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Has the Independent Musician Been Empowered? Analyzing the Use of Internet Technologies for Music Promotion

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Abstract The widespread use of social networking and the MP3 format have revolutionized the promotion and distribution of music for independent musicians (Delchin 2010). While some argue that new technologies have enabled independent artists to promote and distribute their music online more effectively than ever before, giving them more control over their careers (Baym 2010), others believe this is a myth, pointing to the many ways that record labels still control the industry through their economic power, their control over major channels of distribution, and their power to promote musical acts (Bettig and Hall 2003).

This research project aimed to answer the question : How do independent musicians use social media for promotion, and is it benefitting their ability to increase fan bases? Twenty-two interviews were conducted with independent musicians and music industry members in the Hamilton/Toronto area to discover how Canadian independent musicians were using technology for the purposes of promotion and distribution of their music, and how effective this was in garnering fans and income. The research demonstrated that online technologies had become a necessary promotional tool for independent musicians, affording new and alternative forums for independent musicians to promote and disseminate their music. At the same time, the research showed that social media was not a panacea, and record labels still held their industry advantage.

Keywords Music ; Independent Musicians ; Social Media ; Promotion ; MP3 ; Record Labels.

1. Introduction

The widespread use of social networking and the MP3 format have revolutionized the promotion and distribution of music for independent musicians (Delchin 2010). While some argue that new technologies have enabled independent artists to promote and distribute their music online more effectively than ever before, giving them more control over their careers (Baym 2010), others believe this is a myth, pointing to the many ways that record labels still control the industry through their economic power, their control over major channels of distribution, and their power to promote musical acts (Bettig and Hall 2003).

This research project aimed to answer the question: How do independent musicians use social media for promotion, and is it benefitting their ability to increase fan bases? Twenty-two interviews were conducted with independent musicians and music industry members in the Hamilton/Toronto area to discover how Canadian independent musicians were using technology for the purposes of promotion and distribution of their music, and how effective this was in garnering fans and income.

2. Literature Review

There is a great deal of debate over the effect new technologies have had on the music industry, and exactly who they are benefitting. Some scholars argue that the internet provides extensive new opportunities to musicians who are now able to avoid signing to major labels by doing all of their promotion themselves online (Benkler; Gaffney; Michel). Scholars identify numerous major benefits that the Internet brings to musicians: enhanced discovery of musicians, a greater degree of control over their music and their careers, and increased promotion and distribution. Others believe that myths about the benefits of the internet have circulated, which create disproportionately high expectations of its possibilities for independent artists (Bettig and Hall; McLean, Oliver and Wainwright). These scholars argue that ultimately the music business is still in the hands of the large labels who have substantial control over the industry and its resources.

A report by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (2013) finds that “music has not only adapted to the internet – it is at the very heart of its development” (5). Music has become so intertwined with the online world that it has affected the industry in a noticeable way. A report by Music Canada (2013), argues that “the internet and social media have altered the way music companies do business and how artists create music and connect with fans” (1). The report finds that music discovery has migrated online, with “the most successful music marketing today takes full advantage of social media” (11). Baym (2012) found that musicians are now more accessible to their audiences, but that audiences are also more accessible to musicians (292), with musicians “expected to be present and to engage” (293).

Gaffney (2009) argues that social networking sites and digital distribution have helped to facilitate the discovery of independent music. Challenges have “been greatly alleviated through the internet and digital distribution” (376). As well, social networking provides the ability to connect similar interests, creating links which can “help music discovery greatly” (379). Kruse (2010) argues that new technologies have created online spaces where independent musicians compete to sell records, be noticed online, or have their songs downloaded (635). Similarly Hracs, Grant, et al. (2011) argue that digital technologies have made music production “placeless”, as “distribution through the internet and advertising through social media such as Facebook and MySpace gave musicians the means to promote their work to audiences near and far” (370).

