



Dropping in, not out: the evolution of the alternative press in Byron Shire 1970-2001

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Abstract: This paper examines the evolution of alternative print publications in the Byron Shire of coastal Northern NSW, a region that since the 1970s has attracted a steady stream of 'alternative seekers' from urban centres. We discuss the reasons why most alternative newspapers and magazines in the area flowered and died quickly, while one, the Brunswick Valley Echo, recently celebrated its 15th anniversary as the Byron Shire Echo and has become the dominant weekly in the Shire. In comparing The Echo to its current corporate competitor, The Byron Shire News, we identify The Echo as a hybrid commercial/community media identity which contributes to an alternative public sphere, and remains physically and symbolically tied to its counter-culture roots.

Key terms: newspaper history, alternative press, regional media, print, Byron Shire Echo, Northern Star, Australian Provincial Newspapers

Introduction

I had been very angry with the local press ever since the '83 raids, the Operation One-up. There we were, bailed up in Main Arm for three days by gun-toting police and low-flying helicopters. Biggest bloody story in Australia probably that week and the local press wouldn't report it. Pulled over at roadblocks every time we wanted to go into town. It was out of the car, hands on the roof, men and women strip searched, search the car, defect notices, abuse. It was just bloody outrageous and the [local] press wouldn't report it.¹

Nicholas Shand, co-founder, *The Byron Shire Echo* (Bradbury, 1996)

By the time Operation One-Up laid siege to the alternative communities of Mullumbimby in Byron Shire, NSW, they were over a decade old. Home to hundreds of ideological and economic refugees from the cities, these communities were hardly an invisible element of the Rainbow Region economy. Yet they were marginalised by an entrenched regional media monopoly and conservative local government. In the press, as in council meetings, 'surfies' and 'drop-outs' were portrayed at best as

¹ Only *The Daily News*, published in Tweed Heads Shire, ran stories on One-up. The editors were personally congratulated by the Mullumbimbby communities although *The News* was not widely read there.

curiosities and often as dangerous or criminal. Galvanised by the 1983 police raids, the concentration of local media ownership and a desire to scrutinise local government activities, Nicholas Shand established a provocative, community-based weekly newspaper, *The Brunswick Valley Echo*, in 1986.

The Echo was far from the first attempt to create a media voice for Byron Shire's counter-cultures. Our examination of 30 years of print history in the Byron Shire reveals diverse experiments in ideological evangelism created by communitarians and libertarians who fled the urban centres in the heady, hippie days of the 1970s, bringing a grab bag of new political, cultural and social ideas to this economically depressed rural area. Although none of these newspapers and magazines are mentioned in Susan Forde's pioneering study of Australia's alternative press (1998), we will later consider whether some would meet a central criterion for inclusion, namely that papers 'cover general news and political issues' (1998:116). Some North Coast publications are mentioned briefly in historian Peter Cock's accounts of a flourishing alternative press in 70s Australia (1979: 42-47). Most local attempts at print diversity flowered and died within a year. In contrast, Shand's vehicle, now the *Byron Shire Echo*, recently celebrated its 15th anniversary and is the dominant weekly in the Shire.

Why the *Echo* survived when others failed, and how it contributes to an alternative public sphere in Byron Shire are questions central to our concerns in this paper. To answer them we pursue two parallel trajectories:

- the inability of a conservative, parochial and increasingly concentrated local print media to invoke and engage constructively with counter-cultural plurality.
- the inability of the 'radical', urban individuals who drove alternative publications to effectively secure a sustainable readership and advertising revenue.

By examining these trends in the context of cultural shifts within the region, we are able to locate the ways in which *The Echo* diverges from the latter path, and collides with the former. It is that collision which occupies our final reflections on competition between a corporate and independent weekly newspaper, and the factors which distinguish *The Echo* as a hybrid commercial/community media identity which remains physically and symbolically tied to its counter-culture roots.

Aquarius rising?

At the start of the 1970s the Byron Shire's only daily newspaper was the Lismore based *Northern Star*, first published in 1876. It was a typical rural publication, with a penchant for regional development stories, law and order, agricultural markets, local history and other parish pump staples. Its front page was devoted mainly to state, national and international politics. It published few readers letters and the editorial tone suited the conservative tastes of the surrounding Richmond electorate, which had returned a Country Party member to Canberra since Federation. *The Star* was part of Northern Star Holdings Ltd, a locally owned company which also controlled 2LM, the area's only commercial radio station, NRN 8, the local television station and other regional media interests. Journalist Stephen Brouwer noted that by 1974, over a decade before cross-media ownership laws were brought into force, the 'monopoly of Northern Star Holdings was the subject of an investigation by the Department of Media ... It is fairly common knowledge that from the Gold Coast's Bulletin newspaper, down past the Coffs Harbour Advocate, Northern Star Holdings effectively control or have part control of virtually every section of print, radio and television' (Brouwer, 1979: 6).

The *Star's* only print competition in 1970 was an independent free weekly, *The Brunswick-Byron Advocate*. Under various owner/editors it had served the farming community around Mullumbimby, in the north of the shire, since 1905. In 1971 Reg Wright, a jobbing printer, and his wife Jean started another weekly to cater specifically to the town of Byron Bay, in the south-east. *The Byron News* was printed and distributed from the front room of their Bangalow Road home. With its emphasis on crime, sport, fishing news, pub and social gossip and bikini girls, *The News* was more city-tabloid in its style than *The Advocate*.

