

# Introduction

## Zines in Libraries

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Intellectual freedom can exist only where two essential conditions are met: first, that all individuals have the right to hold any belief on any subject and to convey their ideas in any form they deem appropriate, and second, that society makes an equal commitment to the right of unrestricted access to information and ideas regardless of the communication medium used, the content of work, and the viewpoints of both the author and the receiver of information.

—*American Library Association, Intellectual Freedom Manual, 7th edition*

**IF YOU DECIDE TO START COLLECTING ZINES, WHICH I HOPE YOU WILL, YOU** will probably find yourself called upon to defend the legitimacy of zines and their place in your library or institution. This is why it is essential to prepare yourself for possible challenges with a thorough knowledge of zines, their history and application, and their current and future value. The American Library Association's Code of Ethics dictates that knowledge workers take into account the significance of their power to decide or influence decisions about the selection, organization, preservation, and dissemination of information (American Library Association 2017). Libraries, archives, and cultural heritage institutions that wish to take seriously the commitment to intellectual freedom and diverse and representative collections must thoroughly consider the ways in which alternative forms of knowledge, like zines, are included or excluded from their collections, and the impact this has on people, communities, and cultural memory. Historically and contemporarily, zines have been a publishing format of choice for many marginalized individuals and communities and a wide variety of subcultures, making their relative absence in

libraries and cultural heritage institutions a matter of ethics. We must maintain an awareness that the resources being collected and preserved in cultural heritage institutions quite literally become the historical record, serving as our cultural memory. For much of history, those institutions have collected items because they fit within certain criteria of value, as determined by the very institutions (like academia) that marginalized members of society and to which most zine creators do not have access. Because zines do not resemble the typical scholarly sources that institutions have been taught to value, they are often considered too difficult, obscure, or “cheap” to collect. This creates a dangerous gap in our cultural memory, in which those with the privilege to be published will be preserved as part of history, while voices from the margins are devalued or ignored, and then lost. The dominance of traditional information sources in our institutions, paired with the exclusion or marginalization of all others, serves to simultaneously delegitimize and obscure alternative ways of knowing. While some institutions are beginning to take seriously the call for including and centering marginalized voices and alternative forms of knowledge, it is still ultimately up to library staff to discover and make the case for the value and inclusion of these materials. After all, as librarians, archivists, and knowledge workers go about the act of appraising and collecting items, “they are doing nothing less than determining what the future will know about its past: who will have a continuing voice, and who will be silenced” (Cook 2011).

## DEFINING ZINES: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FORMAT

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What unites all zine publishers is their passion for communication. Zine makers are driven to publish their ideas purely for the sake of communicating, generally with complete disregard for money, let alone profit. Anyone can publish a zine—all it takes is the desire to write and publish ideas. . . . There are zines from people of almost every age and background.

—*R. Seth Friedman*, *The Factsheet Five Zine Reader*

When it comes to defining zines, there are almost more exceptions than rules. Zinesters will tell you that there really is no fixed definition of a zine. Like the communities they often represent, zines are a fluid format that actively resists traditional publishing and its control over knowledge organization,

production, and consumption. While some trace the history of zines back to the earliest self-publications, zines as we conceive of them today are widely considered to have evolved from early science fiction fanzines. From their origin in the 1930s, science fiction fanzines provided an alternative mode of information-sharing for a community that was outside the mainstream, creating a legacy of self-publishing that continues today. Initially, fanzines were about science fiction exclusively, but realizing the potential of the format, zine creators “have since wandered rather far from the path and now produce fanzines which contain any damn thing they can think of” (Roberts 1978). Different zine genres began to emerge, and while there are still many in the realm of science fiction, new categories continue to form. It is important to note that this heretofore unprecedented freedom of expression in print was only made possible by the ability of creators to access increasingly affordable technologies, like the typewriter and the mimeograph. For most of publishing history, the tools of publishing and mass communication have been reserved for the privileged few. The increasing ability of people from all walks of life to access communication and publishing technologies, fueled today by the evolution and proliferation of computers and the internet, has created a context for radically shifting what is counted as knowledge, who can be seen as a knower, and what knowledge is valuable enough to preserve. This creates an opportunity to combat the epistemic inequality that exists in our institutions and in our world.

