

Welcome to the Zany World of the 'Zine...

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What exactly *is* a 'zine ? Like pornography, the world of zinedom is hard to define, but most people know 'zines when they see them. The 'zine publishing world is sometimes called the "small press" due to its low circulation, although some 'zines are circulated all over the world to thousands of subscribers. The "small press" also includes such things as : nonprofit organization newsletters; academic journals; literary reviews; arts and poetry magazines; fanzines; and other things that are not really 'zines per se. Basically, a 'zine is basically like any other mass-circulation magazine, except for two basic facts : 'zines are usually published out of "love" rather than for money (most 'zine publishers barely break even); and they are generally aimed at narrower, more unusual, or more "alternative" audiences than regular magazines. Also, most 'zines are usually put together by a small group of people, or are even a one-person affair (that person being at once editor, publisher, and business manager) rather than being published by media companies. Especially at the outset, most 'zines can be distinguished by a distinct lack of "high" production values - they are noted for their amateur xerography, typesetting, formatting, and editing. This is because many 'zine publishers are deliberately anti-"corporate" and mass culture, and therefore choose to eschew major sources of advertising revenue.

The 'zine revolution basically kicked off in the early 1980s due to a confluence of several factors. There had been many underground papers in the 1960s, such as the *San Francisco Oracle*, but they always remained local, almost parochial, affairs. The new 'zines linked "underground" elements, subcultures, and countercultures across the country (and the world). Most 'zine publishers would say the initial impetus was the dawning awareness that the mass media were increasingly beginning to offer corporate, featureless fluff. But, in fact, the factors that launched the 'zine revolution were infrastructural - the growing cheapness and availability of personal computers, desktop publishing and multimedia software, personal laser printers, photocopying, word processors, and bulk mail sorting machines. Another incidental factor, not to be ignored, was the coming of age of **Generation X**, who more so than perhaps any previous population cohort had fractured into countless *subcultures* which nonetheless wanted to remain in touch - riot grrrls, punks, skaters, heads, cyberpunks, pomos, hiphoppers, grungers, new wavers, ravers, and SubGenii. And that generation was also one that was more tech-literate and communication-crazy than any of its predecessors.

Though most 'zines are generally only available by subscription, you can quite often find many of them at independent and alternative bookstores. For a 'zine to be carried this way is seen as a great accomplishment, but many 'zine publishers simply want to eschew the bookstore/newsstand scene altogether. For what it's worth, of course, many bookstores are not willing to tolerate the irregular publishing schedule of most 'zines (whenever their editor-publishers feel like putting out the next one) or their irritating style of going out of their way to be repellent to mass audiences. Many people try and follow the 'zine world by reading other 'zines such as *Factsheet Five* which reviews other 'zines, or others such as *Blue Ryder*, which reprints the "best of" the alternative press, usually other 'zines. The 'zine business is a terribly circular affair, and most 'zine publishers maintain "trade lists" with two dozen or more other 'zines. They all review each other, but seem to do it in a rather fair non-competitive spirit, as if to say, "hey, you can read them, and us, too !". 'Zines are aimed at low-budget audiences such as youth, students, and slackers with little cash - most average about \$2 for a single issue, which sure beats newsstand prices for most "real" magazines - so 'zine publishers see this as a ticket to wide distribution.

The 'zine publishers know that the best form of advertising is word of mouth, and that for any topic, no matter

how bizarre, there will be enthusiasts. Mike Gunderloy's *World O' Zines* lists 'zines devoted to : personal obsessions; unusual hobbies & collections; alternative music; unusual sexual practices; "cult" movies & TV shows; unusual travel destinations; wacky sports; weird science; and fringe culture. Then there are always 'zines like *Murder Can Be Fun*, which attempts to make the case of the thesis in its title; *Ben is Dead*, which defies description; and *Monk*, which is about two guys who wander around the U.S. and write about their misadventures as they happen. Not all 'zines are necessarily "far out" - there are plenty devoted to recreations like bowling, wrestling, or the martial arts; or more weighty topics, such as politics, technology, religion, spirituality, philosophy, or advertising. The **World O'Zines** is an excellent reference for any would-be 'zine publisher out to get started, in any case, with tips on printing, binding, mailing, financing, promotion, production, and, yes, taxes too. Gunderloy used to do the reviews for *Factsheet 5* (now it's Jerrod Pore and you can find his F5 Electric on the WELL), and he still clearly has a great fascination for the world of zinedom.