But there was little in these publications that acknowledged the interests of the 'drop-outs' trickling, and then flooding into the Byron Shire. First the surfing fraternity had arrived in Byron Bay, drawn to the deserted beaches, excellent waves and the region's sub-tropical beauty. Nomadic and often poor, some young surfies set up illegal campsites on the beaches. Others settled, taking advantage of cheap accommodation and land around Mullumbimby, where empty farm houses rented for \$5-6 a week, and rural blocks cost \$60-80 a hectare (Cock, 1979: 95).

Nicholas Shand typified another wave of immigrants. In 1972, at the age of 23, he arrived in Mullumbimby seeking a place where he and his family could 'live in a community ... drop all those values of materialism and consumerism and get back to the natural life' (Bradbury, 1996). Many 'alternative-seekers' (as Cock called them) moved onto share-owned properties where they often ignored council building codes. Shand and many others trekked over the coastal ranges to the May 1973 Aquarius Festival in Nimbin,² an event which also sped the growth of organic lifestyle communities throughout the Byron Shire (see Hannan in this issue).

To a degree, the surfies shared with the 'back-to-earth' movement an egalitarian ethic and an environmental awareness, particularly in Byron Bay, where the meatworks still flushed blood and offal into the sea. Both groups, which often overlapped, were well informed about the burgeoning anti-Vietnam War movement and the Whitlam push for government via a constant influx of city refugees to the region. They also had a common appreciation of cannabis sativa, 'the herb superb,' and a tendency to find themselves on the wrong side of the law. They had little taste for *The Northern Star*, which, reciprocally, had little taste for them.

In the last three months of 1972 *The Northern Star* carried only one neutral mention of the area's new arrivals (*Northern Star*, 1972a). All other accounts related to 'Indian hemp' and narcotic drug charges, a protest outside the Lismore court after a drug raid, and a piece entitled 'Surfies asked to move on' sourced from Victoria (*Northern Star*, 1972b). In early 1973 this trend continued, although the Aquarius festival gained growing attention, most of it positive and enthusiastic about the business opportunities for Nimbin. Only days after the festival, started, however, an editorial raised concerns about health hazards and child welfare, complaining about the 'scruffy' newcomers whose 'primitive and permissive' lifestyle it suggested 'the majority will reject' (*Northern Star*, 1973). Subsequent stories that week examined unfounded rumours of a venereal disease outbreak at the festival [*Figure 1.*] and the details of drug charges, 'ugly scenes' between police and festival-goers, vandalism by persons unknown, and protests about government funding of the festival (in which the total grant is inaccurately inflated from \$5,000 to \$50,000).

² For more detail on that period see *The Nimbin News*, which was published during the festival, and then bi-monthly from 1978 until the present. Archives are held by the publisher, the Nimbin News collective:

<http://www.nnsw.quik.com.au/nimnews.html>

The Northern Star

TUESDAY, MAY 15, 1973.

When or if?

SINCE THE election of the Government December it has been believed there will be their Poll by a double dissolution — the doubt is when it will come.

The conjecture imposes a clear possibility to ensure action is neither lightly taken by the Government nor lightly forced in it by the Opposition. There have been reasons that both sides have sometimes in short of that test.

Repeated warnings in the last week by the Minister, Mr. Whitlam, and challenge the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Scoones, in general tactics to indicate the time could short-term rather than prolonged.

The Government has played its cards towards the holding of a poll — it has spent very to buy continuing popularity and, with its been able to find some justification in road ranging interpretation of its mandate, its role in achieving a soaring inflation rate year cut.

Some aspects of the industrial legislation outside the pre-poll policy. Perhaps it is barely designed as the play for the session, although unexpected complications arising through sections of the union movement, not the least being the A.C.T.U. It is to be a reason for modifying a pass it or ultimatum to the Senate.

There has been other serious review, decision by three Labor Premiers and two rural and Country Party colleagues to seek Council rulings on Commonwealth on whether State rights under its policy of rationing one of them.

The Opposition, with some structural strategy, is in a position to capriciously to a deflation. The test of responsibility is of all parties. At this stage the Government seems more concerned with the risks and expedience of selected substances.

C.P. officers lan conference

BALLINA. — Two senior officials of the stralian Country Party were in Ballina today and will meet members of the committee today to finalise arrangements for annual Country Party conference.

The Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Leon Powell, will address the meeting on Thursday.

The annual meeting of the Central Executive will be held before conference commences on Thursday.

Mr. Ford, and chief administration officer, W. Johnson, said today they expect at least 400 visitors for the annual conference.

Accommodation has been found at Ballina and more for at least 400 beds for the three days.

Mr. Ford, an confident in his ability at this time of the year, Mr. Ford, said today.

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Denial on reported outbreak of disease at Nimbin

Medical officer of the North Coast Department of Health, Dr. J. R. Whitfield, yesterday denied that there had been any outbreak of disease at Nimbin.

There had been rumours of widespread venereal disease and a outbreak of infectious hepatitis at the Aquarius Arts Festival. Dr. Whitfield said, "There is no outbreak of disease out there at the moment. All sanitary arrangements and organisation, I do not expect there to be any outbreak."

