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A New Kind of Social Media Strategy: Collecting Zines at the Vassar College Library

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Abstract

“Where do we go from here?” One way that the Vassar College Library is answering this question is by making concerted efforts to promote unique or rarely held materials—that is, nurturing collections that will make us stand out from the crowd. With that goal in mind, the Vassar College Library has spent the past year working to create a collection of zines.

This article will discuss the importance of social media in the acquisition of zines, using the Vassar College Library’s experience as an example. Zines are DIY, self-published materials that are a vibrant and creative way to represent diverse points of view in your collection; however, with DIY publications come a host of new collection development and acquisition hurdles to consider. Since zines are produced outside of the purview of for-profit publishers, librarians cannot rely on our comfortable and well-established mechanisms to explore and acquire these materials. Using social media to inform collection development can be daunting, but if zines are a medium your library wants to pursue, doing a little bit of networking can go a long way.

Readers will learn about the Vassar zine collection development plan, and different ways that we use social media (particularly Twitter) to fulfill our mission. Different online zine distributors (or distros) will also be discussed, as well as the wealth of materials to be found from individual zinesters via avenues typically not utilized by libraries, such as Etsy. The topic of ethical zine acquisitions will also be explored.

Introduction

Zines are remarkably slippery to define; they almost seem to exist to defy categorization. They can come in many shapes and sizes. They can be typed, handwritten, collaged. They can be about any topic, created by any individual. At their core, zines are a do-it-yourself, creative form of publication. As Duncombe (2001) writes “zinesters privilege the ethic of DIY, do-it-yourself: make your own culture and stop consuming that which is made for you” (p. 7). For academic libraries, zines can add a new and welcome viewpoint; lacking the barriers to access present in more formalized publishing processes, the zine is a medium where anyone can make their voice heard. These small, self-made publications can add huge amounts of vibrancy to a collection.

The same qualities that make zines such diverse resources also serve to make them unruly for your collection development and technical services processes. Zines can and do present interesting challenges when it comes to researching, locating, and purchasing.¹ This paper will attempt to shed some light on how the Vassar College Zine Library is learning to take these challenges in stride.

Vassar College Zine Library

Vassar College is a private liberal arts college located in Poughkeepsie, New York. As of fall semester 2015, the full-time enrollment is 2,425. Creating a zines collection at Vassar College was something that Heidy Berthoud was interested in since starting her position in December 2012; she had previously worked with the zine collection at

¹ Zines can also present interesting challenges to citation methods when they are used in scholarly

papers; this author referred to Giari (2009) for assistance in formatting.

the University of Chicago Library and thought that zines would hold a certain appeal to the Vassar campus population.² However, it was not until the fall semester 2014 that the idea gained traction. To date, Vassar has purchased nearly 400 zines, and with the 2016 fiscal year, zines have been given an official slot in the acquisitions budget.

The focus of this project is to speak more in-depth on how the Vassar College Library goes about both researching and acquiring its zines, with a particular focus on its use of social media in these processes. Much of the collection development and acquisitions work is handled by Berthoud, the unofficial zine librarian and originator of the zine collection, though she is assisted in all things zine related by senior college student Matthew Higgins, the zine library's "zintern."³

Using Social Media in Collection Development

Finding zine content to purchase can be a time consuming process depending on your collection development goals. At Vassar, we have made the decision to center our zine collection on several key areas: namely, feminist zines, zines concerning gender and sexuality, and zines created by people of color. In order to fulfill this mission, we research zine content being created across the country, and even content being created abroad.

Since zines exist outside of corporate publishing models, zine librarians are forced to use unconventional methods to locate this content. There is no handy publisher's database listing thousands of available zine titles, no zine reviews being regularly pushed out to subject librarians for their consumption. There are resources available to zine librarians online via the ZineLibraries.info WordPress site,⁴ but as every zine library is different, it is necessary, to a certain extent, to cultivate your own network of zine resources.

The primary way that Vassar is approaching this problem is through social media. Simultaneous with the public launch of our zine collection, we introduced the Twitter account @vassarzines and began following zine libraries, zine distros, and zinesters. We also utilize TweetDeck to track hashtags such as #zines and #poczines. These very simple steps have introduced us to a world of zine content that we might have otherwise overlooked. It was Twitter that led us to purchase such titles as *Black women & self care: Thoughts on mental health, oppression, and healing* by Naomi Moyer, and the edited series *Sonorus: Feminist perspectives on Harry Potter*.

Another quasi-social media site where one can locate zines is Etsy. A number of zinesters sell their creations in Etsy shops, and it is worthwhile for zine libraries to create an Etsy account. This functionality will allow you to "favorite" the zine shops you use. Etsy will provide automatic notifications whenever there is new content available in your favorite shops; they will also provide a list of recommendations based on your favorites, allowing you to potentially discover new content. While not a vendor database in the more traditional sense, Etsy can certainly be made to serve this purpose for zine acquisitions.

