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### **Music journalists, music press officers and the consumer music press in the UK / Eamonn Forde.**

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**Music Journalists, Music Press Officers & the Consumer**  
**Music Press in the UK**

Eamonn Forde

Ph.D. Thesis, October 2001

University of Westminster

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## Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma at any other higher education institution. The research contained in this thesis was gathered by the author as part of Ph.D. research at the University of Westminster, conducted between 1998 and 2001. All sources, to the best of my knowledge, have been fully credited.

Signed:

*Carmen Torde*

Date:

*19<sup>th</sup> October 2001*



## **Abstract**

This thesis presents a professional/organisational analysis of popular music journalism in the UK. It considers the conditions under which consumer music magazines are produced (at the level of both the newsroom and the publishing organisation) and how music journalists deal with their main point of informational contact, the press officer. Drawing on original interview and participant observation research, the thesis considers: the economic and bureaucratic forces within magazine publishing organisations; how titles are positioned both individually and collectively as part of portfolio of niched titles; how market forces condition how and why titles are launched, redesigned and folded; and, ultimately, how all these factors impact upon and shape the socio-professional and cultural conditions under which editors and their staff work. The thesis then considers the music press officer (both in-house and independent and their office/departmental hierarchies) in terms of how they exist and operate at the meeting point of three distinct groups: the artists they are employed to represent; the artists' record companies; and the press (and their attempts to reconcile these often divergent needs).

Having considered the music press and music journalists in isolation (in terms of power structures as well as their collective and individual goals) and press officers in isolation (in terms of their position within wider music industry promotional strategies and how they build, develop and revise a roster of artists) the thesis then moves on to analyse how these two distinct professional groups (journalists/editors and press officers) work together, how they professionally and organisationally define their goals and objectives and the steps they take to meet these goals and objectives, negotiating quantitatively and qualitatively the coverage of artists. A complex relationship of conditional power and mutual dependency links these two sets of professionals in both their formal activities and their socio-cultural activities. Breaking from previous studies that have described a uni-directional flow of power and influence of press officers over the press, the thesis argues that the relationships that tie these groups together (in terms of gatekeeping within the hierarchy of the newsroom and a tilting balance of power) are much more complex than has previously been assumed.

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*Melody Maker (1926-2000)– R.I.P.*

# **Introduction**



This thesis presents a professional and organisational analysis of consumer music journalism in the UK, considering the conditions under which music magazines are produced (at the level of both the newsroom and the publishing organisation) and how music journalists deal with their main point of informational contact, the press officer. It works through the key distinct sociological approaches that have arisen from organisational studies, work on the political economy of the print media and on the analysis of news production, news management and source relationships.

**Chapter 1** presents a methodological overview of the research conducted for the thesis and how the scope of the work was determined. First hand research was essential for this study and therefore interviews with music journalism and music PRs were conducted, participant observation in three newsrooms and one PR department was carried out and this was supplemented with additional desk research.

**Chapter 2** provides a literature review of the existing academic work that has touched on the music press, music journalism and music PRs. While there are a number of studies which have raised issues relating to both music journalism and the music press, there has not been a single, detailed study of how music journalism operates at either a professional or an organisational level. The literature review considers the existing key conceptual approaches to music journalism and identifies their theoretical and methodological strengths and weaknesses, thereby marking out how this thesis contributes to a better and richer understanding of this much under-theorised field of study.

The majority of the existing literature on this topic can be placed broadly within popular music studies. However, a number of studies of arts critics offer up interesting conceptual entry points and have a direct bearing on how music journalism (as a distinct branch of arts criticism) can be considered. Music journalism, like all popular and high art criticism, represents a distinct strand of professional journalistic activity and occupational practice that the dominant sociological studies of news production (because of their focus on hard news production) have not fully accounted for. The thesis therefore adopts the position that these studies must therefore be reconsidered, revised and

reformulated within new conceptual frameworks. This is essential in order to evaluate the distinct and idiosyncratic conditions under which music journalism and music magazines are produced as well as how journalists establish, maintain and revise their socio-professional links with press officers as a key point of contact.

**Chapter 3** considers how music magazines work as businesses both individually and within a corporate portfolio of titles. The dominant market trend in the UK music press has been towards increased concentration of ownership and the management, investment and funding strategies of the major publishers are located as central to an understanding of the corporate and bureaucratic conditions under which magazines are launched, closed and redesigned. The chapter therefore works through a detailed analysis of the market performances of each of the major titles and a consideration of how sales trends affect how magazines are produced and managed as financial entities by publishers. The organisational structures of music magazine publishing organisations are such that a very complex set of power relations between middle management and editorial staff exists here. Corporate publishing strategy impacts here in a number of ways on both the editorial content and the market pitch of individual titles in the light of an over-saturated and fragmented publishing market. Editors are increasingly under pressure to broaden their activities into lifestyle journalism in order to increase readership and attract new advertising opportunities. Here a corporate drive towards branding and brand-extensions as an ancillary revenue source has had important ramifications for both music titles as economic entities and music journalism as socio-professional practice. However, while drawing on a general political economy framework, this chapter does not propose that a top-down uni-direction flow of control and influence exists here. It suggests instead that a complex dynamic of resistance and negotiation defines the middle management/editorial nexus leading into Chapter 4 which works through a detailed analysis of the individual power structures and professional discourses within individual titles and how this relates to macro corporate publishing strategies.

**Chapter 4** moves away from the macro analysis of magazine production to consider how newsrooms are structured as socio-professional spheres, how labour is distributed, how



occupational, cultural goals and economic goals are identified and how they are pursued. It places the dynamics of the newsroom as absolutely central to the understanding of both how and why music magazines work. Each individual role within the newsroom hierarchy is analysed in turn in terms of how they operate both independently and co-dependently and how power structures are put in place and negotiated within the production cycle of a number of distinct titles. The chapter considers how editors reconcile the needs of publishers with their own editorial needs and professional needs of their staff and freelancers. Within this is a analysis of how power is distributed and negotiated across all the distinct roles and how the newsroom hierarchy determines production, the criteria of aesthetic inclusion and exclusion in terms of which artists are written about and the pursuit of both individual and collective goals.

The changing employment conditions within the UK music press are seen as having a number of important impacts on office politics. There has, since the mid-1990s, been a slow but concerted dynamic of the professional exclusion and de-democratisation of the freelancer. This tilting of the newsroom power balance away from writers and towards staffers/‘processors’ has impacted directly on the socio-professional climate of the newsroom, determining how writers progress upwards through the office hierarchy. The institutionalised turnover of staff, recruitment policies and the revision of editorial direction are all considered within market forces and the cultural and aesthetic homology that ties a title to its readers. Staff and writers, drawing on Bourdieu (1993: 96), are seen as the ‘ideal/typical’ reader of their title and within this represent important cultural proximity to their target readership. There needs to be fluidity in staff and freelance appointments here to revise this title/reader homology and the overall editorial direction is shaped in a number of overt and covert ways as a result. Within the dynamics of the newsroom as a professional and cultural sphere the division between the formal and the informal and well as between the professional and the personal become blurred. This chapter therefore places all these discourses as absolutely central to an understanding of the dynamics of music journalism as socio-professional practice and how they impact on the circulation of ideas and the manner in which the title/homology is refined and revised.

**Chapter 5** follows this consideration of how roles and goals in the music magazine newsrooms are defined and pursued with a discussion of the music press's key institutional point of contact, the press officer, and how PRs operate as professionals within distinct organisational, hierarchical, cultural and economic frameworks. Just as the previous chapter considered the music journalist outside of the dominant sociological frameworks of hard news production, so this chapter considers the music press officer as a distinct type of PR and revises the existing theoretical descriptions of the PR profession accordingly. It begins by arguing that music PRs must be considered within new conceptual frameworks because their activities are primarily *promotional* unlike, for example, government department PRs whose activities are primarily *informational*. It is this argument that provides the conceptual direction of the remainder of the chapter that considers the three main types of music PRs: the in-house at major labels, the in-house at independent labels and the independent/out-of-house PR. Particular hierarchical, cultural and professional discourses shape the activities of each of these PR types and how they evaluate their activities and accumulation of cultural capital as well as the links they establish and maintain with the press in general and editorial 'gates' within titles in particular.

Music PRs are constrained by both wider record company promotional and marketing strategies and by music titles as distinct organisational structures. As a result, PRs in their activities must reconcile a number of important and distinct cultural and economic obligations. They have economic and cultural obligations to the artists they represent (in terms of the exegetical frameworks within which they are positioned and how they are revised) and obligations to the changing composition and cultural capital of their roster of artists (and how it must be revised just as a title's homology with its readers is revised). They also have important obligations to the record companies their acts are signed to and to individual music titles' needs for access and exclusives. PRs as cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1986: 239-240; Bourdieu, 1993: 94-96; Negus, 1996: 62) straddle the formal and the informal in the socio-professional links they establish, maintain and revise with the music press and this chapter considers all of these dynamics and how professional and cultural discourses are shaped and conditioned here. While their activities are necessarily pre-planned because of their promotional obligations, it



does not follow that campaign structures are assured. They can and will run into a number of complications and obstacles that impact on both their short-term and long-term activities and these are considered in detail here.

**Chapter 6** follows the analysis of the music press market, music journalists and press officers as separate areas of critical enquiry by considering how the different roles at stake here operate in the pursuit of both shared and antagonistic goals. The nexus of power relations and formal/informal socio-professional exchanges involving journalists and PRs that condition activity here are particularly complex. This exchange represents the point where two distinct sets of organisational expectations meet and how their relationships of dependency and conflict impact directly on the manner in which artists are picked up on and written about by the music press. This chapter provides a synthesis of the central ideas that have been raised and worked through in the preceding chapters. As such, it revises the dominant arguments that have tended to position the PR as having almost total power in their exchanges with the press (who have been seen as merely the compliant promotional wing of record companies). The chapter suggests that instead of a uni-directional flow of industry control over the press, the music press and the music industry are locked into a mutual dependency that is characterised by compliance, compromise and resistance on *both* sides of the exchange. The power balance here can tilt in either direction and either side can be, at particular points, dominant. PRs must negotiate their artists through a very complex series of hierarchically structured gates within the music press and within this a myriad of complications and barriers can be encountered. Simply because an act is written about it does not follow that they are therefore located within the exegetical framework the PR intended. The chapter concludes by arguing that the press/PR nexus is more complicated and fraught with uncertainties that has previously been assumed.

**Chapter 7** presents the conclusions of the thesis, highlighting how the study contributes to a greater understanding of the popular music press, music journalism and music PR in the UK.

# **Chapter 1 - Methodology**

For the primary research that forms the basis of this thesis, a dual-methodological approach was adopted to complement the overarching theoretical framework – namely focused interviews and participant observation (the overt participant-as-observer sub-discipline) studies. This research was supplemented with desk research (using trade titles and newspaper articles) to provide secondary sources and information on music titles, the music magazine market and PRs. The dual-methodological approach draws on the broad body of work within the sociological analysis of news production, with the work of Tunstall (1971) and Schlesinger (1978) in particular providing a methodological blueprint. Theoretically the thesis is located within the sociological study of media production, media organisations, media professionalism and source relations and interviewing and participant observation have long been used as the key methodological tools in the study of such dynamics and discourses (Forcese & Richer, 1973; Dixon, Bouman & Atkinson, 1987; Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1992; Wimmer & Dominick, 1997; Arksey & Knight, 1999). First-hand research (with a focus on producers and the context of production) was essential for an understanding of music journalism and music PR because of the methodological limitations of the existing literature on the topic. In conceptualising and defining the topic as a subject for doctoral study, these methodological approaches were therefore placed as central to the overall project.

In terms of defining the scope of the field of study, because no detailed academic research had been conducted here, it was decided to confine the research to a particular strand of the ‘music press’, namely the mainstream UK consumer press across a variety of genres (rock, indie, pop, dance and leftfield). For reasons of research pragmatism, it was not possible to consider the dynamics of consumption at the level of the reader or a content and discourse analysis of the printed word. There is clearly a need to conduct audience and reception analysis to understand how readers negotiate their way through the discourses presented in the music press, but a study of this nature is complex and beyond the scope of this thesis. A number of important studies exist on the cultural and economic influence that arts critics have on the audience (Lang, 1970; Farber, 1976; Burzynski & Bayer, 1977; English & Martin, 1977; Steinberg, 1979; Austin, 1983; Wyatt & Badger, 1984, 1987; Schrum, 1991). While they do not consider the music press specifically, they do offer important entry points for a study of this nature.



In determining which titles to base the analysis on, I did not consider the music trade press (e.g. *Music Week* or *Billboard*), music fanzines or tabloid newspaper pop columns. The reasons for their exclusion from the scope of the study were as follows. The trade titles were inappropriate because the key focus of the study was on the consumer press and how artists are mediated (via the print media) to a record buying public and the organisational and socio-professional conditions under which this occurs. The music trade press is geared around record company dynamics and is industry-centric rather than consumer-centric or review-centric. In terms of music fanzines the publishing conditions and professional and cultural discourses within which they are inscribed (i.e. how their producers view them, how artists view them, how readers view them and the levels of cultural/subcultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986: 43-45; Bourdieu, 1993: 43-45; Thornton, 1995: 11-14) they are seen as accumulating) are markedly different from those within which the mainstream consumer titles are inscribed. As such, I believe that the economic production of fanzines, the ideas they circulate and how they view themselves outside of or in opposition to the mainstream titles is worthy of separate analysis and was something that, unfortunately, this thesis could not cover except to note that they provide a talent pool of journalists for the music press. Finally, in terms of tabloid music coverage, their agenda here is necessarily inscribed within the cultural discourses of the quidnunc. This agenda of gossip is not determined by the dual-drive towards both promoting and interpreting artists that defines the mainstream consumer music press and music coverage in the broadsheets. Of course, gossip is circulated within the consumer titles but this cannot be seen as their dominant function. In terms of new media outlets, music websites at the time the research was conducted were a relatively recent development and were seen erroneously by many print journalists and PRs as something of a 'novelty' and an irrelevance. As the research project neared completion the number of music websites had proliferated and they clearly will have important ramifications for both the print media and music PR professional activities. There is, in Chapters 4 and 6 of the research, consideration of website music journalism (indeed, participant observation was conducted at a music website) but the recent and rapid developments here demand much greater academic attention than this thesis could provide.

In terms of interviewing music journalist professionals and music PRs, it was important to cover all the key roles in order to gain a detailed understanding of the organisational, professional and cultural discourses within which music journalism is produced. In order to achieve this in relation to the press I interviewed editors in chief, editors, editor/publishers, assistant editors, features editors, reviews editors (albums and live), news editors, production/sub-editors, art editors, staff writers, freelance writers and photographers. In terms of PRs I interviewed in-house PRs at major labels, in-house PRs at independent labels and out-of-house/independent PRs. In total, between September 1998 and February 2000, I interviewed fifty-five individuals across all these roles. Quotes from these interviews are indicated in the main body of the text with the names of the interviewees given either before the quote or in brackets after the quote. I also used quotes from journalists, publishers and PRs in trade journal and newspaper articles gathered from my desk research. When using these quotes, they are fully referenced and attributed. Forty-nine of the interviews were conducted face-to-face with the individuals and six were conducted as phone interviews (which are seen by Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias (1992: 231) as a “semipersonal method of collecting information” which might not be possible any other way (Dane, 1990)). In addition to this I had lengthy informal conversations and e-mail correspondence with a further six journalist and PR professionals. The full list of names and their roles are contained in the appendix.

I began by writing letters to a number of editors in chief, editors, senior editorial staff and PRs from a broad range of titles and companies outlining the nature of my research and requesting an interview of between 45-60 minutes. Arksey & Knight (1999) have argued that this is the most suitable approach as the letter explains what the research project is, who it is being conducted for, why the respondent has been selected, the type of information the interview is intended to reveal and to reassure the respondent that confidentiality is paramount. I followed these letters up with a telephone conversation a few days later to further explain the nature of the project and to arrange an interview time and place. In only six cases was the request for an interview declined either by outright refusal or by not taking or returning my calls. In one case, Bob Kilbourn the editor of *Blues & Soul*, I had arranged and then re-scheduled (at his request) an interview several times and after repeated rescheduling and cancellations I accepted the futility of the



situation and did not pursue it any further. These initial interviews resulted in me meeting several other individuals in magazine offices and PR departments and arranging interviews with them without having to send letters. One journalist contact (David Sinclair) was made via my supervisor and three PR contacts (Kate Stuart, Justin Spear and Julian Carrera) were made after they gave a talk to students on a music course I tutored on at the University of Westminster. All participant observation (which will be discussed further below) was arranged after having interviewed three editors (Allan Jones at *Uncut*, John Harris at *Select* and Brendon Fitzgerald at *music365.com*) and one head of a PR company (Anton Brookes at Bad Moon). I judged their approachability in regard to this and proposed observation to them and they all agreed. However, in two cases (David Davis and Steve Sutherland) this request was refused.

In terms of methodological structure and approach, the interview technique I adopted has been variously termed as ‘intensive interviews’ (Dane, 1990; Wimmer & Dominick, 1997), ‘focused interviews’ (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1992) or ‘guided interviews’ (Bell, 1992). This approach is informal and “the shape is determined by individual respondents” (Bell, 1992: 71) and is “customized to individual respondents .... [because they] ... allow interviewers to form questions based on each respondent’s answers” (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997: 100). As Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias (1992: 225) say of this approach, “respondents are given considerable liberty in expressing their definition of a situation that is presented to them ... The focused interview permits the researcher to obtain details of personal reactions, specific emotions and the like”. This type of interview is necessarily semi-structured and I used an ‘interview guide’ (which is informal and flexible) rather than an ‘interview schedule’ (which is formal and rigid) (Forcese & Richer, 1973). This interview guide was used as a thematic prompt in interviews, containing a list of relevant topics. It passed through a number of drafts and I used my first two interviews (Peter Murphy at *Hot Press* and Judith Farrell at *BBM*) as a pilot but it did not require any further revision. I had worked as a researcher at the University of Leicester’s Centre for Mass Communication Research on a number of media projects before beginning this Ph.D. and therefore had experience of drafting interview guides and conducting interviews with media professionals. All the interviews were tape-recorded (after gaining approval from the interviewees) and

transcribed the following day. This was a lengthy procedure as one hour of interview material took around eight hours to fully transcribe. I had problems with my tape recorder in three interviews and lost around ten minutes of these interviews where it did not record. However, because they were transcribed the following day I was able to refer to the schedule and recall what the respondents' answers had been.

The benefits of this type of interviewing are that they are flexible and the interviewer can change the thematic structure and request either clarification or further information from the respondents (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1992). This was important in many of the interviews I conducted as they hinged to a greater or lesser extent on the personal dynamic I established with the interviewees. The interviews became, at points, conversational and this, I believe, put the respondents at greater ease and they were able to also suggest topics or issues that I had not previously considered or had been unaware of. However, in three cases (John Mulvey at the *NME*, Jody Thompson at the *NME* and Mark Sutherland at *MM*) I encountered hostility and paranoia (bordering on rudeness) from respondents and these made the interviews very difficult as all trust had been lost. In all three cases I terminated the interviews early (after roughly twenty minutes) as I felt the respondents were on edge and defensive meaning that the interviews, while illuminating important aspects of their personalities and my own social and interviewing techniques, were beneficial to neither side in the exchange.

The fact that the majority of these interviews were conducted face-to-face meant that they allowed for "lengthy observation of respondents' nonverbal responses" (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997: 100). The majority of the face-to-face interviews were conducted (at the interviewees' request) in bars and cafes as they were free from interruption and away from work colleagues where they could be more candid. A number of interviewees gave me strands of information that were 'off the record' (in one case the interviewee requested that I turn off my tape recorder while they went into a lengthy criticism of their editor). In such cases I was informed that I could use this information but to ensure that I credited them anonymously. In the transcriptions I indicated which quotes were non-attributable and treated them as such when I used them in the thesis. Within this, however, it is important to be aware that respondents can use interviews to make defamatory comments as they have an alternative and personal agenda (Arksey &



Knight, 1999). A number of respondents asked me if I wanted to work in the music press (assuming that I was using the interviews to make contacts and network). When I informed them that I had no interest in pursuing a career in music journalism they all responded in exactly the same manner by instantly becoming more relaxed and forthcoming in their answers. This all raises a number of interesting points in terms of social dynamics and interviews as social exchange as well as the importance of establishing 'trust' (Mies, 1993).

While the flexibility of this interview approach has been seen as a strength it has also been seen as a weakness (Dane, 1990) because the lack of standardisation makes the qualitative analysis of the data more complicated and harder to detect general trends across all respondents (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997). However, I found that between interviews there was a great deal of repetition of certain points and ideas, which made it easier to identify general trends and themes. The informality and flexibility of these types of interviews means that they are open to interviewer bias both in terms of the verbal and the nonverbal (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1992). This was a problem in several interviews where respondents began by asking me questions and how I felt about particular issues either they or I had raised. I believed that it was important to give replies to their questions, as diplomatic avoidance of the issues would make them hesitant and suspicious of my motives. Wimmer & Dominick (1997) argue that the interviewer must be detached at all times and should not reveal their personal views. However, there are occasions where this is not always possible and refusal to answer a respondent's questions or inquiries may actually jeopardise the social dynamic of the rest of the interview and the extent of their openness in replies. This may, of course, have skewed the replies I received but I felt for the overall social dynamic of the interview that the benefits outweighed the drawbacks. In transcriptions I included all my own responses and how I worded the questions and took this into account when analysing the material. As Bell (1992) points out, a high degree of subjectivity creeps into the interpretation stage of data analysis. The researcher must be reflexive here and accept that there is bias not only in the types of questions that are asked, but also in how they are asked and how the replies are interpreted. It was important in analysing and using the data to stand back from the material and display a critical and reflexive awareness that my presence, my



questions, my questioning technique and my personal responses would and could have a determining influence on the types of answers given by the respondents.

The decision to adopt observational studies as a methodological tool was made in order to supplement and expand on the interview data. Interviews are limited in that they are subjective and the respondent may not raise issues, because they consider them to be unimportant, that the researcher might regard as being of great importance. As Bell (1992: 89) argues, “[d]irect observation may be more reliable than what people say in many instances” and its strongest advantage in media research, according to Wimmer & Dominick (1997: 91), is that it analyses the sphere of media production as it happens and it “takes place in the natural setting of the activity being observed”. Dane (1990) marks out three types of observational study: (i) complete observation; (ii) observer-as-participant; and (iii) complete participation. The first two types are defined in terms of how involved the researcher/observer becomes in the activities, while complete participation/complete observation (Layder, 1993) is done covertly and the objects of study are unaware that they are being observed. The approach I adopted lay in the mid-point between ‘complete observation’ and ‘observer-as-participant’ as I did not wish to disrupt the normal routines and cycles of the offices I had entered, and nor did I wish to come across as disquietingly silent and uninvolved. Forcese & Richer (1973) suggest that the researcher be as open as possible about their reasons for being there and should aim for unobtrusive and nonreactive observation by being as inconspicuous as possible and this was the approach I adopted.

In total, I conducted four days of observational study at *Uncut* in February 1999, three days at *Select* in November 1998, one day at *music365.com* and one day at Bad Moon PR. While this was by no means as detailed as I would have hoped for, the research produced a number of interesting insights and examples of events which, when placed alongside interview data and informal conversations with journalists and press officers, helped to produce a solid understanding of the complex production and socio-professional dynamics within which these individuals operate. The observational studies at both *Select* and *Uncut* were conducted during the final stages of their monthly production cycles. Both John Harris at *Select* and Allan Jones at *Uncut* stated that this was the optimum time to observe their newsroom dynamics as the rest of the month

leading up to this point was geared around commissioning reviews and features and the newsroom was relatively calm. They both felt that I would get a better understanding of how their offices worked in the days leading up to deadline. I did not become involved in any aspect of the editorial production cycle, I merely took notes as events unfolded (getting clarification on certain issues at the end of the day rather than interrupt routine activities by asking questions as events unfolded). In both magazines I was told by the staff that I did not present an obtrusive presence as they had work-experience schemes in place and were used to 'outsiders' being in the office while they went about their activities. While Wimmer & Dominick (1997: 92) have argued that "reactivity" is a problem in this type of research as the researcher's presence can be disruptive and make individuals behave differently as they know they are under analysis, no attempts were made to conceal issues from me and staff did not go into other rooms to discuss their work among themselves out of earshot. At the end of each day I would go with staff to the local pubs and they used this as an opportunity to ask me about my work and how I felt the observation was contributing to my knowledge of their work as well as offering clarification and explanations for what had happened during the day. At *music365.com* and *Bad Moon* I had one day to observe and, while this was not as detailed as the research as the research at *Uncut* and *Select*, a great deal of helpful information was collected. Ultimately I felt that a day's observation in both these offices was preferable to no observation.

Bell (1992: 97) has suggested that observational studies "often reveal characteristics of groups or individuals that would have been impossible to discover by other means". The findings of these studies assisted me in fleshing out the issues that had been raised in interviews because this methodological approach is rich in "detail and specificity" (Smith, 1975: 234). This was particularly obvious in relation to how offices operate as socio-professional and organisational spheres as well as helping me to "learn their language, their habits, their work patterns, their leisure activities, and the like" (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1992: 273). This research approach is seen by Layder (1993: 116) as a good way of "obtaining qualitative information on the fabric and dynamics of situated activity, either as it happens or shortly thereafter" but, within this, presents the researcher with a number of problems and complications. There is a danger



that researchers are drawn to the activities (and thereby over-privilege the subjective perceptions) of individuals and therefore drawn *away* from the analysis of the situated activity. The research technique “relies heavily on a researcher’s perceptions and judgements and on preconceived notions about the material under study” (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997: 92) and the researcher must ask him/herself if what they are analysing is idiosyncratic or representative of the field in general.

This dual-methodological approach was considered to be the strongest way to gain a critical understanding of the music journalist and music PR professions. The thesis was based on the central epistemological point that the existing literature on the music press had failed to account first-hand for the socio-occupational and organisational conditions under which these professions work both separately and collectively. The importance, then, of conducting research of this nature was obvious. The research allowed for a rich understanding of the professional and organisational norms and practices of these individuals, how they are tied together in a dynamic of mutual dependency, how and where tensions arise and, ultimately, how they are negotiated or worked around. As noted above, there is a long tradition of this type of sociological enquiry into media production and the thesis used this to critically consider in detail a particular case study (of the mainstream consumer music press) and revise and re-evaluate some of the dominant paradigms. While there are a number of research complications tied up in both conducting the research and analysing the data generated (most notably the intrusion of researcher subjectivity and bias) this was allowed for as much as possible in final analysis. The thesis accepts that research of this nature presents methodological problems and, like all research, must regard these as an unavoidable by-product and work around them as much as possible.

## **Chapter 2 – Literature Review**

## Introduction

The academic writings touching on the popular music press and music journalism in Britain and the US, when approached *in toto*, can be seen to constitute a considerable, and yet methodologically and paradigmatically diffuse, body of work, which touches on music journalism as a specific cultural and journalistic form only peripherally. The broad literature on the sociology of news production (for example, White, 1950; Breed, 1955; Boyd-Barrett, 1970; Tunstall, 1971; Chibnall, 1977; Schlesinger, 1978), offers important conceptual entry-points for a study of the music press, in particular through a consideration of newspapers as complex professional and bureaucratically-conditioned organisations. However, the focus on ‘hard news’ production techniques coupled with the absence of formal journalistic training as an entry requirement<sup>1</sup> for the music press (Meisler, 1958: 224; English, 1979: 21; Wyatt & Hull, 1990: 39) means that this approach must be rethought and reformulated to deal with the distinct and idiosyncratic case of the music press.

To illustrate how dispersed and eclectic the existing academic and non-academic writings on the music press and music journalism are it is worthwhile to cluster them into six distinct sub-sections. These are:

- i. writings which appear as sub-chapters or sub-sections in wider sociological studies of the popular music industry or academic texts on popular music, youth culture and society (Hirsch, 1972; Frith, 1978, 1996; Chapple & Garofalo, 1980; Steward & Garratt, 1984; Chambers, 1985; Laing, 1985; McRobbie, 1991; Negus, 1992; Thornton, 1995; Mitchell, 1996; Nehring, 1997);
- ii. academic journal articles or chapters which appear in collected academic and other volumes (Gillett, 1972; Stratton, 1982; Breen, 1987; Frith, 1988b; Denski, 1989; Wyatt & Hull, 1990; Hill, 1991; Théberge, 1991; Jones, 1992, 1993, 1995; Toynebee, 1993; Mitchell & Shuker, 1998; Evans, 1998; Sloop, 1999; Forde, 2001);
- iii. writings which appear as sub-sections in academic studies on critics (English, 1979);



- iv. the non-academic histories of the music press, biographical/autobiographical accounts of the lives and work of individual music journalists and semi-fictionalised accounts of the music journalism profession (Flippo, 1974a, 1974b, 1974c; Draper, 1990; Hoskyns, 1995; Burchill, 1998; Wall, 1999; DeRogatis, 2000; Morley, 2000);
- v. reflexive pieces of writing by music journalists which can be best classed as forms of ‘meta-journalism’ (Flippo, 1974d; Christgau, 1976; Edwards, 1976; Landau, 1976; Frith, 1985; Kane, 1995; Gill, 1998);
- vi. single-author collections or edited volumes of journalistic writings (Christgau, 1973; Marcus, 1977; Tennant ed., 1985; Morley, 1986; Bangs 1987; Frith, 1988a; Reynolds, 1990b; Murray, 1991; Heylin ed., 1992; Kane, 1992; Marcus, 1993; Aizlewood ed., 1994; Kent, 1994; Roberts ed., 1994; Kureshi & Savage eds, 1995; Jones, 1996).

Nowell’s (1987) longitudinal analysis of the evolution of a ‘rock beat’ within the culture pages of the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* remains the only detailed, single-focus study of popular music journalism. However, it is limited in that it does not consider either the organisational and professional conditions under which music journalism is produced or the position and function of the specialist music press as a simultaneous cultural entity and economic enterprise. Common threads, however, are traceable through all these texts, but the fact remains that an overarching synthesis and resolution of the discourses has yet to be arrived at. Key among the reasons for this imprecision of thought are, firstly, the fact that detailed first-hand documentation and analysis of the professional and the occupational spheres of the popular music journalist does not exist<sup>2</sup>. Secondly, the tendency in the academic study of popular music has been to approach the music press from the starting point of its relationship to the industry rather than the other way around, with the result that the press has been predominantly professionally and organisationally analysed from *without* as opposed to from *within*.

Those common threads which are identifiable through all the work on the subject can be collected under four main themes: (a) the historio-stylistic development of the

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<sup>1</sup> The news editor post in weekly music titles is the only one in the UK music press to require a formal journalistic qualification.

<sup>2</sup> With the exception of Forde (2001) which was an article that arose out of research conducted for this Ph.D.



music press, (b) the typological division of titles, (c) the press's influence on and duty towards their readership and (d) the press's relationship with the wider music industry. Each of these themes will be now considered in turn in terms of the strengths and weaknesses of their theoretical and methodological bases of the writings about them.

## **I The Historio-Stylistic Development of the Music Press**

Within the context of popular music studies and media studies, a single and definitive chronology of the UK music press (or, indeed, a single and definitive history of an individual title) remains unwritten. Rather a history of the press can only be understood through the piecing together of strands of information drawn from numerous texts which describe distinct historical moments in terms of the emergence of 'waves', or 'schools', of writers (generally plotting out a professional and ideological migration from the underground, or counter-cultural, press into the mainstream as can be seen during the mid-1960s in the US rock press and during punk, between 1976-1978, in the UK). In the following discussion, three themes to be found in the literature are highlighted, namely: (i) the origins of the music press; (ii) the rising importance of individual writers; and (iii) the act of criticism and a critical normative order.

### **I (a) The Origins of the Music Press**

Both English (1979: 11) and Russell (1997: 176) date the emergence of a dedicated popular music press as a unique publishing niche and the rise of the popular music critic as an identifiable journalistic specialist to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The populist 'Penny Press' (English, 1979: 11) in the US and the UK ran popular music reviews and stories alongside other soft news and human interest items as part of a much wider mainstream publishing shift away from an exclusively hard news agenda. Popular music writing in England was quite quickly recognised both economically and culturally as an important niche topic, symbolised most obviously in the fact that by 1900 over 40 dedicated music titles (some, such as *Musical Times* dating back as far as 1842) made up a densely-



populated yet buoyant strand of the publishing market<sup>3</sup> (Russell, 1997: 176). The majority of these titles courted a performer-centric (both professional and amateur) demographic, hinged around particular musical styles or movements (such as the *Musical Herald* which began in 1889 and was pitched at the choral movement of the time).

It was, however, the founding in Britain in 1926 of *Melody Maker* which is commonly taken (Frith, 1978; Negus, 1992; Toynebee, 1993; Shuker, 1994) as the birth of the *modern* music press, in that it was a regular, nationally-distributed title which, crucially, was devoted exclusively to the popular music of the time. The development of the national contemporary music press in Britain is seen as pre-dating developments in the USA.

## I (b) The Rising Importance of Individual Writers

It is the period 1965-67 in the US that is commonly put forward as the starting-point of ‘contemporary’ (i.e. inscribed within a rock ideology and aesthetic) music journalism with the founding of the highly influential triumvirate of specialist titles *Crawdaddy*, *Mojo Navigator* and *Rolling Stone*, as well as a regular column on rock in the *Village Voice* (Nowell, 1987: 32). Retrospective analysis of this period plots the pivotal emergence of several loosely-connected and geographically-specific<sup>4</sup> ‘schools’ of rock writing which shaped the formal aspects of contemporary rock writing on both sides of the Atlantic (Flippo, 1974b; Nowell, 1987; Denski, 1989; Savage, 1991; Jones, 1992; DeRogatis, 2000). Retrospectively, a canon of ‘greats’ has been erected and positioned as the natural and logical product of New Journalism as a critical and reflexive journalistic and literary movement: the key (often repeated) names include Nat Hentoff, Paul Williams, Jon Landau, Robert Christgau, Lester Bangs, Hunter S. Thompson, Greil Marcus, Ralph Gleason and Richard Meltzer. Bangs and Meltzer, in particular, are

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<sup>3</sup> *Brass Band News*, for example, claimed a circulation of 25,000 in 1890 and demand for such titles was so high that it became a penny weekly in 1902 (Russell, 1997: 176).

<sup>4</sup> The publication bases of the key US national rock titles - (i) *Crawdaddy* and the *Village Voice* in New York, (ii) *Rolling Stone* in California and (iii) *Creem* and other underground titles linked to the Underground Press Syndicate in the Midwest (Detroit and Michigan) – are taken as establishing three very distinct and professional approaches to rock writing which together are seen as shaping US and UK rock writing from the early 1970s (Flippo, 1974b).



regarded as pivotal in the forging of the ‘form’, being hailed as the “‘masters’ of rock criticism” (itself a somewhat pretentious and certainly sexist term) (Crane, 1988: 348).

A number of these writers first emerged in the underground and fanzine publishing cultures (Denski, 1989: 10), a by-product of the counter-cultural and political climate of the Civil Rights movement of the mid-1960s (Chapple & Garofalo, 1980; Nowell, 1987; Savage, 1991; Jones, 1992), before forging a new critical and journalistic approach within mainstream rock journalism (and thereby contributing to the legitimisation of rock as a cultural form) which is seen as still retaining its hegemony. Collectively, these writers are seen as having taken what was a “traditionless discipline” (Christgau, 1973: 9) and establishing a critical and professional blueprint and touchstone through the stylistic and paradigmatic shift towards a new academic and analytic lexicon. This professional metamorphosis only occurred, Denski (1989: 10) suggests, because of the unparalleled levels of journalistic autonomy afforded to writers as a result of New Journalism’s temporary tilting of the power balance away from editors and publishers and towards freelancers and staff writers (Wolfe & Johnson, 1975; Pauly, 1990). Both Williams (1992) and Chambers (1985) talk of a cultural symbiosis, suggesting that the growth of music journalism as a discipline neatly parallels the growth of music as a serious, political force and as rock became culturally legitimated, so rock criticism became professionally legitimated.

This critical explosion was, Flippo (1974b, 1974c) and DeRogatis (2000) argue, only to span a nine year period (1965-1974), eventually atrophying into stylistic repetition and cliché as a result of a massive influx of opportunistic careerist writers with no interest in advancing the critical and analytic tradition. Stylistically, the pivotal writers of this period are regarded as rock mythologizers, dissecting both music and musicians to find American cultural reference points and symbols, locating American rock artists within a much broader cultural tradition and continuum, in particular having a tri-thematic concern with issues of authenticity, mass culture and race/the city (Jones, 1992), which continued into the 1990s<sup>5</sup> (Jones, 1995). They were commentators on American culture as much as they were commentators on popular music (Frith, 1983: 168/174),

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<sup>5</sup> Sloop (1999), using the examples of the Sex Pistols and Kiss’ respective reunion tours of 1997, considers how journalistic discourses of the authentic shifted in the light of post-modern theory to celebrate the inauthentic.



with Greil Marcus' *Mystery Train*, published in 1977, as perhaps the key representative text/thesis.

A similar, if somewhat swifter, process of aesthetic and cultural validation of rock and roll took place in the UK press between 1956 and 1964 (between the emergence of Elvis and the peak of Beatlemania as it bled into the R 'n' B boom). In 1956, *Melody Maker* (then geared around jazz and the musicians' world – much more so than the *New Musical Express*) saw the emergent rock 'n' roll form as a threat to the musical and cultural complexities of jazz. For them, "Elvis' singing was 'ersatz' and 'mannered'" (Chambers, 1985: 21) and the journalists at the paper "began a campaign to silence rock 'n' roll" (ibid.: 19-20). Certainly not quite as caught up in the issue of juvenile delinquency as the American press was (musical values and cultural aesthetics were by far their primary concern), the UK press seemingly reacted much quicker than the American press and, by 1964 had performed something of a *volte-face*.

"Popular music journalists found themselves caught between bemoaning the 'tastelessness' of rock 'n' roll while being forced to swallow its popularity" (Chambers, 1985: 30). The economic reality of rock 'n' roll's lasting chart success coupled with wider factors such as the Establishment's apparent endorsement of the form meant that the music press dropped their antagonistic stance vis-à-vis rock 'n' roll. By 1964, *Melody Maker* was forced to reconsider its initial position and was to gradually reduce its jazz coverage (over 50% at this point) while increasing its rock 'n' roll coverage. The endorsement of the Establishment came at the height of Beatlemania in the UK when "*The Times*' musical critic, William Mann, did a long and serious review of their music in which he talked about their pandiatonic clusters and submediant key switches. He said John Lennon and Paul McCartney were 'the outstanding English composers of 1963'" (Davies, 1969: 204). Echoing these sentiments, Richard Buckles in *The Sunday Times* (dated 29 December 1963), in a review of the Beatles' music in the 'Mods and Rockers' ballet, called them "'the greatest composers since Beethoven'" (quoted in Davies, 1969: 204). The assertions of both Mann and Buckles' musicological dissections were part of a wider cultural process of dismantling the divisions between high and low art (tellingly Lennon and McCartney were referred to as 'composers' as opposed to 'songwriters').



The blueprint established by the post-New Journalism writers in the US is positioned as a key influence on rock writing in the UK in the 1970s. Stylistically, the writing which emerged in the UK underground press, which was to foreshadow punk's transition into the overground was a hybridisation of New Journalism, gonzo journalism (as typified by the writings of Hunter S. Thompson) and beat writing. Again, as in the US, this stylistic shift is discussed in terms of a 'school' of writers (Negus, 1992; Toynbee, 1993; Savage, 1991) and particular journalists such as Nick Kent and Charles Shaar Murray are singled out as representative of a generational and conceptual schism within the UK music press. Echoing the cultural and professional migration from the US underground press into the US mainstream rock press, music fanzines<sup>6</sup> in the UK fed both ideas and staff into the national rock titles (Chambers, 1985: 177-180; Hebdige, 1994: 111). The UK punk fanzines are considered as sites for ideological resistance, rooted within the radical English tradition of 'pamphleteering' (Savage, 1991: 200) and, because of their detachment from and opposition towards the wider (major record label dominated) music industry and mainstream music titles (such as *New Musical Express*, *Melody Maker* and *Sounds*), were able to report punk from 'within', symbolised most tellingly through their links with the independent punk record labels (Laing, 1985). Chambers (1985: 177-180) suggests that, as a nation-wide network of fanzines and punk scenes emerged, the underground titles and the 'punk community' existed symbiotically. The fanzines, Chambers (1985: 177-180) suggests, did not passively report on the scene, rather they played a key proactive role in initiating and fuelling it. While Chambers (1985) and Hebdige (1994) adopt a highly romanticised view of punk fanzines - explaining their function in terms of neo-Marxist theories of subcultural resistance, simultaneously creating and articulating a sense of community in rooted opposition to the mainstream - Crane (1988: 349) argues that they "merely reinforce[d] stylistic insularity" and their esoteric nature only compounded the mainstream/punk dichotomy. The end impact, then was that of preaching exclusively to the converted. Self-referentially, the subculture spoke only *of itself to itself*, achieving little more than an underscoring of its

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<sup>6</sup> Initially fanzines referred - in the US - to science fiction magazines written by fans rather than critics. Rock fanzines such as *Who Put the Bomp*, *Flash* and *punk magazine* emerged in the US between 1972-73 (Laing, 1985: 14-15), with the more dedicated titles being referred to as 'prozines' (Nowell, 1987: 34). These US rock fanzines pre-date their UK counterparts by four years, with *Sniffin' Glue* (published in 1976) being seen as the first pivotal punk title (Burchill & Parsons, 1978; Savage, 1991).



essential marginality and a drawing of attention to its inherent exclusion from mainstream discourses.

While the titles defined themselves against the mainstream (press and industry alike) it did not necessarily follow that the writers confined themselves to the fanzine side of the fissure. The discourses surrounding punk that were articulated by the fanzines eventually bled into the mainstream rock titles (which had initially dismissed it as a fad, while the mainstream media demonised it) through a concerted programme of recruitment of former fanzine writers into the national rock titles (Laing, 1985: 107; Savage, 1991: 281) which were hoping to gain taxonomic credibility. Rather, then, than overturn the music industry and mainstream music press hegemony, punk fanzines became exploited as talent pools with the national rock titles adopting the fanzines' anti-industry rhetoric (Laing, 1985: 107).

Historically, the third, and final wave, of stylistic innovation in popular music journalism is dated to the mid-to-late 1980s in the UK as writers such as Paul Morley, Ian Penman, Pat Kane and Simon Reynolds introduced structuralist and post-structuralist perspectives (drawing most obviously on the work of Foucault, Barthes and Adorno) into their writing style (Nehring, 1997; Harley & Botsman, 1982; Kane, 1992; Toynebee, 1993). This wave of writers can be taken as a parallel to the academically-influenced style of rock journalism that emerged in the late-1960s in the US, attempting to extend the critical lexicon which had become static by the mid-1980s. This period of writing perhaps represents the most obvious coupling of popular journalism and academic thought<sup>7</sup> and yet is probably the most anomalous in that these writers forged quite a narrow agenda and aesthetic which was not to alter the general grounding of mainstream rock writing, something which is seen as having changed little since the 1960s (Harley & Botsman, 1982). Crane (1988) locates all this within the context of a critical continuum and hierarchy, but concedes that while a canon of writers can be identifiable retrospectively, their influence is negligible as their work is only read by a small number of other rock critics. Ultimately, this absence of a pan-occupational 'metacritical-

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<sup>7</sup> Nehring (1997: 85-89) takes issue with music journalists' appropriation of post-structuralism in their writing. He isolates Simon Reynolds in particular and suggests that his work constitutes little more than a misreading/misunderstanding of Foucault's work.



referentiality', where new writers reference and revise the ideas and writings of the dominant writers who preceded them (Farber, 1976), dilutes their impact over time.

### **I (c) The Act of Criticism and a Critical Normative Order**

Stratton (1982: 270) argues that the sheer act of writing on popular music involves, by its very nature, analysis. "[E]ven description requires the use of categories which are at the very least the product of some taken-for-granted analytic ordering of the world. The music press, then, operates to increase thought and discussion in the discourse which is 'popular music'". Building on this notion there is, for Stratton (1982), a qualitative end result brought about by quantitative increases in the amount of music press coverage on the area. For him, the frequency and regularity of the UK music press (weekly, bi-weekly, and monthly), as compared to the US (bi-weekly and monthly), has a direct impact on the manner in which music is written about. If all music writing, therefore, necessarily involves analysis then the UK press is seen as offering more analysis than the US press.

The need to establish a normative order and a critical ideal within music journalism is a central motif in a number of writers' work touching on this topic. Taking the idea of popular music journalism as a 'traditionless discipline' in the 1960s, they suggest that the form has betrayed its origins as an eclectic and multi-disciplined journalistic form (Flippo, 1974d: 72). Drawing on textual analysis techniques, a number of writers have qualitatively assessed popular music criticism and found it lacking. Breen (1987: 206), for example, describes popular music in terms of displaying an 'impulse' and positions journalists within a professional and aesthetic obligation to locate this 'impulse' and communicate it to their readers. The majority of music journalists are, for Breen, united in their singular inability to explain and keep alive this 'impulse'.

