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Summary of the *Alternative Times*

The *Alternative Times* thesis is about alternative newspapers and is presented as a newspaper itself. In its many stories, it seeks to celebrate the more than 50-year history of alternative news weeklies in California. It chronicles the demise of some alternative news weeklies in the state while examining why some of the papers are surviving in an era when news is available 24/7 through social media with the click of a mouse.

Like a typical newspaper, a letter from the editor is accompanied by multiple news and feature stories. The work is based on interviews with readers, staff, publishers, authors, government officials, and owners of California's alternative news weeklies, seeking to illuminate the varying fates of this genre of journalism.

The main story focuses on the loss of four news weeklies including the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* and the *San Francisco Weekly* as well as the *OC Weekly* (Orange County) and most recently, the print version of the *Sacramento News & Review*. Its companion piece, "And the Beat Goes On" highlights three alternative news weeklies that are surviving and explores possible reasons for their longevity.

In other sidebar stories, the author spotlights the kind of people who were attracted to news weeklies by profiling a graphic designer who worked for California's first alternative news weekly, The *Pacific Sun*, and California's second alternative, the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*. "Readers Speak" allows a few faithful customers of alternative news weeklies to express what they most enjoyed about the papers. In the letter from the Editor, the author discusses what she sees at stake when newspapers, and specifically alternative newspapers, disappear. A feature story about the *Pacific Sun* gives a snapshot of a paper that helped shape Marin in the 1960s until the early 2000s, when the paper was sold

A companion timeline aids readers in seeing the rise of the alternative newsweekly industry from the 1960s until 2008.

The Alternative Times

Revolt, Raking Muck & Rock & Roll...

Letter from the Editor

News Deserts, Propaganda and Democracy

A community square is a place where people gather and share news about their community. Locals can talk about the issues that matter to civic life. It is a place where locals meet up, and feel a sense of belonging, participation and even a sense of identity.

Alternative newsweeklies, provided such a community square for more than 50 years to their readers, beginning in California in the mid-1960s. They have an editorial voice that highlights important issues for a community while still celebrating the arts.

This edition (*The Alternative Times*) will spotlight the death of some of California's newsweeklies and search for reasons why a handful remain vibrant.

Starting in the 2000s, and increasingly post-covid, the weeklies have been disappearing from the news boxes on our sidewalks, and pathways and going out without fanfare. This issue is meant as a clarion call for the public to take notice of their diminishing numbers and the impact this has on communities. In the interest of transparency, I have a vested interest. I worked for the alternatives for more than ten years and value the newspapers for the role they play in their communities.

The loss of alternative newsweeklies is part of a larger story. For the last 20 years, newsrooms across America have been closing, or at least downsizing, leaving some communities with no local news source. According to Pew Research over 1,800 newspapers have closed since 2004 with an additional 200 disappearing during the pandemic alone.

Margaret Sullivan, *Washington Post* Media Columnist, and author of the book «Ghosting the News: Local Journalism and the crisis of American Democracy» warns that without local news sources, communities start to shrivel. Voter participation, involvement in the PTA and other civic organizations, all begin to shrink.

In my community, I experience the decline in the local news weekly in the vandalized newsstands still scattered across Sacramento after the publication ceased of the *Sacramento News & Review* (SNR). I noticed it when it came time to vote and I missed the published endorsements section of the SNR. Instead, redundant glossy campaign flyers arrived in my mailbox every day for weeks. If there are important civic issues I should be paying attention to, I am not sure where to look other than researching them piecemeal on the internet, where I am likely to find pay walls.

“The political and social divides, which so many decry, may begin between with those who can and those who can't afford access to a wide range of fact-checked, accurate information. Disinformation, of course, is utterly free,” wrote Scott Simon, a NPR reporter in his February 5, 2022 article “Remember Reading the Newspaper?”.

Another news veteran, David Comden, Southland Publishing's former Vice President, reflected on our polarized politics: "One of the problems, I think, is the lack of editorial board voices." (Southland published three Southern California alternative newsweeklies). "For someone to stand up and say 'this is wrong--it is unacceptable.' I don't see that anymore. We are all getting news from different sources. We do not have a collective set of facts from which to debate. There are no more repercussions. Facts went by the wayside."

At newspapers, be they daily or weekly, facts are checked and ultimately editors are held accountable for what they publish. On the positive side, the internet allows more widespread access for people to publish. But it has also become a largely unchecked megaphone for conspiracy theories, right-wing rants and lies that go unchallenged.

We must support news services that are fact checked and held responsible for what they print. They are a hedge against the lies.

As many have warned, democracy is at stake.

Alternative Newsweeklies Enter Mid-Life; Are they Persisting or Perishing?

by Julie Scheff

In 2021, after Covid-19 finished ravaging what the internet had already done to its bottom line, the *Sacramento News & Review* stopped printing. Publisher and owner Jeff Von Kaenel had been working mightily for the last two decades to weather the various storms that came his way for the three alternative news weeklies he owned.

Von Kaenel sold one of his newspapers that year too—the *Reno News & Review*. He decided to publish the once weekly *Chico News & Review* just monthly and offered a much-shrunken version of the Sacramento paper online.

His story mirrors the struggles of many of California newsweeklies. Yet a handful of California's newsweeklies have escaped this trend, raising the question: what is their secret sauce? (See accompanying story, «And the Beat Goes On»).

Jenny Antolin, 52, a reader of alternative newsweeklies and a Tri Point Homes Sales Advisor, remembers reading Von Kaenel's papers in both Chico and Sacramento: "To me, everything I wanted was right there. I would read it front to back in a peaceful hour or so. I felt like I was kept up to date with things that were important. I miss the papers very much." (See other readers' perspectives on alternative newsweeklies in the accompanying sidebar, "Readers Speak").

