

Navigating the Media Environment: How Youth Claim a Place Through Zines

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Introduction

Zine: A small handmade amateur publication done purely out of passion, rarely making money or breaking even. Sounds like zeen. Not short for “magazine” or written with an apostrophe (‘zine), though the derivation is from the word “fanzine.”

— R. Seth Friedman (1996), publisher of *Factsheet Five*

[Zines are] where the action is, where information (and disinformation) is free...the few thousand publishers and the few million readers are the ones at the cutting edge of social change.

— Mike Gunderloy (1990), founder of *Factsheet Five*
and author of *The World of Zines*

Zines...[are] fueled by the same sloppy solipsism that is transforming America into a land of self-obsessed jabber jaws....

— Peder Zane (1995), *New York Times*

Zines: most people seem to think they’re “crap,” while in fact they are a wondrous beast of great complexity.

— *MSRRT Newsletter*

LIKE RAP MUSIC, GRAFFITI ART, AND OTHER FORMS OF YOUTH-INITIATED MEDIA, THE value of zines is hotly contested in the world of media. What can be agreed upon is how these self-published works provide one of the only independent sites for tens of thousands¹ of youth voices (usually under age 30) in a media environment otherwise dominated by corporate adult interests (Romenseko, 1993; Gunderloy, 1990). Beyond that, zines are simultaneously valorized by most youth participants and dismissed by most adult observers. My intention in this

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article is to examine what zines *mean* to the youths who produce and consume them.² The task is to seriously explore how young people take an active role in shaping their media environment and, particularly, how they view media in their everyday lives.

Traditional research on youth and media has generally been more preoccupied with what media *do* to young people, rather than what young people are doing with media. Though researchers may disagree on whether media influences are pro- or anti-social, they have typically dismissed youths as passive consumers who are easily influenced by media messages.³ Young people are rarely seen as agents in their own lives, let alone as *producers* of media themselves. Instead, research commonly conflates changes in media content with changes in the quality of young people's lives. Aimee Dorr's optimistic conclusion to *Television and Children: A Special Medium for a Special Audience* is a case in point: "Options abound for making television a magic window, not an idiot box for children and for making children brains not boobs..." (Dorr, 1986, emphasis added).

Likewise, media policy debates concerning young people often ignore the lived experiences of youths. Rather than asking young people how media *matter* in their lives, advocates opt to speak for youth by privileging their own often uninformed interpretations of youth-oriented media. One example is the crusade of Tipper Gore's Parents Resource Music Center (PRMC) to curb youth suicides, pregnancy, and crime by censoring rock-and-roll lyrics. In response, Mike Males (1996) recounts how a 1988 PRMC video blaming youth social ills on rock music was "both fraudulent and for its slick production, and astonishingly ignorant of rock music":

Its authors distorted the words to Ozzy Osbourne's 1981 song "Suicide Solution" to make it appear pro-suicide (the song is not about suicide; "suicide solution" refers to the deadly dangers of alcoholism) and butchered statistics wholesale. To prove it wasn't stodgily anti-rock, the PRMC singled out two artists as "healthy and inspiring" for youths. One was Bruce Springsteen, whose earlier music is replete with realistic and evocative drug, sex, and violence themes (his 1982 "Nebraska" describes a murder spree by teenagers as "fun"). The other PRMC-approved group was Irish band U2. U2's song "Pistol Weighing Heavy" would be cited in 1991 by psychologist Park Deitz as prompting a deranged fan to murder actress Rebecca Schaeffer (the song is not about murdering actresses) (*Ibid.*).

Despite such shaky empirical foundations, policy and research alike have successfully framed media as one of the most daunting terrains for youths — one in which young people are powerless, constantly "at risk" of "corrupting" messages, and therefore requiring the close supervision and control of adults. Both the recent push for a "V-chip" to censor violent content on the Internet and the

institution of a new TV ratings system are informed by this vision of media as an environment of vulnerability and danger for today's youths. Yet what would this media environment look like if we actually *asked* youths about their media interests, rather than simply observing and objectifying them as a monolithic group of vulnerable couch potatoes?⁴

The research that follows evolved out of my exchanges with more than two dozen zine publishers who shared their thoughts, writings, or both through phones, e-mail, and snail mail. I also visited the local bookstores, record shops, and the usenet newsgroup *alt.zines*, as well as the occasional zine readings, workshops, and conferences where publishers and readers gather to trade zines, share tips, and form friendships and alliances.