A study by McLean, Oliver and Wainwright (2010) found that social networking, blogs and websites allow independent artists to “have the headspace to think clearly and precisely, to consider their ‘brand image’ and what they wish to communicate without interference, censorship and corporate remodelling” (1367). Although they found that the majority of power still remains with major labels (1375), “an examination of communities of musicians does suggest that technology has, to an extent, helped to facilitate the DIY culture and empower communities of independent musicians” (1375).

These new technologies have provided the independent artist with more choice regarding the direction of their careers. Yokai Benkler (2003) argues that the internet is a communications medium which decentralizes distribution (1250), allowing “the emergence of radically new relationships between individuals and their information environment, and more dramatically, radically new roles that individuals play in the production process” (Benkler 1254). Further, Moreau (2009) argues that “the position of the majors is weakening in relation to that of the independents, in several ways. Entry barriers to distribution, particularly international distribution, have disappeared” (Moreau 14). Additionally, Michel (2004) argues that as artists now have the ability to generate fan-bases and sell music, new technology increases their power and allows them to rely less on record labels (32).

In contrast, Bettig and Hall (2003) argue that four myths about the MP3 technology and its new possibilities emerged that proved to be untrue: “that it would liberate established recording artists, that it would usher in a renaissance for independent musicians, that its primary beneficiaries would be music consumers, and that it posed a serious threat to the music oligopoly” (65). They argue that the idea that the “MP3 would bring about a renaissance for garage bands and independent musicians by enabling them to distribute their own music and establish their own fan bases” (66) is a myth; the mp3 format has only increased the amount of music available, causing most artists to get lost in the large libraries of available music. Bettig and Hall call the idea “that online music distribution posed a serious threat to the major record labels” “the biggest myth of all” (67). They argue that “he who pays the piper still calls the tune” (67), therefore record labels who held the economic power of the industry still were, and would remain, in power of it.

According to Brown (2012), recent attention has been paid to circumventing the major label hegemony, using new media to market directly to an audience (522), but through this control of their music, independent musicians lose the benefit of the large infrastructures and networks of record labels (530). Supporting this, a report by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (2012) explains that record companies are the largest upfront financial investors in artist's careers, with a huge range of expertise and experience (7), and "it is still extremely rare to see an artist build a career without the support of a label" (23). Similarly, McLean, Oliver and Wainwright (2010) believe that technology may seem to provide greater opportunities to musicians, but in actuality "economic power, surveillance, censorship and control continue to impact on independent, or DIY, musicians to restrict and ultimately prevent the ideal speech situation that is necessary to empower musicians and promote greater independence and control over art and career" (1366). Therefore, major labels still hold the ultimate power, because "music continues to be commodified and fans continue to be constructed as 'consumers'" (1375). They do suggest that technology has allowed musicians to connect, collaborate and become more entrepreneurial, and that with a better understanding of how the industry works the potential exists for them to challenge the power of major labels.

3. Method

In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-two musicians and music business personnel in the Hamilton and Greater Toronto, Ontario regions to gauge the perspective of musicians involved in online promotion and social networking and to answer the research questions:

RQ1: Which online technologies are musicians using?

RQ2: Which online technologies do musicians find most effective in generating fans and income?

RQ3: How do the musicians surveyed use social media?

RQ4: Have new online technologies benefitted artists in finding fans and kick starting their careers?

For the purpose of this project, an independent musician was defined as an artist who does not currently hold a record deal with any major record label. In total, 16 interviewees considered themselves independent musicians, 3 were industry members and 3 considered themselves to fall under both categories. Industry members included record label owners, promoters, music reviewers/writers, and music publicists. Participants' level of technology use and music experience varied; participants were recruited through snowball sampling based on two factors: their self-identification as an independent musician (or related experience in the music business), and their use of online technologies, at any degree. A content analysis of each interviewee's online presence was done alongside the interviews to gain specific data

on the number of technologies used, number of followers, and regularity of online posting by each interviewee.

