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1990S ZINE DISTRIBUTION AND UNDERSTANDING THE WORK OF ZINE DISTROS THROUGH THEIR CATALOGS

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ABSTRACT

During the 1990s zine distros—small scale, DIY distributors—emerged to become a vital part of zine communities by attempting to address the lack of established distribution channels, championing the medium, and fostering community. Before distros moved online in the 2000s, some produced paper catalogs to market and sell the zines they carried. These publications are complex documents that offer important information about zine distribution and culture unavailable elsewhere. This article considers the function of zine distros and what their catalogs can tell us. The first section provides an overview of 1990s zine distribution and examines how and why distros emerged when they did, arguing that distros offered something unique and important among distribution methods: distribution overseen by those embedded in zine communities that afforded creators the opportunity to reach a wider but controlled audience within a framework that valued support, participation, and community building. Yet a close examination of distros also reveals some of the problems inherent in these volunteer-run projects. The latter portion of this article analyzes catalogs produced by several distros. Catalogs, although short lived, document an important window of time: the emergence of distros, their optimism and efforts, and the role they played in zine distribution and communities.

INTRODUCTION

Self-published, inexpensively produced (often photocopied) publications, zines have long been made to communicate ideas and share information, rather than for financial gain. Because they are non-commercial, small circulation works created and dispersed outside of traditional publishing channels, distribution has always been a challenging part of the zine-making process.

As Alison Piepmeier has argued, distribution methods are part of zines' meaning.¹ While a publisher oversees the distribution of a writer's work, a zine maker must determine how to get their zine to readers, a crucial aspect that sets them apart from other publications. Historically, most have been "distributed in ways distinct from the consumer culture industry," traded, gifted, or sold at cost, often moving directly from creator to reader in person or by mail.² Science fiction fanzines of the 1930s were "clustered together in 'Amateur Press Associations' coordinated by a 'Central Mailer'" who managed the distribution for participants.³ In the late 1940s, Edythe Eyde circulated her lesbian publication *Vice Versa* by giving it to friends and encouraging them to share it with other gay women after reading.⁴ During the rise of punk in the 1970s, zines such as V. Vale's *Search & Destroy* were distributed via mail order businesses and record stores.⁵ Zine distribution has been varied and idiosyncratic, with creators relying on the methods that were available at the time within their particular communities.

Multiple factors affected zines and zine culture during the 1990s, including mainstream media attention, a dramatic growth in the medium, zine makers' heightened interest in broader distribution, and later, predictions of the medium's demise. Amid these shifts, zine makers and readers increasingly recognized the need for and value in managing their own distribution. Zine distros, although small, went beyond the common practice of direct distribution from creator to reader. Usually run by an individual or a few friends in their free time for little or no financial compensation, these mail order projects promoted and sold zines by many different creators.⁶

¹ Alison Piepmeier, *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2009), 74.

² Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 74.

³ Jess Baines, Tony Credland, and Mark Pawson. "Doing It Ourselves: Countercultural and Alternative Radical Publishing in the Decade Before Punk" in *Ripped, Torn and Cut: Pop, Politics and Punk Fanzines from 1976*, ed. the Subcultures Network (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 17.

⁴ Eric Marcus, "Edythe Eyde," *Making Gay History*, <https://makinggayhistory.com/podcast/episode-1-3/>.

⁵ "Q & A: V. Vale," *BAMPFA*, <https://bampfa.org/news/q-v-vale>.

⁶ Bill Brent and Joe Biel. *Make a Zine! Start Your Own Underground Publishing Revolution* (Portland, OR: Microcosm, 2008), 94. The focus of this article is mail order distros, although there were distros that prioritized selling zines via other methods, such as at shows or events. As projects that usually did not produce catalogs, these are even more challenging to research. Additionally, because I am interested in the work distros did connecting creators and readers across the country, these more locally-focused distros are out of scope for this discussion.

Distros not only played a fundamental role in addressing the lack of established distribution channels for zines, but also championed the medium, supported creators, and enabled readers to discover and acquire zines.

The role and work of distros are essential to understanding 1990s zine distribution and culture. Yet they have been underexamined, likely because of the difficulty in researching these enterprises, many of which were relatively short-lived. Before distros moved online in the 2000s, some produced paper catalogs to market and sell the zines they carried. These publications are complex documents that do more than provide an inventory and price list. They also contain descriptions of available zines, record the distro's priorities and activities, and reveal the zine networks created or expanded by their efforts. As publications made by zine makers, they often included artwork and other writings, and are also worth examining as creative works.

This article considers the function of zine distros and what their catalogs can tell us. The first section provides an overview of 1990s zine distribution and examines how and why distros emerged when they did. I argue that distros offered something unique and important among distribution methods: distribution overseen by those embedded in zine communities that afforded creators the opportunity to reach a wider but controlled audience within a framework that valued support, participation, and community building. Yet a close examination of distros also reveals some of the problems inherent in these volunteer-run projects. The latter portion of this article analyzes catalogs produced by several distros. While zines have been increasingly recognized as valuable primary source documents, distro catalogs have yet to receive attention, but this archival material offers important information about zine distribution and culture unavailable elsewhere.

Perhaps because of the challenges in researching distribution and distros, much of the existing scholarship has acknowledged but not deeply explored these topics. In "Zines Then and Now," Janice Radway contends that distribution, although recognized as integral to defining the genre, has received little attention: "often definitions...focus on zines as unique forms of material

culture that circulate socially through do-it-yourself distribution and informal social networks” yet “more often than not move quickly past materiality and sociality to focus intensively on their textuality and therefore on the content of zines.”⁷ Analyzing zines without considering their distribution, then, means that we may not fully appreciate their context.

Scholarship exploring contemporary zine distribution and distros has largely focused on 1990s and early 2000s girl zines (zines by girls and women, often personal and with a feminist perspective) or zines that came out of the 1990s feminist punk movement Riot Grrrl.⁸ For example, Mary Celeste Kearney dedicates a section of *Girls Make Media* to early 2000s online girl-run distros.⁹ Elke Zobl has written on feminist media, including the circulation and distribution of girl zines, and her early 2000s website, Grrrl Zine Network (no longer updated but still live), comprises information about and interviews with women who ran girl-focused distros.¹⁰ In her 2009 article “Free, Trade: Distribution Economies in Feminist Zine Networks,” Red Chidgey interviewed 1990s zine makers found via Zobl’s site about their experiences, including distribution.¹¹ Kevin Dunn and May Summer Farnsworth’s “‘We ARE the Revolution’: Riot Grrrl Press, Girl Empowerment, and Self-Publishing,” provides an essential case study of Riot Grrrl Press, an early 1990s publisher and distro of Riot Grrrl zines.¹² While the research on the distribution and distros of girl and Riot Grrrl zines is indisputably important,

⁷ Janice Radway, “Zines Then and Now: What Are They? What Do You Do with Them? How Do They Work?” in *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Anouk Lang (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 28.

⁸ For more on Riot Grrrl, see Rebekah J. Buchanan’s *Writing a Riot: Riot Grrrl Zines and Feminist Rhetorics*, Sara Marcus’s *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, and Lisa Darms’s *The Riot Grrrl Collection*.

⁹ Mary Celeste Kearney, *Girls Make Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006). In particular, see chapter 6, “Cybergurls” 239-290.

¹⁰ Elke Zobl, “Persephone is Pissed! Grrrl Zine Reading, Making, and Distributing across the Globe,” *Hecate* 30, no. 2 (2004):156-175. Elke Zobl, *Grrrl Zine Network*, last updated July 17, 2006, <https://www.grrrlzines.net/>.

