

In Contesting Media Power: Alternative  
Media in a Networked World

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## CHAPTER 7

# Commercialism and Critique

## CALIFORNIA'S ALTERNATIVE WEEKLIES

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Critique and commercialization need not be mutually exclusive, as the Comedia (1984) research group long ago conceded. But alternative media researchers who have followed in this vein (e.g., Khiabany, 2000; Pimlott, 2000) seem to prefer commercialism in small doses—in other words, just enough to survive. Two assumptions generally follow from this formulation. Advertising is seen as the bogeyman to be avoided, whether at the national or local level. Indeed, local television and daily newspapers are often far more sensationalistic and de-politicized than their national mainstream counterparts (Underwood, 1995; McManus, 1994). Thus, paying audiences are viewed as the preferred form of commercial support (Bagdikian, 1992; Baker, 1994), a philosophy that guides such venerable alternative publications as *The Nation*, *Mother Jones*, and *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

America's urban "alternative" weeklies challenge both of these assumptions, with a vengeance. All are distributed in a single metropolitan area, all of them receive nearly 100 percent of their funding from advertising. Most surprisingly, many (if not all) of these weeklies offer genuine critical alternatives to both local and national mainstream media. Yet, with the exception of a few excellent social histories (e.g., Armstrong, 1981; Peck, 1991), this paradoxical blend of a commercially successful yet politically and culturally radical press has largely escaped scholarly notice.

The earliest and most famous example is the *Village Voice*, founded by a collective of Greenwich Village writers and cultural critics in 1955 (Frankfort, 1976; McAuliffe, 1978). The *Voice's* outsider image and style influenced the first revolutionary "underground" papers of the 1960s, such as the *Los Angeles Free Press* founded in 1964 and the *Berkeley Barb* started in 1965, as well as the urban consumer (non-revolutionary, but generally left-reformist) weeklies from San Francisco to Boston that took hold shortly thereafter. At the end of the 1960s, according to D. Armstrong (1981: 60), 400 American underground and alternative publications had a combined *paid* circulation of 5 million.

Currently, the 118 member-publications of the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies (AAN) have a combined *free* circulation of 8 million and annual revenues of about \$500 million (AAN, 2002).<sup>1</sup> Some of these "alternatives" have long used free distribution, others have only recently shifted—the *Village Voice* went "free"

in 1996—but the “paid” status of the old underground papers is somewhat of a misnomer, since many of these also relied heavily on advertising. Fifty-three percent of the AAN weeklies belong to chains, defined broadly as “companies that own at least one other media property,” although the average size of these alternative chains is only about three papers.<sup>2</sup> During the 1990s, while U.S. daily newspaper circulation declined 10 percent, alternative weeklies more than doubled theirs and the largest of these, such as the *Voice* and the *LA Weekly*, now routinely approach profit margins of 15 to 20 percent (Barringer, 2000).

Today, no one disputes alternative newsweeklies’ commercial appeal: their ability to efficiently reach the affluent, college-educated, 18- to 34-year-old urban single with plenty of disposable income and the propensity to spend it (AAN, 2002). “Alternatives” are the place to be seen for advertisers cultivating an edgy, hip attitude, and both readers and advertisers are ostensibly attracted by editorial copy that is culturally and stylistically “radical” (Schnuer, 1998). Rather, what remains puzzling, to rephrase David Hesmondhalgh’s problematic (2000), is why alternative weeklies actually offer alternative *political* content. Why do some alternatives even bother to go after City Hall? Why do they *ever* cover the local environmental protest? And why do they attack the corporate world that pays their bills? Or do they?

## California’s Alternative Weeklies: General Features and Hypotheses

To answer these questions, I take a closer look at the leading alternative newsweeklies in two of California’s major media markets—the *LA Weekly* and *New Times LA* in Los Angeles, and the *Bay Guardian* and *SF Weekly* in San Francisco. California was the birthplace of much of the underground and alternative press, and it continues to be a trendsetter in the cultural and media realm. Another reason for the comparison is that these four publications offer a microcosm of the contemporary American alternative weekly industry.

The *Bay Guardian*, circulation 150,000, was founded in 1966 as a politically committed (though pointedly non-underground) urban weekly joining investigative and consumer “service” journalism. It is still independently owned by founder Bruce Bruggmann. In Los Angeles, the *LA Weekly* has been the dominant alternative newspaper since the late 1970s and currently has a circulation of 220,000. The *Weekly* was purchased in 1995 by Stern Publishing, which had also bought New York’s *Village Voice* in 1986. Stern’s alternative media properties, in turn, were sold in 2000 for an estimated \$150 million to Village Voice Media, a newly founded corporation headed by *Voice* publisher David Schneidermann though effectively owned by the private equity firm of Weiss, Peck & Greer, associated with the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (Moses, 2000a; Smith, 2002; Cotts, 2002).

