Zines as Nonbinary Objects and Questions of Privilege

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Introduction

Zines exist within the hybrid recesses of cultural consciousness. They are subcultural relics of the eras prior to the internet and they are knowledge infrastructures that overtly disrupt mainstream cultural perspectives. They also function as boundary artifacts that bridge gaps between analog print protocols and digital manifestations of data such as PDFs and hyperlinks. Nicolini et al. (2012) observe that "we look at objects as boundary devices but also as epistemic things, objects of activities, and infrastructures" (p 5). Zines as critical data artifacts communicate subcultural values and rebellious ideologies. Zines are also hybrid creations that traverse the boundaries between digital and analog as well as the social and scholarly.

Zines as "epistemic things" (Nicolini et al. 2012 p. 5) emerge as cultural representations but also adapt to serve as attitudes about "the world that leads to the deposition of knowledge in a form from which others can draw" as Rheinberger (2005 p. 409) commentd. Zines traditionally are laypersons' objects, with content that is created for and consumed by other laypersons. They possess rebellious potential in that not only do they represent the ideas which they espouse and the cultures which generate these notions, but they communicate ideologies across social margins. They are traditionally laypersons' objects, with content that is created for and consumed by other laypersons.

Zines are social objects too, and they draw their influences from underground and nonlinear processes that make them "distinct from other modes of relating to the world" (Rheinberger 2005 p. 409). The "data journeys" (Longino 2020 p. 391) of zines are mutable messy and multiple; as social objects they do not pursue linear trajectories and as knowledge infrastructures they are porous as they evolve through the participatory responses, reactions and reflections of the individuals who read them. R. Clark Parsons (2017) has indicated that "Over the last decade, zines, or self-published booklets ranging dramatically in style and content, have made a resurgence. It is impossible to estimate the number of contemporary zinesters in the United States, whose subversive, hodgepodge texts are not catalogued in the Library of Congress or issued ISSNs… The humble do it yourself (DIY) zine perseveres in spite of, but perhaps more accurately, *because* of the meteoric rise of blogging and social media platforms" (p.2). Zines occupy the digital and the analog terrains simultaneously. However, R. Clark Parsons (2017) also interjects that "the polarization of zines versus blogs also precludes a more nuanced framework that positions zine-making as a feminist practice working in conjunction with digital media, distinct but symbiotic discursive strategies for coping with structures of power that privilege some bodies while marginalizing others within the public sphere" (p 4). Zines are social objects too, and they draw their influence from underground and nonlinear processes that make them disruptive and disorderly.

Furthermore, data themselves are messy and mutable; zines capture this reality through their lack of formalized classification, indexing and bibliographic archives during their creation and distribution. Longino (2020) expands on this, concluding that it is "a naïve fantasy that data have an immediate relation to the phenomena of the world, that they are 'objective' in some strong, ontological, sense of that term, that they are the facts of the world speaking directly to us" (p. 391). Zines as boundary objects are subjective, social

and subversive data artifacts that not only demonstrate subcultural ideologies, but collaboratively create communities of practice through shared interest and perspectives. Clark- Parsons (2017) supports this through her observation that "Zine-making as an accessible DIY media practice that operates outside of both marketplace logic and sociopolitical constraints, enables the invention and circulation of counterdiscourses that might otherwise find no outlet within the commercial media landscape" (p 9).

Zines such as *Major Threat* (a punk rock boundary object designed by academics and educators to reach laypersons) is a data artifact that loudly proclaims how zines occupy digital and physical communities and resist conventional classification schemes. Kemp, founder of Major Threat, tells the readers that "if you find a copy of this online, please share it. Print a couple. Email to friends. Post it anywhere and everywhere. Help this movement to improve education grow" (Kemp 2020 p. 2). This particular zine uses the viral philosophical practices of the digital realm to encourage widespread meme awareness in print formats and in online platforms as well. *Major Threat* promotes the mores of punk literati to dismantle traditional academia and simultaneously calls for rebellion from laypersons to effect this change from a place of privilege.

The embodied contradiction in this zine-as-data-thing deftly reveals how zines resist binary classifications as simply literature, ephemeral objects or digital representations of countercultural insurrection. Grey literature supports rebellious data things as it calls attention to contradictions as reflexive spaces where people can delve into transgressive knowledge infrastructures built through collaborative, social and subjective interactions within varied communities. Zines are one crucial example of the sundry possibilities to engage in conversations beyond the cross disciplinary and ask difficult questions about accessibility, privilege and diversity.

Zines as cultural artifacts and librarians

Creasap (2014) has argued that "Zines occupy a middle ground between traditional research papers or essays and Web-based media such as blogs. Unlike research papers, zine style is decidedly informal. Images are hand drawn or cut and pasted by hand..The informal, creative and participatory character of zines…unlike blogs, zines are physical objects that can be held and passed from person to person by hand" (p.155).