Dovetailing into Breen's (1987) criticisms, a number of music journalists, in highly reflexive evaluations of their profession, suggest the need for a critical dialogue within the field, continually evaluating the form and its strengths and weaknesses. For Denski (1989), music journalism must be considered as a work-in-progress: it is



evolutionary, and as it attempts to find its feet it is only natural that some of the writing will be flawed. This, he argues, is inevitable as a body of work attempts to become established. It is of central importance for the form to be reflexive enough to acknowledge that it is still in its first phase and therefore needs to be continually revised and repositioned, with its past clearly informing its future. This historical dialectic is seen as central to the evolution of the form and discipline. However, the continual constriction of review space within magazines (English, 1979: 26; Flippo, 1974c: 292) works against the possibility of detailed critical evaluation in reviews as writers are increasingly given less space to work through ideas. Jon Landau (1976: 20) suggests that music writing's historical and formal development has been compromised by music journalists' lack of formal musical training, meaning that textual analysis techniques (focussing on music's literary aspects, heavily tilted towards lyrical analysis where lyrics are reviewed as poetry and linked to discussions about the personality of the singer) have been deployed at the expense of (and to the exclusion of) musicological ones.

Contrary to Landau's (1976: 20) criticism, Evans (1998), in a content analysis-based study of the reviewing practices of *Rolling Stone* (Australia) and the Australian rock magazine, *Juice*, suggests there is a high level of musicological analysis in Australian rock writing. There is, however, a complex debate here as to how exactly to define the 'musicological'. Reviews are classed as containing 'musical analysis' even if they merely mention the types of instruments used on tracks, as opposed to any discussion and analysis of timbre, the 'grain of the voice', tempos, key changes, harmony structures and procedures, tonality, chord sequences or any of the other terms more commonly associated with formal musicological analysis, which Middleton (1995: 103) defines as being "the scientific study of music' ... [which] ... must include every conceivable discussion of musical topics".

In the main (as can be seen from the above), the critiques of the music press and the qualitative debates surrounding journalists' failure to satisfactorily incorporate academic theory into their writings are working from the starting-position of what is *wrong* with contemporary music journalism. Long checklists can be drawn up from these critiques, detailing where exactly music journalism is either stumbling or regressing. Theorists talk in vague and abstracted terms about the need for clearly defined 'criteria'



through which music journalism should operate (Harley & Botsman, 1982: 256-258), and yet offer no suggestions as to what shape the criteria would or should take. Breen (1987) and Winston Dean (in English, 1979) offer perhaps the only systematic breakdown of a set of definite criteria through which music journalism should evolve.

Breen's (1987) six-point criteria is as follows:

- i. content - which "demands of the journalist that the music, the impulse, be considered in its basic form ... Is it good music?" (p. 220);
- ii. context: for example, consideration of the country in which the music was created (as a means of understanding the conditions under which music was created). The relationship that exists between the environment and the producers of the music is of central importance to the understanding and appreciation of musical forms;
- iii. form: something which most journalists are incapable of understanding. He sees them as unable to understand a piece of music that is "technically revolutionary and musically complex" (p. 221). For him too few music journalists are musicologically conversant;
- iv. history: writing must have an historical angle. This historical grounding would consider how conditions have changed the ways in which music is produced and how it is understood (for example, technological advances allowing the recording, editing and layering of music and so forth). This places an understanding of music within "technological, political and social developments" (p. 222);
- v. text: which is related to both 'content' and 'form'. It is "the actual projected image that a journalist confronts. It is the meaning of a song and its words and music" (ibid.) and the different ways in which it can be understood;
- vi. continuity: the need for "continuity of analysis" (ibid.) and a need to foster an on-going dialogue about analytic ideas and the meanings of music. This demands reflexivity on the part of music journalism, continually reviewing and confronting its own stylistic and theoretical evolutionary path.

Neatly anticipating many of Breen's (1987) criteria, the classical music critic Winston Dean (paraphrased in English, 1979: 159) sets out eight prerequisites that he believes music critics need to meet to be able to make qualified criticism. They are:

- i. having a technical and theoretical knowledge of music;
- ii. having a strong historical knowledge of both music and scholarship;
- iii. an eclectic education which will allow them to connect music to a wider range of subjects;
- iv. clarity of thought and ability to write in a way which stimulates;
- v. having "an insight into the workings of the creative imagination";
- vi. an "integrated philosophy of life of his own";
- vii. being inquisitive and willing to learn;
- viii. being aware of their limitations (their personal limitations and the limitations of their profession).

Both Breen (1987) and Dean argue for music writers to be more inclusive (even holistic) in their analysis which will then feed into the scope and reach of their evaluation and critical judgement. Only a broad, informed and detailed *modus operandi* will result in valid aesthetic judgements. The social, the cultural, the historical, the formalistic, the textual and the epistemological are all positioned as being of equal importance as the musicological. Within all this, equally, is a need for critical and professional reflexivity – with writers considering not just music (and the conditions of its production and development) but also their own profession (and, equally, the conditions of *its* production and development). They both, in similar ways, are calling for an on-going, ever-adapting, self-reflexive inter and intra dialogue between critics themselves.

The subtext, of course, of this is that too few critics are aware of (let alone attempt to grapple with) any or all of these criteria. As such, music journalism becomes static (even regressive) in character and scope, stumbling around in circles while slowly and gradually intellectually atrophying. How these critical touchstones can and should be imposed, however, is left at best unclear and at worst uncertain by both Breen (1987) and Dean (in English, 1979). While it is important that they actually take steps to draw up a



table of these norms, neither indicates how they could (if at all) be incorporated into a code of universal journalistic practice. The desirability of this situation is certainly fleshed out but the reality and the pragmatics of their implementation and propagation is, sadly, not.

## II The Typological Division of Titles

From within frameworks of (i) the historical development of the music industry, (ii) publishing pressures and market readjustments and (iii) the social emergence of distinct and often oppositional ‘taste cultures’ it is possible to consider and position the music press as an organic and heterogeneous entity, highly sensitive to emergent economic, social and musical changes. To talk of the ‘music press’ as a homogenous entity is to miss out on particular and unique historical trends and schisms. Therefore, it is of central importance to consider the typological distinctions that inform and define the music press.

Shuker (1994) takes steps towards providing an approximate typological breakdown of the popular music press, yet such an historical and descriptive overview of the publishing world’s topography can only reveal so much, lacking, as it does, critical analysis of the ideologies underscoring these publications, the aesthetics informing them and the economics of niche publishing. Shuker’s general typology is echoed to varying degrees in the writings of others<sup>8</sup> (Negus, 1992; Frith, 1985; Reynolds, 1990a; Toynbee, 1993), yet his work provides a reasonably general overview of the different titles. This typology is tilted heavily towards a core of UK titles, although he does find room for a number of US titles and Australian titles in his discussion. His work is primarily concerned with a consumer-oriented press, but he does set this against performer-oriented titles, although there is no discussion of these titles in any detail. He classifies music titles along a six-point typology, beginning with: (i) the underground fanzines and working through (ii) the teen-glossies (meaning mainly the pop-oriented titles such as *Smash Hits*, but his classification also includes, confusingly, the Heavy Metal press. He groups these conflicting genres together simply because of the type of glossy paper the magazines are

printed on which presents a misleading portrait of distinct taste cultures), (iii) the inkies (essentially the UK weekly titles), (iv) the ‘serious’ rock magazines (primarily a euphemism for US titles such as *Rolling Stone*), (v) the new tabloids (positioning *Q* as central in cornering a niche in its succinct and historically-informed reviewing style pitched at readers who have progressed from the weekly turn-over of the inkies) and finally (vi) the style bibles (titles such as *The Face* which mark a shift away from music-centric publishing to embrace lifestyle, fashion, popular arts and youth culture<sup>9</sup>).

It is difficult to actually ascertain what, exactly, Shuker’s typology is based on. The six-stage grouping is certainly something of an attempt to neatly compartmentalise the disparate array of titles, aesthetics and cultural agendas which constitutes the contemporary music press. Yet in establishing this six-point typology, he straps together titles, which have a (sometimes passing), single key characteristic in common. This results in a misleading and confused cartography in that a common thread cannot be traced through all six clusters. The clusters themselves are not connected in any obvious or linear fashion. A more consistent approach would have been to, for example, identify titles which pursue a particular musical agenda and then apply this core criteria to all the titles under analysis (for example using ‘pop’, ‘dance’, ‘leftfield’, ‘metal’, ‘mainstream rock’, ‘soul’, ‘hip-hop’, ‘folk’ as workable generic tags). Instead, he conflates heterogeneous criteria (choosing not to compare like with like) which exposes his typology as muddled and capricious; working through seemingly incompatible criteria such as the ideological stance of the title (for the underground press), the paper quality the title is printed on (the inkies and the teen glossies), paper size (the new tabloids), the attitude the title displays towards the music it covers (the ‘serious’ rock monthlies) and, finally, thematic eclecticism (the ‘style bibles’ which cover music as but one aspect of their popular culture agenda). There is no flow between any, let alone, all of these criteria as they all pull in disconcertingly different directions meaning his typology confuses more than it actually explains.

Shuker’s typological distinctions need to be revised also in the light of the evolving face of the UK popular music press – to be able to deal with the increase of

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<sup>8</sup> His typology appears in a slightly revised format in an overview of the New Zealand music press (Mitchell & Shuker, 1998).



titles and the move towards either a smaller, yet more clearly defined, niche audience or towards a larger, lifestyle-oriented, readership in an attempt to survive in a contracting marketplace. Indeed, the proliferation of the dance press represents a shift in focus, not just in publishing terms, but also stylistically in that it demands a re-examination of the journalistic discipline which was forged and fed within a rock sensibility.

Moving beyond the consumer-oriented press, Théberge's (1991) work on musicians' magazines remains the only academic piece to look at these titles. His notion of the creation of a 'community' (serving as the focal point for a network of musicians) through these magazines is an important one and certainly can be applied to the readers of the consumer-oriented press – something that has not yet been attempted. While academic work on the music press is limited, critical analysis of its readership is virtually non-existent. Théberge, too, carves out a typology of the music press and his emphasis on the specialist press offers a more apposite framework than Shuker's. He clusters the consumer-press around three general areas: (i) the fanzine, (ii) the specialist title and (iii) the academic. On the production/performance side he divides titles, once again, into three clear camps: (i) the trades, (ii) the tip-sheets and finally (the main focus of his work) (iii) the technical. From this we can see a three-point market for the press – a consumer-oriented press, a performer-oriented press and an industry-oriented press. This stands as a clear development from Chapple & Garofalo's (1980) two-point schema, which distinguished between music titles aimed at the industry (generally finance-oriented) and those aimed at the public.

Working between these two typologies (as established by Shuker, 1994 and Théberge, 1991) it is possible to gather a general sense of the distinctions and the dynamics which inform the evolutionary nature of the music press, yet many aspects (as noted above) are ignored and, as a result, the complexity of the issues are skirted around. Both studies tell us little about the political economy of magazine publishing and how publishers, journalists and press officers occupationally define a typology of titles and how this informs their working practices. In determining the goals of these music press professionals – from an occupational and a market perspective – we can understand both

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, it was Nick Logan (ex-editor of both *NME* and *Smash Hits*) who launched *The Face* to break from what he saw as a general aesthetic stagnation in the traditional music press (Hebdige, 1988: 155).

how and why titles are typologically determined and divided by the context of production and how this relates to a typology determined by the context of consumption.

### **III The Press's Influence on & Duty Towards their Readership**

While no empirical studies have been conducted on the readership of the music press, a number of theoretical assumptions have been made concerning the mediating role of the art critic and their role as a two-way translator between the performer and the consumer. The general theoretical framework has been a loose coupling of encoding/decoding (Hall, 1990) and the critic as a 'cultural intermediary' (Bourdieu, 1986: 239-240; Bourdieu, 1993: 94-96; Negus, 1992: 46; Negus, 1996: 62). A central assumption detectable through much of this work is that music journalists are not simply informing and attempting to direct consumer choices; additionally, they are playing an important function in assisting their readers to locate and consider music from within particular frameworks of intelligibility (Harley & Botsman, 1982: 256). Their centrality to a dynamic of exegesis<sup>10</sup> (translation being distinct from mediation) has been alluded to in a number of studies concerned primarily with popular arts critics (most notably Albert, 1958) and this provides an interesting theoretical standpoint to adopt in regard to the contemporary popular music journalist.

Bourdieu (1993: 94-96), for example, in his discussion of the Parisian left-bank arts critics suggested they were the typical readers of their own titles. There is direct cultural empathy between the writer and his/her readers which directly informs not only what they write about, but also the frameworks within and conditions under which it should be understood, evaluated and appreciated. Toynbee (1993: 297) extends this argument to consider the title-reader relationship to be more fluid as readers are forced to shift in order to match the shift in a title's agenda. Within a process of editorial and market re-evaluation, the letters page works to 'educate' the readership in how to

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<sup>10</sup> Exegesis (from the Greek meaning to 'lead out of'/'to interpret'/'to explain') is most commonly associated with Biblical studies and involves critical textual analysis to establish *an* interpretation of the text rather than *the* interpretation. Exegesis accepts that texts are inherently polysemic and "does not allow us to master the text so much as it enables us to enter it" (Hayes & Holladay, 1987: 23). Throughout the thesis I adapt and use the term to refer to a very



reposition themselves within the new agenda, openly chastising the out-of-touch readers who fail to embrace the introduction of new musical scenes which, as Savage (1991: 159-160) argues, are fundamental for a title's economic survival. Here the titles work to relocate the readership as a 'community' (linked through a shared aesthetic) around which disparate strands of readers aggregate (Théberge, 1991). The magazines, then, construct their readership not just as a community, but also as a market - thereby serving both a social function for their readership and an economic function for publishers, advertisers and hardware manufacturers (whose products are reviewed in musicians' magazines) alike.

Stratton (1982) has conceptualised this role of the press in broader ideological terms. For him, the press's function<sup>11</sup> is to present records and artists to consumers and to rationalise the antagonistic art/commerce dichotomy in such a way as to make it meaningful for their readers<sup>12</sup>. If consumers of a particular title, after having read a published review or feature, are left incapable of understanding the music they were consuming they will quickly desert that title in favour of another, more appropriate and intelligible, one. The press, then, must meet both aesthetic obligations (evaluating and explaining music) and commercial obligations (doing this successfully so that readers return to them rather than divert their loyalties to another rival publication). Indeed, as Frith (1996: 71) argues, the public should be able to turn to critics as experts to articulate for them music's use-value and cultural worth.

Methodologically these writers present a number of difficulties in that a professional journalistic action is taken to result in a clear and intended audience reaction. While little actual research exists on the persuasive powers of critics, both Frith (1985: 126) and Edwards (1976: 20) argue that (by considering publishers' market research and record sales patterns) individual writers remain anonymous (and lacking in influence) and the press's constant pursuit of the chimera of 'credibility' often has very little observable bearing on the mainstream record market. The acts they back invariably fail to overturn the chart hegemony of the acts condemned or ignored in the press because such acts are

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specific form of translation of artists (under particular professional and organisational conditions and within particular economic expectations) both by PRs and by journalists.

<sup>11</sup> As well as radio's function – which is the other focus of his study.

<sup>12</sup> Within this relationship their legitimacy and authority is wholly dependent on their ability to convince the readership of their impartiality from record companies.

deemed as having little credibility or aesthetic worth (Edwards, 1976: 20; English, 1979: 123; Chambers, 1985: 116; Frith 1985: 126; Frith, 1988b: 336). This catches the press in a two-way pull between the commercially-successful and the aesthetically-exceptional – writing about non-populist acts while going unread by the fans of the largest selling acts (Frith, 1985: 126). However, counter to this, Mitchell (1996: 19) concludes that the music press (particularly the inkies in Britain) have a clear and direct influence in the breaking of new acts and the dictating of new styles and taste patterns and this is an influence that the press themselves feel they have, regarding their profession as one of ‘kingmakers’ (Nowell, 1987: 63).

Of course this concentration on what is merely one section of the print media fails to acknowledge the role of other media (most notably the broadcast media) and advertising in breaking acts. There is additionally an obvious need to consider the economic muscle the record companies are able to put behind the promotional campaigns for their larger acts. Alongside this, an act’s previous sales will also have a bearing on their subsequent sales. What Edwards (1976), English (1979) and Chambers (1985) all over-privilege here is the notion of *mainstream* commercial success (and with it, mainstream acceptance and validation). The acts which are deemed ‘critics’ favourites’ do sell, but often their success is mid or small range. Certainly mainstream success is never guaranteed by music press coverage alone – it must be supplemented with, superseded by or even monopolised by broadcast coverage. But of crucial importance here is the idea that the readers of the music press are a small, but culturally important grouping. They are the media- and culturally-literate ‘opinion-leaders’ who occupy an important (and persuasive) sphere between the media and the wider public (they are the ‘experts’ others will turn to for advice on record purchases) (Lazarsfeld et al, 1944). Having said this, whatever influence the music critic is seen as having over his/her readership, a common thread linking analysis of the profession is that this influence is waning (Negus, 1992: 118; Frith, 1985: 126; Shuker, 1994: 91-98; Toynbee, 1993: 299).

#### **IV The Press’s Relationship with the Wider Music Industry**



While it has been argued that the power of the press as a cultural force, capable of influencing consumer behaviour, has declined, magazines are still considered by the industry as being of central importance in promotional campaigns (particularly in the early stages) (Flippo, 1974c: 284; Negus, 1992: 118). Those writers who have considered the nature of the professional, structural and economic relationship between the music press and the music industry (meaning, in the case of the consumer music press, record companies) have established various models of dependency and tension in order to explain the dynamics present. The relationship is not necessarily one of top-down influence (with the industry completely controlling the press) yet nor is it one of complete autonomy (with the press immune to the demands of the industry). The historical analysis of the industry/press relationship posits a cyclical model of almost total dependency up until the 1960s where the press was ideologically and financially incorporated into the music business<sup>13</sup> (Frith, 1978: 153-156; Frith, 1983: 166/173-174), moving into a model of partial autonomy from the late-1960s to the mid-1970s (DeRogatis, 2000) and returning, in the late-1970s/early-1980s, to a climate of almost total dependency as the boundary between rock writing and rock publicity has become blurred as a result of the press's agenda being determined by the industry simply to synchronise with release dates (Frith, 1985: 127; Negus, 1992: 120; Shuker, 1994: 91-92; Reynolds, 1990a: 26-27; Kane, 1995: 14; Harley & Botsman, 1982: 250; Toynbee, 1993: 289; Breen, 1987: 210).

Within this, it is advertising revenue (or, more specifically, the threat of its withdrawal in the wake of negative reviews and features<sup>14</sup>) which has been seen as a key device through which external music industry (who are the key advertisers) pressure is exerted on the press (Flippo, 1974c: 287; English, 1979: 101-102; Stratton, 1992: 268; Jones, 1993: 88). Advertising revenue is key to the economic survival of consumer rock titles (often with a one-third advertising/two-thirds editorial split in terms of page space (Janssen (1974: 61)), particularly for the smaller-circulation titles (Flippo, 1974c: 285). Because of the economic importance for titles of this revenue stream, Jones (1993: 80) suggests that the press becomes caught in a contradiction between a duty to impartially

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<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Russell (1997: 176) notes how three key music periodicals in England – *Brass Band News* (started in 1881), *British Bandsmen* (1887) and *Cornet* (1893) – were all owned and run by London publishing houses. The historical precedent for this is a long one.

<sup>14</sup> English (1979) suggests positive coverage can also be negotiated in advance (as a trade-out) by record companies who commit to an agreed advertising spend over a particular period.

inform their readers and a duty to deliver a large and demographically specific audience to their advertisers. Within this, they can feel pressurised to shift their editorial line to meet their advertisers' needs, as in the case, in the mid-1980s, of the UK teenage magazines (spurred on by the market success of *Smash Hits*) who began to include pop music within their remit so that they could increase their total advertising revenue through pop-related advertising (McRobbie, 1991: 172).

While the majority of titles cannot hope to survive without this advertising revenue, it should be noted that the major magazine publishing companies have separate multi-title advertising departments who deal with and solicit advertising revenue, rather than reporting to the editors directly. The bureaucratic presence of these departments means that the direct exerting of control over editors is a tangled and complex procedure. Indeed it can be argued that editors and sub editors encounter spatial, rather than economic, complications when dealing with ads in that their layout must work with the available space around ads in the flatpack<sup>15</sup> of the title each week or month. Of course, editors can be informed that, say, advertising space will be bought up by a label if a feature on one of their acts is positive but it is open to debate (and too often it has been open to conjecture) how directly this can inform content. Indeed, as Jones (1993) in a study of the relationship between advertising content and editorial concludes, there is no discernible correlation between an increase in the amount of advertising revenue being spent by a record label and an increase in the number of positive reviews the label's acts receive. For him, the nexus is considerably more complex than an economic-determinist thesis (Stratton, 1982) would allow for.

Moving beyond advertising's role in the press/industry relationship and discussions on a purely organisational level, models of dependency are identifiable through much of the work which considers journalists as individuals and their relationships with press officers as industry points of contact. Most commonly, payola (generally indirect such as free records, free gig tickets and press junkets<sup>16</sup>) is seen as the

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<sup>15</sup> Flatpacks are the layout plans for magazines where pre-booked advertising space is already marked off.

<sup>16</sup> (Flippo, 1974c: 284) notes how in the US Columbia Records was rocked by scandals in 1973 where it was alleged that drugs were given to rock writers in return for positive reviews of Columbia artists. They launched their own internal investigations. The whole US industry, in the wake of these allegations (and general belt-tightening steps as a result of the oil crisis), began to re-evaluate its relationship with the press. A number of record company publicists were sacked for "spending too freely on junkets" and bookkeeping by publicists was subject to close scrutiny. He says that while free plane tickets, food and drugs (and, in extreme cases, the offer of prostitutes) were par for the course for



industry's means of forcing the press into a state of fiscal dependency resulting in a position of reliance and compliance (Chapple & Garofalo, 1980: 165-169). Jones (1993: 84) argues that on a routinised professional level the press rely on press officers to bring new artists to them in the sense that almost all of the artists they cover have been 'officially sanctioned' (i.e. signed) by record companies. Through their press releases, press officers are viewed as carefully packaging their acts in a textual manner which can easily be recycled (and, therefore, condoned) by journalists who have to turn reviews and features around quickly (Negus, 1992: 120-122; Hirsch, 1972: 131; McRobbie, 1991: 169) and writers come to expect and depend upon such pre-packaging of artists.

The nature of this professional relationship between the journalist and the press officer has been described in terms of 'service' metaphors, where the (generally female<sup>17</sup>) press officer's duty is to "sensitise a journalistic community to an act" (Negus, 1992: 120) by matching acts to like-minded journalists. The press officer must, therefore, have an encyclopaedic knowledge of the taste patterns of all journalists to ensure that the acts they present (after a process of media grooming and training) will be of interest to the writers they approach. They forge close social contact with the journalists, learning their idiosyncrasies, traits and tastes, slowly building up a relationship of trust and co-operation. This close working and socialising relationship allows the press officer to get a story or a review into the pages of a magazine by circumventing the editor (Negus, 1992: 120; Jones, 1993: 85) and approaching journalists directly. S/he exploits their knowledge of the journalists knowing who has a strong working relationship with the editor and who does not. Negus' (1992) research, however, was based only on interviews with press officers, rather than on interviews with both press officers and journalists, and, as such, only considers one side of the professional relationship, reducing what are complex power-structures and relationships of mutual dependence to a mono-directional flow of control and influence.

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many music journalists he states that he does not know of any journalists who have accepted cash bribes for positive reviews. Wall (1999) worked as both a journalist and a press officer in the UK during the 1980s and argues that it was common to attach a gram of cocaine to review copies of records and to supply journalists with the drug at gigs.

<sup>17</sup> Negus (1992: 126-128), Steward & Garratt (1984: 68-69/87-88) and McRobbie (1991: 145) all state that the majority of press officers are female while the majority of journalists are male. Steward & Garratt (1984: 68-69) quote several female press officers and female journalists who talk of chauvinism in music journalism where male journalists expect to be 'waited' on by female press officers. McRobbie (1991: 145) regards this as typical of what is a male-dominated industry.

Counter, however, to this general conception that the press's agenda is dictated by the industry, is the argument that in the early stages of any act's promotional campaign, the industry is reliant on the press to provide coverage for their acts, primarily due to the comparative low-costs involved and the fact that the press fulfil a 'surrogate consumer' function, providing valuable initial critical feedback (Negus, 1992: 116), which can then be used to launch wider media campaigns. Here, press officers will be highly proactive and court as much publicity for the act as they can, revealing more concern with, not *what* is being said about the acts, but rather *how much* is being said. As the act becomes more successful they have greater bartering power and increasingly limit access and exert both quantitative and qualitative control over what is written and when (Negus, 1992: 124-125; Théberge, 1991: 285) and take steps to co-opt the media gatekeepers in order to bridge the institutional divide between record companies and the press (Hirsch, 1972: 133/136). Indeed, as music titles have proliferated, access to the major stars (whose presence on the front cover can greatly boost magazine sales in an unstable market) has decreased and press officers can exploit this by offering exclusives in exchange for coverage of their less famous artists (Steward & Garratt, 1984: 68; Negus, 1992: 124).

Rimmer (1985) (having worked as a journalist in the 1980s) considers the press/industry relationship from a markedly different perspective. Rather than view the press as purely the compliant and parasitical (Frith, 1985: 127) promotional arm of the music industry, he regards (as Flippo, (1974c) did of the US press in the 1970s) the producers (record companies) as institutionally segregated from the disseminators (the press) and unable to dictate the media gatekeeping process from start to finish. Their relationship and the process of promotion are fraught with immense uncertainty and is one that cannot be simply boiled down to the idea that the press is a gatekeeper for success. The US press, due to a monthly and fortnightly publishing thrust (as opposed to the monthly, fortnightly and *weekly* thrust of the UK press), can be seen as adopting a more cautious and hesitant approach, writing about the new as it happens rather than actively try to set the agenda and dictate what the new should be. The role of the UK weekly press, with its links to emergent scenes and acts, can be seen to work at points beyond the dictates of the mainstream industry, with their constant turnover of new acts (in both the live pages and the new bands' section) (Hill, (1991). While it may be argued



that many of the acts they cover come through ‘official’ industry channels, they also serve an A & R role by giving early coverage to unsigned acts (mainly on the London live circuit) which record labels can and do pick up on.

Within the dominant Marxist-influenced view of the press/industry relationship, the music press has been viewed as economically determined by the flows of finance and access from the record companies, who exploit the press’s position of economic and professional subservience, thereby pushing the press into a passive service-role. This Marxist dialectic is nowhere more apparent than in the work of Harley & Botsman (1982: 253) who consider the press as the music industry’s “ideological superstructure”. This base/superstructure model echoes through the greater majority of writing on this area, and the notion of the superstructure being defined through the economic dynamics of the base has been used to explain how the industry exerts considerable, yet indirect, control over the print media.

Stratton’s (1982) conceptualisation of the press’s economic dependence on the industry exists in, however, markedly different terms from that of Harley & Botsman (1982). While he agrees that a relationship of dependency does exist, it does not necessarily follow that it is a relationship of *direct* intervention and control. His stance is one that explores wider, macro-economic flows. The music press is both organisationally and financially independent from the wider music industry in that their publishing houses are economically distinct from record companies. However, on a much broader financial level he regards the music titles as being dependent in the sense that they, alongside record labels, distributors, record shops and so forth, constitute the ‘music business’ and, as such, their fortunes will fluctuate in accordance with the fortunes of the record companies (who can be conceptualised as the most important segment in this nexus).

However, the central political economy models of influence, control and resistance are problematic, as Jones (1992) notes, because they over-privilege the organisation as the single, determining structure and exclude the role of the autonomous or recalcitrant individual, suggesting the need to mark out clear aesthetic, cultural and ideological distinctions between the press (as an industry) and critics (as autonomous individuals). Jones (1992) positions the critic in individualistic terms, necessarily detached from and not subsumed within the ideology of the paper they write for.

Journalistic values may be informed by organisational and institutional norms, but they are not necessarily determined by them wholly. What Jones' (1992) work points out is, theoretically and methodologically, the limitations of existing studies of the press/industry nexus which theorise the press from *without* (viewed economically and structurally from the perspective of the industry) rather than from *within* (as distinct media organisations with particular power structures and socio-professional norms). Within these studies, the determining nature of the base has been assumed and yet no study of the working conditions and professional climate of the press (within the wider superstructure) exist<sup>18</sup>; this is necessary in order to work beyond notions of how the industry controls the press and to consider how the press works in and around these economic forces. The passivity and complicity of the press has tended to be assumed rather than validated and this, in epistemological terms, reveals an inconsistency of argument which raises more questions than it provides answers for.

There is a clear need to move away from the notion of a homogenised press that informs much of the work on this area. 'The press' tends to be approached as a single, unified bureaucratic entity and not a highly competitive sector of consumer title publishing where titles jostle with each other to be the first to break new acts and secure exclusives with major artists. The role, equally, of the individual writer in relation to both bureaucratic publishing policy and socio-professional links to the industry has not been considered in any detail. While a number of sociological studies on the activities of the hard news print journalist exist (Breed, 1955; Tunstall, 1971; Rivers, 1973; de Vries & Zwaga, 1997), there has been no sociological analysis of the professional environment of the music journalist, considering how and why writers pick up on tips from the industry or from outside the industry (from other journalists for example) on the basis of demos or on the live circuit. The flows of new acts from these two channels (the industry and the non-industry) have not been considered first hand and, as a direct result, possibly too much speculation has been made in regard to how, exactly, the 'gates' in the press work and the conditions under which they are opened or closed. It is, therefore, essential to

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<sup>18</sup> A few studies (Nowell, 1987; Stratton, 1982; Théberge, 1991; Evans, 1998) have actually incorporated interviews with music journalists, but these interviews are small scale and offer little or no insight into the professional and social dynamic of the newsroom. The journalists, in these interviews, are divorced from the context of their working environment and therefore wider dynamics that the journalists themselves may not be aware of are not picked up on.



consider the press as a complex grouping of both competitive and supplementary titles, produced by a wide range of media professionals (publisher, editors, editorial staff and freelancers) with both collectively- and individually-defined roles and goals to evaluate how power structures operate across all these positions and can become subject to negotiation.

## **Chapter 3 – The Music Magazine Market**



## Introduction

Before conducting a study of the professional activities and goals of music journalists, it is important to locate them occupationally within the commercial context of the magazine publishing market. It is essential to understand the business practices and market activities of magazine publishers and to then extend this to consider how external market forces impact on, shape, direct and condition the activities of music journalists, both individually (in the pursuit of individual goals and career paths) and collectively (as one part of a much wider media organisation infrastructure). This chapter provides an analysis of the development, expansion and subsequent fragmentation of the consumer music magazine market, exploring the investment tactics, niche developments and shifting market shares of the major publishing companies during a particular period of transition and re-evaluation (specifically between late-1998 and 2001). By focusing on a set period, the chapter will analyse how the major publishing organisations distributed their resources as well as how magazines were introduced into, repositioned within or completely removed from the ever-fluid consumer magazine market. At the end of 2000, it was announced that both *Select* and *Melody Maker* (henceforth referred to as *MM* unless quoting from an interview where it is referred to specifically as *Melody Maker*) were to close. While the research focuses on the period immediately before these closures, it will take into account how they fitted into and illustrated market trends as well as how they impacted on the activities of the dominant publishing companies specifically and the mainstream market for consumer music titles generally.

### I A Publishing Duopoly: Emap & IPC's Domination of the Market

The mainstream music magazine publishing sector in Britain in the late-1990s can be viewed in terms of a virtual publishing duopoly. Between them, Emap Metro<sup>19</sup> and IPC<sup>20</sup> own eight of the top ten selling music magazines with combined sales of 662,762 and

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<sup>19</sup> A division of the Emap (East Midland Allied Press) organisation. In mid-2000 it re-branded itself as Emap Performance as Emap increased its multi-media ventures into TV, radio and the Internet.

<sup>20</sup> International Publishing Corporation.

166,944 respectively<sup>21</sup>. Such concentration of ownership is typical of the print media in general with the majority of national and regional newspapers being owned by a relatively small number of publishers (McNair, 1999: 17). Throughout 2000 a number of industry rumours circulated that Cinven (the venture capitalists who funded the management buyout of IPC from Reed International in 1998) were in discussions to sell off part of the company to Telewest (Addicott, 2000h: 1). Interestingly, Emap expressed an interest in acquiring the company (Addicott, 2000g: 1). Feeling, however, within the industry was that a merger of this scale would have “a drastic long-term effect on newsstands across the country” as the two companies’ combined annual turnover was £650m and they controlled over a third of the total UK consumer magazine market (estimated at £2.2 billion) (Reeves, 2000: 11). If such a merger were to go ahead, Emap would control almost all the mainstream consumer music titles and this would undoubtedly act as a barrier to market entry for smaller publishing companies, thereby ensuring an unchallengeable (and, indeed, insuperable) monopoly. These merger rumours, however, subsided by late-2000, but they are illustrative of the overall push towards concentration of ownership that has characterised the market since the mid-1980s.

As the market stands in 2001, only the BBC (publishers of *Top of the Pops*) and Ministry of Sound (publishers of *Ministry* and *Hip-Hop Connection*) can compete on a relatively level playing field with the ‘Big Two’ publishers. Tellingly, both of these companies are not primarily print media publishers and their magazines can, if necessary, be funded and subsidised by their other business interests. Indeed, the magazines exist as merely one part of their wider (global) corporate branding strategies. The other publishers who compete at the periphery of the mainstream market are economically incapable of competing directly with the dominant publishers, pursuing instead much smaller niche readerships (thereby indirectly fuelling the publishing hegemony that places them at a disadvantage).

It is because two publishers dominate this sector that the majority of the analysis will hinge on their specific market performances, investments and power structures.

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<sup>21</sup> *Music Week*, 2001: 4. The figures drawn on here relate to average sales during the period July-December 2000. ABC (Audit Bureau of Circulation) figures are published twice each year with first period average sales (January-June) being



However, a focus on just these companies would give a distorted view of the total market and the chapter will also include discussion of those smaller publishing organisations operating around them. The ‘Big Two’ do, however, serve to characterise the overall market dynamic because, as Bourdieu (1993: 83) notes, those who dominate in the production of cultural goods “operate essentially defensive strategies, designed to perpetuate the status quo by maintaining themselves and the principles on which their dominance is based”. Ultimately, the state of the market during the specific period of analysis can only be fully understood through the consideration of the organisational structuring, business practices and historical growth of, in turn, Emap and IPC. These two specific case studies will be used to focus the key debates and illustrate the dynamics of: portfolio-management, market segmentation, the repositioning of long-standing titles, the re-designing of existing titles, the launching of new titles, the closure of poorly-performing titles, the mainstream push towards lifestyle publishing and, finally, the opportunities opened up to magazines and publishers through branding and brand-extensions.

## II Emap: From Outsider to Market Ascendancy

The publishing history of the UK music press in the 1980s and 1990s can, in many ways, be understood through the publishing history and eventual market domination of Emap Metro Ltd.<sup>22</sup> Within fifteen years, from having no music titles in the late-1970s, Emap’s investment and development strategies radically altered the music press publishing topography and saw them eclipse the once dominant IPC. In terms of portfolio size and range, Emap publishes the fortnightly pop music title *Smash Hits* (with average sales in the second period of 2000 of 221,623), the rock monthly *Q* (204,014), the classic rock monthly *Mojo* (84,010), the dance monthly *Mixmag* (106,111) and the hard rock weekly *Kerrang!* (47,004)<sup>23</sup>. Its alternative rock monthly, *Select*, had a final ABC figure of

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published two months after this period in August and second period average sales (July-December) being published in February of the following year.

<sup>22</sup> Hereafter referred to as Emap, unless a distinction needs to be made between Emap Metro and the parent Emap organisation.

<sup>23</sup> *Music Week*, 2001.

56,049 (covering the period January-June 2000)<sup>24</sup> before its closure in December 2000, by which point its sales had dropped to 50,534 (Addicott, 2000m: 2). *Select* was replaced in Emap's music titles portfolio by the launch of *Kingsize* in March 2001, aimed at 16-34 year olds who had grown out of *Kerrang!* but who did not want to progress to an explicitly mainstream title such as *Q* (Addicott, 2001b: 1).

Emap's earliest publishing success in the music magazine market was with *Smash Hits* in the autumn of 1978 (Rimmer, 1985), launched by the former *NME* editor, Nick Logan. Until that point, the Peterborough-based company was more commonly associated with provincial papers and angling magazines. Logan had originally approached the *NME*'s publishers with the idea before taking it to Emap: "He tried to convince IPC that *Smash Hits* was a viable title and they said 'Nah, we don't think so'. One of the great publishing decisions of recent years [laughs]" (Allan Jones, *Uncut* editor<sup>25</sup>). This, according to Winship (1987: 150), was typical of IPC as an "over-centralized and inflexible organization ... and since the 1970s this factor has contributed to its missing out on nearly every growth sector". Emap had initially proposed that Logan change the title to *Disco Fever*, presumably to exploit the disco market of the period. The rapid mainstream success of the title marked the first step in Emap's eventual market domination and the company shrewdly used it as a "training ground and profit-source to set up other publications" (Beckett, 1996: 8). *Smash Hits*, along with Emap's other main teen title, *Just 17*<sup>26</sup>, was devised to lure young readers away from IPC titles (Winship, 1987). The revenue it generated was used to build and solidify a broad portfolio of music and lifestyle titles, eventually creating a market share greater than that of IPC.

The company was described in the year it launched *Q* by Jordans (the magazine industry analysts) as a young company "still growing and adventurous but shrewd" (1986: 16). Just as Emap had succeeded through IPC turning down *Smash Hits*, so they succeeded with *Q*. The magazine, according to Danny Kelly, former *NME* and *Q* editor (and now publishing director of the *music365* website<sup>27</sup>), was "the result of a mistake that

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<sup>24</sup> *Press Gazette*, 2000: 6-7.

<sup>25</sup> As noted in Chapter 1, all quotes from journalists, publishers and PRs come from first-hand interviews I conducted, unless they came from secondary sources where they are credited as such.

<sup>26</sup> The success of *Smash Hits*, and the other 'teen titles' which incorporated a pop agenda in the 1980s, was partly due to music industry expansion and heavy investment in, and marketing of, pop acts (McRobbie, 1991: 172).

<sup>27</sup> Part of the 365 Corporation that publishes sport, lifestyle and culture sites covering music, football, cricket, rugby and dating.



IPC made when they allowed Mark Ellen and Dave Hepworth – because they weren't hip enough – to be derided as stringers at the *NME*. They took their revenge by making *Smash Hits* and *Q* in their turn both better magazines than the *NME* at various times. And they should take full credit for that". *Q*'s remit<sup>28</sup> was to target an adult album-buying demographic, set explicitly against the weekly music papers that were geared towards the singles market and a student readership<sup>29</sup>. Mark Ellen estimated that the start-up costs for the magazine were under £2m with the expectations for the magazine being that it would go into profit if it sold 55-60,000 copies. Limited market research for *Q* was conducted before its launch and as Andy Cowles noted: "By conventional wisdom we should never have launched it. The research determined that not many people liked it, but them [sic] that did liked it a great deal, therefore we saw this as our way through" (quoted in O'Brien, 1996: 61).

Ellen stated that "the research came back and said 'Don't, under any circumstances, launch this magazine. It will die. It will die like a louse in a Russian's beard!' [laughs]. We, rather arrogantly, shrugged this off and said 'Look, it's not a big deal. We really feel we know a lot about it. We are very qualified to do this because we are the people we're writing for and all our friends<sup>30</sup>.'" What Ellen argues here ties in explicitly with Bourdieu's (1993: 96) contention that the critic should be the "ideal reader" of the paper they write for, working from a position of direct cultural, aesthetic and intellectual empathy with their readership. "To each position there correspond presuppositions, a doxa, and the homology between the producers' position and their clients' is the precondition for this complicity" (ibid.). This cultural and aesthetic homology is, of course, temporal and as writers evolve and their tastes shift, so too do their readerships'.

Writers and readers go through a symbiotic development process, but this is conditional in the sense that as new (and younger) writers and readers come to the title, the title's agenda and appeal are slowly revised. Within this revision, there exists an

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<sup>28</sup> It was originally conceived as a weekly pop title (*Star International*), but Emap rejected this idea (O'Brien, 1996).

<sup>29</sup> Before *Q*, the music press drew 70% of its readership from an under-24 demographic (Tunstall, 1983: 51).

<sup>30</sup> *Q* sold 42,000 copies of its first issue, dropping to 41,000 on the second and dropping further to 37,000 on the fifth. Ellen argues that the sales turned around by word of mouth among a previously ignored readership demographic (25+ year olds still consuming music). The editorial team reacted to the poor initial sales by altering *Q* in its first year before hitting on a "winning formula and a certain character and sense of humour that people really seemed to latch on to"

insidious process of cultural exclusion and repositioning slowly edging the long-standing writers and readers onto other (older) titles to write for and read. At times, this process of exclusion will be much more explicit, as in the case of the *NME* in December 2000, when the newly appointed deputy editor, James Oldham, discussed a recruitment drive to bring in a raft of younger freelancers to shift the title's agenda and appeal. He stated that “*NME* has always had a good youth policy, but it may be an area we have slacked off in the past 12 months. We want to get a younger team in place. We want to be in the office with people who like music and have some fun” (quoted in Addicott, 2000n: 11). While there are organisational structures in place to ensure a turnover of younger writers in the youth-oriented music titles, writers and editors will also be forced to acknowledge that age is a key factor in losing cultural proximity to their readership and subject matter. Some will consequently use the music press as a stepping-stone into other media (Burchill, 1998).

The migration dynamics onto other titles by both writers and readers can be considered in terms of a ‘transferable and evolving homology’, where accumulated ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 43-45) is carried over to a new title which better suits the writers’ professional needs and the readers’ consumption needs. This is perfectly illustrated in the case of John Harris’ resignation from the *Select* editorship before his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday because he could no longer claim cultural empathy with his readers when he was almost twice their average age (Addicott, 1999d). Scott Manson expressed similar reasons when resigning from the *Ministry* editorship, stating that “[n]o one can club forever and I’ve just turned 31 ... It’s definitely time to work for an older magazine” (quoted in Addicott 2001d: 2). While writers can transfer this ‘professional homology’ to existing titles, it can also be used to launch new titles pitched at those readers, mirroring the writers, who have grown out of titles. This can be seen in the establishment of *Q* (by writers who had grown out of the inkie writing for culturally empathetic readers who had grown out of the inkie) and the subsequent establishment of *Mojo* by *Q*’s founding editorial team aimed at like-minded readers who had grown out of *Q* (which will be considered in greater depth below).

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(Ellen). The magazine’s first official sales figures were 48,140 for the period January-June 1987 (BPI, 1995: 51), rising as high as 215,057 for January-June 1996 (*Press Gazette*, 1996: 9)



*Q*, like *Smash Hits* before it, was based on a critical ideology set explicitly against the indulgences and fickleness of those critical discourses circulated within the pages of the weekly papers, and in particular the *NME* (Reynolds, 1990a: 26). Giles (1989b: 16) suggests that the appeal of *Q* lay in its “no nonsense approach ... [which] ... rekindled the interest in pop writing” for many former readers of the inkies. While the *NME* had been defined through its antagonism towards the music industry (Frith, 1983: 172), *Q*’s antithetical position ushered in (through its identification of a new market and its eventual publishing hegemony) a climate of journalistic passivity and the muzzling of confrontational interviewers (Reynolds, 1990a: 27; Kane, 1995: 14). Beyond the purely journalistic, what the success of *Q* and *Smash Hits* revealed was the presence of fecund publishing markets outside of the remit of the alternative rock inkies<sup>31</sup> (*Sounds*, *NME* and *MM*) and they represented, at the time of *Q*’s launch, opposite ends of a publishing spectrum (teenage girls and 25+ males). The ground between and beyond these two demographic groupings was to be carved up by genre-specific niche titles all owned by Emap as part of their ‘cradle-to-the-grave’ publishing philosophy, generally attributed in the music titles sector to Mark Ellen.

This publishing approach is based upon straightforward corporate portfolio-management where companies break their operations down into “strategic business units” (Negus, 1999: 46), with each operational unit being assigned a particular budget and set of middle managers accountable for the overall market success of their portfolios. By breaking the company’s activities down in this manner, the owners and directors develop a corporate strategy for the organisation as whole and can closely monitor the corporate activities and market penetration of each portfolio and each title within that portfolio as a means of maximising profits and minimising waste and expense (Purcell, 1993). In introducing new titles into the market aimed at new (or previously ignored) ‘taste publics’, there are wide repercussions for the market structure (and the agendas of the existing magazines) as a whole. Bourdieu (1993: 108) suggests that any structural transformations within the ‘field’ and market of cultural production will lead to the “displacement of the structure of tastes, i.e. of the symbolic distinction between groups”. By this, he suggests that when a new producer (in this case Emap), a new product (or

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<sup>31</sup> The ‘inkies’ were weekly, broadsheet-format rock titles selling mainly to a late teen and student demographic. The

range of products as evidenced in Emap's broad portfolio structuring) and a new system of tastes (i.e. in the subsequent fragmentation of the market into sub-niches and taste cultures) are brought or forced into the market, those existing producers (IPC), products (inkies) and systems or taste (male students) are sidelined or become moribund.