Originally titled the *San Francisco Music Calendar*, the *SF Weekly*, circulation 110,000, has been the *Bay Guardian*’s major alternative competitor since the early 1980s (Altnet, 1995). In 1995, local owner Scott Price sold the paper for a reported \$1.3 million to New Times, Inc. Likewise, *New Times LA*, also circulation 110,000,

was created in 1996 after the New Times corporation bought and closed two other alternative papers in Los Angeles (Adelson, 1996). From its founding in 1970 as a university antiwar paper in Tempe, Arizona, New Times has expanded to 11 papers with a total weekly circulation of 1.1 million, making it the largest alternative chain (Iwan, 2001; AAN News, 2002). In 1999, an undisclosed portion of New Times (now officially NT Media) was sold to the venture capital group Alta Communications, in order to underwrite the continued expansion plans of founders Jim Larkin and Michael Lacey (Cotts, 2002). In October 2002, as this chapter was being finalized for publication, *New Times LA* was closed as part of a deal with Village Voice Media (VVM). In addition to paying NT Media several million dollars to effectively leave Los Angeles, VVM also agreed to shut down its competing Cleveland weekly, leaving New Times with a monopoly in that market (Carr, 2002; Moses, 2002).

Data on individual papers' advertising bases are difficult to obtain, since alternative weekly companies are not publicly traded and thus are not subject to financial disclosure laws. However, a 2001 AAN survey found that, on average, 65 percent of newsweekly revenues come from local display advertisements and inserts, 24 percent from classifieds, 7 percent from national advertising, and 2 percent from personals.<sup>3</sup> Since 2000, national advertising in alternative weeklies has dropped sharply—especially from tobacco companies, which provided more than 60 percent of all national advertising during the late 1990s. The other major national advertisers are alcohol and pharmaceutical companies and, varying according to the local market, telecommunications, clothing brands, and automobiles (Bates, 1999; Smith, 2002; AAN, 2002). Sex-related advertising, both display and classified, provides an estimated 10 percent of total alternative weekly revenues (Neuwirth, 1998). Some publishers, such as the owners of the *Chicago Reader* and *San Diego Reader*, refuse such ads, but they are the exceptions.

A page space analysis of a sub-sample of three California alternative weeklies (see table 7.1)<sup>4</sup> shows that "local display" (chiefly for retail shops) is by far the dominant type of advertising. Sex ads take up relatively more space in the two Los Angeles newsweeklies.<sup>5</sup> Classifieds are most important for *New Times LA*. National advertising—for cigarettes,

**Table 7.1. Types of Advertising in California Alternative Weeklies (proportions of total ad pages)**

	SF Bay Guardian 9 January and 24 April 2002	LA Weekly 11 January and 26 April 2002	New Times LA 10 January and 25 April 2001
Local display	.73	.64	.50
Sex	.09	.23	.20
Personals	.03	.05	.00
Classifieds	.12	.06	.26
National	.03	.03	.04
Total ad pages	161	226	133
Total pages	228	344	192
Ads as proportion of total pages	.71	.66	.69

Source: Author's content analysis.

**Table 7.2. Audience Demographics of California Alternative Weeklies**

	Age 18-34 (%)	Female (%)	Graduated University (%)	Attended University (%)	Professional/ Managerial (%)	Median Household Income
SF Bay Guardian	43.7	37.4	43.1	90.4	45.4	\$80,537
LA Weekly	42.3	59.2	26.0	86.0	39.5	\$56,700
SF Weekly	42.4	36.5	48.4	91.5	56	\$53,000
New Times LA	32.8	30.1	55.9	86.3	54.2	\$52,100

Source: www.aan.org. Last accessed in September 2002.

liquor, and portable telephones—takes up only 3 to 4 percent of the advertising page space at all three weeklies.

Turning to demographic statistics, we see that the *Bay Guardian's* readers are the youngest, with about 44 percent of its audience in the 18–34 age group,<sup>6</sup> and the most prosperous, with an average household income of more than \$80,000 (see table 7.2). Readers of the two New Times publications are more educated and more likely to hold professional or managerial jobs. The *LA Weekly's* audience is the most female, the least educated, and the least likely to include professional or managerial workers. Nevertheless, the overall impression of these data is not of marked differences, but of the weeklies' shared success in reaching their target audience of young, affluent professionals.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, there seems little in the basic funding and audience features to sharply distinguish these four papers from one another, or to suggest that any of them might publish politically radical or truly "alternative" editorial content. The political economy tradition of media research predicts that an advertising-dependent press, such as America's urban alternative weeklies, would emphasize culture over politics, disdain social protest, and ignore economic injustice and corporate malfeasance (Bagdikian, 1992; Baker, 1994; Lemert, 1984; Collins, 1992; Underwood, 1995). This study takes five randomly selected weeks from the first half of 2002 (the weeks beginning 6 January, 20 January, 27 January, 3 March, and 21 April) and puts these hypotheses to a (preliminary) test: First, how often and in what manner is culture versus government news treated? Second, how often and in what manner is civic activism facilitated and encouraged? And, third, how often and in what manner are corporate abuse and economic injustice covered? We will compare the alternative newsweeklies with each other and, implicitly, with daily newspapers, which, though also primarily advertising supported, are somewhat less so than the alternatives.<sup>8</sup>