Dr. Whitfield said he was impressed by the creativity of the Aquarius people in providing their own toilet and ablution facilities.

"I am very pleased with the way things are going," he said. "The medical officer made a further inspection of living conditions at the festival yesterday. Deputy medical officer of the department, Dr. J. D. Russell, also denied the rumours yesterday. Dr. Russell said, "There has been no notification received in this office regarding venereal disease or infectious hepatitis."



Three main different domes (from left) of grass and leaves, plastic and cardboard illustrate the variety of materials being used in construction shelters at the Aquarius complex surrounding Nimbin.

CHRISTIANS EMERGE

The curious onlookers were not in force at the Aquarius Arts Festival at Nimbin yesterday so the 4,000 odd temporary "Nimbinites" settled down to doing their "thing."

Most of the inhabitants were not focusing God onto them. They had many people were coming to them, hoping that God could give a purpose to life.

Some said they were trying to follow others who had been there before. They had "been there" before.

People morning the evening during the day. They were organized into groups, some of which were referred to as "gangs".

At one stage two groups of people were seen to be talking. They were talking about their "thing".

In other parts of the ground there were more religious activities. Some were praying, some were singing.

Inter-denominational church groups made up of many of the university students, have organized a service, distributing the word of the Bible.

But preparation for all of the four Christian denominations visited said they were not focusing God onto them.

Unseemly words at Aquarius Festival

Six men were charged in the Lismore Court of Petty Sessions yesterday with having spoken unseemly words at Nimbin.

Another man was charged with having behaved offensively and another with drunkenness. They are: Trevor Keith Gardener, 23, of Gosman Street, Newcastle; Christopher Raymond Miller, 23, also of Gosman Street, Newcastle.

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Arts Council allocations defended

The N.S.W. Government has provided \$71,000 this financial year to the N.S.W. division of the Arts Council of Australia, and Mr. Bruce Duncan, M.L.A. in Lismore, yesterday.

He was commenting on a report in "The Northern Star" yesterday of a meeting of the Richmond District Council of the P and C Association. It referred that more was being spent on the Aquarius Festival than the Arts Council had allocated.

"In my report, I said I would make representations to the Government to increase the amount available to the Arts Council," he said.

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BRASS RUBBINGS DISPLAY

Fascinating brass rubbings of English characters from the mid-13th to the mid-17th century were on display in the Lismore Art Gallery yesterday.

The rubbings, featuring some detail of the ornate of the period, are the work of talented Miss Jilly Turner, of Brisbane.

Miss Turner is staying in Lismore at the home of Mrs. D. A. Jones, of Brisbane. She first became interested in the hobby in the 1950s when she made her first trip to England.

Since then, her collection of brass rubbings has grown and now includes a set of rubbings from the 400 years of brasses in England.

Miss Turner said the brass was one of her first rubbings. She first became interested in the hobby in the 1950s when she made her first trip to England.

"KING" LION TO VISIT

Lismore and Murwillumbah have been included in the itinerary of a visit to Australia this month of the first vice president and president elect of Lions International, Mr. Tris Coffin.

Mr. Coffin will visit the Lismore Lions Club at the City Hall, which commemorates the birth of the organisation in Australia before attending a luncheon at Lismore and District Workers' Club.

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\$12,000 lottery win

BALLINA. — Yesterday second prize of \$12,000 in New Jackpot Lottery No. 593 went to Mr. Peter Byrne and his mother Mrs. Byrne of Broadwater.

The ticket number 1234567890 was the winning ticket. Mr. Byrne said, "I usually buy all the tickets in Ballina and I gave the National Bank."

The ticket was bought at the Esplanade Agency in the Lismore Arcade. The excited purchaser, Peter Byrne, said, "My mother is also very happy about the win even though the prize will be one day late."

"It is a great Mother's Day present and it will be put into hand as far as I am concerned," he said. Peter shares farm his father's cane farm at Broadwater.

He is a keen mountaineer and drives a sporting MG. Mr. Duncan said the action by the Government in proceeding to award a counter bonus was aimed at to ease country students.

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These stories were complemented by several congenial narratives and ethnographic images of festival participants ('Silent Swami meditating naked in the sunshine'), but the overall effect was condemnatory.

A 'higher' Shire

Buoyed by preparations for the festival and a taste of Labor activism, Rusty Miller, a US surfing champion, produced the Shire's first local 'alternative' newspaper in late 1972, *The Byron Express*. Rusty, who had studied both history and politics at university, was 'self-exiled' from the 'oppressive' climate of Nixon-era North America. After working as an advertising salesman and writer with *Tracks* surfing magazine in Sydney, and then moving to Byron Bay, he was inspired to publish a newspaper that advocated social change.

With a masthead that proclaimed 'For a Higher Shire', the *Express* contained eulogies to the Aquarius movement, ecology and new age cultures, brief council reports, a smattering of Eastern religious philosophy, 'soul food' recipes, letters, a section of display advertising, and a few classifieds. The (usually) eight-page free tabloid was more celebratory than dissenting and only ran seven issues, until mid 1973. Miller found the production schedule exhausting and his readership too small to attract consistent advertising.