4. Findings

The research pointed to many trends in the way independent musicians were using online technologies to promote their music. In response to RQ1, “Which online technologies are musicians using?” the interviews indicated that musicians were using multiple online technologies simultaneously and found it necessary to have a presence on numerous social networking websites. Although most musicians had multiple accounts on many different online platforms and social networking websites, many of them indicated that there was a great discrepancy in which ones were regularly used, and for what purpose. One musician stated, “I’ve got my music online on so many sites I can’t even remember all of them”. By far, interviewees indicated that Facebook (100%) and Twitter (95%) were their most highly used social networking platforms, followed by YouTube (80%). They often held accounts on dozens of other social networking websites, which were either ignored, or used primarily for hosting media (such as MP3s), but not used regularly for networking and promotion. Some social media platforms, like MySpace, had gone out of fashion.

None of the interviewees indicated that they had officially shut down or taken their MySpace profiles offline, but instead left them vacant as they moved on to using the next platform. Personal or band websites had also fallen somewhat out of fashion among the musicians interviewed. Websites were not frequently updated and were only in existence to provide a hub with links to social networking websites, where information was regularly updated. One interviewee described his band’s website as “a means to an end... we have to have one, but it’s almost a portal for media and press just to have access to our photos and bio, whereas the other stuff is direct connection to our fanbase, which is why I spend the majority of my time on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.”

This study set out to answer the question “Which online technologies do musicians find most effective in generating fans and income?” (RQ2). With 100% of interviewees having a Facebook account, this social networking platform was definitely the most popular. For many, Facebook was their most highly updated and frequented social networking website. This social media platform was seen as the most effective in interacting with fans, and as having the greatest diversity of users, as one interviewee demonstrated “our audience range is so wide that Facebook really helps bridge the gap like we have everybody from fifteen and sixteen year olds to people in their early fifties”.

Facebook and YouTube served as a means to track where fans and listeners originated. Many musicians used Facebook to look at the profiles of new fans to find out where they were coming from and if they had any mutual friends, and used the built-in features on YouTube to determine the geographical data of listeners. During the interview, one

musician demonstrated the functionality of Facebook fan pages, where “insights” allow you to view anonymous demographic and geographic data about those who have liked your page. YouTube was seen by many musicians as a place where music is often discovered. Even if a musician or band did not have music videos or live performance videos, they often posted videos consisting of audio along with a still image to ensure a presence on YouTube even if they did not have other types of videos available.

Overall, social media was seen as beneficial, as one interviewee stated “the internet allows you to get in contact, keep in touch with, the people who support your music and talk to your fans”, and another said “it makes things faster”. Musicians found that once they created a plan to how their accounts would be managed, they could use them more effectively, especially when building a primary fan base and with larger bands who wanted to maintain a consistent voice online. Interviewees stated “after I created a plan I started getting more followers. I noticed I got a lot more and they just kept coming”, and in regards to the importance of having a social media policy “it’s your public face that’s what’s going to get you in the most trouble and get you the most attention, so it’s far more important than people give it credit for”. Strategies for generating fan interaction commonly found in social media plans included: maintaining a consistent personality, contests/asking questions, posting visuals (images, videos), and regular scheduling of posts.

In total, 100% of artists interviewed had music available for free online, with most having either physical or digital copies also available for sale in other locations. Musicians gave their music away for free to build fan bases and encourage attendance at live shows. Digital copies of music were found overall to be easier and cheaper to produce and distribute, however, the interviewees did not make significant income from music sales. When physical copies were available, they were created for two reasons: for sale at concerts and performances, where fans were directly interested in the band/musician, or as a collector/limited edition item, and both were usually sold at cost.

This study asked “How do the musicians surveyed use social media? (RQ3). Musicians indicated that they most often post when there is something happening, such as a new release, an upcoming performance, a recording session or a video shoot. Most interviewees preferred to keep their posts related to their music careers, emphasizing important events or counting down to new releases or concerts. When there wasn’t a direct event to promote, musicians often used social media to interact with fans, asking them questions and giving them a backstage view of their lives. However, musicians were very conscious of causing “overload” or “spam”, by either posting too frequently, or posting things that were irrelevant to their followers.

The musicians interviewed touched on many negative aspects of using social media to promote their music. This included: the permanent nature of posts, becoming lost in the overwhelming amount of content

that exists online, and musicians not having the thought to post regularly and keep their social networking updated.