## How Alternative Are the Alternatives?

### CULTURE VERSUS INSTITUTIONAL POLITICS

Within the news and commentary pages (also labeled "news & culture" at some of the papers), government stories outnumber cultural stories at all four weeklies<sup>9</sup> (see table 7.3).<sup>10</sup> Culture, of course, is not necessarily the opposite of politics. While culture stories are often light and humorous (e.g., the *SF Weekly's* "Clear Window: The 13th annual International Window Cleaners Association Convention is transparently entertaining," 30 January), the genre allows room for political critique and reflection. In a *Bay Guardian* cover story titled "The apotheosis of cute: How fluffy bunnies, bouncy kittens, and the Clinton era brought cuteness to an awful climax" (23 January), culture editor Annalee Newitz offers a wide-ranging critical assessment of contemporary American culture, the kind that wouldn't seem out of place in a hip academic journal (indeed, Newitz is a former Berkeley graduate student in English and a founding editor of the Berkeley online cultural studies journal *Bad Subjects*). This passage gives the article's flavor:

Cultural amnesia, according to [the late Berkeley culture critic] Michael Rogin, is all about using appealing images to wipe out our memories of painful

**Table 7.3. News Article Topics in California Alternative Weeklies (Spring 2002)**

	SF Bay Guardian (n = 68)	LA Weekly (n = 87)	SF Weekly (n = 23)	New Times LA (n = 17)
Culture/lifestyle	7 (.10)	15 (.17)	7 (.30)	1 (.06)
Culture/political	8 (.12)	13 (.15)	0 (.00)	5 (.29)
Total culture	15 (.22)	28 (.32)	7 (.30)	6 (.35)
Media	11 (.16)	18 (.21)	2 (.09)	8 (.47)
Government	51 (.75)	34 (.39)	9 (.39)	8 (.47)
Citizen activism	21 (.31)	17 (.20)	4 (.17)	2 (.12)
Economic inequalities	12 (.18)	6 (.07)	1 (.04)	1 (.06)
Business	13 (.19)	6 (.07)	6 (.26)	1 (.06)

Source: Author's content analysis of all news and opinion articles appearing in five randomly selected issues from Spring 2002. Arts and restaurant reviews/listings not included.

historical and political realities. Looked at from this perspective, cuteness is a kind of cultural decoy. . . . It's no coincidence that the recent run on U.S. flag fashions dovetails nicely with cuteness. You can get weensy teddy bears waving American flags and neat sparkly tops and bell-bottoms in red, white, and blue. There's no contradiction, in other words, in the partnership of retrograde nationalist spectacle and mainstream raver chic. Ultimately, the danger of cuteness is that it's a style that plays into the most conservative American tendencies. It vaunts a frivolous, impotent femininity, cartoonish racial representations, and a passive, apolitical view of the world.

Another political, if not strictly government-oriented, aspect of alternative weeklies' news coverage (partly overlapping with the cultural category in table 7.3) is criticism of mainstream media organizations. At the *LA Weekly*, for instance, John Powers' 11 January "On" column laments the virtual absence of any mainstream media investigation of the Enron bankruptcy scandal and its potential connections to the Bush administration. *New Times LA*'s Rick Barrs is widely credited with exposing the *Los Angeles Times*' secret "Staples Center" deal, a blatant editorial conflict of interest, which in turn provoked a national debate over the excesses of marketing-driven journalism.<sup>11</sup>

In its heavy coverage of government institutions, the *Bay Guardian* is clearly the most political of the four weeklies examined. Typical government stories focus on insider gossip (who is up, who is down in local city politics), investigations (e.g., the police cover-up after the shooting of a local black man), and the paper's own political causes. One of the paper's favorite campaigns is on behalf of "public power" (and thus against the private Pacific Gas and Electric company), evident in such stories as "Utility stonewall: PG&E won't give records to CPUC" (9 January), "Following up on public power" (6 March), and "Volt revolt: PG&E faces increased criticism from investors and activists alike" (24 April).

The *LA Weekly* also takes politics seriously, although the emphasis is often national or statewide as well as local. Harold Meyerson (the paper's former executive editor, who recently moved to Washington, D.C., to edit the left-liberal opinion magazine *American Prospect*) contributes a column primarily on national politics in which he consistently takes a pro-labor Democrat position. What most differentiates the *LA Weekly*

from the mainstream press is its ability to go in-depth and offer multiple perspectives, such as in its "Dissent Now" issue (1 February) and, even more impressively, in an issue (26 April) commemorating the tenth anniversary of the 1992 L.A. race riots. Readers were unlikely to find anywhere else not only riot posters created by local schoolchildren but the first-person account of a man who participated in the looting, as well as thoughtful postmortems. The journalistic "voice" at the *Weekly* is often highly personal, even impassioned (e.g., Sara Catania's "A Killer Job: How a lousy lawyer landed Stephen Wayne Anderson on Death Row," 25 January), but also intellectually honest, acknowledging that there are other sides to the story.