By 1976, ownership of the local press had contracted even further. Northern Star Holdings Ltd bought *The Brunswick-Byron Advocate*, although it kept the former owner, Jim Brokenshire, on as managing editor. In the same year *The Bush Telegraph* appeared. It was a handsome, well-received tabloid produced in Bangalow by Gerald Frape, an ex-Canberra journalist, photographer Lee Pearce and artist Jeanette Railton. The paper contained well-written and illustrated magazine style features on the environment, arts, writers, indigenous and alternate cultures and politics. The first two issues were produced for a local readership but this proved an economically precarious venture, and the following four issues were targeted at a national audience with North Coast inserts.

Frape hoped to reach city-based 'new left' readers, and to connect the variety of rural alternative communities which, by then, had begun to proliferate in the eastern states. However his vision outstripped his business sense. Ambitiously, he attempted distribution as far south as Melbourne, but when the delivery truck broke down on the highway south, and its load of *Telegraphs* was dumped, the financial loss was too great. *The Bush Telegraph* shut down after less than a year in circulation.

The battle for the forests

In *The Captive Press*, David Bowman writes that the 1970s signalled a cultural upheaval in the mainstream Australian press, where journalistic standards were confronted and overturned, 'venerable institutions' were questioned and 'young recruits to journalism came fiercely committed to reforming the world, and when they left disillusioned, others threw themselves in' (1988: 44). Ricketson writes that newspapers like *The Nation* and *National Times* covered new ground in reportage and investigative journalism, while *The Nation Review* 'challenged notions of journalistic objectivity and broached taboo areas such as homosexuality and four-letter words' (1999: 170-171). By 1979 little of this change had yet penetrated the secluded world of *The Northern Star*.

During late 1979, the counter-culturalists' battle to save Terania Creek's rainforests from logging drew a massive police presence and city media attention. A *Star* editorial archly summed up the birth of Australia's direct action environmental protests thus: 'If groups such as those at Terania Creek were allowed to go unchecked chaos would be upon us, and the economy ruined.' (Northern Star, 1979a). It described the protestors as 'outside interference', although almost all lived around Nimbin and Mullumbimby. The *Star's* numerous reports during the period led with the views of sawmillers, police and politicians, including very few words from protestors. Sawmillers' claims that they were subject to 'terrorism' were published without question, although protestors later rejected the claims (Northern Star, 1979b).

The Byron Truth provided a dissident counterpoint to this and other anti-hippie narratives. Peter Rowan and Jim Benfeldt put the mostly typewritten and hand illustrated roneoed quarterfold together in Jim's home outside Mullumbimby. During the newsheet's short life it focussed on the battle to establish legal 'multiple occupancy' arrangements on share owned properties, and one edition provided a day by day account of the Terania Creek action, which lasted over a month.

Coincidentally, one night during the protests, Lismore's biggest timber mill burnt to the ground. Under its picture of the burnt out sawmill, *The Star* report suggested the fire could have been the work of a 'fanatical cult' interested in the Terania Creek protest (Northern Star, 1979c). *The Truth* responded with the article, 'Northern Star Editor slanders conservationists,' and a cartoon depicting a policeman, a hippie, a mill worker and an ASIO spy, each carrying a gas can. The caption read: 'Come on. One of us must have a match.' By the time the arson was slated to a 'straight' citizen, *The Truth* had died. Cheekiness and subversion were not a recipe for attracting local advertising, and the entrepreneurial Rowan wanted to publish a more professional product.

He went on to start *The East Coast Times* in 1980. He was joined by Gloria Searle, who operated the first computer-typesetting machine in Mullumbimby, Gloria's husband Bill, a writer, Stephen Brouwer, a progressive journalist from the Canberra press gallery, and graphic artist Geoff Williams. *The Times*, dubbed by many in the still conservative population 'that hippie newspaper,' began with well-written, forceful features defending the natural environment and the cultural values of the alternative community. When Rowan, driven by a need to secure mainstream advertising, insisted that members of the creative collective curb their demands for editorial freedom, they shunted him. But their coup was followed by an advertising drought and they lost interest. Rowan returned, and rebuilt the advertising base with the introduction of page three bikini girls, local historical articles and advertorials, before shutting the paper down in mid 1981. In the same year the *Nation Review* folded, signalling the end of Australia's early counter-culture print movement (Forde, 1998: 123).

None of the Byron Shire's early alternative publications managed to develop a sustainable editorial vision and business plan. They were produced in rural localities, but were not local papers in the sense that they represented both the civic aspects and social minutiae of life relevant to a broad rural readership. In this, they did not provide a 'general news alternative' to the mainstream local press (Forde, 1998: 115).

“The Echo”

During the early 1980s the Mullumbimby counter-culture presence grew and thrived. Communes expanded, and a food co-op was set up. While marijuana growing and social welfare were important sources of cash flow for some, the alternative economy extended beyond the arts and craft base of the 70s. Some of original drop-outs dropped back in, opening businesses like health food and clothing shops, holistic medicine practices, restaurants, and other small businesses. Alternative seekers were slowly integrating into the social and economic base of the older rural community, sending their children to local schools, joining the bush fire brigade and becoming significant, reliable customers of local businesses. And they were still arriving. Between 1971 and 1981 the population of Byron Shire nearly doubled, from 7,831 to 15,426 (CBCS, 1971: 15; ABS, 1981: 9).