The logic underpinning Emap's approach was that the diversity of their portfolio would serve to attract a wide demographic of readers and ensure that their future purchasing habits stayed within the company's range of magazines, thereby keeping all profits and advertising revenue within the company. The approach recognised that readers of music titles are seldom readers for life and as they grow up their needs and tastes change. *Q* was founded on the premise that there is a natural fall-off point for readers of the inkies and until it was launched there were no mainstream rock titles for them to graduate to. Indeed, this is related to wider music industry changes (Negus, 1992) and the importance of the previously overlooked 'middle-youth'<sup>32</sup> market (mid-20s to mid-30s adults who still consumed a considerable amount of popular culture), seen most explicitly in the manner in which CD re-issues were promoted by the industry in the 1980s.

Each title within the Emap music portfolio is carefully niched and positioned in such a manner that it does not cannibalise the readership of the magazines either before it or after it in the chain. Each title should, as much as possible, be hermetically-sealed and exist as a stepping-stone, logically following on from the remit and aesthetic of the title before it in the chain and lead, at the upper-end of its readership, into the next title<sup>33</sup>. Neil Burnett, the art editor at *Select*, stated that within Emap three creative directors will work with art editors when titles are routinely redesigned and they will put the 'Emap stamp' on each title across the portfolio, thereby stylistically branding each title and visually promoting an image and aesthetic which links it to its sister titles, again reinforcing the 'cradle-to-the-grave' model<sup>34</sup>. The intention is to ensure stylistic crossover between all

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epithet derives from the fact that cheap printing quality meant ink would come off on the readers' hands.

<sup>32</sup> This concept and demographic bracketing was a theme in several interviews I conducted with editors and publishers.

<sup>33</sup> Of course Emap also publish specific genre-based titles (such as *Kerrang!* and *Mixmag*). These magazines can be seen as part of a second corporate strategy as titles which branch off from the core 'cradle-to-the-grave' model, where readers progress to them rather than *Select* or *Q*. They can, of course, return later to the core model titles.

<sup>34</sup> In March 2000, *Select* was redesigned following the appointment of a new editor (Alexis Petridis) and a new art editor (Cass Spencer). The redesign was part of a revamp designed to turn around falling sales and "scrap its studenty image" (Addicott, 2000c: 2) involving a new logo and type faces. Petridis said that: "I don't want to alienate our



their titles so that they can be identified as a ‘family’ of magazines. Ergo, Emap “get [readers] for life. Start out with *Smash Hits*, then you go through *Select*, then you go through *Q*, and then into *Mojo*. So they’ve got you for life ... Emap have been the most successful publishing house certainly in culture titles ... [and] other publishing houses look to Emap and try and emulate what they do” (Tony Herrington, editor and publisher of *The Wire*). The titles in Emap’s music magazine portfolio are ultimately defined in terms of their ‘niche statements’ (drawing on Wharton, 1992) which should make clear in economic and corporate terms the following: what the scale of their operational market is, what the needs of their readership are, what their readership’s purchasing power is, the size of the total market and their share of that market, what their direct and peripheral competition is, the format and appearance of the title, what its strengths and characteristics are, and, finally, how it fits into and contributes to the company’s overall portfolio.

In building up their portfolio of titles from *Smash Hits*, *Q* and the hard rock title *Kerrang!*, Emap diversified by acquiring *Select* from United Newspapers in 1991, along with the rights to *Sounds* which had folded the year before (Dash, 1992a). Emap had initially rushed out *Zig-Zag* – through the Emap Images division of the company, rather than through Emap Metro which was more commonly associated with music titles - in seventeen weeks to act as a ‘spoiler’<sup>35</sup> for *Select* when it was first launched, fearing that it would take advertising revenue and sales away from *Q*. The *Zig-Zag* spoiler was, however, only to last a single issue. *Select*’s monthly sales rose to 88,000 without any obvious damage to the sales of either *Q* or the inkies, thereby showing that a previously untapped market existed for a title of this nature (Reynolds, 1990a: 27). Emap intended *Select* to serve as an alternative rock title that would bridge the gap between *Smash Hits* and *Q* and also to attract young readers away from IPC’s alternative rock titles (*NME* and *MM*). IPC had recently launched *Vox* as an *NME* offshoot to compete against *Q* in the monthly sector. Emap, feeling it was too late to launch a new title into this particular

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existing readers, but it’s not a student magazine and I don’t want it perceived as a student mag” (quoted in Addicott, 2000c: 2).

<sup>35</sup> In the 1980s, IPC were seen as equally ruthless in protecting their titles, often launching new titles with heavy advertising and promotion to crush those titles that had been launched in direct competition with any of their magazines (Tunstall, 1983: 90).

niche, bought *Select*, brought in new staff and, as Mark Ellen, states “changed it into a kind of monthly title in the entertainment rock magazine, in the *NME* market I suppose”.

The next step in the building up of Emap’s portfolio came partly as a result of a change in editorship at *Q* and what can be considered as a shift in the corporate and bureaucratic culture of the organisation. In 1992 Danny Kelly was headhunted from the editorship of the *NME* by David Hepworth with a remit to reposition *Q* (its first redesign in 11 years) towards the upper-end of the inkies’ readership, thereby biting into IPC’s traditional constituency earlier. When asked about the mechanics of the repositioning, Kelly stated that *Q* had been founded on a principle of covering established acts and such institutionalised hesitancy (waiting for a band to prove their musical and market worth before covering them in any depth) negated *Q*’s ability to competently and confidently cover new acts. Kelly repositioned the magazine so that it was less staid and austere, covering music from outside a rock tradition, particularly rap: “I wanted it to be funnier. I wanted it to be faster. I wanted it to use more of the tricks of the weekly press and of the national tabloids without losing any of its essential quality or beauty ... I wanted it to be ... less like *Q*, really. *Q* had done very well getting to where it was as *Q*. It needed to be a general entertainment magazine that happened to be about pop music: that’s the phrase I’d use”. What this quote from Kelly illustrates is a strategic editorial and middle management concession towards ‘lifestyle’ publishing and the admission that monothematic magazines have an inherent circulation ceiling<sup>36</sup>. The shift in *Q* to bring in coverage of other aspects of popular culture alongside music undoubtedly set a mainstream publishing agenda that other magazines were quick to incorporate and adapt.

Pitching *Q* to a marginally younger readership as a means of netting the inkie readers earlier led to a falling-off of the readership at the magazine’s top end. As Mat Snow (former editor of *Mojo* and a former colleague of Kelly’s at the *NME*), then at *Q*, says of the editorial and market repositioning of the title: “I felt a bit mixed about it to tell you the truth, about Danny coming along. Because I already rather liked *Q* the way it was

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<sup>36</sup> It also reveals a bureaucratic acknowledgement that popular music consumption patterns had changed. Mark Ellen stated that organisational research discovered that consumers were no longer loyal fans of artists (buying their whole catalogue) and were buying more compilation albums and magazines had to adapt to take this into account. This, Ellen believed, validated the need for focus group-based research by publishers (an increasingly common marketing tactic) as titles must be constantly evolving and – crucially – adaptive to changes in the market. In the US in the 1970s, *Rolling Stone* had to go through a similar process of readapting to society and the market by incorporating broader lifestyle, culture and political journalism into what was originally a rock-centric magazine (Janssen, 1974: 61).



and I was pretty sure Danny would change it. And if he was going to change it, he could only change it for the worse ... I didn't want it to go younger because it suited me at my age which was then 34, 35." Nevertheless, *Q*'s recruitment of younger writers and its pursuit of a younger readership demographic under Danny Kelly opened up, via the transfer of a clear writer/reader homology into *Mojo*, a new publishing opportunity at the top end of its readership demographic. In terms of reader/writer symbiosis, this new publishing niche offered career development opportunities for those long-serving *Q* writers with the closest cultural proximity to the readership demographic being slowly excluded from *Q*'s new agenda<sup>37</sup>.

Magazines must adapt and evolve in reaction to social and market changes (Wharton, 1992) and *Mojo* (a title Emap had been planning since 1992 (Dash, 1992b)) can be seen as the result of such a practice in operation. Indeed, according to Glen (1999), in order to survive in the current market, "magazines need investment, need to move on, need to reflect the changing lifestyle patterns of the readership" (16). Emap, rather than have *Q*'s aesthetic shadow the ageing of its readership, invested in a new niche publication to hold on to readers in keeping with what Wenban-Smith (1978) argues when he states that small changes in an established magazine's content will affect the composition of the potential audience at the margins. If editorial policy remains static, the title will appeal to an unchanging (and potentially dwindling) readership. All mainstream magazines must compete with rival titles courting the same readership and, in the long term, "demographic and cultural changes will ... [accelerate] ... the existing [market] segmentation by creating new markets or calling for changes in approach" (ibid.: 3).

Paul Trynka (*Mojo* editor) stated that the magazine was conceived within a niche market philosophy with publishing expectations of monthly sales of around 40,000, a figure it far exceeded, selling twice that at 84,010<sup>38</sup> and moving into what can be classed

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<sup>37</sup> A former Emap and IPC employee who wished to remain anonymous said of *Mojo* and the market identification of its demographic: "Here's a bit of company witchcraft for you – they always say that *Mojo* is aimed at the sort of men who now have dens. You know when a guy gets married and has kids and there's a room that he goes into just to be a bit crap. And that's *Mojo*'s reader. And he goes in there to play his Ry Cooder bootlegs and what have you. Whereas *Q* is for the person who's probably just bought their first house and has got a garden flat and lives with a partner. And this was all part of Emap's strategy and it does work. And I remember at IPC, we were really scathing when *Mojo* came out. We just thought there was 'The Kids' and there was *Q* readers and then you died. And there was no notion that there was something different and that's why *Mojo*'s been successful".

<sup>38</sup> *Music Week* (2001: 4).

as mass market sales patterns. Mat Snow suggested that in terms of the ‘cradle-to-the-grave’ approach there will be smaller sales for each succeeding age bracket, with a reader fall-off at each stage; therefore *Smash Hits*, aimed at a teen demographic will sell more than *Q*, which in turn will sell more than *Mojo*. Beyond exploiting this new (older) market niche and keeping the post-*Q* readership’s purchasing habits within the Emap organisation, another motivation for the launch of *Mojo* was that of corporate and portfolio protectionism. Danny Kelly suggested that, in purely corporate terms, Emap launched *Mojo* “to protect *Q* against a high-level launch against it”. Indeed, as Winship (1987: 41) argues, a common strategy adopted by publishers when one of their titles is performing well in, or dominating its particular market, is to “expediently bring out their own ‘copy-cat’ publication rather than run the risk of a competitor rushing in with ... a ‘me too’ publication”.

The next stage in the building up of Emap’s portfolio of titles was the £4m acquisition of the dance monthly *Mixmag* from the independent publishers DMC in January 1996. The title began in 1983 as a black and white newsletter for DJs and was run out of a DJ organisation in Slough. David Davies (former editor of *Q*) began his editorial career at *Mixmag* in 1991 when the “magazine was then like a ‘me-too’ publication to *The Face* and I changed it so it was an out-and-out dance music magazine. The sales then were 9,500 copies. I became editor and I was editor for two and bit years and got the sales up to 35,000 copies”. Barry McIlheney, the managing director of Emap Metro stated that they bought the title to help build up Emap’s portfolio of youth titles saying that: “We wanted to buy the whole brand and the people who came with it” (quoted in Jaynes, 1996: 7). Having said this, however, a number of *Mixmag* employees (including Davies) were not kept on by Emap after the take-over and the company made editorial appointments with a remit to turn the magazine, through the incorporation of lifestyle features, into a mainstream youth title focussing on dance music rather than as an ‘out-and-out dance music magazine’.

The editor of *Mixmag*, Neil Stevenson, when interviewed about the place of the magazine within the overall Emap corporate structure, revealed that the title’s acquisition from DMC served a dual-function for the company: firstly as a strong and branded market presence in a growing publishing niche and, secondly, as an information resource



within the organisation that could be accessed by the other titles in the portfolio. Emap's structuring of their titles around demographic and genre axes makes niche market sense while also making intramural financial sense as resources can be pooled while waste and expense is minimised:

Emap[']s ... aim is to have a portfolio of clearly differentiated titles that cover all kinds of men's lifestyles and music and I think they just saw there was this really exciting youth movement [i.e. dance music] and they weren't represented there ... [T]hey just thought "It's really important for us to have the market leader in that field" ... [B]y having this magazine, they've also acquired the expertise. So when a lifestyle magazine within the portfolio needs some expertise about dance music it can call down to us. So I think it's a good fit. (Neil Stevenson).

Of course, this is not to suggest that the 'cradle-to-the-grave' model operates as smoothly in practice as it does as a normative ideal. Indeed, *Mixmag* can be seen as a genre-based supplementary title that runs alongside the core 'cradle-to-the-grave' titles. David Davies (when editor of *Q*) stated that the outside view of this model was markedly different from the operational actualities and the company was not as rigidly structured around it as rival publishers and editors believed. He said: "I think that's really easy to understand from outside and that would have been my view before I came here ... But I'm certainly not encouraged to hit a particular audience. I'm encouraged to sell as many copies as I can and to make it about music. That's really my brief. So I don't feel that I have to allow some room for *Mojo* to operate up there. If I want to go on *Mojo*'s territory, I'll have it. If I want to go on *Select*'s territory, or *Mixmag*'s or even *Sky*'s, I'll go there as well. So I don't feel that they are niched. I think that they overlap a lot". Indeed, the former *NME* editor, Steve Sutherland, said of the Emap model in the context of an over-populated and uncertain market: "Emap, for instance [begins to draw diagram on a piece of paper], it used to be that you used to get *Smash Hits*, then you get *Select*, then you get *Q*, then you get *Mojo*. And it was called the 'cradle-to-the-grave' scenario. And it looked beautiful, but unfortunately it doesn't work any more because *Q* are bastardising what *Select* do, *Select* are bastardising what *Q* do, and *Mojo* go and put Gomez on the cover and Gomez are still alive so that's no fucking good. So ... it's all become muddied. Gloriously it should work, but it doesn't". However, editors and staff on both *Select* and *Mojo* made it

clear in interviews that *Q* was Emap's flagship music publication. As a result, the other titles in the portfolio existed as entry points to or exit points from the *Q* aesthetic and there was a clear sense of senior management involvement to ensure that overlap between titles, while certainly unavoidable, was as minimal as possible. *Q* was considered as the portfolio's cornerstone (and its market priority) and the other titles had to necessarily cluster around and adapt to its hegemonic position and its homology with its readership.

It has been suggested that Emap, in building up a large portfolio of music titles, have ultimately overreached themselves and cracks in the model began to appear as the music magazine sector became over-saturated and individual titles began to experience sliding sales, illustrated most obviously in the closure of *Select* in December 2000. In addition to this, in 2001 the Emap organisation as a whole (including its US and radio interests) was under immense pressure from investors after accumulating debts of around £600m and seeing its share price drop from £17.50 in late-1999 to £7 in early 2001 (Teather, 2001). The company reacted by slashing its pan-organisation Internet budget for 2001-2004 from £250m to £120m. However, despite Davies and Sutherland's criticisms of the 'cradle-to-the-grave' model, the direct structural, organisational and marketing influence of Emap on IPC cannot be ignored. IPC took explicit steps after 1997 to re-position their music titles around a portfolio logic, carefully segmenting them in their redesigns to avoid "sub-optimization" (Randall, 1997: 138) in the pursuit of complementary paths as the following section and case studies illustrate.

### III IPC: a Toppled Hegemony

IPC entered the publishing market in the mid-1960s, after a multiple-merger<sup>39</sup>, and Tunstall (1983: 82-84) suggests that it was because it produced pro-Labour papers that it was allowed to dominate in the publishing market and grow to a size he considered wholly inappropriate for a single media organisation. In the 1960s competition sharply declined in the British publishing market as IPC's domination increased and the fact that

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<sup>39</sup> Between 1958-61, as a result of a series of takeovers, IPC acquired four previously separate magazine companies: Amalgamated Press in 1958 and Odham's in 1961 (Odham's had itself bought both Hulton and Newnes in 1959) (Tunstall, 1983: 82-84).



they owned many of the specialist titles at that point ensured that competition in the field was limited (ibid.). IPC was a subsidiary of the International Publishing Corporation and ultimately controlled by Reed International (Winship, 1987) until a £860m buyout by the management of the company in January 1998, funded by the venture capitalists Cinven (Reeves, 1999a) with plans to float on the stock market in 2002 (Davies, 1998).

The successes of Emap in the 1980s, first with *Smash Hits* and then with *Q*, had important structural and organisational ramifications for IPC which found its market position and sales first threatened and then eclipsed by this relatively new organisation. IPC, in attempting to echo Emap's business and operational practices to reclaim lost ground, works as a rich case study of an organisation in crisis, finding its market hegemony overturned by a publishing organisation whose success was built up on publishing opportunities IPC had ironically missed out on. The shifts in the total publishing market's dynamics impacted directly on IPC's position and forced it to reorient and reposition long-standing titles, fold once-healthy titles and launch new titles into distinct market niches in a manner which clearly suggested a company coming to terms with and adapting to their major rival's central publishing philosophy.

Both *MM* (begun in 1926) and the *NME* (1952) reacted slowly to the emergence of rock culture and in 1970, under the editorship of Alan Smith, the *NME* was even on the brink of closure, producing 16-page issues, having previously sold over 200,000 copies per week in the wake of Beatlemania (Maconie, 1992). A new recruitment drive under Smith, bringing in Roy Carr, Nick Logan, Nick Kent and Charles Shaar Murray led into an editorial repositioning and orientation of the paper towards the counterculture and brought the paper's sales to over 300,000 by May 1972 (ibid.), eclipsing *MM*'s sales and making the *NME* the dominant weekly title with the result that "*Melody Maker* has tended to define itself as whatever the *NME* isn't at any given time. The problem is that the *Melody Maker* ought to have been put down many years ago. But it serves as a protection against somebody launching against the *NME* directly and the publisher [i.e. IPC] of both titles [i.e. *NME* and *MM*] over the past twelve years" (Danny Kelly). Indeed, it can be argued that the decision by IPC to close *MM* at the end of 2000 was taken when it became apparent that, in the light of a shrinking weekly market, there was no need to keep the title to protect the *NME* against an Emap launch.

Through the 1980s, the two titles were defined through an intense aesthetic and professional rivalry<sup>40</sup>, fuelled somewhat by the fact that, according to former *MM* writer David Stubbs, *NME* had become IPC's flagship publication and IPC – in terms of bureaucratic structuring and resource management – would not let *MM* overtake the *NME*'s sales meaning that there “were lots of rumours at that point about *NME* and *Melody Maker* having to merge<sup>41</sup>. There was the idea that *Smash Hits* was the future and that *NME* and *Melody Maker* would have to adjust their agenda accordingly or go out of business”. The sheer fact of this direct rivalry between sister titles, more than anything, exposes the deficiency in IPC's organisational and bureaucratic *modus operandi* and portrays the organisation as lagging behind Emap in terms of modern business practices and inter-title market structuring. In the 1990s IPC took various steps to expand its portfolio of titles, launching the alternative rock monthly *Vox* in 1990 to compete with *Q* and *Select* (only to see it fold in 1998, which will be discussed in more detail below), launching the dance monthly *Muzik* in 1994 to compete with *Mixmag* and, finally, launching the film and music monthly *Uncut* in 1997 to compete, in its music coverage, with *Mojo* (discussed in more detail below).

While previously derided as cumbersome and monolithic (Winship, 1987), IPC organisationally restructured in the late-1990s in response to a dwindling market share and ultimately adopted and adapted the structural model of their closest rival. In 1999 the company, following pressure from Cinven to show returns on their investment, announced cost-cutting measures designed to save £6m a year which translated as 200 job losses (Reeves, 1999a). IPC's main music titles are the alternative rock weekly *NME* (with sales of 70,003) and *MM* (32,115) and, in the monthly sector, the dance title *Muzik* (43,748) and the music and film title, *Uncut* (53,193)<sup>42</sup>. *MM* was closed as a standalone title on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2000 and folded into the *NME* ‘superbrand’ (Harris, 2000: 9) with a final ABC figure of 32,500 (Perry, 2000: 7). In early 1999, IPC had attempted to sell

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<sup>40</sup> Danny Kelly said of the rivalry between the two titles in 1992: “Relations remain extremely poor, to the point of violence” (quoted in Dash, 1992c: 8) and several anecdotes circulate concerning physical fights between senior editors on both papers. Pubs near their shared offices (near Waterloo in London) were territorially divided and referred to as either ‘*Melody Maker* pubs’ or ‘*NME* pubs’. As well as aesthetic and ideological barriers between the titles, there was an occupational separation stipulated by IPC whereby freelancers could not contribute to both papers simultaneously. They represent two distinct ‘cultures’ within the organisation, unlike within Emap where writers could, and did, contribute to several titles within the portfolio thereby revealing the marked distinctions between the organisational structures and resource management activities of the two publishers.

<sup>41</sup> This is eventually what happened in December 2000.



the title to Emap but the deal fell through and during the eighteen months before *MM*'s closure, Emap had been in “informal talks” with IPC about buying out the *NME* (Addicott, 2000m: 2) but these discussions did not come to fruition. The specific business practices of IPC will be looked at in greater detail in the following case studies. At the time the research for this Ph.D. was conducted, IPC was going through a period of much greater upheaval than Emap and, as such, represented a richer area of analysis in relation to how magazines are repositioned, redesigned, closed down and launched. However, the following case studies, while focusing specifically on IPC titles, will draw in, where relevant, issues relating to other publishers and their magazines, most notably Emap.

#### IV Repositioning Titles: *Melody Maker* as a Case Study<sup>43</sup>

The market impact of *Smash Hits* on the mid-1980s IPC (and most obviously on *MM*) was unavoidable. According to Allan Jones (then the *MM* assistant editor), the editor (Mike Oldfield) resigned in 1984 over disputes about the direction the paper should take. “Basically the paper had gone through a very, very difficult time under him because he couldn't decide what he wanted it to be. There was a lot of interference on the publishing side. One week they were telling him to be *Smash Hits*. Then they wanted him to be *Sounds*. So we'd veer between the most gormless pop and the most gormless heavy metal. While, at the same time, the *NME* was just thriving. We were just lost completely. We were all over the place”. The full-colour and glossy production qualities of *Smash Hits* exposed the inkies as anachronistic and the magazine brought a great deal of humour and irreverence “which had pretty much been lost in the music weeklies. Both *NME* and ourselves at that time – it was a bit serious” (Allan Jones).

Jones had been left in charge of the paper on those occasions when Oldfield was away: “I used to get so fed up putting Wham! on the fucking cover and stuff like that. Because nobody would buy it when *Melody Maker* put them on the cover. You sensed ... [those readers] ... wanted something else from us ... So, quite famously, when he was

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<sup>42</sup> *Music Week*, 2001: 4.

<sup>43</sup> While *MM* eventually folded in late-2000, during the period of my research it was being repositioned in the market and this section will focus mainly on the corporate dynamics behind this repositioning.

away, I think it was October '83, The Smiths just started. Loved them. He went away with a list of instructions: 'Must get Human League. Must get Wham!' I thought, 'Fuck it. We'll put The Smiths on the cover'. And it was their first ever cover ... [The publishers] went 'Oh, you're fucking mad. The paper's going to sink without trace'. And of course when the figures came back it was our largest selling issue that year. There had been this new audience growing which, once again *Melody Maker* had barely noticed". This incident illustrates how the editor as the 'ideal reader' exists, to draw again on Bourdieu (1993: 94-96), as a 'cultural' producer and the publishing executive exists as a 'commercial' producer and how the tensions which surround them lock them into a – at times – mutually-antagonistic nexus. The 'cultural' producer places an emphasis on 'aesthetics' and 'professionalism' (a commitment to new artists/music and an obligation to take risks with unproven cover stars) in the mass circulation of symbolic goods and services in their writing (Schiller, 1989: 30; Bourdieu, 1993: 115) while the 'economic' producer is oriented almost exclusively around the 'pragmatics of business', viewing magazines as revenue generators as opposed to forums for cultural debate and exchange. This all links into the organisational, occupational and economic tensions that characterise the dichotomous relationship between what Breed (1955: 332) terms 'executives' (owners and publishing middle management) and 'staffers' (editors and writers).

Jones suggested that *MM* survived during the 1980s as a more underground alternative to *NME* and that for a period readers were buying it for writers like Simon Reynolds, David Stubbs, Chris Roberts and the Stud Brothers and they were not necessarily swayed by the choice of cover acts: "And I think for a time it did work because we were having weekly sales of around 60-70,000 and that would be putting the Butthole Surfers on the cover. So it certainly wasn't selling on their immense popularity [laughs]". The 1990s, however, was to prove the most testing time for the inkiies, symbolised most by the folding of *Sounds* in 1990 with final sales of 40,238, having dropped from 172,500 in 1980 (BPI, 1995: 50). "The surprising thing about that was the fact that *NME* and *Melody Maker* thought 'Great. We've got forty odd thousand readers



to carve up between us' and they weren't there<sup>44</sup>. In retrospect it was quite significant I think. It really did prove that the readership for the rock weeklies was much smaller than anybody had imagined. And basically since around that period it has contracted even more" (Allan Jones).

In 1995/1996 the general consensus within IPC had been that the Britpop<sup>45</sup> commercial crossover had been something of a hollow victory for the inkies with their sales not benefiting greatly from the mainstream success of acts such as Pulp, Blur and Oasis; the alternative acts they once had the monopoly on were being written about in the tabloids and broadsheets. As Terry Staunton (former *NME* news editor and *Uncut* contributor) noted: "[T]he Blur and Oasis thing took off to such a degree that it became tabloid news ... You could read about them anywhere and what's more you didn't have to wait every seven days to read about it ... It was around about this time that the likes of Piers Morgan and Matthew Wright and Andy Coulson [the pop columnists at the national daily tabloid newspapers] were actually doing essentially a page of pop music every single day<sup>46</sup>. And on a news and 'what's happening' level it's very, very difficult to compete with that." Indeed, this is a part of a slow process that can be dated back to at least the early-1970s when popular music was being written about (to varying degrees) outside of the specialist press (Hill, 1991: 173).

As sales for the inkies continued to slide throughout the 1990s, IPC were forced to re-evaluate the market positions and roles of their weekly titles as market trends suggested the growth of the glossy monthly sector was directly proportional to the decline of the inkies. Drawing on Emap's portfolio management techniques, in 1997, IPC had Allan Jones leave the editorship of *MM* to develop and launch the music and film monthly *Uncut* for the company. He had been editor of the paper from 1984 and his

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<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the sales of *NME* dropped from 121,001 to 111,503 in the period immediately following the closure of *Sounds* and *MM* dropped from 70,100 to 67,583 in the same period (BPI, 1995: 50).

<sup>45</sup> Britpop was the label given to the type of alternative rock acts long-championed by the inkies. These acts would be classed as 'indie' – but indie in the sense of a genre rather than indie as a business practice (Negus, 1992).

<sup>46</sup> *The Sun* was the first tabloid to run a regular music and showbiz page ('Bizarre') on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1982, designed explicitly to attract a younger readership and the other tabloids, noting the commercial implications, quickly followed this lead (Johnson, 1998). Broadsheet newspapers were slower to pick up on the market possibilities of a regular music section. *The Guardian*, for example, under-estimated the cultural significance of Kurt Cobain's suicide in 1994 and subsequently placed music as more central in their arts coverage (MacArthur, 1999). *The Times*' music critic, David Sinclair, said that the paper had negligible popular music coverage in the 1970s and was so old-fashioned that writers were not allowed to use abbreviations resulting in the Sex Pistols' 1977 single being referred to, rather quaintly, in the paper as 'Anarchy in the United Kingdom'. In 1986, the paper did not have a rock critic but rather a jazz critic and this was, Sinclair believed, symbolic of their "very out-of-touch editorial position".

departure afforded IPC the opportunity to rethink and reposition the paper along the lines of a homology with a younger readership. The ‘executive’/‘staffer’ (Breed, 1955: 332) tension in terms of a redesign was reduced in this instance with the appointment of a new editor (Mark Sutherland, a former *NME* features editor) whose plans for the paper (i.e. to reposition it away from the *NME* towards a younger demographic) most matched those of the publishing executives in a period of increasing bureaucratisation and interventionist middle management tactics within IPC.

Alan Lewis (editor in chief of IPC music titles) stated that the general bureaucratic feeling within IPC was that the paper should be repositioned so that it did not directly compete with the *NME*. He said: “We felt it [*MM*] was really too close to *NME*. That didn’t matter when the scene was healthy. In fact it worked perfectly well for us. But as the scene became less healthy and there was less advertising about people began to wonder why we were publishing two titles which essentially had the same agenda – i.e. indie rock”. The paper was now to operate as a bridging paper between *Smash Hits* and the *NME* (Sullivan, 1998), intended to lure readers away from Emap titles and to court a younger demographic as they had lost a lot of their student readers to the *NME*. The *NME* was now a paper that *MM* no longer competed directly with and both titles, as an IPC cost-cutting exercise, were expected to pool resources (particularly photographs). Lewis argued that in the late-1990s market it had become apparent that it was impossible for a magazine to pinpoint a niche that it would be able to keep to itself, indicating that *Mojo*’s cannibalism of part of *Q*’s readership was indicative of this. Indeed, this was part of the reason why IPC intended to put a three-year gap in the target age groups between *MM* and *NME*, rather than have the former lead directly into the latter. As *MM*’s news editor, Carol Clerk, noted during the period of repositioning: “The editorial policy is more to get these younger readers, not just catch them when they’re leaving *Smash Hits*, but get them while they’re at *Smash Hits*”. The main problem facing the repositioned *MM* was to alert its new target demographic to its presence and new cultural agenda. In 1999, IPC invested in promoting both weekly titles, but their promotional budgets were determined by their overall profitability. Alan Lewis stated



that *MM* had been assigned a promotional budget of £300,000-400,000<sup>47</sup> in order to alert more 15-year-old readers to its presence and it was to be sold to them as a more fun and accessible version of the *NME*.

Throughout 1999, there was immense industry scepticism surrounding the repositioned *MM*, from both Emap and IPC employees, exacerbated somewhat by *MM*'s continual sales decline under Mark Sutherland<sup>48</sup>. During Allan Jones' final period as editor of *MM*, the paper's sales slid from 58,486 for the period July-December 1995<sup>49</sup> to 45,203 for the period January-June 1997<sup>50</sup> when he left to launch *Uncut* for IPC. In 1980, the paper had been at a high of 127,800, dropping to 57,146 in 1988 and peaking at 70,191 in 1991<sup>51</sup>. During Sutherland's first period as editor the sales figures fell to 42,105 for the period July-December 1997<sup>52</sup>. The rest of his editorship was marked by a virtually constant slide in sales: 40,017 for the period January-June 1998<sup>53</sup>, a negligible increase to 40,349 for July-December 1998<sup>54</sup>, a further drop to 34,068 for January-June 1999<sup>55</sup>, and dropping again to 32,115 for July-December 1999<sup>56</sup>. IPC had anticipated a sales slide for the paper and "Rob Tame, publishing director of IPC's music and sports group, said it was inevitable the magazine would lose old readers, following the re-launch and reformatting" in October 1999 (Azeez, 2000: 6). The decline, however, showed no signs or levelling out and the title was eventually folded in December 2000 with a final circulation figure of 32,500<sup>57</sup>.

The final stage of the magazine's market repositioning came in late-1999 when the paper changed from an A3 inkie to an A4 glossy, which Mark Sutherland termed the paper's "biggest step" in 73 years (quoted in Addicott, 1999c: 7). Considerable promotional activity surrounded the reformatting (including the gimmick of projecting

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<sup>47</sup> Company feeling was that more money needed to be invested in the promotion of the title to make it a success and the relatively small promotional budget assigned to the paper was symptomatic of general penny-pinching and marketing myopia within the company. IPC, it was argued, needed to treat the re-design as a long-term investment (as it needed to court and build up a whole new readership) but its budget was more typical of a short-term promotion.

<sup>48</sup> Indeed, in the 1980s, the general feeling in the magazine industry had been that no magazine had ever successfully been re-launched or repositioned (Tunstall, 1983: 103).

<sup>49</sup> Handley, 1996.

<sup>50</sup> *Press Gazette*, 1997b.

<sup>51</sup> BPI, 1995: 50.

<sup>52</sup> *Press Gazette*, 1998a.

<sup>53</sup> *Press Gazette*, 1998b)

<sup>54</sup> *Press Gazette*, 1999a: 7.

<sup>55</sup> *Media Week*, 1999.

<sup>56</sup> *Press Gazette*, 2000.

<sup>57</sup> Perry (2000: 7).

the first glossy cover onto Buckingham Palace), but as Allan Glen (1999: 16) noted: “For all the fanfare, it’s essentially the same mag, wrapped up in glossy paper”. He then voiced the dominant industry rumours surrounding the new look magazine by presciently asking: “So is this a slick marketing ploy aimed at getting it off the bottom shelves and onto eye-level to fight its corner with *Q* and *Select*? Or is it – considering it’s the second redesign in under two years – a last-ditch attempt to save the title before a merger with its sparring partner and stablemate *NME*?” (ibid.).

Across the music journalism profession there was uncertainty as to what exactly *MM*’s repositioning was supposed to achieve. Allan Jones stated that it was not the direction in which he would have taken the paper, implying that it perhaps should have gone even closer to underground rock and dance acts instead of courting a mainstream pop and teen readership in what was a highly competitive market. Beyond losing its core readership, the paper’s redesign also lost the title (and IPC) key advertising revenue. An anonymous *MM* section editor claimed that, before Mark Sutherland took over, quarterly advertising revenue in the paper had never dropped below £500,000 and within one year of his editorship it had slipped to £100,000. This was, according to the section editor, because technical and equipment advertisers were not happy to be associated with the paper’s new direction. As Danny Eccleston, features editor at *Q* and a former *NME* contributor, noted: “One of the structural problems at *Melody Maker* is that it makes a lot of money out of the musicians’ ads and the gear advertising at the back. Now of course bizarrely they’re the magazine that is the least attractive to experienced musicians who might want to buy a new amp.” Beyond the loss of equipment advertising, the paper’s redirection had isolated a number of smaller independent labels that ran advertisements on a regular basis. As Jim Irvin, associate editor at *Mojo* and former reviews editor at *MM*, observed: “The *Maker* was their homeland. So a lot of their revenue was coming in from those artists. And they suddenly, for no reason whatsoever, except that they had taken on this guy whose vision this was, they turned it into something that was completely against all that crowd and lost a *fuck* of a lot of revenue and a *fuck* of a lot of readers. To no discernible benefit”. The industry’s overall lack of faith in the redesign was neatly articulated by Mat Snow: “Put it this way, they identified a niche in that



market, but is there a market in that niche?" As it turned out, in IPC's eyes there was neither a sustainable nor a profitable market in the niche.

## V Re-Designing Titles: *NME* as a Case Study

In removing the direct competition that had existed between the *NME* and *MM*, through taking the latter to a younger demographic, IPC was forced also to significantly redesign the former. This late-1990s redesign, however, needs to be considered in terms (and, indeed, as a natural consequence) of the historical evolution of the title and the stylistic and aesthetic implications of changes in editorship, turnover of staff and general editorial redirection. As Reynolds (1990a: 26-27) notes, it was the emergence in the mid-1980s of the rock monthlies and style magazines that directly impacted on the market stability of the inkies. They initiated the market fragmentation and over-saturation that placed the weeklies in such a precarious position at the end of the 1990s, resulting in an increasingly cautious and conservative corporate publishing climate. The *NME*, under the editorship of Ian Pye in the mid-1980s, was a publication that was heavily divided and the direction in which Pye was taking it resulted in what became known as 'The Hip Hop Wars'. Danny Kelly, then a writer on the paper, said: "What happened was ... Ian Pye ... had this coterie, which included his wife who was a production editor, [and they] gradually tried to spin a line to the readers that rock music was dead and only black music had any pertinence. Now I am a *massive* collector of black music. I have tens of thousands of hip-hop, doo-wop, soul, r & b and reggae records in my house. I yield to no man in my knowledge of the link between 20<sup>th</sup> century music, black culture, pan-Africanism ... but it doesn't sell pop music magazines. Or at least the abandonment of rock music was never going to be anything but a disaster for the *NME*". The subtext of all this was that the *NME* had built up its profile in the courting of a particular taste public and demographic and economic pragmatism dictated that they appease this readership through consistent coverage of particular genres (essentially indie and alternative rock). What can be seen here is a schism in, and collapse of, the notion of the 'ideal reader' ('ideal' in the sense that the writers *are* their readership) with particular writers no longer seeing cultural

empathy with their readers but rather presenting the transfer in their agenda to their readers as an ‘ideal’ (‘ideal’ in the sense of locating themselves as an antithetical taste public that the readers should somehow aspire to join) and in effect chastising their readership for not liking the same music that they liked.

Alan Lewis was brought in as editor for the period immediately following Pye’s departure: “I joined the *NME* as the editor in 1987. A somewhat unpopular choice with the staff ... They had a page called ‘Manifesto’ where people would bang on about saving the whales and stuff. They’d almost ditched news altogether. They saw themselves as *The Face* I suppose. So my job was to come in and shake it up”. Kelly superseded Lewis as editor and brought in a new editorial team with the explicit intention of redesigning the paper and halting the sales slump by dropping politics in favour of a more populist and mainstream approach (Reynolds, 1990a: 26). Kelly stated that the timing of his editorship was crucial and that he was “[v]ery lucky because ‘Madchester’<sup>58</sup> happened. I had a very talented group of people around me. I had James Brown, who went on to be editor of *Loaded*. I had Andrew Collins who went on to be the editor of *Q*. I had Brendon Fitzgerald who went on to be the editor of [the music website] *music365*. I had Steve Lamacq [now a Radio 1 DJ]. I had Stuart Maconie [now a writer and broadcaster]. I had Mary Anne Hobbs [now a Radio 1 DJ]. It was an extraordinary, fertile time at the *NME*.” Brendon Fitzgerald claimed that this new editorial team and mainstream pitch “re-established the *NME*. Because it was quite shaky when I first went there and it was our team who put the sales back up over 100,000”. The paper had dropped to 92,667 in the period July-December 1988 from a high of 230,900 in January-June 1980<sup>59</sup>. It was to peak at 121,001 for July-December 1990<sup>60</sup>, which was the period of mainstream crossover for the ‘Madchester’ acts.

In September 1992 (Dash, 1999b), Danny Kelly left the *NME* to edit *Q* and in October (Dash, 1992c) Steve Sutherland was promoted from assistant editor at *MM* to the editorship of the paper. Sutherland, in discussing his appointment, raised issues of the cultural function and obligation of the writer as ‘ideal reader’ as well as the professional

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<sup>58</sup> ‘Madchester’ was the name given to the Manchester dance-rock scene, typified by bands such as the Stone Roses and the Happy Mondays, between 1988 and 1991. It was also referred to as ‘Baggy’.

<sup>59</sup> BPI, 1995: 50.

<sup>60</sup> BPI, 1995: 5.



consequences of a transfer in an editorial team's cultural agenda at odds with that of their readership:

Danny moved on, but he had a team of people around him ... [w]ho, I think it was probably fair to say, didn't get out that much. They were very erudite writers but they were fairly armchair. And they weren't perhaps tremendously in touch with the readers. *NME* historically has been a very interactive paper with its readers. And often its readers have become its writers. And I think people kind of saw the fact that there was an unbreachable bulkhead, almost, of writers who had settled in there. And bringing me in was obviously not a particularly popular thing because I had been fairly critical of *NME* while I was working on *Melody Maker* and I had very different views. So the brief that I introduced to it was to get it back to – for want of a better term, to make it a bit more 'street' again. A lot of those people left when Danny left or when I joined. We got a new crew of people in and hopefully touched base again with the readers.

Sutherland's appointment, as he noted, was by no means a popular one in the *NME*. His unpopularity was mainly the result of a live review he wrote while at *MM* in which he directly attacked the *NME* and elevated the *MM*'s core aesthetic above it in what is still commonly referred to by music journalists as the 'dogshit/diamonds incident'. The fact that *MM*'s direct attack on the *NME* was allowed to happen is seen by these writers as symptomatic of the bureaucratic incompetence at IPC at the time and their inability to position their two weekly titles in complementary and mutually beneficial market niches. The *NME*, and most obviously Steve Lamacq, had been championing acts such as Carter the Unstoppable Sex Machine, The Frank & Walters, Ned's Atomic Dustbin and Thousand Yard Stare – acts Sutherland derided as 'T-shirt bands'. In the 30<sup>th</sup> May 1992 issue of *MM*, Sutherland wrote a live review of Suede (who he had recently put on the cover of *MM* under the title of 'The Best New Band in Britain' before they had released their debut single) supporting Kingmaker at the Town & Country Club (now the Forum) in North London. Despite the fact that Suede were the support act, they were given the main photograph in the review and Sutherland wrote the review in a manner that alternated between normal font (corresponding to Kingmaker) and italics (relating to Suede). The review set up and worked through - using Suede and Kingmaker as catalysts - two distinct and oppositional aesthetics. Suede were described as having "[d]rama. Poetry. Poise. Audacity" whereas Kingmaker were "[c]liché. Slogans" (Sutherland, 1992:

15). The most telling moment in the review is when he wrote: “Let's not fanny around shall we? The Unstoppable Frank & King Carter Dustbin Stare. NME. *Suede*. *Verve*. *Levitation*. *Pavement*. *Mercury Rev*. *Melody Maker*. Dogshit. *Diamonds*. What are *Suede* doing here - taunting the unconverted? *Touching the heaven and hell in some of us*. What are Kingmaker doing here - seizing their grubby little moment before *Suede* put them back on the dole?” (ibid.).

This review, and what it symbolised, reflected badly on IPC's corporate management of their overall portfolio and the company's middle management were fully aware that Sutherland's appointment would meet with opposition and resistance within the *NME*, particularly among those staff members who had applied for the editor's post. Publishing director, Andy McDuff, said of the appointment: “It was certainly not the soft option and I can understand why some people are agitated about us appointing an outsider. I'm sure they feel it's a vote of no confidence in them, but that's far from the truth”<sup>61</sup>. It was felt within IPC that an ‘outsider’ was needed if the paper was to reposition itself within the market. “What happened was, because this was such an explosive announcement, nobody in the *NME* was told until the exact second Steve Sutherland went into the editorial meeting at *Melody Maker* so that we wouldn't have found out before *NME* or they wouldn't have found out before us. It was simultaneous. They had Steve safely in the editorial meeting before anybody at *NME* was told ... There was shock at the *NME* as well and I think Steve found it a bit rough for a while” (Carol Clerk). As a former *NME* production editor at the paper at the time said of the internal resistance to his appointment: “It was like ‘Well, what the fuck are you doing editing our magazine then if you think we're dogshit?’ He was very much viewed as the enemy”.

“He was a turncoat, if you like,” suggested a former *MM* section editor, talking of the pronounced rivalry and mutual distrust which, at that point, still existed between the two IPC weeklies. “He was just loyal to whoever was paying the bills. It was absolutely clear from the way that he wrote. And he was going to be as vehemently pro the *NME* as he was against them six weeks ago. That was absolutely clear at the start. There were then quite a few politically minded guys on the *NME* who thought *that* was even worse. That he would turn quite so quickly meant that he was a *real* louse [laughs]”. The

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<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Dash, 1992c: 8.



immediate impact of his promotion was that both Steve Lamacq and Mary Anne Hobbs typed their letters of resignation and Andrew Collins and Stuart Maconie quickly followed Danny Kelly to Emap, both working on *Select*. Collins became features editor at the magazine (eventually becoming editor of *Q* after Kelly's departure) under Ian Harrison. John Harris, former editor of *Select* and writer at the *NME* at the time of Sutherland's appointment, said of the *NME* editorial team under Kelly that "it was very hard to avoid the conclusion that that had been a Golden Age and the *NME* had never really recovered from their departure". Sutherland's editorial re-direction did not stem the sales slip and it dropped to 111,388 in 1993<sup>62</sup> and, despite a few minor sales increases (climbing to 117,251 in 1996<sup>63</sup>), it continued to slip from 100,093 in July-December 1997<sup>64</sup>, to 90,763 in January-June 1999<sup>65</sup> and finally to 70,003 in July-December 2000<sup>66</sup>, almost a third of what it was selling in 1980<sup>67</sup>.

