In 2013 I was completing an MA in Library and Information Studies and University College London and decided to focus my dissertation on studying issues around the collection, care and accessibility of zine collections in the UK. This was prompted by my own interests as a zine maker and a library worker, and because even though the UK has a strong zine culture, and as this issue of the Art Libraries Journal shows, a number of libraries in the UK have either established or are in the process of developing zine collections, the majority of the research and literature about zine libraries was (and still is) very USA-centric.

I looked at three different types of zine collection. The first were collections that were situated in existing institutional Libraries- London College of Communication (LCC) Library, The British Library, and the Stuart Hall Library at Iniva. The second were collections that existed in non-institutional ‘alternative’ spaces- 56a Info Shop (an anarchist social centre in South London), Salford Zine Library in Manchester, and a zine library based in a community interest company called SHOP in Bristol. The final type of collection were two private collections that the custodians considered zine libraries or ‘archives’- the artist Mark Pawson, who had made his personal zine archive accessible for the duration of an exhibition of his work, and the Edinburgh Fanzine Archive, a collection of around 6000 fanzines kept in the collector's home that they considered to be an archive. The terms ‘institutional’, ‘alternative’ and ‘private’ will be used in this article when referring to the three groups. I carried out interviews (face to face, email and letter) and observational field work in the case of 56a. This article will focus on the main issues that identified through my research and some changes that have been noted since it was written.  

Juris Dilevko makes the case for collecting non-mainstream material stating that collecting “contemporary alternative and small-press publications was key to providing an in-depth picture of current social, cultural, and political issues.”

Zines can also be considered primary source material often offering counter narratives to prevailing attitudes in the mainstream media at the time of creation. This was a common thread for both institutional, alternative and private collections in terms of the value of collecting zines. Building collections that reflected the purposes of an institution and the communities that used them was also an aspect that the different types of collections shared- for example the collection at LCC which is used to support teaching, the collection at 56a Info Shop that reflects the interests of the anarchist community that run the building...
the collection is housed in, and Mark Pawson’s personal archive that comprises of his body of work alongside material that he has found inspiring as source material, work from friends and other artists.  

One of the major differences between the institutional and independent collections studied were their acquisitions, cataloguing and storage procedures. Institutions such as The British Library and LCC already have formal procedures and mechanisms in place such as cataloguing using set standards like MARC and RDA and making item records available via their publicly searchable online catalogues, as well as for preservation and storage. It was interesting to see the way that the alternative and private collections took some of these formal procedures and customised them - for example Mark Pawson developing his own cataloguing strategy for his exhibition based on what he thought library cataloguers do.  

All three institutional libraries had a budget for purchasing zines (and also accepted donations), whereas the three alternative collections studied had no budget and relied on donations. By being able to select items for purchase the institutional collections had more control over how their collection was developed, although the interviewees from both the alternative and institutional collections stated that if they felt a donation did not fit the collection they would not accept it.  

Institutional procedures when enforced at a blanket level to be adhered to rigidly, created difficulties within some of the institutional collections studied. Compared to buying material from large, established Library vendors, the effort that it can take to acquire zines, and to establish a way of doing so that fits within existing workflows and financial regulations can make developing zine collections within institutional libraries difficult. The extra labour required is a potential reason that institutional libraries could be put off of collecting zines in the first place.  

Another example of this is cataloguing. At the British Library zines are treated at periodicals, and although there are some similarities, zines are not always created in multiple runs, so it is possible to suggest this is not the best way to deal with them. Using Library of Congress Subject Headings, which is the standard in many libraries, to indicate the subject matter of zines can also be problematic, as relevant ones that reflect the specialised or niche topics found in zines often don’t exist.  

Alternative collections have more freedom in terms of how they catalogue their zines, and can develop systems which specifically suit the collections. 56a Info Shop devised their own descriptive keyword index that they applied to their zines which was much better
suited to describing the material in their collection than Library of Congress Subject Headings.