Nicholas Shand had spent much of the 70s, post-Aquarius, working in his native England. He returned to the Byron Shire in 1980 to find several houses had been built by friends on his block, and set about organising a workable ownership structure appropriate to communal land-sharing practices. But while regional development had moved apace, there were no state or council laws which recognised such an arrangement. After the '83 police raids he became increasingly involved in local politics, chairing the Northern Rivers Civil Rights Association and joining a successful campaign to get 'alternative people' elected to local government. He also had his first taste of journalism working as a stringer for 2LM, filing stories on Byron Council meetings.

By this time Mullumbimby was without a local paper. When Jim Brokenshire retired from *The Advocate* in 1980, Northern Star Holdings took the opportunity to change the paper's name and shift it to Ballina, a rapidly growing coastal town in the adjoining shire south of Byron Bay. Although *The Advocate* was distributed in Byron Shire until 1988, it was no longer Mullumbimby-focused. Shand saw a market gap and the potential to recreate the concept of a local paper, in tune with his ideals and the alternative Zeitgeist (Bradbury, 1996).

He borrowed \$5000 to set up *The Brunswick Valley Echo*, teaming up with an erudite typographer and former casual News Limited sub-editor, David Lovejoy, and his graphic designer partner, Wendy. Shand employed a small staff but initially wrote all the stories. He also learned how to sell advertising. 'It was touch and go in the beginning,' Shand later told filmmaker David Bradbury. At first he didn't realise he had to send advertising bills out and, accordingly, they didn't get paid. He later ran out of money and borrowed against his multiple occupancy share. But Shand argued the *Echo* quickly managed to build a strong, supportive advertising base because local companies had 'had fifteen years experience of the alternative society and ... they realised that a lot of their business came from those sort of people' (Bradbury, 1996).

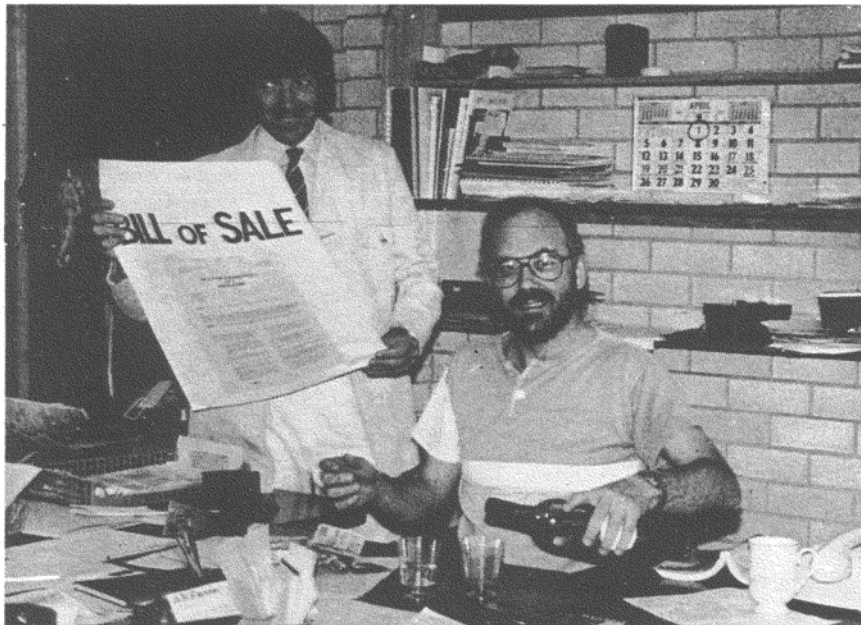
The A4 16-20 page paper began to draw from a range of contributors and quickly settled into an enduring editorial format: probing reports on council activities, articles on a range of social issues and community events, copious letters to the editor and a healthy dose of political satire. In 1987 its April Fool's day front-page informed readers that the paper had been sold to the *Northern Star* group, by then in the hands of media tycoon Frank Lowy [Figure 2.]. In the same year the paper moved to Brunswick Heads, its name was changed to *The Brunswick Byron Echo*, and distribution went shire-wide.

THE Northern Star **Echo**

VOL I No 42 APRIL 1, 1987



The Echo sells out!



Pictured above are ex-proprietors of 'The Echo' Nicholas Shand (left) and David Lovejoy.

IN A GIANT leap towards media domination of the north coast, the Northern Star has made The Echo an offer it cannot refuse.

In a dramatic day of rapid negotiations Mr David Gonski, the new power behind Northern Star Holdings, bought out the Echo partnership and appointed its founders to senior positions in the Northern Star empire.

Mr Nicholas Shand, founding editor of The Echo, has been made editor-elect of the Northern Star itself, and his partner David Lovejoy has been appointed production manager of the Adelaide Advertiser.

Northern Star spokesmen revealed they had been "secretly impressed" with The Echo since it first started. "We realised we had to buy them out now, before it was too late."

A joint statement issued by Mr Gonski and the ex-proprietors of The Echo said "All parties agree that single ownership of media on the north coast is what the people need. Eradication of wasteful competition and abolishing the publication of different points of view can only be of service to the people of this area."