¹¹ Red Chidgey, “Free, Trade: Distribution Economies in Feminist Zine Networks,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 35, no. 1 (2009): 28-37.

¹² Kevin Dunn and May Summer Farnsworth, “‘We ARE the Revolution’: Riot Grrrl Press, Girl Empowerment, and DIY Self-Publishing,” *Women’s Studies* 41, no. 2 (2012):136-157.

it documents just one part of the zine world during this period, and more work remains to be done.

1990S ZINE CULTURE AND DISTRIBUTION

To understand zine distribution and the emergence of distros during the 1990s, it is helpful to begin with some historical context. Although zines had existed for much of the twentieth century, in the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a surge in the number of publications and interest in the medium, often referred to as the “zine explosion.”¹³ Previously zines had developed around a particular topic, such as punk music, or written for a particular community, such as science fiction fans. During the late twentieth century, however, as the number of zine makers and readers expanded, so did the idea of what a zine could be about. While content remained niche and usually idiosyncratic, increasingly zines explored a widening array of subjects, including lousy jobs, pop culture nostalgia, or one’s personal life. Although it is difficult to determine exact figures, zine scholar Stephen Duncombe has estimated that by 1997 there were as many as 10,000 titles in circulation.¹⁴ A variety of factors contributed to this growth. According to Kaya Oakes, the counterculture writings of the 1960s, the rise of punk zines in the 1970s, and a mounting dissatisfaction with mainstream media in the 1980s and 1990s collectively helped pave the way for the medium’s development.¹⁵ The increased availability of word processors, desktop publishing software, and most significantly, photocopier machines, also made it easier to produce zines.¹⁶ Another component was mainstream media’s fascination with underground culture during the 1990s, which led to national exposure for zines. Some zine makers were excited by the coverage and the possibilities it could bring, while others were

¹³ James Romenesko, “The Zine Explosion,” *American Journalism Review* 15, no. 3 (1993): 39-43. For an insider’s perspective on the zine explosion, see Burf Quimby’s *Zine Explosion 1985-1995: A Personal History*.

¹⁴ Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, 3rd ed. (Portland, OR: Microcosm, 2017), 16.

¹⁵ Kaya Oakes, *Slanted and Enchanted: The Evolution of Indie Culture* (New York: Holt, 2009), 89.

¹⁶ Mike Gunderloy, “Zines: Where the Action Is: The Very Small Press in America,” *Whole Earth Review*, Fall 1990, *Gale Academic OneFile*, accessed April 21, 2023.

skeptical or hostile.¹⁷ Regardless, the attention meant an increased awareness of the medium and more individuals interested in both reading and making zines.

An important catalyst in the zine explosion and central to distribution during the 1990s was *Factsheet Five*. Started by Mike Gunderloy as a resource for friends, the first issue was two pages and had a print run of 50 copies.¹⁸ In the years following, it evolved into the largest zine review publication, releasing 64 issues between 1982 to 1998, and at its peak had a circulation of more than 15,000.¹⁹ Although it did not sell or distribute the publications it featured, it did the momentous work of aggregating zines, enabling individuals to directly connect across interests and geographical areas. The publication's expansiveness was intentional, and Gunderloy declared *Factsheet Five* "the zine of crosscurrents and crosspollination."²⁰ An early issue included a reader letter suggesting that it should have a narrower focus. Gunderloy disagreed: "the reason I don't want to pare down to just the SF/fantasy zines is that there are already plenty of zines concentrating on that area, or for that matter any particular area...I'm more interested in breaking down barriers and exposing people to new stuff."²¹ *Factsheet Five* was enormously successful at this and numerous zine makers sent in their work, knowing that a review (even if not entirely positive) would garner unparalleled exposure. To this point, another issue featured a letter from a zine maker ecstatic about the result of his publication being reviewed in *Factsheet Five*: "I've had 80 responses to your plugs, AMAZING!"²² Yet while being reviewed in *Factsheet Five* could generate more interest and a broader reach for a zine, it did not alter a zine maker's distribution method, meaning that the creator was still dependent upon requests from readers and responsible for individually mailing every copy.

¹⁷ Jolie Braun, "'Your Zine Changed My Life': The Impact and Legacy of Zines in *Sassy Magazine*," *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism* 30, no. 2 (2020): 158-159.

¹⁸ Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 56.

¹⁹ Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 56.

²⁰ Mike Gunderloy, ed., *Factsheet Five* no. 11 (1984), 1.

²¹ Gunderloy, ed., *Factsheet Five* no. 14 (1985), 48.

²² Gunderloy, ed., *Factsheet Five* no. 20 (1986), n.p.

Furthermore, despite *Factsheet Five*'s dominance, it did not appeal to everyone. During the latter half of the 1990s the publication (then overseen by R. Seth Friedman, its third and final editor) moved further away from being a zine. Its glossy, color cover, barcode, and national distribution in chain bookstores was likely off-putting to some zine makers. *Factsheet Five*'s reviews of catalogs by the distros Power Toot and Subway Sissy mention that both carried zines "which were never listed in *F5*," a notable comment from a publication that boasted more than 2,000 reviews in a 1996 issue.²³ Such an observation highlights that some zine makers preferred to share their work via the more supportive, controlled networks that distros offered rather than having it evaluated by a review publication like *Factsheet Five* and promoted to a broad audience.

The zine landscape continued to evolve during the late 1990s. Mainstream media's curiosity in underground publications waned and the growing interest in the World Wide Web and digital content led to predictions of the death of not only zines but also of books and other paper media.²⁴ The shuttering of *Factsheet Five* in 1998 radically altered and limited opportunities to discover and distribute publications.²⁵ Yet during this period, distros grew. Their development in the latter part of the decade is consistent with the catalogs surveyed for this study, the majority of which were published in the last three years of the 1990s (for publication dates, see the table).

Perhaps unsurprisingly given all these changes, the difficulties of distribution became a topic of discussion and a point of frustration for zine makers during the 1990s. Yet it was not that distribution had become harder, but that the other components of zine making had become easier. In an interview on the subject, founder of the independent publisher and distributor AK Press Ramsey Kanaan clarified: "With the desktop publishing revolution, production is actually the easy part—the *distribution* is the main headache. There are no simple solutions to that."²⁶ The

²³ R. Seth Friedman, ed., *Factsheet Five* no. 61 (1997), 71. Friedman, ed., *Factsheet Five* no. 60 (1996), 3.

²⁴ Alison Piepmeier, "Why Zines Matter: Materiality and the Creation of Embodied Community," *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism* 18, no. 2 (2008): 220.

²⁵ Jennifer Rauch, "Hands-on Communication: Zine Circulation Rituals and the Interactive Limitations of Web Publishing," *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture* 2, no. 3 (2004): 165.

