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Zines and the Library

Richard A. Stoddart and Teresa Kiser

Zines, loosely defined as self-published magazines, provide a cultural insight to the time in which they are published, making them a genre that libraries may want to consider collecting. Due to their ephemeral nature, however, they create collecting, cataloging, and preserving challenges to libraries. Few libraries across the country have met these challenges and maintain zine collections. Although no two libraries met the challenges in the same way, their unique approaches to zine collections may inspire other librarians to investigate the appropriateness and feasibility of zine collections.

An obvious facet of culture is contained in a society's language. Language is an agent that unifies, strengthens, and acculturates the members of a culture. Written language is an integral part of this process. A library is, at its most basic, a collection of culture in written form. Libraries accumulate the written language and serve as an access point to understanding culture through the written word. At the very least, a library's collection of the written word provides a historical "document" from which a cultural understanding can be derived.

Today, the library's underlying mission of cultural preservation is infinitely more complex than in the past. The computer age has made writing easier and the written word more accessible than ever. This has led to an explosion of information available both in traditional (print) and nontraditional (electronic) modes, making collection development within the library a complex and time-consuming task. Each new addition to a library adds a tile to the mosaic of cultural artifacts the library offers. No library can contain every piece of information ever produced; therefore, no library can provide a complete picture of any culture at any point in time. Print zines are one of the most direct links to the viewpoints and artistic endeavors, and therefore the understandings, of individual members of a society. As such, zines are a potent cultural tool and should be considered a worthy addition to libraries.

What Is a Zine?

The origin of zines is murky and varies depending on who is asked or, more importantly, what an individual personally considers a zine. Benjamin Franklin can be considered a zine maker according to R. Seth Friedman, a former publisher of the definitive zine review publication *Factsheet Five*. According to Friedman, "[Benjamin Franklin] published his own thoughts using his own printing press. It wasn't the magazine business. He did it all on his own."[1]

Historians generally trace the origin of zines to the science fiction fan club culture of the 1930s and 1940s. The term "zine" is a derivative of "fanzines," which were the fan magazines published by fan clubs of that era. *Comet*, a science fiction/fantasy fanzine, is often cited as the first publication of this type.[2]

Zines are tricky to define. The modern zine bears little resemblance to its cousin, the fanzine. There are many kinds of zines in many sizes. Today's zine is a product of the current technological environment. A zine may be a few sheets of paper reproduced at Kinko's in a quantity from ten to a hundred, collated by

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hand, and distributed by leaving them in bars to be discovered. A good example of this low-tech approach is the personal zine, *Spaghetti Dinner and Dancing*.[3] (Zine publishers and, when available, addresses and Web sites are cited in the references section at the end of this paper.)

A zine also may be a seventy-five page newsprint booklet produced in a quantity of two thousand and printed by a small press at the zinester's (a zine's editor) expense. Easy and cheap access to photocopiers, word processors, and desktop publishing allows zinesters to create, print, and mail one hundred copies of a zine for as little as $75.[4] This type of zine is generally distributed through the mail (at the zinester's expense) to friends, independent record companies, and like-minded individuals. Of course, zinesters value in-kind trades for their publications. Like-minded zine recipients are expected to send copies of their own zines, new recordings of their bands, or any other item they produce. *Shat Upon,* published by Andy Smetanka, is an example of this sort of zine.[5] It has gone a step further with the barter system and given advertising space to local merchants in exchange for their wares. Such wares have included pitchers of beer from local bars, loaves of bread from the local bakery, and records from the local record store.

There are types of zines that are more mainstream. A prime example is *Maximum RocknRoll* (*MRR*).[6] This punk music zine can be considered a regular magazine by some standards. It is printed monthly, available through major retailers such as Books-a-Million and Borders, contains more than one hundred pages, and accepts paid advertising. However, *MRR* defines itself as a zine. Historically, *MRR* is the model to which most music zines aspire. Its "rant columns," band interviews, and music reviews (in that order) have become the standard format of music zines throughout the world.

Zines runs the gamut from very small to very large. There are numerous other differences between zines. Zinesters can charge a few dollars to cover expenses or charge nothing at all. Topics are diverse, including music, poetry, stories, politics, and travelogues. The physical size can vary from wallet sized to newspaper length to anywhere between. Almost any print material independently created and distributed can be classified as a zine. While some zines are published as a type of "fan magazine," others are published as an outlet for scathing criticisms. Zines are the unfiltered voice of the common person. Print zines are not bound to editors or publishers.