While anyone can create a zine about any topic, zines have developed primarily in response to the people and communities that create and share them, and this has determined how the format has evolved. For example, the emphasis on DIY (do-it-yourself) production is understood as a cultural practice, “understood in terms of zines’ close relationship with and adaptation of the founding principles of punk, which disregards standards of competence and merit as requirements for artistic production in favor of a democratic model of making art” (Poletti 2019). I would also note that this emphasis on DIY production methods is a result of creators who have historically had limited access to the materials necessary for publishing. The primary function of zines is found not in their ever-shifting form but in their content, and in their ability to communicate, to build and connect communities.

## METHODS OF (RE)PRODUCTION AND DISTRIBUTION

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The material form of zines and the methods that produce them are constantly evolving based on the availability of technologies, the creative processes and circumstances of the zine-makers, and the emergence of new zine communities. The quality and type of materials used varies greatly, but the average zine is usually paper-based and loosely resembles a book, pamphlet, newsletter, or brochure. Zines are generally low-budget productions, made with whatever materials the creator can access. While plenty of contemporary zines are produced on a computer and can look quite similar to a regular magazine, “the typical format for zines is a small, digest-sized booklet, created by folding several sheets of standard-size writing paper. This convenient booklet form allows the publisher to produce a publication that’s compact and easily carried around or sent through the mail” (Friedman 1997). Furthermore, zines are often formatted in such a way as to be easily reproduced and shared by fans. In general, zines are entirely produced and distributed by one person or a small group of people. This is a reversal of the typical operations of power in publishing, in which the publisher or “expert” is the one who selects what is worthy of publication, and who ultimately has control over the final product, how it’s edited and formatted, and how it’s distributed. Because zines are produced and disseminated via DIY and grassroots methods, they provide a forum for the type of freedom of expression that mainstream publishing could never hope to provide.

## INTENTIONALLY SELF-PUBLISHED WORKS

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First and foremost, zines are intentionally self-published by one creator or a group of people. Self-publishing at its most basic is defined as the preparation and distribution of one’s own work, “independently and at one’s own expense” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Zine creators participate uniquely in self-publishing, and it is important to note that they do not seek a formal publisher as other types of self-publications might. Zinesters choose that format explicitly and intentionally, choosing a medium in which the power to create, format, and distribute is entirely in their own hands. It is essential to point out that self-publishing through zines was born out of frustration at the inability of people to afford or otherwise access the means to publish or even

communicate with one another. For example, the very first LGBTQ+ publications in the United States (which could be classified as zines) were born out of the need of a marginalized community not just to communicate, but to validate their existence. Of course, even self-publishing does not protect such works from censorship. Almost immediately after *ONE Magazine* began publishing in 1953, it was declared obscene by the U.S. Post Office, which refused to deliver it. *ONE Magazine*, the first pro-gay publication to reach national circulation in the United States, spent years fighting a legal battle, something very few marginalized people can ever afford to do. At long last, in 1958, the Court's ruling stated that "speech in favor of homosexuals is not inherently obscene" (U.S. Supreme Court 1958). After the *ONE, Inc.* ruling, LGBTQ+ self-publishing began to proliferate. The 1950s would welcome new publications such as the *Mattachine Review* in 1955 (a publication of the Mattachine Society—one of the first U.S. gay rights organizations), the *Ladder* in 1956 (published by the Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian rights group in the United States), and many localized publications dedicated to LGBTQ+ organizing, among which were zines and newsletters. However, these early LGBTQ+ zines and publications were still considered too obscene or fringe for most libraries to collect, which is why very few libraries have a full run of these titles today. While these materials have been preserved (mostly thanks to those doing LGBTQ+ community archiving work), I invite you to imagine how much more widely known and accessible these titles might be had their value been recognized earlier.