Readers and commentators often describe the alternative weekly papers as: "irreverent, edgy, funny, fun, hip, & even taboo."

Julie Scheff, August 2022, *The Alternative Times*

The Bird's Eye View

The alternative press in California expanded from its very first weekly, the *Pacific Sun* founded in Marin in 1963, to include approximately twenty-three other papers spanning the state from as far south as San Diego to Eureka near California's Northern border. Most of the papers began in the mid-1970s with some launching as late as the early 2000s. By then, however, market forces were eroding the entire print industry. Multiple news weeklies started closing in the mid-2000s or selling their businesses to other alternative news companies.

For more than five decades, the papers blazed a new path for reporting the news— attracting loyal readers, who in turn attracted loyal advertisers. They were the voice of the Baby Boomer generation, the largest segment of the population even today, representing 20% of the US population. (Boomers in 2022 are 62 to 77 years old).

What Makes a newspaper Alternative?

Most of the alternative weeklies rose out of dissent arising from American involvement in the Vietnam War (1965-1975), youth culture and a sense that mainstream media--the nation's daily newspapers and television networks--were not telling their stories nor representing a more youthful point of view. Their editorial staffs were often inspired by the investigative journalism of Bob Woodward's and Carl Bernstein's 1973-1974 Watergate reporting in the *Washington Post* as well as the work of established alternative newsweekly forerunners such as the *Village Voice* (established in 1955) and *The Chicago Reader* (established in 1971).

"When I got my start in 1973, there was no significant local alternative voices out there (In California) at all," said Jeff Von Kaenel of the *Sacramento News & Review*. "There was no one covering Rock n' Roll. No one covering the political movements. No one speaking truth to power."

Von Kaenel continued: "There was a similar polarization as today--we called it the generation gap."

Like the *Sacramento News & Review*, the alternative newsweeklies were anti-establishment and pushed for social change. They stood up for the underdog, gave voice to the voiceless, held local officials accountable and focused on issues that were neglected by the mainstream press.

Today their headlines spotlight California's housing crisis, confronting homelessness, global warming, police brutality, rising right-wing violence, among many other hot topics. They were also early advocates for civil rights for people of color and the LGBTQ community.

Many of the papers invested in time- and money-consuming investigative journalism, earning them a place in the hallowed annual competitive line-up of stories published by the

nonprofit, Project Censored. That organization plucked stories from alternative news weeklies and other media that the mainstream media missed printing. Began in 1976 by Sonoma State University Professor Carl Jensen, the organization continues to shine a light on under-reported stories. Its slogan, "The News that didn't Make the News" says it all.

The *San Francisco Bay Guardian* was the first alternative news weekly to publish Project Censored's annual line-up of important stories, helping the group rise to prominence. Later, many news weeklies followed the *Guardian's* lead and devoted cover page prominence to Project Censored stories.

The Alternative newsweeklies' investigative stories unearthed information not reported by the mainstream press. For example, the *Bay Guardian's* commitment to investigative reporting helped it win a San Francisco Press Award for reporter John Schwada's scrutiny of why there was a CIA listening post in San Francisco in the 1970s. In May 2001, Lisa Davis, a reporter for the *SF Weekly* newspaper won press awards for her two-part investigative series "Fallout." Davis's stories described the dumping of radioactive debris into San Francisco Bay by laboratory scientists at the Hunters Point Naval shipyard. These are the kinds of stories that go unreported when alternative weeklies disappear as both of these papers have.

Besides the commitment to "progressive politics" the papers were dedicated to arts and culture coverage—their bread and butter and a critical reason readers picked up the papers each week. Readers also searched the papers' classified sections for roommates, jobs, relationships and even sex. Their sex ads, 1-800 numbers, would become a controversial and litigated aspect of the papers.

The Uniting Thread

Jay F. Hamilton, professor at Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia, Athens and co-author of the book "Alternative Journalism" describes the "alternatives" as local in their reporting, covering issues "outside the boundaries of acceptable topics, a kind of citizen's media with non-professional writers." One of their trademarks and lasting imprints on the journalism field is "making news sources ordinary people, not relying solely on so-called "experts" said Hamilton.

The alternative weeklies appear more like magazines than traditional newspapers with tabloid stitch trim format and 4-color electra-brite cover with attention-grabbing graphics.

The heyday of Alternative Newsweeklies

One of the reasons for the rapid growth in the number of news weeklies throughout California and the nation, said Steve McNamara, the former owner of California's first alternative newsweekly, was the phototypesetting software that replaced costly linotype machines. (see sidebar, "California's First Newsweekly"). The advent of laser printers and software for desktop publishing in the mid-1980s allowed papers to "sprout up like mushrooms in a field," McNamara said. (See accompanying timeline).

Between 1990-1995 the combined circulation and revenues of alternative weeklies nationwide doubled, to roughly 6 million and \$300 million respectively in 1995, said Richard Karpel, who is the former Executive Director of the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies (AAN). The youth market, (18-to 54-year-olds) coveted by advertisers, read the newsweeklies and that paid off handsomely for publishers.

Gut Punches: Craigslist, 9/11 & Social Media Take their Toll

Craigslist came on the scene in 1996. That service was a direct competitor for the alternative media's classified sections—with its roommates wanted, jobs listings and personals sections. John Raeside, former owner of the *East Bay Express*, described its arrival as a “game changer” for alternative newsweeklies. Craigslist and social media platforms like Match.com drained millions of dollars from newspapers' coffers.

“We lost one million dollars from a three and a half-million-dollar-business overnight,” recounted Raeside. “The writing was on the wall.”