Grand farewell today

Echo editor Nicholas Shand and production manager David Lovejoy are to leave immediately to take up their new positions. They will be seen off from Mullumbimby on the noon train, bound for Lismore and Adelaide respectively.

Shire President Stan Robinson, Stan Sigley, president of the Mullumbimby National Party, and Andrew Sochacki, president of the Chamber of Commerce, will make official farewell speeches. An ecumenical group of Christian community leaders will hold a prayer meeting, and the Mullumbimby High School Band will play

prior to a platform performance of the well known Brunswick Valley Rescue Squad Tap Dancing Team.

The train will be officially met in Byron Bay by Crs Mike Watterson and Jim Curtis who will be joined by Dr Roger Munro. They have issued a statement saying "These boys deserve everything they get".

In a generous and moving gesture Byron Taxis proprietor Mr Gary Macdonald offered free transportation, saying "If these lads want a lift out of the Shire, they can have it from me anytime."



Mr David Gonski

I N S I D E	
Letters	6,12
Gardening	8,9
TV Guide	10,11
Dr Who	13
Echo Stars	13
Book of Jobb	16
Whats Happenin' 20	



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Figure 2

In 1988 veteran Canberra journalist Mungo MacCallum turned out a column, state politicians were lambasted, marijuana myths and facts were dissected, and 'Shopping in the Nude with Jeff' introduced (*Byron Shire Echo*, 2001).

Despite its radical approach and educated but uneven journalistic style, *The Echo* was determinedly community-oriented, and captured most of *The Advocate's* former advertising base. Shand was known for his civic and social concerns, his willingness to try to find common ground with rural conservatives and his straightforward approach to business. 'There were some pretty traditional right-of-centre advertisers who didn't want to hear that we were in favour of marijuana legalisation or anything like that. Inevitably I got complaints and I said: "If you want to express your opinion you put it in the paper". But they were terrified to go into print. So I'd say, "We'll print the opinions and you just get on with your business. The only thing you have to worry about is whether people are reading it and they are!"' (Bradbury, 1996). Shand's departure from earlier hippie editors was not to ignore the dynamics of capitalism, or capitulate to a traditional newspaper format, but to reveal media strategies of mutual benefit to 'straights' and 'hippies' – increased trade, a frank political exchange of views and a good laugh.

Competition blues

By June 1991 *The Brunswick Byron Echo* was financially secure enough for Shand and Lovejoy to consider extending its reach into the adjoining Lismore Shire, the local government region which included Nimbin and its surrounding alternative communities. *The Echo* editors saw a market gap for a weekly newspaper, particularly one which reproduced *The Echo's* emphasis on detailed reporting of council politics and cultural activities. They thought the regional daily, *The Northern Star*, deficient in its coverage of these issues and agreed that there was potentially a readership over the shire boundary for a community newspaper.

With a team of Lismore locals, Shand and Lovejoy launched *The Lismore Echo*, another free weekly A4 size paper. While it could not realistically compete for readers with the well-resourced *Star*, there was a struggle over advertising clients. For just under a year *The Star* produced a free weekly called *Happenings* to discourage the newcomers. At the same time it became clear that the Byron Shire editorial formula wasn't appealing to the generally less cosmopolitan and 'free-thinking' demographic of the inland shire. *The Lismore Echo* received far fewer letters and voluntary story contributions than *The Brunswick Byron Echo*. After two agonising years and \$80,000 in losses, the Lismore paper was sold to its employees, who subsequently modified the style to fit a more conservative readership (Lovejoy, 2000a).

During this period the old *Echo* also met increased competition from Byron Bay's weekly, *The Byron Shire News*. Although *The News* had become more down-market and anti-hippie under the management of the Wright's son, John, in 1992, it was bought by a syndicate including merchant banker, David Kingston, and *Sydney Morning Herald* financial journalist, Glenn Burge. They engaged Gary Chigwidden as editor. The quality of copy was improved and standardised, and the paper distributed shire-wide.

A year later *The News* was bought up by international media mogul Tony O'Reilly via his Australian Provincial Newspapers group³. APN had already purchased *The Northern Star*, and added it to a virtual regional monopoly that eventually stretched from Mackay to Coffs Harbour and inland. Within this area the company reportedly owned at least thirteen regional dailies and almost all regional weeklies (more than 50 in number), representing over one third of Australian regional titles and almost one third of regional circulation (APN, 1998; Communications Update, 1998). By 2001, APN (now APN News & Media) was also co-owner, with US company Clear Channel Communications, of the biggest proportion of the Australian radio market through the Australian Radio Network, and had significant investments in pay TV programming and outdoor advertising (APN N&M, 2001). APN had the resources to drastically undercut *The Echo's* advertising rates, and by 1996 it was making a significant impression on revenue (Lovejoy, 2000a).

Nineteen ninety-six was a year of spectacular upheaval for the paper. By then Byron Shire was in the middle of a tourism and arts-led development boom, and *The Echo's* critical coverage of local development debates drew it into a stand-off with the Byron Shire council's general manager, Max Eastcott, pro-development councillors, developers and real estate agents. Eastcott, after reading a political activist's ad in *The Echo* that challenged the probity and acumen of his management, issued an edict that council staff were not to talk to the paper. *Echo* articles then began to question in detail his handling of development applications and developer contributions to council funds.