²⁶ V. Vale, *Zines! Volume 1* (San Francisco: RE/Search, 1996), 107.

growing interest in zines and the success of projects like *Factsheet Five* had also impacted zine makers' expectations, and many hoped to reach an audience outside of their local community. In his punk zine *10 Things Jesus Wants You to Know*, Dan Halligan complained about the lack of distribution beyond one's existing networks or geographic area: "I keep getting letters from kids in far away places that can't find *10 Things* in their local stores, and that's because we don't have any real distribution and try to give away the bulk of our issues free in the Northwest...I would love to get distributed in other towns, but finding zine distribution sucks."²⁷

Prior to the advent of distros, there were some avenues available to those who wanted to reach beyond their personal network and *Factsheet Five* readers. These included mail-order catalogs (independent outfits that sold a combination of items, such as printed matter, cassettes, CDs, patches, shirts, buttons, etc.), record labels, infoshops, bookstores, record stores, coffee shops, punk shows, and zine fests (also called conferences or shows).²⁸ Specialty bookstores, such as Quimby's in Chicago, Atomic Books in Baltimore, and Reading Frenzy in Portland, Oregon, all established in the early 1990s, were major advocates of zines and also became important in their visibility and distribution.²⁹ Such options, however, were not necessarily accessible to most zine makers or readers. Getting one's zine in a shop could be dependent on proximity and location, mail order catalogs often preferred to carry established zines, and record labels tended to prioritize music zines.

²⁷ Dan Halligan, *10 Things Jesus Wants You to Know*, no. 13 (1996), n.p., *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/ten_things_13.

²⁸ Although a zine maker including details about distribution within their zine has never been standard, some did note this kind of information. One example that can provide some evidence of circulation before zine distros is an issue of *Nancy's Magazine*, a miscellany zine begun by Nancy Kangas in 1983, which stated on the table of contents that it was available via record shops, an independent record label, and small press distributors. Nancy Kangas, *Nancy's Magazine 2*, no. 1 (no date), n.p. Nancy's Magazine, Rare Books & Manuscripts Library, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.

²⁹ Quimby's opened in 1991, Atomic Books opened in 1992, and Reading Frenzy opened in 1995. Atomic Books and Quimby's are still open today. *ZineWiki*, https://zinewiki.com/wiki/Atomic_Books. *Quimby's*, <https://www.quimbys.com/faq#store-history>. *Portland Monthly*, <https://www.pdxmonthly.com/stores/reading-frenzy>.

As a result of the mainstream media attention zines received in the early 1990s, national distribution also briefly became an option for a relatively small number of more high-profile zines.³⁰ Magazine distributors such as Desert Moon and Fine Print started distributing zines that had glossy covers, polished design, barcodes, and larger circulations, offering their creators contracts with terms comparable to those of mainstream magazines to have their work available across the country in bookstores like Borders and Barnes & Noble.³¹ These distributors took zines into venues where they could be discovered by readers who otherwise likely would have never encountered them. Yet their policies, established for magazines that made their money from advertisements and could withstand the financial losses of discarded newsstand copies, were impossible for most zine makers.³² Within just a few years, such arrangements had ended as these distributors went out of business, emphasizing that this mode of zine distribution was not a viable model.³³

THE EMERGENCE OF ZINE DISTROS DURING THE 1990S

Notably, none of these distribution methods was rooted in the zine world. This changed during the latter half of the 1990s with the emergence of distros. (The shortening of distributor to distro was likely borrowed from punk, which referred to independent record distributors and labels as distros.) These small mail order operations sold zines (typically on consignment) on behalf of a variety of creators, thereby taking over the work of promotion and

³⁰ Heath Row, "From Fandom to Feminism: An Analysis of the Zine Press," in *The Book of Zines: Readings from the Fringe*, ed. Chip Rowe, <https://www.zinebook.com/resource/heath.html>. Antonio Lopez, "Magazine Distribution 101," in *Factsheet Five*, ed. R. Seth Friedman, no. 48 (1993): 93, *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/factsheet_5_48.

³¹ Vale, *Zines! Volume 1*, 110.

³² Steven Svymbersky, "So, You Want to Start a Zine?" in *The Book of Zines: Readings from the Fringe*, ed. Chip Rowe, <https://www.zinebook.com/roll.html>.

³³ Why did magazine distributors like Fine Print go out of business? The company was plagued by problems beyond the challenges of zine distribution. According to a Fine Print employee, "fast growth without sufficient capital to keep up with it, along with poor management, led the company to the point where it was being sued by several publishers." Mike Tanner, "Zines Left in the Lurch by Bankrupt Distributor," *Wired* (April 3, 1997), <https://www.wired.com/1997/04/zines-left-in-lurch-by-bankrupt-distributor/>.

distribution.³⁴ Unlike other distribution options, distros grew out of zine communities and were run by zine makers and readers, usually an individual or a few friends. They were commonly operated during the owner's spare time for little or no monetary compensation and informed by a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos that had been essential to punk record labels, venues, and other ventures.³⁵ Small businesses such as record labels and underground mail orders had carried and distributed zines, but in such instances the publications were peripheral items rather than the focus. Distros, by contrast, gave zines primacy. Furthermore, with their capacity to distribute across the country, distros were particularly important for zine makers who did not reside in places that had zine-friendly stores or venues through which they could sell or trade their publications. Distros were most accessible to those already immersed in zine culture and readers

³⁴ Although the distros examined in this article prioritized selling directly to readers via mail order, some also sold the zines they carried at shows, zine fests, or other local venues. In the *Tree of Knowledge* catalog, distro owner Theo said that in addition to selling zines by mail order, "I also sell them at local shows and other events in my area." Similarly, in the *Subway Sissy* catalog, owner Witknee noted, "I mostly sell zines via the mail, but occasionally I'll sell them at shows and thru some d.i.y. stores. If you don't want yr [sic] zine sold at shows and/or stores, please tell me. (The stores are feminist bookstores and punk/record stores)." Theo, *Tree of Knowledge Independent Literature Distribution* (Little Rock, AR: 1997). Zine and Small Press Collection, 1963-2002. Archives and Special Collections, University of Montana, Missoula, MT. Witknee, *Subway Sissy Zine Distro* (Pacific Palisades, CA: 1996). Zines and Mini Comics Collection. San Diego State Special Collections & University Archives, San Diego, CA.

³⁵ In his article about punk, Ian P. Moran defines DIY as "the aspect of the punk subculture where everything is constructed by the individual. This often includes distributing fanzines, booking shows, and recording music only with other people involved with the punk subculture." Ian P. Moran, "Punk: The Do-It-Yourself Subculture," *Social Sciences Journal* 10, Iss. 1 (2010), Article 13:

<http://108.166.64.190/omeka222/files/original/e7e782e70441857f0be0ab8369afaae0.pdf>.

Similarly, but more expansively, Ben Holtzman, Craig Hughes, and Kevin Van Meter describe DIY as "the simple idea that you can do for yourself the activities normally reserved for the realm of capitalist production (wherein products are created for consumption in a system that encourages alienation and nonparticipation). Thus, anything from music and magazines to education and protest can be created in a non-alienating, self-organized, and purposely anti-capitalist manner. While production mostly takes place in a small scale and localized manner, extensive and often times global social networks are utilized for distribution." Ben Holtzman, Craig Hughes, and Kevin Van Meter. "Do It Yourself...And the Movement Beyond Capitalism." *Radical Society* 31 (2005): 7.

might have encountered information about one through word of mouth or a mention in a zine.³⁶ This meant that a zine carried by a distro could potentially have a larger audience than was possible for a zine maker to generate alone, but also that this audience was also more specific and controlled than would have resulted from having a zine in a store or reviewed by *Factsheet Five*. Increasingly toward the end of the decade, distros also had websites that allowed them to reach larger readerships.³⁷ Although some were long running, because they were intensive volunteer projects, many, much like zines themselves, often were relatively short lived.³⁸

Distros simplified distribution for both creators and readers. They helped zine makers reach a new audience and relieved them of having to mail each copy individually. In an interview about her distro Pander, Ericka said “I can often sell...more zines for one person than they’ve ever sold before.”³⁹ Distros enabled readers to more easily find publications that aligned with their preferences. In the music magazine *Discorder*, Trish Kelly explained:

...I am really coming to depend on zine distribution services to find the zines that will offer me some substantial reading...Once you tap into a distro that carries some zines you like, chances are you will realize that you and the editor

³⁶ For example, issue 20 of Jen Angel’s *Fucktooth* includes an ad for the distro Primordial Soup Kitchen and in issue 21 she closed her zine with, “Please support the following stores and distros,” with a list of recommended resources that included contact information. Jen Angel, *Fucktooth*, no. 20 (1996), 74, *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/fucktooth_20. Jen Angel, *Fucktooth*, no. 21 (1996), 87, *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/fucktooth_21. An issue of Johanna Fateman and Miranda July’s 1990s feminist zine *Snarla* noted that other issues could be purchased from Riot Grrrl Press. Johanna Fateman and Miranda July, *Snarla* (no date), n.p., Riot Grrrl Collection, Rare Books & Manuscripts Library, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.

