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## The Underground Press in Grand Rapids: The Root

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## The Underground Press in Grand Rapids: The Root

### Cover Page Footnote

Grand Rapids Public Library's archives for preserving the 1960s Underground Newspaper collection, and John McMillian's Smoking Typewriters for outlining the national context.

In November 1971, roughly ten concerned college students and working class people began to question the availability of news in the Grand Rapids area. These individuals believed that important events and features were absent in television news and the dominant newspaper, the *Grand Rapids Press*. In order to fill the media gap, an independent bi-weekly publication titled *The Root* was created. *The Root*'s founders were convinced that citizens would act sincerely and positively if they knew about the conditions of welfare, the confusion in schools, and the misuse of law.<sup>1</sup> The publication was not the first of its kind, though. Underground newspapers exploded across the nation following the New Left and youth countercultural movements of the 1960s and early 1970s with readership that reached over one million.<sup>2</sup> As a community media source targeted towards and created within the counterculture, *The Root* reflected the progressive, anti-Establishment ideologies and themes that surfaced throughout the national underground press movement.

Grand Rapids, among other West Michigan cities, has traditionally been considered politically and socially conservative. The Dutch Calvinist tradition has contributed to the social and political landscape of the region. Before becoming president in 1974, Republican Gerald R. Ford represented the Grand Rapids congressional district seat in the House of Representatives from 1949 to 1973. Despite the general conservatism, Grand Rapids was not exempt from the effects of the 1960s radical countercultural movement, whose public front was the New Left. Newspapers that were not sanctioned through schools or existing publications began to appear in Grand Rapids during the early 1970s. Other West Michigan underground newspapers included Grand Valley State College's *Babylon Free Press*, *The Muskegon Free Press*, *The Salt*, and *Sound of the Watchman's Trumpet*. These newspapers reached a common audience, covered similar stories, and were created to serve the purpose of providing news that mainstream media overlooked.

Grand Rapids was not the only city in Michigan with an underground press that reflected the nationwide movement. One of Detroit's most significant underground newspapers, *The Fifth Estate*, began in 1965 and is now considered the oldest continually publishing, English language, North American anarchist paper in American history.<sup>3</sup> An FBI report claimed, "*The Fifth Estate* supports the cause of revolution everywhere".<sup>4</sup> FBI investigations and infiltrations into the activity of underground newspapers were not only conducted on *The Fifth Estate*, but on underground newspapers nationwide. West of Detroit, a few students at Michigan State University found that the school-sanctioned *State News* was merely a promotional outlet for the university. Consequently, they formed *The Paper* in 1965 and started an underground newspaper tradition in the state's capitol. After *The Paper* discontinued in 1969, multiple Lansing newspapers sprung up to bring news to the university and city's counterculture. The most notable of these new underground newspapers was *Joint Issue*, which saw itself as a tool in the struggle for a

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<sup>1</sup> Judi Buchman, "What's the Root?", *The Root*, vol 1, no 9, May 17, 1971, p3.

<sup>2</sup> McMillian, John. *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p4-8.

<sup>3</sup> Werve, Peter. "History of the Fifth Estate: Part I; The Early Years." *Fifth Estate*. Vol. 31, Issue 1. (Spring 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Werve, Peter. "History of the Fifth Estate: Part I; The Early Years." *Fifth Estate*. Vol. 31, Issue 1. (Spring 1996).

collective community. A former staff member recalled, “We were all young middle-class people who were becoming aware of our own oppression and of the need for our own revolution.”<sup>5</sup> *Joint Issue* became the voice of Lansing’s underground youth, carrying on the tradition that *The Paper* began well into the 1970s. The issues these newspapers discussed were countercultural at the time, but are now the values and concerns found common today.

Underground newspapers of the late 1960s and early 1970s covered specific reoccurring topics, perhaps unknowingly. Additionally, underground newspapers also shared the New Left belief that the American “Establishment”, composed of government and traditional channels of power, was corrupt and oppressive. These reoccurring topics formed a singular theme to help convey their radical ideologies. An examination into the themes of Lubbock, Texas’s underground newspaper, *The Catalyst*, revealed a similar trend. The major themes were societal values and their perception of a corrupt government, with coverage focusing primarily on the Vietnam War, government and politics, and civil rights and race relations.<sup>6</sup> Despite their focus on news in Grand Rapids, the concerns and values addressed in *The Root* were consistent with those covered in underground newspapers across the nation.

