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Movements in Dialogue

Kaleidoscope and the Discourse of Underground News

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Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, underground newspapers such as Milwaukee's *Kaleidoscope* documented, reported on, and informed the burgeoning American counterculture. These papers served many functions. They discussed drug experiences and reported on local news and events, from concerts to protests and police brutality. They reviewed the newest psychedelic rock albums, published poetry and artwork, and sought to challenge their readership (and, by extension, mainstream America) by introducing new and radical ideas. They reprinted communiques from leftist organizations such as the Black Panthers, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and, later, the Weather Underground. Most importantly, they gave the counterculture and the mass movement growing alongside it a venue to articulate its desires and aims. I will explore how the underground press, as exemplified by Milwaukee's *Kaleidoscope*, acted as a venue for intramovement discourse, an arena for kinks to be worked out and grievances aired. Drawing primarily on the complete run of *Kaleidoscope* as well as an oral history of the paper provided by John Kois, the paper's co-founder and managing editor for most of its run, I will discuss both how *Kaleidoscope* can be used as a case study of the broader role of the underground press, and how it differed from its conventional contemporaries in important ways. I will argue that underground newspapers were more than just sounding boards for the counterculture and played a vital role in the articulation of the politics of a mass movement.

In the pages of the various mimeographed papers sprouting up across the country, the growing pains and internal conflicts of the mass movement were laid bare, providing a rare look into the process of a movement working to define itself. This movement had no single aim, and was in fact made up of many different organizations, all with their own agendas. Often, these organizations worked toward common goals, even if disagreements arose over tactics and theory; at other times, the in-fighting and sectarianism looked like a movement tearing itself apart. This tension was often kept behind closed doors, but it bubbled over into the pages of *Kaleidoscope* and the numerous other underground papers of this era.

Unsurprisingly, the underground press has generated a number of works attempting to analyze its importance. Perhaps the most

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comprehensive history of the underground press and its connection to the mass movement is John McMillian's *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America*. McMillian's work is extensively researched and focuses primarily on three papers: the *Los Angeles Free Press*, Austin, TX's *The Rag*, and East Lansing's *The Paper*, although dozens of other papers, including *Kaleidoscope*, are mentioned.

McMillian is one of the few authors to thoroughly examine the direct connection between the underground press of the 1960s and 1970s and the leftist political movements happening concurrently. McMillian examines "how underground newspapers educated, politicized, and built communities among disaffected youths in every region of the country" and "became the Movement's primary means of internal communication." I draw on McMillian's work but acknowledge its limitations. McMillian paints a portrait of a white, heterosexual, male-driven underground press to go along with a largely white, heterosexual, male-driven New Left. While McMillian is mostly correct in his characterization of these overlapping movements, he fails to adequately address connections to the Women's Liberation, Black Power, and Gay Liberation movements. As my examination of *Kaleidoscope* will show, the underground press also had the potential to be a venue for marginal voices within the New Left to articulate their own positionality and aims.

Kaleidoscope itself has not received significant attention in existing scholarship. Mentioned in passing or relegated to footnotes, *Kaleidoscope*'s importance to the larger underground press movement is generally only considered in the context of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover's declaration of war on "New Left-type publications." Specifically, an obscenity charge against *Kaleidoscope* editor John Kois is used as an example of the way the law was used to bankrupt papers by drowning them in legal costs.

This lack of coverage is unfortunate, because *Kaleidoscope* offers more than a mere case study in suppression of the freedom of the press. *Kaleidoscope* directly engaged with women's issues, racism, and homophobia, often before its contemporaries. Notably, *Kaleidoscope* was one of the first papers to discuss Gay Liberation, reprinting material from *Come Out!*, the official organ of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and allowing space for the newly formed Milwaukee chapter of the GLF to discuss the particular nature of oppression against homosexuals, as well as the need for a "working coalition with ... other liberation movements who show a willingness to struggle with their sexism."

