

*Distributing Dissent* – from the *Utne Reader*, <http://www.utne.com/2004-09-01/DonOlson.aspx>

In 1984, when the fledgling *Utne Reader* needed a distributor in its hometown, Don Olson was the no-brainer choice. The veteran antiwar, antidraft, and antinuclear activist distributed off-the-mainstream publications in Minneapolis and St. Paul, and was dedicated enough to have gone to prison for his beliefs.

The Olson-and-*Utne* relationship still stands today. He's a living symbol of the sustainable culture the magazine represents (for years, he made his magazine deliveries by bicycle and city bus), and, in a sense, magazine distribution is simply an extension of the work Olson, 60, did as a dissenter during and after the Vietnam era: spreading information that challenges the status quo.

Minneapolis-born, he entered the University of Minnesota a convinced young conservative, but antiwar demonstrations and teach-ins opened his eyes to what he calls 'the larger context of the steady expansion of U.S. power since the 19th century.' Olson plunged into antidraft counseling and action.

Then came a fateful night in 1970, when he and seven other activists approached government buildings in Little Falls, Alexandria, and Winona, Minnesota, intending to destroy draft records. The FBI was waiting, and they were arrested. Dubbed the Minnesota Eight, the group became a national cause, inspiring huge sympathy demonstrations. Olson eventually served 20 months of a five-year sentence in a dank, antiquated federal prison in Missouri.

A stint as a potter followed, but when the local alt-press distributor went out of business, Olson took over. He also began hosting a weekly program on KFAI-FM, a Twin Cities community radio station. He plays tapes of local speeches by luminaries like Noam Chomsky and antinuclear activist Helen Caldecott, and, via interviews with Minnesota activists, helps keep the spirit of principled dissent alive. The show is still going strong, and so is Olson, who has his hands full with Iraq and the other hot-button issues of the Bush era. While his anti-administration views are clear, he doesn't throw softballs to his leftist guests. 'I often ask the questions a right-winger would ask,' he says. 'I want them to defend themselves. The progressive message should reach everybody.'