The four main topics that *The Root* reported were; international and national news; students, youth culture, and new lifestyles; poor and minority groups; and local domestic items. International news centered on third world struggles and U.S. foreign relations. The focus of international news was the criticism of America’s involvement in the Vietnam War. The war was generally considered capitalistic imperialism that the Establishment disguised with the threat of communism spreading to America. National news covered the anti-government activities and trials of political prisoners, or anti-war protestors who had been arrested. Many of the articles attacked the established government with open dissent, often using sarcasm to represent their frustration. The people who operated underground newspapers felt that their voice was not being heard. No matter how anti-government the articles were, *The Root* did not advocate anarchy as a solution to America’s political problems. The student and youth culture news appeared in nearly every issue, with a special section devoted to local high school and university events. One article in 1971 covered a student strike at Grand Valley, where roughly 100 students dispersed themselves across campus and went into each classroom to rally other students and professors.<sup>7</sup>

*The Root*’s objective to strengthen the Grand Rapids community was especially seen in their coverage of poor and minority groups. Home renter and prisoner’s rights were published in order to thwart discriminatory practices from occurring in the area. *The Root* provided an outlet for the opinions and events of Latino and African-American’s not available in mainstream media outlets. Their belief in an open and democratic society led them to place an importance on the proletariat peoples of Grand Rapids who were not offered a voice in the *Press* or television news. The coverage of poor and minority groups

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<sup>5</sup> Wachsberger, Ken. “A Tradition Continues: The History of East Lansing’s Underground Press, 1965-Present.” *Serials Review*. Vol. 16, Issue 2. (Summer 1990), p113.

<sup>6</sup> Blasingame, Christina and Dee Brown, Lee S. Duemer, Birgit Green and Belinda Richardson. “An Examination of Latent Threads and Themes in the Catalyst (1969-1971).” *American Education History Journal*. Vol. 36, Issue 1-2. (Annual 2009), p302.

<sup>7</sup> *The Root*, vol 1, no 3, February 17-March 3, p3.

also existed within the fourth primary focus of local domestic items. Community gatherings that supported peaceful race relations and public awareness were promoted in *The Root*.

A special section in *The Root*, titled “What’s In The Bag”, aimed to make the public aware of harmful drugs with a bulletin notifying readers of harmful drugs being distributed in the area.<sup>8</sup> The user’s choice to use drugs, free from government prohibition, was a reoccurring perspective that appeared in many articles. *The Root* constructed a countercultural ideology that reflected the radically progressive beliefs that the New Left founded through the four main topics it covered. The New Left rejected old, party-aligned Marxism, and instead participated in agitation politics and community growth. These issues and opinions were believed to strengthen public awareness within the community of Grand Rapids. The final step to achieve community awareness was to get the community involved, but the competition with well-established presses and professional journalists was difficult.

*The Root* believed that it could provide the Greater Grand Rapids area with information and perspectives not readily available through other local media. The news that traditional sources of media failed to report was considered valuable information for increasing public awareness. In order to openly express their opinions, *The Root* staff maintained a commitment to the First Amendment. Their commitment to the First Amendment provided the foundation for their editorial policy. The publication’s editors believed that free speech was essential to an open and democratic community, a belief that underground newspapers nationwide also held. *The Root* aimed to “...educate public opinion towards an affirmation of human liberation, and towards action against those forces which are oppressive and dehumanizing.”<sup>9</sup> Although many founders and writers for underground newspapers were young and inexperienced, their idealism and devotion to the humanist efforts were remarkably admirable. Beyond the mission of *The Root*, the underground newspaper needed to establish an audience in the Grand Rapids area.

Underground newspapers in the late 1960s and early 1970s directly competed with existing news sources that already had a firm customer base. Although underground newspapers had a vastly different audience from existing newspapers, they were both selling the news to citizens of Grand Rapids. *The Root* was unable to employ neighborhood delivery persons, but began to offer door delivery for a small fee in April 1971.<sup>10</sup> Instead of door-to-door delivery, the newspaper was sold in local retail stores. In nearly every issue, retail outlets where the newspaper could be found were listed. Record stores, bookstores, head shops, cigar stores, the Y.W.C.A., and many other local stores carried current issues of the newspaper. Selling the publication proved difficult for *The Root*, which forced them to sell, or “hawk” as it was commonly called, on the street in the same fashion as their contemporary underground newspaper providers. Suppression and harassment accompanied the street sale of underground newspapers, though, making the distribution process even more difficult.

The most common suppression of *The Root* targeted their method and areas of distribution. In the December 9-23 issue, an article titled “Root Harassment” explained the troubles they confronted while distributing the paper. Security guards at Roger’s,

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<sup>8</sup> “Drug Bulletin no. 6”, *The Root*, vol 1, no 17, October 17-November 4, p15.

<sup>9</sup> “Purpose”, *The Root*, p2 every issue.

<sup>10</sup> *The Root*, vol 1, no 6.