Vice President of Southland Publishing's David Comden remembered attending a newspaper conference in San Francisco with guest speaker Craig Newmark, the founder of Craigslist. Comden ran three Southern California alternative newsweeklies including the *Pasadena Weekly*, *Ventura County Reporter* and the *San Diego CityBeat*. “The Editor of the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* (Tim Redmond) was railing against Craig Newmark ‘you are ruining our industry,’” recounted Comden. But to Comden, one thing came across loud and clear: “I was selling typewriters and no one wanted typewriters anymore.”

Mark Hanzlik, the Executive Director of the national ad sales organization, the Alternative Weekly Network (AWN), helped member newspapers increase their ad sales by as much as 25% by placing national ads into their papers. Their first success was placing Amtrak and Big O Tires ads in some of the alternative newsweeklies.

Hanzlik believes the terrorist attack of 9/11 played an important role in declines in his industry.

“9/11, that was the beginning of the slow death over the next 20 years,” said Hanzlik. “The ad agencies fell off the shelf and the business was so messed up in New York. It took the wind out of our sails.

Parable of the Forest

As far as the future of the alternative press “I think they are a blip,” said Comden. “On a desert landscape a single tree planted is obvious but in a forest of media options that tree is no longer visible and it withers,” said Comden. “It is like a parable of a forest. In a crowded forest, like in the Sierra Nevadas, trees grow very spindly and they are threatened by very simple things because there is too much competition,” said Comden.

Comden pointed to news on social media, blogs, Facebook, Twitter that put millions of voices (individuals as well as media companies) at the public's finger tips. He notes that there are some media markets he calls “bubbles” where newsweeklies are surviving. (See sidebar: “And the Beat Goes On”).

Shuttering

When California's second oldest and one of its most venerated newsweeklies, the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, closed its doors in 2014, it sent shock waves that continue to reverberate through the alternative newsweekly industry.

Five years later, in 2019, the *OC Weekly* fell. Two years later the state capitol's newsweekly, the «Sacramento News & Review» ceased publication in 2021. The three papers represent an average of 39 years of publishing in the golden state. The three papers' fates tell the tale of the rise and fall—or at least the shaky steps of the alt-weeklies.

Award-winning investigative reporter Scott Moxley tweeted, “As longest surviving OC Weekly reporter (8,811 days), am honored the job gave incredible freedom to investigate and expose scoundrels for a quarter century.”

If papers were not closing, they were beset by problems, making formerly flush publishers seek out new buyers. Consolidation began in the early 2000s reflecting an aging leadership of the newsweeklies and the toll wrought by Craigslist, decades of social media and Covid-19.

Enter New Times Publishing—the Rise of the 800- lb. Gorilla

From its founding in 1970 in Phoenix, AZ-based New Times grew to become America's largest alternative newspaper company, by 2005, it owned 17 alternative weeklies with a combined circulation of 1.8 million. They were at the vanguard of what would become a trend in the industry—news weekly consolidation.

Notably, in California, the chain, bought three news weeklies and established its own *LA New Times* in 1996. They remained owners of these newsweeklies for as little as four years (OC Weekly) and owned their Los Angeles paper for 18 years. They were active in California from 1995 to 2012.

Their relatively short-lived ownership of these papers may be due in part to some of the early concerns voiced by their peers. Many in the alternative weekly industry feared the chain would bring a cookie-cutter approach to its new California newspapers. They doubted out-of-town owners would know the essence of the communities they sought to serve. Their corporate structure was also anathema to many in the industry who were opposed this kind of corporate ownership.

New Times earned a reputation for aggressive business practices. *San Francisco Bay Guardian* Founder and Publisher Bruce Brugmann, filed a predatory pricing lawsuit alleging New Times was price fixing its ads to undermine the *Guardian* and put it out of business. In 2008, the *Guardian* won \$6.3 million in that legal battle. The *Guardian* later won an additional \$21 million when the Supreme Court refused to overturn lower courts' rulings of further damages. In Los Angeles, New Times also ran afoul of the U.S. Department of Justice for anti-trust practices when it merged competing newspapers to found its own newspaper, *New Times LA*.

New Times founders Michael Lacy and James Larkin became embroiled in legal battles for the sex ads they published. In 2018, for example, the U.S. Department of Justice seized their online business Backpage.com alleging Backpage.com was “the Internet’s leading forum for prostitution ads, including ads depicting the prostitution of children.” A judge declared a mistrial in the case against the founders in September, 2021.

Newspaper Ownership Changes Abound in the 2000s.

Many alternative news weeklies started experiencing a series of new owners, starting in 2000. Aging publishers who had been in the business for decades and had experienced their revenues collapse, decided it was time to sell. Take Steve McNamara’s *Pacific Sun* which he owned for 38 years. He sold his paper in 2004 to owners of the “Palo Alto Weekly”. Eight years later, the group sold the paper to their colleague Bob Heinen in 2012 who three years later sold in 2015 to the Weeklys, a newspaper group belonging to *Metro Silicon Valley* founder, Dan Pulcrano. The Weeklys also owned Santa Cruz’s *Good Times*, *Metro Silicon Valley*, and *The Bohemian*.

At the time of the purchase, Pulcrano, said: “free publications in local markets do well when publishers emphasize local coverage and don’t cut corners on quality, We’ve invested heavily in writing, reporting, photography, design, contemporary news racks, efficient business systems, digital media and customer service when others were cutting back. We intend to continue to do so because regionally based, owner-operated media is important to communities, and we believe in its future.”

Seven years later, the paper had shrunk dramatically. McNamara, said his paper used to run about 60 pages, “now it is between 20 to 24 pages, if you can even find the paper,” he said, adding: “The *Pacific Sun* is decimated.”

Covid-19, the Latest Challenge to Print Media

One reason for the *Sun*’s low page count is, at least in part, due to the pandemic Covid-19 (the worst of which lasted from 2019 to 2022), during which time many alternative weeklies lost more than half of their advertisements. The *Sun*’s publisher Pulcrano did not respond to multiple calls and emails for comment.

