

We need to talk about zines: Collecting alternative press publications in an Australian academic university library.

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Keywords

Zines, alternative press, cataloguing, collecting

Abstract

Purpose:

The paper sets out to discuss the current acquisition, development and cataloguing of modern zines in the collections of Australian academic libraries. A survey was formulated and disseminated during August 2016; and the results suggest that there are several key issues and barriers that surround the collection of alternative press publications in Australia.

Design/methodology/approach:

A survey delivered in 2016 to 40 of Australia's university libraries was designed to gauge the strength of zine collections in research institutions. The subsequent quantitative results are contextualised with a qualitative evaluation of current local and international research on the collection scope of zines and alternative publications.

Findings:

Zines are an important component of the cultural fabric of a free-thinking, responsive, and reflective society. The subversive and at times transgressive nature of zines make the conscious collecting of these underground texts complex. Survey results suggest that although the majority of academic libraries house zines in their collection, only one is actively pursuing and acquiring in this area. Zines are important cultural documents that evince the creativity, values, and complexity of unrepresented marginalised youth. Therefore, it is imperative that Australian academic libraries actively collect zines to preserve and make available for research, records of hyper-personal, contemporary texts that proffer to the reader an insight into the individual psyche of any given period in time.

Introduction

We really need to talk about zines. Their glaring omission and promotion from the shelves of Australian collectors, booksellers, public libraries, and academic libraries is a rather perplexing predicament. From the outset these small, often poorly assembled sheets of lined A4 paper, haphazardly stapled and photocopied, self congratulatory, and self-flagellating amateur publications seem an unwelcome presence in any serious collection. It is of little wonder that from a bibliographical perspective they remain on the fringe of most people's desiderata lists. Why so? A Zinester may argue that this is where zines and the various guises of alternative press publications belong; rather than confined to an acid free archival box in the back of special collections compactus. The rise, fall, and rise again of the zine movement in Australia, and particularly Melbourne, means that as serious bibliographers, librarians, and collectors we need to reconsider why zines persist as an important social document and why we should be consciously collecting for future and contemporary research purposes. A survey of 18 participating Australian academic libraries was undertaken to demonstrate that they are at risk of missing the opportunity to collect important social documents that should be preserved as important cultural and social archives. This paper considers why so many academic libraries are no longer collecting in this area, and what possible issues and constraints deter these institutions from investing in procuring them.

Background

The DIY or "do-it-yourself" nature of the modern zine lends itself to being the antithesis of 'vanilla' or mainstream literature. It is the brooding Uncle that no one wants at the family Christmas dinner, the awkward teenager who refuses to meet your eye, green haired, tattooed hands, headphone wearing, hooded, furrow browed, drug smoking, skateboarding child of an accountant. The term 'zine' was appropriated from the 'Fanzine'; a "neologism coined in the 1930's to refer to magazines self-published by aficionados of science fiction" (Radway, 2011, p.140). One of the hardest questions a Zinester will be asked is, 'What is a zine.....?'. What indeed? Stephen Duncombe, author of the seminal publication *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, tackles the question with a

quintessential Zinester response: “My initial - and probably correct - impulse is to hand over a stack of zines and let the person asking the question decide” (Duncombe, 1997, p.6). As an abstraction of the ‘norm’, zines “[e]xploded in popularity during the 1980’s when punk music fans adopted the form as part of their do-it-yourself aesthetic” (Radway, 2011). It was actually the right time for the zine to thrive. After the fetishisation and commercialisation of the 1970’s punk movement, 1980’s post punk looked to defy the mainstream and subvert information to communicate with one another. Generation X continued publishing zines in the 1990s where youth and youth culture were heavily commodified by corporate entities.

Arguably, the mere fact that zines went underground should make them irresistible to the collector. So why should we care? The zine writer often examines “resisting subjects” that seeks to “privilege and explore the agency and actions of the non elite” (Chidgey, 2006, p.4). One could if they were so inclined consider the remarkable rise of political pamphlets during the French Revolution to argue that alternative publications can play an important role in the shaping of a society. Although the zine might not have the power to change the course of history, we shouldn’t discount the power of information and the many forms with which it is disseminated. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan famously coined the term, “The medium is the message”, whereby the medium influences the message (McLuhan, 2001). With this in mind, zines are the exemplar of this theory. However, the zine finds itself in a precarious limbo. The zine is neither book, nor pamphlet, nor scrapbook. The zine does not subscribe to the rigid definitions assigned to it by librarians.

