Information Access to Zine Collections

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Abstract

Zines are a cultural artefact that won’t quit. Birthed in the DIY punk scene of the 1970s, and continuing strong into the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, zines provide a forum for cultural dissent, creative expression, and alternative discourse. Information access to zines is often challenged by their limited production, distribution, and ephemeral nature. In addition, swiftly developing online zine communities present new options in the dissemination of zines. Zine collections in libraries and archives require careful consideration of information access, through practices of collection development, lending, classification, community events, censorship, and copyright. The success of a zine collection is subsequently dependent on its support and integration with its local zine communities. This paper has been informed by my research working with the zine collection at the Dorothy H. Hoover Library at the Ontario College of Art and Design as a reference intern, as well as through visits to and examinations of zine collections across North America.

Zine What? Defining the Undefinable

Independent production of ephemeral booklets is a practice with a deep and rich history, dating back to the impact of Gutenberg’s first printing press. A new branch of this practice emerged from the do-it-yourself (DIY) punk scene of the 1970s in the form of zines. Finding a clear definition for zines has been identified by several authors as a somewhat
challenging task. While the aesthetic and format can differ from zine to zine, it is generally agreed that a zine is an independently produced and distributed periodical (Dodge, 1995; Gisonny & Freedman, 2006; Stoddart & Kiser, 2004). Though there are no guidelines or restrictions for how a zine should look, the most common format is a photocopied, folded and stapled booklet, often employing a handmade, cut and paste aesthetic (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Zines at the Toronto Zine Library

Zines have been described as “the unfiltered voice of the common person” (Stoddart & Kiser, 2004, p. 192) and as being “produced and published for love rather than profit” (Gisonny & Freedman, 2006, p. 26). Zines today span an almost unimaginable range of subject matter and format, and therefore impart “an unusual perspective...that would be difficult to obtain from mainstream media” (Stoddart & Kiser, 2004, p. 192). For this reason, they have been identified by Chris Dodge (1995) as “a crucial example of media democracy during an era in which daily newspapers are owned by increasingly fewer (and larger) conglomerates” (p. 27). Although access to independent online publishing, such as blogs and personal websites, has helped extend media democracy, zines continue to fulfill an important need for zinesters with limited online access as well as through the physicality of zine production.

Subcultures and Institutions: Influences on Zine Collections

Since the 1970s, the DIY scene has been embraced by many subcultures and communities: activist/political, feminist, queer, literary, comics and art. The development, organization, and access to a zine collection is dependent on how strongly it supports and relates to the community it draws upon. The institution in which a zine collection is housed will also have an impact on the organization and access to the zine collection. Zine collections exist in retail spaces, public and academic libraries, alternative community centres, artist run spaces, and on the Internet. The issues involved in collecting and providing access to zines will be discussed below on a case-by-case basis, as each zine collection is unique and presents its own challenges and activities to the person or group maintaining the collection.

Stoddart and Kiser (2004) wrote about the significance of collecting zines, particularly in libraries, stating that zines “preserve an alternative point of view, celebrate individual expression, or provide a written document of our accelerated culture” (p. 193). Several authors believe that zines will be instrumental to researchers as “cultural documents” (Stoddart & Kiser, 2004, p. 196) which, if adequately
preserved, will provide “evidence of cultural dissent and innovation in the late twentieth century” (Dodge, 1995, p. 26). Also, since zines often feature non-traditional or dissenting voices, they are likely to attract disenfranchised youth and other non-users to the library (Bartel, 2004; Hubbard, 2005).

### Zine Collections in Retail Spaces

Collection of zines in retail spaces is often sporadic, under-documented, and unique to each retail establishment. Generally, these collections are said to share few defining characteristics. They usually have no organization or classification system and consequently lack a finding aid or catalogue for searching the collection. The Bibliograph(e) zine collection at the Toc Toc Café in Montreal (see Figure 2) is an example of such a collection, where access to the zines is limited to physically searching through the items on the shelves.

