HISTORY

THE ONLY ALTERNATIVE, 1968-1971: AN UNDERGROUND NEWSPAPER AND ITS COMMUNITY

A CREATIVE PROJECT
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

BY
RYAN BRANDON FRICK

DR. DOUGLAS SEEFELDT - ADVISOR

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
MUNCIE, INDIANA
DECEMBER 2014
This project is currently available at http://rbfrick.iweb.bsu.edu/the_only_alternative

This digital history project came about as a result of an earlier project created for Dr. Seefeldt’s Introduction to Digital History course. For that course, I created a digital thematic research archive for the various student newspapers at Ball State during the 1960s and early 1970s that is part of the Ball State University Digital History Portal. This project tracked the different newspapers’ viewpoints on the Vietnam War, the Counterculture, and the Civil Rights Movement. Building on that foundation, this new project focuses on one of those student papers, The Only Alternative, which ran from 1968 to 1971 and moves beyond the uncritical thematic digital archive into the argument driven digital research module. The Only Alternative serves as an example of the more liberal underground press which gained popularity in the late 1960s. While much of the scholarship about Ball State University during the Sixties focuses on the apathetic nature of the students and faculty towards the New Left and the Counterculture Movement, The Only Alternative stands as proof of a vibrant counterculture element at Ball State and the larger Muncie community.

In order to fully analyze this newspaper, the full run of twenty eight issues first had to be digitized. I was able to work with the Ball State University Libraries Archives and Special Collections to scan the issues in order to facilitate the creation of a digital archive. The pages were scanned in twenty four bit color at four hundred dpi on an Epson Expression 10000XL scanner. After digitizing the issues, I used Adobe Acrobat XI’s Optical Character Recognition feature to make the scans text readable. This is an important step as it allows the scans to be text searchable, something necessary in order for researchers to use the digital archive more effectively. Once the newspaper was digitized, made text searchable, and proof-read for
accuracy, I had to create a spreadsheet with the metadata for the entire collection. This spreadsheet includes the article title, author, volume and issue number, article subject, and other basic descriptive information. This metadata is necessary in order for the digital archive component of the project to be created. The newspaper archive has been made available in the Ball State Archives and is available there for research.

After the archive was created I was able to use different digital tools to analyze the text and break down the content of The Only Alternative in order to facilitate the analysis of it within the context of relevant underground newspaper historiography. After reading through the different issues of the paper, I decided that the best way to begin my analysis was to break the articles down by subject matter.\(^1\) The first step was to tag each of the articles with a different subject using the Library of Congress Subject Heading database. While there was obviously some overlap in the subject matter of different articles, I was able to narrow them down into seven primary subjects: Ball State University, Muncie, the Vietnam War, the Counterculture, Politics, Sexuality, and the Civil Rights Movement. Articles about Ball State deal specifically with the administration, academic programs, concerts, special speakers, and other events on campus. Articles about Muncie focus on the Muncie Police department, racism in Muncie, and other social problems with housing and the local school system. Articles tagged “Counterculture” deal with the New Left, drug culture, and reviews of music, movies, and books. Those tagged “Civil Rights” deal with the Black Power Movement, the Black Panther Party, the rights of prisoners, and other Civil Rights issues. Articles tagged “Politics” deal with specific political events such as elections or laws at the local, state, and national levels. Those tagged

“the Vietnam War” deal with anti-war protests and other issues surrounding the Vietnam War. The final category of “Sexuality” includes articles on homosexuality on campus and the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Once tagged with subjects, each article could be organized by topic, allowing me to study each topic independently and to trace the frequency of topics throughout the twenty eight issues.

After tagging these articles, I used the digital visualizations at the Voyant-Tools website in order to more closely analyze the newspaper text. This tool allows researchers to upload their text searchable files to calculate word frequencies, show keywords in context, and create word cloud visualizations from text corpora. This tool allowed me to analyze how certain words are used and the frequency at which they appear in *The Only Alternative*. This quantification enables one to compare more accurately how this local newspaper compares to other contemporary newspapers. In addition to comparing the topics included in *The Only Alternative* to those in the average underground newspaper, I also analyzed what topics were not included or were only discussed in a comparatively small amount.

In my analysis of the articles of *The Only Alternative*, I found that forty percent of the paper dealt with Ball State or Muncie. This finding reiterates much of the scholarship on the Underground Press that suggests that these papers were local papers above all else.² The authors were interested in engaging the local countercultural community as well as educating people on the more liberal viewpoints, or even more radical viewpoints on subjects such as the Counterculture and the Vietnam War. I also found that the more controversial elements associated with the Underground Press, such as sex, nudity, drugs, and cursing, were not

---

prevalent in *The Only Alternative*, with only 3.4% of the articles discussing sexuality of any kind and only 4.4% discussing the drug culture. The paper focused far more on issues related to the local community (42%) or the Civil Rights Movement (21%) than anything else.