When council finally decided to dismiss Eastcott, pro-development supporters approached *The Echo's* main advertisers to boycott the paper in support of the general manager. Two major supermarkets withdrew their advertising (one citing a company directive to trial letterbox drops). *The Echo* rapidly moved to a tabloid format to save production costs on trimming and stapling. However, within three weeks the paper was rescued by its readers. Hearing about the boycott, mainly by word of mouth, they threatened not to shop at the supermarkets unless they returned their advertisements. Lovejoy claims the supermarkets 'did admit that they reinstated the advertising because of customer demand and outrage but they never admitted that they took it away in the first place because of political considerations' (Lovejoy, 2000a). A month after the boycott ended, Nick Shand died in a car accident.

The Battle for Byron

Shand did not live to see developments such as the critical massing of the area's screen industry, nor the explosion in backpacker tourism, that continue to elevate the Byron Shire's global profile. Byron Shire's population rose at an average 3.3% annually in the final years of the 90s (ABS, 1999: 21). It now attracts significant numbers of professionals associated with the growth of cultural industries – filmmakers, writers, architects, designers, visual artists, musicians, restaurateurs, and electronic media celebrities (see Gibson in this issue). Developments likely to go ahead in 2002 include a major sound/multimedia education school and a multiplex arts cinema. Veteran journalist and writer Craig McGregor compares Byron Bay to

³ APN N& M is controlled both via major shareholdings and board representation by members of the O'Reilly family, O'Reilly also holds extensive interests in Ireland, Portugal, New Zealand and South Africa.

Carmel, Monterey, arguing it is both an arts colony and an experiment in 'non-city' metropolitan living (McGregor, 2001).

The mixed rural/urban identity of the shire presents peculiar challenges for *The Echo's* representation of community. Under Shand's editorship, 'community' was opposed to 'big business', and successfully fought against companies such as Club Med, McDonalds and Pizza Hut setting up in Byron Bay. However as coastal real estate prices skyrocket and the migration from city to bush continues, Byron Shire's 'community' is changing, suggesting that *The Echo's* rage against 'inappropriate' development, corporatisation and globalisation may be more easily challenged. Already its 'anti' stances on these issues sit oddly with the occasional real estate spread and many ads for designer shops, eateries, internet cafés and hostels which target the tourist hordes.

In late 2001 though it seems that *The Echo* is winning a battle for weekly print supremacy in the Shire. While the 95 cent daily *Northern Star* and the free weekly *Echo* are not directly in competition, it is instructive to compare *The Echo's* performance with the APN N&M's free weekly, *The Byron Shire News*. *The Echo's* October 2001 circulation figure was 17,540, compared to *The Byron Shire News's* 15,742. While both publications ran at around 40 pages, twelve of *The News's* pages were made up of a real estate lift-out. In the same month *The Echo* attracted double the volume of classified advertising run by *The News*. According to Lovejoy, APN N&M allows *The News* to run at a loss in an attempt to destroy *The Echo* (Lovejoy, 2000a). However it is more probable that APN N&M is trying to maintain a toehold in an expanding and potentially lucrative market (see APN N&M, 2001).

In 2000 Lovejoy sought empirical evidence to prove to advertisers that *The Echo* still had broad community appeal, and to counter the potent myth that its 'hippie' readers 'have no money' (Lovejoy, 2000a). He commissioned Strahan Research, a specialist newspaper survey company in Melbourne, to investigate. Strahan's survey found that 30.3 per cent of the respondents had annual household incomes of \$35,000 or more, and 22.6 per cent had incomes of only \$22,000 to \$35,000. But while incomes were not high, loyalty was. Sixty-one point eight per cent of respondents had bought something as a result of seeing an *Echo* ad. Of this nearly two-thirds had done so more than once, and 20.9 per cent regularly. Sixty-two point two per cent used *The Echo's* classifieds either as an advertiser or a customer (Strahan, 2000). Lovejoy argued that 'newspapers great and small, independent and corporate, would sacrifice their sales manager on a granite slab at midnight to achieve that sort of reader interaction' (Lovejoy, 2000b).

Strahan's research also found that the previous week, 87.8 per cent of respondents had read *The Echo*, 61.3 per cent had read *The Byron Shire News* and only 8.5 per cent had read no local newspapers. The same respondents were asked 'Which local newspaper do you prefer reading?' An overwhelming 63.6 per cent said *The Echo*, 15.3 per cent *The News* and 15.6 per cent were unsure (Strahan, 2000). *The Echo's* appeal over *The News* can be traced to the former's stronger grounding in a sense of place, manifested in political and arts-oriented editorial priorities, community ownership and networking, and inclusive journalistic values.

According to Lovejoy *The Echo* has inverted the usual priorities held by a free weekly: a focus on advertising first and then design, with editorial content running a poor third. When compared to *The News*, the proportion of editorial to advertising is much higher in *The Echo*. While both papers often cover similar stories, *The Echo* devotes twice the editorial space of *The News* to coverage of politics and arts/cultural activities. It also represents greater community interaction, evidenced in the quantity

of reader letters it publishes: five pages against *The News*' one. Lovejoy argues that *The Echo*'s high design standards have forced *The News* to improve its own design and layout. Strahan's research showed that 86.8 per cent agree or strongly agree that *The Echo* is clearly written, well designed and interesting.