![Bibliograph(e) Zine Library in Montreal](image)

Zine collections in retail spaces are available to any member of the public, limited only by the operating hours of the retail establishment. Such collections illustrate an interesting phenomenon in creating a public, open space within a commercial space. The lowercase reading room at the Regional Assembly of Text in Vancouver (see Figure 3) is a small room branching off from the main retail space. A small couch in one corner provides visitors with a welcoming space to peruse the collection and read zines for as long as they desire.

![The lowercase reading room in Vancouver](image)

The collection is organized on the shelf according to zine size (see Figure 4), and the zines in the collection are often the same as the zines sold in the store.

![Zines organized by size](image)

### Zine Collections in Libraries

Zine collections in libraries have become increasingly popular in the past fifteen years and tend to have a stronger focus on

Collection Development of Zine Collections

There are several zine distributors and review zines which can be used by librarians to aid collection development. These resources are mostly useful for zine libraries with budgets to select and acquire new materials. Many zine collections are built entirely through donations (see Figure 5).

![Figure 5. Donation box at the Toronto Zine Library](image)

Because zines are inexpensive to produce and are founded in ideals of free information, zine makers – or “zinesters” as they are often called – are often willing to share their work with libraries without compensation. There are several ways of drawing donations to the library, such as through “solicitation in review zines such as *Zine World: A Reader’s Guide to the Underground Press and Broken Pencil*” (Stoddart & Kiser, 2004, p. 194), by “posting a ‘call for zines’ on online discussion lists… [such as] Zinesters and Zine Geeks” (Knight, 2004, p. 28), or by soliciting donations through a profile on the zine-focused social networking site We Make Zines (http://wemakezines.ning.com/). Building a collection entirely through donations necessitates the adoption of a “take what you can get” mentality. Though many librarians would prefer to only selectively collect the highest quality materials, accepting zines of lower aesthetic quality or questionable content is all part of adopting the open, DIY essence of zine culture.

Developing an exemplary zine collection is highly dependent on creating strong ties with zine communities. Dodge (1995) recommends that zine libraries that do not have the budgets to collect comprehensively should “think globally, collect locally” (p. 27). Gisonny & Freedman (2006) believe that having a focus on local zines “connects the institution with its community and is an effective outreach tool to all sorts of folks who may not normally use the library” (p. 27). Good relationships with zinesters can result in significant donations of personal collections, while involving zine makers in “planning non-traditional programs at the library helps foster the local alternative press/zine community” (Gisonny & Freedman, 2006, p. 27).

Becoming involved in this community requires the zine librarian to perform outreach by going outside of the library space. A good way of becoming involved is to attend zine fests, such as Canzine, an annual event held in Toronto and organized by *Broken Pencil*, a
magazine about zine culture and independent arts (Koh, 2008). Other Toronto-based zine events include the Toronto Anarchist Book Fair, Toronto Small Press Book Fair, the OCAD Annual Zine Fair and Zine Dream. These events are a good opportunity to meet zine makers, promote the zine library, and potentially solicit donations. Library programs related to zines such as open houses, open mic nights, readings, and organized visits to local community events have also been a successful method for engaging the local zine community (Hubbard, 2005).

Classification Systems for Zine Collections

Classification of zines presents many challenges for librarians, primarily because of the futility of attempting to impose a classification scheme on a format that is fundamentally against order and categorization. Zine authors are often anonymous or multiple; zine titles are changing or non-existent. Though they are generally defined as periodicals, the sporadic or frequently discontinued production of zines makes applying serials cataloguing rules a frustrating task. Zines can contain alternative content and a diversity of subject matter, making it difficult to assign standardized subject headings. As a result, zine-related subject headings are often employed, reflecting the subcultures which produce zines: activist/political, feminist, queer, literary, comics, art, and cut and paste (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Zines organized by subject heading at the Toronto Zine Library

The benefits and drawbacks of various classification methods are summarized in Table 1 (See Appendix A).