³⁷ Most distros, however, did not accept online payments until the 2000s. In an interview with Elke Zobl, Ericka said that orders for her distro Pander doubled after putting her catalog online and accepting online payments. Elke Zobl, “An Interview with Ericka Lyn Bailie,” (2002), *Grrrl Zine Network*, <http://www.grrrlzines.net/interviews/pander.htm>.

³⁸ Ericka’s Pander Zine Distro was known for its exceptionally long run, operating from 1995 to 2005. A close examination of listings across several editions of *BYOFL*, however, reveals that most distros were not listed for more than two consecutive years. *ZineWiki*, “Pander Zine Distro,” https://zinewiki.com/wiki/Pander_Zine_Distro.

³⁹ Amy Spencer, *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture* (London: Marion Boyars, 2008), 34.

have common tastes, and you will have found someone who is very willing to do the discovery work for you!⁴⁰

Some readers, then, came to rely on the selection of distro owners that not only helped them discover new zines, but to feel a sense of trust when buying publications they could not review in advance of purchase. By buying a zine from a distro rather than a mail order business or a store, a reader also might gain a sense of participating in and supporting the community of zine makers connected with the distro. Offering zines from a variety of creators, distros also enabled readers to purchase several titles at once by different zine makers. A 1998 article in the trade publication *Feminist Bookstore News* encouraged booksellers interested in carrying zines to work with a distro to “make the job of ordering zines a much less daunting and time-consuming task.”⁴¹

Two resources important to zine makers and others with DIY endeavors can help shed light on the growing importance of distros during this decade. *Book Your Own Fuckin’ Life (BYOFL)*, published by the influential punk zine *Maximum Rockroll*, was an annual DIY directory of show venues, record labels, bands, distributors, radio shows, record stores and bookstores, and zines, organized by state. Using submitted content, it collected and organized information, and like *Factsheet Five*, included contact details, making it possible for readers to discover and act on new resources.⁴² Although the first issue, released in 1992, did not list any zine distros in the US, five appeared in the second issue published the following year.⁴³ By the end of the decade, the 1999 edition of *BYOFL* included fourteen zine distros.⁴⁴ Alt.zines, a Usenet newsgroup about

⁴⁰ Trish Kelly, “I Can Read,” *Discorder* no. 151 (1995), 21, *The University of British Columbia Open Collections*, <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/discorder/items/1.0050082?o=6>.

⁴¹ Karen Mitchell, “The Little Zine That Could,” *Feminist Bookstore News* 21, no. 2 (1998): 56, *Reveal Digital*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.28036385>.

⁴² Daniel Makagon, “Booking Your Own Life: The Development of a DIY Touring Network in the United States,” *Punk & Post-Punk* 9, no. 2 (2020): 214

⁴³ *Maximum Rockroll* and Profane Existence Collective, *Book Your Own Fuckin’ Life*, no 1. (1992), *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/byofl_01. *Maximum Rockroll* and Underdog Records, *Book Your Own Fuckin’ Life*, no. 2 (1993), *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/byofl_2.

⁴⁴ *Maximum Rockroll* and Amoeba Collective, *Book Your Own Fuckin’ Life*, no. 7 (1999), *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/byofl_7.

zines also begun in 1992, shows a similar, but more pronounced, increase. In a 1994 post, a member who had been researching distribution options shared her findings, which included the names and contact information of nine distros, mail order businesses, and zine-friendly stores as well as fifteen national distributors.⁴⁵ A list compiled and posted by another member in 1996 had grown considerably longer, recording more than forty distros and distributors in the United States.⁴⁶ The increase apparent in both venues suggests that as distros became a more visible and familiar concept throughout the decade, more individuals were inspired to start their own.

UNCOVERING ZINE CULTURE AND DISTRIBUTION THROUGH ZINE DISTRO CATALOGS

During the late 1990s, some distros produced paper catalogs to promote and sell the zines they carried. Although evidence of these endeavors can be found in zines, the details are often limited. Catalogs, however, contain a substantial amount of information about these projects, much of which is unrecorded elsewhere. Catalogs tell us not only about these operations, but also about zine distribution and culture, through the voices of the individuals who ran them. They are the most detailed records of distros and their work, yet they have not been studied. The remainder of this article will offer a close examination of several distro catalogs published between 1993-1999.⁴⁷ (Additional details about the catalogs are provided in the table.)

A brief explanation of how these materials were located: the archival collections database ArchiveGrid and Google were used to find catalogs at several institutions. A few were also acquired via eBay. The goal was to obtain catalogs from different areas of the country and that

⁴⁵ Jordana, *Alt.zines*, “Jor’s list of distros,” November 22, 1994, <https://groups.google.com/g/alt.zines/c/d-JaMPF0aBo/m/ihEoG30vvi8J>.

⁴⁶ Jeremy, *Alt.zines*, “A List of Zine Distros,” June 18, 1996, <https://groups.google.com/g/alt.zines/c/8exrcxBGcBQ/m/A2V0scO8tsoJ>.

⁴⁷ Most of the catalogs include dates. For those that did not, I provided an approximate year in the table based on other evidence, such as postmarks or the zines featured. The Riot Grrrl Press catalog examined in this article is the same number that is discussed in Kevin Dunn and May Summer Farnsworth’s article, where it is given the date 1993.

were part of different zine communities. Selection was also shaped by which institutions could provide digital copies of their materials. While some distros, such as Pander, produced several catalogs during their run, this study only examines a single issue from each distro included so none was overrepresented. Ideally this article will encourage further research into distros and their catalogs, as there is still more to learn.

Before delving into how catalogs functioned and what they can tell us, a brief overview of those surveyed will be helpful. Although there is some variation in length—some are a single sheet of paper printed on both sides (Junglegym and Cheapskate), while others are stapled booklets of 20 to 30 pages (Pisces and Primordial Soup Kitchen)—the content across catalogs is largely consistent. Several begin with an introduction in which the owner stated the scope of the distro and their motives for running it.⁴⁸ Like zines, catalogs sometimes shared details about the owner’s personal lives (including mentions of their job, college, or plans to move), stressing the informality and personal nature of the project. Distros typically had a specific focus that reflected the owner’s interests, such as music zines or girl zines. Some were explicit about their priorities in their catalogs. Riot Grrrl Press declared, “this catalogue carries girl made fanzines,” while the Okie Dokie Zine Distro focused on zines by Oklahoma creators.⁴⁹ In the Tree of Knowledge catalog, the owner explained that he carried “a wide variety of material including punk/hardcore, art, veganism, gay/lesbian, feminist, anarchist, straight edge, (a little) poetry, political (leftist), and so on.”⁵⁰ All of the catalogs included instructions for ordering. These guidelines often stressed the importance of sending the correct amount of well-concealed cash and listing

⁴⁸ Rebecca, Josh, and Irene, *Junglegym Zine Distro Machine*, no. 3 (Washington, DC: 1994). Sarah Wood Zine Collection, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC. Mike, *Cheapskate Zine Distro*, no. 1 (Ferndale, MI: 1998). Bill Brown Zine Collection. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC. Kerith, *Pisces Zine Distro and Fun Stuff Catalog*, no. 10 (Beverly Hills, CA: 1999). Ailecia Ruscini Zine Sean, *Primordial Soup Kitchen Mailorder Zine / Catalog*, Andy Cornell Zine Collection.