The continual sales slide that the *NME* experienced since the early 1990s forced IPC to re-evaluate its market position and invest heavily in its redesign with the intention of increasing advertising revenue and bringing stability to its sales patterns. Until the 1994 launch and subsequent market success of *Loaded* (with monthly sales in 2000 of 351,353<sup>68</sup>), the *NME* was IPC's flagship publication in their (then titled) Music & Sport<sup>69</sup> portfolio and, according to editor in chief, Alan Lewis, "paid most of our wages" because of the high amount of advertising revenue it generated for the portfolio and the company. IPC middle management felt that they needed to change the inkie format, particularly in a publishing sector in which high-quality glossy monthlies dominated. The impact of the hegemony of the glossies was in a raising of consumer expectations and that, according to Lewis, "[r]eaders now are good little consumers. They have been trained to expect a lot from their magazine. When you look at what the *NME* and *Melody Maker* used to be like in the not too distant past, they were crap. They were printed on butcher's wrapping paper and the ink came off on your fingers and you got about thirty-two pages for your

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<sup>62</sup> BPI, 1995: 50.

<sup>63</sup> *Press Gazette*, 1996: 9.

<sup>64</sup> *Press Gazette*, 1998b: 7.

<sup>65</sup> *Media Week*, 1999.

<sup>66</sup> *Music Week*, 2001: 4.

<sup>67</sup> BPI, 1995: 50.

<sup>68</sup> *Press Gazette*, 2001a: 7.

money and it was rubbish. But nobody cared because there was nothing else to buy. Now they can buy an issue of *FHM* which has 300 pages printed on [glossy paper] ... It's a different world". IPC market research into the appeal (or lack of appeal) of the title found that female readers did not like the format and believed it to be old-fashioned. While the core readership of the *NME* (and, indeed, the rock press in general) had been traditionally a male, student demographic<sup>70</sup>, IPC claimed to have realised the importance of the female demographic for the title's future survival. While Lewis argued that "we don't actively pursue female readers, but that's becoming an increasingly important part of the market" the re-branding of the Music & Sport division suggested differently. In February 2001, following the transfer of sports titles to the IPC Country & Leisure Media group in 2000, Music & Sport became IPC Ignite! (Hemsley, 2001a: 5) and ran with the tagline "Better Men's Media", suggesting a clear gender priority informing the strategic review of their marketing strategies and a corporate reconsideration of how demographics were targeted.

The weeklies, as Lewis noted, were generally regarded as being in a poor market position because they did not have the high production qualities of the monthlies, and this was pivotal in IPC's decision to turn *MM* into a glossy. They also invested heavily in improving the reproduction quality of the *NME*, spending around £450,000 to turn it into a heat set<sup>71</sup> title. The decision by IPC to make *NME* a heat set title was not solely to attract readers who viewed the inkies as archaic, but also to acquiesce to the demands and expectations of their major advertisers. While throughout the 1970s and 1980s the majority of *NME*'s advertising revenue stemmed from the music industry, this had declined in the 1990s but was offset by the rise in 'consumer advertising' opportunities (mainly beer, tobacco and clothing companies). The music titles offered to these advertisers a distinct demographic that had previously eluded them. However, these advertisers had operated mainly through the style monthlies and were frustrated that the inkies could only run a set number of colour pages (in a block of eight) each week. The potential loss of advertising revenue forced IPC to invest in making the *NME* full colour, moving from the A3 format to a slightly smaller, tabloid-sized paper (Reeves, 1999b). In

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<sup>69</sup> Following the 1998 management buyout of IPC, the company was restructured and its five publishing divisions (women's weeklies, TV weeklies, country & leisure, music & sport and Southbank) became subsidiary companies with their own boards (comprising editors and publishers) (Reeves, 1999a).

<sup>70</sup> Frith, 1983: 171; Negus, 1992: 118; Toynbee, 1993: 293; Shuker, 1994: 84-88.



the mid-1990s the publishers had seriously considered turning the *NME* into an A4 glossy, much like the format *MM* was upgraded to in 1999. Alan Lewis stated that “[w]e never admitted it at the time, but we came close to doing it a few years ago in a *Time Out* format, which I personally really favoured and still do to this day. But we backed off on that”.

The new glossy format would have made the *NME* a more reader-friendly title and certainly more attractive to both lifestyle and music industry advertisers, but was considered too costly by IPC middle management. IPC eventually invested in the heat set format after the rise of the Sunday broadsheet supplements that used this printing technique revealed there was a ‘halfway house’ between the inkie and glossy formats. As more Sunday papers produced heat set supplements, more printers invested in the equipment and production costs came down. Lewis said of the company’s expectations following the *NME*’s reformatting: “We never felt that it would put on sales and didn’t put in our plans that it would, but we assumed that it would gradually grow advertising revenue. It *has* grown advertising revenue. That element has worked. But unfortunately I’d have to say we made the change just as the music industry – or our bit of it, the indie sector – was going into a bit of a recession. It was something we had to do. I wouldn’t say we’ve seen much benefit from it yet”. Lewis suggested that, in healthier market times, the majority of revenue generated by the weeklies came from their cover price, rather than their advertising content but a decline in sales had meant that the split in total revenue generated by (a) advertising and (b) cover price was now closer to 50:50 and somewhat typical of the majority of the titles in the Music & Sport portfolio.

The immediate consequences of the removal of the direct rivalry between *NME* and *MM* (and subsequent structuring with a rigid portfolio) meant that the *NME*’s chief rivals were now located in the monthly sector, particularly (before its closure) *Select* (who also chased an indie-oriented student demographic). The title, facing serious circulation problems, appointed its youngest editor in 2000, 26-year-old Ben Knowles, who had been a section editor at *MM* (Addicott, 2000f). As noted above, Knowles made a number of key editorial changes to bring in younger freelancers to slowly reposition the paper’s agenda (Addicott, 2000n) and, in so doing, attract a new, younger, generation of

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<sup>71</sup> Heat set is a printing technique whereby “when coated (non-absorbent) paper is printed by the web-offset method it

readers, through a “new injection of youth” (quoted in Addicott, 2000b: 1) (of which the new writers would be metonymic). Steve Sutherland said that long-term plans for the *NME* were to “expand its operation to take on the monthly market” (ibid.) by which he meant primarily (before its closure) *Select*.

Sutherland was eventually promoted to brand director for *NME*, to overlook the activities of the paper and the *nme.com* website as well as branded TV<sup>72</sup> and radio opportunities. (This issue of branding and brand-extensions will be considered in greater depth below.) With the folding of *MM* in 2000, *Kerrang!* and the *NME* became the only remaining weekly rock titles<sup>73</sup>. Prior to *MM*'s closure, Tim Schoonmaker, chief executive of Emap Performance, expressed the company's intention to make *Kerrang!* “bigger than the *NME*” (quoted in Addicott, 2000l: 11). Indeed, both titles in late-2000/early-2001 were pursuing, at points, an almost identical editorial direction in their coverage of US nu-metal and rock acts (such as At the Drive-In, Queens of the Stone Age, Marilyn Manson, Slipknot and ... And You Will Know Us By the Trail of Dead), to capitalise on a general symbiotic market growth in both rock music and rock magazines. This market's buoyancy was symbolised most obviously by the launch of *Kingsize* by Emap (Woods, 2001; Addicott, 2001b). Historically, the *NME* had performed well when linked to particular musical scenes (to simultaneously report and interpret), such as punk (Savage, 1991; Toyne, 1993) and ‘Madchester’. Its tapping into this growing rock market merely represented the potential next stage in the evolution of title's homology with its readership.

## VI Launching New Titles: *Uncut* as a Case Study

In a typical year, in reaction to new or dying trends, major publishing companies close or merge 10% of their titles and launch around the same amount, thereby keeping the size of their portfolios and the scale of their corporate presence constant (Tunstall, 1983: 89; Davis, 1988: 21-23). Within this lies an implicit understanding that popular culture-

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must be passed through a heater unit or ‘oven’ on order to dry the ink” (Wharton, 1992: 241).

<sup>72</sup> NME:TV (a weekly half-hour magazine show) began a trial eight-week run on Bravo on 3 November 2000.

<sup>73</sup> *7* is a weekly title also, although it deals with dance music.



oriented titles have a finite shelf life and companies must invest in new titles and new publishing areas in order to maintain their position in the market. Jordans (1986) support this, arguing that the magazine industry is in a state of constant flux as new titles are launched and old or moribund ones are pruned. The launching of *Uncut* in 1997 and folding of *Vox* in 1998 by IPC and the folding of *Select* in December 2000 and launching of *Kingsize* in March 2001 by Emap serve as highly illustrative examples of this corporate dynamic at work within the portfolios of the major publishers. The following section will consider the bureaucratic and editorial relationships within publishing organisations as well as the clashes that take place within the context of the current market climate as mainstream monthly publications are launched and closed.

*Uncut* magazine was launched by Allan Jones in 1997 because, he stated, he was becoming disillusioned and frustrated with the weekly turnover of music in *MM* and a dearth of new talent coming up from the underground. For him, the “maverick essence of *Melody Maker* in about '88-89, early nineties, started to be eroded. Groups were splitting up. There was a feeling of pause, hiatus” and an encroaching conservatism in the alternative music scene. Towards the end of his editorship of *MM* he found that he was increasingly writing about films or esoteric artists from within an aesthetic that was not concurrent with the needs of the title's younger readership. “I remember that one of the last things that I wrote for *Melody Maker* on music was Lambchop in Nashville. And I came back and I was writing it up and I thought ‘Nobody's going to get this at all. It's going to seem too strange. All the references are probably just too old for the readership’. So I thought at least I can create a magazine where you can get away with those cultural reference points”. This disillusionment with music and refocusing of cultural interest in film reveals the dynamics of a simultaneous vertical and horizontal ‘transferable homology’ into both an older demographic and sphere of cultural production. In the sense that the editor is the ‘ideal reader’ of their own paper, it is on the implicit understanding that the position is finite and conditional. Jones' loss of faith in new music shows shifting personal, editorial and cultural priorities coupled with a belief that an identifiable and fecund market niche was moving through the same transition: within this shift lay both ‘cultural’ and ‘commercial’ possibilities for editors and publishers.

Alan Lewis was made aware of Jones' interest in film in 1996 and approached him about the publishing possibilities following meetings with Andy McDuff, the publishing director, in which IPC plans to launch a film and entertainment title were outlined. The title was initially conceived as a purely film-based magazine. Jones and the *MM* art editor, Norman McLeod, were give office space and spent one day a week working on dummies for the film magazine and the other four days on the redesign of *MM* to follow its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue. Emap, however, had been leaked information suggesting that IPC were planning a film title and quickly launched *Neon* as a means of protecting their film title *Empire* against a new launch (just as *Mojo* served to protect *Q*). At the same time a rival publishing company, Future, announced plans to launch *Total Film* which was pitched at the same market that *Uncut* had been intended for. Jones stated that: "It seemed, suddenly, what was a fairly empty marketplace had suddenly become very crowded. So Alan and I were talking and he said perhaps we could do another treatment, just some rough pages, because we had a week left in this office". Middle management intervention in shifting the magazine's editorial position was imposed directly at this stage with a new niche orientation devised along explicitly 'commercial' rather than 'cultural' lines, with the cultural *modus operandi* becoming subsumed and renegotiated within an economic framework<sup>74</sup>. Alan Lewis proposed a hybrid title to Jones that would cover music and film, primarily because film titles were an untested market for IPC, and, also because he had already promised the IPC board a test layout. Ultimately, Jones was forced to acquiesce<sup>75</sup>.

According to Lewis, Emap had *Empire* and another film title, *Premiere*, and IPC felt that the film market was booming and was a publishing opportunity that they had let Emap have "on a plate". The board at IPC had three potential visions for how the title could be pitched. The first was as a more cutting-edge and less Hollywood-oriented title that Emap's two film titles (essentially what *Total Film*'s pitch was to be). The second

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<sup>74</sup> It is interesting to note that Stapleton (1982: 15) claimed that there was no evidence of boardroom involvement in editorial direction in IPC in the early-1980s. While increased bureaucratic intervention is typical of the company in the 1990s, it is difficult to believe that a company of its size would ever grant its editors total institutional autonomy.

<sup>75</sup> It should be noted that *Uncut* was launched a year after *Ikon* (published by European Consumer Publications in a joint venture with Winchester Multimedia) folded. *Ikon* was launched in July 1995 aimed at 18-34 year old males with an editorial split across music (55%), film (25%) and sport (20%) but folded in January 1996 after ECP went into liquidation with debts of £500,000, facing industrial action from staff and freelancers over unpaid wages. The industry feeling at its failure was that it was attempting to court too many disparate readerships and taste publics in its editorial mix (Smallman 1995, 1996).



was as a general entertainment title in the mould of *Entertainment Weekly* in the US (an almost identical pitch informed Emap's *Heat*, which was launched in late 1998). The final idea was as a hybrid music and film title with a cutting-edge agenda. *Uncut*'s emphasis on classic film and rock history along with coverage of current releases was clearly based on the same template as *Mojo*, with Allan Jones agreeing that this was their closest market rival: "We saw ... [*Uncut*] ... as perhaps, in terms of the music, closer to *Mojo*. And the film content would be a cinematic equivalent to the kind of stuff in *Mojo*. So we'd take a big historical perspective. We wouldn't just concentrate on the here and now". The music reviews editor at *Uncut*, Paul Lester, argued that while there were similarities, *Uncut* dealt with acts that *Mojo* would not include in their cultural remit: "What is unusual is *Mojo*'s Year Zero is '66. Ours is probably more like '76 ... What is unusual is affording that same kind of detailed scrutiny to groups that aren't Dylan, Hendrix and The Beatles. 'New Order? What you mean they're really key? 18 pages on New Order?' It's like you're not allowed to do it unless it's 30 years ago"<sup>76</sup>.

Jones and McLeod had to deliver a 164-page dummy to Andy McDuff, who sent it out for market research. Jones believed that "it was really make-or-break time because usually a title will go through several stages of research and development". Alan Lewis stated that the market research they did with the dummy amounted to "not a huge amount" and generally titles would have been tested in greater depth. Their qualitative research was based on six focus groups in London and Manchester that yielded positive findings. This was supplemented with quantitative research in the form of 'micro-testing' where 400 males were given a copy of the magazine to keep for a week. They then had to fill in a questionnaire which asked them what they thought of the title and if they were likely to buy it. Jones stated that the findings from this research would determine if the magazine was to be launched. Micro testing is "either an emphatic 'yes' or an emphatic 'no'. There's no 'maybes' or anything like that. And they [the publishers] said 'If they say "no" it's a non-starter. But if they say "yes" ... [we]'ll publish it as quickly as ... [we] ... can'" revealing a corporate caution outbalancing any editorial or cultural orientation. The research findings were deemed encouraging within the company and

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<sup>76</sup> Interestingly, in late-2000 *Mojo*, under Paul Trynka's editorship, began to incorporate more contemporary acts into its aesthetic such as The Smiths and Nirvana (bringing itself closer to what *Q*'s agenda was in the early 1990s in order

they aimed to rush the new title out into the marketplace to avoid any spoiler titles being launched. The organisational drive was to recoup investment in the magazine as quickly as possible and Jones was given six weeks to assemble an editorial team with *Uncut* being targeted at a 25-45 year old male demographic with a first print-run of 100,000 (Jaynes, 1997). Such quick marketing of the title can best be understood in terms of IPC rethinking their Music & Sport division and extending its remit to compete more directly with Emap's range of titles.

The rush release of *Uncut*, according to Alan Lewis, meant that, editorially and stylistically, it was not "as good as it should have been. It wasn't quite as polished and as sharp as it should have been. It was a somewhat rambling beast really. I have to admit that it didn't get off to a very good start<sup>77</sup> and dropped down. At one point it was only selling about 20,000 and we were quite worried about it. So we changed it – I suppose twice in the course of the two years, trying to tweak it up a bit. And it seems to be working now". Lewis stated that IPC invested between £250-300,000 launching the title and its first year it cost the company around £500,000. The start-up costs for *Uncut* were comparatively low for the current market, with Gibson (1999) estimating the industry average to be around £1m, although Brown (2000) estimates that this figure can rise to £3-4m when marketing and advertising costs are taken into account<sup>78</sup>. Schiller (1989: 37) argues that such steep start-up costs operate to prohibit entry into the market for smaller publishers, thereby ensuring the market hegemony of a small number of publishers. It is only the multi-million pound publishing or media corporations who have the financial resources to be able to invest long-term in titles before their high outlay works itself around into profit and fiscal stability: these companies try to minimise the risk involved in their ventures, but risk remains an inherent part of the market.

Because *Uncut* was chasing a hybrid market (readers of music titles and readers of film titles) there was a high degree of industry caution about its possible success. Johnson (1997) argued that in trying to court two previously separate markets the magazine ran the risk of alienating both. He added that both the music and film industries

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to catch a new wave of readers at the top end of *Q*'s readership), while *Uncut*, in 2001, began to reposition itself by covering more overtly 'classic rock' acts such as David Bowie, The Beatles and Bob Dylan.

<sup>77</sup> *Uncut*'s first ABCs – for the period July-December 1997 – were 33,475 (*Press Gazette*, 1998a: 15).



were still suspicious of its possible market penetration, as proved by the fact that in a 156 page issue, only sixteen pages were taken up with advertisements, a common problem facing new and unproven magazines. As Davis (1988: 21-23) notes, publishing companies, when launching a new title, need to identify a gap in the market and, using market research, must clearly identify their potential readership *and* their potential advertisers. IPC had clearly identified their key advertisers as the music industry and the film industry, but initially both were reluctant to spend advertising revenue on the venture until it had proven its market performance. For its first period, *Uncut* had to be considered as a loss-maker with its overheads covered through the profits generated by the other titles within Music & Sport until its market position stabilised, and it eventually recouped its initial investment.

When asked about the early distribution problems that the magazine faced, Allan Jones said that their editorial policy of alternating film and music stars on the cover was a cause for confusion among wholesalers who were unsure where, month by month, they should display the magazine on their shelves. “When it was a music-linked cover it would be up with *Mojo* and *Q* and *Select* and whatever. Then next month, say we had Steve McQueen, it’d be over with the film magazines. It turned out actually to be a real serious problem in terms of availability and just getting off the shelves. And it really came home to us that, while we were establishing the title, for continuity of purchase we needed probably to be music-led as far as the covers were concerned”. The findings of market research after the first six issues supported this as readers had responded more positively to the music features and this resulted in direct publisher intervention in the editorial re-pointing of the magazine as music-led (in terms of choice of cover star), and to balance the music content out with a commensurate amount of film editorial. Such middle management involvement in the editorial direction of the magazine represented IPC’s attempt to echo Emap’s model of structuring and positioning their titles along strict portfolio lines determined by their market reach and position. A freelancer for the magazine implied that publisher preference from the start had been for *Uncut* to be weighted towards music, despite the fact that Jones had originally conceived it as a

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<sup>78</sup> In March 2000, BBC Worldwide invested £500,000 in the redesign and subsequent marketing of *Top of the Pops* (Addicott, 2000c) while Attica Futura invested over £2.5m in the marketing of the monthly pop title, *CD:UK* (a spin-off from its ITV Saturday morning music show namesake) (Hemsley, 2001b).

purely film-oriented title. The freelancer cited the case of Alan Lewis intervening and changing a proposed Kim Basinger cover to an Ian Curtis one as symptomatic of middle management's overt attempts to dictate the title's editorial mix and agenda.

Indeed, such publisher pressure, not just in terms of editorial direction, but also in terms of market performance, characterised the title's first two years. Alan Lewis stated that new titles, in the current market, were expected to break even much quicker than in the 1970s or 1980s. Magazines then were granted a five-year 'payback' period before they were expected to recoup the investment costs as publishers considered them a long-term investment. Within IPC, however, in the late-1990s, with pressure from the City and company shareholders this 'grace' period had been reduced to three years. Titles were now expected to – in a corporate and economic climate of quick investment and quick return - exploit and capitalise on their market niche almost immediately. Lewis suggested that Condé Nast, because it is owned by one family, take a longer-term view of between five and seven years for new titles (as do many Germany publishing companies), but IPC's investors expected quick returns. In 1998, *Uncut* was given one year to turn itself around as IPC had found that it was costing them more to produce one page of *Uncut* than it was to produce one page of *Marie Claire*, one of their biggest-selling titles. Underpinning IPC's activities here is a concern not so much with portfolio *prestige*<sup>79</sup> but rather with portfolio *performance*.

The final drive for the magazine was to introduce, in 1999, regular monthly cover-mounted CDs in the hope of building up the title's market profile (and, therefore, its advertising revenue). Publishers, to bring stability of sales in a fragmented and over-saturated market, have increasingly looked to cover-mounted gifts. The splintering of the music magazine market in the late-1980s and early-1990s echoes the 'Big Bang' in general magazine publishing in the 1960s and 1970s where there was a simultaneous expansion and fragmentation of the market which broke down into special-interest sectors (Jordans, 1986). While there has been an increase in overall sales of music magazines (as there are more titles) there has been the related decline in the sales of *individual* titles. In the period January-June 1980, five music titles had the top total

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<sup>79</sup> i.e. running titles which may not generate profits but will reflect well on the company's internal and external profile and engender a positive working culture within the organisation's various editorial departments making them feel that they work in a climate where cultural products are valued as much as profit-margins.



combined sales of 892,200. By January-June 1990 total sales had risen to 1,101,934 but the number of titles had increased to eight. By January-June 1996 total sales were 1,190,374 across eleven titles and by July-December 1999 there were total sales of 1,394,426 across thirteen titles<sup>80</sup>. Factoring in the closure of both *Select* and *MM*, it is possible to see a slight downturn in this trend, with combined total sales reaching 1,262,132<sup>81</sup>. However, these statistics cover the top eleven titles and the figure is higher than in January-June 1996 when there were an identical number of titles competing in the market. So as total sales, in the main, have increased, individual market shares have been eroded. Increased consumer choice has resulted in weakened market penetration and cover-mounts have been looked to (particularly by the major publishers, but also the smaller publishers hoping to achieve and then stabilise high ABC entry figures (Brown, 2000)) as a means of encouraging repeat purchasing and title-loyalty among increasingly 'promiscuous' readers.

The editor of *Mixmag*, Neil Stevenson, blamed a sales drop in 1998 on Emap's decision to discontinue cover-mounts (Addicott, 1999a). They were considered as key in the success of *Ministry* magazine (Armstrong, 1999), and were eventually revived as a marketing tool by *Mixmag* in order to regain the ground lost to *Ministry* (Addicott, 2000d). This was a policy that clearly worked as the magazine experienced a 47.1% year-on-year sales increase in 2000 (*Press Gazette*, 2001a: 7). The major problem for both publishers and editors is that cover-mounts give an artificially inflated sense of a magazine's performance. As *NME* editor Steve Sutherland argued: "[A]t the moment there are a lot of magazines out there who are superfluous to requirements, who are desperately surviving on giving away free CDs on the cover which is an incredibly expensive way of ensuring that you meet your ABC figures. And in the end you're going to come undone. It can't be done". Alan Lewis implied that the market now dictated that publishers must react to what other publishers are doing and if one publisher runs with cover-mounts, rival publishers must follow their lead, thereby exacerbating the situation: "They do help. I'd say it's a game that we have reluctantly got into. It's the way the market has gone ... Readers now are good little consumers. They have been trained to expect a lot from their magazine ... It's a different world ... There's gifts everywhere and

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<sup>80</sup> BPI, 1995, 1997; *Press Gazette*, 2000.

we've had to just match it. We do find that they do work. They can literally double the sale". Their impact on the success of *Uncut* has been obvious with the title rising from monthly sales of 40,167 for the period July-December 1998<sup>82</sup>, to 44,514 for January-June 1999<sup>83</sup> and finally to 53,193 for July-December 2000<sup>84</sup>, making it one of the few titles to consistently add on sales while the majority of music titles experienced slides<sup>85</sup>. Publisher Robert Tame stated: "I am not denying cover-mounted CDs have had an effect. They are an integral part of the package" (quoted in Addicott, 1999b: 6). While their centrality in building *Uncut*'s sales cannot be disputed, the enormous costs involved may prove to be a long-term drain on IPC Ignite! resources. The function of cover-mounts to compensate for the inherent marketing and promotional problems caught up in introducing and branding a new title in an unstable market offers a short-term solution to what is clearly a long-term problem for publishers. The cost, for the publishers, of cover-mounts versus their perceived importance in building sales will prove to be a decisive factor in the future growth and survival of *Uncut* within the IPC Ignite! portfolio (and, indeed, the growth and survival of other titles and portfolios).

## VII Closing Titles: *Vox* as a Case Study

Having considered IPC's investment in and marketing strategy of a new title, it is important to consider the opposite dynamic when major publishers decide to axe a title. IPC launched *Vox* (as a spin-off from the *NME*, then doing well because of the 'Madchester' scene) in 1990 and it was eventually closed on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1998 (Reeves, 1999a). It was a major investment by IPC to compete with Emap in the glossy monthly sector and its launch followed quite shortly after United Newspapers' launch of *Select*. *Select*'s first sales figures for July-December 1990 were 75,689<sup>86</sup>. *Select*'s market entry had no visible effect (despite immense Emap paranoia) on the sales of *Q* for the same

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<sup>81</sup> *Press Gazette*, 2001a: 6.

<sup>82</sup> *Press Gazette*, 1999a: 7.

<sup>83</sup> *Media Week*, 1999.

<sup>84</sup> *Music Week*, 2001: 4.

<sup>85</sup> The magazine was also forced, in December 1999, to raise its cover price and this was considered a somewhat dangerous move if the magazine was markedly more expensive than its closest rivals.

<sup>86</sup> BPI, 1997: 70-71.



period<sup>87</sup> revealing that rock monthlies were a fecund market strand. *Vox* was actually IPC's second attempt to compete in this market; *Max* had been launched in the wake of *Q*'s success to attract, according to Andy McDuff, "the 230,000 *NME* readers in 1980, who were driven away but were still around, still into music" (quoted in Reynolds, 1990a: 27), but it was eventually to fold.

*Vox*'s launch was initially a market success for IPC, with January-June 1991 average monthly sales of 102,182<sup>88</sup> and its entry-figures were substantially above those achieved by *Q* (48,140: January-June 1987), *Select* (75,689: July-December 1990), *Mojo* (45,232: July-December 1994)<sup>89</sup> and *Ministry* (61,432: July-December 1998)<sup>90</sup>. Only the BBC's pop title, *Top of the Pops*, achieved stronger entry figures<sup>91</sup> (121,223)<sup>92</sup>. Alan Lewis argued that after its strong launch, *Vox* was threatening to surpass *Q* after just two years. Certainly by January-June 1992 it had reached its highest sales figures of 114,213<sup>93</sup> and did seem initially to dent *Q*'s sales. *Q* in the same period had dropped to 161,104 after a high of 173,137 for the period immediately before *Vox*'s launch<sup>94</sup>. Lewis argued that it was the early success of *Vox* that gave him, as editor in chief of Music & Sport titles, the bureaucratic leverage to launch *Loaded*, despite the fact that the IPC board was far from overjoyed with the idea. However, as Lewis admitted, *Q* quickly responded to *Vox*'s initial market gain. From July-December 1992 through to January-June 1995 *Q* experienced a cumulative market growth from 171,561 to 214,225<sup>95</sup>. In the same period, *Vox*'s sales were quite erratic, dipping in January-June 1993 to 97,842, rising again to 112,402 in July-December 1994<sup>96</sup> but sliding constantly after that to a low of 55,042 for July-December 1997<sup>97</sup> just prior to its closure.

IPC have been viewed as being strong in the TV magazine sector and *Vox* was initially one of the company's few non-TV title successes. It was, Lewis believed, Emap's quick reaction in rebuilding *Q*'s profile as a response to *Vox*'s early success that

<sup>87</sup> Which had gone up from 172,053 to 173,137) (ibid.).

<sup>88</sup> BPI, 1997: 70-71.

<sup>89</sup> BPI, 1997: 70-71.

<sup>90</sup> *Press Gazette*, 1999a: 7.

<sup>91</sup> Although *TOTP* has a much more explicit mainstream pitch.

<sup>92</sup> BPI, 1997: 70-71.

<sup>93</sup> BPI, 1997: 70-71.

<sup>94</sup> BPI, 1997: 70-71.

<sup>95</sup> BPI, 1997: 70-71.

<sup>96</sup> BPI, 1997: 70-71.

<sup>97</sup> *Press Gazette*, 1998a: 16.

precipitated *Vox*'s slide. The title had performed well for IPC for two years, but had not generated a great deal of profit for the company and in its final year had lost IPC a substantial amount of money. Lewis believed that the title had existed in the shadow of *Q* and that the market, while expanding in terms of niche publications, was not strong enough to support two monthly rock titles chasing the same readership demographics and advertisers.

One of the major problems that faced *Vox* was its lack of a cohesive editorial and management strategy, resulting in a schizophrenic title unsure of which market, exactly, it should court and capitalise on. In seven years the title went through four different editors who, Lewis stated, attempted to refocus it but who never found their own niche. Roy Carr, the launch editor, was replaced after its first year by Paul Colbert. Colbert's magazine experience had been in launching new titles, but not in taking them to the next stage of market growth and stability. Colbert left IPC to launch *Encore* (a Virgin venture) but it folded after its first issue. The features editor, Shaun Phillips, and the reviews editor, Craig McLean, ended up running the magazine between them for over two years in the absence of an official editorial appointment. *Vox*, at this point, became a serious concern for IPC as it was losing both readers and advertisers.

Steve Sutherland, while continuing to edit *NME*, was appointed editor with the long-term view of co-branding both titles and positioning *Vox* as a monthly appendage (and branded ancillary title) to the *NME* with the intention of encouraging *NME* readers to also buy the monthly title, as a variation on portfolio building and management. This step, according to a former section editor on *Vox*, proved disastrous for the title. The benefits of pitching *Vox* as the 'NME monthly' were short-term as regular *NME* readers felt it was pointless to ostensibly buy the paper again in a monthly format. Editorially, the magazine was in a weak position, according to the former section editor: "Steve was the editor. Also editing the *NME*. Impossible to do that. To do two magazines and devote your full attention to them both ... The *NME* is a flagship publication. It's a lynchpin in IPC's portfolio. *Vox* ... I'm not saying he didn't devote as much attention to it as he could. But I don't think he could have devoted any more to it necessarily". The other editorial staff felt that both Sutherland and IPC's priority was the *NME* and that *Vox* was



suffering as a result and on a number of occasions *Vox* editorial ideas were rejected by Sutherland only to appear weeks later in the *NME*<sup>98</sup>.

Jerry Thackray<sup>99</sup> was appointed as what proved to be the final editor of the magazine with a remit to overhaul it. Before his editorship, the IPC publishers, the marketing department and advertising department had all informed the editorial team that the worst possible place in the market for the title to be pitched was in the ground between *Select* and *Q*. A former *Vox* section editor stated that “by the time that they gave it to ... [Jerry] ... to take over, it was very much ‘The only place you should think of being is directly between *Select* and *Q*’. The ground kept shifting”. There had been no editorial consistency and the title was constantly haemorrhaging readers. Its final editorial redesign was to position it as a mainstream rock title with cover stars including Sheryl Crow and Bryan Adams because, IPC argued, there was no magazine catering for fans of these acts. The editorial objections to this were that, while these were major selling acts, they are “bought by people who don’t read about music ... [They are] bought by people who buy cassettes in motorway service stations rather than people who go down the record shop on a Monday morning to buy the new albums that are out that day. They’re not music fanatics. They’re people to whom music is an essential part of their lives, but it’s a background thing. It’s not a foreground focus. So they’re not going to buy a magazine to read about it. That was our worry”. This argument clearly echoes the points raised by Frith (1985: 126, 1988b: 336) that music magazines do not, by and large, reflect those acts that dominate the charts for the simple economic reason that the audience for these artists have no interest in reading journalistic pieces about them. This ties into wider debates about the press’s lack of influence over mainstream taste patterns and its focus on explicitly directing the purchasing habits of taste publics.

Because *Vox* had changed its market pitch in such an erratic manner, the major advertisers no longer had a clear understanding of the demographic it was supposed to reach and advertising revenue suffered as a result. In the final six months of Steve

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<sup>98</sup> One idea was for a feature on a national drugs debate. Sutherland stated that the monthly print cycle of *Vox* would mean that by the time it was published the article would be out-dated and a weekly paper was a better forum for such a debate.

<sup>99</sup> Thackray, under the pseudonym Everett True, been assistant editor at *MM* and acting editor prior to Mark Sutherland’s appointment and had been led to believe that he would be given the editorship of *MM*. While acting-editor he made several key appointments, all of which were undone by Sutherland who made staffers in some cases apply for

Sutherland's editorship, two consecutive issues of the magazine ran ads for topless dancing videos. The former section editor believed that this happened because the advertising department had cut the rates for ads in *Vox* to the point that they were no longer refusing any ad revenue. Similar ads were appearing in *Loaded* and it was believed that the advertising department was offering these companies low, cross-title, packages where they could advertise in both *Loaded* and *Vox*. This was despite the fact that *Vox*'s editorial teams believed the magazine sold to an antithetical market to *Loaded*'s 'lad'-based readership. IPC would have needed to spend heavily on a promotional campaign to alert their potential readership to the magazine's existence but they were no longer prepared to invest in a loss-making title.

Alan Lewis stated that after the 1998 management buyout there was a refocusing of economic priorities. At the time of this buyout, IPC were publishing around 100 titles and because a third of these were not performing well they were axed, regardless of the quality of their content. As Schiller (1989: 43) notes: "To the extent then that the creative process has been absorbed by industries producing for the market, the commercial imperative prevails. General awareness that profitability is the ultimate determinant of cultural production becomes internalised in the creative mindset". Angus Batey, album reviews editor at the time of the *Vox* closure said: "The writing had been on the wall for a long time and it came as no real surprise to find it being closed. Particularly after the sale of IPC. You look at any sort of corporate take-over or management buyout and there's always a period of cost-cutting several months after it's taken place in a company of any size. That came as no real surprise to any of us".

The changing terms and conditions of employment within both IPC and Emap in the 1990s (discussed in more detail in the following chapter) had seen a pronounced move towards the 'casualisation' of labour, typical of trends within the news media generally (McNair, 1999: 151-165; Trelford, 2000: 16). This 'casualisation' had seen a significant decline in the number of permanent contracts with many of the staff (even on an editorial level) working on freelance contracts. This, as a by-product of the contemporary models of entrepreneurial management, has made the forging of a career "a more uncertain and political affair" as each individual's career development overrides the

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jobs they were already doing. IPC writers believe that Thackray was given the *Vox* editorship as a 'sweetener' because



altruism of teamwork (du Gay, 2000: 79). The shift towards freelance contracts meant that the publishers would not have to provide medical coverage or holiday pay for writers and, in the case of a magazine closure, would not have to pay them redundancy or have an obligation to find them employment elsewhere within the publishing organisation. A number of writers suggested that both IPC and Emap had replaced permanent contracts with freelance ones with closures such as these specifically in mind, so that titles could be folded with minimal expense and employer obligation. Indeed, the decision to close titles is often taken with minimal or no consultation with either the editor or the editorial staff<sup>100</sup>.

When IPC closed *MM*, for example, they only had obligations as employers to find suitable posts for the permanent editorial staff. The editor, Mark Sutherland was moved to the assistant editorship of *Later* (the company's new men's title, pitched within their portfolio at a slightly older readership than *Loaded*), while three staff members were employed by the *NME* (Addicott, 2001a). Equally, when *Select* folded, Emap was only obliged to find posts for those few staff on permanent contracts (Addicott, 2000m). The changing nature of employment in the 1990s within the major publishing corporations has seen a major shift in bureaucratic responsibility towards their employees which the closure of *Vox*, *Select* and *MM* all serve to illustrate.

## **VIII The Parameters of Competition: Branding, Brand-Extensions and the Decline of a Mono-Thematic Music Press**

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his editorial pitch for a repositioned *MM* was not consistent with IPC's long-term view for the title.

<sup>100</sup> To illustrate this, following the closure of *MM*, I was sent an e-mail by a member of the editorial staff (who wished to remain anonymous), describing how the announcement was made to employees (who were divorced completely from the decision-making process): "The announcement was made just after 10am two Thursdays before Christmas when Mike Soutar, the MD of the Music and Sport Group, and the publisher Robert Tame went into Mark [Sutherland]'s office for a couple of minutes and then wandered out and told whoever happened to be sitting around (about six of us) that they were ceasing publication. No effort was made to do things formally or to call the staff together. We were then given times for individual meetings with Robert Tame and informed that since the Christmas issue would be the last one (and it had conveniently gone to press that very morning), we should all go home. If we wanted to collect our belongings, we should make an appointment to come back into the office. When we did make these appointments and turned up to clear our desks, we were supervised by security and escorted off the premises when we had finished, with the office door locked behind us!"

Emap Metro and IPC undoubtedly dominate the music magazine market and, as their portfolios increase<sup>101</sup>, it becomes increasingly difficult for many of the smaller publishing companies to compete in this market<sup>102</sup>, with the ease of entry into the market being determined by the degree of competition and monopoly in the total market (Tunstall, 1983: 82). Nevertheless, the majority of new titles tend to be launched by existing publishing organisations (ibid.). Alan Lewis suggested that the domination of two publishing companies resulted in a market situation where small-scale publishers could only enter the market by tapping into a solid underground music scene which the major publishers, because they are oriented towards the mainstream, would miss out on. He cited the example of *Mixmag* as a magazine that achieved this, but once it had proven its market viability, IPC responded with the ‘me-too’ publication, *Muzik*, and *Mixmag* was bought by Emap from DMC<sup>103</sup> and taken much closer to the mainstream in its editorial content. This market dynamic illustrates Schiller’s (1989: 38) argument about smaller companies functioning as ‘wildcatters’ for the majors. While, he agrees high start-up costs prohibit smaller companies from entering the market, there is scope for them to operate at the margins of the mainstream if costs are minimal. These ‘wildcatters’ ensure that creativity and innovation filter through, but in effect exist as talent-spotters for the majors, becoming a resource for them to tap at the moment of a title’s market crossover.

These smaller companies are considered as being much more flexible than the larger publishing monoliths (who are deemed slow to respond to changes in the market) and are regarded as being more financially committed and prepared to work harder to make their investments work (Jordans, 1986). There are, according to Jordans (ibid.), two types of publishing entrepreneur: firstly the ‘enthusiast’ (like the ‘wildcatter’) dealing mainly in specialist titles and secondly the ‘businessman’ who looks for fecund gaps in the market and then creates a magazine to fill that gap, something that IPC has often been accused of (Winship, 1987). This dichotomy is explained in more cultural terms by Bourdieu (1993: 83) in his distinction between the ‘ordinary entrepreneur’/‘commercial’ producer (whose primary, and in cases exclusive, motive is accumulating economic

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<sup>101</sup> Ministry of Sound seemed to be following IPC and Emap’s lead in portfolio building by, in November 1999, acquiring *Hip-Hop Connection* from Future Publishing and redesigning it, with the long-term view of capitalising on a predicted boom in the hip-hop scene (*Press Gazette*, 1999c: 10).

<sup>102</sup> With the exception, of course, of Ministry of Sound and the BBC, as noted earlier.



capital) and the ‘cultural entrepreneur’/‘cultural’ producer who is driven by the pursuit to accumulate cultural capital “albeit at the cost of temporarily renouncing economic profit”. This dichotomy can be seen in operation not just across the activities of rival publishing organisations but also *within* organisations in the structural split between the culture and ideologies of middle management (oriented around targeting fecund market niches and courting advertising revenue) and the culture and ideologies of the editor (oriented around cultural notions of producing a paper which serves a readership of which they are the ‘ideal’ reader).

Within these major publishing organisations there are various subcultures, some of which are hinged around functional differences (Deal & Kennedy, 1982). They operate within particular world-views, yet there need to be organisational and hierarchical orientations around overall operational consensus so that these subcultures do not pull the company apart. In the structural, economic and cultural tensions between the ‘executives’ and ‘staffers’ (Breed, 1955: 332) the bridging role of the editor in chief is key in reconciling differences and mediating in times of tension and uncertainty. The above-discussed case of *Uncut* and the direct middle management intervention in its editorial pitch can be seen, then, as illustrative of this site of struggle between these two cultures and how the editor in chief acts as a key negotiator in enforcing a consensus which suits middle management much more than it suits the editorial team, with economic priorities heavily outweighing cultural ones.

For Bourdieu (1993: 83) the activities of the small publishing companies (what he terms the “dominated producers”) serve only to reinforce the dominant publishing ideologies through which the major publishers ensure their hegemony. In entering the market, and building up their profile through “subversive strategies which will eventually bring them the disavowed profits” (ibid.), these previously ‘dominated’ companies serve only to overturn the structural hierarchy of the market, rather than the principles upon which that market is based. This is most obvious in the rise of Emap: previously a small-scale publishing organisation who, through the ‘subversive strategy’ of portfolio management, overturned IPC’s domination in the field, but ultimately underscored and legitimated the practices and principles of the market within which they were previously

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<sup>103</sup> DMC responded to this corporate buyout by launching the dance weekly, 7, in 1999, to continue the company’s

the dominated. “Thus their revolutions are only ever partial ones, which displace the censorships and transgress the conventions but do so in the name of the same underlying principles” (ibid.: 83-84).

Because major publishing houses own the majority of music titles, their overheads are high and they are therefore necessarily pitched at a mainstream market, whereas other titles produced by smaller publishing organisations, with lower overheads, exist at the margins. Tony Herrington, editor and publisher of *The Wire*<sup>104</sup>, stated that the magazine’s previous publisher believed their focus on esoteric music made it a difficult read for consumers outside of that market niche and was therefore a publishing liability. They attempted to court lifestyle advertising, but could not deliver to advertisers the scale or type of readership that they had wanted to reach. He suggested that the magazine would not be allowed to exist in its current form if Emap owned it because of their overheads and its need to exist within and contribute to the overall market performance of a broad portfolio of titles. Christopher Mellor, the editor of the dance fortnightly *DJ*, stated that he was forced to refocus the title in 1998 towards a ‘bedroom DJ’ demographic (as a great deal of their advertising revenue came from hardware and electronics manufacturers) while the other dance magazines went increasingly towards the more fecund lifestyle-publishing mainstream. He stated that their publishers (Nexus) would have had to invest £500,000 in repositioning it as a club and lifestyle magazine and this was something they were not prepared to do. Both *The Wire* and *DJ* reveal there are market niches outside of the mainstream, albeit low-revenue-generating ones. The editorial focus of these peripheral magazines is necessarily esoteric and often they explain and define themselves in terms of a mainstream/underground dichotomy by placing an emphasis on the ‘cultural’ function they serve for artists and readers (promoting the musically new and innovative) rather than on their ‘economic’ function for mainstream publishers and lifestyle advertisers.

The push towards lifestyle publishing within mainstream magazine publishing (most explicitly the dance titles) since the mid-1990s happened for explicit commercial reasons and it is commonly accepted by both journalists and publishers that sales of

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representation in this market strand.

<sup>104</sup> A left-field title which sells around 20,000 copies a month in the UK and internationally



music magazines, because they have a heavily male readership<sup>105</sup>, have been badly hit by the rise of male lifestyle and “lads’ mags” such as *Loaded*, *GQ* and *FHM*<sup>106</sup>. *Ministry* editor, Scott Manson, suggested that dance music-centric titles have a natural market cap of 70,000. However, if there is a heavy lifestyle mix within the title then this market ceiling is raised considerably. *Ministry*, when it launched, had set itself a target sales figure of 150-200,000, and this is something its growth figures suggested was achievable, reaching 83,486 within its first year and a half, eclipsing both *Mixmag* (72,115) and *Muzik* (43,606)<sup>107</sup>. Its rapid rise slowed down somewhat (with sales of 90,235) at the end of 2000 as a redesigned *Mixmag* overtook it with sales of 106,111<sup>108</sup>.

The move towards lifestyle editorial and advertising opportunities, while typical of the mass-market titles, is by no means exclusive to them. Judith Farrell, editor and publisher of the small-circulation Northern Irish dance and alternative rock monthly *BBM* (formerly *Baseline*, a dance-oriented title) stated that her company’s buy-up of *Blank* (a Belfast-based indie magazine) in 1998 and subsequent editorial repositioning was done because it opened up wider lifestyle advertising opportunities for the magazine. It also helped the title survive economically as an ‘indigenous’ magazine forced to compete in a local market dominated by UK and Irish music titles. The music magazine market is increasingly moving away from ‘vertical magazines’ (which cover one subject, in this case music) and towards ‘horizontal magazines’ (which cover several elements of popular culture such as movies and fashion alongside music) because they generate wider advertising revenue (music, clothing, perfume, tobacco, alcohol and so forth) and present a much broader and mainstream appeal to readers (thereby attracting a stronger male/female readership mix).

The major bureaucratic and publishing issue facing IPC (and, indeed, the other major publishers too) in late 1998 was whether or not their music titles should orient themselves around clear niches (and generate a small but steady profit) or to pursue an

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<sup>105</sup> The average male:female readership ratio is roughly 70:30 for both rock and dance titles, although *Mojo* state that they have a 90%+ male readership.