Eastbrook, and Woodland malls chased away the hawkers, while North Kent Mall security looked the other way.<sup>11</sup> They claimed that distributing outside of bars on busy nights proved most successful. Although *The Root* successfully distributed its newspapers on the streets, hawkers were continually cited for trivial civil infractions like panhandling and jaywalking. According to the law, every person has the right to distribute literature on public property. Despite what the law stated, high school students faced intimidation, some even receiving suspensions from their school, for selling the underground newspaper. The sixth issue described the distribution status in various communities. Both the community of Caledonia and Woodland Mall considered *The Root* a “commie paper” and consequently prohibited the newspaper’s sale.<sup>12</sup> Although there was nothing illegal about it, some people thought that the newspaper was too subversive and countercultural for their community. The nation’s worst harassment of underground newspapers occurred in the South where the publications faced legal, and illegal, suppression.

The opposition that *The Root* faced while selling their newspaper on the street was minimal in proportion to the harassment of other underground newspapers. A group of Emory University activists began working on Atlanta’s own underground newspaper in 1968 titled, *The Great Speckled Bird. The Bird*, as it was often referred to, intended “to bitch and badge, carp and cry, and perhaps give Atlanta... a bit of honest and interesting and, we trust, even readable journalism.”<sup>13</sup> Although their mission to provide such a newspaper was bold, their intent was to solidify a ‘hip’ culture in the predominately conservative Georgia. Race relations in the South were tense as the Civil Rights movement threatened the white power structure, and those who supported the movement were apart of the minority. Suppression of *The Bird*, which supported radical social and political ideologies, was performed both legally and illegally. Street sellers, similar to *The Root*’s newspaper distributors, were frequently arrested for trivial civil infractions such as jaywalking and panhandling. The police also rejected the legitimacy of *The Bird*’s press badges, which limited their journalistic practices. In 1969, the First Amendment right to freedom of the press protected *The Bird* in a lengthy legal battle in federal court that claimed the newspaper’s content was obscene.<sup>14</sup> The worst harassment of *The Bird* came on the morning of May 6, 1972 when their newly purchased headquarters was firebombed with a Molotov cocktail.<sup>15</sup> Although the First Amendment legally protected underground newspapers, the opinions and communications that they shared with “left-wing” radicals and revolutionaries forced them underground to avoid political pressure and extremist violence.

Reporting news that many Americans considered subversive or obscene may have forced the newspapers underground, but cooperative services were founded to ensure that the news they found important was disseminated. A loose confederation of underground newspapers formed the Underground Press Syndicate (UPS) in 1966. The UPS worked to create a network of underground newspapers that could communicate with each other

<sup>11</sup> “Root Harassment”, *The Root*, vol 1, no 17, December 9-23, p2.

<sup>12</sup> *The Root*, vol 1, no 6.

<sup>13</sup> Gordon, Douglas E. “The Great Speckled Bird: Harassment of an Underground Newspaper.” *Journalism Quarterly*. Vol. 56, Issue 2. (June 1979), p289.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon, Douglas E. “The Great Speckled Bird: Harassment of an Underground Newspaper.” *Journalism Quarterly*. Vol. 56, Issue 2. (June 1979). p292.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon, Douglas E. “The Great Speckled Bird: Harassment of an Underground Newspaper.” *Journalism Quarterly*. Vol. 56, Issue 2. (June 1979). p294.

nationwide. Opinions and articles were shared in order to expand the journalistic movement and solidify connections within the counterculture. *The Root* published at least one article that the UPS distributed concerning the Rock Liberation Front's occupation of the *Rolling Stone*'s magazine offices.<sup>16</sup> Similar to the UPS, former members of the New Left's Students for a Democratic Society created the Liberation News Service (LNS) in 1967. The LNS served as a radical Associated Press distributing twice weekly packets of news regarding domestic protests, radical activity, and third-world guerilla struggles. These packets, sent to more than 300 publications nationwide, included photos, cartoons, articles, and editorials with the purpose of centralizing the underground press.<sup>17</sup> Scattered throughout *The Root* were, in particular, political cartoons that the LNS distributed. Through cooperative services like the UPS and LNS, as well as smaller organizations such as the High School Independent Press Service (HIPS), the New Left movement was able to centralize its voice in underground newspapers. However, the national distribution of LNS packets did not compromise the importance underground newspapers played in their specific region.

Despite the growths in readership and idealism represented in underground newspapers, it was difficult to maintain sustainable publications. Although offset printing was a cheap and often used method in the underground press, there were a variety of factors that comprised the operations. Funding for *The Root* was almost entirely out of the pockets of those who conducted the operation. The money earned from selling the newspaper was close to breaking even, but a business without profits dies quickly. *The Root* staff was able to purchase a headquarters at 449 Jefferson Ave. SE, now a concrete cutting facility, to print and produce their underground newspaper. Other underground newspapers, like *The Bird*, were more unfortunate as regional businesses refused to print the radical publication, which forced them to print out of state.<sup>18</sup> Despite having their own printing press, *The Root* frequently asked for donations to help continue publication. In order to ease their troubles with distribution, they also asked for drivers who could deliver issues to retail outlets and subscribers at home.