⁴⁹ Mary, *Riot Grrrl Press Catalogue [sic] for September-November* (Washington, DC: [1993]). Lauren Jade Martin Zinester Ephemera Collection. Barnard Archives & Special Collections, Barnard College, New York, NY. Melissa, *Okie Dokie Distro* (Oklahoma City, OK: [1998]). Bill Brown Zine Collection. David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC.

⁵⁰ Theo, Tree of Knowledge Independent Literature Distribution, Zine and Small Press Collection, 1963-2002.

alternate options in case a requested zine was sold out, emphasizing DIY nature of these enterprises. Descriptions of the zines for sale were an essential component and typically consisted of a summary along with details about the zine's size, page count, and price. Some catalogs also contained additional content such as information about submitting a zine for distribution, acknowledgements, recommended resources, and creative works.

Given that running a distro was often labor intensive and done at a financial loss, it is worth asking why someone would take on such a venture. Answers to this question can be found in catalogs, several of which provide information about the owner's motivations. Many saw their role as advocates, both for specific zines and creators and for medium more broadly. Mike, of the Michigan-based Cheapskate Distro, said "I started this whole thing out because I've been getting so many cool zines that I figured most Detroiters would never see. Then I decided that I wanted to snatch up local zines that most kids from out of town would never pick up."⁵¹ Distro owners wanted to help zine makers reach an audience beyond their social circles and geographical areas. While zines allowed their creators to communicate their opinions in print, distros enabled their owners to actualize their ideas on a bigger scale. Many owners were inspired by the DIY and participatory ethos of zine culture that encouraged ordinary individuals to create their own alternatives to the existing options. To this point, one of the owners of Basement Children Distro stressed the importance of creative autonomy and collective effort in their catalog: "if we don't set up an alternative media for ourselves, nobody else will."⁵² Owner Theo said his goal with Tree of Knowledge distro was "to build community based on the free exchange of ideas and an ethically-based system of production and consumption."⁵³ The importance of community building is a recurring theme in catalogs. Unique among distribution options, distro owners often aimed to help geographically distanced zine makers and readers connect and feel a sense of belonging, sometimes around a particular cause or interest. For example, those involved with Riot Grrrl Press wanted their project to encourage likeminded individuals to connect around

⁵¹ Mike, *Cheapskate Zine Distro*, Bill Brown Zine Collection.

⁵² Basil, Michelle, and Jenny, *Basement Children Zine Distro Catalog* (Chicago: 1997). Personal collection.

⁵³ Theo, *Tree of Knowledge Independent Literature Distribution*, Zine and Small Press Collection, 1963-2002.

zines that prioritized women's stories and experiences and by doing so hoped to "help the feminist movement."⁵⁴

The major component of a catalog was its zine descriptions. These summaries reveal how owners used expertise and care to write descriptions that did not just promote publications, but also supported zine makers and their work. Within a few sentences, a distro owner explained a zine's content, but also might discuss its writing style, design, or materiality. The description could draw on the owner's subject knowledge by considering a zine within the context of its other issues or the genre, comment on its popularity or importance, or provide information about its creator. For example, the description of issue four of Julee Peezle's *McJob* in the Glovebox Distro catalog incorporated several of these elements:

Legal digest, 55pp, \$2.50 pp. This issue sold out instantly the first time I had it in, but it's back in stock for you. Julee's on her way to Europe for a zine reading tour, but her latest issue is still here. This is more tales from the dark side of wage slave jobs from Julee and her contributors. Experience first-hand the suckiness of working at McDonald's in Paris and other jobs that may (or may not!) be worse than the one you've got. *McJob* is thick, well-written and essential, saying a big "NO WAY" to the prevailing "you're just lucky to have a job at all" mentality.⁵⁵

Sometimes descriptions were personal, integrating the owner's experience of the publication. Such examples highlight that distro owners were first and foremost enthusiastic zine readers and fans of the works they carried. About *Housewife Turned Assassin*, Witknee said in the Subway Sissy Zine Distro catalog, "I love this zine soo [sic] much. It was one of the first zines I ever read and after reading I felt so empowered and in touch with my girlness [sic] and feminism."⁵⁶

Descriptions could also note what a reader might gain from a particular zine. In the Cheapskate

⁵⁴ Mary, *Riot Grrrl Press Catalouge* [sic], Lauren Jade Martin Zinester Ephemera Collection.

⁵⁵ Libby, *Glovebox Zine Distro Catalog* (San Mateo, CA: 1998). Ruel Gaviola Zine Collection, Special Research Collections, University of California, Santa Barbara.

⁵⁶ Witknee, *Subway Sissy Zine Distro*, Zines and Mini Comics Collection.

catalog, Mike's summary of an issue of *Paper Doe* captured his reading experience and envisioned something similar for potential readers:

This is a zine that provoked some very serious thinking from me. I really like the way Lydia looks at things and really explores her ideas from a lot of different angles. Topics addressed: gender roles, organized Christianity, occupational titles, dreams (will make you cry), east Asian prostitution, and a five page in depth article on abortion that offers some insights I've never had before...*Paper Doe* will change the way you think about things and possibly open your eyes to new issues.⁵⁷

Zine descriptions were usually positive. This was not solely a strategy to sell the zines, but because distro owners, perhaps unlike writers for zine review publications, often personally knew the zine makers and their work and felt a responsibility to them. For example, in the Pisces catalog, Kerith highlighted her relationship with the zine *The Ravenn* in her description of issue five: "Ben has put together an impressive zine, and it is so nice watching it grow from the first issue."⁵⁸ Distros were active and persistent supporters of zine makers, which is often evident in catalogs descriptions.

Some distro owners referred to their descriptions as "reviews" and mentioned their ambivalence about writing them. Zine reviews were an important, but fraught, genre of writing in 1990s zine culture, as they often could be the only information available to help readers decide whether they were interested in a zine. The Melvin & Earl catalog included the following disclaimer: "I don't really want to review these cos [sic] it's not really fair for me to put my opinion in the distro. You all have to decide for yr self [sic] whether you like it or not."⁵⁹ In other cases, a distro owner might have struggled to describe a zine because of its intimate content and their sense of obligation to the zine maker. In her summary of an issue of *Candles for Girls* that discussed abuse, Ericka admitted in the Pander catalog, "I have a really hard time writing 'reviews' for

⁵⁷ Mike, *Cheapskate Zine Distro*, Bill Brown Zine Collection.

⁵⁸ Kerith, *Pisces Zine Distro and Fun Stuff Catalog*, Ailecia Ruscin Zine Collection.