Journalists at the two New Times papers cover government aggressively, ever on the lookout for corruption, dishonesty, or hypocrisy from politicians. In his column "The Finger," *New Times LA* editor Rick Barrs regularly skewered local and national political figures. Vintage sarcastic Barrs from the 24 January 2002 issue:

You Go, Girls! Right-wingers were squealing like a **gaggle of little girls** last week about how they'd bitch-slapped a bill in the Legislature that would've brought **Vermont-style civil unions for gays** to California. "We thank **God** for this tremendous victory!" gushed . . . [the] head of the **Campaign for California Families**. "Enough is enough!" shrieked . . . [the] president of **Focus on the Family**, a *Christian* outfit out of Colorado. But hold the phone, ladies! You may have stirred up all your *Bible-thumpin'* **homo-hatin' bi-atches** with catty howling about how civilization's gonna end if gays get the same legal benefits as married straight couples. But you ain't even reduced by an inch the hard-on that The Finger's favorite WeHo assemblyman . . . is sportin' to reintroduce his civil-union bill, probably next year. (original emphasis)

If the tone is harsh, the reporting is usually solid. One critic notes that New Times muckrakers "prefer exposing individuals to illuminating the systems and institutions that perpetuate inequality and injustice" (Bates, 1998). But it would be unfair to characterize the New Times approach as cynical or apolitical. Barrs and his New Times colleagues clearly care about making government more honest and effective.

### CITIZEN ACTIVISM

Advertising funding has been said to promote a consumerist vision of the world, encouraging readers to seek answers to their problems in the shopping mall rather than at city hall. But the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* somehow bridges this consumer/citizen divide, consistently addressing its articles to activist-citizens, with such headlines as "The drive for a minimum-wage hike should put poor people's needs first, advocates say" (6 March) and "Nuke the nukes: Need for radioactive storage gives activists a new weapon" (23 January). Articles often close with exactly the kind of "mobilizing information" (Lemert, 1984) that is said to be missing from the mainstream press. For instance, the "Nuke the nukes" story ends with the suggestion, "To get involved or to send a donation, contact San Luis Obispo Mothers for Peace, P.O. Box 164 [etc.]."

Similarly, an article on a government proposal to tear down affordable housing to build a parking garage ("A lot of problems: Hastings College plans monster garage," 6 March) offers this notice: "A public hearing on the draft environmental impact report will be held Wed/6, 2 p.m., State Building [etc.]." Of the newsweeklies in this sample, only the *Bay Guardian* publishes an editorial page, on which it features an op/ed article by a local activist as well as one or more editorials representing the official view of the newspaper, usually linked to news stories appearing in the same edition. Each issue also prominently features a half-page of "news alerts," essentially a bulletin board of protests, lectures, and meetings sponsored by local activists and political officials.

Compared with the *Bay Guardian*, the *LA Weekly* is more ambivalent about political activism. The *LA Weekly* also lists local "political events," but they are buried inside the regular Calendar at the back of the issue. The "Dissent Now" cover stories in the *LA Weekly's* 1 February issue are aimed less at activists than at interested, even skeptical, bystanders. The special issue includes an extensive, and largely sympathetic, article on antiglobalization protesters and a backgrounder explaining their chief policy demands. But a third, perhaps intentionally balancing, first-person testimony by columnist Judith Lewis offers a rationalization for not getting involved. Activists and protest movements are often covered more for their curiosity and sensational value than for any real political significance. Typical *LA Weekly* headlines include "Review this Book or Else: The latest gripes from the 'gun-toting lesbians'" (8 March) and "Three Guys and a Megaphone: The JDL's shrinking role in Jewish extremism" (11 January).

The New Times papers are the most consistently antiprotest. Activists appearing in their pages always play comic roles. For instance, the *SF Weekly* delights in exposing what it calls "only in San Francisco" protests. In "Horse Senseless" (23 January), staff writer Matt Smith ridicules a group of horse owners who refused to relocate their horses from city-owned stables in Golden Gate Park, including one woman who threatened to "kill her 18-year-old Jo Jo on the steps of City Hall unless supervisors decreed the horse could remain at the stables." Smith concludes, "In San Francisco, it's possible to spin a struggle for private privilege into a fight for social justice, and the public won't have the horse sense to know the difference."

## CRITICISM OF CAPITALISM

Critical stories about businesses and economic inequalities appear most frequently in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*. As noted, one particular target, the California Pacific Gas and Electric utility company, reappears in several issues. Other articles examine a proposed bill to raise the local minimum wage, report a study on understaffing at low-income nursing homes, and investigate possibly illegal, backroom deals between developers and city officials. The *Bay Guardian* doesn't just report the news, it takes sides and often leads readers by the hand to the "correct" conclusion. If the tone is sometimes simplistic or preachy, the paper is nevertheless sensitive to the contradictions of movement politics. In "Home Creepo" (23 January), Cassi Feldman presents the clash between antigrowth activists opposing the construction of a new Home Depot and black activists supporting the chain retailer for its ability to create jobs. As the title not



so subtly hints, the *Bay Guardian* ultimately sides with the antigrowth forces, while urging additional efforts to expand employment.

While generally ignoring poor people, the *SF Weekly* often writes about big business, sometimes even critically. In a story about America On-Line ("Serfing the Web," 9 January), Matt Smith doesn't shrink from broad criticisms of American capitalism:

Sometime during the last two decades of the Technology Age—perhaps it was after the publication of the 250th touchy-feely management best seller, or after the broadcast of public television's 100th Sesame Street-like investment tips show—Americans came to fully accept the idea that profitable companies are like churches. Successful companies emphasize Love: "At firms with strong cultures, employees care about the company, each other, and customers," writes Whitney Tilson, a management analyst. . . . But this can be a corrupt faith. A class-action lawsuit against the world's most successful online company suggests that profitable corporations still make money the old-fashioned way: They exploit, manipulate, and underpay employees; they usurp Americans' common patrimony; they flout the law. They're certainly not churches.

