**“Detroit, Zines, and Digital Justice.”**

“Maybe buying in is really the punk rock choice.”

-Gretchen (Aya Cash), *You’re the Worst*

At first glance, the early twenty-first century appears an odd time to jump on the zine bandwagon. As a staple of the latter half of the twentieth century, zines have provided a space for contributors to take action against existing power structures and to promote awareness of alternative perspectives. Such publications are handcrafted and distributed to small numbers of readers, often for little or no cost. However, as the rise in digital-communication and self-publication rapidly become the preferred method of transmitting dissent and organizing for mass activism and protest (Hands, 2011; Hill, 2013), there are many underprivileged communities and individuals left behind in the race for digital literacy. In 2009, to address those who were left behind, the Detroit Digital Justice Coalition (DDJC) began distributing zines designed to aid citizens to learn about technology and to teach ways of participating in, creating new, and manipulating existing digital networks.

As stated in each of its four annual issues, the DDJC’s zines “[prioritize] the participation of people who have been traditionally excluded from and attacked by media and technology” (DDJC, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012). This presentation will look at the ways this specific example of DIY activism subverts mainstream routes of spreading information digitally in favor of analog information sharing. In line with other research on zines (Duncombe, 2008), this paper argues the DDJC’s zines emphasize personal over public political activism. In zines past, readers had been encouraged to create new systems, organizations, and outlets by which to fight against existing power structures (Piepmeier, 2009; Wrekk, 2006). However, this paper highlights the suggestion that these DDJC publications teach readers how to participate in the systems from which they are being excluded. More importantly, the DDJC’s zines ultimately encourage citizens to use their digital literacy skills to participate in social justice activism within their own communities.

However, before I continue, I want to point out the irony of an academic presentation on zines, particularly zines aimed at an audience with a historically lower probability of attending and persisting through post-secondary education. In addition, zines are designed largely to subvert the process academic articles undergo and are created by those who want freedom publishing process: scrutiny, revision, language choice, and document design. Such freedoms are not welcomed in academic publishing, (a lesson I learned the hard way after spending an inordinate amount of time attempting to format my dissertation correctly because I assumed it was an easy, last-minute task). All this is to say writing about documents intended to skirt around the exact type of publication in which this article will be available doesn’t go unnoticed.

**Detroit Zines: What are they?**

The Detroit zine scene is still incredibly active. Pieces of Detroit, a zine dedicated to the city’s graffiti, launched January 2015. In March 2015, longtime zine activist Julia Eff was profiled in the *Metro* *Times*, Detroit’s alternative circular highlighting local arts, culture, and entertainment. New and back issues are also available at small book stores, in some alternative workspaces, as well as makeshift libraries, usually someone’s personal zine collection on display for purchase or barter. And Detroit isn’t alone—many cities, both very large and very small, have active zine scenes. However, because of their unofficial-ness, tracking and counting the actual number of zinesters out there is a seemingly impossible task (Duncombe, 2008). The narrow focus of this paper – namely the four zines produced by the DDJC from 2009-2012 – are not dismissing the importance of the many zines across the city and nation worthy of similar critical inquiry.

The DDJC produced these four zines with the intention of teaching individuals about networks, both how to create and how to manipulate them. In the final issue, the DDJC thoroughly explains how to host a DiscoTech, or a Discovering Technology workshop. This presentation will explore the implications of the DDJC zines, how they function differently from other zines, and the cultural impact such projects have on citizens’ digital literacy.

I also want to point out that a fifth zine was released….Saturday. DDJC hosted another DiscoTech workshop aimed specifically at using and understanding “open data.” In the zine, co-panelist Alex Hill’s project is actually discussed (and he actually wrote a section of the zine). 2015 reboot of DDJC: As part of the reboot they restructured our work within four major areas: technical support for organizing, digital justice policy, discotechs, and mesh networks. [Description from website]: The focus of the September 19 DiscoTech was “Opening Data,” during which “Workshops at the Data DiscoTech will include “How to FOIA,” “Mapping with Data,” and “Policy for Data Justice Provisions.” Other workshops will be presented in partnership with grassroots organizers working around issues of housing, food, land, education, and community benefits ordinances.

**The “Opening Data” Zine**

In conjunction with the Data Discotech we are excited to release the “Opening Data” zine, which offers a primer on open data, real-world examples of data discrimination, use cases of data in organizing, creative data storytelling, and more. The zine will be available to attendees of the Data Discotech and for download or sale online. Check out previous DDJC zines [here](https://www.alliedmedia.org/ddjc/products).”

