

Cereal Boxes and Milk Crates Zine Libraries and Infoshops are...Now

by Lacey Prpic Hedtke

“[...] It’s hard to find library materials that challenge the for-profit, corporate culture. Our well-stocked county, community college, and university libraries, though publicly funded, primarily serve private middle-class constituencies – businesses, professions, students, job-seekers, and consumers. There’s not much there for those who don’t share the American Dream.”¹

In some circles a radical statement, in others, a motivation for action. Zine libraries, infoshops, bookmobiles, street libraries, and zine vending machines are all very different spaces and ideas, but all with the same purpose to provide access to information outside the corporate mainstream. I’m especially interested in how people who don’t fit neatly into categories create venues for their own access to information, specifically through the establishment of zine libraries and infoshops.

Here’s the breakdown: A zine library is a collection of zines (handmade books like the one you’re reading) organized by zine-lovers and makers (often referred to as zinesters) in the hopes of preserving and making accessible obscure materials. Since most zines typically have runs of 1-500, each and every one is rare.

An infoshop is what its name implies: a place to go for information. Infoshops are usually, but not always, run by anarchists, but not necessarily for anarchists. They are volunteer-run non-hierarchical spaces where people can go to for lectures, meetings, events, concerts, and activist resources. Some infoshops house libraries and reading rooms. Many have cafés or at least a cup of tea available. Infoshops sprung up in Europe and have caught on in the US in the past fifteen years. Infoshops are ideal for activist travelers, functioning as a place to stop in to find out where the coop is, where to crash, and to find people with similar interests. They usually have free internet access too.

The term “street library” hasn’t caught on as much as “infoshop” has, but it is basically the same idea with a twist. A street librarian is a one who doesn’t leave the library when they leave the physical structure. Many librarians who are also activists will offer their resource skills at protests and events, and are able to bring their abilities wherever they go. People can go to a street librarian to gain information on “underground” activities and events. Although they’re hard to pin down, when they’re around you’ll be sooo happy.

There are millions of inventive and creative ways of getting resources and materials to the interested. Zine bookmobiles and vending machines are some venues I’ve stumbled across. Tool lending libraries and zine recycling programs are another. It’s surprising how many new ways there are of exposing people to self-published media. All of these resource centers have something in common: The aim of fulfilling the need for access to materials and information otherwise difficult to obtain. You won’t find People magazine proudly showcased in these venues. I’m mainly focusing on infoshops and zine libraries, as they are the most enduring and organized forms of information centers, and have more evolved methods of collection maintenance. It’s interesting to see what happens when people who aren’t librarians by profession, or even by education, get together to form a library or resource center.

Why do these people need their own library? Can’t they just go to the public or academic library?

No. There’s a reason why so many alternative libraries exist. There is a clear gap in the information world. As stated above, most libraries keep to the middle of the road. It is very hard to find any materials published outside the mainstream, and especially hard to find materials that have been self-published (zines and factsheets), or non-mainstream periodicals, newspapers and tabloids. Also, infoshops and zine libraries tend to have later hours, be connected with galleries, music show spaces, and other resource venues such as darkrooms or screenprinting shops, as is the case at ABC No Rio in New York City. It also seems these types of libraries draw the paranoid, and rightfully so. Since the PATRIOT Act was enacted, library records are no longer private information. Activists and anarchists, and even sometimes artists are

¹ Atton, C. (1999) The infoshop: The alternative information centre of the 1990s. *New Library World*, 100 (1146) 24

watched by the FBI. Rather than give the government fodder to harass them, through questionable library research, the use of a zine library for information results in trackless searching. “In many groups [...] there is an emphasis on self-education [...] Groups often establish their own small “libraries” of relevant books, periodicals and papers, sometimes in collaboration with a local alternative bookshop or information centre. The rise of the “infoshop” in recent years throughout Europe and the US is one manifestation of such local activity. Usually based around a local anarchist group, although it is of benefit to more than anarchists, it acts as a communication and distribution point for any number of local, national and international groups, movements and projects [...] The infoshop emphasizes empowerment, providing information freely (or very cheaply) to enable people to work together, directly on issues that affect their lives.”²

What kind of spaces are they housed in? How could you possibly have a library in a house or old gas station?

