cartoon character that was orange. So wutthadilly, ladies? This whole orange-skinned white-woman shit is just unsettling.

Verily I say unto you white women of America: Stay white. It's pretty to be pale. God didn't place your race all the way up in the mountains and cold of Europe so you can look like an orange lollipop in an H&M tube top. You're supposed to be running the world alongside your menfolk, and it's time for you to start looking fit enough to drink merlot from the skulls of the lesser races that've fallen before your globalization. Only an uncivilized buffoon would think a McDonald's doesn't belong in Mogadishu.

Oh, before I forget, white ladies, you're also fucking with us niggas too. We like our white women white. Like Laura Ingalls Wilder white. Björk white. Fluffy-cloud-on-a-spring-day white. It's hard for us to lust after a caucasian gal who looks like a Dragon Ball Z character.

So to wrap this up: It's great to be white! White like the clean dishes in my cupboard! Your race created denim and concrete. Don't trade those accomplishments in to look "exotic" or something. You just look scary to me, and I'm too old to be having nightmares about the Blond Citrus Monster from Nebraska.