Some zines readily disregard copyright laws.[7] Zinesters sometimes cut and paste relevant articles from other publications and include them in their own to reflect a particular point of view or mission. Sometimes the goal of getting their information to other like-minded individuals leads them to infringe on copyright laws. Additionally, since the goal of zine authors is to disseminate their thoughts and ideas to the widest audience as cost effectively as possible, the duplication of their work by others is not discouraged as long as it is not reproduced for commercial purposes.[8]

Zines are eccentric little publications that are expansive in their format and content. It is extremely difficult to put a finite definition on a zine. A better way to grasp what defines the zine is to consider the attitudes and purposes behind its creation. A zine is usually created as a means of sharing an unusual perspective and providing information that would be difficult to obtain from mainstream media, and is produced in limited quantities using low-tech means. A zine is not published for monetary gain.[9]

One of the most important tenants regarding modern zines is a do-it-yourself (DIY) attitude. DIY is one of the hallmark qualities of zines. The DIY attitude is often associated with the punk rock subculture: if a punk band wants to put out a record, to tour, or to play a show, the plan of action is (to borrow a phrase from Nike) "just do it." Adherents to the DIY philosophy put their money and sweat into a project, whether it is a band or a zine, to produce and participate in something they love.

This attitude is heavily ingrained in the zine subculture. If zinesters want to write about something, they write about it. Erik Bluhm, the producer of the California-centric zine *Great God Pan,* produced a zine that had a large press run, hard cover, and a generous distribution.[10] *Great God Pan* was therefore not cheap to produce, and Bluhm certainly did not make money off the project. However, his desire to publish and be read outweighed any financial restrictions.

Zines are a written product of the human need for self-expression. Beyond that, zines are hard to define. Their ephemeral nature makes it difficult to pinpoint a clear definition, yet it is possible to grasp the concept even though the specifics can sometimes be vague.

The Value of Zines

Why are zines important? Why should a library care about them? Three aspects of zines speak to their importance. First, they provide an alternative point of view. Some of these points of view are quite passionate. If a person is willing to spend the time, money, and effort to produce and distribute a zine, then they must have something they think is worth saying, no matter how obscure. For example, *Dishwasher,* by Dishwasher Pete, is an ode to the restaurant dishwasher.[11] Pete's goal is to wash dishes professionally in all fifty states and documents that quest from the point of view of a dishwasher. Who would have thought someone would take the time to write about something as unique as this?

Secondly, zines are important because they embrace individual expression. Zines usually are not filtered

Figure 1. *Cometbus* is an example of the artisitc qualities of zine cover art.

through an editor, much less an editorial board. When a zine is made available to the world, it can be thought of as a direct link to an individual's opinion, personality, or interpretation of the world. In addition, zines can be artistic. Many zines contain short stories, poetry, and art. The next Charles Bukowski, Allen Ginsberg, or Jean-Michel Basquiat may now be publishing in zines. The layout of zines can be dynamic, often taking on collage forms. These layouts can be hectic and sometimes beautiful in a creative sense. The covers of the zine *Cometbus*, for example, are quite artistic, all the more striking since they are created in most cases by manipulating a photocopy machine for effect (see figure 1).[12] Figure 2 presents a sampling of other zine covers.

Zines provide insight into today's modern popular culture—a third reason for libraries to collect zines. They offer a direct and unfiltered view of an individual's interpretation of and participation in the culture that surrounds him or her. The zine presents a first-person attempt to decipher and decode the world. Laila Miletic-Vejzovic, the rare books and special collections librarian at Washington State University sums it up by stating, "Zines are an important part of popular culture because they reflect the attitudes and values of the masses."[13]

Kathryn DeGraff of the DePaul University Libraries in Chicago believes historians will lose out on an important resource if zines are not collected. She has said, "Unfortunately, the telephone and e-mail are replacing letters as the principal form of communication, so a lot of history is disappearing. If we don't preserve zines, historians and other researchers are going to have to write about our era from secondary sources."[14]

Whether to preserve an alternative point of view, celebrate individual expression, or provide a written document of our accelerated culture, zines can be a worthwhile and important addition to many libraries' collections.