Over the paper's run from 1967 to 1971, the subject matter shifted from typical counterculture fare such as New Age mysticism, poetry, and drug culture, to a more pronounced focus on politics. The first issue of the paper, published in October 1967, immediately takes an adversarial stance, introducing itself as "something to wave in the decaying face of a

dying establishment.” Despite this confrontational opening, however, much of the issue feels tame by today’s standards. While the issue does dedicate significant column inches to a first-hand account of one of Milwaukee’s now famous open housing marches, the other features include discussions of magic mushrooms and LSD and an introduction to the I Ching; the piece on the housing march is the only article which engages with politics head-on.

By the paper’s 12th issue, the discussion of hippie counterculture and revolutionary politics is about evenly split, and the cover story is on the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In the following weeks and months, the paper would devote increasing attention to gay rights, gender roles, abortion, Black Power, and New Left politics. *Kaleidoscope* would cover both local and national issues, and as the paper pushed into the 1970s radical politics dominated its pages.

Interestingly, Kois described the paper as “never real strong on the political side. ... We covered it, we allowed people from those organizations and groups to use the paper as a way to communicate their message and join the dialogue, but that was never our main intention.” However, the idea of creating a platform for “different groups who had a hard time being heard and who were usually misinterpreted by the mainstream media” without taking an official editorial stance was integral to Kois’s vision of the paper.

This dedication to furthering “the dialogue” is one of *Kaleidoscope*’s most important characteristics, no doubt a response to the stifling political environment of Milwaukee in the mid-1960s. When Kois founded the paper with his friends Bob Reitman, a radio disk jockey, and John Sahli, a musician and artist, Milwaukee had a “very small town feel,” with the city segregated along ethnic lines. Although known for its socialist tradition, Milwaukee was socially conservative, and “a bit old-fashioned.” *The Milwaukee Journal*, a generally liberal paper, was not interested in covering what Kois and the *Kaleidoscope* staff considered the pressing issues of the day; as such, it was important for *Kaleidoscope* to expose its readership to all of the news, music, and ideas they would otherwise never have access to. This echoed the stated philosophies of early underground papers such as *The Los Angeles Free Press*, which pledged to “provide a place for free expression and critical comment and for dialogues between creative figures ... who presently have no local outlet in which to print such provocative writing.”

Former *Kaleidoscope* writer Mike Zetteler, writing for his website Zonyx Report, noted that there was pushback from the paper’s readership for the increased inclusion of more overtly political material. Zetteler described a “deep-seated division ... between the political Radicals and alternative-culture Heads,” with readers accusing the paper of promoting violence whenever it published political material. To its credit, the editorial staff maintained that writers were speaking for

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themselves, not on behalf of the paper. As described by Zetteler, “the paper was open to just about anybody who cared to do the work, and ... it was a newspaper of individual voices, not a party organ.” This is contrasted with McMillian’s characterization of the trajectory of the underground press, with many papers becoming “mouthpieces for militant New Leftists and third-world revolutionaries.”

Kaleidoscope’s first truly radical experiment in exposing readers to new ideas was a 1969 issue in which the reins of the paper were turned over to *Kaleidoscope* regular Beverly Eschenburg for a “Women’s Liberation Special.” This was not the first “theme” issue of the paper (that would be the November, 1967 issue which focused entirely on marijuana); however, this was the first issue to exclusively spotlight political issues, giving women total control of the paper. In her introduction, writer Jennie Orvino addressed the paper’s male readership, stating that “The *Kaleidoscope* supplement on Women’s Liberation will threaten you.”

This bold, almost cocky introduction partially obscures that this was no doubt a risky move on *Kaleidoscope*’s part. In the following pages, women writers discussed lesbianism, masturbation, birth control, and abortion. A two-page spread entitled “Women’s Liberation: A Primer” laid out the case for the importance of feminism. “Women are getting together,” wrote contributor Marsha C., “and when we are united, the potential for changing society will be limited only by our imaginations.”

According to Zetteler, the Women’s Liberation Special sold out in three days. The following issue described the Women’s Liberation Special as “a milestone” and “by far our most successful issue” which “reached and affected an incredibly wide range of people.” The success of the Women’s Liberation Special clearly energized the *Kaleidoscope* staff, and a special Gay Liberation supplement was published only two months later.