The predominant vision of media that emerged from my conversations and interaction with young publishers is far from the foreboding terrain referred to in mainstream discussions. Rather, most zine publishers see media as one of the only hopeful environments in an era of increasing public retrenchment of material and moral support for young people. Zines, in particular, articulate young people's strong need for a place of their own, despite the vanishing of such public spaces from the material environment. For zine publishers, the media environment provides some of the few remaining resources and opportunities for youths to carve out a space for themselves.

In the following sections, I describe the historical context that gave rise to today's zines, with particular attention to repressive trends in the 1980s that zine makers suggest are critical to the boom of youth participation in self-publishing. I then explore how zine publishers navigate through the media environment and articulate a meaningful place for themselves within this terrain. Particularly, I show how zines not only highlight young people's active role in their media environment, but also their sophistication in critically engaging mainstream media and in addressing the limitations of material space. Finally, I explain how the process of producing a zine serves as an oppositional and potentially radical practice for young people by challenging the material constraints for participation in the media environment. Moreover, I argue for taking zines and other forms of youth-initiated media seriously as a place of productive meaning and action, especially as they articulate young people's disillusionment and loss of meaning in formal sectors like school and work.

Zines in an Historical Context

Self-publishing is itself nothing new. Zines have long, multifarious roots. Their historical lineage can be traced back as far as 1517 when, on the brink of the Reformation, Martin Luther posted a "zine," his famous "Ninety-five Theses," on the Castle Church door at Wittenberg. In 18th-century Enlightenment France, Voltaire complained of "riffraff authors" who published personal diatribes against the literary and political elites.⁵ Also, as Seth Friedman of *Factsheet Five* — the

reputable review of zines — has remarked, “Benjamin Franklin made zines” (Gross, 1994).

Various self-publishing efforts in this century have also been noted for influencing zines. These are most notably the *samizdats* circulated under Communist Soviet regimes, and from the U.S., the science fiction fanzines of the 1930s, literary chap books of the 1950s and 1960s, and underground high school newspapers of the late 1960s and 1970s.⁶

Though “zine” has become a catch-all term for self-published works covering everything from the broadly political to the extremely personal, what is particularly different about today’s zines is the growing number of publications focusing not on a specific interest, but on the everyday life of the publisher. Music, comics, and literary zines tend to be the most prevalent, but topics ranging from eco-anarchism to gun owner’s rights and from serial murders to bird watching have engendered their own publications. The youngest producers tend to publish personal zines or “perzines,” which are very autobiographical and intimate in nature.⁷

Most zine makers point to the advent of cheap and accessible photocopiers and desktop publishing in the 1980s for the blossoming of self-publishing beyond the scope of political, literary, and fan interests. Credit (or for the disgruntled, the *blame*) for building the infrastructure of a booming zine network is also given to Mike Gunderloy, the founder of *Factsheet Five (F5)*.⁸ Making its debut in 1982, Gunderloy’s *F5* grew from a two-page list of recommended zines for friends to a full-fledged, internationally distributed publication with nearly 140 pages in zine reviews and a circulation of 10,000. It became a prime resource for zine publishers and would-be publishers. By sending free copies of *Factsheet Five* to editors of zines reviewed in its pages, Gunderloy fostered “cross-pollination” not only among zinesters, but also among all sorts of mail artists, cartoonists, poets, and activists hungry for mass-produced media.

Yet while Gunderloy may have given some shape to the zine phenomenon and photocopying technology provides the tools for it, they alone cannot account for the *direction* of the growth in self-publishing. Why, for instance, has there been a proliferation of personal, confessional zines by teenage girls in the past two decades?⁹ Or, to ask it another way, why *not* a boom in sports zines by middle-aged businessmen?