Of course, the 'zine revolution is still ongoing. The newest frontier is made up of electronic or "*E-zines*" which are "published", by electronic mailing lists and ftp archive sites, over the Internet, or downloaded off a Bulletin Board System (BBS) with your modem. The "E-zines" are practically all text, but with the latest push to get sound, color, and digital graphics over the 'Net, you can expect that this will soon be changing as well. Since many mass-circulation magazines are now starting to go this route - you can now read *Time*, *Omni*, or *MacWorld* on *America Online*, for example - the 'zines were once again on the cutting edge of publishing. Many print 'zines are increasingly trying to duplicate the glossy texture and feel of mass-media magazines, without "selling out" to that ethos. For their part, the big publishers have tried to invade the 'zine market, by creating (attempted) mass-circulation publications aimed at such people as punk music listeners and UFO abductees, but generally they have had little success. You will not see those types of mass-media magazines in the index of the Publisher's Clearinghouse any type soon... they are sort of the "black sheep" of the big publishing houses, tolerated as a necessary evil (but a great marketing strategy) by the corporate execs.

Why should you read 'zines ? They represent the true decentralization of information, which media activists constantly complain we need to achieve. They are a truly democratic, grassroots, from-the-ground-up effort. Anybody who wants to tell the world about anything - whether it's the discovery of their latest unusual body mark, or multinational corporate abuses in Venezuela - can tell it through 'zines. If you read 'zines regularly, you are guaranteed to find out about things you probably have never heard about, and may see exposed some things the mass media may not ever talk about. 'Zines will introduce you to people with seemingly bizarre points of view, but with a passionate attachment to their ideas. They expand the terms of debate beyond C-Span and CNN. You can hear the opinions (if you want to) of libertarians, anarchists, socialists, feminists, radicals, gay activists. Greens, situationists, Dadaists, Discordians, postmodernists, neomonarchists, Objectivists, civil libertarians, skinheads, Deadheads, or syndicalists. The fiction in 'zines is always sure to be experimental, and the art and photography avant-garde. 'Zines will expand your horizons, perhaps far beyond where you ever wanted them to go....

But, after wetting your feet in the 'zine world, you feel an itch... don't stop there ! Consider writing for one. Most of the people who write for 'zines are not professional writers. In fact, many of them may have no other qualifications than that they are friends of the publisher. 'Zines do take those unsolicited manuscripts that other magazines often send back to you; in fact, many thrive on just such serendipitous items. And they do provide exposure, beyond the seemingly small audiences which subscribe to them. You will continually be surprised at the highbrow places where 'zines (or features from 'zines) eventually wind up. The Library of Congress does its darndest to get one copy of everything. And if you have a topic that really *begs* for discussion - Seinfeld appreciation; just why do 7-11s have locks on the doors ?; your favorite late-night phone sex ads - don't just schmooz about it with your local gang of friends. Put out a zine about it. And see what people in Peoria, Vancouver, or Baluchistan think about it. The letters may come pouring in. And, as is well known in the 'zine biz, the greatest part of any 'zine is always the letter section.

'Zines are an often ignored part of the "alternative" media which progressive activists tout is so heavily suppressed. 'Zine publishers read magazines like *Fair*, *LOOT!*, and *Propaganda Review* to remind themselves of the massive corporate biases of the "mainstream" mass media, which so often bend over to the bland lowest common denominator of their audiences, and bow to the will of their advertisers. But they are tired of criticizing the corporate media; there are plenty of media critics out there complaining as it is, from the right, left, center, and just plain far out. Instead, 'zine publishers have decided to be part of the solution, rather than just yelling about the problem. They give a voice to groups that might not otherwise have a forum. They tackle topics that others would rather keep silent about. They offer an alternative to the "*infotainment*" that passes for news in so much of the mass-circulation publications. People should support the 'zine revolution by buying 'zines rather than their slick, mass-market imitators. Sure, the pages may be blotched, the type may be illegible, or the photographs may appear like Rorschach blots; but you can see that this is a labor of love, frequently a one-person effort by a person who could just as well do something "better" with their time, such as go to school.

No matter how unusual your interests, there is probably a 'zine somewhere out there that caters to them. No matter how controversial the topic, there is probably at least one 'zine which tackles it head on. No matter how suppressed the point of view (the mentally ill, the handicapped, etc.), there is probably one or more 'zines which try to give it a voice. Many "mainstream" newspapers and magazines (such as *Utne Reader*) tell you where to find and get a hold of 'zines, and they also often provide decent reviews. Another way to dip your feet into the world of zinedom is to pick up a copy of Factsheet 5 (the reviews can also be found online on the WELL). You will not be disappointed. The current editor, Jerrod Pore, always searches out for 200 or more new 'zines to review in each issue. Nobody knows how big 'zinedom is, but it is clearly expanding exponentially every day. To me, 'zines are the *samizdats* of our repressive society. Pick up a copy of one today, and be a good dissident against the tyranny of normality and mass-marketed culture.