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We Need to Talk About Zines: The Case for Collecting Alternative Publications in the Australian Academic University Library

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the research potential of zines and the current issues around acquiring these disparate publications for Australian academic libraries. The paper reports a review of the literature and a brief environmental scan in the form of a survey, which suggest that Australian tertiary institutions are undecided or unsure about how and why zines could be a useful research tool in the future. It is argued here that zines are an important component of the cultural fabric of a freethinking, responsive and reflective society. The subversive and at times transgressive nature of zines makes the conscious collecting of these underground texts complex. A review of the current practices of international academic libraries and the survey results undertaken for the purpose of this paper, suggest that Australian academic libraries are behind their overseas colleagues in their consideration of these issues. Zines are important cultural documents that reveal the creativity, values and complexity of unrepresented marginalised youth, among others. The author suggests that, 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.

KEYWORDS

Zines; alternative publications; collection development; collecting

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Creating partnerships and engaging in conversation with zinesters and library staff can assist in the development and creation of a working collection.
- Collecting zines for its research potential can be speculative; identifying the strengths of your current collection can provide a clear collection development policy for acquiring zines.
- Educating and demystifying zine culture can assist Australian librarians in determining whether a zine collection is suitable for their institution.

Introduction

We really need to talk about zines. Their rather fortuitous place on the shelves of Australian collectors, booksellers, public libraries and academic libraries means that the voices of

national and local sub-cultures are effectively muted. 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'. Arguably, their capacity to offer rich insights into counter-culture could provide Australian universities with a useful mechanism for contemporary and future research.

The zine bestows researchers in disciplines areas such as literature, sociology, philosophy, arts, health and musicology a rich insight into what are traditionally difficult sub-cultures to access. From the outset, these small, often poorly assembled sheets of A4 paper, haphazardly stapled and photocopied, often self-congratulatory and self-flagellating amateur publications seem a rather awkward addition to collections. It is of little wonder that from a bibliographical perspective that zines remain on the fringe of most people's desiderata lists. Why so? People who create and/or distribute zines, a zinester, may argue that the periphery is where zines and alternative press publications belong. Would the author of a zine want their work confined to an acid-free archival box in the back of a compactus? The rise, fall and subsequent rise again of the zine movement in Australia, means that as serious bibliographers, librarians, collecting institutions and other collectors should reconsider the worth of zines. Zines persistence in Australian culture raises questions about the contemporary collecting practices of Australian academic libraries. This paper will highlight some of the key issues surrounding the lack of zine collecting by Australian academic libraries. The Australian zine story will be framed with exploration of several exemplary international zines collections, the latter of which expose the advantage and potential research capabilities of these important cultural and social archives.

Background

The DIY or 'do-it-yourself' nature of the modern zine lends force to zines being considered the antithesis of 'vanilla' or mainstream literature. They are the brooding Uncle that no one wants at the family Christmas dinner, the awkward teenager who refuses to meet your eye, the 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 1930s 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 1980s when punk music fans adopted the form as part of their do-it-yourself aesthetic' (Radway, 2011). The 1980s were actually the right time for the zine to thrive. After the fetishisation and commercialisation of the 1970s punk movement, 1980s post-punk looked to defy the mainstream and subvert information in order to communicate with one another. Generation X continued publishing zines into 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. The zinester often examines 'resisting subjects' which seek 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 such as zines could 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 should not 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, Agel, & Fiore, 2001). With this in mind, zines are the exemplar of this theory as the materiality of the zine is as important as the message it contains. However, the zine finds itself in a precarious limbo. The zine is neither book, nor journal, nor pamphlet, nor scrapbook. The zine does not subscribe to the rigid definitions assigned to publications by librarians.

Kids and adults from the punk-rock, LGBTQI, gaming, anarchist, lyricist, poet, literature and geek movements come together to form a complex web of zinesters and distros (zine distributors) that culminate 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 can often have a jarring effect for those on the outside. For those looking in, it can be almost impossible to conceptualise, categorise and understand a zine textual community. Bearing this in mind, we cast our eyes towards the 'safe' hands of the Australian academic library, where conceptualising and categorising is a professional role.