If we accept the common assertion of zine publishers that the history and the medium itself belong to young people, then we need to contextualize youths according to the era that serves as zines’ historical marker: the 1980s.¹⁰ Gunderloy himself points us to that context. In *The World of Zines*, he writes, “the Reagan years, with their legacy of a tattered safety net, have encouraged people to depend more on their own talents and abilities for everything from survival to entertainment” (Gunderloy and Janice, 1992). Elsewhere, Jerod Pore, a current *F5* staff member and zine publisher, adds this insight:

The mid-1980s saw a fairly large number of young, disaffected, reasonably well-educated (or otherwise bright) people consigned to temporary jobs (thanks to rapid growth in various corporations, leveraged buyouts, and such) with little or no hope of advancement. These people were exposed to desktop publishing, a solution looking for a problem... (Pore, 1995: 132).

Two trends in the 1980s, it seems, affected the content of zines: an increasing retrenchment of public support for youths, coupled with an escalating campaign of labor and moral discipline. The culmination of these two trends is exemplified by Clinton's recent signing of a welfare reform bill that will send a million more children into poverty, and by the continual popularity of William Bennett's best-selling *Book of Virtues*, a neoconservative bible for improving the moral and work ethics of young people.

With the anti-tax revolt set in motion by the 1978 passage of Proposition 13 in California, young people since the 1980s have faced increasing policies that slash public programs for them in favor of tax breaks for older generations; that defund education in favor of prisons; and cut public assistance to the poorest among them. Given these trends, it is no surprise that youth poverty rates — cut by half through the 1960s and 1970s — began rising again in the 1980s and have since reached their peak in this decade in states like California (Males, 1996).

Along with soaring costs in higher education and drops in real wages, young people in the 1980s also began to see declining prospects for secure employment and the rising dominance of temporary employment agencies like Manpower, Inc.¹¹ Youths in droves have increasingly found themselves in dead-end jobs *and*, at the same time, blamed for being too lazy, indifferent, and cynical about their larger social environments. Douglas Coupland coined the term for this impression of youths in the 1980s: "Generation X." Moreover, young people were not only increasingly demonized as lazy and in need of labor discipline. In the 1980s, they were also being cast as morally bankrupt and even pathological by *nature*. Males describes how youth "treatment industries" blossomed to establish "adolescence itself as a diseased state" during the 1980s. As he writes:

Officials, programs, and agencies...teamed up to perpetuate the image that every teenager is a suicide, homicide, pregnancy, and AIDS case in the making, a kinetic calamity manifested in the tiniest signs: mood change, a falling grade, an outburst, a quietude, sadness, exuberance, unexpected behavior or emotion, unexpected stability and calm, just being an adolescent (Males, 1996).

Despite trends of declining economic prospects, the message to youths in the 1980s and, more importantly, *about* them can be summed up by Nancy Reagan's anti-drug crusade: "Just say no."

We should also note that deregulation of media industries took place in the 1980s under the Reagan administration. That move allowed for increasing commercialization of youth culture and such recent mergers of industry giants like Disney and ABC (Kline, 1993). The 1980s was also an era of vanishing public gathering places (especially for poor youths of color), with police enforcement of anti-loitering and curfew laws, and the rise of quasi-public spaces such as the heavily secured and surveyed “panopticon” shopping malls (Davis, 1990).

It is perhaps no surprise, then, that the youngest zine publishers have been most likely to assert very personal and intimate details of themselves during times of increasing isolation and objectification of youths. Eras of increasing surveillance and repression, as noted by Michel Foucault (1978), often give rise to a multiplication of discourses rather than “a plain and simple imposition of silence.” Hence, alongside the proliferation of medical, policy, and criminal justice discourses aimed at managing and delimiting youth agency (“Just say no”), a new mode of youth discourse also developed in the 1980s via the zine network. For those like Andrea Lambert who believed “...there is this evil creeping feeling of voicelessness that will get me for good if I don’t do something,” zine publishing provided an outlet for youth expression (Owens, 1995). Outside the watchful gaze of adult institutions, these self-made works carved out an intimate arena for young publishers to make their *own* sense of “youth.”