⁵⁹ Lida and Anna, *Melvin & Earl* (Belleville, NJ: [1997]). Personal collection.

zines like this. They're so raw and personal that I want to choose my words just right and I fear I'll never do them justice."⁶⁰ Some distros, such as Riot Grrrl Press and Pisces, circumvented this issue by asking zine makers to write their own descriptions or pulling quotes directly from the zines.⁶¹

Traditional mail-order catalogs have long been tools for advertising and selling goods directly to consumers. Distros borrowed and repurposed parts of this model, describing zines for sale while also functioning outside of and sometimes intentionally against conventional business practices. Catalogs often document the tension between a distro's need to manage its operations and the owner's desire to imagine and facilitate other modes of exchange. Idiosyncratic ordering instructions such as using stamps as currency, gluing stamps, and listing alternate selections were common, requiring customers to follow zine culture etiquette and engage in additional steps beyond simply sending payment.⁶² Warnings about delays were also standard, rejecting customer expectation of immediacy and emphasizing that distros were volunteer efforts managed during the owner's free time. In the Pisces catalog, Kerith explained that orders may be slow because "I run this catalog all by my self [sic]. And I have a job, and chores and a boyfriend and hobbies and well, hopefully you get the picture."⁶³ Chris Atton observes that "many zines run at a continual loss, the costs incurred being acceptable as the price of communication and self-valorization."⁶⁴ Operating at a loss was also typical of distros, and some owners discussed keeping their projects alive with copy scams (Riot Grrrl Press), the use of others' equipment or supplies (Basement Children), or personal funds (Pisces and Tree of Knowledge).⁶⁵ Several

⁶⁰ Ericka, *Pander Zine Distro* (Kansas City, MO: 1996). Personal collection.

⁶¹ Mary, *Riot Grrrl Press Catalouge* [sic], Lauren Jade Martin Zinester Ephemera Collection. Kerith, *Pisces Zine Distro and Fun Stuff Catalog*, Ailecia Ruscin Zine Collection.

⁶² Chris Atton, *Alternative Media* (London: SAGE, 2002): 59. Tea Hvala explains the practice of gluing stamps: "One of the tricks that made you feel like a rebel when making and trading zines in the 1990s was coating stamps with soap or paper glue. This prevented the postmark from sticking, so the stamps could be reused several times." Tea Hvala, "P.S. Stamps Back," *Kinosiska*, <https://www.kinosiska.si/en/dogodek/tea-hvala-p-s-vrni-znamke/>.

⁶³ Kerith, *Pisces Zine Distro and Fun Stuff Catalog*, Ailecia Ruscin Zine Collection.

⁶⁴ Atton, *Alternative Media*, 59.

⁶⁵ Mary, *Riot Grrrl Press Catalouge* [sic], Lauren Jade Martin Zinester Ephemera Collection. Basil, Michelle, and Jenny, *Basement Children Zine Distro Catalog*, Personal collection. Kerith, *Pisces Zine Distro and Fun Stuff*

insisted that their distro did not make a profit. The Basement Children Distro catalog declared, “We lose money all of the time.”⁶⁶ Writing on value and money in 1990s zine culture, Red Chidgey contends that “zine makers and distributors hold emotional currency in the networks of trading, reading, responding, exchanging ideas, and sharing work; this is typically more important than monetary returns.”⁶⁷ But a statement such as Basement Children’s was also an assertion of authenticity: the project is for love rather than profit, an idea central to zine culture and its DIY ethos during this era.⁶⁸ Many distros priced publications as inexpensively as possible, often between 50 cents and \$2.50. For comparison, such prices are noticeably lower than those found in a 1997 issue of *Factsheet Five*, which range from \$1.00 to \$6.00, with the most common price being \$3.00.⁶⁹ In the catalog for the Secluded Universe Fanzine Mailorder, the owner Leah explained her prices: “The only thing you pay is wholesale plus postage, so this should be the cheapest around seeing that there is no markup!”⁷⁰ Yet this was not a sustainable practice and could put a distro owner in a perilous situation. Writing on Riot Grrrl Press, Dunn and Farnsworth note that “keeping prices down had always required members...to work for free and to continually rely on illegal and clandestine photocopies.”⁷¹ While the amount of work involved in running a distro could make it difficult to maintain long-term, the inevitable issues with money were also a major factor.

Some distros tried to promote alternate forms of exchange. Although the Cheapskate catalog listed prices, the owner Mike noted that he preferred trades.⁷² In the So to Speak catalog, owner

Catalog, Ailecia Ruscin Zine Collection. Theo, *Tree of Knowledge Independent Literature Distribution*, Zine and Small Press Collection, 1963-2002.

⁶⁶ Basil, Michelle, and Jenny, *Basement Children Zine Distro Catalog*, Personal collection.

⁶⁷ Chidgey, “Free, Trade: Distribution Economies in Feminist Zine Networks,” 34.

⁶⁸ Julie Chu, “Navigating the Media Environment: How Youth Claim a Place through Zines,” *Social Justice* 24, no. 3 (1997): 79.

⁶⁹ R. Seth Friedman, ed., *Factsheet Five* no. 62 (1997), *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/factsheet_5_62.

⁷⁰ Leah, *Secluded Universe Fanzine Mailorder* (San Francisco, CA: 1996). Anchor Archive Zine Library, Halifax, NS.

⁷¹ Dunn and Farnsworth, “‘We ARE the Revolution’: Riot Grrrl Press, Girl Empowerment, and DIY Self-Publishing,” 154.

⁷² Mike, *Cheapskate Zine Distro*, Bill Brown Zine Collection.

Jenna explained that customers could “pay in stamps or money or we can work out a trade. If you’re local, you can borrow things from me.”⁷³ In addition to zines available for sale, catalogs for Glovebox and Primordial Soup Kitchen had a category of zines or other small publications obtainable for only stamps.⁷⁴ Other distro owners recognized the necessity of charging for zines but stressed that prices did not relate to the publication’s value. The Junglegym catalog announced, “don’t fall into the trap of thinking that the prices reflect anything about the zine except a combination of the zine editor’s access to cheaper or more expensive copies, and how many stamps we were able to recycle at the time.”⁷⁵

Several catalogs included submission instructions and terms for zine makers, offering insight into how distros reinforced the participatory nature of zine culture. Stephen Duncombe contends that the “notion of *emulation*—turning your readers into writers—is elemental to the zine world,” disrupting the normally clear division and between producers and consumers.⁷⁶ Distros solicited for new titles within their publications, making it clear how to participate as a producer. Although most requested a sample of a finished zine, some such as Projects Left Undone, So to Speak, Melvin & Earl, and Riot Grrrl Press accepted flats (an unfolded, unstapled copy), allowing them to print copies as needed.⁷⁷ By taking on a substantial portion of the zine maker’s labor and costs, these distros made it easier for an individual to submit a zine for distribution. Some owners asked zine makers to include pricing with their submission, such as Power Toot’s request for “information on how much we can buy it from you and how much we should sell it

⁷³ Jenna, *So to Speak Distro* (Venice, FL: [1996]). Andy Cornell Zine Collection. Special Collections, Williams College, Williamstown, MA.

⁷⁴ Libby, *Glovebox Zine Distro Catalog*, Ruel Gaviola Zine Collection. Sean, *Primordial Soup Kitchen Mailorder Zine / Catalog*, Andy Cornell Zine Collection.

⁷⁵ Rebecca, Josh, and Irene, *Junglegym Zine Distro Machine*, Sarah Wood Zine Collection.

⁷⁶ Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 133; 134.