Not many mainstream libraries are collecting zines. Many alternative venues are currently filling this void. In many cases, they are simply a back room in an independent bookstore or magazine shop. One prominent independent zine library is the Independent Publishing Resource Center (IPRC) located in Portland, Oregon.[15] This non-profit facility has an online-cataloged library of 3,500 titles, plus publishing facilities and workshops for zinesters. The IPRC, funded through grants and donations, is a great resource for zine publishers, scholars, and researchers and serves as an example to other like-minded institutions.

Libraries and Zines: Hurdles and Hoops

Due to the ephemeral nature of zines, libraries face a real challenge if they choose to include them in their collection; few have risen to that challenge. The authors conducted an informal e-mail survey of twenty libraries that house zine collections. Responses from fourteen respondents offer some insight into the obstacles libraries face in collecting zines. The variety of answers received in response to questions about collecting, cataloging, and preserving issues were most interesting.

Collecting

If a library is to have a zine collection, the first hurdle is to obtain the zines. With the ephemeral nature of zines, where do libraries start? Some university zine collections began as a large donation from a zine collector. Approximately one thousand zines were donated to the Minneapolis Community and Technical College Library by Chris Dodge, a librarian at *Utne* magazine and former editor of the Minnesota Library Association's *Social Responsibility Round Table Newsletter,* which reviews zines.[16] In 1991, the New York State Library accepted the zine collection of Mike Gunderloy, the founder of the zine review publication *Factsheet Five*. His collection totaled approximately ten thousand zines.[17] The Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture at Duke University received its core zine collection from artist and zinester Sarah Dyer in 2001.[18] Darby Romeo, who was associated with the now defunct zine, *Ben Is Dead,* donated her collection to the University of California–Los Angeles Arts Library.[19]

Zines are most often acquired through donations of collections, subscribing to titles through independent distributors, or by simply writing to the creator of a zine and requesting a copy. Another more obvious collection strategy is for a library to pick up copies found at distribution points such as independent bookstores, record shops, or a local "alternative culture" hangout. Many zines are free and zinesters are, in most cases, more than happy to provide back issues.[20] An extensive alphabetical listing of zine publications with zinester contact information for requesting zine issues or information can be found on the Web site for Sleazefest.[21]

The Ray and Pat Browne Library for Popular Culture Studies at Bowling Green State University (Bowling Green,

Ohio), the Zine Archives and Publishing Project at the Richard Hugo House (Seattle, Washington), the Special Collections and Archives Department of DePaul University Library (Chicago), and the Special Collections Division of Michigan State University (East Lansing) are a sampling of the libraries that depend on donations as their main source of zines.[22] Donations come through solicitation in review zines such as *Zine World: A Reader's Guide to the Underground Press* and *Broken Pencil*, and by word of mouth.[23]

Many libraries' zine collections specialize in one or more forms of zine literature, such as women's studies or protest literature, therefore limiting the donations they accept. The Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan, for example, specializes in protest literature, but accepts any zine with "entertainment value."[24] The Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture housed at Duke University only accepts "donations of zines by women and girls," while the University of Buffalo will only accept zines that are at least fifty percent poetry.[25]

The Mansfield Library at the University of Montana in Missoula is an active collector of all types of zines. According to Christopher Mullin, the special collections librarian, the library currently has about seventeen-and-a-half running feet of shelf space, representing more than five hundred titles of zines.[26] The zine collection is based strictly on donations, no money is designated for the purchase of zines, and still the collection remains active. Mullin estimates the library receives several hundred zine issues a year, keeping only one copy of each zine issue in the collection. To keep the collection active, the library periodically puts out a call on the newsgroup alt.zines for more donations, which has resulted in the library being added to several Web lists of zine repositories, such as "The Zine & E-zine Resource Guide" and "Infoshops & Zine Libraries."[27]

Very few libraries subscribe to zines in addition to accepting donations. The Salt Lake City Public Library and the University of Buffalo are two exceptions.[28]

Cataloging

After obtaining zines, the next challenge for most libraries is cataloging. Should zines be categorized as alternative press, underground press, or small press publications; little magazines; "vanity press" materials; or something else altogether? Are zines considered serials? Their often erratic publication patterns (they are often unnumbered and may appear months apart) make handling them as a traditional serial problematic. Should they be included in the main library catalog or cataloged separately as part of an archive or a special collection? These are all questions that a library will have to consider regarding its zine collection.

Figure 2. Zines come in various sizes, each with its own unique cover art.