Sellouts Versus Outcasts: Articulating a Place for Youths

....when i walk into the grocery store and stare at the magazine rack all i see is propaganda: lies and standards set by people in power...and i'll walk out empty-handed and run home to my mailbox to see what new zines i got that day. i'll curl up in my room, free from all the people that tell me i'm just a kid/i'm just a girl/i can't change the world, and read.... i'll read the truths of so many kids that finally have an uncensored forum to yell and cry and heal and inform and incite, free from the burdens of adulthood.... so while your average jane/joe teenager is out partying all night, there are a whole slew of kids overtaking the copy shops and crowding mail boxes for the love of the zine and the hope and action it inspires.

— Witknee Hubbs, publisher of *AWOL*, *Youth for Peace and Revolution*

Zines have recently been “discovered” by the mainstream press as a new authentic voice of youths. In the past few years, these self-made publications have received increasing coverage in the press for their “quirky,” “irreverent,” “hip,” attitude — in short, for their subjective stance. *Rolling Stone* declared zines to be “a novel form of communication” (Sherril, 1995). *Time* praised them for “mak[ing] words on paper radical again” (Gross, 1994).

For the most part, zine makers have taken these compliments with an equal part of suspicion and unease. Some have frowned on the press' knowledge of zines, pointing out that zines are neither new in form nor special in radical content. Others have been quick to distance themselves from particular media images. "Details have declared zines the hip trend for young alternative kids," Jeff Stark of *Stew* complains. "[But] we're no more alternative than the kid who drove the black Camero and blasted Led Zeppelin at my high school" (bellerue, 1994). Still many more are angered not specifically by what is being said, but by *who* is doing the speaking:

...[the mainstream press] come knocking on your door, asking Hey What's Going On? & You're s'posed to be polite to them? Share your know-how, that's American Ingenuity or Christian Charity or something, whatever. The TV comes to Real Life, and brings back stunning footage of Real People Doing Real Things on Their Own Time Because They Love To...(Not just dramatics! Real Feeling! Opinions!) (bellerue, 1994).

There is a deep suspicion in the zine world that mass veneration of "Real People Doing Real Things" is somehow specious and manipulative. No doubt some zine makers have welcomed press coverage. Many others, however, fear that all this media attention works to co-opt rather than to privilege their voices. As Bobby S. Fred, publisher of *Bobby Is Fred*, tells *Time* magazine, "Look, this is a nation of disenfranchised kids. The reason we don't talk to the mainstream media is because we want to guard the few places we have left, like our zines" (Gross, 1994).

This articulation of zines as a "place" for "disenfranchised kids" — and not as a commodity, interest, or activity — is critical to understanding how young publishers have defined their stakes in the media environment and in the larger debates over the social conditions of being young today. Publishers of zines reiterate this notion of zines as a "place" by variously describing their need to "create a forum," "build a network," and "form a community." As a "place," zines lay claim to a less transitory and more definite location for youths in the media environment. As one of the "few places left," zines also provide a critical space for young people. Particularly, by *defying* material space, this "place" of zines stands as a tacit critique of the limitations for youths in the larger social environment.

The vocabulary of "sellouts" versus "outcasts" that demarcates the boundaries of this "place" provides particular insight into how young people perceive themselves in relation to mainstream media and other institutions of power. In my conversations with zine makers, self-publishing is rarely framed as a stepping stone toward acceptance in mainstream channels. In fact, those who publish with such motivations are commonly branded as "sellouts" and excluded from membership in the zine world.

Instead, publishers perceive zines as a discrete and peripheral "network" away from the gaze of mainstream media and other established institutions.