Zine Collections in Academic Libraries

Academic libraries with zine collections share many characteristics with their public library counterparts, with one important distinction: physical access to academic institutions and libraries is often limited to the institutions’ members (students, faculty, and staff). This can be a challenging hurdle to overcome if the collection is built from donations from the broader public without providing access to the collection to that same public. An example of this is the Ontario College of Art and Design Zine Library, started by former OCAD student Alicia Nauta. Originally housed in the Dorothy H. Hoover Library, the collection was moved into a more dynamic library space: the Learning Zone, a collaborative and flexible library space that opened in May 2009 and intended to build community and participation among students. This change in location provided new opportunities for student engagement with the collection through workshops and events, including a workshop on zine distribution.
presented by the Toronto Zine Library collective and the annual OCAD Zine Fair (see Figure 7), followed by zine-themed film screening. However, access to this space is only possible with an OCAD ID card, limiting the effectiveness of the collection to the wider external zine community.

Many of these collections operate as lending libraries and develop their collections primarily through donation. The success of these spaces is largely due to their support of their zine communities, through providing space to create zines and through development opportunities such as workshops and events. Danielle O’Hearn, a member of the TZL collective, wrote that some of the workshops presented by TZL in the past included “how to make a zine, zinemaking for social change, and how to start a zine library” (personal communication, May 22 2009).

Censorship of zine collections is generally avoided in the hopes of maintaining the accessibility and openness of zines. However, instances of censorship do occur when necessary. The Toronto Zine Library keeps questionable content in a separate binder among their special collections labelled Smut/Filth, which includes items which promote pornography or discuss pedophilia and suicide (see Figure 9).
Members of the collective do not self-select items to censor. Zines in the binder have been placed there according to suggestions and complaints from the user community. Instances of censorship and demand for censorship can spark interesting discussions of what is considered offensive within zine communities, which often embrace radical political and progressive sexual perspectives.

Zine Collections Online

The online environment, rather than negating the need for zines, has been used to strengthen ties between zinesters, zine communities, and zine librarians. An easy way to connect with other zine librarians is through the Yahoo! Group Zinelibrarians created by Jenna Freedman, librarian for the Barnard College zine collection. The discussions on the group page “range anywhere from zine cataloging methods to debates on the inclusion of abstracts for zine records to zine related events at the next ALA conference” (Knight, 2004, p. 29). Reading past discussion threads can provide many answers for the budding zine librarian while also provoking new questions. Appendix 2 includes an annotated list of online zine resources helpful in building and maintaining a zine collection.

The online environment has also been used to support searching of zine collection catalogues and finding aids. These search tools are put to use by the local community as well as long-distance researchers seeking information on specific zines. The Anchor Archive Zine Library presents a powerful prototype for further online access to collections. Their web presence (http://www.robertsstreet.org/n/zine-library) includes a catalogue with multiple access points (title, author, subject, location, year), a zine thesaurus with relevant subject headings, and a zine catalogue blog discussing the development of their cataloguing project.

The Internet has also been used to host digital zine collections, a practice which brings about a unique set of challenges. The Queer Zine Archive Project (QZAP, www.qzap.org) is a well-organized and maintained zine collection that can be a model for best practices in this area. When questioned why the archive uses Portable Document Format (PDF) in their digital files, co-founder Milo Miller provided the following reasons (personal communication, April 19, 2009): the files are supported on a broad variety of operating systems (MAC, Windows, Linux, Unix) and devices (cellular phones, eBook readers), the files have good resolution and can be compressed to small size, and it is possible to make text in the file searchable, providing access to keyword searching.

Creating digital copies of zines and making them accessible online may be in conflict with copyright laws and rights. QZAP
operates under a fair use policy, stating that their archive is a site for research and cultural appreciation. The archive practices what they call “due diligence”: they contact each zine maker for permission before posting their zine online. If a zinester cannot be contacted, the archive posts the zine and makes it clear that any zine will be removed upon request (Milo Miller, personal communication, April 19, 2009). By practicing these policies, the Queer Zine Archive Project has successfully manoeuvred around the minefield of copyright laws. An interesting question is whether zines are an open source material. Copyright laws are often bent and broken by zine makers themselves by borrowing images and text from copyrighted material (Herrada, 1995). The concept of sharing their work without permission may not even be an issue for many zine makers.