Zines present unique challenges due to qualities inherent to the genre itself. Titles often change on the whim of their creators; some zines die without warning. For the most part, zines are rarely published in a consistent manner. Since they are self-published, their publishing schedules are uniquely bound to the financial stability of their creators. They generally contain no dates or identifying marks such as ISSNs (International Standard Serial Numbers). Zinesters do not make it easy for the librarian.

Cataloging practices vary from collection to collection. The Ray and Pat Browne Library for Popular Culture Studies at Bowling Green State University does not catalog zines.[29] Minneapolis Community and Technical College Library maintains an in-house databases using commercial software.[30] The University of Buffalo treats zines "the same as any other periodical."[31]

The Mansfield Library at the University of Montana, Missoula, is one library that does not catalog zines.[32] Instead, folders are set up and titled for each zine publication, and zine issues are placed in the appropriate folder. The folders are arranged alphabetically by title and placed in pamphlet boxes on the shelf. When a new issue of a previously held zine arrives at the library, it is simply added to the appropriate folder with no additional processing. There is no attempt to organize the zine collection beyond the folder level. A folder may contain one issue of a zine or fifty issues. If a patron wants to know what is in a folder, he or she has to examine it physically. Title lists of the collection are made available at the library's reference desk and in the Archives/Special Collections reading room. The zines may be viewed within the Special Collections reading room only.

The Minneapolis Community and Technical College (MCTC) Library catalogs zines using Microsoft Access and

provide access points by title, keyword, author, and subject.[33] According to Thomas Eland, librarian/instructor at MCTC, plans are underway to design a Web-based catalog interface to simplify the cataloging process. MCTC Library is not the only library that has created an in-house database using Microsoft Access. The Zine Archives and Publishing Project at the Richard Hugo House also uses Microsoft Access as does the Salt Lake City Public Library, although the latter does not make its database available to the public at this time.[34]

At the New York State Library, approximately four thousand zines are cataloged.[35] However, this does not represent the entire collection of ten to twenty thousand titles. Billie Aul was, at the time of the Mike Gunderloy zine archive donation, the reference librarian in the Manuscripts and Special Collections Section of the New York State Library. Her plan for cataloging at that time was to provide a brief record entry (title, holdings, subjects from a forty-entry thesaurus, and sometimes a short description) to enable title and subject keyword access for each zine title.[36] With some ten thousand titles to be processed, Aul estimated the project would take from fifteen to twenty years. Unfortunately, due to system problems and her eventual transfer to another department, this project resulted only in the approximately four thousand records that currently exist in the catalog; there is little hope that the project will be resurrected. In retrospect, Aul believes she probably should have simply used the finding-aid approach of maintaining an alphabetical listing of the titles.[37]

Other libraries catalog zines as they would archives, at the collection level rather than at the title or item level. One example of this approach is found in the Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library at Duke University. Amy Leigh Hagardorn, archivist at the library, states that they have developed an in-house database that provides access by title, subject, and author to aid researchers.[38]

The authors' informal survey of various libraries and zine repositories suggests that no standard approach exists for cataloging zines. (See the appendix for survey questions.) Each library has developed its own system to meet its local needs and available resources.

Access and Patrons

Regardless of how zines are cataloged in the collection, the main objective is to make them available to patrons. Most zine collections are for in-library use only, maintained in closed stacks or the reference area. The few exceptions found were the Independent Publishing Resource Center, which allows patrons to check out ten zines at a time, and the Salt Lake City Public Library, which maintains small circulating collections at the main library and its five branches.[39]

Salt Lake City Public Library believes its zine collection has brought in "a whole new group of patrons that haven't been to the library before."[40] Collections in many of the university libraries that responded to the survey are used mostly by researchers and scholars. Thomas Eland uses the zines as examples in a Minneapolis Community and Technical College class he teaches titled "Alternative Knowledge: How Radical Ideas Are Communicated in Society."[41] According to Amy Leigh Hagradorn, archivist at the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture at Duke University, "researchers from all over the country and abroad" use the library's zine collection, and users "range from students in first year writing courses at Duke, to faculty in a variety of disciplines."[42] Paul Mercer, senior librarian at the New York State Library, identifies collection users as "zinesters and would-be zinesters looking for inspiration, curiosity seekers, and serious scholars of popular culture, literary, political or art history."[43] On the other end of the spectrum, Travis Fristoe, a librarian at Alachua County Library District and volunteer zine librarian at the Civic Media Center, a zine repository in Gainesville, Florida, finds that most of his patrons are local foot traffic, although some patrons who visit the collection do have an interest in alternative media.[44] Asked how zines are used by these patrons, Fristoe's tongue-in-cheek reply was, "Ideally, they're read, memorized, and then the reader is fired up to lead a better life and fight for a better world."[45] However, he admits that "typically someone will stare at the cover for a few seconds, thumb the pages, and put it back on the shelf."[46]