In contrast to the tenets of mainstream journalism, Smith concludes the article with his own policy recommendations, such as greater scrutiny of "technology age companies" by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission and the Labor Department.

But more typical of the *New Times* approach to business and economic issues is a focus on the colorful, controversial entrepreneur or the off-beat enterprise. Sometimes this approach can include a critical element, as in Jill Stewart's "Master of Disaster: How L.A.'s super-rich Gary Winnick is trying to wash blood from the Global Crossing implosion off his hands—and make more money in the bargain" (*New Times LA*, 25 April). Just as often, business stories are stripped entirely of politics, focusing instead on the amusing and bizarre, as illustrated by these *SF Weekly* headlines: "The Garden East of Eden: Is it a dream—or an obsession—when someone pours a \$75 million fortune into an amusement park, based on trees, located in Gilroy?" (6 March); and "Death of a Death School: The 72-year-old San Francisco College of Mortuary Science—perhaps the country's premiere institution of funeral service education—has its last graduation and moves (gulp) into the great beyond" (24 April).

The typical *LA Weekly* story is not likely to dwell on corporate misbehavior or economic injustice. But via the occasional special issue (e.g., "The LA Riots," "Dissent Now") and the regular columns of Meyerson, Powers, and Marc Cooper (also a contributing editor for *The Nation*), the *Weekly* often raises questions that transcend the usual mainstream (promarket) political consensus. As Cooper writes in the 26 April issue:

In the park-sized back yard of a well-known producer's Mandeville Canyon mansion, under a massive rented circus tent, every table perfectly adorned with fresh flowers and gleaming press kits, liberal [i.e., left] Hollywood reached deep into its pockets to fight the Bush administration's opposition to expanded stem-cell research. No problem with that in itself. But try to organize a similar benefit for the 30 percent in L.A. who live in poverty, or the 11 percent who try to get by on the minimum wage, and

see what kind of turnout you get. Better cancel the valet service and scrub the caterers. . . . And these are the liberals!

## What Makes Alternative Weeklies "Alternative"?

This quantitative and qualitative analysis of alternative weeklies finds the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* consistently more "alternative" than the other three newspapers in the sample, at least by measures of political versus cultural emphasis, citizen mobilization, and capitalist critique. While not traditionally leftist, the New Times-owned weeklies still offer important alternatives in their impassioned, provocative writing style and muckraking investigative journalism. In this sense, New Times papers also contribute significantly to engaging (if not mobilizing) the public in debate, rather than just providing it with basic information (Baker, 1994: 43). The *LA Weekly* emphasizes serious commentary and analysis, approaching complex events like the 1992 L.A. riots from a broad range of perspectives. And all four publications are far more politically oriented than predicted. How do we account for these findings? Type of advertising cannot be discounted entirely as a broad background factor distinguishing alternative weeklies from the more "mainstream" press. However, before analyzing the role of advertising, I discuss three other factors that vary more sharply among the alternative weeklies and may also shape editorial content: ownership and professional identity, audience composition and motivation, and competition in the local journalistic field.

### OWNERSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

The *San Francisco Bay Guardian* is the sole independent, non-chain-owned newspaper in this study. Independent ownership, combined with the continued defense of a political mission by its founder-publisher, clearly makes a difference. *Bay Guardian* cultural editor Annalee Newitz<sup>12</sup> portrays the weekly's identity in both personal and historical terms: "A lot of the *Bay Guardian's* activist stance comes from [founder] Bruce [Brugmann] and the fact that he started it as an explicitly political project. But also at the time he founded the *Guardian*, there was a much stronger sense [than today] that alternative newsweeklies had more of a political mission." Newitz hesitates to call the *Bay Guardian* itself a "social movement," instead labeling it a "socially-conscious business" or even "like a non-profit association": "The money we make is totally in the service of the cause." At the same time, Newitz reports that Brugmann, far more than his editors, is also passionate about the paper's "Best of the Bay" issue, pure "service journalism" in support of urban consumerism. It is this seemingly incompatible mix that has allowed the *Bay Guardian* to survive and thrive.

The New Times chain, despite being vilified as the "Gannett of the alternatives," also is driven by a cause, if a different one from that of the *Bay Guardian*. Shortly after purchasing the *SF Weekly*, co-publisher Lacey was quoted as saying, "If it is political, we are against it, meaning that we are skeptical of political movements and politi-

cians" (Alternet, 1995). At the same time, many New Times staffers appreciate the freedom the chain has given them to dispense with traditional, cautious "objectivity" in order to "tell the truth," as former *Los Angeles Times* reporter Jill Stewart argues. Stewart<sup>13</sup> recalls how she joined New Times:

[After leaving the *LA Times*] I had been doing this power brokers column for *Buzz* magazine. It was kind of edgy, a little bit snotty. . . . They [the New Times owners] said, we want you to keep doing something along those lines. Anything goes as long as you can prove it. That's the first time I had ever heard that as a journalist. Especially at the *LA Times* where that is absolutely not the rule, where there were so many sacred cows. . . . I thought, my God, that's what I'd come to journalism for. That's like, back from 1976 when I was in college.