The people organizing these types of places aren’t going for glamorous. In most cases, they’re going for whatever they can get. This is why you’ll find these libraries in people’s living rooms, trucks, basements, in tenements, galleries and student centers. Unless a non-profit organization is backing the infoshop or library, be prepared for creative solutions to space problems. Cheap rent in a bad neighborhood usually equals a great place for an infoshop or zine library. “Besides financial problems, neighborhood communication difficulties are common [...] many infoshops are organized by white youth in communities populated by minorities. The subculture that patronizes the shop [...] sticks out in contrast to the surrounding neighborhood. Residents may perceive the infoshop as a beach-head in the gentrification happening in that town.”³

The Mobilivre out of Canada travels across the continent in a stylish Airstream trailer, bringing zines and workshops with them. The Anchor Archive Regional Zine Project in Nova Scotia offers an artist-in-residence program where artists can stay in a storage shed in the backyard for a few weeks to make a zine. A few libraries accompany “Food Not Bombs”, an organization in several cities handing out free food at different parks or public areas weekly. In Japan, there are bunkos. “Typically run by groups of women for their neighborhood children” [...] bunko is a network of “tiny outposts which may be found in homes, converted train cars, community centers, or even log cabins.”⁴

What are in these libraries? How are they run? How do they acquire materials if they’re anarchists? I heard anarchists don’t like money.

It’s true. They don’t. But some infoshops sell things. Patches, t-shirts, books, videos, art, etc. Most places operate collectively, which often involves paying out of collective member’s pockets, and most frequently relying on donations of materials from people with a lot of zines lying around, other zine libraries with duplicates, or donations of cash. Zine-makers tend to understand a zine library’s motives, and since they aren’t making zines to make money anyway, feel great donating their creation to the library. It provides another venue for a reader to stumble across their hand-bound lovingly screenprinted handmade book.

A way most libraries pay rent is through benefit concerts or sometimes art auctions, or anything else that might be fun and also raise money. In the case of the Papercut Zine Library, the group of librarians was able to trade building labor for a free room.⁵ Rarely are materials bought outright. Sometimes library dumpsters are raided for discarded books, and also for organizational materials (bookshelves, magazine racks, etc.) Dumpstering is a fantastic way to get a lot of what you need for free. But that’s another topic. However these libraries obtain their materials, almost all ask the subject matter not be racist, sexist, or homophobic. Collective action entails each member committing to the project, coming to meetings and voting on each major decision, and each being equally responsible to maintain the space, and everyone is also able to plan events or enact ideas within the space. No one person is in charge of a collective. A collective is a cooperative effort, which if done with a certain amount of enthusiasm and respect for each other, can work out fantastically. If those basic values aren’t in place, there will be burn out, and the space

² Ibid.

³ Dodge, C. (1998) Taking libraries to the street: Infoshops & alternative reading rooms. *American Libraries* 29 (5)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Stockton, P. (2005, June 12) Ah, a new literary oasis, and she the zine queen. *Boston Globe*

could fail. Luckily, people working on fun projects like zine libraries just want to see the library succeed and grow, and they do!

How can you possibly organize information that hasn't already been cataloged by another person?

Easy. You make it up. This is where Sanford Berman would argue the access part comes in. How easy is it to find this information? In some instances, there is no organization. Your findings are left up to fate, chance, and synchronicity. Which is great if your psychic skills are honed. Several zine libraries stick to the alphabetical system, but most zine libraries catalog by topic. If you go in to the library searching for a good book on bicycle maintenance, you'll also find a zine on good routes to ride without getting hit, how to weld your own tall bike, and riding safely, if you're searching the bicycling section. Since zine and infoshop library collections tend to be radical in nature, their subject headings are unique. DIY (do-it-yourself) is a HUGE category, with several subsets to the category. A few others you won't find in the public library are- radical menstruation, squatting, dumpstering, protesting, XXX, sustainable living, fat, and grrrls. The people cataloging this material respond to their material through topics and organizational methods appropriate for their subject matter. It's important to point out that although there are librarians by profession involved in infoshops and zine libraries, most zine librarians are either still in library school, or have never had any experience working in a library at all. They just want to give people access to information they might not even know was out there.