Many interviewees spoke about how social media has changed how fans interact with musicians. Previously, newspapers and magazines had been the gatekeepers of the information a fan could receive about their favourite musician or band. According to one musician, the way that fans interact with musicians has changed: “now you follow them on twitter; you don’t even read many of the interviews that a band does in the press anymore because you find out way more through the direct access to the band instead of reading an interview or somebody’s articles about them where you’re getting the filter from the writer, you just get it directly from whoever the musician is”.

The musicians interviewed expressed a common trend: they believed that their online fan bases originated from their local fan bases, who discovered them within their local music scene, most commonly at a live show or festival, and then went to find their online accounts. There was not a belief that the musicians interviewed gained many new fans who discovered them solely online, instead, social media was used to supplement and increase their interaction with their already existing fan bases. This was exemplified by a noticeable growth in social media followers experienced by musicians when they play shows, as one interviewee explained, “if you were to graph it, likes would go up at the days following a show and then they would be back down to nothing and then up again, so like when we play shows we get new followers and if we do nothing, we’re not getting our name out and we don’t get new followers”.

In addition to interacting with fans through social media, musicians were interacting with each other. They used social media to promote other bands and remain relevant and visible in their local music communities. This included creating “teams” of artists, defined by one interviewee as “a group that is pushing your music, helping you, giving you ideas”. Although these teams are fundamentally local and in-person, usually a group of locally-based artists who assist each other in succeeding and share industry contacts and expertise, social media was used to help promote the members and create a team mentality. One interviewees team was composed of friends who “specialize in things like lyrics editing, another person is strong in writing lyrics, I’m strong in producing, somebody else is strong in something else, so we’ll bring all these skills together and help each other, do what we can do”. This relationship was further facilitated and translated online, creating joint-marketing and a stronger overall presence for each individual artist.

5. Conclusion

In response to the last research question, “Have new online technologies benefitted artists in finding fans and kick starting their careers?” (RQ4), musicians believed that most prominently the local music community was pertinent to their success and was the root and majority of their fan bases. They felt that live performance was the most

valuable aspect of their music careers, both to grow their fan bases and as a source of income. However, this research supports the argument that social media has become an important and beneficial networked institution for independent musicians.

Musicians were using a variety of online technologies and social media websites, the most popular being Facebook, Twitter and YouTube for promotion. The institution of music promotion was found to have been changed incredibly, with the internet being used as a do-it-yourself method of promotion for unsigned artists. The internet and social networking was seen as a faster, more effective way of communicating with a large number of fans, involving less physical labour, lower cost and shorter waiting time than traditional promotional methods.

Online technologies and social media have positively affected the promotional abilities of independent musicians, allowing them to disseminate information quickly and easily, and increased accessibility and convenience, but was not found to greatly impact their ability to acquire new fans. Although interviewees acknowledged that online promotion was now considered a necessary and integrated part of the music industry, it was not a panacea, nor did it completely close the gap between the promotional abilities of record labels and independent artists. Additionally, the majority of musicians did not find signing to a record label a necessary goal or equate label representation with success, but they did credit record labels as important for the multiple reasons: funding availability, distribution channels, expertise and industry connections, especially when a music career was considerably established.

There are several limitations to this study. One is its generalizability. The sample, consisting of musicians from Hamilton and Toronto, was large enough to determine trends and similarities between respondents, but is not necessarily representative of independent musicians generally. Second, because of the snowball technique used, the study was more likely to identify participants who had connections to the musicians initially contacted. Finally, the study looked at the opinions of independent musicians about what social media works best for them, but does not necessarily provide concrete data on what does actually work best. The purpose of the research was to gain data from the point of view of the musician and what they find most effective in their own music promotion and distribution. There are many factors which could affect this, such as their specific location, music genre, and musical experience. However, overall, the research does provide information which can contribute to other studies in the field of music studies and technology, benefit independent musicians, and assist those interested in social media, promotion and the dynamics of the music industry.

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