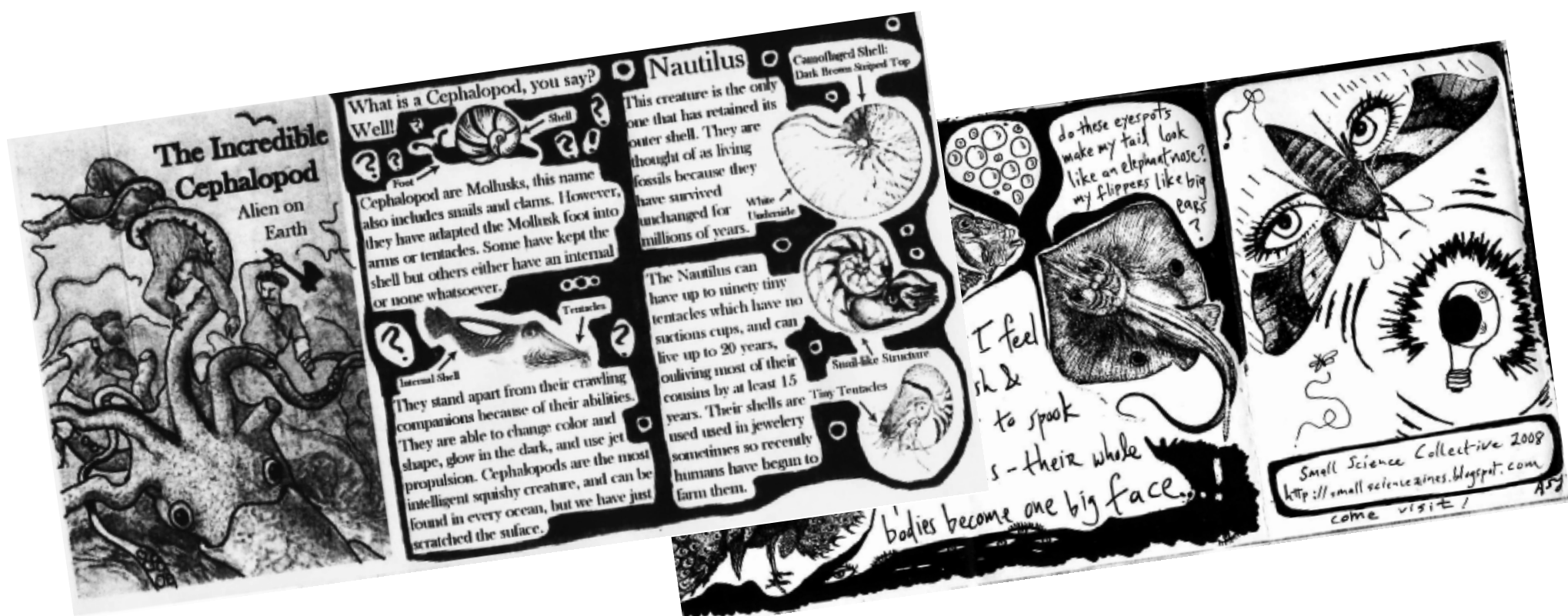


# So you've decided to make science zines



## The Small Science Collective, bringing you science in easily digestible portions

• CHRISTOPHER OLSON

When it comes to science education, our society is falling way behind. Fighting scientific illiteracy while simultaneously channelling the creativity of its contributors, The Small Science Collective, a blog founded by Andrew Yang and J.S. Oishi, is taking back the public consciousness one zine at a time.

So how did it all get started? Yang, a professor at The School of the Arts Institute of Chicago, explains.

**The Link: How long have you been making zines, and were they always based on science?**

Andrew Yang: I made some zines in high school and spent a lot of time as editor of my school's newspaper, which I thought of as a kind of large, collaborative zine among students. I taught English in Japan post-college for a couple of years and would make zines mainly for the students in the schools I taught on English language, culture, interviews, and the like—but not science.

The idea for Small Science Collective was born from all the Chick tracts—religious propaganda brochures—that I came across a lot on chairs and desks at my university. It irked me they were so much better at having their word on every little bus bench in town and wondered why science couldn't have its say similarly, especially in the case of some of these very anti-science pamphlets out there.