Kids and adults from the punk-rock, LGBTQI, gaming, anarchist, lyricist, poet, literature, geek movements come together to form a complex web of Zinesters and Distros (zine distributors) that culminates in the formation of “textual communities” (Eichhorn, 2001). In her article, Eichhorn (2001, p. 566) defines a textual community as people “brought together through a shared text, a shared set of texts, or a shared set of reading and writing practices”. The complexity of these communities has a jarring effect for those on the outside. For those looking in, it is almost impossible to conceptualise, categorise, and understand what it is they are actually looking at. It is with this in mind that we cast our eyes to the ‘safe’ hands of the academic library, and in particular, to the Australian academic library.

Literature Review

Databases like Austlit and Informit were used to scan literature that had been researched and written on zine collections in Australian academic libraries. The search results suggested that little research has been undertaken by Australian academic libraries into this facet of collection development. The bulk of the research into zine collections has been undertaken in the United States where the support for the collections of zines seems adequate, but not overwhelming. As early as 1995, Chris Dodge argues that, "Academic and research librarians must foresee that this era's zines will one day be important historical sources. Future researchers will rely on materials like zines for evidence of cultural dissent and innovation in the late twentieth century" (Dodge, 1995, p.26). Moving forward nineteen years, Tkach and Hank's article "Before Blogs, there were Zines" suggests that little has changed concerning the collection of zines in libraries. They argue that "due to zines' ephemeral nature and their often anti-authoritative stance, which includes flaunting conventional standards, it is assumed that many academic librarians in charge of collection development would likely pass over zines for their library" (Tkach, 2014, p. 17).

Not all libraries shy away from the daunting task of acquiring zines for their collections. Progressive libraries like the New York Public Library and Barnard College actively source zines and alternative press materials for their shelves. Selling points for Barnard College were the "uniqueness of the materials, the fact that zines were not yet part of many academic library holdings, and most importantly their usefulness as future primary sources on contemporary history from perspectives not usually represented in libraries" (Gisonny 2006, p.27). Curator at Barnard College, Jenna Freedman, believes "Libraries do not typically house works unmediated by publishers and editors or those by authors uncredentialed by education degrees or professional accomplishment" (Freedman, 2009, p. 52). Fundamentally, this is a strong characteristic of many Academic Libraries, whereby resources 'should' be academically sound.

At Michigan State University, Librarian, Randy Scott curates a large collection of zines, stating, "Zines are a form of communication among like-minded isolates all over the world" (Chepesiuk 1997, p. 68). Minneapolis Community and Technical College concedes that their collection, "may never attract antiquarian book collectors or Ivy League literacy schools", but their message is the same, "Libraries purport to represent the diversity of knowledge -- we have a lot of wonderful rhetoric in our profession -- but when it comes to collecting amateur and radical-left material, many libraries don't step up" (Carlson 2004, p. 4).

Australian scholarly literature relating to zine and alternative press publications is limited; scholarly literature relating to academic libraries is borderline non-existent. The gap between the number of zine collections housed in academic libraries is certainly disproportionate to the amount of study undertaken in this area. Australian state and public libraries on the other hand discuss collection development and the motivations for acquiring alternative press publications in their institutions. Sydney's Manly Library envisions zines and artist's' books cohabiting the same collection as "it is important for libraries to collect them as part of the cultural history of the local region" (Smith, 2011, p.14). The drive to preserve the cultural heritage of an area comes through in the literature as a fundamental driver to collect in this area. For the Manly Library, their motivations are community driven; asserting that their "collection is extending the role played by our library in the community and is supporting emerging young artists and local established artists in the community while also promoting these emerging and stimulating art forms" (Smith, 2011, p.14).

When libraries are procuring zines for their libraries, cataloguers face the unenviable task of subscribing metadata and descriptions to them. As zinesters are "liberated from the editors of publishers that would regulate the content of their work", zines are not delivered with information required for a record (O'Dell 2014, p. 256). These include essential components such as: authorship, year, place of publishing, etc. However, the international "zine library community recently developed a Dublin Core-based schema, called ZineCore, for encoding records about zines" (O'Dell, 2014, p. 256), . According to the group, "Use of the format enables not only goals of data transformation and sharing within the zine library community but also interoperability with the library community" (O'Dell, 2014, p.256).

Methodology

A list of 40 Australian academic libraries were compiled from the Australian Universities website (<http://www.australianuniversities.com.au/>). All 40 libraries were emailed or contacted to inform them of the research being undertaken for this paper, and invite them to complete a short survey. In total 18 Australian university libraries replied and confirmed that they would like to participate in the research. Where possible, Arts Librarians, Special Collections Librarians, Curators, and Rare Books Librarians were contacted first. Not all the institutions from the list of 40 libraries had staff contact details and therefore emails were sent to generic library information addresses.

Findings

A scan of Australian academic library holdings was performed prior to the survey's commencement; results suggested that for the most part, the libraries that did not respond either do not have special collections or do not curate zines. It is also possible that the relevant or appropriate librarian did not receive the email. Unfortunately, a number of institutions do not provide employee contact details, so emails were forwarded to the general information email provided. Where contacts and position titles were available ie. Special Librarian, Rare Books Librarian, the response time vastly improved. Overall, the survey results which can be viewed in appendix A provide some interesting results.