From a global perspective, the past decade has seen a noticeable shift, where

the presence of zines in library and archival collections was relatively rare and anomalous; they resided in collections, perhaps, as part of a larger whole, but rarely as collections in their own right. It is becoming less and less unusual to find collections, or entire institutions, devoted to preserving and providing access to zines. (Brett, 2015)

American academic libraries are strong collectors in zines of all kinds; some attributing names to their collections. Although not an exhaustive list, institutions such as the Barnard College, Michigan State University, Duke University (Dwayne Dixon Zine Collection), the University of Miami and the Schlesinger library at Harvard University do fantastic work in this area. The methods with which US academic libraries work with zines could be seen as an exemplar for the development of zines as research objects within Australian academic libraries.

Initial Assessment

A scan of the literature and a short survey was conducted to ascertain the current situation for zines in Australian academic libraries. Although limited in its qualitative data, an overview of the current collecting habits and motivations of Australian academic libraries provides us with a reasonable comprehension of identifying factors that may lead to a paradigm shift in the way zines are being collected.

The Australian scholarly literature relating to zine and alternative press publications is limited; scholarly literature relating to academic libraries is elusive. Databases like Austlit and Informit were used to scan the literature on zine collecting and collections within Australian academic libraries. The results identify that very little research has been undertaken by Australian academic libraries into collecting zines. In contrast, considerable research literature has been undertaken in North America, not surprising when we consider

that in the past decade zines are becoming increasingly relevant to the development of their academic library collections.

A small survey was disseminated to 40 Australian academic libraries. 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.

The survey responses provide interesting insights into the current practice of zine collecting in Australian academic libraries to add to the literature. The key finding of the 18 respondents to the survey was that only one institution was actively seeking to acquire zines for their collections. A lack of funding and staff may play an issue here, but the results also suggest that there is some misunderstanding as to what a zine actually is which indicates further research in the area is warranted.

Discussion

The lack of Zine collecting in Australia academic libraries may be symptomatic of several issues; a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the sub-culture, the difficulty of formalising the process of acquiring and cataloguing zines and a lack of demonstrative examples whereby zines play a central role as an effective primary research tool.

Historically, librarians and academics acknowledge that zines hold potential value for researchers, in part due to their anthropological efficacy. As early as 1995, Chris Dodge argued 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 19 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 & Hank, 2014, p. 17)

It would be erroneous to suggest that their, 'passing over' is solely borne from the ignorance of academic librarians.

Public and state libraries have perhaps an easier task of promoting the conception of the zine. 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 space. 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). Concerning the academic library, the connection between public, community and stakeholders are not as clearly defined. For them, collecting of zines does not necessarily have to reflect the broader community; rather, their collection has to have research potential. Therefore, whether an academic library zine collection reflects its immediate geographical location is not necessarily the major factor for its collection development. The academic library also takes on the larger concepts; for

example, the history of feminism needs to be considered on a global level, rather than solely on parochialism.

The history of women collections at the Harvard University Schlesinger's Library, is an exemplar for what can be done when library staff conscientiously develop a collection area. Library executive director, Marilyn Dunn, notes that, 'The Schlesinger Library collects popular culture because it both influences women and is influenced by women' (Harrison, 2007). Library curator, Marylène Altieri, ponders the research and collection value of the zine, quoting, 'We collect women's and girls' zines because zines offer uncensored, frank, and creative views of their lives'. The Schlesinger library has identified their core collection strength and subsequently acquire items that have compatibility. In Western Australia, Murdoch University also focus on one core area, Science Fiction fanzines. The Leigh Edmonds Collection houses 'speculative fiction', including correspondence, fanzines and other ephemera.

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).

New York's Barnard College are also active collectors of zines and alternative press materials. As a woman's college, Barnard began collecting zines due to 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 & Freedman, 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 un-credentialed by education degrees or professional accomplishment' (Freedman, 2009, p. 52). Freedman acknowledges the zine as an object of academic awkwardness. It's credibility as a reputable primary resource calls into question its relevance to a research library. With some chagrin, the zine calls out this 'intellectual snobbery'; catechising the academic elite. Gisonny and Freedman (2006) argues that, 'It is important for libraries to collect zines, and all alternative press materials, to ensure balanced and diverse collections'. Although the zine is guilty of non-conformity, its value as a true representation of societies, sub-cultures and movements warrant the notice of academic librarians in Australia (Appendix 1).