Conclusion

Zines are a cultural artefact that are here to stay. Despite the proliferation of independent online publishing, zinesters continue to produce ephemeral publications expressing their unique outlook on the world. For librarians and other information professionals, providing access to zines is an important activity in preserving the alternative culture and creative expression of their local communities. Zine collections thrive in institutions that build connections and relationships with zine makers, increasing donation and interest for the collection. Providing access to zines can present librarians and information professionals with new challenges in traditional practices such as collection development and classification. When navigated with the help and insight of local zine communities, these challenges become new opportunities to provide access to a colourful and diverse world of unique ideas and perspectives.
References


Appendix A: Table 1 – Classification System Analysis

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<tr>
<th>Classification System</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
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| MARC records                                       | • “Cross-referencing zines within the library’s main holdings creates a more comprehensive information space where researchers and patrons are more likely to happen upon other voices on a given topic, which can offer a fresh and unconventional angle—perhaps … offering a more human rather than academic voice that speaks more personally or realistically to the reader” (Knight, 2004, p. 21)  
  • “Users who search the catalog and do not find records may think the library has no zine holdings” (Hubbard, 2005, p. 354) | • Several qualities to zines make them a difficult material to catalogue including:  
  - “the frequent use of unique content and language”  
  - highly irregular publishing schedules and pagination  
  - changes in/missing information about the title, author name, and publishing city (Koh, 2008, p. 50)  
  • Requires time, delay between cataloguing zines and getting them out on the shelf  
  • Applying standardized classification to zines conflicts with their free and open spirit |
| In-house database or searchable finding aid         | • Librarians can customize the search tools and parameters used  
  • Can provide simple access to the collection without incorporating zines into the catalogue | Requires time, resources and technical skills to design, update, and operate the software used  
  • In order to access the collection, users must perform a separate search from catalogue |
| Thesaurus                                          | • Simultaneously a learning and finding resource that “describes the subject, lists similar terms, and offers examples of prominent zines in that category” (Hubbard, 2005, p. 353) | • Establishing and defining subject terms is a difficult task, particularly with the unique and multi-subject nature of many zines |
| Subject-based shelving                             | • Zines can be put into the collection faster since they do not have to be processed | • Does not provide remote access to the collection  
  • Physical browsing is the only method of access |

Ex: Search “zines” at http://clio.cul.columbia.edu  
Anchor Archive Zine Library Catalogue  
http://www.robertsstreet.org/n/catalogue  
Independent Publishing Resource Center Library Catalogue  
http://www.iprc.org/iprlibrary/  
Little Maga/Zine Collection Finding Aid  
http://sfpl.org/index.php?pg=2000005801  

http://www.robertsstreet.org/n/thesaurus/out.htm
Appendix B: Zine Libraries and Collections in North America

**Canadian Collections**

Anchor Archive Zine Library  
c/o Roberts Street Social Centre  
5684 Roberts Street  
Halifax, NS  
B3K 1J6  
http://www.robertsstreet.org  

Bibliograph(e) at Toc Toc Café  
6091 Avenue du Parc  
Montreal, QC  
H2V 4H4  

Broken Pencil Zine Collection at the Toronto Reference Library  
3rd Floor Periodicals  
789 Yonge Street  
Toronto, ON  
M4W 2G8  
http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/uni_pnc_zine.jsp  

Edmonton Small Press Association  
P.O. Box 75086, Ritchie Postal Outlet  
Edmonton, AB  
T6E 6K1  
contact@edmontonsmallpress.org  
http://www.edmontonsmallpress.org  

Hamilton Zine Library at the Sky Dragon Centre  
27 King William Street  
Hamilton, ON  
L8R 1A1  
admin@skydragon.org  
http://hamiltonzinelibrary.blogspot.com  

Junto Library, Local 91  
Old Market Autonomous Zone  
2-C 91 Albert St.  
Winnipeg, MB  
R3B 1G5  
http://a-zone.org/  