“On March 13, I got a call from our publisher who said almost all the ads have just pulled and I have never heard of anything like this in my life in my 40 years in publishing,” said Marianne Partridge, Editor-in-Chief of the *Santa Barbara Independent*. “If it continues much longer, I will need another word (to describe the *Independent*) other than not-robust” She said that Covid-19 government relief money and a committed ownership have helped the paper weather the pandemic.

“I have fought to get a unified vision among the newspaper’s owner/shareholders who don’t just say ‘Cut, cut, cut’ at the first sign of a tightening budget,” said Partridge.

Unlike the dailies with income from paid circulation, the newsweeklies are entirely dependent on paid advertising. Restaurants, night clubs, music venues, theaters and other indoor event spaces are the mainstay of their advertisers. Stay-at-home orders and the

public's fear of the Covid-19 virus, dramatically squeezed these businesses and made them pull their advertising. Some of those businesses closed entirely.

Free Circulation, a Novel Notion

The Pacific Sun's McNamara remembers an early discussion with Bob Roth, founder of the *Chicago Reader*, about how they were giving away their papers for free. «We were in an elevator together at one of the earliest alternative newsweekly conferences held in Chicago,» said McNamara. Roth described how free circulation would enable the alternative newsweeklies to attract a wider audience that would appeal to advertisers. At the time this was a radical idea.

Chicago Readers' Literary Journalism, Free Circulation

John Raeside, founder and former owner of the *East Bay Express* remembered that early circulation discussion at the AAN convention. He and most, if not all, the newsweeklies embraced the new idea.

Raeside met Nancy Banks when he was a student in the Graduate Theological Union at UC Berkeley. Banks would later join Raeside to co-own the news weekly. Banks had worked at the *Chicago Reader* and its trademark literary style journalism made a deep impression on the co-owners. Its explanatory, long reporting was one hallmark of the alternative press.

Raeside envisioned giving writers the opportunity to express their unique point of view in a literary style.

“What the alternative press was saying was news should be fair but trying to purge opinions from news stories was a fool's errand,” said Raeside. The paper was a “celebration of point of view.”

Raeside distinguished the *Express'* form of subjective journalism from broadcasts by Fox News, which also feature opinionated journalism.

“We insisted that the point of view be fair, to dramatize the opposing position in a way that was fair,” said Raeside. Fox News embraces its point of view, continued Raeside, but does not give opposing positions reasonable and even-handed treatment.

Express writer Dashka Slater's piece was an excellent example of the kind of writing Raeside was proud to publish. Slater wrote a 12,000-word article about the ethical issues of keeping a brain-dead woman alive to allow her baby to come to term.

The case split editorial boards and the community's newspapers, said Raeside. Some accused the hospital of “grand-standing” and performing “heroic medicine.” Some papers, including the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, decried that it was shameful.

“As hot as it was, we weren't going to take the surface story” said Raeside. “She investigated and wrote about the galaxy of problems that face a cash-strapped hospital.”

In this article as in others, Raeside remained committed to what he described as explanatory journalism. By contrast, said Raeside, the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* lambasted the

hospital. The *Guardian* was more activist in nature with a more strident point of view on issues than the *Express*, said Raeside.

The Village Voice, a Beacon for Muck Raking.

The *Guardian* followed the tradition of the *Village Voice* with its track record of investigative journalism. Other news weeklies embraced this ethic.

The *San Francisco Bay Guardian* railed against the privately owned utility, Pacific Gas & Electric for its monopolistic practices. Its ongoing coverage of PG&E prompted some of its peers to think *Guardian* founder Bruce Bruggman's fascination with the story was a joke.

But *Pacific Sun's* McNamara said: "We laughed at Bruggmann but in the end, he was right: they are a bunch of crooks."

The *Guardian* ran cover stories about Gay Pride Parade, nude beaches, shenanigans of Pacific Gas & Electric and media monopoly.

The paper, like many of the alternative newsweeklies, carried progressive voices in the form of editorials, cartoons and advice columns. Cartoonist Tom Tomorrow, Sex and relationship Advice columnist Dan Savage and Rob Brezny's astrological column all got their start with the alternative press, later becoming widely syndicated throughout the country's alternative news weeklies.

Its "Best of" edition was the size of a small-town phone book. It chronicled what locals prize in food, entertainment, services and more. Local small businesses got their 15 minutes of fame in these "books" and they were popular with readers. These editions stood out to publishing competitors. City magazines and dailies copied the popular editions.

Publishers were seeking new revenue streams after losing so many previous held sectors so they created even more special supplements: sections focusing on weddings, dining, pets, real estate, for example. *Sacramento News & Review's* Von Kaenel came up with the innovative idea of telling the stories of nonprofits and civic agencies and selling the public sector that service. Impressively, he printed 600 of these special supplements.

But these revenues were hard won. They took additional staff and time. Making money with prints ads was becoming harder to accomplish as newspapers competed with nearly free advertising on the web. Meanwhile the outlook for online advertising did not seem very promising. The income represented just 1-2% of their incomes in the early days and less than 20% on more established websites.

Slow Movement to Online Publishing

Many alternative newsweekly publishers were slow to move their publications online. Print ads were far more lucrative than online ads. In addition, online publishing would require a new whole new infrastructure (and staff) unfamiliar to print publishers.

Will Online Publications Rise To Fill the Gaps?

Despite the general gloom hanging over the newspaper industry, there are sparks of hope within online publishing. It is beyond the scope of this reporting to know whether these sites will be successful in creating revenue streams from subscribers, grants and donations that will allow them to thrive in the long-term.