Before the recent change in ownership at the *LA Weekly*, former staff writer Ruben Martinez<sup>14</sup> defined his relationship to politics in a way quite distinct from most daily newspaper reporters: "I came from alternative journalistic circles [where] the relationship between alternative journalists and activists, they're one and the same. We all hang out together." Another *LA Weekly* writer, Sandra Hernandez,<sup>15</sup> described her vision of journalism in clearly alternative terms (though in sharp opposition to that of New Times): "I think a journalist's responsibility certainly goes beyond . . . ranting and raving simply to sell more papers. I think my responsibility as a journalist . . . is to bring forth some of the voices and some of the interests of those people who generally have been left out of the debate."

After having been passed on to its third owner in less than ten years, the *LA Weekly's* "alternative" identity today is less certain. While *New Times LA* was staffed with several ex-*LA Times* editors and reporters (and proud to be "ex"), *LA Weekly* journalists tend to be more closely allied with the mainstream press. Long-time editor Sue Horton is now Sunday opinion pages editor of the *Los Angeles Times*. The current editor, Laurie Ochoa, was most recently at *Gourmet* magazine. Most important, Village Voice Media CEO David Schneidermann has said he wants to remake the *LA Weekly* so that it will compete "on the level of all the major media in L.A. . . . not just . . . alternative media" (Burk, 2002).

In sum, alternative weekly journalists distinguish themselves, albeit in diverse ways, from their mainstream colleagues. But, as elsewhere, publishers have the last word.

## AUDIENCE COMPOSITION AND MOTIVATION

Alternative journalists propose two theories about how audiences affect their work. One is that readers, most of them, only pick up the paper to read the non-news sections at the "back of the book"—arts and entertainment listings, restaurant reviews, and the like—and that this, ironically, gives them more freedom to do what they want with the "front of the book." As the founder of the *Chicago Reader* once said, "If they read the articles, fine. If they don't, fine" (Armstrong, 1981: 283).

But alternative journalists also invoke their readers' engagement with what they do. The *Bay Guardian's* Newitz sees "progressives" as constituting the "core" of the paper's

readership. If the *Bay Guardian* is not exactly a case of radical media being supported by radical social movements (Downing, 1995, 2001), its success does demonstrate the importance of organized activist associations and independent alternative businesses, many of which are extremely loyal to the paper.

Assuming that political indifference on the part of "commuters" looking for weekend entertainment is relatively constant, then the size and visibility of local activist networks are probably the more crucial factors in shaping each weekly's particular form of political engagement. Nevertheless, the importance of the "indifference factor" should not be entirely discounted: it is the economic base that gives publishers maneuvering room to risk offering some form of alternative political content, even if only in small doses.

### COMPETITION IN THE LOCAL JOURNALISTIC FIELD

If the *Bay Guardian's* activist orientation is partly due to the strength of the San Francisco/Berkeley/Oakland progressive political community, how then do we account for the *SF Weekly's* disdain for what it views as "only in SF" political extremism? Here, Bourdieu's notion of a cultural field (1980; see also Benson, 1999) is a useful concept. Cultural discourses, whether literary, political, or journalistic, are produced in discursive and social fields marked by the struggle for distinction. In order to exist in a field, one must mark one's difference. The *SF Weekly* and other papers, such as Seattle's *The Stranger*, have competed by positioning themselves slightly to the right, or rather toward the neo-populist center, of the surviving activist-era weeklies.

Yet in those markets where the only paper is center or center-right, it is important to acknowledge that few papers are emerging now to take up the vast unoccupied space on the left. In other words, the left-orientation of many older alternative weeklies is not due to contemporary struggles for distinction but, rather, is a residual feature of the field's constitution during the relatively radical 1960s and early 1970s. Unless there is a revived left mobilization (not impossible, given the impetus provided by the overreaching of an antiterrorist, national security-oriented U.S. administration), we should probably expect a continued centering or even rightward shift in local alternative weekly fields.

Vigorous local competition itself may also have been a temporary condition, facilitated by a growing economy and rising advertising expenditures. The Village Voice Media/NT Media deal may indicate an increasing trend toward local monopolies, as happened long ago with most U.S. daily newspapers.<sup>16</sup> As a result, surviving weeklies will be in a better position to compete with daily newspapers. Indeed, immediately after the folding of *New Times LA*, Schneidermann remarked: "To me, this is all about making us more competitive, particularly with the *LA Times*. Like most daily newspapers, they have an aging readership and they want our readers. We're not going to sit around and let them have them" (Blume, 2002). Indeed, mainstream media corporations such as the Tribune Company (owner of the *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, and a host of other television and print properties) and Gannett (the largest U.S. newspaper chain) are starting to buy up alternative weeklies and to create their own weeklies aimed at younger readers.<sup>17</sup> With mainstream daily ownership, one of the first ed-

itorial elements to disappear from the alternatives, not surprisingly, is the media criticism columns.