In order to continually expand our network of zine contacts, it has become part of our zine intake process to make note of a zinester's social media accounts and follow (or favorite) them, if possible. Additionally, we make a conscious effort to tweet about new acquisitions, including mentions of the zinester. In our view, these types of small interactions are simply part of being a good zine citizen. We like to publicly acknowledge our appreciation of the work zinesters create, and tweeting about our library content allows us to simultaneously spread the word about zines and build our own network of contacts.

² Her job talk was about acquiring and cataloging zines at the University of Chicago Library.

³ Higgins also read and provided comments on this article.

⁴ Or zine librarians to meet and exchange insights and expertise on a range of topics.

Methods of Acquiring Zines

As noted by Berthoud and colleagues (2015), “not all methods of acquisition are equal” (p. 4). The best—and most ethical—method of acquiring zines is to purchase content directly from the creator. The vast majority of zinesters are not making huge profits from their zines; many have other careers and pursuits, and are creating zines in their leisure time. Indeed, Wrekk (2009) notes that zines are “independently made for the love of creating and rarely make a profit” (p. 6). This kind of direct purchase ensures that one hundred percent of the cost of the zine goes directly to the zinester, which enables them to sustain their creative process. Moreover, when a library purchases content direct from the zinester, it shows that the institution respects the value of the zinester’s work (Berthoud et al., 2015).

Libraries should also make it clear at point of purchase that the zines will be housed in a public space, not in an individual’s private collection. Zines can be very personal items, and it is important to give the zinester the right of refusal; some zinesters may not feel comfortable with their work being available to so large an audience (Berthoud et al., 2015). When ordering for Vassar College, we also include a brief note, typically in the comments section of the online store form or the PayPal submission,⁵ noting that the zines are being purchased for a library collection. To date, we have not received any notes from zinesters rescinding our purchase. On the contrary, a number of zinesters are extremely excited for the opportunity to have content they have created in our library, and many of them have mentioned us in kind tweets, or have sent along handwritten notes of thanks with our orders.⁶

While it is always preferable to purchase content directly from the creator, it is occasionally neither possible nor practical. When this is the case, the next best option is to use a zine distributor. Much

like zines themselves, zine distros come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Some zine suppliers have both an online presence and a brick and mortar storefront, as is the case with Bluestockings in New York City, Quimby’s Bookstore in Chicago, or the Portland Button Works and Zine Distro in Portland, Oregon. Other zine distros exist as an online presence only. For example, the Brown Recluse Zine Distro (BRZD) in Seattle is run out of founder Nyky Gomez’s home (Gomez, n.d.). Other zine distros, like Stranger Danger Zine Distro, have existed in multiple locations with management being passed from zinester to zinester. Some distros will only sell zines by certain creators, while some build their zine catalogs around particular themes. If zinesters lack their own online store presence, you may be able to find their work in a distro. Because distros carry a range of content from different creators, it can sometimes be more convenient for libraries, both from a time and budget perspective, to purchase a single large order with a distro rather than a number of smaller orders with individual zinesters. Zine libraries will have to find a balance that works for their situation.

At Vassar, we try to purchase direct from the zinester whenever possible. This is especially true when we purchase zine content from abroad; we have a number of titles purchased direct from zinesters in the United Kingdom. However, we do have distros that we return to repeatedly in part for convenience, but mostly because we value the content they aggregate. BRZD is an excellent example; on the distro’s website, Gomez (n.d.) writes that BRZD “. . . was created to support and center zines written predominantly by POC folks of all identities . . . [and] was born out of passion for zines and frustration at the lack of representation and meaningful zine material for People of Color” (“About Brown Recluse”). Our zine library appreciates the work that Gomez is

seriously considering creating a separate archive to hold the various accoutrements received as part of our zine packages. In addition to notes, some zinesters have also sent us free stickers and buttons, and some highly decorate and ornament the packages themselves.

⁵ Having a PayPal account is an absolute necessity for any library interested in starting a zine collection.

⁶ In fact, we have received such a quantity of notes that we had to develop a workflow to process them. For each note, we know the zinester who created it and the package it was sent with, and we are

doing in promoting zinesters of color, and we show our support by being frequent customers of the distro.

Conclusion

No two zine libraries are exactly alike, so the strategies currently employed by Vassar College may not be the perfect solution for your home institution. Because there is only one librarian and one student zintern handling all aspects of zine development and acquisitions, it was relatively easy to create a social media strategy, and did not require buy-in across multiple staffers in multiple departments.

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That being said, we would still highly recommend that any library considering a zine collection should explore ways in which they can make social media a regular part of their workflow. Turning to social media for assistance in both the collection development and acquisitions process has been hugely beneficial. This kind of networking has proven to be an integral piece in how we discover and purchase new content. Moreover, it has given us the opportunity to connect more fully with the community of zinesters, and play a role in helping to share their creativity with others.