Where alternative collections seem to struggle more is how they make their collections searchable. Unlike the institutional collections examined, alternative collections either had no or much less sophisticated catalogues and this could make it hard to realise the scope of these collections, especially if you are unable to visit personally to browse it. The private collection of Mark Pawson is interesting to consider in this respect-the detailed contextual information he provides could prove useful for provenance should his collection ever become part of an institutional archive or library.

In 2010, Research Libraries UK (RLUK) published a report into 'hidden collections', which showed that uncatalogued material was an issue within many libraries⁹. From looking at the alternative collections studied, where collection cataloguing happens at varying levels, it could be said that this could be the case for them. By not having a searchable catalogue which accurately describes material in the collections, the scope of the collection could be missed, and the collections not utilised fully. For private collections such as the Edinburgh Zine Archive, or Pawson's with limited access to the material and no fixed plans for their legacies, this could be considered an even more pressing issue.

The temporal, precarious environments in which alternative collections often find themselves housed causes distinct issues for non-institutional libraries. Although sharing space can often be complimentary- for example 56a is based in a building which also houses a food co-op and a free bicycle repair workshop- as writer Chris Dodge states, many of these alternative spaces come and go frequently due to surrounding environmental pressures such as rising rent, redevelopment and gentrification and tighter laws on squatting. Indeed, since the 2013 study, SHOP in Bristol- one of the independent zine libraries I studied- had closed and the whereabouts of the collection is unknown. In Dublin, The Forgotten Zine Archive was housed in a squat until it's eviction and has moved between a number of temporary locations since.¹⁰

This is not to say, however, that zine collections in institutional libraries are totally immune to these difficulties- witness the move of the women's library as a standalone institution based in purpose built building to being incorporated within the library collections at LSE. The reliance on volunteers to run alternative collections can also place a strain on things-political and ideological differences can cause breakdowns and as people move on and things change, collections in the words of one of the librarians I interviewed 'develop a
Accessibility of collections was an issue is different ways for each of the collections. The Edinburgh Fanzine Archive is housed in the owner’s bedroom, where space is at a premium, so opening the collection to visitors is not really an option. It's also arguable that the institutional collections studied have their own barriers to accessibility. Although allowing visitors from outside of the institutions to visit, still require interested parties to go through formal processes- for example signing in or prearranging a visiting time. This could be something users may feel uncomfortable doing, and act as a block to them accessing the collections. In terms of user groups, both the institutional and alternative libraries studied are heavily used by people who already know about, are involved in the zine scene, although both institutional and alternative collections are generally keen to broaden their users groups and have carried out outreach work to do this.

Due to their unconventional, handmade nature, zines within institutional collections are often considered 'special collection' material, and kept in closed access conditions and so library users are unable to browse freely, and generally have to put in specific requests for material, which could also be potentially off putting.

Alternative collections tend not to have these restrictions. Salford Zine Library and 56a Infoshop allow you to browse their zine collections on open shelves but as a result have to take into consideration issues that might arise due to the way the collection is handled or in the case of Salford Zine Library potential loss if anyone decides to just take a zine, as the space is often unsupervised. Alternative collections are also better placed to support principles of privacy and untracked searching, often important to communities who make and use zines due to the more radical and personal content they sometimes contain. Zines are distributed by the people that make them and within the wider communities they are produced in are an important part of what they are, and allow zine creators a relative level of control over who might read them. As Red Chidgey writes, these methods of circulation act

“as a safety net giving zine writers a little more freedom to speak out about their personal lives, yet with the belief that their disclosures will remain relatively private to the general public and their immediate families. They are therefore written within a context based on an imagined community of truth-telling and the safe sharing of secrets and testimony.”

So, for example, someone making a highly confessional zine about an aspect of their private life that was not meant to circulate widely may not wish for their zines to be publicly
accessible or described on searchable library catalogues. Zine makers may also feel unhappy that work they no longer consider to be relevant, or have 'outgrown' are within library collections.