<sup>106</sup> This has been a remarkable growth area in publishing since the mid-1990s, although it has been suggested that they went through a ‘cooling off’ period in late 1999 (Addicott, 2000a). However, their sales figures overshadow those of the music press in general. *FHM* (Emap) has sales 716,679, *Loaded* (IPC) has sales of 351,353 and *Maxim* (Dennis) sells 328,463 (*Press Gazette*, 2001a: 7). New launches have also performed well, despite the fact that the industry has long talked of this as an over-crowded publishing sector. Cabal’s *Front* debuted with sales of 141,162 and IPC’s *Later* had what was classed as ‘disappointing’ entry sales of 90,555 (*Press Gazette*, 2000: 7).

<sup>107</sup> *Press Gazette* 2000: 6.

eclectic agenda and tap into the general entertainment and lifestyle market (potentially generating greater profits but at a higher risk). The belief was that there had been a much wider cultural shift in the manner in which audiences consumed music (where music remained an important, but no longer defining, element in their lives) and this shift weakened the public's interest in music-only magazines. This can be considered within the context of the rise of wider culture and leisure industries and what might be considered a post-modern fragmentation of once-solid taste publics, indicated in the market success of lifestyle publishing and programming. This trend runs counter to Rivers' (1973: 540) prediction that the general interest magazine would become weakened and eventually disappear, to be replaced by the specialist title catering for an individual and rigidly defined taste public.

Rivers' (ibid.) original argument was endorsed by Tunstall (1983: 89) who suggested that magazines are generally weak in the UK because of the popularity of the broadcast media and that in what he terms the 'TV age' the trend had been away from general magazines towards specialist titles appealing to specialised (and, at times, large) sections of the public. Yet the growth in (male) lifestyle publishing since the mid-1990s and the rise, in the slipstream of *OK* and *Hello!* of 'celebrity' and gossip magazines such as *Heat*, *In Style* and *Star* (Teather, 2001; Dugdale, 2001) have both had a clear impact on the construction and orientation of the total publishing market. Because overheads at the major publishers have risen, magazines are increasingly expected to generate high levels of revenue over short periods of time, something Emap's high-priority marketing of *Heat* illustrates (it saw a sales increase of 137.6% in the second half of 2000 (Dugdale, 2001)). Popular culture and 'lifestyle' eclecticism (tapping into several 'taste publics' simultaneously as *Heat* and *Star* have done by covering movie, TV and fashion celebrities alongside music ones) has become the publishing norm and its market success has, in the eyes of the major publishers, de-legitimised the pursuit of narrowly defined taste publics through niche-interest mono-thematic titles.

Related to this is the fact that title-loyalty had been eroded in the marketplace with readers being described by publishers and editors as 'promiscuous' because they 'graze across' the multitude of titles in the over-saturated market and are no longer repeat

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<sup>108</sup> *Music Week*, 2001: 4.



purchasers<sup>109</sup>. Editors and publishers agreed with Frith's (1985: 126) contention in the 1980s (in relation to sales declines in the weekly sector) that readers were no longer committed to a title and their purchasing habits were primarily swayed by two factors: who the cover star was that issue and what free gift was on offer (reflected in the fact that readership subscriptions are less important than casual newsagent sales<sup>110</sup>). The inkies, Reeves (1999b) argues, had a loyal readership in the 1970s and early-1980s, but the competition from glossy monthlies and the lifestyle press has meant a shift in consumption patterns and young readers are no longer attracted to the weekly music press. Because there is a generational fall-off point for the inkies, in the late-1990s they were simultaneously losing older readers at the upper end and failing to replace them with young readers. It is a weakness in their branded identity that ideally, if strong, should attract new readers while retaining the purchasing loyalty of existing readers (Wharton, 1992). Portfolio management can be seen as a means of holding onto pockets of existing readerships (through titles which allow for and encourage a 'transferable homology'), but the major publishing companies have been forced to re-think how they attract new and young readers into their portfolios. This will undoubtedly prove to be a long-term problem and concern for them, exacerbated by the closure of both *MM* and *Select* (which were both seen as key entry points for younger readers in the chain of titles within their respective portfolios).

Publishers reacted to the acceleration of 'reader promiscuity' in the late-1990s by taking clear steps towards branding both the name and identity of their titles and their portfolios, with it becoming increasingly common for magazines to spawn other products and services (Wharton, 1992). Nilson (1998: 8) suggests that the branding of products increases in importance when the market is over-populated as the increase in market competition results in a decline in product differentiation. He notes that "as the tangible aspects of the product or service are becoming more similar, the intangible aspects, the abstract values, are increasing in importance". Branding is a step taken by companies to ensure market survival as a "strong brand in a market sector creates barriers to entry. The

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<sup>109</sup> McRobbie (1991: 142) suggested that 'teen titles' had very loyal readerships in the 1980s, but subsequent market trends would seem to suggest the erosion of this.

<sup>110</sup> The majority of music magazines now offer reduced prices to readers who take out long-term subscriptions. For example, *Uncut* (2000: 112) offered 25% discount for 2-year subscriptions, *Q* (2000: 131) offered 20% for annual subscriptions and *Melody Maker* (2000: 45) offered 7%.

stronger the brand values of the leading brands in a sector ... the more difficult it is for players to enter the market” (ibid.: 9). Brands need to adapt to the market they operate within and project a “*consistent, coherent identity*” (Randall, 1997: 16) to the public. Successful brands work as a shorthand summary of the product or service and bring customer reassurance as well as an added value beyond the product itself (Randall, 1997). In magazine terms, a solid brand is something which raises the value of a magazine beyond that of its intrinsic characteristics (Wharton, 1992).

Steve Sutherland, while editor of *NME*, concurred with this notion of a ‘consistent, coherent identity’ when he said: “I think the most important thing I do is to take care of the *NME* brand and to ensure that not only does it survive now and do well now and keep to its remit but also to explore opportunities for that brand to expand. To use the resource that we have in whatever form it needs to be used in the future. So that’s pretty much it”. In February 2000 Sutherland left the editorship to take up the middle management post of *NME* brand director, overlooking the paper, the website and related ancillary products and ventures (Addicott, 2000b). Alan Lewis argued that there have been no short-term economic returns for IPC’s investment into Internet projects. His contention was that advertisers were reluctant to take out ad space on their sites as the market remained unproven. IPC’s long-term plan was to gain ‘transactional revenue’ from their sites by turning them into on-line record and ticket shops and this is typical of the majority of publishers who have been developing ancillary products to boost the brand values of their magazines (Locks, 1999). Christopher Mellor, in discussing *DJ*’s spin-off website and Atlantic 252 radio show, said that magazines could no longer exist solely in the print market and had to build up both their brand profile (through extensions) and total revenue through ancillary services and market activities.

The *nme.com* site was set up, after five months’ development, in mid-1996 and it exacerbated the sales decline for the paper as it offered many of the paper’s informational resources for free. A former website employee estimated that in the months immediately following the launch of the site the paper lost over 1,000 readers each week. The key problem facing the paper’s editorial team and the website’s editorial team was to find a way for both to grow symbiotically and offer readers something unique so that they bought the paper and visited the site (indeed, the closure of *Vox* can be seen in terms of



its inability to achieve such symbiosis with the *NME*). The result has been a marked growth in the site, with an estimated unique readership of over 800,000 (Addicott, 2000b), and the continued slide in readership figures for the paper which illustrates the danger Randall (1997) warned of when brand extensions damage faith in and sales of the parent brand. Parent brands and their extensions need to be carefully segmented and positioned so as to avoid cannibalism. The parent brand should occupy the centre of the market where the majority of consumers are and the extensions should be used to increase total market share by courting other market segments. Extensions operate as ‘blockers’ (ibid.) to stop rival companies from entering and *nme.com* can be seen as a revenue-losing ‘blocker’ intended to protect and strengthen long-term brand profits and market survival.

IPC middle management and the *NME* editorial team both understood that the website would naturally damage sales of the ‘parent’ paper. Their own market research showed that readers primarily bought the paper for the ‘hard’ information sections (the news pages and the gig guide) which was being given away free on the website, thereby negating the need for readers to buy the paper. IPC felt that it was better to lose cover revenue and advertising revenue for the paper in the short term through the launch of the site, rather than have a rival Internet company set up a music site that would appeal to *NME* readers. The intention was to accept the short-term losses, build up a solid branded identity for the website and ultimately benefit from the long-term revenue it would generate. The growth of the *nme.com* website<sup>111</sup>, like other popular culture-based websites, can be explained in terms of its increased potential audience reach through its global and free access (Swanton, 1998). Material distribution costs are no longer an issue and speed of delivery internationally is instant rather than taking days or even weeks. This relates explicitly to the point raised by Jordans (1986: 12-13) who argue that “the discovery of a new method of distribution is sometimes the discovery of a new market”.

At a BBC seminar in August 1999, Chris Cowey, the executive producer of the Top of the Pops television show, spoke in detail of corporate plans to develop and extend the TOTP brand globally and the *Top of the Pops* magazine was situated as key to this

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<sup>111</sup> In 2000, *nme.com* extended its cultural remit in an attempt to move away from being seen as only an alternative rock site, by introducing genre-specific versions (for example, pop and hip-hop) of the site. This shift in the branded title’s

process, with plans to launch a ‘localised’ German version of the magazine on the back of the success of the German TOTP TV show. Just like the British magazine (Handley, 1997), the German edition would work in close co-ordination with the show’s producers, heavily focussing on acts appearing on and gossip from the show in the hope of a symbiotic market growth. The marketing dynamics adopted by the BBC here relate directly to the organisational rationalisation of production as defined by Schiller (1989: 31), where major companies develop more efficient production techniques and look outward to the global marketplace.

Taking the logic of international branding in a different direction, the British dance magazines *Ministry*, *DJ*, *Muzik* and *Mixmag* began producing free Ibiza-centric issues for distribution to the clubbers on the island. The UK circulation battles were relocated to the island for the summer of 1999. The magazine editors and publishers intended their brands to stick with clubbers when they got back to the UK. Free copies were distributed to the majority of bars, clubs and hotels on the island – using an international forum to raise awareness of and reinforce a domestic brand. The UK titles only produced Ibiza-specific titles for the duration of the summer clubbing season. The free editions were simply ‘localised’ versions of the British titles, and because the island itself does not produce an ‘indigenous’ dance magazine, the marketing potential and branding possibilities were left wide open for the UK publishers (Marks, 1999).

Since the late-1990s, all the major UK music titles have invested heavily in brand-extension opportunities, which, along with a professional downgrading of ‘personality writers’ has contributed to the enforcement of a rigid (and homogenised) house style for each of the titles (Forde, 2001). Emap have been the most proactive publisher in this field, launching artist-specific spin-off collectors’ titles from both *Q* and *Mojo*<sup>112</sup> and a £9m investment in overhauling the websites of all their major titles<sup>113</sup> between 2000 and 2003 (Vickers, 2000; Addicott, 2000j). Their investment in branded TV shows for both *Smash Hits* (Smash Hits TV on Sky One) (Vernon, 2000; Addicott, 2000k) and *Q* (QTV on Sky Digital) (McGeever, 2000) is part of a much wider multi-media trend towards “‘masthead television”” (Reeves, 2000: 11). This is something IPC have also invested

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core aesthetic, however, may damage the parent brand values by attempting to compete in genre territories it is not commonly associated with.

<sup>112</sup> *Q Beatles*, *Q Dylan*, and *Mojo Lennon* were the first titles in proposed series for both magazines.



heavily in for both the *NME* (NMETV on Bravo as discussed above) and *Muzik* (R:Muzik on Rapture TV) (*Press Gazette*, 2001b: 5). The various steps towards branding and product-extensions taken by all these music titles can be seen as “adding new product variants or new products in essentially the same field” to increase long-term profits (Randall, 1997: 59). However, these brand extensions “must be consistent with the core values, strengthen the brand’s differentiation, and offer real consumer benefits” (ibid.: 67). Branding and brand extensions have been undoubtedly the key market opportunities available to counter the problems facing magazine publishers and editors in the late-1990s.

Each title has to work through a dual process whereby it clearly brands itself while subtly distinguishing itself and its market position from that of rival titles. In doing so, they must attract sufficient like-minded readers to make the magazine a viable commercial enterprise (Scott, 1999); *Mojo* is an example of a title which has located a new, post-*Q*, niche corresponding to its readers’ requirements. As the magazine market around it has contracted, *Mojo* has been one of the few titles to see its ABC figures constantly rise without the concerted use of cover-mounts. Branded titles not only face inter-publisher competition, but also *intra*-publisher competition. The larger publishers offer a portfolio of titles and, hence, a portfolio of brands; therefore “[e]ach brand needs to be managed separately, but they also need to be managed together to avoid sub-optimisation” (Randall, 1997: 138). The titles must be arranged and managed carefully within the current publishing market. Such “category management” (ibid.: 139) involves the developing of a strategy for the category as a whole and not for each of the individual title brands separately. Therefore, to take an example, IPC’s overall strategy for their IPC Ignite! titles is considerably more important in company and market terms than their strategy for any individual music titles which exists within the portfolio. The first duty of each magazine’s branded identity is to contribute to and support the branded identity of the portfolio of which it is but one part.

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<sup>113</sup> *Q, Mojo, Smash Hits, Mixmag and Kerrang!*

## Conclusion

Within the major magazine publishing organisations, there exist very complex power structures and relations between middle managers and editorial staff. The climate of intense inter-publisher rivalry and the concentration of ownership characterising the music magazine market in the 1980s and 1990s have impacted directly on how individual magazines are positioned within organisationally-determined portfolios, how magazines are viewed as sources of revenue-generation and the imposition of increasingly restrictive employment terms and conditions for magazine staff. The over-saturation and fragmentation of the total market (and cyclical dynamic of magazine launches and closures) has brought immense uncertainty to the circulation patterns of many mainstream titles. Publishers have reacted to this by edging them towards lifestyle journalism to simultaneously attract a wider readership demographic while drawing in lucrative lifestyle advertising.

The changing employment conditions within music magazines have accentuated the power imbalance between 'executives' and 'staffers' (Breed, 1955: 332), thereby allowing publishing middle managers (particularly the editors-in-chief) to intervene much more directly in the editorial content of titles (particularly for newly-launched titles, re-designed titles and re-positioned titles). Editors, in the light of funding cutbacks, are increasingly pressurised to view their titles in economic terms as one brand within a wider portfolio of brands, rather than in cultural terms as titles in their own right. As publishers have invested heavily in multi-media brand-extensions for their magazines (in order to cement their existing market worth while drawing in potential new sources of revenue) editors have been forced to work around this by pitching their titles increasingly towards mainstream demographics in order to quickly recoup the investment tied up in launches, redesigns and brand-extensions.

However, these organisational relationships, inscribed, as they are within economic conditions, cannot be explained simply as a top-down exercise of power by publishing middle managers over editors and their staff; rather, they need to be evaluated in terms of both dependency and recalcitrance. Having considered the economic, bureaucratic and institutional forces under which music magazines are produced, it is



important - through the evaluation of each newsroom role individually - to extend the debates to consider the dynamics of the newsroom and how occupational goals and constraints impact on the routine production of music journalism. The following chapter will trace how the social, professional, organisational and cultural climates of the newsroom affect and determine production and consider this all within the dynamics of how power-relations between middle management and editorial teams (as well as between the individual roles within the newsroom) are set, negotiated and resisted.

## **Chapter 4 – Music Journalism as Profession**



## Introduction

While there is a long sociological tradition of enquiry into the professional and organisational activities of the print journalist (Breed, 1955; Gieber, 1964; White, 1950; Boyd-Barrett, 1970; Tunstall, 1971; Rivers, 1973; Mortensen & Svendsen, 1980; de Vries & Zwaga, 1997), there has been a strong and almost exclusive emphasis on the hard news journalist, in particular on crime, court, lobby and environmental correspondents (Chibnall, 1977; Negrine, 1991; Hansen, 1993). Within this, the role, place and activities of the (popular) arts journalist has been comparatively under-theorised, with only a few studies addressing this profession in any critical detail (Albert, 1958; Albert & Whitelam, 1963; Brown, 1978; English, 1979; Vincent, 1980; Scott, 1999). Within popular music studies, there has been a tendency to critique music journalists in terms of how their publications co-exist with the wider music industry, being theorised from without rather than from within. The profession is explained primarily in terms of organisational structures, in effect excluding the individual from the discussion (Frith, 1978; Chapple & Garofalo, 1980; Frith, 1983; Negus, 1992).

Particular studies have considered the ideological function and the theoretical evolution (described mainly in terms of ‘waves’ or ‘schools’ of writers) of music journalism yet have ignored the professional and occupational conditions under which mainstream music journalism is produced (Flippo, 1974a, 1974b, 1974c; Harley & Botsman, 1982; Stratton, 1982; Breen, 1987; Nowell, 1987; Jones, 1992, 1995; Toyne, 1993; Nehring, 1997; Mitchell & Shuker, 1998; Sloop, 1999). A small number of journal articles (Wyatt & Hull, 1990; Théberge, 1991; Evans, 1998) do touch on (through interview and questionnaire data) elements of journalistic professionalisation, newsroom structuring and reviewing priorities. There is, however, a clear need to consider these issues in much greater sociological depth by analysing: (i) the relationships between the different professional and organisational roles; (ii) how occupational goals are identified and pursued (both individually and collectively); (iii) how power structures within the newsroom impact on production; (iv) how the ‘culture’ of the newsroom both encourages and negates reflexive change; (v) how routinisation exists within the production cycle; and (vi) where and how the ‘music press’ can be talked of as being both homogenous (in

terms of what a variety of music titles hold in common) and heterogeneous (in terms of what they hold as characteristically different).

The traditional sociological paradigms of (hard) news production such as agenda-setting, gatekeeping and encoding/decoding offer conceptual entry points into the critical understanding of this profession, yet the dynamics of production, bureaucracy, hierarchy and source relations are markedly different in this context meaning the dominant models need to be rethought. Indeed, as Scott (1999: 47) argues, critics are different from hard news journalists and must, therefore, be studied outside of the dominant sociological frameworks, primarily because they do not deal in hard facts (with the exception of the news editor) in the same way that the traditional journalist must because “the traffic is not between a generalised reality and the society which lives in that reality”. This chapter will build on the previous chapter’s discussion, at the macro level, of the political-economics of magazine production by working through, at the micro level of the individual, a sociological and ‘professional-organisational’ (McNair, 1999) overview of the music journalism profession. Within this, there will be detailed consideration of the newsroom’s editorial structure, the different production roles within magazines (and how they intersect) as well as the dynamics of the production cycle, ultimately positioning the music press as a distinct and unique field of study within both popular music studies and journalism studies.

## **I The Newsroom Structure**

The most obvious point to strike one when entering the offices of a weekly popular music newspaper or monthly magazine is how few permanent staff members there are. Music magazines, particularly those produced by the major publishers (Emap and IPC), are commissioned and processed in small (often cramped and invariably cluttered) offices, with a skeletal staff of what Tunstall (1971: 30-36) terms ‘processors’. Most magazines are run by a core full-time staff of between seven and ten, who occupy the major editorial and production posts within a newsroom hierarchy determined by status (Tunstall, 1971: 51-54). The key newsroom posts are as follows (although, it should be noted, they are not



always identifiable in every publication): editor, assistant editor, features editor, reviews editor, news editor, production (or sub) editor, art editor, staff writer and editorial (or office) assistant.

In terms of roles, the editorial assistant is primarily secretarial (although they do have a number of administrative duties) and does not really exist outside of the inkies<sup>114</sup>. Similarly, the news editor as a separate full-time post is more typical of the inkies, as news is located as more central to their weekly production cycle than it is on a monthly magazine. Occasionally, as a result of budgetary cutbacks, an individual will straddle two editorial positions as in the case of Ian Watson at *MM* who, before its closure in 2000, was classed as a features editor (and paid a feature editor's salary) while essentially doing a feature editor *and* assistant editor's job. Neil Burnett, former *NME* assistant art editor, stated that "with IPC, they don't like giving titles away because that means they have to pay you more", saying that while he was classed as an assistant art editor, he was the *de facto* art editor when the art editor left the paper. At both IPC and Emap, the editor in chief (who is directly accountable to the publishing director and managing director) will work across the company's portfolio of titles, but will occupy separate office space removed from the day-to-day activities of the individual titles they work with. Additional posts within the major publishers include special projects editor<sup>115</sup> and brand director.

The reviews editor role on the *NME* is divided into two – album editor and live editor. Again, IPC budgetary concerns impacted on *MM* (as each title's staffing level was determined by the revenue they generated) and the post of reviews editor was held by one person (Jim Arundel<sup>116</sup>) in the early 1990s, held by two individuals (albums and live) in the mid-to-late 1990s, only to revert back to a single editorial position by late-1999 following IPC cutbacks. Until 1999, Gavin Martin worked as the *NME*'s media and film editor<sup>117</sup> before taking an IPC redundancy package as they downsized staff across a number of titles. This section was, thereafter, edited by the assistant editor, John Mulvey, until he resigned in 2000 when the section was taken over by Victoria Segal. The inkies

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<sup>114</sup> Because they are not directly involved in editorial decisions about the direction of the title or help shape its cultural agenda and aesthetic, the editorial assistant will not be considered in any detail in this chapter.

<sup>115</sup> Their tasks include working with editors when compiling cover-mounted CDs, securing the use of suggested tracks from record companies and arranging MCPS royalty payments to the artists included

<sup>116</sup> After leaving *MM*, Arundel took up a reviews editor post at *Mojo* under the surname Irvin.

<sup>117</sup> *MM* also had a film and media editor (Michael Bonner) until he left the title in 1997 to join the newly launched *Uncut*.

are the only titles to employ full-time staff writers<sup>118</sup>, while the majority of their writers (and indeed those on the monthlies) are employed on a freelance basis. It is important to note that it not just writers who are employed as freelancers, but also news assistant and reporters, art assistants and section editors, such as Ian Harrison at *Select* who was initially paid a regular freelance rate to edit the 'Primer' section at the front of the magazine until the post was made permanent in 2000 when Alexis Petridis took over as what proved to be the title's final editor. There is a difference, however, in how these different types of freelancer are paid. Writers are paid on a printed word rate while section editors and assistants (because of the editorial responsibility) are given a flat fee for a specified number of days or hours on a 'shift' rate (Niblock, 1996).

The majority of small-run magazines (even in large publishing organisations) do not have access to in-house lawyers unless they come across a legally problematic story. Generally the editor or production editor will have completed libel courses meaning stories can be checked in-office. Most section editors sit in close proximity to each other (often around the same set of desks) and this has a number of important ramifications for the manner in which the titles are assembled and freelancers treated, as will be seen below. While most offices are open-plan, a number of titles (notably *MM*, *Uncut* and *NME*) have a separate and enclosed office for the editor, and this topographical separation does impact in a number of important ways on the socio-professional culture of the title. In enforcing both a spatial and an occupational distinction between the editor and the rest of the staff, a particular hierarchical order is subtly imposed and the circulation of ideas and decisions (and the opportunities open to freelancers and staffers to participate in this circulation) is clearly different from those magazines produced in open-plan offices. There is, of course, an explicit hierarchical structure within all organisations (taking the newsroom as a particular type of organisational structure within a broader publishing organisation) in that they all have clear boundaries, a normative order, clear levels of authority and are oriented around the achievement of explicit goals

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<sup>118</sup> In 2001 *Q*, however, employed a senior writer (John Harris) and two writers-at-large (Ian Harrison and Roy Wilkinson). Harris had negotiated a senior writer post at *Select* when he resigned as editor and this post carried over to *Q* after *Select*'s closure. Both Harrison and Wilkinson, after *Select* closed, had to be relocated within Emap and the writers-at-large posts were created for them. Similarly, when Ted Kessler left his post as *NME* features editor in 2001 following a major editorial overhaul of the title, he negotiated a senior writer post for himself. The creation of all these posts only occurred because all the writers mentioned were on full-time contracts and would have received substantial compensatory payments had they been made redundant.



(Smith, 1977). Yet it is the manner in which the organisational and hierarchical structure is imposed which is of crucial importance here.

The *Select* office was fully open-plan with the editor (John Harris) sitting in a corner able to overview the whole office and he would circulate around all the desks on a regular basis, whereas at *Uncut*, Allan Jones was based in an enclosed room unable to see or be seen by the rest of the newsroom staff, only entering the newsroom to check copy and layout with the section editors and art department. The lack of an explicit spatially-demarcated hierarchy at *Select* meant that all staff were included and consulted on a regular and informal manner about editorial issues and the culture of the office was seen by all the staff as one which encouraged their involvement. John Harris took the office stereo as a metaphor for power structures and hierarchies within offices, noting that at *Select* no one had a monopoly over what could be played on the stereo while he compared putting a record onto the *NME* office stereo as akin to “going over the top”, where a selection would be met with jeers and derision from other staff members. The office and professional climate there as a result, he suggested, could be hostile and vicious. This socio-professional dynamic is of central importance to the understanding of magazines as centres of cultural production, and, as collective enterprises, the working environment of the office will filter into the aesthetic of the magazine as a whole, either bolstering it or damaging it. Within this, the editor must strike a balance between the overall direction and cultural agenda of the title (informed, of course, by market dynamics) and the contributions of the other staff members and freelancers without over-privileging one to the detriment of the other.

## II The Production Cycle

Traditionally, the sociological analysis of news production has been concerned with the routinisation of production activities of journalists and editors, yet Zelizer (1993) talks of how journalism can be seen in terms of both ‘performance’ (regarding it as fluid, varying across different situations) and ‘ritual’ (considering how an organisational collective results in patterned behaviour). Newsrooms, to achieve their economic and occupational

goals while minimising the risks associated with journalism as ‘performance’, are structured within particular organisational, economic, technological and political frameworks under the tyranny of what is commonly termed a ‘stopwatch culture’ arising out of regular and constant deadlines: daily for newspapers (or more frequent if they produce early and late editions) and hourly or half-hourly for radio and television journalists. Here is where an important distinction between music journalists and hard news journalists needs to be made. The production cycles of music magazines is, depending on the title, weekly<sup>119</sup> (*NME*, *7*, *Kerrang!*), fortnightly (*Smash Hits*, *DJ*) or monthly (*Q*, *Mixmag*, *Ministry*, *The Wire*, *Uncut*, *Muzik*). It is only news-led music websites (the main sites based in the UK being *nme.com*, *dotmusic.com*, *music365.com* and *worldpop.com*) that work under production conditions more typical of the hard news broadcast media. The professional climate and organisational conditions of the music press are characteristically different from hard news titles and need, therefore, to be singled out for particular analysis outside of the dominant sociological paradigms. Tellingly, music journalists refer to themselves as ‘writers’, stressing that their job is not (what several of them in interviews termed) ‘proper journalism’. While Tunstall (1971: 92-94) found motoring and fashion journalism to be the most derided specialist areas within the journalistic profession, Jones (1993: 81) suggests that other journalists consider music journalism the lowest form of journalism. There is a clear process of professional exclusion here by music journalists and hard news journalists, with both sides agreeing that music journalism is professionally and ideologically different and needs, therefore, to be evaluated within a distinct framework divorced from hard news production.

On monthly magazines there is not as explicit and as rigid a production routine as there is on a daily or weekly papers. The deadline stretches over the monthly production cycle in which the whole magazine is put together, with particular sections being finished before others and sent in advance to the printers. There is not a single deadline around which all editorial and production activities are geared, but rather a staggered set of deadlines. *Select* was, for example, put together over a four-week timeframe. The first Monday and Tuesday of the cycle was given over to editorial discussions and production

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<sup>119</sup> Of course, a number of UK Sunday newspapers (such as *The Observer*, *The Independent on Sunday*, *The Sunday*



planning (up to three months in advance) attended by all staff and contributors (although they also ran a staff-only editorial a few days after the general staff editorial). *Kerrang!* used their weekly editorial meetings to discuss the next three issues where the reviews and features editors outlined the contents of their individual sections to ensure that they were not all covering the same acts in the same week, and that album reviews, live reviews and features were staggered. *Kerrang!*'s section planning was formalised through an office-planning grid so that each 'processor' could see when and what the other 'processors' were covering and modify their sections accordingly. Both the *NME* and *MM* held editorials on Tuesday afternoons so that all staff and freelancers could see that week's issue<sup>120</sup> and incorporate professional reflexivity along with advance editorial planning, which generally involved planning up to five weeks ahead<sup>121</sup>. Other magazines, however, such as *Uncut*, *Q* and *Mojo* did not have 'formal' editorial meetings in this sense (the editors of all these magazines claimed that they discussed editorial issues on an informal and *ad hoc* basis and that formal editorials were called only when they felt the magazine was struggling or in need of reflexive re-evaluation). However, each section editor had to distribute to the other section editors a breakdown of their section a number of months in advance and they all would work simultaneously on short, medium and long-term plans for their sections and the magazine as a whole.

While office hours in all the magazines are generally from 10:00am to 6:00pm (Monday-Friday), this becomes more elastic as the magazine enters the final days of the production cycle. The first two weeks of the cycle are given over to long term planning and commissioning by the core editorial staff while the last two weeks are focused around the gathering, processing and fitting of copy around the flatpack<sup>122</sup>. As McNair (1999: 60) notes, the issue of 'space' (and the routinisation of activities around filling this space) is, alongside 'time' (in the form of deadlines), the basic governing and

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*Times* and the *News of the World*) can also be classed as 'weeklies'.

<sup>120</sup> Both titles were available nationally on Wednesday mornings, but were available in London on Tuesday afternoons. Copies of the finished issues were delivered from the printers to both titles early on Tuesday mornings.

<sup>121</sup> Ben Knowles argued that before he took over as *NME* editor, formal editorial meetings had fallen by the wayside. He said: "Staff didn't have the direction they needed or the force and drive behind them to give them the opportunities they needed ... [T]here was a very badly structured set-up in the office. They didn't have weekly meetings. We now have twice-weekly meetings and everyone feels they're directly involved in the paper ... The first one had more than 30 people ... Probably the biggest gathering of *NME* writers since the pub across the road was giving out free drinks" (quoted in Addicott, 2000f: 15).

organisational factor in news production. Sections of the magazine will be sent (in two-page groupings) to the printers at various points during the total cycle, while in the final four days the news pages<sup>123</sup> are updated and the remaining sections of the magazine processed.

There is a formal deadline structure, but it is stretched sequentially over a two-week period and becomes increasingly intensified in the final days. However, certain section editors will complete their sections much earlier in the month. For example, during participant observation (in February 1999) at *Uncut* magazine, Paul Lester (the music editor) had completed his section earlier in the cycle and was oriented around commissioning freelancers to do reviews and features for subsequent issues while the other editors completed their sections. The fact that the whole magazine was not oriented as one around a single, collective deadline resulted in wildly conflicting views of appropriate deadline behaviour. On the final day of production, Michael Bonner (the film editor) arrived in the office at 10:00am enraged that no-one else had made it in yet Paul Lester arrived at 10:30am expressing amazement at the fact that so many people were in the office so 'early' as he saw it.

Weekly titles are obviously much more explicitly routinised than the monthlies, yet the level of routinisation is by no means as advanced as that on daily newspapers (Breed, 1955; White, 1950; Gieber, 1964; Tunstall, 1971). Both the *NME* and *MM* went to press on Monday afternoon, to be printed up and available in newsagents by Tuesday afternoon in central London and Wednesday morning around the rest of the UK. However, the majority of the paper would be compiled and processed by the preceding Friday evening, with the Monday deadline really only applicable to the news pages. The news editor would have a 'draft' version of the news pages ready by Friday evening

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<sup>122</sup> Magazines are made up of groupings of eight-pages and if advertising space is less than expected (or falls out at the last minute) the editor must decide if they have enough copy to make up the shortfall or if they should 'downsize' (and jettison copy) the title by eight pages.

<sup>123</sup> During participant observation at *Select* (November 1998), the final day of production was Monday 16<sup>th</sup>. John Harris had been record shopping over the weekend and bought a Japanese import of the Manic Street Preachers album 'This is My Truth, Tell Me Yours'. It contained an extra track – 'Socialist Serenade' – which was not available in the UK and which contained an attack on the Labour government. Harris felt that it warranted inclusion in the news pages (although there were initial reservations about including a transcription of the line "Robin Cook's licking too much pussy") and he believed that it was something the inbies would not have picked up on. He changed the news pages at the final stage of production to include a 3/4 page feature on this track.



which they could change or add to (and, in almost unprecedented cases, dump<sup>124</sup>) should a story break over the weekend.

Within the social and professional dynamics of the newsroom, a constant theme in interviews was the importance of a positive working environment for both the title and the staff. Different editors will naturally stamp their identity on the aesthetic and ideological thrust of their titles, yet this translates also into the social dynamics of the workplace. Mat Snow, having worked in what he called a “poisoned atmosphere” at the *NME* during the political divisions crystallised in the ‘Hip-Hop Wars’, stressed the importance of maintaining a healthy professional mood in the *Mojo* offices. Danny Kelly, during this time also at the *NME*, described the office climate as follows:

Wonderful. Brilliant. I mean, I cried every night when I got home from work ... You want to know about the ‘Hip-Hop Wars’? There used to be forty people attending the editorial meetings on a Tuesday to watch myself and Stuart Cosgrove scream at each other. Two, big, red-faced, Celtic bastards screaming blue murder and abuse at one another. I admire Stuart. He knew what he was talking about and he had the courage of his convictions. For him, the death of rock was a good thing. The people I hated were the ones who stood behind him and went [in sneering voice] ‘Yeah, yeah, Stuart. Yeah, yeah’. Ian [Pye] and I ended up in a different situation. I was assistant editor and we didn’t agree about how the paper should be. I don’t think it’s unfair to say that on at least one occasion he asked me to resign on the grounds that I was disruptive. And I’m afraid that I told him that I wouldn’t give up the paper to people with his beliefs.

The central issues at the heart of the ‘Hip-Hop Wars’<sup>125</sup> were both editorial (concerning the shifting musical agenda of the title) and occupational (concerning the poor treatment of freelance writers by key editorial staff). A certain symbiosis existed here with the editorial direction of the title affecting the working climate and vice versa. If, as Bourdieu (1998: 23) argues, the “journalistic world is a divided one, full of conflict, competition, and rivalries”, then inter and intra-occupational rivalries and competition between staffers and freelancers will shape the climate of the office space as a central meeting-point. Similar (if less pronounced, than the ‘Hip-Hop Wars’) divisions were identifiable within *MM* during 1999 with the office climate so poor that certain freelancers would not come

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<sup>124</sup> One such case was in the breaking of the news of Kurt Cobain’s suicide on 8<sup>th</sup> April 1994 and will be discussed below.

<sup>125</sup> Hoskyns (1995) satirises these divisions briefly in his semi-fictional novel on the UK music press.

into the office in case they met the editor (Mark Sutherland), with one writer in particular arranging to meet the art editor (Tony Judge) in a pub by the IPC offices and handing copy in via him. A section editor at the paper argued that the office was divided into clear camps – those in agreement with Sutherland’s redirection of the title (as discussed in the previous chapter) and those opposed to it. It was a situation exacerbated, they believed, by what they called Sutherland’s “poor social skills”<sup>126</sup>. The result was that certain staff lost enthusiasm for their jobs and the paper and the quality of the writing and ideas in the magazine, they believed, exponentially declined.

Indeed, as du Gay (2000: 64) (paraphrasing Newfield, 1995) notes, organisations, to avoid the long-term structural and professional damage caused by internal schisms, must create a sense of community and belonging among their staff. Within this, work should be seen not as “a painful obligation” but, rather, as something that individuals undertake and feel fulfilled doing – a socio-professional dynamic that was, a number of freelancers and staff members felt, absent from Sutherland’s editorship. It is important to note also that the working culture of music magazines is by no means confined spatially to the office and important professional and social dynamics take place outside the office, primarily in the local pubs and at gigs. Certain editors would make a point of taking the staff to the pub at the end of the production cycle. Their belief was that such personal interaction was essential for strong professional interaction and often informal editorial meetings would take place there, representing a more fluid and organic (rather than an inert and hierarchically-inscribed) management system, very much in keeping with the flexibility described in models of new wave management (du Gay, 2000: 61).

However, there is the related danger of this social interaction excluding contributors who are spatially outside the office. A former *NME* freelancer suggested that because the key section editors (assistant editor, features editor, album editor and live editor) all sat in close proximity, they generated a closed loop of opinion which impacted on the dynamic of the whole office and the aesthetic of the title. His argument was that a particular and myopic arrogance about the importance of the paper was circulated by these editors and engendered in the whole professional mindset of both ‘gatherers’ and ‘processors’. The professional ideology of the paper was shaped here, he felt, as staffers

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<sup>126</sup> Sutherland received a formal IPC warning after attempting to browbeat a staff member.



censored and moulded copy to fit the agenda of the key processors in, what Mortensen & Svendsen (1980: 175) call “internal, explicit control” typical of most media systems. Within this system, freelancers learn (and adapt to) the policies and norms of the newsroom through osmosis with a series of visible rewards (e.g. promotion or an increase in commissioned work) or punishments for those who either disobey or transgress policy (Rivers, 1973: 532).

The rigidity of policy implementation in the *NME* meant, a former freelancer argued, that the section editors “tend[ed] to dictate what goes on. And if you do write something that they don’t agree with, they do make it very obvious ... Sometimes they don’t get what they expect, which they hate. I’d been given an album they were sure I was going to give a bad review to and I’d given it a good review ... I walked into the office the day after I’d delivered the copy and they we’re all just shouting ‘WRONG!’ at me ... *NME*’s got this little enclave and it is like a 6<sup>th</sup> form common room”. As Danny Eccleston argued, the ideological differences (and how they shape professional practice) between the *NME* and *Q* lie in the fact that that “*Q* believes there is good music and bad music and the *NME* believes there is right music and wrong music ... So therefore, you’re very much encouraged, or that’s probably the mindset you have at that age, that some music is good and some is evil and you write like that”. While “production is a collective enterprise” (Bourdieu, 1998: 23), the terms and conditions of entering this ‘collective’ (as seen above) in the music press are complex and professional, organisational and personal factors will operate to dictate both inclusion and exclusion.

Because critics work and socialise with other critics and with artists<sup>127</sup> the ‘field of cultural production’ is affected in particular and important ways. Therefore the analysis of professional dynamics both inside and outside the newsroom (and the consideration of behavioural and occupational patterns in different environments) is crucial for an understanding of the total profession (Schlesinger, 1980). Bourdieu (1993: 116) argues: “No one has ever completely extracted all the implications of the fact that the writer, the artist or even the scientist writes not only for a public, but for a public of

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<sup>127</sup> The particular ‘social worlds’ of bars at concerts, after-show parties and pubs centred around, for example, Camden in north London really cannot be discounted from any discussion of the mechanics of how the music press operates both in relation to itself and to the music industry. It is important to note, too, that several journalists and senior editors are in relationships with press officers and it is common for journalists to share flats with both other journalists and press officers.



equals who are also competitors. Few people depend as much as artists and intellectuals do for their self-image upon the image others, and particularly other writers and artists, have of them”. Indeed, it can be argued that music writers write, primarily, for other music journalists (rather than a readership) and their analysis is shaped accordingly (Gleason, in English, 1979: 100). A former *MM* freelancer stated that in the early 1990s, writers on the paper generated a small and closed field of opinion and used their reviews to try and impress or out-do their colleagues through references to esoteric artists as a game of cultural one-upmanship. Their social and professional world is so small that they end up influencing each other (English, 1979: 100) and even writers on rival titles and from rival publishers will socialise in the same places. These social networks serve to forge a common critical consensus to a point where the same ideas and buzz-acts are circulated quickly within the ‘community’. This “sort of game of mirrors reflecting one another produces a formidable effect of mental closure” (Bourdieu, 1998: 24) leading into a form of ‘metacriticism’ narrowly defining itself and its parameters either alongside or against existing criticism (Farber, 1976: 421).

Within this, many journalists have talked of a ‘club’ atmosphere in operation in many music papers, particularly within the inkies, where the work offered to (or, indeed, withheld from) freelancers by section editors is dictated to a point by internal political divisions<sup>128</sup>. Several freelancers noted how their review work was reduced when a new live or album editor took over with whom they had little or nothing in common personally. Equally, when favoured reviews editors or features editors moved titles, freelancers expected their career opportunities at the section editor’s new title to increase. This ‘club’ atmosphere is also, it must be noted, defined at particular points along a gendered discourse. The music press is, as Negus (1992: 126-128), Steward & Garratt (1984: 87-88) and Burchill (1998: 121-131) all note, an unavoidably male-dominated terrain, and sexual politics will also cut across the newsroom’s field of production. Caroline Sullivan (a former *MM* freelancer and music critic at *The Guardian*), defined the inkies as an ‘all lads together’ environment, and female writers would have to work twice as hard to prove themselves in this environment or adopt a “protective male colouring by writing like the guys”. Théberge (1991: 286) suggests that because females in the press



occupy “positions of low visibility” (in posts such as editorial assistant, marketing and sales), “males retain a monopoly on speech” resulting in a gendered discourse in both the newsroom and reviews, while McNair (1999: 18-19) talks of the sex-based division of labour in the media in general resulting in a ‘glass ceiling’ within organisations, where female journalists can only progress so far within the corporate and organisational hierarchy.

Having considered the newsroom structure and hierarchy as well as the occupational and social dynamics of music magazines, it is important to look in detail at the activities and goals of each individual occupational position within music magazines to consider how they both shape and are shaped by the other occupational positions and how this contributes to an overall ‘newsroom and professional culture’ (Breed, 1955; Boyd-Barrett, 1970; Tunstall, 1971; Schlesinger, 1978, 1980; Schudson, 1991). In the following sections there will be detailed consideration of the structural positioning and role of: (i) the editor in chief; (ii) the editor and assistant editor; (iii) the features editor; (iv) the reviews editor; (v) the news editor; (vi) the art editor and photographer; (vii) the production (or sub) editor; and, finally, (viii) the staff writer and the freelancer. In working through these roles separately, the chapter will consider how they work both individually and collectively and how magazines (and their professional cultures) are shaped and affected by the complex nature of these inter-relationships. The analysis is in keeping with Smith’s (1977) contention that in order to fully understand the operational activities of an organisation, one must consider the different levels of activity through detailed consideration of the behaviour of the individual, the behaviour of the small group and finally inter-group behaviour. There is a clear academic need to move beyond the purely structuralist view of organisations as impersonal spheres and consider the professional and the social dynamics within them in order to understand both how individuals are “processed by organisations” (ibid.: 78) and contribute to the culture of organisations.

### **III Hierarchical Roles 1: the Editor in Chief**

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<sup>128</sup> One anecdote circulates about a former *MM* assistant editor who would not acknowledge freelancers until they had a



Editors in chief at the major publishing organisations exist at the mid-point between what Breed (1955: 332) terms 'executives' and 'staffers'. They liaise between the management, advertising departments and the editorial teams across a portfolio of titles within the framework of overall corporate strategy and are responsible for the overall market success of the titles they overlook (Niblock, 1996). Purcell (1993) notes that the corporate office (of which the editor in chief is a key component) fulfils four distinct roles which impact on resource management: (i) the development and implementation of corporate strategy; (ii) the monitoring of the performances of the various divisions within a company/portfolio; (iii) the handling and location of capital within the company; and (iv) the managing of links with external capital (through links with advertisers, the development of brand extensions, corporate sponsorship and so forth).

Traditionally the editor in chief will have had a proven journalistic track record (often within the company) and, because of this, will exist as a key negotiating point between editors and owners. Generally editors prefer to work with individuals who have had direct experience and knowledge of the conditions within which they work and produce their publications. As noted in the previous chapter, the editor in chief performs a decisive role in the launching of titles, the acquisition of titles, the re-pitching (or closing) of titles, the appointment of editors, the building up of editorial teams and the co-ordination of market research into their titles (through focus groups and 'in-mags'<sup>129</sup>). David Davies, former *Q* editor, stated that the editor in chief is only called in when something is wrong with a title or when they want to create excitement about a title. They will call a planning meeting and, along with the editor and the art editor work through redesign budgets and ideas, possibly calling in marketing specialists to assist or involving other senior editorial staff.

They will appoint editors on a regular basis with both Mark Ellen (Emap) and Alan Lewis (IPC) arguing there is a need for a constant turnover of editors every four or five years to stop magazines becoming stale and creating a schism in their homology with their readership. They are involved in the structural issues of a magazine but are occupationally outside the day-to-day running of a title, unless it is facing serious market

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stand-up row with him in the office – something he considered a 'rite of passage'.



or staffing problems. Ellen stated that as a member of the Emap Metro board of directors his main contribution to board meetings hinged on the twin issue of quality of production and staffing, rather than on financial aspects. When editors are appointed, the editor in chief becomes their manager and first bureaucratic point of contact within a 'matrix management' model. They liaise across all the editors within the portfolio and bring them together in portfolio meetings to ensure that the editorial plans do not clash with (or cannibalise) those of another editor, helping to synchronise editorial activities around the publishing 'vision' which, du Gay (2000: 67) argues, is a "crucial feature of senior management activity. Visions are held to provide a clear sense of where an organization is going and what its core activities are".