These things you call “zeens” are written/put together by people who are doing nothing that would be considered by most to be newsworthy. Small people living inconsequential lives, not shooting people or planning corporate mergers or anything important like that.... It is our own way of networking in an increasingly impersonal world.¹²

The ironic identification with “small people living inconsequential lives” highlights a common perception among zine publishers that mainstream media devalue their interests and their everyday lives. Zine publishing, in contrast, reclaims the importance of “small people” by articulating a place where those on the margins of power and, particularly, “outcasts” are central to the vitality of the space.

As an active voice of various cultural minorities, [zines] serve social and political diversity.... The variety of flavors one can find in the zine scene belies a veritable buffet of the bizarre and smorgasbord of the subversive (Andy “Sunfrog” Smith, publisher of *Babyfish...lost its momma*).

Fifteen-year-old Yael Grauer echoes the sense of marginalization many young zine publishers feel when she explains her need to “create a forum for my own opinions.”¹³ As she puts it, “I...hate assumptions made about my generation under 20 and our view of music and politics. We are intelligent and a lot of us do have a good handle on what’s going on” (Owens, 1995).

The assertion of zines as a “place” for “disenfranchised kids” is also an assertion for an alternative vision of young people as intelligent actors and shapers of their media environment. Moreover, the fact that this space so clearly differentiates itself from mainstream media (“sellouts” versus “outcasts”) sheds significant light on young publishers, not only as actors and shapers, but also as astute critics of their media environment.

Particularly, zine publishers are very aware of the domination of mainstream media over communication. Notions like “media monopoly,” as coined by Ben Bagdikian, and “manufacturing consent,” as popularized by Noam Chomsky, are well known in the zine world. With circulations usually between 15 and 2,500, zine publishers recognize that they cannot compete with the magnitude of mainstream media circulations. In fact, by claiming a separate “place” for themselves, zine publishers do not even try to compete with mainstream media.

Rather, publishers strive to redefine the dynamics of their media environment by envisioning a place that is free from the domination of mainstream media. The explicit “for love, not profit” stance of most zine publishers is one strong example of how they attempt to disengage from the corporate dynamics of mainstream media. In my conversations with zine publishers, two common “for love, not profit” practices were consistently noted: the anti-copyright policy that many publishers espouse and the barter system by which many exchange one zine for

another rather than through money. These two practices encourage publishers to read each others' zines. More critically, they also encourage new readers to become publishers.

Con(tra)science is in full support of honest, truly independent, do-it-yourself projects. Take control, utilize your surroundings and your mind, create art, make music, write, read, communicate (Bryan, 1995).

What the last excerpt most clearly indicates is how attuned most zine publishers are to the link between communication and power. The fact that a copy machine serves as the central icon of power also attests to young publishers' sense of limitation from more full participation in the larger social environment. As Lloyd Dunn points out in *The World of Zines*, "one publishes because one must; which is to say that *I* publish because I don't know what *else* to do to make my voice heard outside of the narrow confines of my home turf" (Gunderloy and Janice, 1992).

By claiming a separate place for youths, the disengagement of zine publishers can be seen as a response to the limitations of material space. Moreover, it captures the common disillusionment of young publishers toward participation in the larger social environment. As Erik Farseth, publisher of *The J. Cruelty Catalog*, explains,

We have no time for an increasingly homogenized adult world that tries to skim whatever it can off the surface of the underculture and then sell it back to us as the latest flavor-of-the-month (Owens, 1995).

Truly, under the harsh lights of media coverage, the passion and meaning in zines are often trivialized and commercialized as another passing youth fashion statement. In contrast, my own review of mainstream press coverage did not yield even one insight into the arduous and intensive *process* of publishing, a process that is common to all. As Mike Gunderloy points out:

There are many reasons for publishing various kinds of zines, but there is one overall purpose: people are building networks independent of big business, big government, and big media.... While a few mass media continue to dominate the communication channels, there are plenty of holes between their coverage where the dedicated and passionate small publisher can make a difference. Most zines start out with the realization that one need no longer be merely a passive consumer of media. Everyone can be a producer! (Gunderloy and Janice, 1992).