This issue is notable for several reasons. First, it was the two year anniversary issue of *Kaleidoscope*. To devote significant coverage to the Gay Liberation movement in such a monumental issue speaks volumes of the editorial staff’s commitment to challenging themselves and their readers. The issue’s introduction, uncredited but presumably written by Kois, responds to a letter to the editor criticizing the paper for its poor coverage of homosexual issues:

We hope this issue’s Special Homosexual Supplement helps correct the oversight on our part. We want the material in this issue to be but the beginning of regular and thorough coverage of the local gay scene, and hope readers will help by supplying relevant news and graphics.

Also of note is the fact that *Kaleidoscope*’s Gay Liberation supplement was published in February, 1970, less than a year after the Stonewall riots, widely considered the inciting incident for the Gay Liberation movement. While there is, as Terrance Kissack suggests, ample

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reason to “deconstruct Stonewall narrative,” that *Kaleidoscope* devoted considerable attention to Gay Liberation so early sets it apart from the rest of the underground press and the activists of the New Left who rebuked GLF efforts to “integrate the politics of homosexuality into the consciousness and agendas of their fellow activists.” It is astonishing to realize that this conversation was taking place in a mid-sized, socially conservative Midwestern city like Milwaukee; additionally, *Kaleidoscope*’s focus on Gay Liberation predates Milwaukee’s most prominent homosexual organizations, the Gay Liberation Organization and the Milwaukee GLF.

Organized in a similar manner to the Women’s Liberation Special, the Gay Liberation supplement begins with a brief introduction to Gay Liberation and a manifesto of sorts. The *Kaleidoscope* staff, never known to shy away from controversy, included numerous photographs of naked men, including depictions of erect phalluses. A piece from writer and psychotherapist Paul Goodman begins, “In essential ways, homosexual needs have made me a nigger.” If there was any reader backlash, it went unremarked in the pages of the paper, and *Kaleidoscope* continued to cover Gay Liberation in nearly every issue.

In the weeks and months following these special issues, the letters pages were overwhelmingly full of support and appreciation. But while *Kaleidoscope* may not have published many dissenting opinions on the topics of Women’s and Gay Liberation, this didn’t mean that difficult conversations weren’t taking place behind the scenes. The increased political focus of the paper, outside pressure from radicals, and the staff being restructured into an ostensibly nonhierarchical collective provoked many disputes. Further, Zettler felt that this new structure gave the women staffers a “double voice.”

A particularly contentious fight over the nature of sexism led to a vote to ban ads for *Avant Garde*, an erotic magazine, as well as any personal ads soliciting sex. For his part, Kois felt these discussions were an important part of the process:

If it was painful, it was real. ... If it came as a surprise to us, and it made us see things in ourselves that we needed to deal with, then obviously it was a real issue. ... If an issue came along and seemed easy, then we knew it didn’t mean much. But if there was some pain with it and we recognized it in ourselves, then that’s something that we really had to take seriously and do something about.

Kois’s dedication to difficult conversations and making space for marginalized voices set *Kaleidoscope* apart from much of the rest of the underground press which, “in their organization and content ... mirrored the sexism and homophobia of the dominant culture.” Of course, *Kaleidoscope* was far from being the only paper to cover such issues. In fact, the gay press was beginning to thrive in New York thanks to papers like *Come Out!*, *Rat* (later *Women’s LibeRATion*), and *Gay*

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Power, as well as an ever-increasing number of articles in the underground and mainstream press alike. Still, it is clear that *Kaleidoscope* was unique among much of the underground press in their extensive coverage of women's and gay movements.

Beyond amplifying those voices that were marginalized even within the mass movement, *Kaleidoscope* also provided a venue for intramovement dialogue and criticism within its pages. On one notable occasion, the paper reprinted an open letter from Black Panther co-founder and Supreme Commander Huey P. Newton in support of Women's and Gay Liberation. Despite the hypermasculine veneer of the Black Panther Party, Newton was "one of the only movement men to indicate support for gay liberation ... asking Panther Party members to confront their discomfort and hostility to gays and lesbians and to support gay liberation and women's liberation."