In sum, I do not share the optimism of some that the market is simply "self-correcting" when it comes to restoring marginal or iconoclastic political voices. Nevertheless, local cultural entrepreneurs, with links to activist networks and a willingness to accept less than phenomenal profit margins, could conceivably move into the audience and advertiser "spaces" left vacant by either mainstreaming alternative chains or their major corporate competitors.

### "OUTLAW" ADVERTISING

Many of the most radical underground weeklies of the 1960s were funded by advertisers who paid a premium because no one else would take them: the sex industry. This advertising was "of a sort unlikely to impose pressure on the paper to become traditional," wryly concedes media scholar Edwin Baker, otherwise a staunch critic of advertising funding (1994: 154, fn138). One can go farther than that, positing that certain kinds of advertising may be better than others in facilitating critique. In a sense, this is the flip side of Thomas Frank's (1998) argument that American dissent has been almost completely commodified. To the extent that '60s-era radicalism spawned new kinds of enterprises and professional activist organizations (head shops, eastern religion bookstores, environmentally friendly ice-cream manufacturers, and Greenpeace, to name just a few), a sector of the economy thus arose with a need for consumers, contributors, and low-paid workers sharing these alternative ideas and lifestyles.<sup>18</sup> This alternative business sector has been particularly important and extensive in California.

As we have seen, a higher proportion of sex-related advertising in the *LA Weekly* and *New Times LA* does not correlate with a more radical political posture for these weeklies vis-à-vis the *Bay Guardian*. But there does seem to be a correlation between the journalists' attitudes toward sex-related or other "outlaw" advertising and the extent of the weeklies' radical editorial posture. At one extreme, the *Bay Guardian's* Annalee Newitz sees sex advertising as "part of our political mission," that is, helping sex workers make it on their own "rather than rely on pimps," and in general, promoting a "sex-positive" attitude. For Sandra Hernandez of the *LA Weekly*, however, back-of-the-book quasi-pornography is an embarrassment or at best a necessary evil:

Look at the paper. I mean, it's kind of funny. We're supposed to be a left paper yet, if you look at the advertising in terms of women, it's completely demeaning to women. . . . I think there's a sense among the reporters and editors that we wish we had a different advertising base, sure. But you know, I've never been in an editorial meeting where I've heard somebody say, "I've had it! You know, I don't want to see any more 900 number "call Trixie for a good time" ads! That's just not, that's not part of it.

Whatever the effects of particular kinds, mixes, or amounts of advertising, their impact is clearly indirect and diffuse. Just as with the mainstream American press, alternative journalists speak of a "church/state" wall that strictly limits interaction between

business-side and editorial-side employees. Yet it would also be wrong to dismiss any “elective affinity” between type of advertising and editorial content. Despite their different approaches to mainstream and movement politics, all four weeklies in this study cover sexuality and alternative lifestyles to a far greater extent and far more sympathetically than the typical daily newspaper. Conversely, in seeming repetition of earlier American press history (see, for example, Schudson, 1978), publishers of alternative weeklies that want to be less partisan, professionalize, broaden their reach, etc., speak in the same breath of “expanding their advertising base.” Village Voice Media’s Schneidermann has indicated his desire to attract more national and mainstream business advertising while supposedly “downplay[ing] the body-part ads that fill the *Weekly*—plugs for breast enhancements, face-lifts and the like” (Smith, 2002). The private equity group behind Village Voice Media has been described as operating according to the following modus operandi: [They] “typically look for a return on their investment of about 35 percent compounded annually over five to seven years. . . . At the end of that period, the company—Village Voice Media, in this case—often is sold or taken public” (Moses, 2000b). If such rumors are true, one might expect a “centering” or “mainstreaming” of the *Weekly* to make it more attractive to mainstream advertisers, and thus more palatable for such a sale. And this, according to recent reports, is exactly what is happening (Smith, 2002).

## Conclusion: Small (But Not Too) Is Beautiful?

This study has called into question the common research assumption that commercialism, especially advertising, *necessarily* undermines the critical, oppositional stance of the press. Although relying on advertising to a greater extent than U.S. daily newspapers, many urban newsweeklies offer news and views ignored by the mainstream media, as well as encouraging passionate democratic debate and, in some cases, active political involvement. This study does not prove that advertiser-supported media are more critical and oppositional than audience-supported media, all other factors being equal. But the foregoing discussion certainly establishes that the *most* advertising-reliant media are not necessarily the most conservative and can even be quite progressive in all senses of the term.

Explaining these findings is a more difficult matter. It appears that critique is facilitated by a complex interaction of multiple factors: publisher commitment, audience involvement, local journalistic competition, and type of advertising. All four factors distinguish alternative weeklies from their mainstream competitors. However, since the *Bay Guardian* is the most politically radical of the newsweeklies examined and differs most from the others in ownership and audience involvement, we may conclude that these factors are particularly crucial. This is not to deny the positive features of the other weeklies profiled here. Ideally, audiences should have access to a broad range of alternative papers.

Urban newsweeklies cannot replace more experimental and intellectual “small journals,” but they do offer one key advantage over these types of publications—their potential not only to “preach to the converted” but to broaden the worldviews of ordinary citizens who were literally just looking for a movie on Saturday night.