With all the trivial talk of zines as a hip trend or quirky statement, what mainstream media continually elide is this process of production—the exact thing that makes zines so oppositional to the currents of mainstream media practices.

“Do-It-Yourself” Publishing: The Serious Work in “Play”

Most of us make magazines to communicate our message or manifesto to the world, but sending our writing out to other publishers, or even a conventional letter-to-the-editor, could accomplish that. Something deep, profound, sublime, ridiculous, radical, irrational, irrepressible, incredibly meaningful, or important drives us back to the typewriter or computer, x-acto knives, and glue each time.

— Andy “Sunfrog” Smith, publisher of *Babyfish*...lost its momma

We’re tired of being fucked over by small-minded vicious editors and publishers...ruled by these unbreakable commandments: Do it cheap, do it quick, and don’t offend advertisers. We say it’s time to fight back.

— The publishers of *Sabot Times* (Romenesko, 1993).

If your parents are still paying for your voice you’ve got a problem....

— Brinda Coleman, publisher of *Multiball*

Youth culture cannot be reduced to mere fun and games. For “there is work, even desperate work, in play.”¹⁴ The process of zine publishing demonstrates the serious efforts involved in such “playful” youth endeavors. When publishers I encountered asserted the old punk principle of “do-it-yourself” (DIY for short), they *really* meant taking control of the entire publishing process — from funding their projects to distributing the finished publications. As zine publisher Andy “Sunfrog” Smith notes:

Most zine publishers take responsibility for every aspect of production — writing, typesetting, layout, fundraising, printing, collating, stapling, mailing, selling, distributing — the work done by dozens of paid people at professional magazines. And we maintain a “real” life of relationships, school, and work responsibilities as well. Our vocational demands include sleep deprivation and insatiable inspiration (Smith, 1995).

Indeed, zine publishing is *very* hard work. Eric Nakamura, publisher of the popular *Giant Robot*, told me that he spent approximately 100 hours in getting the writing, photos, and layout together for his fourth issue. While holding down a day job, he devoted nights on end to zine publishing. Like most zine publishers, moreover, Nakamura was footing the bill for production. When I talked to him before *GR* #4 hit the stands, he was still waiting to recuperate the money he lost on issue #3. Nakamura, though, is probably one of the few whose zine circulation has continued to swell since our interview. Others may not be so lucky. “My zine has me \$8,000 in debt,” writes D.B. Velveeta, publisher of *Quimby Presents*

(bellerue, 1994). Such a zine debt may be extreme, though on top of all the hard work, zine publishing clearly can be quite a drain on the pocketbook. “It takes a lot of individual effort and motivation,” Nakamura said. “You need to do it fast and get it out fast before your fire burns out.”¹⁵

“Burnout” is quite common in zine publishing. Though plenty of new zines appear everyday, many also vanish after one or two issues. According to bob bellerue (1994),

The biggest drawback to being an independent charmer is the burnout that ends up consuming your innocent abilities when faced with the increasing demands for publication. This is the bind of the zine martyr: how to keep up with the outside world as the hobby takes over your space and still remain as interested in your project as you were when it was a simple thing you did after work or parties with your friends. (Long hours in late-night copy centers make for unsightly eye baggage.)

Why, then, all the effort and resources for sustaining something the mainstream media dismisses as a passing youth trend? “The hours are long, publications infrequent, and tangible rewards few,” says Smith, “but the immeasurable satisfaction most of us glean from making our zine is an ineffable intoxicant rarely equaled in other aspects of daily life” (Smith, 1995). That satisfaction in the process of production largely stems from a sense of independence, an independence from what Gunderloy calls “big business, big government, and big media” (Gunderloy and Janice, 1992). Jeb Branin, publisher of *The Crass Menagerie* and *Not Fragile*, offers this explanation:

Why publish without big financial backing? Being independent allows me the control I want and need. It also makes me accountable.... I find that responsibility desirable and inspiring. My work promotes exactly what I want it to. There is no catering to others because they hold the purse string (bellerue, 1994).