In addition to analyzing the text of the articles, I broke down the paper into its different sections or content types: articles, advertisements and classifieds, and the Preview Paper events calendar. Each section had a specific purpose for the paper. The advertisements and classifieds were the main connection between the newspaper and its target audience, the Countercultural community of Muncie and Ball State. These sections also served as a source of income for the paper, though unlike many other undergrounds, subscriptions and street sales provided a larger percentage of the income than did the classifieds and advertisements. I broke these sections into different categories and found that the most common ads were for local events, draft resistance information, and local businesses. The final section of the paper was The Preview Paper. This section was the back page of each issue which served as an announcement board for events at campuses and cities around Indiana. While reading through these events, it became clear that they were widespread across dozens of venues. In order to analyze this section, I created a Google Map which shows the venues that advertised in *The Only Alternative*. In addition to mapping the venues, this map shows the reach that *The Only Alternative* enjoyed in spatial terms. As each of these events was suggested by readers of *The Only Alternative*, the fact that events at venues from South Bend in the far northern part of the state, all the way to Bloomington, 112 miles south of Muncie, had advertisements in The Preview Paper suggests that the newspaper created an underground community that had a widely dispersed readership.

In order to properly display all of these graphs and interactive tools, I needed to create a website to host the project. To do this, I used Adobe Dreamweaver to modify a CSS template to
create a website that was useful for this project. Creating the project in a website format allows it to be available to a much wider audience than does the standard print format. It also allows for a more visual project than a paper, especially with tools like Google Ngram Viewer, Timeglider, and Google Maps only available online. The website format is currently the best option for digital history projects and with the usability of programs like Adobe Dreamweaver, historians and other digital humanists can easily create online archives and research projects like this one. I have included these files along with this process essay as part of my CRPRJ 698 submission.

Sources and Data

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Underground Press


**Digital Humanities and Digital Archive Scholarship**


Price, Kenneth M. “Edition, Project, Database, Archive, Thematic Research Collection: What’s In a Name?” *Digital Humanities Quarterly* Vol. 3 No. 3 (Summer 2009), 1-10.


**VISUALIZATIONS**

**Graphs**

Visual LightBox Gallery of *The Only Alternative* covers

Visual LightBox Gallery of advertisements in *The Only Alternative*

Pie chart of subjects of Liberation News Service articles
Pie chart of subjects of Local Writer articles
Pie chart of estimated Ball State readership of *The Only Alternative*
Pie chart of estimated Ball State readership of *The Only Alternative*
Pie chart of estimated Muncie readership of *The Only Alternative*
Pie chart of estimated Muncie readership of *The Only Alternative*
Pie chart of the staff of *The Only Alternative*
Pie chart of Male vs. Female staff of *The Only Alternative*
Pie chart of topics in *The Only Alternative*
Pie chart of percentage of topics in *The Only Alternative*
Pie chart of percentage of topics by local writers
Pie chart of topics by other writers
Bar graph of statistics of Ball State students
Pie chart of advertisements by subject
Pie chart of advertisements by type
Bar graph of Ball State University articles per volume
Bar graph of Muncie articles per volume
Bar graph of Counterculture articles per volume
Bar graph of Civil Rights articles per volume
Bar graph of Politics articles per volume
Bar graph of Vietnam War articles per volume
Bar graph of Sexuality articles per volume
Line graph of Women’s Liberation articles

Textual Analysis

Voyant Word Cloud for the full twenty eight issues of The Only Alternative

Voyant Word Frequency graph of “sex” “sexuality” and “sexual”

Voyant Word Frequency graph of “black”

Voyant Word Frequency graph of “gay” “homosexual” and “homosexuality”

Voyant Word Frequency graph of “women”

Voyant Word Frequency graph of “marijuana”

Voyant Word Frequency of “panthers”

Keywords in Context of “Pruis”

Keywords in Context of “Pigs”

Google Ngram Viewer statistics about the use of “underground newspaper” and “underground press” in American English from 1700 to 2008

Google Ngram Viewer statistics about the use of “underground newspaper,” “underground press,” “alternative press,” and “alternative media” in American English from 1700 to 2008

Other

Google Map of the venues in The Preview Paper

Database

Spreadsheet containing descriptive metadata for the complete twenty eight issue run of The Only Alternative – Vol. I - V