## CIRCULATING ZINES: ZINES AND COPYRIGHT

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Zine creators are motivated by the desire for expression or the need for information-sharing. Zines are not made for profit. Generally, they are sold for just a few dollars to cover the costs of printing and/or mailing. However, trading zines instead of selling them is considered an honored tradition across zine communities. Because zines are generally made to be shared and reproduced, they will occasionally include statements by the creator(s) providing direction with regard to their copyright status and the redistribution of their content. Copyright is complex, and each zinester is allowed to define for themselves how they wish their work to be shared, or not. However, all zines are protected by copyright law, even if they are not likely to be submitted for copyright

registration or define themselves as anti-copyright or “copy left.” So while sharing may be encouraged, it’s important to educate yourself and others about the ethics of zine sharing and distribution. The best way to understand the relationship of zines and their creators to copyright and redistribution is to read the statements and disclaimers in the zines themselves and, whenever possible, contact the creator directly for express permission to redistribute them.

## ZINE COMMUNITIES

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As previously discussed, zines have played a central role in the development, communication, and proliferation of an untold number of communities and subcultures. Zines exist as a type of community publication “which grants access and encourages the participation of those not represented (or not represented correctly), within mainstream society. . . . Groups lacking access—especially people of color, women, working-class radicals, gay and lesbian groups, and homeless advocates, among others” (Mathieu et al. 2012). While libraries continue to claim an increased dedication to diverse and representative collections, I remain unconvinced that they will succeed in that goal unless they not only include, but center, the perspectives of the marginalized and the underrepresented. Collecting zines, and other self-published or community-created content, is just one of the many ways we can resolve the lack of diverse voices in our collections, and therefore, our historical narratives. Of course, it is not enough to simply collect a few zines. Our collections can and should focus on the most marginalized; we must work, as bell hooks advises, from margin to center, with knowledge workers reflecting on how they have “acted in complicity with the existing oppressive system” (hooks 1984).

Let’s look at an example of zines created by one of the most marginalized groups in the world, incarcerated people. The millions of lives spent and lost within this prison-industrial complex have rarely had their stories told. Are these lives not worthy of recognition, now or in the future historical record? The ALA stands firmly behind the rights of all, including those in prison, to access the information they require (American Library Association 2010). However, it is not enough to provide information and internet access to the incarcerated. In order for a condition of intellectual freedom to be met, they too must have the ability to publish and communicate. While incarcerated people are sometimes able to get access to the few supplies needed to make

a zine, there are often a number of additional barriers that conspire against incarcerated people communicating or publishing. Libraries and all proponents of intellectual freedom should take seriously the lives being lived behind bars, and do whatever we can to ensure that their stories are not suppressed now, or from history. Using prison zines as an example can invite further conversations about those who have been left out of the historical narrative, and the types of materials they leave behind. Beyond prison zines, I would invite you to consider the zines created by all those who are locked up and locked out of full participation in our society.

## CONCLUSION: ZINES AND INTERSECTIONALITY

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Intersectionality is a theory and concept that provides a way to analyze “the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of (racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect, especially in the experiences of marginalized users or groups” (*Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* 1994). First coined by the scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the term *intersectionality* can be used to consider how oppression actually works through identity categories and their social value to create a unique experience of life, and of oppression and marginalization. Becoming fluent with critical intersectional analysis is necessary for libraries that wish to create a truly diverse and representative collection. There are any number of zine categories that, if centered in institutions, could have a lasting ability to challenge and stand in resistance to the white, western, cisgender, heteropatriarchal bias that currently dominates our society. Using the lens of intersectionality, practitioners might begin to interrogate and attend to the inequality that is inherent in the way our libraries and cultural heritage institutions create and maintain our cultural memory. I would encourage you to ask yourself: where and when have individuals, communities, and social movements had to, out of necessity, become their own information generators and providers, their own historians and bibliographers? What materials, if any, did they leave behind? How can these materials best be captured not just for preservation, but for access? Intersectionality, when applied, allows us to consider how race, class, gender, ability, health, sexuality, religion, citizenship, age, and other identity categories determine not only an individual’s experiences, but also their ability to be valued as a knower, and to be understood.

Zines, as products of communities and cultures, are an ideal format for libraries and institutions that wish to create a truly diverse and representative collection. Long before I worked with colleagues to establish a zine collection at the Library of Congress, I was being laughed at by people in my field who could not understand the value of these materials. This is why it is essential to prepare yourself for possible challenges, and be ready to make the case for the value of zines. It is ultimately up to the knowledge workers who staff and lead cultural heritage institutions to take responsibility for their collections by making a case for the value and inclusion of these materials, and to fight the conditions of epistemic inequality wherever they are found.

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