

# The Radical Press Today

E.B. Maple (Peter Werbe)

1993

a review of

*The World of Zines: A Guide to the Independent Magazine Revolution*, Mike Gunderloy and Carl Goldberg Janice, Penguin Books, New York, 1992, \$14.

I wish I liked this book better since its authors, particularly Mike Gunderloy, have worked tirelessly through their magazine, *Fact Sheet Five*, to promote 'zines as the independent publications of this generation. One problem is its cost which seems fairly high for those of us used to seeing the same information in publications such as *Fact Sheet Five* or *Anarchy* for a quarter of the price.

Even though *The World of Zines* lists 400 fairly intriguing publications it seems still somehow sparse to me. Maybe it's the big type and all the white space after my years of reading the above publications with their tiny type and every precious inch of page filled to the margins.

I don't want to seem ungrateful toward the authors since a generous review of this newspaper appears in its pages. However, there are some serious omissions in the listings. For instance, when I asked Mike why he didn't review *Anarchy*, he replied simply, "I didn't have room for everything." Still, the book contains a useful directory of what the authors consider "the most interesting and unusual zines," as well as a history of zine publishing and how to start your own.

Maybe my criticisms are unfair in that the book is not intended for initiates of zinedom, but rather for those to whom it will come as a jolt that so many independent publications even exist. I know when I first saw the *Fifth Estate* almost 25 years ago, I was flabbergasted that anyone outside of the power apparatus had access to a press and could publish a newspaper with radical and dissenting ideas. The same sensation may strike those who think similarly in this era.

A generational difference also is reflected in the technology utilized by the publications. When the underground press movement of the 'sixties began, it was the availability of offset printing which allowed for kitchen table lay-out and cheap print bills that set the context for the appearance of over 500 regularly published tabloid newspapers.

With its first issue in 1965, the *Fifth Estate* was the fifth of those 500 papers to appear after the inauguration of *The Los Angeles Free Press*, *The Berkeley Barb*, *The East Village Other*, and *The (East Lansing, Mich.) Paper*. Why this newspaper survived and the other 499 folded or became commercial rags by 1980 is a story for another time.

The technology of choice this time around is, of course, the xerox machine—the fastest, cheapest way (often at a boss's or school's expense) to produce limited edition zines. Offset printing is still in use for large circulation papers such as ours, *Anarchy*, or *Bayou La Rose*, but its use usually makes sense only with press runs of 5,000 or more, often the minimum number printers will do. It's an interesting phenomenon due to the capitalist concept of economy of scale that the per unit printing cost of a *Fifth Estate* is 40 cents per copy for a 28-page paper while a Kinko's produced 16-page xeroxed zine is four times that figure no matter how many are run.

Trying to ascertain a circulation figure for the zine movement is tough. Gunderloy and Janice estimate there are at least 10,000 zines being published in the U.S. with a total audience in the millions. The underground press readership at its apex in 1970 topped out at a million a week. However, the underground press papers were almost

entirely political whereas much of the zines today are a hodgepodge of poetry, punk, mail art, hobbyist, even right-wing as well as the weird and undefinable.

The zine movement's erratic and decentralized nature also makes it near to impossible to determine how many people read strictly political zines. Only a few of them top several hundred in circulation and many are the product of a single individual, but still their existence states quite eloquently that there is a continuing refusal to accept the blather which emanates from the corporate media.

In general, we owe the intrepid Gunderloy and co-author Janice a debt of gratitude for chronicling the obscure, the unusual, the radical and the strange. For these oppositional publishing efforts not to exist would be a triumph for the soft forces of totalitarianism who dream of a world in which our freedom of choice goes no further than changing a channel.

Sorry guys, no such luck.

# fifth Estate

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<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/341-spring-1993/the-radical-press-today>  
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