Although the survey only captured 46% of Australian University Libraries, 66% of them have zines in various forms and guises in their collections. Libraries who do not hold zines, may have overlooked the survey as it didn't apply to their collections. The overall survey results do not take into account that 6 libraries who did not complete the survey but responded by email to confirm that they do not have zines collections. Hypothetically, if we include those 6 libraries in the overall survey results we would have a 50/50 split of libraries with zines and those without.

For those survey respondents who do not have zines in the collections, a remarkable 66% (4 of 6) do not feature zines in their collection development policy. The same number do not have an interest in collecting zines for their institution. Upon further reflection on the design of the original survey, this paper would have benefited from the addition of open-ended style questioning for participants who do not have zines in their collection. However, this survey was designed with a quantitative approach, and therefore follow up emails or correspondence was not undertaken. Further research in this area would warrant a revisit to survey contributors for further examination and analysis that would include a review of other formats that were included in the libraries' collection policies.

The most disquieting result centred around the number of institutions actively seeking and acquiring zines to supplement collections. Only 1 university library are actively acquiring in this area, leaving 11 libraries who are not looking to increase their holdings. Further consultation and research is recommended to interpret these results. It may be the case that these libraries do not have the money or staff to continue developing the collection.

Academic libraries do not have the requirement of legal deposit provisions like the National Library of Australia, and therefore do not have to continue collecting in this area.

The survey also focused on the zine as a cataloguing object. 58% of respondents (7 of 12) have their collections catalogued. Notably, 16% (2 of 12) have not catalogued their collections; the same number have their collections only partially catalogued. Next, respondents who have not or have only partially catalogued their collections were asked why this is the case. The results varied, with the majority of libraries (3) highlighting that they do not catalogue their zines due to low staffing levels.

For those who have a catalogued collection, they were asked to elaborate on their answers. The results varied, with most outlining that their zines are treated like any other record, with one library making their content available online. There was one obvious outlier from these responses: "These are easily catalogued from our electronic resource packages". Due to the way that zines are produced and distributed, it would be highly unlikely that they would be made available through subscriptions to electronic resource packages and therefore this response is not relevant to this paper.

Considerations and recommendations for collecting zines in academic libraries.

Overall, the survey results provide us with a succinct if not brief overview of current zine collections in Australian academic libraries. The most illuminating and certainly the most disheartening issue concerns the lack of activity around building comprehensive zine collections in an academic environment. With only one library from the 18 university libraries surveyed actively pursuing zines, there is clearly an issue requiring further analysis. What are the barriers that stop a library from continuing their collection development? Due to the ephemeral and transient nature of the zine, its inherent qualities "create a unique set of problems for the librarian attempting to collect and process them" (Gisonny 2006). But what are these problems and what can academic libraries do to become more active in this scene?

Zines are a product of resistance; resistance to the establishment and the norm. Duncombe (1997) suggests that, "In an era marked by the rapid centralization of corporate media, zines

are independent and localized, coming out of cities, suburbs and small towns". As much as we would like to think the contrary, librarians are part of the establishment; our restrictive cataloguing standards and schemas make collecting zines and alternative press publications complicated. Our survey results suggest that some libraries only apply entry level records or single serial records for their zines. This means that libraries aren't providing users with full and rich records to discover material which was reflected in the initial search for zines conducted as the basis for this paper. This means that researchers will have to search through boxes of material in order to find items that may or may not be part of the collection. Of course, it would be ideal to have zine librarians or zine specialists in the library, and this would be dependant on the size of the collection and the importance placed on it for research purposes. In order to tackle the difficulty of zine cataloguing, further research can be undertaken by Australian university libraries to examine Dublin Core-Based schemas like 'ZineCore'.

As the production of zines is by no means absolute, it is not unusual for zines to omit standard bibliographical characteristic like: title pages, half title pages, publishers, authors and dates. This lack of available bibliographical detail means descriptive cataloguing is difficult. The same can be said for descriptive bibliography, making a bibliography of Australian Zines nigh impossible. The production and distribution process of alternative press publications can be burdensome for those who are not familiar with "The Zine Economy" (Poletti, 2008). The life span or 'run' of a zine can be fleeting. A zine can "run out of copies in a few hours at a zine fair, or may mail out the entire print run to their readers in the course of a day" (Polleti, 2008, p.11). The obvious place to start is the distro (distribution centre for zines) or alternative bookstores. They are few and far between these days, but Sticky Institute in Melbourne is the exemplar. Creating a relationship with places like Sticky is an excellent way of placing the academic library in the 'scene' and starting to understand the many facets of zines, zine making, and zinesters. The work of Des Cowley at the State Library of Victoria is an excellent example of what can happen when a librarian feeds into distros. They have one of the largest library zine collections in Australia, acquiring zines from Sticky on a regular basis. Of course, working with a distro is not the only way to find zines. According to Polleti (2008, p.12), "Australian zines are circulated by three main strategies: commission selling through online distributors and sympathetic stores, direct distribution of zines at zine fairs and markets and individual postal circulation". Librarians could also think about approaching zinesters and distros about the possibility of providing

their material as a cultural gift to be preserved for future use. University libraries could also consider collecting zines that have been created by their own students.