Unlike *The News* or even *The Northern Star*, *The Echo*'s editions are accessible online – <http://www.echo.net.au/> - which may appeal to the mobile professional wanting to keep touch with local issues. *The Echo*'s pages often include the responses of national and international online readers and expatriates. This was particularly evident in its letters pages post September 11, 2001, with international contributions to debate regarding the 'war on terrorism'. Also unlike *The News*, *The Echo* is still owned by local residents, almost all of whom work at the paper. The thirteen full-time and about 20 part-time staff are not paid standard metropolitan rates, but are willing to work long hours and share jobs for a community venture. Many worked for the paper well before Nick Shand's death, and agree that they feel like a family. *The Echo* supports festivals, protests and numerous community organisations, including another advertising competitor, the non-profit radio station *Bay FM*.

News styles and values represent another stark contrast between the two papers. While *The News* supports the rural status quo, *The Echo* covers the political spectrum, including a column by the sitting National Party member. *The News*' two journalists stick to a standard tabloid style, but *Echo* articles vary wildly from folksy to witty to convoluted and dry. Readers, who present editor, Michael McDonald, finds to be 'quirky and unusually cosmopolitan', still contribute much of the paper's editorial content. Few *Echo* staff writers have journalistic qualifications, but McDonald says they 'assume a higher common denominator of intelligence in our readers rather than dumbing [issues] down' (McDonald, 2000).

Conclusion: dropping in

More complex stories still need to be told about the place of community radio and TV in the growth of a localised, alternative public sphere in the wider Rainbow Region (of which Byron Shire is only a part); stories which perhaps better explicate Nimbin's symbolic place in contemporary representations of rural plurality. However our chronicle of the evolving counter-culture press in the Byron Shire locates *The Byron Shire Echo* as a mature, influential media expression of the cultural shifts which have taken place in the region over the past 30 years, and a very different form of local newspaper to that which resulted from changes to ownership of established rural publications.

It is difficult to propose that *The Echo* might have flourished in the absence of its short-lived print predecessors and their particular journalistic values. Our research indicates that they were vital to nourishing alternative communities, publicising political action, and to some small extent communicating their 'vision splendid' to a wider audience. Aquarians discovered that 'dropping-out' did not mean disappearing from the public radar, but merely engaging with a different set of civic issues which had to be discussed and negotiated. The editor/publishers of some counter-culture papers were certainly visible, straddling new and old rural communities as they searched for financial support. Media aware but untrained in the publishing business, they trod a fine line between nurturing alternative values and making enough money to disseminate them widely. Most overbalanced.

The Echo had several advantages over its predecessors. Changes to Mullumbimby's original weekly left it a market niche, it appealed to a critical mass of alternative-

seekers in Byron Shire, and they had solid trading relationships within mixed rural communities, which ensured the paper mainstream advertising revenue. In one respect *The Echo* and its forerunners can thank the established rural newspapers for their antipathy, even antagonism towards outsiders. Their conservatism created an oppositional space for new papers to fill. Being part of social movements which valued communal ownership and political dissent meant *The Echo* editors also had an ethical position from which to reconsider the form and function of a local paper. Equally, the increased concentration of print ownership gave them the opportunity to sell this difference to their readership. Indeed if *The Advocate*, *Northern Star* or *Byron Shire News* had been more pluralist, inquiring journals, perhaps they might have absorbed and diluted the ideological influence of alternative cultures. Perhaps belatedly, *The Star's* most recent editor has, in an attempt to appeal to a new readership, made gestures towards a supportive stance on marijuana decriminalisation (*Northern Star*, 2001).

Forde indicates that Australia's independent alternative journalists and editors claim the role of giving 'context to news', politically motivating readers and providing 'a forum for minority groups overlooked by the mainstream media' (1997: 118). While *The Echo* fulfils these roles in Byron Shire, the newspaper's popularity also indicates that, unlike much of the alternative press (as identified in Forde 1998), it reaches a mainstream local audience. Further, that audience extends beyond the Byron Shire via *The Echo's* availability online, its large subscription list and its appeal to tourists, some of whom take the paper far afield.

The strengths of *The Echo* lie in its ability to evoke the political, economic and social diversity of the Byron Shire, and its particular mobilisation of a community media ethos within a commercial media framework. On one hand it fosters political debate and cultural expression, is a local government and environmental watchdog, and encourages readers to participate in editorial production. On the other, voluntary contributions and the goodwill of its staff help keep overheads down, while its editors maintain a careful interest in design and format appeal, using market research to ensure viable advertising revenues.

While *The Echo's* political eclecticism, civil rights focus and amused scepticism draw from a libertarian heritage, its 'sustainable development' mantra is clearly communitarian in origin. There are interesting political and philosophical tensions between these two traditions and the ideals of well-heeled urban individualists now gravitating towards the Byron Shire, looking for their slice of rural paradise. Rural development, job creation and the impact of tourism are major issues of contention. However *The Echo* has a tradition of fostering robust debate, and at present at least it seems to be well-equipped to provide a forum for negotiating community change that accommodates both Aquarian values and those of the next generation dropping in.

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