Newton's letter, as historic as it may have been, was still problematic. *Kaleidoscope* published, directly across from Newton's letter, a statement from the newly formed Milwaukee GLF in which the group both praises and critiques the Black Panther co-founder:

While we welcome Huey's statement and recognize its importance as a first step, we also detect in it a lack of deep understanding of the Gay Liberation Movement, of what it means to be gay, and what contributions the anti-sexist movements are making toward building a revolutionary society.

The letters pages of the paper also functioned as a discussion forum, with readers responding to the stories and ideas presented in the paper, as well as to other letters. Some conversations would take place over the course of several issues, such as a curious exchange between social workers discussing the particulars of working with welfare clients and the necessity of caseworkers calling for wildcat strikes (unauthorized strikes, initiated and conducted without union approval over an issue of local significance). Other letters would go on for dozens paragraphs, requiring that they be continued in the back pages of the paper.

For Kois, this was all about building community. Perhaps this is the overarching value that made *Kaleidoscope* special. Unlike other papers which served as de facto party organs for the SDS and other New Left groups, *Kaleidoscope* wasn't about parroting the party line; nor was it about making a buck. While its increased focus on politics reflected the times, this came from Kois's deeply-held conviction that communities were strengthened by the free exchange of ideas. And for Kois, *Kaleidoscope* was always about serving the community in a lasting and meaningful way:

It was always about relationships. I mean, it was always about, you know, a different kind of relationship. And initially that relationship

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wasn't much more than sharing a joint. But then, if you take relationships seriously, you realize, well, how are you judging the person you're sharing joints with? Let's look at the people we're sharing joints with. What's common about them, what are people missing from this? ... That was always what it was about. It was about helping people learn about themselves.

In many ways, *Kaleidoscope* represented the best of the movement. That is not to say that its staff worked together in perfect harmony or made no mistakes. Writers occasionally "blew up and quit in a huff or in sorrow." The paper made editorial choices that didn't always sit well with its readership, and the staff had their blind spots. But under the leadership of editor John Kois, they worked to confront these head on and continue growing.

By the time the paper folded in 1971, it was \$15,000 in debt. Kois, who had left the paper earlier that year, holed up in a one bedroom apartment, feeling as though he was too notorious to show his face around town. When he finally heard that the Supreme Court had overturned the obscenity charge against him, Kois felt the *Kaleidoscope* story had come to a close. It was time to leave Milwaukee.

Nationally, the political landscape was changing; it seemed as if the movement was tearing itself apart. Underground papers either evolved or folded, and those that hitched their wagons to the New Left fared especially poorly. Meanwhile, SDS, responsible for so much of the politics of the era, "destroyed itself in a paroxysm of factional infighting."

It is a testament to *Kaleidoscope* that it lasted as long as it did. In fact, it outlasted East Lansing's *The Paper*, which ceased publication in 1969. Similarly, the glory days of the *Los Angeles Free Press* ended in 1970, with the paper drowning in debt and sold off to a major California pornographer. While *Kaleidoscope* may have been late on the scene compared with the papers based in larger cities or nearer hubs of movement activity, its staying power can be attributed to its focus on community and the dedication of its staff.

From 1967 to 1971, *Kaleidoscope* shared new and revolutionary ideas, challenged its readers, and created an important venue for intramovement dialogue. Beginning as an outlet for Milwaukee's burgeoning counterculture and evolving into an important part of the mass movement, *Kaleidoscope's* willingness to honestly interrogate the issues facing the community it served meant that it was an arena for tensions to be resolved. That *Kaleidoscope*, unlike many of the underground papers of the era, never transformed into an unofficial party organ for the New Left allowed it to be uniquely critical of the politics of the mass movement while at the same time articulating its aims. The close study of *Kaleidoscope* offers many insights into the various components of the movement: the hippies, the Yippies, the New Left, the Black Panthers, and, importantly, Gay Liberation and Women's Liberation.

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It is wholly unfortunate that *Kaleidoscope* hasn't been afforded the same attention as other, more prominent underground papers. Further study of the paper and those men and women who ran the mimeograph, wrote articles, stood on street corners selling the paper, and fought for the paper's very right to exist, would no doubt be fruitful. Such study would allow us to examine not only the ways that the paper could be used to exemplify a movement, but how it was truly unique as well.

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