However, concerning subject matter and research potential it would be prudent to select an area of strength of the collection, and start collecting in that area. As a librarian, one of the key issues is the lack of consideration in developing the collection. We can acknowledge that future researchers may get something from zines, but simply acquiring or stockpiling for the sake of collecting everything will become a burden to the collection. This means that the librarian can channel their budget to items that will be useful for future research purposes. The zine can be a low cost, affordable acquisition for any library.

Conclusion

Zines should have a place in the special collections of Australian academic libraries. Their worth as a social document of the time(s) has countless research potential in disciplines like sociology, psychology, and literature. This research discovered that only one Australian academic library continued to actively acquire zines for their collections. University libraries could be missing out on the opportunity to preserve texts from one of Australia's most important sub-cultures; a culture that offers us insights into generations of disenfranchised, disgruntled and creative youth. There are numerous measures that a librarian can take to commence collecting zines for their collections. Librarians can play a larger role in the creation and distribution of zines, working with zinesters to create meaningful and useful collaborations. Focusing on your collection strengths and acquiring zines that work with these strengths, means that not only will you know what is being brought into the collection, but you can also demonstrate why they are in the collection. I have touched on the issue of cataloguing zines, and certainly more can be done in this area to accommodate them in our current practices. It is worth having this conversation; it might be uncomfortable or awkward, but the zine wouldn't have it any other way.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Question 1.

Do you have zines in your collection?

- 18 Australian university libraries responded.
 - 12 have zines in their collection.
 - 6 do not have zines in their collection.

Question 2.

What is the reason for not collecting zines in your collection?

- 6 Australian university libraries responded.
 - 4 stated that collecting zines is not part of their collection development policy.
 - 1 do not collect zines due to budget/finance constraints.
 - 4 do not have any interest in collecting zines.
 - 3 stated they have other reasons for not collecting zines.

Question 3.

How are these zines made available to patrons?

- 12 Australian university libraries responded.
 - 7 are closed access collections.
 - 2 are open access collections.
 - 3 have a bit of both.

Question 4.

What are the reasons for having zines in your collection?

- 12 Australian university libraries responded.
 - 1 has the acquisition of zines in their collection development policy.
 - 5 said that they collect them for their research potential.
 - 6 acquired zines through donations and cultural gifts.
 - 4 stated they have others reasons for collecting zines.

Question 5.

Are you actively collecting zines for the collection?

- 12 Australian university libraries responded.
 - 1 library is actively collecting zines.
 - 11 are not actively collecting zines for their collections.
 - 1 stated other.

Question 6.

Is your zine collection catalogued and available through your discovery service?

- 12 Australian university libraries responded.
 - 7 libraries have catalogued collections.
 - 2 do not have catalogued collections.
 - 2 have partially catalogued collections.
 - 1 stated they have catalogued their collection differently.

Question 7.

Are there any reasons why your collection is partially catalogued or not catalogued?

- 5 Australian university libraries responded.

- 1 library did not have enough time.
- 1 library feels that it is too difficult to catalogue.
- 3 do not have enough staff to catalogue zines.
- 1 stated that there are more important areas of the collection to catalogue.
- 2 stated there are other reasons why their collection is partially or not catalogued.

Question 8.

If you selected “Too difficult to catalogue” please let us know why.

- 1 Australian university library responded.
 - “Often not much in the way of bibliographic detail”.

Question 9.

How is your zine collection catalogued?

- 6 Australian university libraries responded.
 - 3 had their collections catalogued and uploaded to Libraries Australia.
 - 3 stated other.

In as much detail as possible, please tell us why you choose this particular method over any other.

- 7 Australian university libraries responded.
 - “The items are not treated any differently to other monographs in the collection”.
 - “These are easily catalogued from our electronic resource packages”.
 - “We really only have a serial record for the run of material, they aren't catalogued individually”.
 - “Zines are part of the Library collection we do not have a special collection devoted to zines therefore they are catalogued along with the rest of the Library collection. They are mostly available online”.

- “Standard policy to catalogue all items for the discovery tool. Our archival/mss collections have at least a catalogue collection level entry as well as a web listing”.
- “Most convenient”.
- “We prefer all of our collections to be catalogued in this way”.