San *Francisco Bay Guardian's* longtime news editor Tim Redmond migrated online with a daily paper, *48 Hills*. Redmond started the publication in 2013. In San Diego, investigative reporters publish *inewsourc*e, founded in 2009. Cal Matters, a nonprofit, nonpartisan online news service has been in business for seven years with a large and diverse staff dedicated to reporting a wide range of issues in California.

In 2022, a consortium of media, including the *Sacramento News & Review*, launched the website "Solving Sacramento" with a focus on rebooting the arts (from the Covid-19 downturn) and finding solutions to the shortage of affordable housing.

While these efforts are shining examples, they in no way replace local reporting in each of California's municipalities that were once served by a healthy mix of newspapers, alternative weeklies and daily newspapers as well as local magazines.

##

And the Beat Goes On

News weeklies that Defy the Odds

by Julie Scheff

"Blue zones" in public health speak, are used to describe places where people live longer. These include Sardinia, Italy, Okinawa, Japan, Loma Linda, CA. Metaphorically speaking, "Blue zones" also exist in the alternative press industry. These are a group of newspapers with a longer lifespan than their peers.

The alternative weeklies in San Jose, San Diego, Santa Cruz, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Monterey are a handful of these outliers that exist in a journalism "blue zone." It is not clear whether each of these papers has its own set of special circumstances. They could just be in a "bubble." Or maybe the way they conduct their business has insulated them from the troubles that have shut down other alternative weeklies. It's worth a look.

Widening the Lens, the case of the Monterey County Weekly

In Monterey, CA, Bradley Zeve has been publishing the *Monterey County Weekly* for 34 years. He founded the news weekly in 1988. He said he is careful to appeal broadly to the community: "To become this entity not just considered fringe was critical to our longevity," said Zeve.

He thinks some urban papers that went out of business may have appealed to smaller segments of the community by focusing on just one or two political issues. He said he thinks the *San Francisco Bay Guardian's* reporting on Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E), for example, might have made that paper become too predictable.

Julie Scheff, August 2022, *The Alternative Times*

“I set out to have an impact on the whole community,” said Zeve.

Zeve made strategic advertising and editorial decisions to appeal to a diverse and broad readership. He put the “cabash” on the sex ads (the 1-800 numbers) that were a lucrative source of income for many in the alternative press industry—including the *San Francisco Weekly* and the *Sacramento News & Review* (two papers that have ceased printing).

Despite being lucrative, Zeve said he thought the ads would make his paper less appealing to both a broad swath of his readers and to potential advertisers. The decision paid off. Conservative institutions such as hospitals which do not typically advertise in the alternatives, run ads in his paper. For a period of three years, Macy’s which favored running in the Dailies, took out ads in his paper as well.

Zeve said he was lucky that his paper did not rely too heavily on marijuana advertising. When marijuana was legalized in 1996 for medical purposes, the dispensaries spent a lot of money in the alternative newspapers. After marijuana was legalized for adult recreational use in 2016, many marijuana advertisers reduced their spending in the weeklies. When that sector cut back, his paper did not experience the same cataclysmic losses others did.

As for the numerous setbacks confronting his industry, Zeve thinks it is just the cost of doing business. But he conceded, “It’s a tricky business.”

When the pandemic Covid-19 hit in the winter of 2019-2020 and for the following couple of years, many of the small businesses that support alternative weeklies like his, pulled their ads from the paper. Because of this loss of revenue, Zeve had to lay off one-third of his staff. Thankfully, he has now hired back to pre-Covid levels. Most owners of his sister papers would be envious of the 52-56 pages that he is now printing each week.

In those pages, Zeve said his editor picks stories to be as inclusive as possible. “We mix it up,” said Zeve. “One week we had the reggae festival on the cover and the next week, the Bach Festival.”

In Monterey, the Dailies once out circulated the *Monterey County Weekly*, but now the alternative newsweekly is the leading newspaper in that community. Zeve claimed he out circulates the Dailies by as much as 10 times.

Marianne Partridge, the Editor-in-Chief of the *Santa Barbara Independent*, also runs the dominant paper in her town. In Santa Barbara, the Daily, the *Santa Barbara News Press (SBNP)*, distributes 7,000 papers. The *Independent* distributes 40,000—almost six times the circulation. She adds the city has a “strong sense of identity and yet a weak Daily.”

In addition, ongoing controversy has rocked Santa Barbara’s Daily paper. On July 6, 2006 five editors and a columnist at the SBNP resigned. They cited that owner Wendy McCaw who had purchased the newspaper from the *New York Times* in 2000 was meddling in their editorial decisions, compromising the credibility and integrity of their reporting. The Society of Professional Journalists gave the departing editors and three other staffers an “Ethics in Journalism” award. Subsequent turmoil at the newspaper further diminished SBNP’s

standing among Santa Barbara residents. (In 2008, film maker Sam Tyler released *Citizen McCaw*, a documentary about the upheaval at the SBNP.)

The weakening reputation of the Daily only furthers the importance of the *Santa Barbara Independent*. In addition, the higher distribution numbers of the Dailies make both the Santa Barbara and Monterey papers the go-to resource for their communities.

“What are we alternative to? asks Partridge, signaling that her paper has switched from being a secondary voice in the community to becoming the leading paper. “We are the ones bringing out stories that nobody else is doing. We are doing the long stuff that Nick (Walsh) is doing on homelessness, on the police review board, on the Sheriff’s department.”

Small to Mid-Size Markets

Both owners agree the size of their small to mid-sized marketplace, has helped their newsweeklies. Both papers circulate 40,000 papers in similar sized counties (roughly 400,000). Many of the “blue zone” papers share a similar market size. The cost of maintaining news boxes and circulating 100,000 or more papers may have been too costly for some papers in larger cities, said Zeve.