Shelving the Collection

How do libraries shelve or organize these zines for access? Again, responses to this question varied. Some alphabetize by title only while others organize their collections alphabetically by title within a category (such as poetry, war, politics, music). Since zines are usually small and hard to shelve individually, some libraries use archival folders within archival boxes, while others simply use magazine boxes. Others prefer using a filing cabinet system, with a hanging folder for each zine title.

Preservation

Asked about plans for long-term preservation, librarians and collection managers cited their use of archival folders and boxes in climate controlled areas. Some have long-term plans for digitizing their collections. Others have no plans for preservation, stating that while they treat their collection with care and respectful handling, when and if the collection begins to deteriorate, they will repair as much as possible and otherwise discard as needed.

Zine Information on the Web

Even though zines are print resources for underground writing, information about zines can be gathered from the Internet. Simply searching for "zines" or "zine reviews" in Google or other online search engines will result in a listing of Web sites containing reviews, content, and other information about zines. For example, the Zine Guide Web site contains reviews and information on zines.[47] Zine World: A Reader's Guide to the Underground Press, another Web site, provides a good overview of zine culture, sample reviews, and suggestions on how to obtain zines.[48] The Web site Zine Book is a source of information on "readings from the fringe."[49] Another good online resource for alternative publications is the Web site The Street Librarian, maintained by Chris Dodge.[50] Some zines have a Web site that gives information about the zine and how to obtain it. *Roctober* and *Maximum RocknRoll,* for example, maintain their own Web sites.[51] It is important not to confuse print zines with e-zines. E-zines are electronic magazines that differ from print zines in their content, manner of publication, and purpose. Many Internet sources address zine culture; one must simply conduct appropriate Internet searches to locate them.

Most publications and Web sites that review zines provide addresses for purchasing zines directly from the publisher. Many alternative online music stores, such as Insound.com, contain "zinestands" where zines can be purchased online. More mainstream zines, such as *Punk Planet* or *Giant Robot,* are available from traditional online outlets such as Amazon.com or Booksamillion.com.[52]

Conclusion

The world of information resources is not static. The flow of information is constantly changing in both content and form. Libraries must be flexible enough to respond to this ever changing influx. The library's inherent mandate is to provide access to information in all its forms. And while libraries may be patting themselves on the back for successfully integrating electronic media into their collections, their acquisition of print materials is in most cases not all encompassing. Print zines are all too commonly an oversight.

Many scholars and historians understand that print zines are important tools for researching the connection between an individual and the culture of which he or she is a part. The value of zines should not be discredited because of the format's often primitive print style and unedited content. Since libraries are archives of written culture, they should acknowledge the significance of zines as cultural documents. A library's purpose is not to act as arbiter of culture, deciding what it is or is not. A library is an access point to the information in a culture. As such, a library's holdings should encompass a wide range of materials to provide as accurate a picture of a cultural time period as possible. The print zine is well within such a range of materials.

Zines are proliferating, not fading away. In 1995, an estimated twenty to fifty thousand zines were published worldwide.[53] Estimating the number of zines being published today is impossible; they start and stop publication constantly, and the widespread use of computers fosters their proliferation. Most libraries at some point will receive a piece of zine literature. At that time, a library must weigh whether the zine is a valuable addition to its collection. Is it appropriate to the library's mission and within the library's collecting scope?

Information is a perishable resource. It can be forgotten, lost, deleted, or destroyed. Cultural identity becomes less defined with each piece of information that is lost. Libraries should consider this when deciding whether to collect zines.

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Appendix
Zine E-mail Survey Questions

I am in the process of completing an article about zines. In my research I found that (insert name of institution here) maintains a collection of zines. Could you please take a few minutes and answer the following questions in relation to your zine collection.

1. How did the zine collection begin? For example, donations, soliciting zinesters, etc.

2. How do you catalogue zines?

3. How do you maintain them on the shelves?

4. Can they be checked out?

5. How do you plan to preserve them over time?

6. Who are the users of the zines? How are they used?

7. Do you share your zines with other libraries?

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. Feel free to share any additional information regarding your collection you feel will be of interest to other librarians.

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