

## Zine cataloguing, ethics & future discovery

Joshua Barton, Head of Cataloging & Metadata Services, Michigan State University Libraries

Zines, while still under-collected, have become increasingly visible in libraries and archives. In libraries in particular, zines pose special cataloguing challenges. Those challenges illuminate broader implications for librarianship as they forefront the value of cataloguing and metadata in the field. The challenges of zines, as will be discussed, demonstrate why high-level expertise and judgment are required of metadata practitioners as well as, crucially, a willingness and ability to incorporate the interests of multiple stakeholders in libraries' collections, including creators and subjects of library material.

Beginning with the consideration of library metadata in general and its ramifications for future generations, if we do not prepare for the structured discovery and use of cultural heritage data in the future, there is a sense in which there will be no future. At least, there will be no future representation or access to the world's cultural heritage, which is probably not a future worth having.

The case that will be made here – for the value and necessity of metadata work as a profession – will be made in terms of ethical parameters: that the future, and the quality of the future for our fellow human beings, depends in part on us and the work that we do. Namely in the realms of rights to privacy and the enabling of social change: greater equality, equity and diversity in representation.

If a good future hinges on good metadata, then what is good metadata?

Good metadata adheres to content and encoding standards. It is skilfully created and harmonized. It is shareable and interoperable. However, a larger question remains: in the context of professionally practicing in metadata, what is good? How do we do good with our metadata?

As librarians are beginning to question and reject conceptions of libraries-as-neutral ("Are Libraries Neutral?," 2018), new perspectives emerge on the value and import of metadata and on how it can have good and/or sinister consequences. Determining how to wield metadata for good may provide fresh rationale for how much metadata deserves to be supported and resourced.

So, what is good?

Surely, if perhaps simplistically, it entails identifying and doing the "right thing," being humane, reducing harm. These kinds of considerations have not arisen often enough in metadata circles. Questions like: When we consider who we are serving in our metadata work, who is being left out? And what are the consequences of that exclusion?

Zines are a great example to illustrate answers for the question of how do good with metadata. With growing interest in zines in cultural heritage institutions, there is growing awareness of the challenges that zines pose, particularly in metadata.

Why do these challenges exist? In large part because zines are not made for us. They often have a limited range of audiences. Take the example of zinester Michelle, quoted in Fox & Swickard (forthcoming), who explicitly seeks to exclude family and employers as potential audiences.



*"My main concern is that my family will somehow find out my sexual orientation, which I intend to keep private. I also worry about whether or not my critiques of my workplace will somehow end up in the hands of my boss. I also don't like many people knowing about my past drug-use, for fear of judgement, so I like to keep that information private as well."*

Zines often are not made for libraries either, nor bookstores. They are made for other information networks outside of and often intentionally apart from everyday cycles of information exchange and consumption. Zines are made for the zine community, which is a varied group of communities, as communiqués, symbols, calls to action, the fabric of networks of support and care for marginalized people, or as anonymous acts of self-care for someone who simply needs to express something.

All of this creates some incompatibility with how we approach metadata creation, in which we generally assume that the creator should be identified with their work and that the work should be discoverable. Based on what librarians working with zines have come to know, neither of these may always be the case for zines (Berthoud et al., 2015).

And yet zines are also material records of these marginalized communities. They are both primary sources that should co-exist with and challenge other library resources and exciting means for the communities represented in zines to see themselves rightfully represented in cultural heritage collections. It is really important that zines are a part of posterity.

Balancing these opposing considerations yields a consensus something like this: having zines in libraries is an imperfect fit, but it is important enough to make it work. The incompatibilities remain. Dealing with those incompatibilities helps illustrate how we ought to practice good metadata.

The sometimes-opaque nature of zines sets us up to be metadata detectives. They might lack basic identifying bibliographic information like author, title or date. We cataloguers take pride in our ability to track this information down. Fox and Swickard (forthcoming) critique this tendency to sleuth.

*"Catalogers need to understand the very real danger posed by sharing [information] about, for example, street artists who are protesting police violence or city inaction against economic hardships, or transgender artists who do not want previous art created under a dead name connected to their current art."*

Just like the example of Michelle, zines' intimations can create unexpected risks for zinesters when they end up in libraries. Cataloguers' diligence to overcome obfuscation by sleuthing out data elements can exacerbate those risks, exposing sensitive information to wider readership or, after cataloguing, to dissemination via online networks.

Consider zine metadata on networks like WorldCat and local library bibliographic data being transformed into linked data. That metadata could be disseminated and stored or cached across the internet. Such large-scale information networks are where the tensions of doing metadata work with zines will play out, with both costs and benefits.

Consider the upsides. Networked zine metadata has revolutionary potential as seeds of dissonance and change. It represents a potential re-coding of dominant knowledge systems, a remapping of epistemologies by infiltrating the semantic web with new, more inclusive, transformational ways of knowing. Kate Eichhorn (2013, pp. 152–153) connects zine cataloguing to Donna Haraway's "Feminist cyborg stories" – "recoding communication and intelligence to subvert command and control," making "previously unimaginable identities ... that resist the prevailing binary code ... visible." Eichhorn sees zine cataloguing as "part of a larger epistemological project" in which re-inscription of zinesters' ways of knowing into machine readability "may hold even greater potential for social change than the act of media transfer itself" (i.e. digitization).

However, these seeds of change are also the seeds of exposure. All of this potential-laden visibility is accompanied by an increased vulnerability insofar as linked data remains uncertain in its capacity to be changed. Linked data can certainly be changed at its source, but once disseminated across the web and cached by third parties, it is not at all clear that it can be universally changed or recalled.