Returning to the DDJC and DiscotechThere are four major goals of the Data DiscoTech workshops, which are all represented in the zines. These four goals are:

1. **Demystify data.** What is it? What does it look like and how do we read it? What is my online identity?
2. **Understand the risks of open data.** What personal data is made public through open data and does it compromise individual’s privacy and security? What are the risks of open data for marginalized communities? Does open data create risks of criminalization?
3. **Understand how to use data in community organizing efforts.** How can we use open data to solve problems in the community, make a case for community owned land trusts, develop community wi-fi networks? Can we use open data to support the campaign to stop water shutoffs? What information on blight is available and how can communities use it to reclaim abandoned structures and land?
4. **Use data in creative ways.** What are unique ways we can tell compelling stories with data from our communities?

To illustrate the sessions more clearly, here’s a short video posted on the DDJC website showing one of the workshops in action. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=130&v=rvoivPsQb_A>)

As we can see in the video, the participants are learning skills with the purpose of using them to disseminate information, to gain knowledge of the things that are happening in their neighborhoods, and to subvert the ways technology is actually meant to be used. In *Notes from the Underground*, Stephen Duncombe argues that “[personal zines] are the voice of a democracy: testimony to the unrepresented everyday, the unheard-from everyperson” (29). Although specifically referring to zines that are based on personal experiences, Duncombe’s description can easily be mapped onto just about any type of zine out there. The rhetorical nature of the zine in general is primarily to offer a self-directed, often highly personal, publication in which are perspectives deemed not large enough (or, really, not profitable enough) by mainstream media. Duncombe also argues that zines make the invisible citizen visible by not waiting for anyone’s approval—the zinesters don’t need to wait for anyone’s approval (quite a different experience from traditional publishing). One of the ideas I find so fascinating about zine culture, and specifically about the purpose of the DDJC zines, is the concept of alienation—how to avoid it, how to circumvent it, how to flip it. Duncombe sates, “there is plenty of howling at injustice in zines, too, the strategy of the zine rebel is one of removal: of communicating feelings of alienation by alienating herself from society, but as a way to share personal stories of living on the outside quietly with other disaffected individuals.” What is so interesting about the DDJC zine project is it functions doubly as a text that subverts the main ways of getting information across (digitally) in favor of producing an analog text. But! The content of the analog text is encouraging users to actually go out there and participate in the exact systems the zines are trying to avoid. This participation, both in the zine movement and in digital spaces, creates an ownership of personal voice—this is my space, my creation, my text. With the DDJC’s zines, they’re not entirely personal. Instead, the actually go gathering a small audience to talk about small aspects of digital stuff, and the final issue is entirely devoted to organizing a huge neighborhood workshop. I wonder about the effectiveness of this method. Since these zines were only published once a year, would the time in-between be used to develop skills, create mesh networks, spread the message, and teach others?

To continue, let’s look at a few other ideas from Duncombe: #1: “community suggests bonds through similarities while zine networks showed people bound through difference” and #2: “the presses didn’t just produce papers, they created associations (network, not community, is the preferred term). That first quote—zine networks show people bound through difference—is quite interesting if only because what the DDJC project is attempting is to bring people together in order to disintegrate difference. This disintegrated difference is exactly what the second quote is talking about—a network of engaged and educated citizens using and creating tools in order to regain control of the systems from which they might be excluded.

As I come to the end of this talk, there are a few “loose threads” I want to discuss (or even leave out there for conversation). There’s an interesting “buy in” narrative happening more forcefully in recent months. I want to play this Quicken Loans ad to preface this conversation.

[Play video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ytx-U4XRrOI>]

Similarly, in the FXX series *You’re the Worst*, one of the main characters, upon questioning her decision to move-in with her boyfriend, states, ““Maybe buying in is really the punk rock choice.” The suggestion that “buying in” is the “edgy” thing to do makes me wonder whether the DDJC zines function truly in an activist space or are they disguised as zines to trick people into conforming? I’m now having a hard time reconciling whether the DDJC zines are pushing against the mainstream culture, or if they’re merely drumming up more support for it. At what point do zines cross the lines? Is it the action or end goals that suggest an anti-establishment publication? Or is it the medium itself?

While the point of the DDJC zines might be to encourage citizens to learn about digital technology, the undercurrent seems skeptical—encouraging users to “buy in.” If the history of zines has always been to provide an alternative space for voices that are left out of the larger conversations, then maybe the DDJC zines are actually manipulating the format of zines in order to disguise their true colors—getting more citizens onto the grid, participating in the dominant digital culture, and in-turn teaching others how to do the exact same thing. Thanks!