⁷⁷ Jessi, *Projects Left Undone*, no. 1 (Houston, TX: 1998). Personal collection. Jenna, *So to Speak Distro*, Andy Cornell Zine Collection. Lida and Anna, *Melvin & Earl*, Personal collection. Mary, *Riot Grrrl Press Catalogue* [sic], Lauren Jade Martin Zinester Ephemera Collection.

for.”⁷⁸ A few catalogs provided details about payment, and Basement Children gave the following explanation of their process:

Send us a copy. We'll read it and write you back. If we decide to distro it, we work on consignment. We will take 15 to 20 copies of your zine and we will pay you for what we sell. You tell us how much you want for each zine, and then we will round up the price a little bit (maybe 20%) then add packaging costs to it, and that's the price we put in the catalog. We round up cost because we need to make some money to cover the cost of copies, extra postage, and some other Basement Children expenses.⁷⁹

Distros did not require zines submitted for consideration to have a significant print run or an established audience as periodical distributors Desert Moon and Fine Print did.⁸⁰ Rather, owners were primarily concerned with content and carried zines based on their interests. Libby of Glovebox said she preferred zines that were “personal or obsessive or both” and in the Primordial Soup Kitchen catalog, Sean mentioned that he wanted to “expand our political, comics, and personal sections.”⁸¹ Some did not specify what kind of zines they were interested in, but noted what they would not carry, such as Over E's statement that “As long as your zine is non racist non sexist [sic] non pornographic etc. we'll be happy to share your literature.”⁸² Catalogs show some variation in distros' terms for working with zine makers, but also indicate that owners aimed to be transparent and supportive. A few noted that they could not carry every zine they received. In the Pisces catalog, Kerith recommended to zine makers whose work she declined to “send your project off to the other wonderful distros in zineland,” and included

⁷⁸ Heidi and Brian, *Power Toot Zines-by-Mail Catalog*, no. 3 (New York, NY: 1996). Lauren Jade Martin Zinester Ephemera Collection. Barnard College, New York, NY.

⁷⁹ Basil, Michelle, and Jenny, *Basement Children Zine Distro Catalog*, Personal collection.

⁸⁰ Vale, *Zines! Volume 1*, 107.

⁸¹ Libby, *Glovebox Zine Distro Catalog*, Ruel Gaviola Zine Collection. Sean, *Primordial Soup Kitchen Mailorder Zine / Catalog*, Andy Cornell Zine Collection.

⁸² Lauren and Jorja, *Over E's Zine Distro* (Franklin Square, NY: [1997]). Andy Cornell Zine Collection. Special Collections, Williams College, Williamstown, MA.

names and contact information of other distros.⁸³ In the Tree of Knowledge catalog, Theo suggested that those who did not like his policies could start their own distros, reminding readers that the only barriers to taking on such a project was their own willingness to do so.⁸⁴

Catalogs also offer documentation of relationships in their acknowledgements and recommended resources. Although a distro might be operated by one individual or a small group, acknowledgements underscore that the project was supported by a broader network. For example, the Basement Children's catalog stated: "We really thank everyone who has helped type descriptions, decide yes or no on zines, and then wrote letters for us, filled orders, or just offered advice...or let us borrow their computer."⁸⁵ Other catalogs make it clear that a distro's survival depended on the participation of its zine community. In the Pisces catalog, Kerith thanked the zine makers who trusted her with their work, while in the Tree of Knowledge catalog Theo recognized customers, and in the Subway Sissy catalog, Witknee expressed her appreciation for "everyone out there who have wrote / spoke [sic] encouraging and supportive words for me to continue doing this."⁸⁶ Some catalogs included resource lists, helping readers discover new organizations and publications while also aligning the distro with endeavors it identified with or admired. In the catalog for the Oklahoma-based Okie Dokie Distro, the owner included a list of "other Oklahoma zines and contacts," bringing together otherwise disparate projects under the shared trait of place.⁸⁷ Distro owners saw one another as allies rather than competitors, and several catalogs, such as Pander, Primordial Soup Kitchen, Subway Sissy, and Projects Left Undone, contained a list of recommended distros.⁸⁸ The Pisces catalog included a list of catalogs available for stamps with a note telling readers that they no longer needed to send

⁸³ Kerith, *Pisces Zine Distro and Fun Stuff Catalog*, Ailecia Ruscin Zine Collection.

⁸⁴ Theo, *Tree of Knowledge Independent Literature Distribution*, Zine and Small Press Collection, 1963-2002.

⁸⁵ Basil, Michelle, and Jenny, *Basement Children Zine Distro Catalog*, Personal collection.

⁸⁶ Kerith, *Pisces Zine Distro and Fun Stuff Catalog*, Ailecia Ruscin Zine Collection. Theo, *Tree of Knowledge Independent Literature Distribution*, Zine and Small Press Collection, 1963-2002. Witknee, *Subway Sissy Zine Distro*, Zines and Mini Comics Collection.

⁸⁷ Melissa, *Okie Dokie Distro*, Bill Brown Zine Collection.

⁸⁸ Ericka, *Pander Zine Distro*, Personal collection. Sean, *Primordial Soup Kitchen Mailorder Zine / Catalog*, Andy Cornell Zine Collection. Witknee, *Subway Sissy Zine Distro*, Zines and Mini Comics Collection. Jessi, *Projects Left Undone*, Personal collection.

away to other distros for them “so now you definitely don’t have an excuse!”⁸⁹ Such examples show that, like zines they distributed, distros “depend[ed] upon and help[ed] create community,” and this community is evident throughout their catalogs.⁹⁰

Historically, personal contact had been considered an essential aspect of zine culture and many believed that readers had a responsibility to actively engage with creators about their work. In a 1989 issue of *Factsheet Five*, Mike Gunderloy admonished readers on this topic: “More and more publishers seem to be getting in touch with me about reader response – namely, that they don’t get enough of it. Readers, remember, the people who put out all these fine magazines are spending time, trouble, money, energy, blood, toil, tears, sweat and who knows what else for little reward. Even a postcard really helps brighten up the day.”⁹¹ As distribution options expanded, readers could more easily acquire a zine from a source other than the creator, meaning that the two might never interact. Duncombe notes that “distribution services... eradicate[d] the networking aspect that is so important to the zine world.”⁹² Yet such exchanges were part of why many individuals made and valued zines.⁹³ In an 1996 issue of her personal zine *Fucktooth*, Jen Angel asked readers who had not acquired their copy from her to write and “let me know where you bought this and what you think.”⁹⁴ As zine makers themselves, distro owners were aware of and sensitive to this issue, and some catalogs urged readers to reach out to those whose zines they purchased. The owners of *Jungle gym* told readers, “Remember, it doesn’t stop here. Write letters to the editors of the zines you order and let them know what you thought. Communicate. Zines are written by people, not corporations.”⁹⁵ Similarly, in the *Pisces* catalog, Kerith insisted, “when you finish reading a zine, write to the person who made it. Let them know that you are out

⁸⁹ Kerith, *Pisces Zine Distro and Fun Stuff Catalog*, Ailecia Ruscin Zine Collection.

⁹⁰ Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 71.

⁹¹ Gunderloy, ed., *Factsheet Five*, no. 31 (1989), 11.

⁹² Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 183.

⁹³ Rauch, “Hands-on Communication: Zine Circulation Rituals and the Interactive Limitations of Web Publishing,” 160.

⁹⁴ Jen Angel, *Fucktooth*, no. 20 (1996), 3, *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/fucktooth_20.

⁹⁵ Rebecca, Josh, and Irene, *Jungle gym Zine Distro Machine*, Sarah Wood Zine Collection.

there!”⁹⁶ Rather than limit connections, distro owners tried to use their intermediary role to encourage communication and personal interactions.