Yet as demonstrated by the aforementioned zine *Major Threat,* zines are also digital objects that circulate in online environments. Zines as cultural artifacts are constructed as countercultural data objects; as Creasap (2014) also finds "Zines share commonalities with independent media of earlier women's movements, such as scrapbooks, pamphlets and manifestos" (p. 157). The scholar C. L. Weida (2013) argues that this countercultural significance of zines has antecedents in other types of DIY objects when she observes that "Zines may be seen as an extension of genres like artist sketchbooks, chapbooks, surrealist games, and manifestos of art history" (p. 68). C.C. Bagelman and J. Bagelman (2016) comment on this further by linking zines to "philosophical movements like Surrealism used small runs of self-published material, decorated in collage and bricolage, as a forum for ideas" (p. 366). Zines have also, according to N. Nijsten (2016) "evolved to include punk fanzines from the 1970s onward, and since the 1990s more and more women got involved" (p. 414). Zines as symbols of countercultural and grassroots community values within their historical antecedents continue to fascinate information professionals and educators. Many librarians are fascinated by zines and S. Thomas (2018) has commented on how librarians in particular "have expressed interest in collecting and teaching zines

and regularly seek opportunities to co-teach or present to classes. Librarians can also assist with zine assembly and reproduction outside the classroom. A librarian may know of other faculty teaching with zines, of campus resources and contacts for planning a zine event and of relevant special collections in the library" (p. 750). Librarians do have access to knowledge infrastructures that include special collections and the opportunities to engage with communities and classrooms in various ways that students and faculty might not be able to do.

Du Laney, Maher and Schindler (2020) have argued that "The zine format becomes a vehicle that integrates key skills such as research techniques, critical information literacy and concise argument synthesis with course-specific learning outcomes" (p. 12). Lymn (2013) expands this to include librarians as potential countercultural producers of knowledge infrastructures as well as information allies when she constructed "librarians as insider ethnographers" (p. 1) within their communities. She directly confronts conventional perspectives of librarians as custodians of traditional mores when she states: "There is the sense that the librarians don't participate in DIY and grassroots communities; but they do" (Lymn 2013 p. 4). S. Britton (2018) has expressed the odd status of zines in library spaces as well as the difficulties presented in terms of access, authority, and agency when zine values and countercultural resistance encounter institutional barriers and metadata management. She comments that "Some zine makers are reticent for their zines to be part of library collections, particularly institutional libraries as the controlled, owned, nature of something like a library collection seems to be the antithesis of many of the fundamental ideas that are central to zine making: independence, estrangement from mainstream culture, and the zine as an ephemeral object" (Britton 2018 p. 5).

Zines as NonBinary Objects

Zines as artistic expressions, sentimental confessions, cultural critiques and community manifestos establish themselves as nonbinary objects. They disrupt digital spaces through an insistence on print media as a way to spread memes of resistance and revolt. They disrupt analog spaces through an insistence that community and creativity can expand and grow through digital connections.Alison Piepmeier observed in 2008 that zines are "what Gregory Sholette terms 'Dark Matter' , work that functions outside of and is therefore invisible to the established art world and to academic scholarship" (p. 218). C.L. Weida (2013) indicates that the zine as a nonbinary objects demystifies knowledge infrastructures as hidden from the layperson; rather it builds infrastructures through creativity and community: "..making a zine does not require training, initiation, or education as a prerequisite-a zinester is simply a person who creates a zine." (pp. 76-77). Zines as hybrid nonbinary social objects "explicitly explore the intersection of narrative and materiality" (Poletti 2008 p. 87).

M.R. Bold (2017) also discusses why zine making has grassroots outreach through digital spaces and why it is critical for zine communities to be diverse, active and visible. "Zines are significant because they offer the opportunity for connection, community and networking between those interested in these diverse topics. Despite this..diversity in race, class, and age are underrepresented in the zine community." (p. 215). However, "Zines and DIY/self-publishing have helped to change the way that consumers engage with content: turning passive consumers into active cultural producers" (Bold 2017 p. 219). Zines as nonbinary data artifacts create agency and have the potential to generate communal ideologies that challenge conventional boundaries and barriers to laypersons because as A. McNutt (2021) observed "Zines allow for personal expression in a manner

that most other mediums do not. This is likely due to history with individualistic or alternative cultures…as well as the amorphous nature of their form-typically any approach to their design or content is valid. The freedom of personal expression is thus not bound by the restrictive more found in other forms" (p. 3). Zines are one crucial example of the sundry possibilities to engage in conversations beyond the cross disciplinary and to ask questions about agency, privilege, accessibility and diversity within cultures that are valued and created by laypersons.

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