The lowercase reading room at The Regional Assembly of Text  
3934 Main Street  
Vancouver, BC  
V5V 3P2  
http://assemblyoftext.com/lowercase_gallery  

OCAD Zine Library  
Ontario College of Art and Design, Learning Zone  
113 McCaul Street  
Toronto, ON  
M5T 1W1  
http://zinesforlunch.blogspot.com/  

Sheridan Zine Library  
Sheridan College - Trafalgar Campus  
1430 Trafalgar Road  
Oakville, ON  
L6H 2L1  
sheridanzinelibrary@gmail.com  

Welland Zine Library  
c/o Tiki  
11 Ascot Ct.  
Welland, ON  
L3C 6K7  
tiki@ididitmyway.com  

**Select US Collections**

Barnard College Collection  
Jenna Freedman, MLIS  
Barnard College  
3009 Broadway  
New York, NY 10027  

Independent Publishing Resource Center  
917 SW Oak Street #218  
Portland, Oregon 97205  
http://www.iprc.org/  
info@iprc.org  

The Little Magazine Collection  
Andrea Grimes  
San Francisco Public Library  
100 Larkin Street, 6th Floor  
San Francisco, CA 94102  
andreag@sflpl.org  

Papercut Zine Library at the Democracy Center
45 Mt. Auburn St.
Cambridge, MA 02138
http://www.papercutzinelibrary.org/
papercut@riseup.net

Popular Culture Library
William T. Jerome Library
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, OH 43403
http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/librarypcl/

Salt Lake City Public Library
Brooke Young
210 East 400 South
Salt Lake City, UT 84111
byoung@slcl.org

Zine Archive Project
Richard Hugo House
1634 11th Avenue
Seattle, WA 98122
www.hugohouse.org

*Online Collections*
localCHAOS online zine archive

http://wdean.fatcow.com/zines1.html

Queer Zine Archive Project
2935 N. Fratney
Milwaukee, WI 53212
http://www.qzap.org
qzap@qzap.org
zinelibrary.net
211 E. 4th Ave.
Olympia, WA 98501
zinelibrary@riseup.net
http://www.zinelibrary.net

This is by no means a comprehensive list. Further information on additional zine libraries can be found at
http://www.undergroundpress.org/zine-resources/infoshops-zine-libraries/,
http://www.papercutzinelibrary.org/resources.shtml and
Appendix C: Online Zine Resources

http://grrrlzines.net/
Excellent resource on zines including writing on zines, organized in categories such as guides, dissertations, academic writing, and an extensive bibliography (http://grrrlzines.net/bibliography.htm).

http://www.barnard.edu/library/zines/proposal.htm
Women's Studies Zines at Barnard College Pilot Project Proposal written by Jenna Freedman succinctly covers goals for collection development, cataloguing, processing, and shelving.

http://groups.yahoo.com/group/zinelibrarians/
Zine Librarians Yahoo Group - With currently 325 members, this list is for exchanging information and ideas about zine librarianship: collection, shelving, preservation, cataloguing, classification, programming, scholarship, publication, fundraising, etc. All zine librarians and archivists are welcome: academic, digital, DIY, public, school, and volunteer.

http://www.zinebook.com/
An incredibly bountiful collection of resources regarding zines including a comprehensive list of zine libraries (U.S. focus, some Canadian and international), articles on zines, copyright issues and much more.

http://www.robertsstreeet.org/n/taxonomy/term/1590
Zine Catalogue Blogue - a blog created by Amanda Stevens and Zac Howarth from the Anchor Archive Zine Library which includes various resources about systems design for zine library catalogues, including the Final Report of the Creation of the Anchor Archive Open Source Online Catalogue (http://www.robertsstreeet.org/n/node/3071).

http://www.zinewiki.com/
ZineWiki is an open-source encyclopedia devoted to zines and independent media. It covers the history, production, distribution, and culture of the small press.

http://www.undergroundpress.org/
Zine World is a source for reviews and information about zines, comics, self-published books, chapbooks, and other DIY stuff. Often called the best review zine being published in the U.S., Zine World is an extensive guide to zine culture.