

To Publish

Aragorn!

Spring/Summer 2009

Inside every cynical person, there is a disappointed idealist.

— G. Carlin

If publishing is defined as the practice of putting ink onto paper and then getting that into the hands of people, then publishing — and anarchist publishing in particular — is on the ropes. While there are arguably more anarchist books being published than at any time in history, readership is shrinking. Anarchist publications, magazines, newspapers, and journals, are nearly universally diminished. Infrequent publishing schedules and decreased print runs indicate that the time for print may be drawing to a close for anarchist periodicals.

The counter to this statement is that there has been a corresponding, if not larger, rise in anarchist publishing on the Internet. But is this actually the case? It depends on what you mean by publishing. On Infoshop.org, the largest and longest-running anarchist publisher on the web, it would be hard to find enough **original** anarchist content on the news portion of the site (the most active portion) in a year to fill a magazine. This is not a criticism but a statement about how qualitatively different Internet publishing is than publishing a newspaper or magazine, where reprints are the exception rather than the rule.

So perhaps a broader definition of anarchist publishing is needed. If we free publishing from paper and ink, then perhaps it can be seen as healthier than it has ever been. These are halcyon days of discussions about events halfway across the world, essays written just last weekend, and salacious details that formerly would have taken years to uncover about the heroes and villains of anarchodom. But what is lost in this new world of constant information limited to screens; broadband network connections; specialists of the digital arts of HTML, CMS, and image manipulation?

Pacing, tactility, seduction, context, simplicity, clarity (copy-editing and proofreading are beleaguered skills), beautiful writing, depth, informed debate, and personal relationships to authors¹ are what has been lost. And it is likely that these things aren't coming back, not in the

¹ The “author as hero” is rightfully criticized (and a puzzling phenomenon for most anyone who has met an author or two). That said, very few Internet writers bridge the gap that a Hunter S. Thompson or Feral Faun does — few go from being someone who is read, to someone who makes everything around them brighter.

anarchist or any other press. Moreover, there is a critical mass of readers² who declare good riddance to retail pricing; long form essays; specialization of authorship; editorship; slow publishing schedules, and the amount of time it takes for periodicals to get to print. People are no longer waiting on print and, by and large, print publishers are fading away one by one.

Any publisher who wants to be relevant³ today has to maintain a presence on the Internet but the opposite also holds true. The move towards digital publishing (as evidenced by the increasing number of “pdf only” anarchist publications) and incapacity of an increasing number of projects to even get their voice out into the world is a demonstration of the bleak times ahead. Sure, there will be more words, more *stuff* thrown against digital walls hoping to stick but mostly this will not be noticed. At best a new kind of virtual elite (which already exists and is in a kind of ownership of many of the anti-authoritarian spaces) will nod in the direction of a text — and links will proliferate. For about a week. Then it is on to the next thing, the next faux-controversy, the next pleasure, the next distraction.

This is distinct from even the lowliest zine or the most fantastic, critical anarchist magazine stuffed into the bottom of a traveler’s pack. Ink on paper continues to contain the greatest possibility of being rediscovered years from now, of finding a new audience.

Anarchist publishing in this century will have to come up with a solution to a new problem that at this time seems more pernicious than the suppression of publications in the last century. While it would seem that the idea of living free of coercion would *have* to benefit from being free from the burden of printing and distribution, this hasn’t shown itself to be true. In an infinite marketplace of ideas even the idea of freedom, of anarchy, becomes just another choice and not a particularly inviting at that. The path is too lonely and fraught with danger. It may seem unevident but the process of desiring anarchist freedom, of articulating your desire for a different world while you are *under duress*⁴, is as much a part of the process of becoming an informed, educated, life-long anarchist as is reading the words of the grandfathers of anarchism, or the Anarchist FAQ.

The process of putting ink on paper and getting it to people who are interested contains a full spectrum of experiences about how to actually *do* something. How to turn good ideas (and half-assed notions) into successes and failures on paper has a value of its own, different than the accolades, dismissals, and misconceptions that result from getting those ideas out into the world. The process of moving words on paper from here to there, from me to you, is also the primary connection a publisher has to the dozens, hundreds, or thousands of people who will be the writers of the future, the magicians of anarchy today, the comrades who may make things happen, and the best friends we will ever have.

² While these readers are overwhelmingly younger than 25, they are speaking volumes about what the future of text, print, and reading will look like.

³ Whatever in the hell that means.

⁴ It is a sad state of affairs that sitting in an office chair staring at a screen is considered the easier option than reading a magazine on the toilet, bus, or couch, but such is the state of affairs we are confronted with.

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