This leads on to what seemed to be the biggest issue with regards to collecting zines in all types of collections and concerns preservation of zines, and whether or not they should be collected at all. 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.¹⁶

The transition of the zine from what could be said to be an active object to a cultural artefact, held in an institution with controlled access, can also seem problematic. As previously mentioned, in the institutional settings studied, zines were kept in closed access conditions, and although there are strong preservation reasons around why this is the case, it could also be perceived as gatekeeping. The Librarian who helped set up the zine library at SHOP believes that this is one of the reasons that independent, alternative collections are very important, stating that as: “zines emerge from a grassroots movement...it should be the grassroots, the makers, that own that curation process” ¹⁷

Zine collections in alternative zine libraries such as the one at 56a Info Shop seem much less problematic in this respect, as they are generally facilitated by members of the DIY community, and not subject to the same institutional structures and forces that govern the institutional libraries, which run counter to many of the core principles of what zines are and why people make them.

Librarian Jessie Lymn suggests that a solution to this is to take the approach of 'librarian-as-insider- ethnographer' where information professionals who are involved in DIY communities such as the zine world use this insider’s perspective to inform their actions as librarians and bridge this gap.¹⁸ It is arguable this is already happening, as many of the librarians working in institutional libraries had been, or were involved in the DIY communities, including zines. This philosophy could also be used to bridge the gaps that can sometimes be seen between alternative and institutional collections. Many library workers are also part of projects within DIY and activist communities, for example library workers who are part of the Radical Librarians Collective have been helping to clean, catalogue and reorganise the library space (which includes a zine collection) at LARC, a social centre in East London.¹⁹
However, it could be argued that there is a strong argument for collecting zines from a collection development perspective in institutional libraries. Alternative voices, and non-mainstream culture from a non-professional publisher sanctioned viewpoint has historically often been overlooked by these kinds of libraries. Increasingly libraries like this rely on purchasing their stock from a limited range of suppliers, and in the case of some libraries elements of selection by staff is sometimes negated altogether. To quote David Tkach and Carolyn Hank:

“In choosing to collect one thing over another there is an implicit bias on the part of the collector that can lead to unintentional suppression of dissenting opinion and which therefore must be examined critically. Collecting is implicitly and explicitly political.”

Since writing my dissertation in 2013, zine collections in UK libraries have also become more common- for example collections being started at Manchester Metropolitan University and the Glasgow School of Art, and there is now a mailing list for UK zine librarians, from which a number of meetings have been held where library workers who work with, or have an interest in zines are able to get together and share ideas and practices. Institutional collections are only likely to grow, so building these communities could be an important way to work through the kinds of issues outlined in this article. For alternative collections, material conditions seem to be the main challenge. Increasing rent prices, laws against squatting and spreading gentrification in big cities like London or Manchester are some of the prohibitive factors against alternative collections.

56a Info Shop is located in the Elephant and Castle area of London which in recent years has been subject to a redevelopment that has turned an area that had previously been the site of large scale social housing into an area full of high density 'luxury' flats. Luckily 56a seems to be in a fairly stable situation in terms of the building it occupies, but many similar spaces have not been so lucky, and it makes the idea of starting a similar zine library in an alternative space something that feels like it would be hard to achieve for anyone who might like to try and start one now.

However something that I feel hasn't changed since writing the dissertation is the overall value in libraries collecting zines regardless of type. As a librarian who is also a zine maker, I still believe that the greatest value of libraries collecting and making accessible zines lies in the fact that somebody visiting a collection, be it institutional or alternative might be inspired by what they see, and that it could act as a gateway for them to discover
more about something- a subculture, a type of music, a political movement, and perhaps act as an impetus for them to create a zine of their own, especially if what they want to see in the world isn't there already.

1 Siobhan Britton, “What we do is secret? A study of issues relating to the collection, care, and accessibility of zines in institutional and alternative collections in the UK” (MA Diss., University College London, 2013) http://dx.doi.org/10.17613/M6H33Z
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