**So is the SSC just a hobby, or is it connected to your work?**

In a sense it is a hobby in that it is my own time and money that runs a lot of the project—mainly in the form of photocopying. I'm trained as a biologist, do biology research and the like, but I came to the Art Institute specifically to interact with a different community

of people and share science in what otherwise would be thought of as a “non-science” context. As a biologist I feel SSC is completely part of my job. A lot of people might disagree with me, but I think communicating and activating discussion about science is as much an important form of knowledge-making as doing basic biological research.

**Where do your contributions come from?**

Initially the contributions have primarily come from students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I feel it's important for them to be as much a part of “the conversation” of science as professional scientists or Discovery Channel producers. The public is increasingly being put in the position of being mainly consumers rather than producers of scientific understanding.

Now more and more scientists are also getting involved writing zines for the collective—it is an outlet they don't usually have given [that] their work goes either into a professional journal or into the notebooks of their students in the classroom. But lots of scientists are really passionate about sharing their ideas and curiosity with others, and I think SSC can provide them an outlet they wouldn't otherwise have in this regard.

**Who came up with the conceit of publishing them online and having readers leave them in public places?**

Since leaving them in public places and unexpected and unsanctioned spaces is part of the idea of the project, the Internet seemed like a natural extension of that possibility. The Internet provides this odd form of engaged anonymity and shared knowledge, which is what the SSC project is about in many ways.

Our hope is that the website can act as a resource for people who have the urge and

interest to put the zines out there; the even bigger hope is that people will make their own to distribute, activating the notion of a collective—even perhaps if it is one in which the members don't know each other.

The Internet is seen by many as the end of hand-making, hand-distribution and the physicality of reading, and the like. Beyond the practical aspects of getting the zines out there, to the extent that online formats could potentially [be] used to promote media outside the internet via zines is the part of “the conceit” that perhaps is the most interesting to me.

**Are the zines made simply to inform the general public or to correct public misconception of science and to debunk scientific myths?**

Both. The author of the *Endless Spirals* zine is an astrophysicist who really got tired of all scientifically questionable/new-agey associations that people seem to make about the universality of spirals as some unifying physical process. But he was also interested in also conveying his own love of spirals—to inform while also debunking. It's good to be critical, but if there is nothing contributive about it, then what's the use?

Many of the myths about science that bother me have to do with evolutionary biology—that is why Chick tracts were so motivating to me. Their anti-evolutionism tires me. The zine *Snake Legs and Wisdom Teeth* was done as a homage and parody of a Chick tract. There are also a lot of misconceptions about bacteria and insects as being categorically bad things. I study insects, so I like to challenge those assumptions through the zines collective members create. Many of the zines are more equivocal about things and seek to pose questions rather than just “inform.” Fascinating facts are of course wonderful on

their own, but it is also in the service or promoting greater engagement, curiosity and questioning of just what science, technology and the natural world are all about.

**How much traffic does your web site receive?**

The website has been getting more and more traffic. I think most still comes from Chicago though, as those are where most of the hardcopy zines are likely to be found randomly by people. The recognition in the web is really good assuming it motivates people to share science by distributing zines and creating zines themselves.

**Have you ever encountered one of your own zines in coffee shops, bars, or in waiting rooms?**

The other day I came across one of our zines in an exhibit of a group called the Chicago Underground Library, which was pretty exciting. I have never heard of them and I am not sure where they picked up the zine in the city, but it means they are getting around, which is the whole idea.

These days, I am also finding the zines in virtual places on the internet in a way that is wonderful to see: Italian-language blogs, or hearing about certain zines being downloaded and distributed in New Zealand—that kind of thing is exciting and makes me feel good about the web component of the project. As long as people actually print the zines out and put them in the world.

To print and download a science zine, simply visit [smallsciencecollective.blogspot.com](http://smallsciencecollective.blogspot.com), print out a zine, fold along the edges, and presto: a short and nifty guide to the science of cephalopods, protein structures, DNA-based computing, and the human gut. Step two: place it in a public spot, where others can stumble upon it and expand their minds.