Take for instance the Papercut Zine Library, in Cambridge, Massachusetts.⁶ Even though this library is housed in the Harvard Social Hall, in the same neighborhood as some of the world's biggest and best libraries, this library is thriving. There is obviously a need within the community for zines and all the information they contain and offer. With over 2,000 zines organized by topic on small shelves, and an online searchable catalog, the volunteer zine librarians running the place have figured out how to catalog and organize their material without burying it underneath unsearchable databases or vague subject headings. None of these libraries use cataloging terminology or systems. None of them have scannable barcodes, use the LC or Dewey Decimal systems. I'm sure they have never once consulted the Library of Congress subject headings to make sure they're using the appropriate heading for the zine on home dentistry. Most record which zine or book belongs in what section, maintain a list of what they have and what gets checked out, if theirs in a circulating collection, and forget the rest. The extents to which the digital cataloging systems go are Filemaker or LibraryThing, making the catalog available online. It's important to realize that even though these zine librarians aren't trained in cataloging, they've merged systems that have already been invented with their own original systems.

Although each system is different-some might throw zines into a box and let you sort through, some cut the tops off cereal boxes for organizational systems, and some have book racks, displaying items more like a store, all have invented innovative ways of cataloging and finding the material.

Who uses zine libraries? How do they find out about them?

Anyone who wants to access information not available at their public library uses zine libraries or infoshops. Anyone interested in zines, underground publishing, little magazines, one-offs, tabloids, art, quirks, or free speech in general are excited by zine libraries. Researchers, students, zinesters, artists, old hippies and beatniks, those on the political left and outfield use them. Zine libraries and infoshops don't advertise in newspapers or magazines because they're poor. They're found through word of mouth, posters put up in co-ops, bike shops and on telephone poles. There are a few websites about zines that mention library locations. They are often moving and sadly closing. But new ones are always opening, in different forms. The Zine Machine, for instance, is a vending machine with zines inside. For a dollar or two you can have your own zine to take home. Some are in university libraries, and they are much more organized and professional-looking and operating, which is why I didn't choose to focus on them here. Some libraries are connected to other ventures, and if you look, or go to any zine-related event (store, reading, zine fair), you'll be sure to find a trail to the zine library or infoshop.

⁶ Ibid.

How do the libraries attract users? Who are these libraries geared toward? Do I have to pay to get in?

Other than word of mouth, libraries will often bring cross-sections of their collection for on-site checkout to zine fairs and events, anarchist book fairs, or to zine and book readings in the punk community. The libraries aren't necessarily geared toward anarchists or punks, but due to the radical materials and DIY ethics of zines, these groups are a large user base. These libraries are frequented by anyone interested in the subjects they cover, and most importantly, it is almost always free to check out a book or zine, if they don't think their collection is too valuable or rare to let off-site. It is because of this idea of libraries for all that such a wide variety of people are drawn to the zine library or infoshop.

Are zine libraries really libraries? I don't know about this...

Zine librarians take the stance that if anyone says it's a library, it is. If Duchamp can say found objects are art, zine librarians spending hours cataloging and organizing ephemera and oddities can call themselves librarians and their creations libraries. In this sense, anyplace that provides access to information in a somewhat organized or searchable form, can be considered a library. The word library seems so authoritative and smarty-pants. Zine librarians are taking the word and applying its meaning to a wide range of information resources, including a roomful or bagful of books or zines.

I do hope that zine libraries and infoshops grow in popularity and use. I hope that the collectives running them find reliable methods of funding so fewer are closing. And I do hope that public libraries will become hip to the idea of zines and alternative/non-mainstream periodicals and other materials. Some are starting to realize what a valuable resource they are in terms of documenting cities, contemporary culture and events otherwise not covered by the media. However, there will always be a need and space for infoshops and zine libraries. No matter how much information makes it into public and academic libraries, unless these libraries are suddenly taken over by zine librarians, the board of directors booted, and the institutions are run collectively, zine libraries and infoshops will be filling the information gap in storefronts, garages and shacks.

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