For the Australian academic libraries who have either acquired zines by donation, as a cultural gift, or by actively collecting, there seems to be little cohesion and agreement on best practice. Internationally, ad hoc 'Zine Librarian' groups meet either physically or digitally on a semi-regular basis. This community of practice provides interested librarians from academic, public and state institutions the opportunity to discuss the future and contemporary practices for improving the accessibility and relevance of their collections. These initiatives and strong community focus have led to the concept of the 'Zine Librarian' as a legitimate future career path within North America and the United Kingdom.

In order for a zine collection to grow and convert its investment into research potential, it needs a librarian or a group of librarians to have a genuine interest in the area. Because zine collecting is often 'decentralised and outside standard methods (such as centralised mass

vendors) that institutions generally use for purchasing materials, collection development of zines has generally been approached on an individual basis' (Brett, 2015). The best zine collections are curated by those who understand zines and their culture and have a certain level of passion for it. Although zine librarianship has yet to capture the imagination of Australian academic libraries and librarians on a professional level, all it requires is someone with a little bit of passion. For example, the Schlesinger Library formed a popular culture committee to, 'locate and acquire zines and other non-mainstream materials' (Harrison, 2007). The formation of the group leads to the rewriting of the library collecting policy; strengthening the popular culture collections. Whether it be under the guise of a committee, an online community or an industry-based interest group, budding Australian zine librarians have an opportunity to create best practice for the area.

Considerations and Recommendations for Collecting Zines in Academic Libraries

Zines are a product of resistance; resistance to the establishment and the norm. As much as we would like to think the contrary, librarians are part of the establishment; collecting zines and alternative press publications is a complicated process. Although having a dedicated zine librarian would be ideal for the collection, this is not always going to be possible. Identifying an individual or a group of librarians interesting in zines and/or alternative publications is a realistic way to increase awareness of such collections to patrons as well as library management.

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' (Poletti, 2008, p. 11). For librarians looking at acquiring zines, the obvious place to start is the distro (distribution centre for zines) or alternative bookstore. They are few and far between these days, but Sticky Institute in Melbourne is the example. Creating a relationship with places like 'Sticky' is an excellent way of placing the academic library in the 'scene' and for interested librarians to start 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. Fortunately, zines are generally low-cost and donations can be sought from zine exchanges and festivals.

To establish and maintain a zine collection, librarians could work to the strength of their current collection and identify areas of research potential from academics and relevant subject librarians. As discussed above, it is generally acknowledged that zines have research potential, however, simply selecting 'one of each' does not necessarily constitute a collection

identity. Establishing this identity can enable librarians to channel their budget to items that will be useful for future research purposes. The zine can be a low cost and affordable acquisition for any library as well as a unique addition to a research collection.

Interested academic libraries and librarians should also consider forming working groups; creating opportunities to discuss the future direction of zine collecting in Australia. Starting a conversation will lead to scholarly works, talks, forums, discussions and, ultimately, clear and identifiable practices.

Conclusion

Arguably, zines have a place in the special collections of Australian academic libraries. Their worth as a social document of the time(s) has research potential in many disciplines, for example, sociology, psychology and literature. This initial research discovered that only one Australian academic library currently actively acquires zines for their collections. University libraries could be missing out on a unique 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 as discussed above. Librarians can play a larger role in the creation and distribution of zines, working with zinesters to create meaningful and useful collections and collaborations. Focusing on existing library collection strengths and acquiring zines that work with these strengths, enables easy demonstration of their worth in a collection. It is worth having this conversation; it might be uncomfortable or awkward, but the zine wouldn't have it any other way.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on Contributor

Daniel Vincent Wee is a librarian at Monash University, working in Rare Books and Research and Learning. Research interests include: The collection development of contemporary special collections; new graduates and early career librarianship in rare books and special collections in Australia; book illustrations, engravers and artistry; and ephemera in special collections.

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Appendix 1

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.'