Zine makers often joke about how zines are “published by someone with an ego bigger than a budget” (Corsaro, in bellerue, 1994). Yet there is an implicit recognition in this joke that the assertion of “ego” is not merely gratuitous. Rather, zine publishers are naming an oppositional self, one that poses itself as “bigger than a budget” and challenges the material constraints to who can publish. It is this construction of an oppositional “self” that makes self-publishing potentially radical. In bell hooks’ (1989) words, “It is that act of speech, of ‘talking back,’ that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject....”

Particularly, the process of zine publishing can be seen as a counterpoint to the common image of youths as passive consumers easily influenced by the media. In

asserting control over the tools of representation, young publishers not only show an active engagement with media, but also a *critical* engagement. Hence, beyond the actual physical work of typing, cutting, pasting, and distributing a zine, there is serious *symbolic* work in the production process.

The pleasure in “play” clearly stems from critiquing mainstream representations of power. Contrary to notions of “play” as a disengagement from critical thought and meaning, zines suggest that much of the pleasure in youth popular culture stems from the active critical work involved in the *production* of meaning. Zines like *I Hate Brenda*, a personal rant against one of the TV characters on the popular “Beverly Hills 90210,” are testimony to the particular pleasure of opposition and criticism that many young people derive from a sophisticated engagement with mainstream media.

“*I won’t play girl to your boy NO MORE*” (Sudata, 1996)

The above image also illustrates the extent to which zines provide young publishers a space to re-envision the power dynamics of their larger social environments. As much as they are critiques of mainstream media, zines also point to media as one of the last hopeful environments where young people can assert a sense of agency by redefining a social space in otherwise constraining material circumstances.

Perhaps more importantly, the amount of effort invested in these representational practices points to a disillusionment and loss of meaning for participation in formal realms like school and work. This common sentiment toward work is captured by Mike Thain, publisher of *Sleepy Foot*, who explains,

For five or six bucks an hour an employer can buy my time — I have no choice but to sell it. But it would take far more than any employer can afford to buy my enthusiasm, motivation, and care (in Bellerue, 1994).

Elsewhere in zines, rants about the lack of meaning in school are commonplace. Ultimately, the tremendous work, both the material and the symbolic, in zines points to the significant value and meaning that young people attach to forms of popular youth culture. Since they articulate the disillusionment with formal sectors like school and work, zines and other youth-initiated media call for our serious attention.

Conclusion

Much of this special edition of *Social Justice* emphasizes a framework for involving youth and children in extant projects and social movements like environmentalism. My research on zines ultimately attempts to go a step beyond involving youth by asking how *we* can involve *ourselves* in the projects young people are initiating on their own. If it is true that we take young people seriously

as “self-determining social actors,”¹⁶ then we must engage them as more than passive consumers of media or mere participants in adult-led movements.

Zines provide one way of interacting with youths as initiators and producers of their own social agendas...*and* representations. Particularly, the articulation of zines as a “place” for “disenfranchised kids” points to the type of ideal space young publishers envision for themselves. This is a space where neither mainstream media nor other institutions of power have the last word on youth and, particularly, on the value of young people’s engagement with media.

Instead, zines attest to the importance of looking at youth-initiated media as realms of meaning and agency, particularly as they serve to illuminate young people’s own perceptions of what is wrong with their larger social environments. Of course, zines are not the only “place” young people have claimed as their own. Some complaints of the predominance of “white boyz” within zine circles suggest that it would not be adequate only to engage the youth publishers in the zine world.¹⁷ Other avenues for conversing with youths need to be explored. Within youth media culture, this may include youth-produced music such as hip-hop or punk, video poetry, and graffiti art.

As this article shows, the media as an environment for youths look tremendously different and *richer* when zine publishers’ own perceptions are center stage. Further engagement by young musicians, artists, and other youths can only add much needed contours to the road map necessary for building better environments.