"[T]he efficiency and regularity of bureaucratic administration is a prerequisite of any long term economic calculation" (Mouzelis, 1981: 25) and the editor in chief can be seen as central within the corporate practice known as "management by objectives" (Bradley & Wilkie, 1974: 48) where organisations (and the component parts of their portfolios) define their goals in terms of the availability of money, time and resources. They closely monitor sales and advertising revenue which are used to determine the distribution of internal capital for each title (regarding the number of full-time posts available, promotional and marketing budgets and so forth), with each title subsumed bureaucratically and corporately within the total organisational structure to increase overall portfolio profits, rather than their own individual profits. The editor in chief performs a key function as a mediator between the economically driven sphere of publishing management and the more culturally-oriented sphere of music journalism with the two worlds often being mutually contradictory and, at times, antagonistic. The editor in chief is seen by editors, because they will have worked as editors themselves, as much more approachable than other senior managers and can, in times of crisis, help reconcile the editor's journalistic needs and the publisher's economic needs. However, the editor in chief is both professionally and culturally closer to the middle managers and, ultimately, it is their interests they will most strongly represent and promote in both their routine and crisis meetings with editors.

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<sup>129</sup> 'In-mags' is the common term for readership questionnaires sent inside magazines on an annual or bi-annual basis.



#### **IV Hierarchical Roles 2: the Editor & the Assistant Editor**

Within the hierarchical structure of the newsroom, the editor is the most important individual (in terms of day-to-day activities) in any publication and this is something that is repeated throughout the sociological study of news production. Indeed, as Davis (1988: 14) notes, it is “the editor who gives the magazine its character”, provides it with a public face through interviews and, is ultimately, the one who will be sued in a libel case. However, the editor rarely enjoys complete autonomy in controlling the newsroom except in very rare circumstances where he/she, for example, is also the owner, which was more typical of the press barons of the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century (Curran & Seaton, 1991). The power they have is restricted and conditional in the modern corporate environment as they are accountable to their publishers and directors (Davis, 1988) and there is a complex division of labour and responsibility here. The distribution of newsroom power (in terms of the daily operational activities of the newsroom editorial staff as opposed to the longer-term financial activities of the boardroom), more typically, is mercurial and is, at particular points and under particular conditions, delegated to and negotiated between the other hierarchical positions within the title.

While Weber’s (in Silverman, 1970) ‘ideal-typical’ bureaucracy model stated there should be a clear hierarchy and individuals should have specific functions with universal rules tying them together, within the music press the divisions are not quite as hard and fast and there is a degree of crossover between the various functional activities, where they both inform and are informed by each other. The official position of ‘assistant/deputy editor’, interestingly, hardly exists in the music press and Emap do not have such a post in most of their titles because it is deemed too vague an editorial and administrative post. Rather the functional activities of the assistant editor will be delegated and spread across the senior editorial posts of features editor, reviews editor and associate editor(s).

The *NME*, until late-2000, was one of the few titles to have this post because, John Mulvey argued, Steve Sutherland was tied up with administrative, marketing and branding activities and Mulvey, as deputy editor, became central in the day-to-day



running of the paper. This involved working through flatplans and overall presentation issues (in many ways becoming the *de facto* editor in terms of routinisation) with the job changing in its definition week by week as, unlike the features and reviews editors, he was not functionally tied to putting a weekly section through. However, following the appointment of Ben Knowles as editor in early 2000, Steve Sutherland was appointed brand director to look after the marketing and branding of the title thereby removing many of the duties of the assistant editor. Two new editorial posts were created in its place, with James Oldham promoted from live editor to deputy editor<sup>130</sup> (Addicott, 2000n) and Alex Needham poached from *The Face* to become associate editor (replacing Ted Kessler, the features editor, and also working with the other section editors on long-term redesigns) (Addicott, 2001c).

In terms of defining editorial duties, Mat Snow (editor of *Mojo*) interestingly echoes Tunstall (1971: 42-49) when he suggested that the editor has three inter-related roles, defined along editorial and administrative lines: (i) the journalistic (responsible for commissioning and processing copy and dealing with the layout and visual look of their title); (ii) the financial (responsible for allocating budgets and liaising with the company advertising departments who co-ordinate the selling of advertising space across all the titles in the portfolio); (iii) the managerial (responsible for running the office and ensuring that the social and occupational dynamics are positive). Most editors talked, here, of a degree of conflict in their roles in terms of a dichotomy between editorial and administrative duties, with the latter geared around liaising with middle management through long-term planning meetings. For example, John Harris attended an advance planning meeting with Emap directors in November 1998 where he had to outline proposed contents of issues of *Select* running into summer 1999. At these planning meetings editors had to discuss corporate strategy, engage with the activities of the company on a wider level and deal with budgets and recruitment. Within Emap, all the editors across the music titles portfolio were obliged to attend an annual conference where they discussed each other's titles. Editorially, they must supervise the day-to-day running of their title and they viewed their administrative tasks as a 'necessary evil'

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<sup>130</sup> One IPC employee suggested that Oldham was given the title of deputy editor because its salary would be lower than that of an assistant editor.



which occasionally got in the way of editorial duties, meaning they had to delegate certain responsibilities to other members of the editorial team.

Certain editors, however, were seen as poor at this delegation of duty and responsibility, wanting to overlook every stage in the assembly of the title, while others treated their magazine as a collective enterprise and actively courted the involvement of other staff members in editorial decisions and direction. Terry Staunton, former news editor at *NME*, illustrated this split when discussing the editorial delegation of power under both Danny Kelly and Steve Sutherland: “Danny was a very up-front editor ... You could usually contribute ... [and] ... roll your sleeves up and be part of it. Steve ... [was] ... not very good at delegating ... There wasn’t such a great camaraderie in the place”. In response to this perceived difference in editorial practice at the *NME*, Sutherland argued: “[T]he difference between Danny’s style of editorship and mine is that Danny tends to surround himself with friends. There are various ways of editing a paper. It’s not a science are there are very different ways of doing it ... I prefer people to argue. I think that a bunch of people who respect one another and like one another but don’t agree with one another is a particularly useful environment to work in because it means almost every decision you make somebody disagrees with and it makes you question what you’re doing and it gives the articles more teeth than they might have. They have to fight for their space. So that’s the way I *hopefully* tend to put a paper together”.

This notion of ‘building teams’ that Sutherland alludes to here is crucial for an understanding of how newsrooms are organised and run. Editors, unless they are launching a new title (as was the case with *Uncut*), ‘inherit’ their staff from the previous editor (Davis, 1988). They may, of course, be promoted from within the existing staff, but appointment trends seem to suggest that editors in chief and publishers prefer to appoint an ‘outsider’ (someone from another title within the portfolio, or from another publishing organisation) to bring a new editorial dynamic and agenda to the title’s homology with its readership. Invariably, this will be seen as unpopular within the existing professional community as can be seen in the appointments of both Mark Sutherland to *MM* and Steve Sutherland to *NME* (as senior editorial staff will have been passed over for the post and professional frustration and jealousy can and will impact on the functional and social dynamic of the office). Following the appointment of a new



editor there will be a complex (and at times uncomfortable) ‘readjustment’ period within the existing staff. Staff will either accept the appointment and attendant change in the title’s aesthetic or quickly leave for another title (or, indeed, career). Staff may also be poached by their former editor for his/her title as they slowly replace an ‘inherited’ team they feel they have little or no professional and cultural empathy with. This ‘changing of the guard’ will often be a drawn out process, as Danny Kelly noted when he went to *Q*: “I took what I considered to be the best writers off the *NME* with me ... I brought the ones I thought would help me to do *Q* differently and better. That was a period of two or three months though. It took me a while to pry some of them off the rock face”.

Within the music press this will be a reasonably regular occurrence as, in pure market terms, a title’s homology with its readers must shift in order to attract a new generation of readers at the bottom end. The most obvious way achieve this is through the appointment of a new (generally younger) editor and a subsequent recruitment drive for new freelancers and writers in closer cultural and aesthetic proximity to the desired new demographic of readers at the bottom end. In professional terms, staying in an editorial position for a long time can prove to be very tiring as increasingly editors have to take on so many corporate and bureaucratic responsibilities above and beyond the running of their title. John Harris stated that he left the editorship of *Select* at the age of 30, after four years, as he felt that “‘when people hang on for longer than four years, it’s to the detriment of the title’” (quoted in Addicott, 1999d: 4). Similarly, Scott Manson left the editorship of *Ministry* in 2001, citing an age and cultural schism between himself and the readership (Addicott, 2001d). Alan Lewis said of these issues of professional burnout, the loss of cultural empathy with the readership and the need for regular editorial turnover: “I think with an area like music it’s probably hard to sustain it for much longer than about five years. On a weekly there’s a tremendous treadmill ... You can get a little bit cynical ... The editor doesn’t necessarily need to be like a wide-eyed kid who’s completely swept away ... He probably needs to feel that he’s in the right place at the right time and breaking new ground. I guess five years would probably be long enough, if not too long<sup>131</sup>”.

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<sup>131</sup> A former *NME* employee said of Steve Sutherland’s editorship of the title: “[S]ince the seventies, since the so-called birth of music journalism, Steve Sutherland is now the longest-serving *NME* editor ever. People like Nick Logan and



However, there is not always a ‘natural’ turnover of editors taking over titles in five or six year blocks, fine-tuning the title’s homology with its readers and then, after acknowledging the cultural and generation schism between themselves and their readers, progressing to a new title or career. While clashes between editors and middle managers over the cultural direction and economic performance of a title is an unavoidable aspect of corporate publishing, generally the editor in chief will be instrumental in negotiating a compromise. Relations, however, between editors and senior management can become so strained that the editor is sacked, as was the case with Andy Pemberton, former *Q* editor. In 2000 Emap introduced a new working system for their portfolio of music titles, moving all the titles together into an open plan office on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor along with the marketing and radio departments with a view to pooling resources and ideas (Kennedy, 2000). Previously, each title had their own enclosed office space in the Emap Metro building, removed from the marketing and advertising departments, and this, staff felt, was key in generating a distinct culture and professional environment, which were pivotal in shaping each magazine’s homology with its readers. Emap Performance’s chief executive, Tim Schoonmaker, said of the new pan-title office: “‘The culture we had was very closed with everybody in separate boxes. Now we are finding there is a much better flow of ideas between everybody and the younger people love it’” (quoted in Kennedy, 2000: 11).

However, staff members and freelancers disputed this notion of a pan-portfolio utopia. They believed that the open plan nature of the office only increased inter-title suspicion and rivalries between the magazines, and that the idiosyncratic socio-professional climates built up in each title when in their own office space was being damaged in a shift towards title homogenisation. A number of serious clashes between editorial staff and Emap management followed the move into the new office space, symbolised most by a Post-It note appearing on the office stereo stating “‘This CD [player] is for editorial use only so step the fuck away’” (quoted in Kennedy, 2000: 11) after a marketing executive had changed the CD. Pemberton had been opposed to these changes as well as Emap’s push towards brand-extensions that he felt were damaging the

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Neil Spencer set themselves a ceiling limit of five years and moved on after about five years or whatever. But Steve’s now been there over six years now”. He was to stay in the post for almost 7 ½ years before becoming brand director.



parent brands<sup>132</sup>. He was, after a problematic ‘Performance Strategy Conference’ in Madrid (where editors had to outline their ‘visions’ for their titles to management), recalled to the office during a meeting and told to clear his desk immediately (Addicott, 2000i). Sackings were considered, by staff, to be out of character for Emap and this new attitude towards employees was seen as symptomatic of, what one staff member described as, a “‘very heavy-handed central management system’” (quoted in Addicott, 2000i: 1), adding that “[n]ormally when Emap want to remove someone they are put in charge of special projects and made to sit on their own in a room for three months until they go mad’” (ibid.).

In terms of their other (more routine) activities, editors serve a simultaneous fiscal role (alongside their editorial and administrative ones), by both: a) shifting the creative and financial direction of their title to draw in wider advertising opportunities; and b) assisting record companies in the marketing of their acts. In terms of this first fiscal role, Neil Stevenson (editor of *Mixmag*) noted that one of his key long-term duties was to increase advertising revenue by restructuring the agenda of the magazine in order to draw in wider advertisers (by, for example, targeting clothing manufacturers through the inclusion of a fashion section). In terms of the second fiscal role, Phil Alexander (editor of *Kerrang!*) suggested that at certain points the editor of a genre-specific title will play a marketing and A&R role for record labels. For example, UK metal labels would consult him at stages in their signing of acts and US labels would look to him for an overview of the market potential of their acts before they released them in the UK. Equally, at *Smash Hits*, the editor would be invited to teen-band showcases at the early developmental stages and asked for feedback that would be included in the overall marketing of the act

The notion, therefore, of a perceived antagonism between the industry and the press that Frith (1983: 172) talked of the early 1970s has dissipated and the press at particular points becomes, as Negus (1992: 118), has argued, merely part of the marketing wing of the (major) record companies. However, this is not to suggest that the press is completely passive in this relationship and exchange as artists must pass through

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<sup>132</sup> Shortly after his sacking, a former (anonymous) senior Emap section editor told me that Pemberton had clashed repeatedly with Emap executives over the issue of QTV. He was expected to work as editor of the title and also record links for the TV show in a cramped back office that he felt “‘cheapened” the *Q* brand. Pemberton was informed that he either had to be involved in all brand-extension activities or else be sacked and, ultimately, his recalcitrance cost him his job.



a complex chain of negotiation points, or 'gates' (White, 1950: 162), within any publication, and, indeed, the press is organisationally separated from the music industry (Stratton, 1982: 272). What this unofficial (and, indeed, unpaid) 'consultancy' role reveals is the editor's acceptance that, as the person in charge of a magazine whose economic growth and profitability is linked directly to the fluctuations of the overall music market, they share common interests with the music industry: i.e. the turnover of new acts to ensure the financial growth of the industry as a whole (Frith, 1978: 153-156). While the editor (along with the assistant editor) defines the general direction and aesthetic of a title, their control over every single aspect of that title's agenda (in terms of controlling the 'gates' by demarcating and enforcing the terms of aesthetic inclusion and exclusion) is never total. There is a three-way process of delegation, negotiation and resistance defining the relationship the editor has with the other editorial 'gates', and key among these posts in terms of the occupational power to position and culturally validate new acts within the title's homology with its readers is the features editor.

## **V Hierarchical Roles 3: the Features Editor**

The features editor in a music magazine is considered a senior editorial post and their position within the organisational and professional hierarchy means that they play a central role in shaping the title's homology with its readers. Despite the fact that market research conducted in the 1980s suggested that features were the least-read part of any music title (Frith, 1985: 126), the music industry considers features, and particularly cover features, as central in their promotional activities (Negus, 1992: 118). The features editor, therefore, represents an important 'gate' into the press for the industry as well as a principal power-centre within the newsroom structure, particularly in terms of freelance writers progressing up the career ladder. The choice of cover act is considered by both editors and publishers as central in attracting casual newsstand sales in an over-saturated market, where choice has increased and title-loyalty has declined exponentially. The cover act must thereby serve a dual function for the aesthetic and market success of a title by, firstly, holding existing readers and, secondly, attracting new or casual readers.



Within this decision-making process the power of the features editor to decide on cover stars, while ultimately negotiated through the editor, is high.

The management system in music magazines can be seen as being closer to horizontal models of power sharing across roles rather than to vertical models of managerial/editorial autonomy (du Gay, 2000: 61), although this is not to suggest a total power sharing democracy is action. Within this more horizontal model, the features editor is a key 'processor' (Tunstall, 1971: 30-36) and co-ordinator in terms of staff management. While Childs (1977) suggests that one of the major consequences of large-scale organisational structures is that employees are made remote from the decision-making process, within the music press the features editor occupationally straddles the divide between the editor and writers. However, this type of limited new wave management, where structures become increasingly like 'global villages' (Newfield, 1995 in du Gay, 2000: 64) that encourage conditional power sharing and pan-role participation, can and will lead to a degree of professional frustration. As an anonymous features editor said of their position and influence within the editorial structure: "There's a triangle and I'm one point of the triangle between ... [the editor]... and ... [the assistant editor] ... He's [the editor] sitting in his office, trying to think of interesting things and not doing very well". While the features editor will be key in the generation and realisation of features ideas, ultimately the final decision lies with the editor. The degree of occupational autonomy that the features editor has within this nexus will, of course, depend on their socio-occupational relationship with their editor. While several features editors suggested that they have a high degree of autonomy, others implied their activities were conditioned explicitly by their editor's singular vision for the title.

The argument that cover stories and other features are almost exclusively promotional has been a unifying theme in the literature touching on this area of the press (Gillett, 1972; Harley & Botsman, 1982; Stratton, 1982; Frith, 1983, 1985, 1996; Negus, 1992; Shuker, 1994). Locating them as key in the promotional strategies of the record industry, the academic trend has been to view the press as somewhat passive and even manipulated, within this exchange. While features are negotiated between the press



officer, the features editor and the editor to coincide with a major record release or tour<sup>133</sup> it does not follow that there is a top-down relationship of dependency and control. A complex criteria of inclusion and exclusion operates (at times idiosyncratically) within each magazine and it is somewhat erroneous to view this flow as linear and as predictable as the writing on this aspect of the press would seem to suggest. Music magazines need to be understood not simply in terms of their relationship to the music industry. They need also to be understood as social, cultural and professional organisations in their own right as well as an economic and structural part of a much larger commercial publishing infrastructure. The features editor is located, therefore, at the meeting point of these various commercial and occupational forces and features and cover stories are necessarily generated within and arise out of this complex interchange.

*Select* magazine, for example, used three criteria to determine their cover acts and, to a lesser extent, their other features. These were ‘scale’, ‘the aesthetic’ and ‘breakthrough/crossover’. In terms of ‘scale’ (which was somewhat linked to ‘breakthrough/crossover’), the cover act must be seen, for the most part, to help boost sales of the magazine by appealing to large sections of their core readership while displaying a crossover appeal capable of drawing in new readers. The ‘aesthetic’ element was crucial in the overall structuring of the magazine, with certain acts (in the late-1990s these acts were Suede, Blur and Oasis) being seen as key to and metonymic of their magazine’s agenda. Feature acts must simultaneously arise from and contribute to this overall magazine aesthetic, but the manner in which this happens does not always cement the notion of the press as the passive ‘unofficial PR’ wing of the industry. For example, in October 1998 *Select* ran an Alanis Morissette cover feature which certain editorial staff had argued the magazine should have run some eighteen months earlier as they viewed her as absolutely key to the magazine’s aesthetic. The piece, however, was highly critical (and at points, scathing) serving, in effect, to ‘exclude’ her from the magazine’s cultural agenda. There were minor editorial divisions about both the timing and the nature of this piece, as well as a fundamental debate about the title’s perceived relationship with and understanding of their readership. Particular members of staff believed Morissette was, in their readers’ eyes, seen as an equal to many of their other core acts. Therefore the

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<sup>133</sup> Features in the monthly rock press are almost exclusively geared around album releases, while the weekly rock



magazine, they argued, was doing their readers a disservice by firstly taking so long to promote her to cover status and secondly by portraying her in such a negative light (and making her an aesthetic pariah).

In terms of the final cover feature criteria, that of 'breakthrough/crossover', *Select* closely monitored the progress of new acts within the pages of the inkies (who courted a somewhat similar, student-based readership demographic). *Select* would step in with a feature designed to coincide with the act's predicted moment of mainstream crossover, as they did with the Stereophonics in January 1999. The act had already received some small features in the magazine<sup>134</sup> and there was a belief in the office that their second album ('Performance & Cocktails') would extend their commercial profile enormously. In November 1998, the act had released a single ('The Bartender & the Thief') as a trailer for the album to be released in 1999. Its chart progress was closely monitored by the editorial staff (they were regularly 'leaked' mid-week chart positions from a mole in a major record company<sup>135</sup>) and the market indications were that it would be a Top 5 single. On this information they confirmed a cover feature for their January 1999 issue (within a theme of new acts for 1999), leaving them only a month to arrange the interview and photos. Andy Perry (officially the deputy editor but in effect the features editor) stated that they went to the wire with this feature as it all hinged on their crossover potential, saying that two weeks earlier the act would not even have been considered for a cover.

The cover was, he argued, considered an important commercial element of the magazine. Because they ran twelve covers a year, the floating reader would possibly only see nine of them (and make their purchasing choice from who was on the cover (Frith, 1985: 126)) the magazine therefore had a duty to get the mix right between the established and the new. It was commonly regarded in the press as a high commercial risk to put a relatively unknown act on the cover and editors were becoming increasingly conservative in their choice of cover acts. However, the first cover of the New Year was

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titles, dance titles and pop titles will more typically run them for single releases, albums and tours.

<sup>134</sup> John Harris stated that *Select* wanted to be ahead of *Q* in covering new acts and that they should ideally have been written about at least twice before they appeared in a 'New to Q' feature. Within this they were quite reliant on their freelancers to suggest new artists for them to cover, believing that the culture of their freelancers (the 'gatherers') was closer to their readers' culture than their own (as office-bound 'processors') was.

<sup>135</sup> Since 2000, this 'classified' information has been made freely available via e-mail on the anonymously produced weekly Popbitch mail out.



traditionally one of the lowest-selling issues of the year. Editors, therefore, felt that they could take risks with this cover and use it as a ‘mission statement’ (i.e. getting behind new acts) for the next year, and this factor played a key part in *Select*’s decision to give the Stereophonics their first cover. The editorial staff talked of a need to balance the populist with a commitment to the new or emergent. Populist cover acts would, they argued, attract the floating reader, but too much coverage of this nature will alienate the regular reader and temporarily damage the title’s perceived homology with its core readers. On the reverse, too much coverage of esoteric acts would drive away the floating readers. The choice of cover act was, therefore, conditioned by an attempt to simultaneously attract and hold two very distinct taste publics.

The inkies, to a point, had a tradition of taking risks with new acts on their cover, but the editors felt they, having 51<sup>136</sup> covers a year, could afford to take such risks much more than the monthlies could. Phil Alexander implied that the new act on the cover was a functional component of the long-term market strategy of a weekly title saying that they would take risks with new or unknown acts with a “view to reaping greater rewards further down the line”. The hope was that in backing these acts, they would develop a special relationship with them and get exclusives and greater access to them if and when they broke into the mainstream (thereby being able to boost magazine sales). He cited Bon Jovi, AC/DC, Metallica and Marilyn Manson as examples of acts they took risks with early in their careers and who still give the magazine exclusives because of this. Alexander suggested that every music magazine has what he termed a “holy trinity” of acts they would put on the cover if sales had been low, and many of these were acts they had backed from the start of their careers. *Kerrang!*’s ‘holy trinity’ of acts (key in defining its homology with its readers) in the late-1980s and early-1990s were Guns ‘n’ Roses, Bon Jovi and Metallica and the magazine would explicitly sell brief phone interviews with lesser members of these acts on the front cover as ‘exclusives’, fully aware that these acts had a broad appeal outside the magazine’s readership and sales would increase as a result.

In terms of incorporating acts into (and elevating them within) their aesthetic by synchronising features with release dates, *Uncut* had particular stipulations and house-

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<sup>136</sup> They produce a double-issue at Christmas.



standards that cover features must adhere to. They located the new release within wider discourses about the band's history and evolution and the feature served a dual function: both promoting the new album and providing an historical overview, contextualisation and evaluation of their oeuvre. *Mojo*, similarly, took an almost archival approach to their features, many of which were not typically product-led (in the sense of coinciding with the release of new product), but rather based around anniversaries of classic artists/albums or structured thematically (such as, for example, 100 Greatest Vocalists, the history of psychedelic music or an overview of Krautrock). These 'historio-glossies' both operate within and contribute to the legitimisation of a particular ideology of aesthetic merit and proven career longevity. Their features are inscribed within a framework of 'classicism' and while they will cover new acts, it will be done within the context of a clear historical lineage.

While the press have been criticised for simply using their features and covers to promote new product<sup>137</sup> for record companies and not running investigative pieces on the music industry (Frith, 1985: 127; Kane, 1995: 14) there have been occasional instances of this happening. In 1998, the *NME* ran a feature on the perilous financial state of the British music industry, claiming that they had spent several months investigating the piece. Ted Kessler stated that they had been sitting on the story for over a year, waiting for the right time to run the piece. However, a former *NME* writer suggested (off the record) that this cover story came about when another feature fell through and was not the carefully planned piece that the editors claimed that it was. The writer stated that the piece was actually brought together quickly to meet a looming deadline. The cover shoot for the piece was of a guitar with a Union Jack painted on it (to symbolise Britpop) up in flames. The guitar belonged to a staff writer at the paper and the art editor had to stay up the night before the photo-shoot painting the flag on the guitar as the feature had only been confirmed that evening. The paper presented the piece as an exposé on the music industry yet was seemingly less a carefully planned and politically motivated investigative piece and more a means of filling a flatpack at the last minute.

To build on this, it is important to note that not all features will arise out of the promotional and marketing activities of the music industry and, in fact, at points features

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<sup>137</sup> Or, indeed, old product as in the case of both *Uncut* and *Mojo* who run overviews of artists' complete output.



will be run precisely because there is a lull in the corporate and release strategies of the industry. This tends, though, to support the view that the press is heavily dependent on the industry's 'timetable'. In early 1999 the *NME* re-ran what they deemed to be 'classic' features on acts such as Happy Mondays and the Beastie Boys from earlier in their career to put their current work in an historical context. When asked about the reasons for these features, Ted Kessler implied that the *NME* had built up historical resources that other magazines lacked and this was a way for fans to make sense of an act's present through their past. He suggested that "*Q* would do it if they had them. *Mojo* would *fucking* love to. If *Mojo* had our vaults they'd do it every month". When asked further about these features, he admitted there was a more pragmatic reason behind them – that of filling up blank space in the flatplan:

Crudely it came from the fact that it's January and it's probably the worst January since I've been there for record releases. The only record releases are mainstream American hip-hop and R 'n' B, which is fine, but not really our core value. It's not going to cut the spread. And also we were just talking about the Beastie Boys and how pious they were towards certain things and how pious the ... [Manic Street Preachers] ... were and we just thought "Hang on. We've got these interviews with rock stars acting like real pricks. Why don't we run them?"

In terms of newsroom routinisation, the features desk is generally seen as the one that has to plan furthest in advance and resources are geared around the long-term professional activities of major commercial acts and those acts central to the title/readership homology. Danny Eccleston, features editor at *Q*, argued that because of the time required to negotiate interview access and the length of the pieces (time-consuming to both write and to edit) the features editor needed to be sent review copies of major albums weeks or even months ahead of the reviews editor. Advance planning for a feature in a monthly magazine averages between three and five months, and occasionally over six<sup>138</sup>. For example, in early-February 1998 *Select* were already planning a cover feature for the mid-September release of a Manic Street Preachers album. Typically the magazine would be thinking at least two or three months in advance, but the Manic Street

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<sup>138</sup> At *Smash Hits* the then acting editor, Alex Needham, stated that in conducting interviews they had to be thinking up to six issues in advance. Because their key acts were internationally famous and their time was at a premium the



Preachers album was deemed by the editorial staff as the single most important album of the year for them (and their readers). They knew that media competition for access to the band would be high (even within Emap titles as the band tapped simultaneously into the aesthetics of *Select*, *Q*, *Kerrang!* and, to a lesser extent, *Mojo*), so they had to make exceptionally early plans to interview the band. Bureaucratically, such advance planning is also crucial in terms of overall portfolio activities as Emap publishing executives expected a formal breakdown of what each title planned to cover in the upcoming six months. This has meant that Emap features editors not only have to work around what is in their own magazines (so that they do not clash with review editors) but also what is in the other magazines within the portfolio structure.

The weeklies operate with a similar number of covers in advance although there is greater uncertainty because – being weekly and news-driven to a point – a news story can break and reset the whole agenda of the paper (as happened following Kurt Cobain's suicide in 1994). Of the differences between a weekly and a monthly press cycle, Ted Kessler stated:

At the moment I'm quite lucky. I'm about six weeks up front for covers ... It'll change. Every day it seems to swap around and something drops out. Next week's cover is not certain *at all*, but the one in three weeks is. The one in three weeks might have to come forward but it might not. I mean, we really do go very close to the wire. It's not like the monthly magazines where everything's sewn up so far ahead. We're working on cover stories and features for the issue right up to deadline day. Sometimes we'll have two cover stories. Well we should every week have two cover stories to choose from ... But we don't always have two cover stories to choose from. That's why we work out we've got ... [to get] ... two or three things ... [lined up so that] ... we can say "What can we do this week?" And we'll do that on a Tuesday and go to press on a Friday.

The turnover time for the writing of these features varies as a result and the nature of the press cycle can and will negate organisational attempts to routinise commissioning and writing. On a weekly, turnover time can be as much as three weeks or as little as two days, or even a day, depending on the story. A Marilyn Manson piece for the Christmas 1998 issue of *Kerrang!* was turned around in four days, although the editor suggested that

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magazine would not have regular access to them and they would have to think about getting six issues' worth of material from one interview.



this was somewhat atypical of the magazine's working patterns in general as it was deemed a "luxurious amount of time". Each title enforced a strict word limit for their features and writers would be told in advance what size the piece should be. The *NME* for example, ran three sizes of features: a one-page feature (generally for new and emergent acts) of 1,300 words, a two-page feature (for reasonably established acts) of 2,500 words and a cover feature of 3,400 words. These word-lengths were strict, and writers had little political sway in increasing the length, unless their interview generated some form of scandal and the piece will be increased accordingly. Both *Uncut* and *Mojo* ran cover features of around 10,000 words (going against the general publishing trends towards shorter and less-investigative pieces). The longest piece *Mojo* published was a 22,000 word feature by Andy Gill on Krautrock and Mat Snow argued that these features are only given to very senior writers as they require a high level of literacy and journalistically are difficult to structure. It was not uncommon for the first and second drafts of these features to be sent back to the writer if the features editor and editor feel there is nothing to draw the reader into the piece.

Most feature editors were seen as very hands-on when it came to commissioning writers to do features. Both Paul Lester and Ted Kessler admitted that they tended to monopolise the features that they want to do themselves. David Sinclair (a *Q* contributor) stated that Danny Eccleston gave a very clear idea of what he expected the feature to do and the writers had to structure their copy accordingly. During participant observation at *Uncut* (February 1999), Paul Lester had commissioned Simon Price to write a cover feature on Suede to coincide with the release of their 'Head Music' album. The feature was intended to provide a rich historical contextualisation of the band to mark their entry into the *Uncut* aesthetic. Lester explicitly told Price who he should speak to, what types of questions he should ask and how the overall piece was to be structured. While this was not done in a dictatorial manner, the editorial expectations of the writer and the piece were made clear from the earliest stages of commissioning. Price was told that he would be paid £1,500 to research<sup>139</sup> and write a 10,000 word piece and that if the piece was longer he would not be paid any extra and the piece would be cut. Lester warned him against getting bogged down in background material, saying that while background was



important it was not the central thrust of the piece. Lester recounted how, when writing a New Order cover piece, he got caught up in the background of the band and lost sight of what the overall piece was supposed to do. The choice of Suede as cover artists was agreed originally between Lester and Allan Jones, the editor. However, after this point, Lester operated quite autonomously and it was his expectations and journalistic experience that were directly imposed on the piece and how it was researched. While features editors are employed to articulate (in the long term) the editorial 'vision' to staff writers and freelancers, within this there is a considerable degree of freedom to modify the house style and homology with their readers. What this reveals is that cover features are commissioned within the parameters of a set house style, but this is something that the features editor can be central in both defining and adjusting.

## **VI Hierarchical Roles 4: the Reviews Editor**

While the features editor can be seen as perhaps the most important 'gate' for established and becoming-establishing acts in the press, the reviews editor is undoubtedly the key entry point for new acts, invariably gatekeeping their first wave of press coverage (most notably the live editor within the inkies). The key criticism of White's (1950: 162/164) classic 'gatekeeping' study was that he looked merely at one 'gate' (that of the wire editor) and, as Gieber (1964: 173) notes, he missed out the complex dynamics of the chain of 'gates' (conditioned by both structural bureaucracy and distinct deadlines) which make up a newsroom. The inter-relationship between these 'gates' is of particular interest within the music press. The features editor may be hierarchically more important within the newsroom than the reviews editor, yet for the industry the reviews editor is the single most important gate to negotiate their way through. Once entry is approved by the reviews editor, press officers can use this as lobbying power for introductory band features which, in turn, can be used to snowball into a small feature, then a major feature and finally a cover feature. The reviews editor, equally, is the pivotal gate in the turning away of acts and also in the institutional legitimisation of acts by incorporating them into

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<sup>139</sup> IPC offered their magazines a centralised clippings service, but this was taken out of each title's overall production



the overall magazine, subtly shifting and refreshing the title's homology with its readers at the perimeter.

The reviews editor can be subdivided into three distinct types: the live editor, the albums editor and the media editor. This professional typology, however, is not common to every magazine. While *Q* and *Mojo* both run live reviews, they do not have a specific editorial post to co-ordinate these reviews. This section was usually assembled by another section editor alongside their own section, whereas at *Uncut* Paul Lester co-ordinated all the live and album reviews as well as features. The inkiess are the most obvious place where all these distinct posts can be found as they give live reviews equal status with album reviews. Cost cutting within major publishers has increasingly impacted on the roles and routine activities of these section editors. As Jim Irvin (former reviews editor at *MM*) argued, the reviews desk is the most stressful post on the inkiess as it represents the first entry point for bands, managers, press officers, venue owners and writers. While reviews editor at *MM* in the early-to-mid-90s he had to cover albums, live reviews and assorted media reviews, while the *NME* had three editors appointed to cover what he was doing alone. Each week he had seven pages of live reviews and five pages of album reviews (showing an occupational and institutional bias towards live music) to commission, process and sub-edit. The live reviews bias of the inkiess is revealed the fact that they will be regularly sent demo tapes by unsigned bands<sup>140</sup>, whereas the monthlies almost exclusively only gatekeep 'industry approved' (i.e. signed) acts.

Just as the live desk on the inkiess is the primary – and the most difficult – gate for new acts to pass through, it is also the main entry point for new writers. The occupational trajectory of new writers through the inkiess exactly mirrors the progress of new acts through the paper. They will begin by submitting live reviews and their progress will be monitored by the other editors and, when they have proven their worth, will be approached to write small introductory band features, then one-page features and eventually lead/cover features, possibly at this point shifting from a freelance 'gatherer' basis to a full-time 'gathering' or 'processing' role. Music journalism remains one of the

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budget.

<sup>140</sup> At least two former live reviews editors on the inkiess conceded that they did not have time to listen to the demos they were sent. They relied instead on freelancers to filter and suggest acts (as well as picking up on wider industry buzzes). What this reveals is that the reviews editor 'gate' is by no means fixed (and confined to the office) as wider occupational and social discourses will impact on how and why acts are granted or refused entry.



few journalistic careers where formal training is not a pre-requisite for entry; rather it is often seen as a barrier to entry by reviews editors as journalists with professional qualifications are trained to write in a staid style which does not fit into the overall style and approach of the paper. Indeed, both English (1979: 20) and Steinberg (1979: 244) found that arts critics in general did not consider themselves to be journalists, but rather, as English (1979: 20) argued, “journalists with a difference”, a point echoed in many of the interviews I conducted.

The reviews editor, therefore, will have to regularly field test reviews from aspiring writers. Often test reviews are unsolicited and it is common for fanzine writers to send in copies of their publications (proving that they have a wider understanding of the mechanics of magazine production). Going against the assumed career path (from journalist to press officer) that Negus (1992: 125) outlined, several writers began their careers as press officers and used their contacts with the editors to submit reviews. Interestingly, when Ben Knowles took over as *NME* editor he was “swamped by job applications” (Addicott, 2000f: p. 15) because the editor rarely, if ever, fields applications for non-staff posts. What this shows is a belief on the part of the prospective writers that the normal application routes were disrupted immediately following the new editorial appointment and it was expected that staff posts would change.

Educational background is by no means uniform among writers, although English and English Literature degrees have been seen as the common route into the press because of their emphasis on textual criticism (Landau, 1976: 20; English, 1979: 166; Breen, 1987: 219; Denski, 1989: 11; Jones, 1992: 88). Indeed, Wyatt & Hull (1990: 39) found that only 5% of US music journalists had music degrees. The writers I interviewed had done degrees such as philosophy, history, art, science as well as having worked as builders, in wine bars, in petrol stations, in oil companies and some having come the traditional journalistic route. Both *NME* and *MM* additionally operated unpaid work-experience programmes and several writers were recruited this way when they proved they could work to deadlines and contribute to the social and professional dynamic of the office. Generally, however, the main flow of new writers into the IPC titles has been on an ‘informal’ basis (via test reviews or fanzines), whereas, in contrast, Emap explicitly



formalised this system by introducing six-month training schemes in 2000 to recruit new writers across all their titles (Stevens, 2000).

Live editors remain quite vague about the things they look for in test reviews. They all talk of the need for basic literary skills (implying that most reviews are peppered with grammatical and syntax problems) as well as knowledge and ‘attitude’ in their writing. All editors are in agreement that what they are looking for is a writer who had knowledge about a genre of music that the title is not already covering, thereby adding to the collective knowledge and frames of reference of the title while contributing to the evolutionary shifts in its homology with its readers. James Oldham (while live editor at *NME*) estimated that out of every twenty test reviews he received, five were either grammatically flawed or nonsensical while another ten were written entirely in cliché. While De la Roche (1949) suggested that writers are recruited precisely because their views and style already fit the aesthetic of the paper (or they readjust their view and style in order to fit) reviews editors argue against this. They stated that, unlike the traditional hard news press (for whom the homogenisation of a rigid house style is more important), the common mistake that aspiring reviewers made in believing that the magazine wanted more of the same style of their main writers. They were, in fact, looking for the opposite. Johnny Cigarettes (former *NME* staff writer) outlined what reviews editors were looking for in reviews:

A general native wit. Generally avoiding the clichés. So many people write in and say “The band came on, and then they played this song, that song, this song, that song, this song, that song and the guitarist played a guitar solo with his guitar which was blistering. The crowd, quite literally, went wild [sarcastically] and a good time was had by all”. For fuck’s sake. It just says nothing. Just absolute clichéd bollocks ... Generally it’s a mix of enthusiasm and witticism, I guess.

Writers were rarely deemed good enough to be commissioned as a result of their first review and were encouraged to keep submitting until they have honed their style. As English (1979: 26) notes, writers must quickly learn to submit copy that pleases either the editor or section editor or they will find their work rejected again and again. Reviews editors stated that this was undoubtedly the first hurdle most potential reviewers fell at (finding initial rejection difficult to deal with) and never submitted after this point. Jim



Irvin noted that at *MM* it took test reviewers a number of submissions before they found a style, although occasionally he would be sent copy that required no editing at all, as in the case of Taylor Parkes. The following lengthy quote from Irvin reveals a great deal about the processes tied up in writers entering the press, how reviews editors both gatekeep musicians and writers and the occupational, aesthetic and occupational frameworks within which writing is judged:

Taylor Parkes was my fault really. He sent me a demo tape of his band<sup>141</sup> ... and this demo arrives and this covering letter from this guy [saying] “Will you listen to my band?” It was this *enormous* thirty-page press release with it which was like a story, this stream of consciousness stuff. And I read this thing and it was *stunning*. It was *amazing* stuff. I put the tape in and I swear to you it’s the worst tape I’ve ever heard ... And I rang him up and I said “Look, to be honest with you, this tape is really, really awful but if you’re ever going to give it up and want to write anything, give us a ring, because your writing is really interesting”. I checked it was him that wrote it. And he went “Oh, alright”. And he’s got a really bored voice. I thought “Fair enough. Funny bloke”. Put the phone down and thought no more of it. And then about a year later or something I got a phone call [in bored voice] “Do you remember talking to me about a year ago, saying if I ever gave up? Well, my band’s fallen apart. Can I write for you?” So I said “Sure. Why not? Send in three 200-word live reviews just to see what you do” ... He sent in three reviews that were absolutely perfect and I could have run any of them. I picked one of them and I just ran it that week. And he got mail within three days. There was an album arrived for him. People had noticed – they’d read his review and went “Shit!” [laughs] ... Really unusual [for someone to have that impact]. And the people on the paper were going “That was a great review, that one” ... It was about some local band ... It was a complete slag off of this band. But it was very elegantly done. And it made beautiful points about the process of being a member of the audience and watching a mediocre band. That whole thing of how you have to sort of suspend your disbelief in a way. That’s part of the job of a viewer of a band. You have to go in and allow yourselves to be taken somewhere. You have to go in and say “Right, I’m going to let this do this for me for the next half an hour ... For the next half an hour I’m just going to focus on this”. He

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<sup>141</sup> A common cliché that circulates about music journalists (and critics in general) is that they are all failed artists. While it is undoubtedly true that many writers began in bands there is also an occupational dynamic in the opposite direction. Performers such as Chrissie Hynde, Bob Geldof, Marilyn Manson, Neil Tennant, Morrissey, Lou Reed, Patti Smith and Bob Stanley (of St. Etienne) all – at various stages – wrote for the music press (and, arguably, exploited their positions and contacts to build their musical careers). This occupational crossover taps into the complex social interaction that Bourdieu (1986: 239-240; 1993: 94-96) argues takes place between artists and critics. Indeed, as Paul Moody (member of Regular Fries and a former *NME* contributor) notes about the cultural connections between these two spheres: “They’re both as unreal as each other ... People like to divide them, but there’s a lot of connection

did this and then went into a lovely little riff about - they had a terrible name<sup>142</sup>, I can't remember what it was now – but he said “Can you imagine these people sitting in a room and saying ‘That’s a really great name. That’s sexy. That’ll look great on a T-shirt?’” [laughs]. And picking apart all those things. And he did it all in 250 words. It was absolutely brilliant. Within seconds people had noticed him.

Typically, because of the professional bias towards London (almost all the major magazines are based there), freelancers often begin as regional stringers. As well as being able to fill the knowledge gaps in the inkies, freelancers are sought to fill the geographic gaps. Each inkie attempted to build up a team of stringers across the country, but it is never guaranteed and all reviews editors complained that they did not have as many regional stringers as they felt they needed. James Oldham described February 1999 as the “lowest ebb ever” at the *NME* as they only had stringers in Portsmouth, Oxford, Bristol, Glasgow and Hull. It is seen as much easier for stringers to progress within the inkies as they do not have any other freelancers competing for work on their ‘beat’ (the metaphor of a ‘big fish in a small pond’ was commonly used in interviews). All former regional stringers I interviewed said that this worked to their advantage as they were able to supply review copy of tours ahead of the London dates and had more regular work than some of the London freelancers where inter-freelancer competition was fiercer. However, to their disadvantage they were spatially excluded from the social and professional dynamics of the newsroom. While most freelancers in London worked from home, they would regularly go to the office as they felt that a regular presence there (or, indeed, at the gigs and bars frequented by editorial staff) could get them noticed and secure them extra work and help to propel them up the freelancer hierarchy.

The importance and centrality of the live editor in creating a positive and progressive ‘freelancer environment’ was a common theme in interviews. They all argued that they had to be proactive in this drive as they were the first (and often only) points of occupational contact for the freelancers. The other editors contributed little to the dynamic in the early stages of the freelancers’ careers (they monitored their progress and would only approach them when they feel they are ready to write features). Reviews

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between these two groups that people from outside can't recognise. It's alchemy, man. Sonic alchemy” (quoted in Dalton, 1999: 44).

<sup>142</sup> The band was called Icebreaker.



editors had to ensure that freelancers felt part of the culture of the paper and they all spoke of how professionally isolated they themselves had felt when freelancing. They, therefore, regularly invited the regional freelancers to London (to see how the papers come together and meet each other and the other staff). Other live reviews editors talked of the occupational demands on them and the fact that they were office-bound and processing copy meant they could not liaise with freelancers as much as they felt they should. While particular writers were highly self-motivated, the live reviews editors believed that there was a risk of losing good writers by not contacting them on a regular basis and giving advice and encouragement. This complex and symbiotic nexus of social relationships and occupational relationships, as argued above, is crucial for an understanding of the newsroom as an socio-professional organism and it is nowhere more apparent than in the relationship between live reviews editors and their freelancers.

In terms of routinisation and forward planning, the different reviews editors will operate from a 'live diary' and an 'album diary', much like the 'news diary' Schlesinger (1978: 50) talked of within the BBC. Because of the time involved in commissioning and processing review copy, the section editors need to think in advance and allocate resources accordingly, ensuring that reviewers have review copies of albums (and enough time to listen to them) and they (and photographers where necessary) have been added to concert guest-lists. James Oldham compiled a 'live diary' from the gig guides in both the *NME* and *Time Out* to plan at least one week ahead. Sharon O'Connell (former live editor at *MM*), however, suggested that the live desk could not work more than two weeks in advance as tour dates and freelancer availability invariably changed. They would be sent record company information concerning the major tours weeks, even months, in advance while smaller reviews were finalised nearer the time. The live pages on both the inkiies operated a three-point gradation system for live reviews, distinguishing between: (i) opening page leads; (ii) downpage leads with photos; and finally (iii) downpages. Sharon O'Connell argued that they needed to balance the review size out across their tour typology (based on almost exclusively commercial criteria) of 'mega-tours', 'potential crossover' acts and the 'bubbling under' acts. Within this there was a professional drive towards over-production ideally commissioning more reviews than would be needed using the backlog the following week or if other gigs that week fall through. Freelancers

would be paid a 'kill fee' (half of what they would normally be paid per word) if they have been commissioned to write a review and it was not published.