So what do we do? There are nascent conversations about ethics in cataloguing work that deal with issues like these, in part by advocating for building such considerations into our professional practice. Take for example, the *Zine Librarians Code of Ethics*, prepared by participants of the North American-based Zine Librarians Interest Group.

*"To echo our preamble, zines are 'often weird, ephemeral, magical, dangerous, and emotional.' Dangerous to whom, one might ask? ... prospectively ... zinesters themselves. Librarians and archivists should consider that making zines discoverable on the Web or in local catalogs and databases could have impacts on creators – anything from mild embarrassment to the divulging of dangerous personal information. [Therefore] [z]ine librarians/archivists should strive to make zines as discoverable as possible while also respecting the safety and privacy of their creators."* (Berthoud et al., 2015, p. 16)

Caswell & Cifor's (2016) concept of radical empathy in the archives profession has been an inspiration for subsequent conversations in the zine librarian community, such as those at the Zine Librarians UnConference 2018 ("ZLuC 2018 MSP Notes," 2018). They argue for a shift away from a rights-based approach to archival work and a detached professionalism, towards one founded on a feminist ethics of care that acknowledges webs of mutual affective responsibility between archivists, record creators, record users, the subjects of records and the community at large. This approach makes marginalized communities "*not just a target group of users, but central focal points in all aspects of the archival endeavor.*" (Caswell & Cifor, 2016, p. 24)



Figure 1: image courtesy of the author, pp.3-4 of: Wooten, Kelly (2018). Radical Empathy in the Archives. <https://tinyurl.com/wootenRadEmpathy2018>. Licensed under Creative-Commons BY-NC.

This graphic is taken from a zine created by Kelly Wooten of the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture at Duke University's Special Collections Library. It illustrates the four affective responsibilities laid out by Caswell & Cifor (Wooten, 2018, pp. 3–4). Caswell & Cifor also figure directly into Fox & Swickard's main argument for the responsibility of library cataloguers to recognize the needs of the subjects of authority records in traditional library catalogues; that cataloguers should "*take the time to recognize and empathize with the persons [being described]*" in authority records (Fox & Swickard, forthcoming).

These evolving conceptions of how to approach zine librarianship and cataloguing involve responsibilities along a continuum of institutional roles, from zine collection curators to cataloguers. They entail a broad range of questions about how professional practice could evolve – not just with zines, but with any information resources that implicate marginalized or potentially vulnerable populations. These include questions such as:

1. What if it became common practice to seek consent from the subjects or creators of zines before we include them in our collections?
2. What if we included creators and subjects of zines in our description and organization work – ensuring that we include or exclude the information that will adequately represent and protect them?
3. And how might we develop the standards and best practices that guide our work to acknowledge and help us navigate these mutual affective responsibilities?

However, there is meaningful conflict between user expectations and zinester (i.e. creator) needs. Though this paper and most zine librarians advocate for the often under-considered creator's point of view, we must think carefully about what we are giving up when we make decisions to benefit or protect the creator. Cataloguing and metadata have held user needs at their centre from Cutter to Ranganathan to FRBR. Extending our responsibilities to include creator needs reveals the fundamental tension between the interests of these two groups. Acknowledging that tension and beginning to grapple with it is a necessary burden in the evolution of the profession, one that will require great skill and judgment.

Put another way, under a new, broader sense of affective responsibility, work with zines or other like materials becomes weightier and more complex. That weight and complexity calls for a more nuanced approach, new requirements for professionalism, an ability to wrestle with sometimes-conflicting ethical considerations. We need high-level expertise in metadata and its lifecycles – understanding where our metadata might end up, and the potential and risks posed. We need contextual knowledge of the zine community or other at-risk communities, a commitment to genuine relationships with them, to be a partner to them, to draw on their support and consultation as we literally encode their lives and knowledge into the cultural record. And, crucially, we need the institutional and professional support and empowerment to operate at these highly skilled, highly complex levels. To do no harm, we must do metadata right, including the concept of "doing the right thing." Metadata operations should therefore be supported and resourced to enable that level of stewardship and responsibility.

## Biography

Joshua Barton is Head of Cataloging & Metadata Services, Assistant Head of Technical Services, and Zine Librarian at Michigan State University Libraries. His background is in serial cataloguing, in which he remains active as MSUL's CONSER representative.  
[bartonjp@lib.msu.edu](mailto:bartonjp@lib.msu.edu)

## References

- Are Libraries Neutral? (2018, June 1). Retrieved November 30, 2018, from <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2018/06/01/are-libraries-neutral/>
- Berthoud, H., Barton, J., Brett, J., Darms, L., Fox, V., Freedman, J., ... Wooten, K. (2015). *Zine Librarians Code of Ethics Zine*. Durham, NC: Zine Librarians unConference.
- Caswell, M. L., & Cifor, M. (2016). From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives. *Archivaria*, 81(Spring 2016), 23–43.
- Eichhorn, K. (2013). *The archival turn in feminism: outrage in order*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Fox, V., & Swickard, K. (forthcoming). "My Zine Is My Private Life": Reframing Authority Control from Detective Work to an Ethics of Care. In J. Sandberg (Ed.), *Ethical Questions in Name Authority Control*. Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books.
- Wooten, K. (2018). *Radical Empathy In Archival Practice* ([2nd edition]). New Haven, CT: Kelly Wooten. Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/wootenRadEmpathy2018>
- ZLuC 2018 MSP Notes. (2018, July 14). Retrieved November 30, 2018, from <http://zinelibraries.info/wiki/zluc-2018-msp/notes/>