While distro catalogs aimed to promote and sell zines, they could contain more than just inventories of what they carried. Some also included unique content often directly related to the distro’s perspective or mission. The Melvin & Earl catalog featured an essay by the distro owners’ friend on the importance of communication. It encouraged readers to pursue their own creative projects, declaring, “your voice is your salvation.”⁹⁷ The Primordial Soup Kitchen catalog incorporated essays and interviews on socialism and anarchist history, topics also represented in some of the zines the distro carried. The owner Sean explained that this content was “an attempt to make the catalog a bit more interesting and more like a traditional zine.”⁹⁸ This original material reveals that catalogs were often multifaceted, creative works in their own right.

Although this analysis has focused primarily on the textual content of catalogs, their graphic design is also essential to their meaning and, like the additional material in some, underscores that catalog itself was a creative work. As Alison Piepmeier has contended, “the zine is an art object as well as a literary text.”⁹⁹ Some catalogs evoke Janice Radway’s description of 1990s zines as an “insistently collaged, multimedia form—which combined hand-writing, printed text, drawings and photographic images.”¹⁰⁰ The catalogs for Over E’s, Melvin & Earl, and Projects Left Undone all included a mix of handwritten and typed text, text on a background of repurposed material, and hand drawn illustrations.¹⁰¹ 1990s zines often incorporated recycled images from other sources, a practice also found in distro catalogs. Among those surveyed, there

⁹⁶ Kerith, *Pisces Zine Distro and Fun Stuff Catalog*, Ailecia Ruscin Zine Collection.

⁹⁷ Lida and Anna, *Melvin & Earl*, Personal collection.

⁹⁸ Sean, *Primordial Soup Kitchen Mailorder Zine / Catalog*, Andy Cornell Zine Collection.

⁹⁹ Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 218.

¹⁰⁰ Janice Radway, “Zines in the Library: Underground Communication and the Property Regimes of Book Culture” in *The Printed Book in Contemporary American Culture: Medium, Object, Metaphor*, eds. Heike Schaefer and Alexander Starre (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 88.

¹⁰¹ Lauren and Jorja, *Over E’s Zine Distro*, Andy Cornell Zine Collection. Lida and Anna, *Melvin & Earl*, Personal collection. Jessi, *Projects Left Undone*, Personal collection.

is a wide range in visuals: some used found images (a newspaper stock exchange charts in *Over E's*), others featured artwork the distro owner identified as personally significant (*Eloise* illustrations in *Subway Sissy*) or personal photos (photobooth images in *Projects Left Undone* and *Basement Children*).¹⁰² Cut and paste was used in multiple catalogs as well. Originating with 1970s punk zines, this aesthetic grew out of necessity as well as a desire to create something visually distinct from the conventions of mainstream publishing.¹⁰³ In the decades since, it has come to be recognized as a visual shorthand for zines and way to place one's work within the aesthetic tradition of medium, even though the ubiquity of word processors and desktop publishing has rendered this method unnecessary. Such design choices show that some distro owners wanted to create catalogs that clearly drew from and identified with the aesthetic tradition of zines. Others, such as the ones produced by *Primordial Soup Kitchen*, *Pander*, and *Tree of Knowledge* took a different approach.¹⁰⁴ Created with a word processor, their typed, text heavy pages prioritized content over aesthetics. While they are noticeably different from the cut-and-paste examples, their DIY appearance still marks them as publications produced outside of mainstream channels. The variety in the layout and design of distro catalogs highlights that, as with zines, there was a wide range of approaches to aesthetics, but they all shared a distinctly non-commercial appearance.

During the late 1990s, declarations that the internet would lead to the death of zines became increasingly common. In the 1997 *Factsheet Five Zine Reader*, R. Seth Friedman remarked that “some soothsayers are predicting the demise of paper-based print and the demise of paper zines along with them.”¹⁰⁵ Arguments that assumed a sharp divide between paper and digital, however,

¹⁰² Lauren and Jorja, *Over E's Zine Distro*, Andy Cornell Zine Collection. Witknee, *Subway Sissy Zine Distro*, Zines and Mini Comics Collection. Jessi, *Projects Left Undone*, Personal collection. Basil, Michelle, and Jenny, *Basement Children Zine Distro Catalog*, Personal collection.

¹⁰³ Teal Triggs, *Fanzines: The DIY Revolution* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2010), 81.

¹⁰⁴ Ericka, *Pander Zine Distro*, Personal collection. Sean, *Primordial Soup Kitchen Mailorder Zine / Catalog*, Andy Cornell Zine Collection. *Tree of Knowledge Independent Literature Distribution*, Zine and Small Press Collection, 1963-2002.

¹⁰⁵ R. Seth Friedman, ed., *The Factsheet Five Reader: The Best Writing from the Underground World of Zines* (New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, 1997), 13.

obscure a more nuanced reality.¹⁰⁶ Catalogs reveal that some distro owners recognized the web as a way to leverage their projects and expand their networks. Several distros, including Pander, Pisces, and Primordial Soup Kitchen, included an email address and website address in their catalogs.¹⁰⁷ While all required payment to be sent through the mail, some accepted orders via email. Jessi of Projects Left Undone noted, “you can email your order...but I won’t send it until I receive payment.”¹⁰⁸ A website also allowed for greater flexibility than a paper catalog, enabling a distro owner to update their inventory more easily. In the Glovebox catalog, Libby advised, “zines come in and sell out quickly sometimes that it really is best, if you have internet access to check the catalog online. I update it regularly (obsessively?).”¹⁰⁹ Some distros continued to produce paper catalogs in the early 2000s, but by the end of the decade, most had moved entirely online, as an online presence was a simpler, cheaper, and more efficient way to promote and sell zines. Despite the predictions, however, neither zines nor distros died out, but instead adapted and continued.

CONCLUSION

According to Stephen Duncombe, zines offer “a space within which to imagine and experiment with new and idealistic ways of thinking, communicating, and being.”¹¹⁰ This spirit of possibility and the desire to create something of their own is also what inspired so many to individuals to begin distros in the 1990s. Made possible in part by the zine explosion and an increasing interest in and awareness of zines, distros were efforts by those within zine communities to manage distribution for themselves, friends, and others in their networks in a way that aligned with their zine community’s values and priorities. Although the zine landscape changed profoundly throughout the 1990s, the presence of distros was continual and grew during the latter half of the

¹⁰⁶ To this point, in her discussion on the topic Alison Piepmeier observed, “many of the zine creators I interviewed actively produce both zines and blogs.” Piepmeier, *Girl Zines*, 15.

¹⁰⁷ Ericka, *Pander Zine Distro*, Personal collection. Sean, *Primordial Soup Kitchen Mailorder Zine / Catalog*, Andy Cornell Zine Collection. Kerith, *Pisces Zine Distro and Fun Stuff Catalog*, Ailecia Ruscini Zine Collection.

¹⁰⁸ Jessi, *Projects Left Undone*, Personal collection.

¹⁰⁹ Libby, *Glovebox Zine Distro Catalog*, Ruel Gaviola Zine Collection.

¹¹⁰ Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 212.

decade. They offered an expanded reach for zine makers, but one more controlled and supportive than other modes of distribution. Crucially, they provided zine makers and readers with the opportunity to be a part of a community, regardless of physical location. Their catalogs, although short lived, document an important window of time: the emergence of distros, their optimism and efforts, and the role they played in zine distribution and communities.

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