Printed Freedom, On-line Access: Zine Resources on the Web

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Printed Freedom, On-line Access: Zine Resources on the Web

By Jeremy Brett, University of Iowa

Zines on the Web are . . . wait a minute, a what now? What’s a “zine”? It is unfortunate that zines, because of their underground origins and the limited nature of their distribution, may be unfamiliar to many readers. Zines are truly remarkable publications—sometimes funny, sometimes tragic, sometimes beautiful, and always individual in their identity—that deserve wider recognition and increased preservation by archives and libraries.

By their highly individualistic nature, zines are hard to define, but most zines share a few characteristics that provide us with a reasonable, common definition. A zine is an informal, non-professional, self-published work. It is created without a primary consideration for profit and involves a limited distribution, such as by subscription, purchase at zine shops or other “distro” (distribution) outlets, or passed hand-to-hand. More often than not, zines do not have a copyright because there is a strong belief among most zinesters in a freedom of expression untrammeled by the exclusivity guaranteed by copyright.

A zine can be about anything its creator or creators desire, and it can take a variety of artistic appearances and formats. Zines are poems and collections of poetry. They are stories. They are collages, they are comic books, they are drawings, they are photographs. They are diaries, they are essays, they are catalogs, they are reviews, they are political tracts, they are prison narratives, they are calls for social justice and equality, they are cries for personal acknowledgment, they are revelations of personal trauma and disaster, and happiness and triumph. They are forums for opinions on society, sexuality, science fiction, the body, the media, music, the economy, the workaday world, the road, and other zines.

The World Wide Web may seem at first to be an odd place for zines to reside. Since modern zines first arose in the late nineteenth century as outgrowths of the amateur printing movement, their existence has been intimately tied to the medium of print. Today, even as E-zines have emerged on the Internet, zines continue to flourish on paper, as zinesters by and large prefer the hands-on, solid aesthetic of working with paper and print. Traditional zines, however, slowly are making their digitized presence felt in several on-line repositories where they can be accessed by a much larger audience than they ever could in their original print versions.

ZineLibrary.info (http://zinelibrary.info/) is probably the most visible digital repository of zines, and it is a sister site of the Olympia Zine Library (http://zinelibrary.blogspot.com/), a free and open-to-the-public library of radical political zines housed at Last Word Books in Olympia, Washington. ZineLibrary.info users can upload their zines and make them publicly available and printable as PDF files. The site provides a list of subject categories that users can apply to the zines that they upload and that viewers can use to narrow their searches. The subject categories, in keeping with the site’s focus on radical zines, run from “Ableism” to “War and Imperialism,” and a full alphabetical list of the E-library’s contents also is available. Overall, ZineLibrary.info is a wonderful site for exploring the breadth of zine political involvement.

The Queer Zine Archive Project (http://www.qzap.org/v6/index.php), based physically in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is another important zine Web site. In operation since November 2003, QZAP seeks to “establish a ‘living history’ archive of past and present queer zines and to encourage current and emerging zine publishers to continue to create. In curating such a unique aspect of culture, we value a collectivist approach that respects the diversity of experiences that fall under the heading ‘queer.’” QZAP maintains a digital gallery of more than nine hundred zines that are alphabetically divided into sub-galleries, and keyword searches of the holdings by author, subject, or title are possible.

Zines are ephemeral documents, especially those that document smaller, more underground, or more transient communities. In such cases, the Web can be a useful repository for publications that, absent physical preservation by a collecting institution, might otherwise disappear. A good example is localCHAOS!, which was started in the 1980s as a zine devoted to the music and skateboarding scenes in and around Ann Arbor, Michigan. localCHAOS! now has an on-line presence (http://wdean.fatcow.com/zines1.html) focusing on the same topics. The site contains a gallery of cover images and descriptions of the original (Continued on page 14)
localCHAOS! zines from the 1980s, and there is also a zine archive of other skate and music zines from throughout the United States. The digitized zines are combined with video clips, photos, reviews, and additional materials that together document the evolution, activities, and quirks of a particular social community—something that zines do very well.

One of the driving forces behind the popularity of zines as a method of communication and social interaction within communities has been the growth of science fiction fandom. Science fiction fans have used zines since the 1930s as forums for sharing opinions or stories about the genre. Even today, zines are still synonymous with science fiction fandom for many people. A number of fan groups have devoted great effort to preserving the artifacts that mark the evolution of fandom, including the Fanac Fan History Project. At the project’s Web site (http://www.fanac.org/), a number of early and modern science fiction zines are available for viewing. Another important fan-related site is Fanlore (http://fanlore.org/), a wiki that mainly documents zines that are specific to science fiction fandom, but that also includes zines on other topics. Within the wiki, media properties (e.g., Star Trek) often have their own entries describing their presence in fan fiction, and many of the entries on specific zines include scanned images.

A crucial source of on-line information on zines is ZineWiki (http://zinewiki.com/). ZineWiki, an open-source encyclopedia devoted to zines and other independent small press media, is a continually growing site with entries on numerous zines and zine-related subjects. A researcher can find entries on individual zine titles, notable zinesters, and other topics, and the wiki also includes an archive of zine-related articles, including content from the famed punk zine Punk Planet. Similar content can be found at the Punk Zine Archive (http://punkzinearchive.blogspot.com/), which provides access to zines focusing on the subject of punk and underground music, including PDF images of some of the more prominent, out-of-print punk zines.

At this time, only a few archival institutions are mounting formal efforts to collect and preserve zines in any format. It is a shame that more repositories are not following their example, as zines are important, varied social documents that reveal valuable information not only about traditionally underrepresented communities, but also about individuals who choose to express themselves outside the mainstream. If we as archivists advocate for the acquisition and preservation of zines in our repositories, we can help ensure that these creative voices will not be stifled through neglect or the simple passage of time. Digital repositories like those mentioned above certainly have improved access to zines, but if archival repositories were to utilize zine collections appropriately, while forging cooperative and creative links with zinesters, zine distributors, zine libraries, zine publishing projects, and other zine-collecting institutions, archivists could help to make zines available to vast new audiences. Archivists should embrace the value of zines as historical documents and, in doing so, explore the viability within their institutions of digitizing their zine holdings (whether partially or in full). Let’s not allow the universe of creativity and passions documented by zines to fade away due to lack of access.

Jeremy Brett is the Special Collections Project archivist at the University of Iowa. He has worked in various archival and records management capacities for the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, the Council of State Archivists, the National Archives and Records Administration—Pacific Region, and the Wisconsin Historical Society. He would like to assure people that this frequent change of workplace is not because he is fleeing law enforcement professionals or engaged on some sort of pointless reality show.

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