On the monthlies, the albums editor works between four and six weeks in advance, while the lead-time on men's magazines (such as *FHM* and *Loaded*) could often be up to three months. Angus Batey, reviews editor at *music365.com*, said that the cycle of production on websites was much more intense than on weeklies or monthlies and that commissioning and editing were on-going and negated the devotion of time to forward-planning. However, they did not have the delays built into a print cycle to routinise activities around and could commission, process and upload reviews in a morning or afternoon if necessary. Website users, it was argued by website reviewers, did not want reviews weeks in advance of release dates preferring topicality meaning album reviews were posted on the site a few days before the albums are available to the public. The production cycle on websites is markedly different from the production cycles on the traditional print titles and freelancers, as a result, can deliver their copy much later. Freelancers on monthlies (because of processing time and a two-week print up delay) had to submit their album reviews a month or more before the magazine was available in the shops, while the writers for the inkyies were expected to deliver copy at least a week before the paper went on sale.

Reviews editors, because their jobs are geared around processing, must invariably perform a sub-editing role and the occupational divisions between these two posts in a music magazine are often difficult to determine. In processing, subbing and gatekeeping the journalistic talent into the magazine, the reviews editor will play a central role in defining and propagating the house style and house standards typical of each mainstream title. Jim Irvin argued that all review copy in *Mojo* conformed to a house style precisely because it was filtered through him. He ensured that each review met certain standards (even going so far as editing out terms such as "plethora", "perfect pop" and "pop sensibility", believing them to be redundant). Indeed, just as the features editor work within the parameters of an editorially-defined vision while slowly updating and shifting the title's homology with its readers at the edges, so too will the reviews editor make small, but insidious, changes. The editor is central in defining and promoting a *general* direction for the title, but the (admittedly conditional) autonomy afforded to the section



editors will see the introduction of minor changes to the style, ideology and aesthetic of the title. These can and will eventually bleed into other areas of the title as well as into the socio-professional climate of the workplace, thereby revealing the occupational climate of the office and the agenda of a title as never fixed and constantly under review.

House standards (enforced by reviews editors under general instruction by the editor) have become increasingly enforced within the review pages of all music magazines. Reviewers must operate within progressively restrictive stylistic and word-length parameters and new writers are told to closely examine recent examples of reviews and to tailor their copy accordingly. On a monthly magazine, the reviews editor has a finite amount of space and must work around the flatpack as they receive more review albums than they have space in which to review them. For example, Carol Clerk (the *MM* news editor and *Uncut* freelancer) came down to the *Uncut* offices to collect the Wings 'Band on the Run' 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition to review. Paul Lester told her that the review should only be 120 words as he felt there were too many major album reviews (full-page, half-page and quarter-page) that month and they had to balance it out with downpage reviews to fit in the space left after the ad space had been booked. While this issue of space is paramount for the traditional print media editors, the reviews editors on websites did not have to gatekeep quite as rigidly. Conceivably website editors could run reviews of every album they were sent (although they are constrained equally by review budgets and the per-word/per-album pay rates<sup>143</sup>). Angus Batey suggested that reviews editors on websites were liberated because of the removal of the impediment of the flatpack, but this could equally operate as a noose. While they could hypothetically run more reviews, they were constricted by the context in which their reviews were read. Market research has suggested that website readers only want to read a 'screen-full' of information and are resistant to reviews they must scroll through, meaning that websites can only run reviews of 200-250 words, and cannot go into the same depth in a lead review that the print titles can.

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<sup>143</sup> The inkies typically paid reviewers by the printed word, whereas the monthlies paid a flat fee for each downpage album review they print. *Q*, for example, in 1999 paid £30 for a 120-150 word album review, arguing that the writer was being paid for the time they spend listening to the album (so that they give it the critical attention it deserves) rather than the time they spent writing the actual review copy. David Davies estimated that a skilled reviewer should be able to write a downpage review in fifteen minutes after having listened to the album several times.

All reviews editors agreed that the copy they processed had to fit a particular model and meet certain conditions. Live reviews in *MM*, for example, had to contain the titles of at least three different tracks played. *Q*, however, insisted on four distinct criteria being met before they will run a live review the piece must include: (i) an interview with the performers; (ii) a backstage photograph; (iii) a live photograph; and (iv) a shot of the set-list. Most magazines will insist on exclusive shots of the gig as a document of having been there. *MM*, for example, turned down a review of Blur at Oxford University in the promotional build-up to their '13' album because they could only get a reviewer into the concert and not a photographer (as another title had been promised exclusive shots of the concert by the band's PR company). They were given access to another gig in Stockholm and brought their own photographer, while *Uncut* was promised first refusal on the official record company shots from that gig. Interestingly, while Sharon O'Connell was key in defining the types of acts to be reviewed in *MM* as well as the manner in which they were reviewed, she accepted that the artists she would personally like to write about would not suit the redirection of the paper. Instead she wrote her own reviews for *Time Out*. Her role, then, as a processor at *MM* shaped a particular house approach and homology with their readership that – unlike the house style imposed by the majority of section editors across all titles - worked towards actually *excluding* her own writing style and personal cultural agenda. What this reveals is a professionally determined split in obligation as section editors are able to simultaneously divorce themselves *personally* from a title's homology with its readers while *professionally* policing it and updating it.

While the reviews editor, as a key processor, works possibly several weeks in advance in commissioning out copy, reviewers are expected to turn around their reviews relatively quickly. There is an institutional emphasis placed upon routinisation of activities around deadlines, but this was seemingly designed to assist processors much more than it was to assist gatherers. John Aizlewood (at *Q*) felt that writers should be give no more than a week to review an album as “any more and they get a bit bored or they get over-indulgent. Any less and they can't hear it properly”. David Sinclair suggested that reviewers were kept on a tight leash as processors – in attempting to routinise their activities through the steady flow of review copy – wanted to avoid all their commissioned reviews coming in together towards the end of the production cycle.



This occupational emphasis on (and the time devoted to) processing activities is borne out by Angus Batey who broke the production cycle at *Vox* (when he was reviews editor there) down into four one-week segments. The first week was given over to commissioning reviews, the second devoted to processing copy around the flatpack, the third week spent editing copy and proofing layout with the sub editors, senior editors and art editor while the fourth week was spent liaising with the industry, confirming release dates and securing review copies in advance.

The expectations placed on reviewers to submit copy within a week was consistent across most music magazines, although occasionally the inkiies required live reviews (of concerts on Thursday nights) to be done overnight and ready for the reviews editor to process by Friday afternoon. During the festival season, the production cycle for the live reviews editors on the inkiies was extended. The majority of their live pages were put together during the weekend of the festival and the Monday afterwards, to be on the newsstands within three days of the end of the festival, driven by a professional (and commercial) need for topicality<sup>144</sup>. Sharon O’Connell stated that the festival period was the most intense on the live desk and they would at times have to work through the night preparing and proofing layout. However, she suggested that this was preferable to the way the monthlies work, taking up to six weeks from seeing a concert to having the review published and in the shops.

The rapidity of turnover here runs the risk of reviews collapsing into what English (1979: 11) termed “‘instant criticism’”. He occupationally dates this back to the early-20<sup>th</sup> century Penny Press rivalries in the US between the major publishers such as Hearst and Pulitzer in which reviewing and criticism was “‘treated as news and competitive news operations were bent on being first in print with a ‘scoop’””. In terms of album reviews, the elliptic nature of ‘instant criticism’ was something that *Mojo* tried to avoid, ensuring that writers had a reasonable amount of time to listen to albums, although most writers (while stating that they listened to each album at least twice) admitted they, if pushed to meet a deadline, could review an album after one listen. Angus Batey, when reviews editor at *Vox*, claimed that Everett True’s record for reviewing an album (including

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<sup>144</sup> *Select*, interestingly, produced a daily on-site newspaper for the three days of the Glastonbury festival as part of a sponsorship deal with the organisers.

listening to it) was twenty minutes, although he stressed this was atypical of the profession as a whole.

The criteria of inclusion and exclusion employed by reviews editors are complex. They all talk obliquely about how albums and concerts ‘select’ themselves, echoing the many hard news studies where editors struggle to give a concrete definition of news but claim that they recognise it instantly as they have a ‘nose’ for it (Tunstall, 1971; Schlesinger, 1978; Negrine, 1991; McNair, 1999). The dynamics of gatekeeping become conditioned by occupational, economic and cultural factors that are not consistent across every title or even from issue to issue of a particular title. Each magazine has a core aesthetic and homology with its readers and those particular acts (and genres) which fit this cultural framework will be selected for review. The aesthetics of magazines are primarily defined under economic and market conditions (which are subject to change in an unpredictable marketplace and also as a result of staff turnover). Magazines will cater for a particular readership demographic and set of taste publics (again subject to change) and lead reviews will be selected because they will be, as John Aizlewood noted, “the most important album of that month ... Not always the biggest selling, although often it is. The most important from our readers’ point of view. Even if the readers don’t necessarily want to buy it, the readers would be more interested in reading about it”. The reviews editors, like all music writers, talked of a homology of cultural and aesthetic empathy with their readers and in many ways their gatekeeping can be seen as being conducted as much for themselves (as Bourdieu’s (1993: 94-96) ‘ideal reader’) as the actual readership.

While most magazines will try and avoid including compilation albums (except the dance magazines that rely quite heavily on these types of album), there still remains a difficult selection and rejection process. In the December 1998 issue of *Select*, Roy Wilkinson could only run forty album reviews despite having been sent two hundred albums for that issue<sup>145</sup>. He defined his selection criteria as being shaped within four distinct sets of dynamics and discourses: firstly the acts that fitted the magazine’s core aesthetic; secondly the predicted major commercial albums; thirdly the personal

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<sup>145</sup> Such filtering is typical of most magazines, as they have limited space for reviews. In September 1998, *Mojo* were sent 457 albums and could only review 50 of them. *Q* has the largest reviews section of all mainstream consumer titles with over 200 albums reviewed – roughly 50% of those they are sent.



preference of the editorial team; and finally those albums which have an interesting story or angle attached to them. Month by month, there was a need for a carefully balanced mix in their reviews section and certain albums could be included in a slow month to achieve this balance while in another month they would not be selected or prioritised. Wilkinson took the example of Liz Phair's 'Whitechocolatespaceegg', which was given major review status in the January lull. He stated that in a 'normal' month her album would have been, at best, a downpage review because she was not seen as a major commercial figure that a major section of their readership would be either aware of or interested in. She was given such a large review because there was a dearth of major commercial albums that month and the editorial team felt there was a need for a greater mix of genres in the section. The other lead reviews were an afro dance compilation, Freddy Fresh and Busta Rhymes and so an indie-guitar album (a genre absolutely central to the magazine's aesthetic) was needed to balance out the hip-hop and dance albums to create a richer composition for the whole section.

The first few weeks of the New Year were seen by all magazines as a poor time for new music (and for sales of music magazines) as the record companies hold back major albums and tours until the market picked up again after the Christmas boom. This was a period where editors actively searched for viable review material instead of merely filtering what was sent to them. Because the editors – particularly on the live pages – could become desperate for music to write about, certain acts would choose this point to launch their publicity and marketing campaigns knowing the obstacles to inclusion were greatly reduced at this point. The case of Gay Dad in December 1998 and January 1999 works here as an illustrative case in point. The band (led by Cliff Jones, a former music journalist) undertook their first UK tour in January and received considerable coverage in both the inkies. James Oldham stated that it was the industry hype around the band – regardless of the quality of their music – that ensured they got lead coverage in the *NME* (in February), with the hype acting as the angle of the piece. In the same issue of the paper, a joint tour featuring Spaceraiders and Indian Ropeman got prominent coverage for two reasons: it was, firstly, considered a slow month and they, secondly, were signed to the same label (Skint) as Fatboy Slim, whose album had recently gone to Number 1 (putting the label in the public eye). Dark Star were given a prominent review in the same

issue because, Oldham stated: “It’s a lead because a) I like them b) the reviewer likes them c) it was a quiet week and d) they used to be in Levitation and people know the name”. From all this it can be seen that gatekeeping is shaped under (drawing on Silverman, 1970) both ‘exogenous’ pressures (by external factors outside of the newsroom such as the market and the charts) and ‘endogenous’ factors (by internal factors such as the newsroom climate and professional dynamics between the staff and writers). It is in the straddling of (or attempts to straddle) these two distinct sets of forces that the character and the content of the review pages can be best understood.

There exists a particular professional relationship between the live reviews editor and the freelancers because, as noted above, they are generally the immediate points of contact with the title for writers. This relationship is arguably much more intense and co-dependent than that between such freelancers and more senior editorial staff, who tend to occupationally liaise almost exclusively with more established writers. There is a two-way flow of dependence and influence between the live reviews editor and the reviewers, and because of this freelancers are more able to make suggestions and have them taken on board. It is very rare for a freelancer, particularly on the weeklies, to have the autonomy and influence to suggest album reviews or features ideas as the ‘processor’/‘gatherer’ dichotomy is at its most pronounced here. Freelancers are able to suggest reviewing concerts they have already been to (almost exclusively on the small gig or support circuit) and that the live editor has missed. Simon Williams, for example, would do this on a regular basis at the *NME* and because of his commitment to and enthusiasm for new acts he was, as James Oldham stated, “a law unto himself and ... allowed to review whatever he likes”.

In matching reviewers to acts, there are two primary concerns. The first is that the writer has an interest in or enthusiasm for the act. Most review editors considered assigning a writer to an act they clearly dislike as counter-productive, as their criteria of judgement would be wrong and they would be unable to contextualise the acts properly. Sharon O’Connell stated that there was a need to try and to avoid playing reviewers to type and only sending them to review things they are obvious fans of. She preferred sometimes to send them to review acts they may not be fans of, but stopped short of sending them to review acts they had made no secret of hating. The second concern is



that reviews editors must check that writers are not consistently reviewing the same artists as it leads to a closed loop of opinion and the publication requires alternative takes on an act as its career progresses.

The degree of autonomy that writers have in the grading of reviews is limited at best. The five-star review system<sup>146</sup> or marks out of ten is more typical of the album reviews section and, as noted above, the nature of the power and professional relationship between the album editors and reviewers is hierarchically determined. John Aizlewood stated that in *Q*, he would discuss the viability of a five-out-of-five review with the reviewer and possibly include the editor in the decision, revealing extreme institutional and professional caution being exercised<sup>147</sup>. A former *Q* freelancer stated that Aizlewood would have to approve all five-star reviews and had often reduced five-star reviews to four-stars because he was not convinced either by the quality of the work or the reviewer's arguments. The reviewer in this relationship would have little or no influence and occasionally four-star reviews would be upgraded to five-stars by the reviews editor if they had not had any five-star albums for a long time. Other commercial and external political factors impinged on the grading of albums. For example, in February 1999 Paul Lester (at *Uncut*) killed Chris Roberts' review of a Gene album because he had given it two-stars. The primary concern was that a track from the Gene album was appearing on a cover-mounted CD in that issue of *Uncut* and it was felt that the magazine's authority would be undermined if they panned an album and yet offered one of its tracks free to their readers. Carol Clerk was given the album to re-review and the conditions under which she was being assigned the album were made clear to her. She was already favourably disposed to the band (part of the reason why she was chosen) and gave it a three-star review which, while not markedly different from Roberts' evaluation, ensured consistency in the magazine.

The reviews editor represents an important power source within music magazines and can be seen as an important contributing force in the evolution of a title's homology

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<sup>146</sup> This model of reviewing was seen as being pioneered by Robert Christgau in 1974 in his *Newsday* 'Consumer Guide' (Flippo, 1974c: 295-296).

<sup>147</sup> John Aizlewood argued that re-issues tended to get more five-star reviews than new albums because there was a need for hindsight in evaluating an album's aesthetic and cultural worth (and they have proven to be influential). He said: "To make that decision [to give a five-star review] with an album that none of the readers are familiar with, and you haven't lived with for all that time, is very, very difficult ... If it's a five star, you're recommending it to every

with its readers. As a central 'gate' within the newsroom's system of 'gates' they are often the most crucial in the initial introduction to and development paths of both new artists and new writers through the title. As a result of this dual-gatekeeping process (gatekeeping both the aesthetic and the professional) they contribute to, re-evaluate and police the overall aesthetic in a number of overt (in formal and semi-formal consultation with the other editorial staff) and subtle (where autonomous personal judgement informs professional decisions) ways. While their criteria of inclusion and exclusion will be shaped within the general editorial vision for the title, they can cause alterations at the periphery that will eventually leak into and later shape the title's overall agenda. This criteria of judgement is shaped by a complex combination of the editorial direction of the paper, the socio-occupational environment of the newsroom, their socio-professional links with the ever-evolving base of freelancers and contributors and, finally, their own idiosyncratic cultural agenda. Having considered a number of editorial roles that do not fit neatly into the dominant sociological paradigms of hard news production, the next section will consider the music magazine editorial role closest ideologically and occupationally to the 'traditional' news journalist – that of the music title news editor.

## **VII Hierarchical Roles 5: the News Editor**

The post of news editor (more typical of the inkyies than of any other type of publication) is the only post within the music press that has formal journalistic training as a prerequisite. Therefore its occupational activities and goals can be most easily subsumed within the dominant sociological paradigms of news analysis and production (Breed, 1955; White, 1950; Tunstall, 1971; Rivers, 1973; Chibnall, 1977; Schlesinger, 1978; McNair, 1999). The majority of music journalists I interviewed felt that their occupation did not constitute 'journalism' in the traditional sense, preferring instead to call themselves 'writers', 'critics' or 'music journalists'<sup>148</sup> (as opposed to 'news journalists'). They all stated that the news editor's post was the only one which most corresponded

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reader". This raises a number of interesting issues relating to the magazine being compromised somewhat by music's past and how its approval and validation of the 'present' is heavily affected by the encumbrance of the 'past'.



with the conditions and routinisation of hard news production, recalling Brown's (1978: 37) discovery that reviewers and review editors were not expected to have any special training. The traditional route into the music press for news editors is through NCTJ<sup>149</sup> entry course qualifications, working first on local papers (where they tended to be instrumental in initiating regular music columns and coverage) and, after two years, sitting the NCTJ proficiency tests to qualify as a senior reporter. The traditional journalistic skill of shorthand is a basic requirement for this post but remains rare across music journalism as a whole, with one former news editor (Terry Staunton) estimating that only one in every twenty music journalists had this training.

The monthly magazines (with a few exceptions such as *Uncut*), because of their lengthy production cycles, will not have an official news editor or promote an explicit news agenda. Instead they will have a section editor, or team of contributors, who compile an intro section (such as 'Primer' in *Select* and 'Incoming' in *Q*) which combine news stories with small interviews and other snippets of popular culture. *MM*, under its final redesign in 1999, drifted closer to this format in their 'Headlines' section but still pushed a clear news agenda alongside small interviews, new band features and other assorted regular pieces (like a celebrity darts league, cartoons and a column by Radio 1 DJ, Steve Lamacq who had previously worked for the *NME*). In terms of its final staffing structure, *MM* removed the official 'news editor' post and replaced it with two 'Headlines' editors and a news reporter (with freelancers occasionally helping to write and compile the section). The *NME* however, because of its higher position within the music titles portfolio, had a news editor post and three news reporters. The *nme.com* website ran its own team but were expected to share resources and staff with the paper's news desk<sup>150</sup>. A stand-alone music website, however, such as *music365.com* has a single news editor. In terms of the differences in resources and professional activities, the Internet news sites host search-engines, which allow them to build up a news archive

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<sup>148</sup> Their occupational definitions here directly echo those given by the critics English (1979: 20) interviewed who classified themselves as "journalists with a difference".

<sup>149</sup> The National Council for the Training of Journalists was established in 1952 and trains journalists in aspects of media law and media ethics, interviewing and writing skills, shorthand and (in some cases) sub-editing and layout (Niblock, 1996).

<sup>150</sup> When the *NME* set up their website they had to find ways for the two news desks to co-exist. Initially, the *nme.com* desk was spatially separated from the *NME* news desk, but they were brought together to pool resources and share stories, although Brendon Fitzgerald suggested this led to professional frustration as the website would have to hold

meaning they can insert links to pertinent news stories of the past in current stories, allowing the much easier historical contextualisation of a story. These links play a function in saving space in individual stories, as they are expected to be succinct digests of events. The website news editor can, through the inclusion of links, add in important background information while simultaneously broadening their field of reference (by including artist biographies in the links). They also serve a clear commercial function by increasing the site's hit rate and number of page impressions as readers link through to more pages thereby spending more time on the site<sup>151</sup>.

The production cycle of the news pages on the inkiies is highly intensive and routinised around at least three sets of deadlines stretched across the cycle. It is the final section to be sent to the printers and is deemed important within the overall organisation as it marks out the inkiies as providing a service that the monthlies cannot offer. The place of the news section within the overall newsroom hierarchy may be high, but has been reduced in prominence. In the 1970s and 1980s news stories would regularly appear on the cover, but in the corporate caution of the 1990s covers are almost exclusively product-led, with the press being seen as an ancillary wing of record company marketing departments (Negus, 1992: 118). While most news editors stated that they tried to avoid being occupationally reactive by simply running tour and record release information in the news pages such industry-led stories formed a substantial proportion of their news output. Such stories were relied on, to an extent, in order to fill out the news pages as they were, firstly, a reliable, regular and official news source and, secondly, they could be processed quickly (because they did not need any secondary quotes or background research). In terms of occupationally defining the news values they worked along, when asked, they all struggled to define what exactly constituted 'news' for them. They talked of deaths, violence and band splits as obvious stories while talking vaguely of 'interesting' stories connected to those bands core to the title's aesthetic that they felt their readers would be interested to know about. They struggled to define specifically

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back on stories to let the paper run them first. His argument was that institutional priority was given to the paper (the 'parent' brand) and the website's development was stunted and compromised as a result.

<sup>151</sup> This can prove to be very time-consuming for the news editor, who will have to manually create links (via active text) within each news item.



what these ‘interesting’ stories might be, although often they would be routine and product-centric (such as rumours about new albums or tours<sup>152</sup>).

In terms of the mechanics of the production cycle, the majority of the news pages on both the *NME* and *MM* were laid out on Friday afternoon and held back until Monday morning in case a story broke over the weekend. Jody Thompson, the *NME* news editor, stated their Monday deadline was 9:30am and they would occasionally have to work over the weekend if a big story broke. At *MM*, Carol Clerk stated that they could make alterations up until 11:00am on Monday if they called the production editor at the reprographics house (where the final layout would be made and the issue set up to be printed). Clerk argued that sometimes news stories came in so late that no definite confirmation had been given by either band members or press officers. The news editor would therefore have to decide if it was worth printing or if they should wait until the following week when the story could be confirmed. She gave the example of a Happy Mondays reformation story in December 1998, which came in too late for *MM* to print because they felt, at that stage, it was all still speculation and to publish a news story would be pointless until they had official confirmation.

In recent years only one story completely overturned the routinised news and production cycle of the inkies. At 7:30pm on Friday 8 April 1994 news of Kurt Cobain’s suicide began to filter through to the inkies. Carol Clerk had most of her section prepared and the office was preparing to go home. James Brown, then launching *Loaded* for IPC, came into the office to break the news. Immediately Allan Jones took the decision to dump not just the news pages but the majority of the rest of the paper as it was deemed too important a story not to devote the whole issue to<sup>153</sup>. The cover had already gone to the printer’s earlier in the week and had to be recalled. The rest of the weekend was spent in the newsroom collecting information and gathering quotes. Because *MM* did not have Internet connections installed at this point, Jennifer Nine (a freelancer) worked from her Internet connection at home and faxed and phoned in breaking news and new information as she found it on the Internet. David Stubbs stated that the atmosphere in the office was

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<sup>152</sup> For example, in the 21 April 2001 issue of the *NME*, a total of twenty-two news stories ran across five pages. Of these stories, eighteen were ‘officially’ placed (by press officers or band members) and product-centric (with details of albums, tours and other official events).

<sup>153</sup> The cultural importance of his suicide was greatly under-estimated by the broadsheet newspapers that did not cover the story in any depth (MacArthur (1999)).

highly emotionally charged and he had had to write the obituary as everyone in the office was too upset to be able to do it, indicating an overturning of the normal divisions between the personal and professional. Carol Clerk noted that such events (where a whole issue was scrapped and another written from scratch in two days) were incredibly rare and was the closest the music press came to working like a traditional news organisation.

In an 'average' week, the early hours of Monday were the most intense on the news desk (checking voice-mail, faxes, e-mails, teletext, the Internet, calling contacts and press officers and so forth) but the rest of the day was relatively calm. The gathering of news stories would be pushed back to Friday (rather than the following Monday) if the paper was promoted (i.e. carrying a cover-mount which takes longer to be put together at the printers<sup>154</sup>) or when it was the Christmas double-issue. Tuesdays were the editorial day on both papers and the news editors would have the flatpacks for their sections sent down from the advertising department and they will begin planning out the section and arranging its regular features (such as *MM*'s 'Straight Down the Line' telephone interview). Wednesday was described as the main day news stories began to come into the office from press officers and other sources (such as freelancers). The news desk can be seen, in organisational terms, as heavily reactive (relying on a regular set of sources and information resources) rather than proactive<sup>155</sup> because, as key 'processors', its members are office-bound (White, 1950: 164; Tunstall, 1971: 30-36). By Thursday the news editor would try to meet their first deadline by having one or two news pages ready and by Friday would have a second deadline where they try to have the section ready (subject to amendments on the final Monday deadline) early (so that the production and art staff would not have to stay late finalising the layout).

The news editor post is the most labour-intensive and demanding within the papers and often means ten-hour days. On websites the news editor, or another member

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<sup>154</sup> This can be seen to contradict the news-led agenda of the inkiies as stories will be at least four or five days old by the time the paper went on sale and was a cause of organisational and professional frustration for news editors as it usurped their attempts at routinisation.

<sup>155</sup> In slow news weeks news editors will occasionally make up stories to fill out their sections. Terry Staunton, in his final week as news editor at *NME* in 1989, invented a story about counterfeit tickets circulating for the following week's Stone Roses concert at Alexandra Palace. He said: "About 5:00pm on the Friday evening ... it had been what we call a quiet news week. And there was absolutely fuck all going on. I thought 'We need something' ... I thought 'I bet there's been loads of counterfeit tickets for this gig'. So I rang their PR and said 'Have you heard anything about anyone making counterfeit tickets for this gig?' They said 'No. I haven't heard anything like that at all'. 'Yeah, but can you take me through what the actual real tickets look like?' 'Yeah, yeah, yeah'. 'And would you advise me against buying anything else?' 'Oh yeah. I would certainly'. Just that. And it made a great story".



of the team, would effectively work a seven-day week as the news pages had to be updated over the weekend (as they got a large percentage of their readers then). They will hold back certain news stories on Friday evening to post over the weekend, but one of the editorial team will have to upload it (either from home or the office). The idea of ‘breaking news’ (McNair, 1999: 60) really only applies to websites, as the inkies are straightjacketed by print-up times. Brendon Fitzgerald, for example, stated that within forty-five minutes (or less) of a story breaking *music365.com* could have a news story posted<sup>156</sup>. Their production cycle was more intense than on a paper and they were not spatially constricted by the flatpack. Fitzgerald estimated that in two days a website would process more news stories than an inkie would in a week. The slowness of the news drive of the inkies was exposed, he argued, when one noted that a website would normally run seventy-five to eighty news stories a week as opposed to the inkies which would run around twenty-thirty (although, like in the inkies, these stories would be predominantly product-centric).

A high sense of professional rivalry exists between the news editors on titles and they, as Tunstall (1971: 243) argued of all journalists, want to cover every story that their rivals cover but also to have a story their rivals missed out on. Such ‘exclusives’ were really only possible when working outside of the normal (generally official) information channels. Many news stories tended to be broken by long-standing contacts within the industry, and the longer news editors work in the industry the more regular contacts and news sources they accumulated. As Bourdieu (1986: 239-240; 1993: 94-96) notes, the world the critic and journalist operates within is a small, self-referential and incestuous one and in the music press the same small groups of people (press officers, journalists and label managers) meet and speak on a regular (formal and informal) basis. This means that the same stories tend to circulate very quickly in what Jody Thompson called “a *ridiculously* small world”<sup>157</sup>. Press officers will only contact the press about their own

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<sup>156</sup> During participant observation at *music365* on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1999 Reuters broke the news of reggae star Dennis Brown’s death in the morning. Danny Kelly was passing through the office at the time and sat down with the news editor (Gary Crossing) and dictated on the spot Brown’s history and musical career for the obituary, even listing recommended albums. Crossing then checked various reggae websites for extra information and had posted the obituary within ninety minutes. This example illustrates the mix of sources within newsrooms: the formal (news agency copy), the semi-formal (websites and Internet resources) and the informal/personal (the journalist-fan).

<sup>157</sup> For example, during December 1999 interviews for the editorship of the *NME* were being held and this was a common talking point among the press officers and journalists I spoke to at this time. They speculated as to who might

acts when they have some positive news or must work towards ‘damage limitation’ (which will be covered in more detail in the later chapters on the press officer/journalist nexus). They also will, news editors admit, contact the press and leak stories about another press officer’s acts.

Jody Thompson argued that news editors need to build up trust and assure their contacts and subjects that they will not be ‘stitched up’. She went on to suggest that they stood to secure ‘exclusives’ in the future if they cover stories in the ‘right’ way (i.e. without being too critical or negative about acts). This institutional and occupational passivity is clearly a cause for concern. The music press rely heavily on a pool of news sources that they cannot write or run news stories which risk alienating or infuriating them, lapsing somewhat into Gillett’s (1972: 64) idea of music magazines as a ‘vanity press’ for the industry. In terms of illustrating how ‘ridiculously small’ the sphere of news sources and contacts is, often stories will be run about (or come from) friends of the news editor. Jody Thompson, for example, DJ-ed at a London club (‘Uncle Bob’s Wedding Reception’) run by Billy Reeves, a former Fire Records PR and former member of the audience, who would regularly appear in the news pages. A former *NME* freelancer stated: “[S]he’s involved ... [T]hat’s why you keep getting those the audience news stories. Those non-stories about them ... It’s because she’s the news editor, she knows him, she’s his mate”.

Outside of the routine and officially confirmed stories, because of the complex legal issues involved, news editors must double-check every story. Stories deemed controversial will have to be checked more than twice and quotes from a variety of sources gathered in order to pad them out. The news editor, if in doubt, would check with the editor who ultimately would have the final say on whether or not a story should run, although the news editor would be quite autonomous in this regard and would only turn to the editor in extreme cases. One such example was a story on the Verve’s recording contract that *MM* ran and were being threatened with legal action over in December 1998. The news editor had been faxed a confidential document by a regular anonymous source who worked under a variety of pseudonyms giving details of the finances tied up in the Verve’s deal. The band’s lawyers were putting pressure on the paper to disclose the

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be applying for the post while repeating the rumours they had already heard and when Ben Knowles was appointed



name of their source which the news editor refused to do. Each publishing company has an in-house legal team to check major problematic stories, but this story was not deemed to be controversial and was checked and approved within the newsroom by Mark Sutherland. However, having said this, such cases are very rare and this, Carol Clerk stated, was the only time *MM* had been threatened with legal action over a news story in the twenty years that she had been on the news desk.

While being the most labour-intensive section of the weekly music press, the news section, Carol Clerk argued, is also the most stylistically rigid section: "It's very much formula writing. A lot of people can't seem to master the precision that's needed". The model for news writing on the inkiies was criticised by editors on monthly magazines who suggested that it over-privileged hard information at the expense of critical distance. John Harris, when covering the news in *Select* that Ian Brown (former lead singer of the Stone Roses) had been imprisoned for alleged 'air-rage', explicitly stated that he wanted it written in a style that was different from how the *NME* and *MM* would run it and bring in information (and sources) that they would not include. He argued that the reporting of the incident should fit the stylistic model of a monthly magazine and display a macro and more distanced and contextualising overview of the events, something he felt the weeklies (because of the intensity of their production cycle) did not have the power to do.

Individual news sections can be seen in terms of operating as a 'shop window' for a magazine as a whole, existing as metonyms of each title's overall stylistic and aesthetic agenda. Because of this, news editors become restricted somewhat in what they can cover and this is generally determined by the activities of the other editorial posts. They play no role in 'introducing' new artists into the title's homology with its readers (the traditional entry point being mainly on the live pages) and can only write about artists and events that the majority of the readership would be considered to be interested in and familiar with through the other sections. The news editor, therefore, takes their cue from the other section editors, presenting, in effect, a digest of the cultural agenda that they are mapping out. In terms of career paths, the staffing of the news desk is generally hermetically sealed off from the rest of the newsroom and determined only by the news editor and the editor. Stylistically and occupationally different demands are placed on news writers than

are placed on the other writers and contributors. As a result, they, in the main, are not considered as a 'talent pool' and therefore do not experience the same upward occupational dynamic as reviewers do through the live section, into album section and, finally, into the features section (and from there into an editorial post). The news desk is a somewhat enclosed world, reflecting and reinforcing the title's homology with its readers rather than contributing to it. Similarly 'enclosed' occupations, designed to mirror rather than mould the overall homology, within the music press are in the art and production sectors, which will be considered in the following sections.

### **VIII Hierarchical Roles 6: the Art Editor and the Photographer**

In the final stages of the production cycle on a music title, the art editor is pivotal, as the majority of editing at this point can be best described as 'cosmetic' rather than 'journalistic'. Like the news editor, particular formal qualifications will be expected including detailed professional experience of desktop publishing and design packages such as Quark Xpress and Photoshop. The art editor, along with the sub/production editor, will deal mostly with fitting copy around the flatpack. Generally on glossy monthlies ad sizes are standardised (full-page, half-page, quarter-page, 'fireplace' and 'dog's leg'<sup>158</sup>) and are relatively easy to fit copy around, whereas on the inkies numerous small box ads (from small record and mail order companies) are sold and can prove problematic for layout. The art department must wait for copy to come through from the various section editors and are at their busiest in the second half of the production cycle. The acceleration of the production cycle at this stage is evinced by the fact that monthly magazines will hire freelancers (paid on a day rate of roughly £100) to assist the art editor. These freelancers have no occupational autonomy as the art editors will carefully monitor their work so that they do not alter the house style.

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<sup>158</sup> 'Fireplace' ads are where the left and right hand columns of a single page or two-page spread are booked to advertise a single product, whereas a 'dog's leg' ad is L-shaped.



On monthly magazines the art editor will liaise frequently with the editor who will approve or amend the chromalins<sup>159</sup> revealing a strong editorial emphasis on the visual appeal of the title and its importance in contributing to its overall impact and identity. This visual aesthetic is seen as crucial for magazines and lengthy editorial debates surround even the tiniest aspect of the layout. Each magazine has a clear branded visual identity and layout, represented in the choice of colour scheme, graphics and, most notably, font. Neil Burnett (art editor at *Select*) stated that it is often the choice of fonts that make magazines look different and there is an unspoken agreement among art editors on music titles that they will not use each other's fonts. There is a need for continuity in a magazine's visual aesthetic that is considered by both editors and publishers as central to the push for continuity of purchase among the readers (as it enforces familiarity month by month while simultaneously marking out an aesthetic and stylistic difference from rival magazines).

Magazines are routinely editorially redesigned in the wake of sales shifts. Within this, the visual look must adapt to and evolve along with the editorial content (and contribute to the overall homology with the readership). The art editor will test out different visual tricks to keep the title looking fresh and this will be key in "directing the 'feel' of publications" (Niblock, 1996: 86). *The Face* is said to have set the visual agenda for the majority of British consumer titles (Hebdige, 1988: 157; McRobbie, 1999: 13) and art editors look to it for inspiration as it uses different ideas constantly to keep it ahead of rival style magazines. Weekly papers are much harder to redesign: because of the intensity of the production cycle the art editor does not have time to devote to working through different ideas. Neil Burnett, while at the *NME*, stated that they could only redesign single sections at a time rather than the whole paper and this led to, he felt, a visual inconsistency and schizophrenia. The front cover of any magazine is the most important part in terms of presenting a strong branded identity and catching the floating reader and, like the content of the news pages, must work as a rich metonym for the rest of the magazine. The role of the art editor here is of central importance, but they are

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<sup>159</sup> Chromalins are A3 embossed printouts (covering two pages of the magazine) designed as a guide to show how the layout will look. The printers will be sent the chromalin to use as a colour guide and therefore, as *Select* art editor Neil Burnett stated, "the chromalin is the final guide. Everything should look like the chromalin in the issue". They are costly (averaging around £50 each meaning that that a 140-page magazine may spend up to £3,500 solely on chromalins).

constrained somewhat by the manner in which magazines are stacked on newsstands. All the important information must be contained within the top left-hand quarter of the title<sup>160</sup> and art editors must ensure that the title's logo and the face or name of the cover star appears in this section. Magazines are stacked in three main ways and the art editor must design the cover layout with this in mind: a) where the whole magazine is on display; b) where magazines are stacked side-by-side and only the left-hand side can be seen; c) where only the top half is seen.

Editors will adopt either a 'hands-on' or 'hands-off' approach with their art editors. John Harris, for example, was very involved in the visual design and presentation of *Select* (seeing it as a whole visual and editorial package), whereas Steve Sutherland had little to do with the *NME*'s layout and was only concerned with the cover (although, it should be noted, the *NME* art department were resistant and hostile to editorial interference). The art department works closely with the section editors, although there is a degree of mutual dependency and mutual distrust resulting in minor clashes. The time for such clashes is in the final days of the production cycle. During the final hours of the production cycle at *Select* in November 1998, Neil Burnett had processed a layout that John Harris had not approved and it had to be recalled. Similarly at *Uncut* (during the February 1999 cycle), two section editors returned to the office at 10:00pm to check the layout of their pages as they did not trust the art department to do it the way they had instructed them to.

Art editors will also work closely with photographers, occasionally attending photoshoots to provide art direction and ensuring that colour schemes can be reproduced properly. This was more a concern on the inkies until their late-1990s redesigns: before then, reproduction was so poor that when a colour was put through to the printers it would not hold and come back completely different. Tom Sheehan, *MM* and *Uncut* photographer, stated that he could only use blue backdrops in photoshoots as any other colour would come back from the printers off-brown. This was a cause for immense frustration for art editors who would spend hours on a layout only to have it ruined by poor reproduction. The production quality on glossy monthlies (pioneered by *Q* and *The Face* in the 1980s) improved conditions across the rest of the mainstream music titles.

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<sup>160</sup> When there are cover-mounted gifts the bottom left-hand quarter of the cover is lost unless the art editor can



Photographers who had worked within the restrictive parameters of the inkies suggested they were able to experiment with different photographic ideas and, in co-ordination with the art department, advance the visual aesthetic of the title.

Unlike art editors, however, photographers are rarely employed on full-time contracts and are excluded from editorial decisions concerning style, content and direction. As freelancers, photographers are paid by on a column inch rate, although major companies, such as IPC, took steps in the late-1990s to abolish this payment system and further de-democratise the photographer. Photographers originally owned the copyright to their work meaning they had control over where and how pictures could be used and re-used by the publishing organisation and they would be paid a copyright royalty if archive shots were used in the future. However, in 1999 IPC attempted to enforce new freelance contracts where photographers would be given a single payment for a studio photoshoot (of around £650<sup>161</sup>) on the understanding that they sign over copyright.

Sheehan (like the other IPC photographers) was resistant to this introduction of these new terms and conditions, arguing that his professional career hinged almost exclusively on the trust he built up with the artists he photographed<sup>162</sup>. He believed that if IPC were to produce publications using his shots (without needing his approval) artists would assume that he was profiting from them without their agreement and would be hesitant to work with him in the future. He stated that during the 1980s he could have sold shots of Duran Duran to the tabloids but did not because of what he termed the “gentleman’s agreement” between himself and the bands he worked with. His strong working relationship with both Radiohead and the Charlatans (among others) resulted in lucrative commission work. Radiohead insisted that their record company (Parlophone) commissioned Sheehan do the official press shots in Japan for the launch of the ‘OK Computer’ album (in 1997) while the Charlatans employed him to take the cover and sleeve shots for their ‘Tellin’ Stories’ (1997) and ‘Us & Us Only’ (1999) albums. The

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incorporate the gift into the cover design in some way.

<sup>161</sup> Photographers were previously paid around £50 per shoot, but would also get their column inch rate and future royalties if the shots were used again, which could prove highly lucrative in the long-run.

<sup>162</sup> His strong professional relationships with bands secured a number of exclusives for *MM* with artists. At the 1993 MTV awards REM were surprise guests and Sheehan was able to negotiate on the spot an exclusive interview with Michael Stipe (at a point when the band were doing limited press) as he had worked with the band for almost ten years.

photographer can simultaneously work both inside the press and inside the industry without accusations of conflicting interests. However the increasing bureaucratic control exercised by middle management means that their 'external' (i.e. within the industry) career is compromised, constrained and undermined by the employment conditions of their 'internal' (within the press) career.

In terms of editorial accountability, the art editor will deal almost exclusively with the editor and work under their direction. The photographer, however, will discuss in advance with either the features editor or the live editor what types of photographs are required and how they will intersect with the journalistic angle of the piece. The section editors will rarely become involved with issues of layout, and their only 'cosmetic' interest will be how photographs will complement the writing they have commissioned. In terms of routine features, the editor will generally delegate responsibility to the features editor but may become heavily involved in cover shoots. Editors will also monitor the delegation of work to all the freelance photographers to ensure that one photographer does not dominate the commissioned work. Ultimately, both the art editor and the photographer work to reflect a title's homology with its readers but are hierarchically excluded from initiating shifts in this homology themselves.

## **IX Hierarchical Roles 7: the Production/Sub Editor**

Just as with the art editor, the production (or sub) editor is absolutely central to the final stages of the production cycle and plays an important role in the visual design of the title, requiring both journalistic and layout skills (Niblock, 1996). Production editors argued very strongly that the design of the magazine is paramount and bad design can and will let the editorial content down, and described an important symbiotic relationship between style and content. Titles must be thought of as a complete package and not merely words on a page and layout and design can be seen as important as the subject matter in netting floating readers. Danny Kelly termed magazines "aspirational, fetish objects in and of themselves" and the strong and branded visual aesthetic generated by the art editor and

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For the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition of *MM*, he was able to secure a covershoot with Oasis when Paul Lester (the features



the production editor is paramount here. Production editors are not merely processors, cutting or padding out review copy to slot inside flatpacks. They also check copy for accuracy, potential legal problems, typographical and grammatical errors, write headlines and captions (Hodgson, 1997), approve and send copy to the printers, ensure section editors meet particular production deadlines and ensure that features are visually appealing and readable<sup>163</sup>. The design of a magazine should reflect the editorial content (and vice versa) and in making features readable, the production editor needs to ensure that pull-out quotes are eye-catching and that photographs correspond to the text they are placed beside (particularly important for historical pieces).

Andy Fyfe, production editor at *Select*, referred to his role as “the refinement process”, processing copy to fit and underscore the aesthetic of the magazine and to synthesise editorial ideas. Fyfe’s position in the newsroom hierarchy was important in terms of both short and long-term planning. He stated that both John Harris and Andy Perry had differing views of which type of acts should be included in the title, with Harris drifting towards the populist (chasing a broad – if fickle – mainstream demographic) and Perry towards the esoteric (courting a smaller and more loyal readership). Fyfe stated he had to operate between these two editorial views to bring consensus and cohesion. However, occupational and political schisms regarding legal and ethical issues between editors and production editors could affect the total newsroom dynamic. One (nameless) title ran a feature on a rock band where the writer insinuated that the members were heroin addicts. The production editor voiced strong reservations about the risk of libel tied up in this story, but was overruled by the editor. When the story was published, the band claimed their quotes had been taken out of context and threatened the magazine with court action. At this point the editor refused to back up the writer and a lengthy period of political conflict ensued, with production and other key editorial staff threatening to resign if the editor did not back the writer. The matter was eventually resolved before it went to court, but a degree of tension characterised the professional and social relationships between the production editor and the editor after this point.

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editor) could not.

<sup>163</sup> All copy is stored on a central server and can be accessed by anyone in the office and, hypothetically, subbing can become a collective enterprise, although role definitions and goal orientations work to ensure that it will all be done or approved by the production editor.

Like the news desk staff, the art staff and the photographers, the production editor tends to be excluded from the career path through a title open to reviewers. Production editors tend to enter the music press as subbing assistants and their promotional opportunities are generally confined to the production desk. This post offers much greater career stability than any of the other senior editorial posts as production editors' influence on the cultural and stylistic agenda of the title is limited because age is not as pronounced a career-determining factor (as discussed in the previous chapter). Production staff can, of course, also write reviews and features and contribute to the evolution of the title's homology with its readers this way. However their processing job is labour intensive and counteracts against this. The production editor is the final link in the chain of journalistic production and is forced to make up time in the production cycle if a section editor submits their copy late. This makes the job, in the final stages of the production cycle, one of the most stressful newsroom posts.