One measure of the Monterey paper’s success is how much influence it still has. Monterey Coast’s Zeve said that 100% of the candidates and measures endorsed by the paper won in the last election. He notes that the county is not a particularly liberal bastion so it surprised him his progressive slate had so much sway. He thinks making endorsements is an important role for alternative news weeklies and said he thought it was a mistake for some of his colleagues at other newspapers not to make them.

As recently as 2020, the *Monterey County Weekly* won second place in an Association of Alternative Newsweekly Awards for its story, “Hate in Monterey County—and efforts underway to stop it.” It follows awards for first and second place for best alternative newsweekly by the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies (AAN) as well as numerous other awards for reporting on the Catholic Church scandal in Monterey County and the use of pesticides on strawberry fields.

Public officials in Santa Barbara think the alternative newsweekly there remains a powerful voice in the community. “The paper has become the de facto source of info for people,” said Santa Barbara Mayor Randy Rowse. He likened the mix of entertainment and news that the *Independent* publishes to how audiences once turned to “John Stewart’s the Daily Show.”

The paper gave Rowse’s mayoral opponent an endorsement which gave him an “instant profile,” said Rowse. “He shot up from number four to number two in the race.” Although the paper did not endorse Rowse’s successful mayoral run, he said he understands that he is an “old white guy” and given the *Independent’s* readership, the editors probably felt that politically, they could not endorse him, he said.

Santa Barbara City Council Member Oscar Gutierrez agrees that the *Independent* carries a lot of clout. “In our community, the independent’s endorsement is vital to being able to garner enough community support to be elected,” said Gutierrez.

The paper also continues to win awards, most recently a 2021 first place award for its story, “The Struggle Against Learning Loss” by Better BNC, what its website calls “the leading online awards platform”.

San Diego, is home to a legacy paper operating since 1972, the *San Diego Reader*. San Diego is the second largest city in California with a population of nearly 1.4 million, according to the 2020 census. To serve that large urban area, the *San Diego Reader* once distributed up to 150,000 newspapers for most of its existence. During its boom times, page count was often stratospheric—200 pages. According to the paper’s founder, James Holman, in the past few years he has had to cut staff, and contract circulation by more than one third—to 40,000 papers. The page count is one-quarter of its previous size (currently at 50-56 pages). Ten to 11 of those pages are marijuana ads, Holman said.

“The era of the old alt-press is over—almost entirely,” said Holman. “I don’t think it’s over for us. I think we can survive in this weird way.” He explained as “weird” the mix of incomes that are relatively new in his career in publishing. His company sends out electronic newsletters carrying banner ads as one form of revenue. In addition, the business makes about 20% of its income from a mixture of online banner advertising on the paper’s website. Part of his staff is dedicated to digital services. These online specialists build websites for clients and grow their visibility with search engine optimization (SEO). “We are doing better than just breaking even,” he added.

Local ownership seems important as well. “If you look around the country at entities with multiple newspapers they haven’t fared too well,” said *Monterey County Weekly’s* Zeve. “You have to be able to be in the grocery store and have people come up to you and tell you how much they love you and how much they hate you.”

The owners of the three newspapers interviewed for this article all live in their circulation area and each own only one newspaper. Partridge, Editor at The *Santa Barbara Independent* said one of her proudest moments is interacting with her readers she comes across in her daily life. She recounted how happy she was when she took her car to the auto repair shop and the repairman told her how much he likes the *Independent*.

The dedication to covering the arts is apparent looking at the covers of both the Santa Barbara and Monterey alternative newsweeklies. As one indication of its commitment to the arts, the *Independent* hosts the “Indy’s” which is an annual award given to the theater world’s movers and shakers.

“Our mandate is to cover the arts,” said Partridge. “There has been a huge growth in theater since we started. We are not responsible for that, people with money are. But we have interviewed people in the arts, and made them come alive in the community. We have put them on the cover of the print version of the paper.”

“The art museum, the natural history museum, the botanical gardens have all told us: ‘we can only advertise in your paper.’” It is the most effective medium for their ad dollars.

Most alternative news weeklies similarly focused on arts coverage. But perhaps the wealth in some of the coastal cities such as in Santa Barbara, Monterey and San Diego help support

theater, dance, and music which in turn support the alternative news weeklies making it their task to spotlight the arts.

The reasons for “blue zones” in public health may be easier to diagnose than the “blue zones” in publishing. Health researchers can point to a Mediterranean diet or exercise or specific cultural traditions that promote longevity. But the reason for “blue zones” in publishing is less identifiable and more anecdotal.

Still the papers that continue to publish at a time many have gone silent seem to share a few commonalities. They exist in wealthy communities; they are the leading source of information for the community; they prioritize arts coverage that often wins front page placement; they stay relevant and influential to their readers; they maintain a loyal and diverse ad base; their owners are locals who are not spread too thin by multiple newspaper ownership.

##

Readers Speak

Reflections on Alternative Newsweeklies

NO « FOMO » Here!

One reader, architect Ralph McDaniel, 68, said he used to pick up news weeklies every week to make sure he wasn't missing out on the latest band, art exhibit or protest. He uses a somewhat new term generated by Social Media and all the alphabet soup of acronyms it spawned: «FOMO»—Fear of Missing Out. “The papers were part of the Bohemian life style in San Francisco. I found out what sub cultures were going on--the gay sub culture, the punk sub culture, the hip hop sub culture. The mainstream papers weren't interested in that!”

An Education

“The papers were a little off-center, sometimes slightly taboo as well,” said Jenny Antolin, 52, a New Homes Sales Advisor with Tri Point Homes in Folsom, CA.

“You were reading about so many different types of people and subjects you weren't going to hear about in the local paper. The newsweeklies talked about women's rights, birth control, abortion. My family didn't talk with us about these things. This is how you educated yourself.”