An article in the May 1971 issue outlined the underground newspaper's operation. Around thirty people were involved in the process with six to ten individuals who worked on the final layout. An editorial board oversaw the newspaper, but their goal was to maintain a democratic and decentralized process.<sup>19</sup> The belief in a purely democratic society was important to the 1960s politicized counterculture, but informal leadership eventually formed in the organizations that held this belief. The struggle to prevent authoritative leadership was common in the New Left movement and underground newspapers, and even brought some newspapers to an end. It is uncertain why *The Root* ceased publication, but their frequent request for donations and trouble distributing reveal that the lack of profits caused a great deal of concern for the individuals involved. Independent forms of media in America did not die with underground newspapers of the late 1960s and early 1970s, though. The alternative press boomed with the invention of

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<sup>16</sup> *The Root*, vol 1, no 17, December 9-23, p4.

<sup>17</sup> McMillian, John. *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p83.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon, Douglas E. "The Great Speckled Bird: Harassment of an Underground Newspaper." *Journalism Quarterly*. Vol. 56, Issue 2. (June 1979). p291.

<sup>19</sup> Judi Buchman, "What's the Root?", *The Root*, vol 1, no 9, May 17, 1971, p3.

the Internet, where online publications and blogs have provided an outlet for anyone seeking to express their opinions and promote particular issues they believe are important.



Annotated Bibliography

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Collection #256. Box 1. GRPL Archives. Grand Rapids, MI

Series I. Underground Newspapers

**Root-** Vol. 1, 17 Issues, 1971. Vol. 2, 2 Issues 1971

**Babylon Free Press-** Vol. 1, Feb. 17, 1971.

**Muskegon Free Press-** Vol. 1, no. 3, July 1973.

**New River Free Press-** Vol. 1, no. 1, Nov. 1973. Vol. 1, no. 2, Dec. 1973. Vol. 1,  
no. 5, Apr. 1974.

**The Salt-** Vol. 1, no. 1. Oct.-Nov. 1972

**People's Voice-** Vol. 1, no. 5. October 1972

Series II. Ancillary Documents

**March for a Non Nuclear Michigan**

-These newspapers are the source that ties Grand Rapids' underground newspapers to the larger narrative of alternative media in the late-1960's and early-1970's. *The Root* has the most issues in the collection. This newspaper was nearly identical to other underground newspapers across the nation. Topics and general themes are the same with region being the only indicator of where the news originated. The other newspapers in this collection will provide a secondary example of underground newspapers in Grand Rapids to compare with nationwide alternative media.

Blasingame, Christina and Dee Brown, Lee S. Duemer, Birgit Green and Belinda Richardson. "An Examination of Latent Threads and Themes in the Catalyst (1969-1971)." *American Education History Journal*. Vol. 36, Issue 1-2. (Annual 2009). p299.

-This article aids with the discovery of themes that existed throughout underground newspapers. The article is specifically targeted towards the "Catalyst", but similar themes reoccur in Grand Rapids' underground newspapers such as the "Root". The general outline of underground newspapers of the early 1970's is laid out in this piece.

Gordon, Douglas E. "The Great Speckled Bird: Harassment of an Underground Newspaper." *Journalism Quarterly*. Vol. 56, Issue 2. (June 1979). p289-295.

-This article focuses on the social impact "The Great Speckled Bird", an Atlanta underground newspaper, had on Georgia and the nation. Harassment of newspaper staff and audience came from law enforcement as well as the courts and other people. This newspaper was the extreme example of media suppression at the time of underground newspapers. Compared to the writers of "The Great Speckled Bird", Grand Rapids underground newspapers experienced limited harassment. Nonetheless, they were harassed, following the theme of clashes between culture and counterculture.

McMillian, John. *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

-This book is the comprehensive study that will provide context for the larger narrative of underground newspapers. In fact, this book IS the larger narrative of underground newspapers. This book will provide understanding for why underground newspapers existed, why they began to appear, what their effect on society was, and what others thought of them. The answers will be very similar if they are asked about Grand Rapids' underground newspapers.

Wachsberger, Ken. "A Tradition Continues: The History of East Lansing's Underground Press, 1965-Present." *Serials Review*. Vol. 16, Issue 2. (Summer 1990). P109-120.

-This article is about the networks of information that underground newspapers formed. The close proximity of the article's content will give my audience a stepping stone to understanding the larger national movement.

Werve, Peter. "History of the Fifth Estate: Part I; The Early Years." *Fifth Estate*. Vol. 31, Issue 1. (Spring 1996).

-This article is about the treatment and purpose of underground journalists. Once again, this article will provide context for the larger narrative at hand. It will also provide a better understanding of the sacrifices and gains of the writer

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