## Notes

1. According to AAN executive director Richard Karpel (telephone interview with author, 4 October 2002), an additional 100 general-interest urban weeklies could potentially join the AAN but have either not applied or not been accepted for membership. The AAN's bylaws (available online at [www.aan.org](http://www.aan.org)) stipulate that newsweeklies admitted to the association "should exhibit sufficient public service through journalism and editorial distinction and excellence to merit designation as a positive editorial alternative to mainstream journalism."

2. "Chain Ownership in the Alternative Newspaper Business," internal AAN document e-mailed to the author by Richard Karpel.

3. Author interview with AAN director Karpel. The figures do not add up to 100 percent because of rounding and the exclusion of small miscellaneous revenue sources, such as website advertising and out-of-area subscriptions. Of the association's 118 member papers, 75 chose to participate in the survey, but some of the largest papers, such as the *Village Voice*, did not. Papers in the survey averaged \$3.8 million in annual revenues, versus Karpel's estimate of \$20 million at the *LA Weekly* and the *Chicago Reader* and \$35 million at the *Village Voice*.

4. Given that the data are from just two editions, the figures are suggestive only, but a less systematic survey of other editions showed no significant variation in advertising proportions within papers. The *SF Weekly* would not ship back issues of its papers, thus its non-inclusion in this table.

5. In the AAN survey, sex advertisements were categorized as local display or classifieds and not reported separately.

6. Figures for the *Bay Guardian* are provided for only the 21–34 age range. One can reasonably assume that if 43.7 percent of its readers are 21–34, even more would be in the 18–34 range.

7. Demographic statistics are self-reported by publishers and then posted on AAN website newsweekly profile pages. According to the website, sources for the demographic data are as follows: R2 2001 San Francisco Scarborough Report (*San Francisco Bay Guardian*); MRI and Media Audit, undated (*LA Weekly*); and Mediamark Research Inc., fall 2000 (*SF Weekly* and *New Times LA*). Selective presentation of these data, produced by private marketing firms using different methodologies, makes any hard and fast comparisons difficult.

8. Most American daily newspapers earn from 75 to 80 percent of their revenues from advertising, with the rest provided by subscriptions and daily street sales (Baker, 1994).

9. If we take into account all editorial and quasi-editorial copy—arts and entertainment (including restaurant) reviews and events listings as well as news and opinion columns—culture/lifestyle is the dominant focus of all four alternative weeklies. In the same editions analyzed in table 7.1, arts and entertainment reviews/listings as a proportion of all editorial pages ranged from 61 percent at *New Times LA* to 67 percent at the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* and 68 percent at the *LA Weekly*. But this aspect of alternative weekly content is already well known.

10. For the *LA Weekly*, *SF Bay Guardian*, and *New Times LA*, content analyses are of actual print copies. Stories for the *SF Weekly* were taken from its website, the contents of which are supposed to match the print version (confirmed, at least, by a comparison of partner newspaper *New Times LA*'s print version and website). Since many stories were coded for multiple topics, topic *N*s exceed story *N*s.

11. An unwritten rule of American journalism is that a metaphorical "wall" ought to separate the domains of news and advertising (Benson, 2000). Dramatically violating this ethical principle, in 1999 the *Los Angeles Times* created a special news supplement about the Staples Center—a new sports and entertainment complex in which the *Times* was also a "founding partner"—and then privately split the advertising revenues from the supplement with the Center.

12. Telephone interview with author, 14 September 2002.

13. Interview with author, Sherman Oaks, California, 14 March 1998.
14. Interview with author, Los Angeles, 6 March 1998.
15. Interview with author, Los Angeles, 4 March 1998.
16. Note, however, that the damage caused by temporary losses in national advertising revenues was exacerbated—in NT Media's case, by heavy borrowing in service of corporate expansion, and in Village Voice Media's case, by its need to maximize short-term profits for its outside investors in anticipation of an eventual sale. In other words, reliance on advertising per se need not ultimately lead to local monopolies.
17. The Tribune Company founded its own weekly in 1991, *City Link*, to compete with a New Times paper in south Florida, and now owns the New England-based Advocate chain of alternative newsweeklies. Recently, the *Chicago Tribune* announced plans to launch a paid-circulation weekly with the working title of *Red Eye* in the Chicago region. The *Chicago Sun-Times*, owned by Hollinger International Inc., quickly announced plans to start its own competing weekly tabloid. Gannett Corp. is in the process of launching weeklies in Lansing, Michigan (reportedly to be titled *Noise*), as well as in Boise, Idaho. Daily newspaper company-owned weeklies possess at least one powerful weapon in their battle against existing alternatives: economic deep pockets that allow them to charge significantly lower ad rates. See Gilyard (2002), Kirk (2002), and Mullman (2002).
18. For example, in the 24 April 2002 *Bay Guardian*, a display ad for the women-owned store Good Vibrations is headlined "Think Globally, Masturbate Locally," and a half-page classified ad titled "Progressive Opportunities" lists job openings at the activist organizations Clean Water Action, Swords to Plowshares, and the Sierra Club.

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