A Launching Pad for Fresh Voices

Todd Goluba, 55, said he loved the writing in the papers, especially stories about food, arts and entertainment. Goluba is a lawyer representing California school districts at Atkinson, Andelson, Loya Ruud and Romo. He laughed as he pulled out a manila folder with an article

he clipped 19 years ago from the *East Bay Express's* May 7-13, 2003 edition. The article, "Perfect Day: Me, My Gut, and I" asks: "What if you could eat anything you wanted for a day?":

The day starts out at 2am when "The fuzz are making sure that nobody's having too much fun...The downtown crowd is heading en masse to Nation's over by Jack London Square.... "

Goluba notes that like the author of "Me, My Gut and I" many new writers got their start and an opportunity to publish in the alternative weeklies.

##

Marin's *Pacific Sun*, California's First Newsweekly

by Julie Scheff

There is such a thing as local pride, don't you know?

So when NBC came out with a 1978 "expose" of Marin lifestyles called "I want it all now," Steve McNamara, the longtime owner of Marin's alternative newsweekly *the Pacific Sun*, wasn't having it.

The consummate newspaper man was armed with facts to challenge the reporting. "We thought the thing smelled a little weird and that they were taking seriously a mockery of some of the most bizarre aspects of Marin County behavior," remembered McNamara, 87. "It wasn't the way most people behaved. But some did and we made fun of them."

McNamara claimed "B.S." on their "facts" such as how many foreign cars Marin residents owned, how many homeowners had hot tubs in their backyards, and the number of suicides off the Golden Gate bridge. In one segment, a masseur dusted his client with a peacock feather, supposed proof of the weird massage therapies embraced by Marin denizens.

"This was an example of the hedonistic depths Marin County had fallen," exclaimed McNamara. He noted that NBC's Edwin Newman uttered his lines in a serious and authoritative tone as if to ask: "What is the world coming to? "

It turned out the scenes with the masseur were staged by NBC producers, said McNamara. Even president George Bush cited the peacock feather incident to disapprove of Marin's character. "The peacock feather business was the epitome," reminisced McNamara, chuckling. McNamara recorded the segment and launched *Pacific Sun's* special edition taking down NBC's portrait. "We had a lot of fun doing that. That was a hallmark of the paper, not that we didn't take on a lot of causes and fight them—which we then won—but we did so in an enjoyable way."

Lamooning was not new to the *Pacific Sun*. One of the *Sun's* crowning jewels is the serial by writer Cyra McFadden, a 52-week satire of Marin lifestyles, which became a nationally best-selling book and later a movie.

Another *Pacific Sun* claim to fame was being the first to publish Armistead Maupin's early installments of a series that eventually was published as the book *Tales of the City*. Maupin ran the series later in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. It was also made into a movie and TV series. Although the

Julie Scheff, August 2022, *The Alternative Times*

San Francisco Chronicle claims it was the first to publish Maupin's *Tale of the City*, during a BBC interview with author Armistead Maupin, the author affirmed that he got his start in the pages of the *Pacific Sun's* short-lived San Francisco edition.

Before coming across the Bay, McNamara worked at the daily newspaper, the *San Francisco Examiner* in a variety of editorial roles including Assistant News Editor. *The San Francisco Examiner* was the city's evening paper published by the Hearst Corporation. A true newsman with more than six years at that paper, he also worked at other major urban dailies including the *Miami Herald*. His experience made him a natural pick to serve as president of the newly formed industry organizations-- the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies and the California Association of Alternative Newsweeklies.

McNamara's political support of Barbara Boxer for her earliest run for the Marin County Board of Supervisors, won McNamara a friendship with Boxer. When she did not win her first race for a supervisorial seat, she wondered out loud what to do with her newly acquired knowledge about the workings of local government. McNamara recruited her to write for *the Pacific Sun*. Boxer, later became the U.S. Representative for California's 6th congressional district for 10 years, from 1983 until 1993. She was a California Senator from 1993 to 2017.

With such a distinguished cast of writers it is little wonder that McNamara's newspaper won the award for General Excellent from the California Newspaper Association in 1984. Upon first taking over the newspaper almost twenty years prior, in 1966, the San Francisco Press Club awarded the newspaper first prize for best news story. "The Night Nicasio Fired the Principle" was about how admitting to smoking marijuana got the small-town principal fired.

"We were very strong on environmental stuff and racial equity and just a free-wheeling view on how life could be lived," said McNamara. When environmental issues arose, we would pitch in and fight." Among the environmental battles the newspaper covered and championed:

"They wanted to run freeways throughout Marin and we fought that," said McNamara. "They wanted to put a nuclear power plant on Bodega Head, "not near it but right on top of the San Andreas Fault!"

McNamara tells how years later, one reader complained in a letter to the editor: "You used to be very feisty, what happened?". "The problem is that we won," explained McNamara. That letter came toward the end of his career at the *Pacific Sun*.

In 2004 he sold his paper to the *Palo Alto Weekly*. "Print journalism was dying," said McNamara. "I was 70 years old. My kids were all past college age. It was time to start something new."

After leaving the newspaper, McNamara began working as one of the initial advisers of the *San Quentin News*. It is now a 24-to-28-page paper with 35,000 circulation. It is the nation's only inmate-directed newspaper distributed to all California prisons. The *San Quentin News* has won numerous awards from the California Newspaper Association.

##

Punk, Garage Rock and Zines Lead Graphic Designer to Weeklies

by Julie Scheff

Hardcore punk rock band, Detroit's Negative Approach, along with the Circle Jerks, was just what graphic designer Beth Allen, 54, needed to hear on Labor Day weekend 2021.

With her jet-black hair, buzz cut on both sides, and bangs blunt across her forehead, she rocks the punk look. Covid-19 had kept her pent up inside her desert home for more than a year, and that concert jolted her back to her roots.

