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ROLLING YOUR OWN

Dozens of alternative newspapers are challenging the monopoly of the big publishers – and they're not all amateurish cut-and-paste jobs. Crispin Aubrey reports; pictures from the papers themselves

It all started back in the late Sixties, when a combination of cheaply available offset litho printing presses and a revival of community politics led to a rash of locally produced news-sheets. Today some 70 papers are circulating in towns, boroughs and country districts around Britain.

Most appear monthly, cost 10p-20p and sell between 1000 and 5000 copies. But the past year has seen a growing interest in developing a network of weekly papers.

The impetus for starting a local alternative paper is not hard to explain. Their commercial counterparts are for the most part unadventurous, reflect the view of the provincial establishment, and are hooked to the demands of advertisers. Rolling your own isn't as easy as it sounds, however. Few papers have any capital, and most depend on a handful of volunteers to collect and type the articles, pore over the Cow Gum and Letraset, then rush it off to the cheapest printers they can find.

Still there have been some notable successes. *Liverpool Free Press*, the product of a group of disaffected journalists, sold over 10,000 copies around Merseyside before it folded in 1977, a victim of

WAVENEY CLARION

News coverage in the *Waveney Clarion* (monthly, 20p) is dependent on the area it serves: a 30-mile radius inland from Lowestoft and along the Waveney valley. Its pages are filled with threats to the countryside, rural crafts, the desecration of the Broads, ley-lines and a column on the stars headed 'Heavens Above'. It started seven years ago on the proceeds of the mediaeval Barsham Faire, and the most popular feature is about pubs. Its symbol is an alternative version of the coypu, East Anglia's notorious rodent, whose views create a regular comic strip. The *Clarion* is exceptionally well-designed, with original drawings by art students at Lowestoft College. "If you just produce pages of tabloid prose, it's the biggest turn-off in the business," says contributor Don Mathew. "A good cartoon is worth 1000 words."

Half of its income comes from advertisements, and 1000 copies a month go out to everyone from young farmers in pubs to a small country post office.

Just recently the *Clarion* has noticeably shifted its ground, turning to the harder political issues of nuclear energy (Sizewell power station is 20 miles away) and Cruise missiles, of which the area will get a large share. "But we still want ordinary people to read it," says Mathew, "so we must have the stuff on Beccles parish church and the local craft shop."

WEST HIGHLAND FREE PRESS

The idea of four adventurous Dundee University graduates in 1972, the *Free Press* (weekly, 15p) is the longest-running of the weekly alternative papers. It is based in a former schoolhouse on Skye, and sells over 8000 copies around a chain of 20 islands. To reach them it has to travel by bus, ferry and even plane.

First and foremost a traditional local paper, with court reports, council business and shinty results, it adds a distinctly socialist slant. It has taken up battles over crofters' rights, the expansion of a NATO base on Lewis, and the ubiquitous saga of powerful landlords. "Hardly a week passes without some tale of evictions, hundreds of acres changing hands overnight, or a property speculator moving in," says Roger Hutchinson, a rare English member of the nine full-time staff. Stories such as that of the Sussex doctor who bought up the island of Raasay, some say killing its economy, have hit national headlines, and pushed the *Press* into forming its own news agency. In an area dominated by the Tories, SNP and Liberals, it said 'Vote Labour' at the last election, and its regular columnist, Brian Wilson, was a local Labour candidate. It has won the confidence of advertisers, steadily increased circulation – and has sacrificed none of its principles.