NOTES

1. There are somewhere between 10,000 to 50,000 zines, mostly traded or sold through mail to an estimated readership of one to three million. These estimates do not take into account self-published works on the Internet, better known as “e-zines,” which have rapidly proliferated in the past few years.

2. It is not my aim to offer an encyclopedia or taxonomy of zines; such reference books exist. See, for instance, Gunderloy and Janice (1992) and *ReSearch*. Several zines specialize in reviewing other zines. Particularly, see *Factsheet Five* (Box 170099, San Francisco, CA 94117–0099). Also see *MSRRT Newsletter* (4645 Columbus Ave., S., Minneapolis, MN 55407), *Obscure Publications* (Box 1334, Milwaukee, WI 53201), *Book Your Own Fucking Life* (The Bleeding Heart Collective, 4728 Spruce St., Box 354, Philadelphia, PA 19139), *Alternative Press Review* (Box 1446, Columbia, MO 65205–1446), and *Queer Zine Explosion* (Box 590488, San Francisco, CA 94159–0488). Also check out the following web sites: <http://www.well.com/mich/F5/f5index.html> and <http://www.meer.net/~johnl/ezone-list/index.html>.

3. See, for instance, Carmen Luke (1990) for a discussion of dominant constructions of children in media research. Also see Todd Gitlin (1978: 205–254) for a discussion of the behaviorist orientation of traditional media research.

4. Paul Willis (1990) is one of the few scholars whose research develops out of conversations with young people on what it *means* for them to engage with different media. Another researcher to actively engage young people in dialogue about media is David Buckingham (1993).

5. See James Corsaro, “A Micropress in Every Home,” a manuscript of his address at the Society

of American Archivists Annual Meeting in New Orleans (September 4, 1993), reprinted in Jim Romenesko, *Obscure Publications* (P.O. Box 1334, Milwaukee, WI 53201), #29 (1993b).

6. For a history of zines, see Romenesko (1993b). Also, see bob bellerue (1994).

7. Interview with Seth Friedman (September 22, 1995).

8. *Factsheet Five* and Mike Gunderloy himself have been frequent subjects for praise and criticism. See, for instance, Jim Romenesko (1993); for a history of *Factsheet Five* and Gunderloy, see Romenesko and Gunderloy.

9. In my own review of zine literature, I came across a large number of perzines by teenage girls relative to other zines. These zines, sometimes tagged as “riot grrrl” or simply “grrrl” zines, have become so prevalent that they have warranted their own category for reviews in *Factsheet Five*.

10. For instance, see bellerue (1994: 30), where Lauren Martin, publisher of *Boredom Sucks*, writes, “Whose history is [zines]? Young, individual, revolutionary, alternative-thinking people....” Elsewhere, in an e-mail to me on September 28, 1995, Jim Romenesko writes: “I think young people see zines as THEIR mass medium....”

11. For a discussion of declining real income and of rising tuition at the University of California, see Males (1996: 12–13). For a discussion of temporary work, see the zine, *Temp Slave!* (Keffo, P.O. Box 8284, Madison, WI 53708–8284). Also note, for starters, that *Temp Slave!* consistently ranks at the top of *F5*’s “bestseller list.”

12. Letter from Brinda Coleman, publisher of *Multiball*, to bob bellerue, reprinted in bellerue (1994: 35).

13. From phone interview with Yael Grauer (October 12, 1995).

14. See Willis (1990).

15. Phone interview with Eric Nakamura on October 12, 1995. See also *Giant Robot* (P.O. Box 2053, Los Angeles, CA 90064).

16. See the “Introduction” by Meucci and Schwab to this special edition.

17. See, for instance, James Romenesko, *Obscure Publications* 32 (September 1995), in which conflicts at the second annual Underground Press Conference are discussed. Particularly, see the description of one of the last panel discussions of the conference (p. 2). *Obscure* reports how all hell broke loose when conference organizer David Hernandez complained of too many “white boyz” in the zine world, to which Seth Friedman of *Factsheet Five* retorted, “If you have a network of Latino people, tell them to start zines.”

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