In the 1990s, Allen played the bass guitar in San Francisco's girl-led punk band, The Loudmouths. The group's female vocals, according to skateboard culture and music magazine, "Thrasher" are: "f...king screamed out at a high volume. This ain't none of that feel-good, pop-punk, wussy crap or warbling indie rock...That's right, the Loudmouths are loudmouths."

That 1996 review occurred during Allen's 26 years in the San Francisco Bay Area where she worked in the art departments of two alternative newsweeklies, *The Bay Guardian* in San Francisco, and the *Pacific Sun*, in Marin County.

The *Bay Guardian* was "boisterous" and "gritty" Allen recalls, describing how Publisher Bruce Brugmann would thunder at his employees, then soon after, amiably pour brandy shots to beleaguered staff post-deadline. "Print the News and Raise Hell" read the *Bay Guardian's* masthead and that is what they did, both on their pages and in their offices.

Besides working as an Assistant Art Director and the Online Art Director there, Allen reviewed punk and rock bands and co-wrote an editorial piece "Junk Yard Martha Stewart" about turning "trash" into art, a sideline she still enjoys.

Turning trash into art—or even cuisine—was particularly on trend then, leading her next alternative newsweekly, Marin's *Pacific Sun* to carry a feature about people who dive into restaurant dumpsters to scavenge for their meals.

Allen's art budget was tight; she had to illustrate stories with pluck rather than cash. For this cover photo shoot, she asked colleagues to pose inside a dumpster. Two sat at a prop table, another served the couple, with a hand towel draped over her arm, as if in a fine restaurant.

She would have had the money to hire models, illustrators, artists, photographers at her previous post as an Interactive Designer for the worldwide ad agency, Young & Rubicam. But she couldn't abide the trade-offs. The last straw came when a client pressured her to finish the web-site she was designing promoting Kevlar. Kevlar is the material used to make military bullet-proof suits. Her client told her she had to launch the site before America invaded Iraq. Allen asked herself, "What am I doing here?" The stiff work culture was getting to her too, "You could hear a pin drop," at the ad agency, she recalls.

On her salary as Art Director at the *Pacific Sun* Allen couldn't afford to fix her van's heater or get new eyeglasses. She shivered all the way across the Golden Gate Bridge on her way to the San Rafael office. She made due without eyeglasses. But in contrast to the ad agency: "I felt like I came home again."

Toward the end of her almost eight years at the *Pacific Sun*, budget cuts loomed regularly. At first her art department staff was cut, then, in incremental stages, her salary. “What was striking to me was how quickly it all changed,” Allen laments. “I miss newspapers” You saw what you produced every week.”

When the paper started publishing “advertorials”, paid content posing as a story, Allen reached her limits. She left the newspaper in 2011 to work for Kaiser Permanente as a Graphic Designer. She was a valued employee and that enabled her to relocate in 2017 to Moronga Valley near Palm Springs.

On arriving, she sought out the area’s alternative news media. “Whenever I go anywhere, I always pick up any local rags, and am excited when I find alt weeklies,” says Allen. “I like to see what is going on locally—art, music, theater, anything!—and read about local news, people and issues.”

In her new hometown, Allen discovered the *Coachella Valley Independent* monthly and the quirky *Desert Oracle*. In an article Allen did on the latter for the *Coachella Valley Independent* she wrote the *Desert Oracle* hooked her with its coverage of “desert quack Doc Springer and his tiny oasis Zzyzx; original Star Trek production locations in the Vásquez Rocks, local alien legends, and tales of teen pranksters putting smoldering tires in the dried-up volcanic rocks of the Amboy crater.”

Allen chalks up her interest in the printed word to her teenage years when she devoured music zines she found. At 19 she published “Wake Up,” her own zine, and used it to network in the underground punk scene. After getting her B.A. in psychology at University of California at Santa Barbara in 1990, she followed the scent of ink, and for a year, Allen volunteered at the alternative newsweekly, the *Santa Barbara Independent*. She remembers the old school “paste-up” when she cut out each column and pasted it onto a board to ready it for the presses unlike today where “everything is digital, digital, digital.”

With her newspaper chops, she later self-published a 4-color homage to one of her favorite San Francisco clubs where garage rock rattled the basement of the iconic Purple Onion. The 252-page book titled *Club’s Closed! Remembering Tom Guido’s Purple Onion*. Following her journalistic nose, and once again working gratis, Allen is keen to interview and report on desert female snake wrangler Danielle Wall. “I relate to anything offbeat, weird, unusual,” says Allen. “I love that she has her own business (Danielle’s Reptile Relocation) that she created on her own. I like sharing stories about people that others may not have heard of—those who walk unusual paths.”

##

A Timeline of California’s Newsweeklies

1. 1963, Pacific Sun
2. 1966, San Francisco Bay Guardian
3. 1970, Easy Reader
4. 1970, San Francisco Weekly
5. 1972, San Diego Reader
6. 1972, Santa Barbara News & Review
Reborn as Santa Barbara Independent in 1986
7. 1975, Good Times

8. 1976, Ventura County Reporter
9. 1977, Sacramento News & Review
10. 1977, Chico News & Review
11. 1978, LA Weekly
12. 1978, LA Reader
13. 1978, East Bay Express
14. 1979, Palo Alto Weekly
15. 1985, San Jose Metro
16. 1986, San Luis Obispo New Times
17. 1988, Monterey Coast weekly
18. 1994, Metro Santa Cruz
19. 1994, The Bohemian, renamed in 2000 as the North Bay Bohemian
20. 1995, OC Weekly
21. 1998, Pasadena Newsweekly
22. 1998, North Coast Journal
23. 2002, San Diego City Beat
24. 2008, Desert Star

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