Have you ever read a mainstream media report about an event or action that you were at? Did they get everything right? No, I didn’t think so. And you’re in good company. I’ve spent much of the last couple of years researching social movements of the past, from the revolts of the 1790s, through the Indian Independence movement, the South African freedom struggle, and to the anti-globalization movement. All of them had plenty of trouble from the big newspapers.

Thankfully -- both for the movements of the time and for modern day researchers -- they produced their own media, too. A few copies live on in archives today and formed some of the sources for the project that became my book, *Counterpower [2]*. On a visit to Baltimore to speak about my findings, I prepared myself by reading the *Indypendent Reader [3]*, heartened to see the radical media tradition living on, on both sides of the Atlantic.

*Counterpower* looks at the power of the haves and the various methods that have been adopted by the have-nots to resist it. A key facet of power, that any elite has, is control over the flow of information. A key facet of a movement’s power then, is the ability to break or bypass that control. Indeed, access to information unfavorable to the rulers has frequently been an important precursor...
to social upheaval. Most recently we saw this in the run up to the Arab Spring when Wikileaks shone light on the corruption of the Tunisian regime. As far back as the French Revolution, rumors about the aristocracy helped to weaken their grasp on power.

Whilst all kinds of methods have been adopted to spread alternative ideas – songs, poems, novels, pictures -- possibly the most recurring tool has been the independent newspaper. Many of the titles have been long forgotten, but the movements they inspired helped win our most basic rights. To my eye, the clearest examples can be found in the build up to the major revolts which brought about the extension of the vote in Britain in the early 19th century. In radical meetings of the day, participants would non-hierarchically educate one another by reading articles from independent newspapers out loud. They would then debate them, each participant coming to their own conclusion.

The government of the day knew the potential danger to themselves should they allow such wide access to information. In response, they levied taxes on newspapers to put them outside the purchasing power of ordinary working people. The mark of having paid the four penny tax was a "stamp" of approval from the government. Although this led to the closure of some newspapers, a new publication was set-up in defiance of this unjust law, illegally priced at one penny: The Poor Man’s Guardian.

The first issue – published in July 1831 – declared: "We will try, step by step, the power of RIGHT against MIGHT, and we will begin by protecting and upholding this grand bulwark and defense of all our rights – this key to all our liberties – the freedom of the press." The paper constructed its own stamp, whose logo incorporated the phrase "Liberty of the Press" and was emblazoned with some timeless words: "Knowledge is Power." Early on, the publication set out its stall: "it is the cause of the 'rabble' that we advocate, the poor, the suffering, the industrious, the productive classes... we will teach this 'rabble' their power."

The by-lines of the first few issues of The Poor Man’s Guardian reveal the contortions to which the editors went to test the law. The publication called itself a newspaper, then a "newspaper" (in inverted commas). By the time of the fifth edition, it claimed that the publication was "lent to read without deposit for an unlimited period: Charge One Penny."

Despite 740 people coming to trial for selling such unstamped publications, the newspaper reached as many as 20,000 people each week. When the proprietor Henry Hetherington was put on trial, sales of the publication tripled.

Ingenious methods were found to smuggle editions of the newspaper from the printers to the distributors, including concealing copies in piles of clothes, apple baskets, hat boxes, and even coffins. This latter ruse was foiled when neighbors alerted the authorities because they were concerned at the number of deaths that appeared to be taking place at the newspaper!

The final death knell for The Poor Man’s Guardian rang in 1835 when the presses were seized. Despite its short life, the paper was phenomenally successful. It helped to bring about the Reform Act of 1832. Yet, unsatisfied by the mealy-mouthed compromises in the act, its writers pushed for more radical reform, fostering the class consciousness which led to the foundation of the Chartists, often cited as Britain’s first working class political association. The paper also contributed to a more immediate success: the resistance and persistence of newspaper workers who disregarded
the law showed an unpopular policy to be prohibitively expensive and embarrassing to implement. In 1836, the government dropped the stamp duty on newspapers to one penny.

I define a successful campaign as any action that works to redistribute power at least to some extent from the have-nots to the haves. The central call of today’s Occupy movement is for greater democracy – albeit of the economic kind rather than for the vote. But the same principles apply. Any form of media that strengthens the hand of "right against might", erodes the power of the haves, and exposes their double-standards, is to be supported. To quote Baltimore’s most celebrated radical Frederick Douglass: "The whole history of the progress of human liberty shows that all concessions made have be born of struggle…Power concedes nothing without a demand."

We might not need to hide our independent newspapers in coffins anymore but the non-corporate press still plays a crucial role in helping ordinary people to think freely and speak truth to power. It’s also crucial for historians of the future, that seek to give a balanced account of the past. Just remember to keep a copy aside for the archives.

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