## **X Hierarchical Roles 8: Staff Writers & Freelancers**

As noted above, the traditional route into the music press is by submitting test reviews to the live editor and being accepted as a freelance stringer, although freelancers can be recruited by writing to the letters page and 'introducing' themselves to staffers (Gillett, 1972). Once recruited as full-time staff members, the amount of newsroom and organisational autonomy enjoyed by a writer exists on a sliding scale (Tunstall, 1971: 51-54). This is determined by salary, amount of published copy, prominence of published copy, use of bylines and photos of writers, occupational titles, travel opportunities, expenses claims and timing of deadlines (with respected writers more able to negotiate deadline extensions). While for Tunstall (1971: 37) bylines allow writers to become more discursive and be regarded as 'experts', Davis (1988: 135) suggests that, rather than just play a hierarchical and structural role (in the rewarding and publicizing of the writer), bylines fulfil a wider 'service' function 'so that readers can form some judgement about the authority' of the piece.



Within the music press, both occupationally and hierarchically there is – using Tunstall’s (1971: 30-36) model as a professional template - a clear power imbalance between ‘gatherers’ and ‘processors’ with the latter generally being the exclusive few on full-time contracts and the former on freelance contracts. The post of ‘staff writer’ barely exists within the music press as Alan Lewis noted: “There are far fewer in-house writers and most of the people in all these offices are subs, designers or section editors who are responsible for commissioning stuff, getting it in, processing it, putting it through. The number of people who are simply paid to sit and write is very small. That’s just a general trend in the industry and certainly we’ve been part of that”. Only a few titles (*NME*, *MM* and – until 1999 – *Uncut*) had staff writers who were, like the processors and other editorial staff, expected to be in the office every day, unless they were on assignment. Johnny Cigarettes stated that despite the fact they have to keep regular office hours, there is a clear power imbalance in favour of the processors, symbolised most by the fact that staff writers were not consulted about, or included in, long-term editorial plans for the title. He stated that he was not invited to the senior editorial meetings and that power is ultimately contained and circulates within a closed circle of the key editorial staff.

The few staff writers at the two IPC weeklies were under pressure to produce consistent and high levels of copy every week for long and short-term financial reasons. The nature of their permanent contracts meant that they had signed over copyright of their work to IPC and, just as with the proposed new terms for photographers, it could be reproduced in the future without seeking their consent or paying them. In the short term, section editors were increasingly pressurised to cut costs and, where possible, give features and reviews to staff writers (who were paid a monthly salary regardless of how much they wrote) rather than pay a freelancer to write them. While the position in the hierarchy and terms and conditions of the staff writers has been organisationally and bureaucratically eroded, they were in a somewhat stronger position than the many freelance contributors. Indeed, as Rivers (1973: 533) notes, most writers are bureaucratically and spatially removed from their publishers and Trelford (2000: 16) suggests that freelance contracts are increasingly the norm throughout the print media industry. Ultimately, this means that the rules of the professional and organisational

structures are imposed from above with freelancers working under – rather than contributing to – them.

To illustrate this, it is important to note that, since the late-1990s, freelance contracts at IPC stipulate that writers sign over copyright of their work to the company and that they are professionally powerless to resist this. Additionally, in 2000, the nature of the “oppressive” (Campos, 2000: 6) freelance contracts being imposed by the 365 Corporation and the change in the terms and conditions of employment saw a stand off between writers and management. The contracts insisted that the company owned the copyright on the freelancers’ work, that it could be significantly altered and sold on without acknowledging them as the author as well as imposing “an indemnity for libel costs” (ibid.). 365 management stated that the new contracts were necessary to account for the shifting nature of contemporary journalism and allow a broad framework to be put in place that would allow ‘raw’ freelance copy to be used across multiple platforms such as the Internet, WAP phones and SMS messages. Louise Fullwood (the company’s legal advisor) suggested that the legal indemnity clause was imposed to “give some sense of editorial responsibility to freelancers” and that in the unlikely case of a libel arising from published copy the clause “would be there for 365 to take advantage of if it had the inclination” (quoted in Campos, 2000: 6).

This weakening of the position of the ‘gatherer’ within major publishing organisations negates Selznick’s (in Silverman, 1970) notion of recalcitrance (occupational resistance to being brought to heel). For Davies (1987) the professional may clash with the organisational structure on one or more of four distinct levels: (i) resisting bureaucratic rules; (ii) resisting bureaucratic standards; (iii) resisting supervision; and (iv) resisting demands for unconditional loyalty to the company. This, however, only applies to the ‘politically-powerful professional’ which, in the music press, in seemingly a dying (if not extinct) breed (Forde, 2001) and “conflict is avoided in contexts where professionalism is not highly developed” (Davies, 1987: 180).

The increase in the “corporate caution of newswork” (Pauly, 1990: 111) (that the New Journalism movement in the US in the 1960s politically opposed) has ensured that autonomy is limited and conditioned by the corporate bureaucratic framework. Within major organisations there is an explicit need for continuity of policy and leadership and



the participation of all around particular goals. However, if certain sectors within the organisation feel these goals (and terms and conditions) do not serve their best interests, they can use their political power (and that of unions) to resist this. In the early-1990s, however, IPC de-recognised the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) who no longer negotiated yearly pay rises and freelancer terms and conditions. IPC freelance rates have remained fixed at £97 per 1,000<sup>164</sup> words since the early 1990s and all freelancers stated that they had no occupational or financial security and this placed them, professionally, in a precarious and easily exploitable position.

In the late-1990s *Kerrang!* paid freelancers the old NUJ rate of £88 per 1,000 words, although this was open to negotiation if they needed copy turned around quickly. There were no consistent pay rates across titles and often they were negotiated between the freelancer and the editor or section editor. While *The Times* paid around £275 per 1,000, *Mojo* paid £160 – although this depended on the nature of the piece and the time it took to write. Mat Snow stated that certain pieces were straightforward to write (such as a 5,000 word question-and-answer interview) and so freelancers would be paid below the normal word-rate for this and paid for their prior knowledge and ability to transcribe and not for their ability to carefully craft a lengthy feature. Snow took the example of a 12,000-word Pink Floyd feature the magazine ran to illustrate how features were negotiated. The writer was already an expert on the band and did not have to spend days researching the piece. All the interviews were conducted on the same day and Snow estimated that the whole piece would have taken no more than four days to write (a morning on background research, an afternoon on interviews, two days transcribing and writing and a fourth day editing) meaning the writer would have been paid around £2,000 for four days' work which Snow felt was too high. However, a *Mojo* writer stated that Snow estimated how long it would take him to do the piece and paid accordingly, not taking it account that most writers did not work as quickly as he did. If a piece involved a great deal of original research, a writer will be paid above the standard rate such as in the case of a writer who conducted over forty telephone interviews for a piece on Marvin Gaye's 'What's Going On'.

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<sup>164</sup> While this works out at 9.7p per word, *MM* had a minimum fee for any pieces submitted of just over £30, even if it was considerably less than 300 words. They also paid a flat rate of £100 for the singles page and £100 for the letters page (before Mark Sutherland took over sole editorship of this section).

Because of the insecurity of their position, most freelancers stated that occupationally and bureaucratically they were made to feel paranoid and dependent on their editors for work, meaning that they could be exploited. IPC tried to insist that their freelancers did not work for other magazines, particularly Emap titles, and most freelancers argued this is unreasonable as they were already paid so erratically<sup>165</sup>. While they all agreed that they were not in the profession to make lots of money (as they are fans rather than careerists) they would prefer more stability in their work and payments. Few freelancers could survive on their wages for a long time and without the possibility of a staff job, their freelance careers had a very short shelf-life, with Hill (1991: 180) suggesting a cut-off point of around five years. Writers could supplement their income through a variety of means such as writing sleeve notes<sup>166</sup>, farming out interviews across a number of titles<sup>167</sup> and selling their review CDs to second-hand record shops<sup>168</sup>. One controversial means of income for music journalists (both freelance and full-time) is in the setting up of record labels<sup>169</sup>, exposing a conflict of interest as the music press is supposed to be organisationally separate from the record industry. Writers, Stratton (1982: 271) argues, “must not only act as outlets for the industry, they must also define off their own positions from that of the record companies”. This marks as closer still the coupling of cultural producers with cultural intermediaries that Bourdieu (1993: 94-96) talked of and Gleason (paraphrased in English, 1979: 100) warned of, as there is a blurring of boundaries between partisan promotional activities and impartial critical discourses.

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<sup>165</sup> A common tactic was for freelancers to work across publishers under a variety of pseudonyms. While still at the *NME*, David Quantick freelanced for *Q* under the esoteric name of Jimmy Nicol (Ringo Starr’s replacement when the Beatles toured Australia in 1964). Danny Eccleston was forced to change his name to Danny Frost at the *NME* by John Mulvey as he was already writing in technical magazines and it was felt that his was a ‘known’ name. Even within a magazine, writers will work under a variety of names to increase their income.

<sup>166</sup> While at the *NME*, John Harris was paid £200 by Silvertone to write the liner notes for ‘The Complete Stone Roses’ collection.

<sup>167</sup> Patrick Humphries had conducted an interview with Sir Paul McCartney and was able to use sections of the interview data to contribute pieces to several titles (while retaining copyright) including *music365.com*. Similarly, Mick Wall (1999) stated that in the 1980s, he would syndicate major interviews he had done for *Kerrang!* to rock titles in Paris, Tokyo and LA.

<sup>168</sup> This is a very common practice and had become institutionalised. During participant observation at *Select* in November 1998, an employee from a second-hand record shop went to every music title in the Emap Metro building buying unwanted review copies. Senior editors stated that they received over sixty albums each week, most of which were unsolicited and they would only keep a fraction of these.

<sup>169</sup> While still at the *NME*, Simon Williams ran the Fierce Panda label (and its offshoot, Rabid Badger), using the demo tapes sent to the paper to sign acts for one single deals. While also at the *NME*, Roy Wilkinson and Keith Cameron set up Costermonger (signing, among others, Gene).



Increased professional and economic insecurity has led an enormous and rapid turnover of freelancers. With the increased proliferation of titles, editors have suggested that entry standards have slipped and music journalism no longer attracts the quality of writers it did twenty years ago. Danny Kelly, for example, suggested that in the late-1990s the best writers looked beyond the traditional music press to start their careers because, he believed, music was no longer the single defining activity and discourse in people's lives (Reeves, 1999b). However, Jones (1993: 86) argues that because there are so many writers now covering music, editors find it increasingly difficult to separate the good from the mediocre. Within this, freelancers are both occupationally and spatially distanced from their employers and are excluded from the professional, cultural and bureaucratic spheres within which music titles are planned and produced. Rivers (1973: 533) suggests that most media workers rarely meet their publishers and this is particularly true of the music press. Freelancers tended to work from home as they could not regularly circulate in the newsroom as most offices had only one computer terminal to share between all their freelancers. Review editors, as noted above, argued strongly for the need for freelancers to come into the office to be introduced to the other processors (Addicott, 2000n) and use this socio-professional interaction to build their careers. This, however, seldom happens. Freelancers were treated differently across titles with certain magazines taking their opinions and editorial suggestions very seriously. Several freelancers and former freelancers I spoke to suggested they were hierarchically distanced from the power centres within titles. Because of this it often happened that ideas they proffered formally during editorial meetings or informally to section editors would be declined only to appear in the title in a slightly amended form a few weeks later<sup>170</sup>.

The invalidation of the freelancer (as seen in spatial distancing as well as employment terms and conditions) has had a very obvious impact on the nature of the newsroom as a living organism. The newsroom has become increasingly patrolled by staffers and the admission of gatherers is wholly at the discretion of processors, although a high degree of important social and professional interaction takes place outside the

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<sup>170</sup> John Harris talked of the professional frustration faced by freelancers at the *NME*. He stated that the junior writers were expected to play the role of "young Turks" and generate debate in editorial meetings with such dialogue being seen as key in preventing organisational stasis. However, this became occupationally frustrating as freelancers wanted to be in a position where they were making and carrying out editorial decisions rather than merely feeding them to staffers who would then implement them.

office at concerts, after-show parties and bars. The *NME*, *MM* and *Kerrang!* all encouraged a gig-going culture among their freelancers and gatherer/processor interaction here was central because it encouraged working and social lives to fuse. However, on monthlies (as live music was not central to their agendas) there was a clear separation between the ‘occupational’ and the ‘social’<sup>171</sup> and the same atmosphere was not engendered in the occupational climate of the title meaning freelancers were sidelined more. Staffers, because of the routine and office-bound nature of their jobs, were less likely to plough through demo tapes or attend concerts at the weekend or after work, arguing that they did not have the time. As writers progressed up the hierarchy of titles (from freelancer to staffer) they become increasingly institutionalised and less proactive in the breaking of new acts, relying on the industry (through press officers) rather than on their freelancers to bring acts to them. Such occupational passivity (as writers’ cultural empathy with their readership as ‘ideal/typical’ readers and surrogate consumers becomes eroded) can be seen to work against a title’s homology with its readers by creating a cultural and ideological distance between full time staff and readers.

Professional and personal politics, particularly on the weeklies, have characterised the dynamics between gatherers and processors and these relations have impacted directly on the career trajectory of freelancers. All section editors argued that punctuality and “basic literacy” is what they expected of all their freelancers and they would veto writers who did not meet these standards. At times, like in any organisation, the personal would override the professional and certain writers would be treated over-favourably while others would be denied work because of personality-clashes and policy differences (as illustrated above in the case of the ‘Hip-Hop Wars’). Danny Eccleston stated that while at the *NME* he found that his freelance work almost dried up totally when Johnny Dee replaced Keith Cameron on the albums desk (although he was never told explicitly why Dee did not like him). From the opposite perspective, Andy Perry talked of two individual *Select* writers he would veto giving features to. He argued that their poor social skills made them both bad work colleagues (creating an awkward and unpleasant working environment when they came into the office) and bad interviewers (putting acts

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<sup>171</sup> A number of key processors on monthlies stated that they would not work at the weekend, as this was their ‘private’ time. They stated that writers suffered from burnout after around four years and the regular gig and pub social worlds are attractive only to junior freelancers who regard it as a form of initiation into the culture of a title.



on edge and having artists walk out on them). Certain writers were notorious across titles for constantly missing deadlines and Simon Price was singled out by a number of editors as being (after being sacked from a number of titles) one of the few to eventually tighten up their act<sup>172</sup>. Within every title political factions exist and freelancers are compromised into taking sides, endearing themselves to certain editors while alienating themselves from others (complicating their career paths). The metaphor of cliques in schoolyards was a common one in several interviews I conducted and as well as in informal discussions I had with writers and they suggested that the career trajectory of freelancers was entirely dependent of the socio-cultural networks they established with individual section editors.

As noted above, there is a dynamic of mimesis between the career paths of freelancers and how titles cover artists, starting on test live reviews, moving to new band features, albums and then onto features and eventually covers. Certain writers were monitored by senior editors other than the live editor and either fast-tracked or ghettoised into particular types of writing. Several freelancers stated that they were explicitly told that they were not “features writers” and were occupationally and hierarchically confined to the review pages as a result, effectively having their career trajectory stalled. Breed (1955: 331) noted how the three distinct stages of a writer’s career marked out an occupational hierarchy and this professional separation can be still seen to exist within the music press. Writers begin at the ‘cub’ stage, where they will be assigned the minor and run of the mill stories/downpage reviews. When they begin to assimilate the values and norms of the paper (thereby eroding the possibility of recalcitrance as defined by Selznick (in Silverman, 1970), they will be promoted up the hierarchy of the paper to the ‘wiring in stage’ (moving beyond downpage reviews). They will finally reach the ‘star’ or ‘veteran’ stage when they have proven their loyalty to both the title and the publishing organisation. The freelancer could then transfer to employee status and move up through the hierarchy of the editorial positions<sup>173</sup>, accumulating political and organisational power as they progressed. There is a linear career path that is common to most titles, starting as a freelancer then moving up to staff writer or else going to one the section

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<sup>172</sup> He became music critic at the *Independent on Sunday* in early 2001.

<sup>173</sup> Without exception, every journalist I interviewed began as a freelancer saying that it is almost impossible to secure a staff job if you do not take this career path.

desks<sup>174</sup>. From there they could move up to the assistant editorship and finally editor (or, ultimately, editor in chief). However, it was rare for writers to confine their professional career to a single title as after a certain age or period of time they would begin to find themselves at odds with the title's homology with its readers. Indeed, publishers have increasingly looked outside titles when appointing new editors as they view 'outsiders' as being in a better objective position to revise this title/reader homology.

## Conclusion

Music magazines are complex socio-professional organisations where the delegation of editorial responsibilities across a number of distinct roles is conditioned by both cultural and commercial demands. Editors are effectively responsible for establishing and maintaining a 'vision' for their titles as well as determining how a hierarchy of power operates within the newsroom. Yet further organisational forces (expressed through the editor in chief point or publisher) shape elements of this 'vision' with a view towards maximising sales and advertising opportunities. While there is scope for editorial negotiation within this bureaucratic relationship, editors can and will be overruled by publishers either in subtle ways (as in the case of *Uncut*'s editorial repositioning away from a mono-thematic film title towards a music-led hybrid music and film title) or in more overt and brutal ways (as in the case of Andy Pemberton's sacking from the editorship of *Q*, as discussed in greater depth above). Within the major publishing organisations, editors are increasingly under pressure to view their titles as but one part of a carefully structured corporate portfolio rather than as stand-alone magazines. Titles must contribute to the overall survival and development of the portfolio within which they exist. As a result strategic long-term planning is conducted between the publishers and all the editors within the portfolio to avoid inter-title cannibalism and to ensure that each title 'inherits' readers from the title before it in the chain and encourages readers to 'graduate' to the next title in the chain. This then filters down into each individual newsroom and affects in particular ways how each of the section editors operate and how both their individual and collective goals are defined and realised.

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<sup>174</sup> As noted above, news staff and production staff tended to be excluded from this career trajectory because of their



Within each newsroom there are particular socio-professional discourses that are affected by staffing policy as well as both formal and informal editorial negotiation. Titles must continually evaluate and revise the homology that exists between them and their readers. Central to this is a constant and carefully monitored turnover of new writers and section editors who, through their perceived position as 'ideal readers', represent points of cultural empathy and proximity for new generations of readers at the bottom-end. There is a symbiotic process in operation here between new writers and new artists as a title's aesthetic can never be static and must shift in order to accommodate new acts within its cultural mix and agenda. The socio-professional dynamics that underscore these relationships are crucial to an understanding of how titles are assembled as both cultural forums and financial enterprises.

The division of labour and editorial responsibility among the key 'processor' roles within the newsroom is characterised by degrees of both conditional dependency and conditional autonomy. Newsrooms, while governed by occupational goals and norms set by editors and publishers, cannot purely be seen as rigid and unresponsive to change. There is a degree of both professional and aesthetic fluidity in operation in the newsroom as each section editor will simultaneously operate independently and co-dependently, contributing to the evolution of the title's homology with its readers in overt/formal and subtle/informal ways. Indeed, appointments will be made on the understanding of this need to revisit and revise the title/readership homology. The degree of autonomy involved will be determined by the socio-professional relationship between each section editor and their editor. Some editors will adopt a more 'organic' (hands-off) editorial approach while others will adopt a more bureaucratic and hierarchical (hands-on) approach and the editorial participation of each of the section editors will be dependent on the professional and personal relations that characterise their place within the hierarchical newsroom structure.

The changing terms and conditions of employment within the UK music press since the mid-1990s have had important repercussions on how newsroom power is both negotiated and accessed. While the dominant trend has been towards the democratising 'casualisation' of labour at the level of writers (and, in certain cases,

section editors), at certain points within particular titles there is a blurring of the division between the personal and the professional. Within this a process of inclusion and exclusion will mean that section editors professionally prioritise particular writers over other writers. The preferred writers can therefore contribute ideas (notably about which new acts to draw into the title) to these section editors that can have important ramifications for the circulation of ideas through the editorial hierarchy, ultimately filtering into the overall aesthetic and cultural agenda of the title. Writers and section editors can and will find themselves caught between the pursuit of individual goals (career advancement) and the pursuit of collective goals and must, therefore, be considered simultaneously as individuals (with a personal cultural agenda to write about music) and as part of a collective professional unit contributing to the profit-maximisation strategies of major publishing organisations. These tensions between individual goals and collective goals can be a cause of professional and cultural frustration and while there is some room for resistance to editorial and bureaucratic imposition of policy, it is both limited and conditional.

Having considered in this chapter and the previous one how music magazines are run as both businesses and collective cultural enterprises, it is essential next to consider the press's main institutional contact within the music industry (i.e. their main source of information and access) - the press officer. There is a clear need to analyse how the press officer, just like the music journalist, operates on both an individual and an organisational level. These dynamics will be considered in depth in the following chapter. Having then looked at the press officer in isolation from the music press, the subsequent chapter will then consider how music journalists (under the particular socio-professional and economics conditions of the title they work for) work with press officers (under the socio-professional and economic conditions on the record company or independent PR company they work for). This analysis of the press officer/journalist nexus will consider how these professional relationships are characterised by both shared and antagonistic goals and how, within this complex dynamic, artists pass through the newsroom 'gates' as well as the discourses within which they are evaluated.



## **Chapter 5 – Music PR as Profession**

## Introduction

As noted in the previous chapters, the degree of first-hand sociological enquiry into the professional, occupational and institutional dynamics of the music journalists is limited at best and peripheral at worst. Similar arguments can be made for the direct study and consideration of the record company and independent press officer (and indeed the PR industry in general). The area which has received the most academic attention is in the relationship between the press and government press departments (Tunstall, 1971; Schlesinger, 1978; Negrine, 1991; McNair, 1999; Davis, 2000) and police press departments (Chibnall, 1977). These studies, however, are all inscribed within discourses of hard news production, source relations and news management techniques. As argued in the previous chapter, the music journalism profession needs to be considered as a unique form of journalism and therefore its study requires a revision of the dominant sociological paradigms of news production as does the study of music PRs.

There are a small number of studies which consider elements of the professional dynamics of music PRs. Pettigrew (1989), for example, works through a 'How to ...' career guide to US music PR and within this presents a number of important issues concerning professional practice and PR/press relations. Frith (1983: 173-174) briefly discusses the promotional function of the music PR and how this role fits within the overall promotional activities of record companies. Finally, Negus (1992), in an organisational analysis of the music industry, provides a number of important insights and conceptual entry points into the music industry PR role, considering how it is positioned in terms of the activities of other record company departments such as A&R and marketing. Within what is a complex nexus of power structures he considers how inter-tensions and dependencies characterise and shape these institutional and corporate relationships. One limitation, however, of his overview is that he takes the major label in-house press officer as the central point of study and does not consider the professional dynamics of the independent press officer or indeed the in-house press officer at independent labels. In terms of independent press companies, it is essential to understand the cultural, ideological, economic and professional reasons behind why artists choose to take their press out-of-house (i.e. away from the dedicated PR departments of their record



label). These reasons are generally expressed by both artists and independent PRs in terms of socio-professional ideologies of ‘authenticity’ and ‘enthusiasm’. It is important to consider the differences in working relationships that music journalists have with these two distinct PR structures.

This chapter will consider in detail the structural issues impacting on music press officers, their role definitions, the occupational obstacles they encounter and how they operate simultaneously as a communication gate and as a facilitator between artists and the press.

## **I Defining Music Industry PR: Objectives, Historical Development & Typologies**

The purpose of public relations practice is to establish a two-way communication seeking common ground on areas of mutual interest, and to establish understanding based on truth, knowledge and full information ... People skilled in public relations use modern methods of communication and persuasion to bridge the gap to establish mutual understanding. (Black, 1989: 1)

This quote provides a general and normative occupational overview of what a PR does and should do as well as the goals that inform their activities. Several authors (Pettigrew, 1989; Gregory, 1996; Wragg, 1996) offer similar definitions, agreeing that PRs operate as a two-way bridge between their client and the wider public (via the print media). Their *modus operandi* is, as the Institute of Public Relations defines it, “the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its public” (quoted in Black, 1989: 3). Within Black’s (1989) definition there are a number of ethical considerations, particularly the central idea of providing ‘truth’ and ‘full information’ within a democratic and participatory normative conception of the ‘public sphere’ (Habermas, 1989: 1-5). It is their perceived failure to do this, ushering in instead a ‘promotional sphere’ of calculated information-management, that academics have been particularly critical of (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1997: 127; Golding & Murdock, 1997: 23). For example, Garnham (1992: 16-17) suggests, from a strongly neo-

Marxist position, that the rise of a 'PR culture' "represents the direct control by private interests or State interests of public information in the interest, not of rational discourse, but of manipulation". Both Frith (1983: 173-174) and Negus (1992: 124-125) make similar arguments for music press officers specifically, suggesting that they exert particular control over how their artists are presented in the print media, thereby negating autonomous journalistic critical debate. This implies a directorial influence of press officers over the press and tends to over-simplify what is in fact a complex process of negotiation and mutual-dependency between two very distinct organisation and professional structures as well as between two very distinct sets of goals and objectives.

The purpose of this chapter is to conceptually mark out music publicity as a separate and distinct professional field of analysis. The limited sociological literature (as noted above) on PRs has tended to focus on its place within hard news production. The previous chapter argued that music journalists are professionally distinct from hard news journalists and, as such, the dominant paradigms need to be rethought within this new context and similar epistemological arguments can be made for the study of music press officers. Music industry press officers are occupationally and organisationally distinct from government or police press departments as their primary function is *promotional* and their secondary function is *informational*. 'Hard news' press officers are geared almost exclusively around the circulation of information (although, within this, they are playing a promotional role for the organisations and departments they represent but this can be seen as more of a by-product rather than a distinct goal). Structurally, there are important distinctions to be marked out concerning the flows of information and the nature of the press/press officer information-relationship. The professional routinisation of hard news journalism (Tunstall, 1971; Schlesinger, 1978; McNair, 1999) has meant that journalists tend to look to (for example) government press departments for information and the flows of information tend to locate such PRs as being mainly occupationally reactive.

Music PRs, because their activities are primarily product-led rather than news-led, tend to be generally more occupationally proactive, sending material and making numerous follow-up calls to the journalists and section editors. They can also be regarded as informally proactive 'cultural intermediaries' (Bourdieu, 1986: 239-240; Bourdieu,



1993: 94-96; Negus, 1996: 62) in terms of their building up of socio-professional relationships at bars, gigs and other events. Of course, music PRs become more like hard news PRs when a scandal or unexpected news event happens, occasionally having to suppress information and ensure that it does not become public knowledge. As an illustrative example, one (anonymous) press officer stated that he had to, while on a press trip, find an excuse to get all the journalists out of their hotel during breakfast and to the airport. He had to do this to avoid the journalists seeing an ambulance arrive to take the PR's artist to hospital as he had suffered a heroin overdose. However, such incidents are comparatively rare in the PR's week-by-week activities as much of their work is inscribed within formal structures geared around planned and structured long-term routinised activities that hinge on (mainly) record release and tour dates.

Historically, music publicity (Pettigrew, 1989: 24-25) can be dated back to 1900 in the US where 'music pushers', in a pre-radio culture, promoted the sale of sheet music although the profession became subsumed within wider publicity structures following the rise of the broadcast media. The profession had a poor reputation in the pre-World War II period with jazz music PRs derided as 'hustlers', often fabricating stories to fit their clients' image. The proliferation in teen-music titles in the 1950s and the emergence of the serious rock titles in the late-1960s (coupled with a general industry boom) saw the profession rise in both economic and organisational prominence. This boom-period led into a climate of PR excess in the 1970s, as professional standards slipped and the profession was stigmatised by accusation that PRs were promoting what were regarded as poor-quality artists through expensive, often decadent, press junkets and payola (Flippo, 1974c: 283-284; deRogatis, 2000: 162). Indeed, this tarnished perception of press officers is still held by a number of journalists today, particularly in the UK (Wells, 1998: 22-23). Following the Columbia Records drug-payola scandals of 1973 in the US, there was an industry-wide re-evaluation of both the profession and its occupational norms and activities culminating in increased scrutinisation of publicists' book-keeping (with certain publicists sacked for over-spending). A record sales slump in the US at the end of the 1970s led to severe job cuts and a streamlining of the profession in the 1980s (Pettigrew, 1989: 26-27) in an explicit attempt to generate and maintain a more positive image of professionalisation and ethical accountability.

Since the 1980s, more money has been given over to media publicity (as distinct from advertising spending) generally and PRs in general now enjoy, according to Blumler & Gurevitch (1997: 128), exponentially greater status and cultural capital as a result. They argue that “[g]reater value and increased priority are conferred on image-making skills and getting the appearance of things right”. Occupationally, the area has grown dramatically and PRs are increasingly central in shaping and directing cultural production, cultural producers and the culture industries. In this period of occupational boom, the PR industry has evolved and branched out in two main ways. The expansion from in-house PR companies (for businesses and governmental departments) to independent (out-of-house) public relations consultants (Black, 1989) is nowhere more apparent than in the UK music industry, with the number of independent music PR companies proliferating since the 1980s. Pattenden (1998) notes that independent press officers mainly (but not exclusively) work with acts on independent labels primarily for economic reasons as the labels are too small to economically support a committed press department. Indeed, Black (1989) argues that it makes more economic sense for small companies to go to what he terms ‘consultants’ (i.e. independents). This notion of independence ties into wider professional and cultural discourses (and myths) about independent labels as somehow being more ‘ethical’ and ‘moral’ than their corporate major label counterparts (Negus, 1992; Frith, 1983). However, this is to fail to recognise a number of important complexities. It is not always a case of indies being so small that they cannot afford to run their own press departments (although many are), nor is it a case that major labels necessarily retain their acts in-house. The scale of operation of certain independent labels means that they can offer their acts in-house press representation. The Beggars group (covering labels such as Beggars Banquet, 4AD, Mantra, XL, Locked On, Wiiiija and Mo’Wax) is an example of an independent corporate group horizontally integrating their promotional departments. Even relatively small independents choose keep their promotions in-house (such as Faith & Hope and their Faith & Hype press department). However this can also be seen more as an economic necessity as such small labels only work with a small roster of acts and their turnover is not high enough to justify independent PRs’ fees.



Just as with major labels, it does not follow that if an act is signed to a larger independent they will choose to keep their press in-house. This was the case with Basement Jaxx when they signed to XL. They negotiated in their contract that they would take their press to Sainted PR who they already had contacts with and had built up a socio-professional relationship with. Chris Sharp (former head of press at Beggars Banquet and now label head of 4AD) stated that the in-house lawyers at Beggars would try to resist this contract clause as they wished to retain all activities horizontally within the organisation. This was for both organisational reasons (to ensure ease of communication between all the marketing and promotional departments) and for economic reasons (as they already had a press department and did not want to subcontract work they could do in-house). However, if the issue of press representation became a contractual sticking point the company would rather sign the act and pay to have their press done out-of-house than risk losing them totally. Sharp stated: "I was frankly furious about it at the time because I knew what was going to happen with Basement Jaxx ... I knew it was going to kick off. I made sure I told everyone in advance: 'This record is going to kick off. It won't be because Sainted are great. It's because it's happening'. That's because I've got to fight my corner so that we're not left doing the rump acts in-house and the best ones go out-of-house". What Sharp implies here is a professional contrast between the role and perceived campaign success of two different PR systems and the socio-professional perception of each within the press. Implicit also in his arguments is the suggestion that, with particular acts, a cultural dynamic (and anticipation) is already in place within the press before a concerted press campaign is put into operation. Press officers, then, become almost incidental to the success of the campaign. Within this dynamic they exist principally as facilitators, ensuring access for the media rather than conceptualising and determining the nature of a campaign from the start. This process of exegesis is achieved by locating their act within a particular set of aesthetic frameworks and building their 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1993: 43-45) to ultimately exchange it, at the point of press and commercial crossover, into 'economic capital' (ibid.).

Similarly, certain major label acts will choose to have their press done out-of-house and this is done for a number of reasons. Their decision to go to an independent

press department may be as a result of their unhappiness with the working systems of the in-house press department (feeling under-prioritised). It may also be as a result of clashes with a specific press officer over professional conduct and perceived inability to secure adequate or appropriate coverage. Such professional and organisational clashes are not, however, the sole reasons behind an act's move out-of-house. There is also the issue of professional continuity. Artists can build up a strong socio-professional relationship with their in-house press officer and wish to continue and build on it (rather than start again with a new press officer) by following them out-of-house should they decide to set up an independent company. This was the case with Régine Moylett and U2 when she left Island to set up her own press company, RMP. She cited a desire to step outside the working practices of major label press departments and their hierarchical structuring as the motivational factor for leaving. Independent PRs need to be able to take a viable portfolio of acts (as Moylett did with U2) with them if they wish to pursue this avenue as they state that start-up costs are high<sup>175</sup>. Davis (2000: 52), however, argues that "the principal costs in PR are human ones [i.e. salaries]. In addition to work space, public relations practice only requires some basic communications equipment" such as telephones, fax machines, computers and photocopiers. Independent PRs would contest this, stating that office space (particularly in London, where the majority of PRs are based) is extremely expensive. For the first few years of running an independent press department there is very serious financial insecurity until a large enough roster is built up to meet basic running-costs and to recoup the business start-up costs.

Occupationally, the common complaint from former major label press officers who had set up their own companies was that the inflexible organisational hierarchy both within the press department in particular and the company in general worked not to assist them in their job but, rather, to create problems. Independent press organisations are, of course, based on a hierarchical structure but it is, independent PRs argued, not as inflexible as it is in-house at majors. At the majors, much like at the mainstream music titles they deal with, the rigidity of the bureaucratic structure operates to spatially and organisationally distance the staff from their employers. This process is common to all

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<sup>175</sup> Any band can choose to take their press out-of-house if they are prepared to meet the costs themselves. Moving out-of-house generally involves complex contractual negotiations as the (mainly major) record label will be unwilling to have outside parties involved in their overall marketing and development campaigns and to pay for them as well.



kinds of large firms (Silverman, 1970; Bradley & Wilkie, 1974; Mouzelis, 1981; Davies, 1987; Purcell, 1993). The occupational frustrations raised by journalists in the previous chapter concerning the slow erosive process of de-democratisation throughout their profession were echoed throughout all the interviews I conducted with former in-house press officers. Rather than experiencing occupational autonomy, they felt their campaigns were hampered by the fact they had to constantly liaise with and work around the other departments within the major record company. These arguments, however, were all based firmly within a romanticised dichotomy of complete subservience and complete control. Independent press officers still have to work, in terms of both long- and short-term strategy, with the other departments in the record companies their artists are signed to. Indeed, the spatial and organisational distance between independent press officers and these departments creates new occupational complications as the flows of information are not as straightforward as they would be if they operated within a vertically-integrated press department. They not only have to liaise with the marketing departments, they must also work along with the in-house head of press mainly in terms of budgetary concerns, but also in terms of overall press strategies.

The major label in-house press departments are generally much larger than independent companies in terms of staff numbers. There is a carefully structured division of roles and a clearer occupational hierarchy than at independent PR firms because their overheads are determined by the overall budgetary plans of the label as a whole. Within most major record company press departments, the key roles (each with a define set of responsibilities) can be identified as follows: head of press; senior press officer; national titles press officers (possibly having two people fill this role); regional press officer; student press officer and student press assistant; and finally, increasingly, a dedicated Internet press officer. Independent press companies are generally run with much smaller teams and the hierarchical structure is by no means as explicit as it is at majors. Because they generally work smaller rosters they are thereby able to devote more time to individual acts. Howard Bloom, an independent PR in the US, stated that it is not uncommon for a major label to have a PR department of six people working up to sixty acts (of which thirty are active a lot of the time). In contrast, his company was made up of ten people working in depth with twelve acts (Pettigrew, 1989: 157-172). However UK

independent press companies often work more acts with less staff. Bad Moon, for example, in 2000 were working with thirty-one acts (and also doing press for all the acts signed to Grand Royal), divided between four staff members to ensure that overheads and running costs for the company were met by the fees they charged each label<sup>176</sup>.

In terms of recruitment, just as with the music press, there is no formal entry route into the profession (Davis, 2000). In terms of defining job skills, most heads of press talked in vague terms of a need for communication skills, basic computer literacy, a solid understanding of the make-up and function of the British music press, enthusiasm and a love of music. However, Black (1989: 14) is critical of PRs who have not received formal public relations training, stating that: “It is regrettable that anyone can set up as a public relations consultant ... These untrained newcomers to the field tend to bring the practice of public relations into disrepute”. In setting up an occupational norm, Black (ibid.) outlines the need for the following skills (to be achieved, he believes, through direct training): organisation, writing and proof-reading, balanced judgement, imagination, empathy, quick-mindedness, flexibility, a sense of humour and strong social skills. Yet music industry PRs argued that formal training is only helpful to a point and the priority for employers is social and communicative skills. This, of course, echoes the lack of training required for writers to break into the press, with formal qualifications being seen as an anathema to the overall informality of a music PR’s socio-occupational links with the press. As Kate Stuart (head of press at Casablanca and a former in-house PR at Polydor) argued: “You have to be able to get on with people and you have to be able to take quite a lot of abuse [laughs] from journalists. If they don’t like what you’re offering then they just slam the phone down. You can’t take it personally. And you have to be really friendly and really outgoing”.

The majority of press officers I spoke to all talked of PR as a career they fell into by accident, and were unclear as to what the job involved before they began working in music PR (implying a more organic approach to acquiring skills and experience than Black (1989) recommended). Just as with certain sectors of the music press, label press departments (and independents to a lesser extent) run formal work experience programmes. This route offers an important professional entry-point and (if it leads to

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<sup>176</sup> However, in 2000, Sarah Edwards left Bad Moon to work at *nme.com* and several months later she had not been



permanent employment) an opportunity to work up the office hierarchy from office junior, to junior press officer, then regional press officer and finally to senior press officer or head of press. Several PRs actually began as journalists on music titles and became introduced, through the enclosed and self-referential world which journalists, artists and press officers both inhabit and maintain (Bourdieu 1986: 239-240; Bourdieu, 1993: 94-96), to press officers and made their career move that way. There are a number of complex moral and ethical debates tied up in such career migration, with Black (1989: 42) referencing an editor who opposed this trend because “press officers should *issue* news and ... journalists should *write* the stories”. Other music PRs, however, argued that experience in the music press gave PRs a clear professional empathy so that they could understand the mechanics of production and the hierarchy within magazines and publishing organisations. Through this they therefore become more effective in their dealings with the press. PRs occasionally visited the offices of the major magazines they dealt with and, through these visits, gleaned an understanding (albeit partial) of how they operated and how the office hierarchy determined production. This, however, was seen by certain PRs as a ‘necessary evil’ implying that the offices of the *NME* were particularly unpleasant to visit as the paper’s socio-professional atmosphere was so poor that particular staff members treated visitors with rudeness, hostility and suspicion<sup>177</sup>.

## **II Organisations and Professional Typologies: Independent Press Officers and In-House Press Officers**

The remainder of this chapter will consider, in turn, the independent and the in-house press officer as distinct objects of analysis, considering the differing occupational ideologies and practices before moving into a wider discussion of the role of the music PR and press campaigns. It is important to consider these different working systems and occupational ideologies separately for the primary reason that the limited literature on music press officers has treated them as a homogenous professional grouping and, in so

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replaced, meaning that three PRs had to work the entire roster.

doing, has tended to over-simplify and over-generalise their activities and goals. However, through the establishment of this independent/in-house dichotomy, it is not the intention of this chapter to suggest that the two roles are culturally, occupationally and ideologically dissimilar and contradictory. In fact they share a number of important similarities and crossovers. In order, therefore, to grasp a detailed understanding of this profession as a whole their occupational and cultural similarities must be placed within the discussion as centrally as their differences.

### III Independent Press Officers: Pros & Cons

Several independent PRs I interviewed argued, as noted above, that the reason they left the press departments of the majors and multi-national record companies was that they found it ‘stifling’ and were alienated from creative decision-making processes. They all attached a certain professional romanticism to what they were able to do as independents and they inscribed their roles within a perceived ideology of creative emancipation and autonomy. Several press officers talked of having, while in-house at majors, to work on acts they had no role in signing and did not respect artistically. The outside view of in-house PRs was that they were, as John Best (head of Best Est.) argued, “wage-slaves”, begrudgingly, rather than enthusiastically, developing strategies and campaigns. In sharp contrast to this, a romantic myth has been built up around the independent PR carefully choosing a portfolio of acts based on personal taste and cultural empathy rather than occupational obligation. Tied into these debates, the issue of ethics and ethical behaviour was recurrent in the interviews I conducted, although press officers talked in vague (and somewhat ambiguous) terms about ‘honesty’ and being ‘true to the artists’ as well as to the press. In contrast to what they perceived as their own egalitarian working practice, several independent press officers talked of an ‘ethical bankruptcy’ in press departments in-house at majors. PRs there, they argued, were being paid to feign enthusiasm for acts

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<sup>177</sup> Having visited the *NME* offices twice I can verify this accusation. Hoskyns (1995) makes this point repeatedly in his semi-fictionalised account of UK rock journalism. The weekly rock title in his novel (*Cover*) is closed based on the *NME* of the mid-1980s.



they did not believe in, suggesting that independent PRs were somehow professionally absolved from such ethical dilemmas.

This romanticised view of the independent press officer was, Best argued, ingrained within the occupational practices of music journalists. It operated as a barrier to access to the press for in-house PRs because journalists, he argued, considered in-house PRs' cultural capital and authority to be low. To illustrate this, Best stated that during his time at Virgin he never secured the cover of a national title for any of his acts. However, within three months of picking up the 4AD roster and other 'credible' acts as an independent he had secured cover features for Cocteau Twins, Pixies, Lush and The Farm. His arguments, however, over-estimate the relative weight of independent PR in the qualitative complexities of the journalistic and aesthetic evaluation of artists. This dichotomy is a misleading one to erect as it suggests that all major label acts represented in-house lack cultural capital while all independently represented acts are inherently credible and rich in cultural capital. Certainly particular independent press officers and independently represented artists *are* viewed within a particular context of credibility by journalists, but so too are particular in-house press officers and their acts. Equally, in interviews with journalists, it was made apparent that certain independent press officers and independent press companies were regarded with scorn and, in one notable case, outright disgust.

Within this, there is also a temporal issue as certain independent PR companies become fashionable for a while as the acts they work break through or represent a musical movement (e.g. 'Madchester', grunge, Britpop or UK Garage). If these companies do not diversify in terms of the acts they work with they quickly become dismissed as culturally anachronistic. In interviews several press officers and journalists all pointed to Real Time Press as a case in point. Real Time was perceived as a 'hot' company in the early 1990s because it represented several of the key US grunge acts, but it did not consolidate and expand its portfolio and was, in the late-1990s, dismissed as a somewhat peripheral company. Just as music magazines have to continually revise their homology with the readership, so too must independent press companies revise their roster of acts and not present a static aesthetic and range of artists tied to a particular time or movement. As Chris Sharp noted, there is a professional danger in being associated

with a particular scene and a particular roster: “It is cyclical. That’s one of the things that happens. These bands – unless they become *enormous* – if they’re just hip and hot but they’re only selling 100,000 records then the power that that gives you doesn’t go on forever and they become last month’s chewing gum”. Similarly, it is commercially dangerous to base a PR company wholly around a single artist and the most credible independent PRs firms were regarded as those that were able to evolve organically and introduce new artists and styles into their overall aesthetic. Angus Batey (reviews editor at *music365.com*) began as an independent PR working with PJ Harvey and his company folded as a result of its limited portfolio. He stated: “Retrospectively, if I was to run my business ... again I’d make sure that I didn’t rely to such a huge extent on one client ... I based an entire year’s working patterns around it and ... there were times where I wasn’t really doing any work. I had set myself a whole load of time aside that I wasn’t using”.

As noted earlier, there can be various reasons for major acts taking their press out-of-house and they are not limited to feeling alienated within a corporate structure. U2, as noted above, took their press out-of-house from reasons of cultural and professional continuity because their PR was leaving to set up RMP. A major British act of the 1990s took their press out-of-house because they were searching for a more mature and sombre image. They went to an independent company that they felt would represent them with greater professional decorum, believing their image was determined to an extent by the people they were professionally associated with. There had been a breakdown in the socio-professional relationship the band had with their in-house press officer, and they felt that their professional and cultural incompatibility with this PR was detrimental to their overall relationship with the press. Simply, according to the head of the independent press company they moved to, “they didn’t want their press officer to be lying on a pub floor in Camden drunk [laughs]”. Sometimes, however, the decision to take an act’s press out-of-house is not made by the artists themselves but rather by their record company<sup>178</sup>, as was the case with the Spice Girls. As the group were breaking in the UK, Virgin took their press out-of-house principally for reasons of resources. Duff Battye (then at Virgin and now at BMG) stated that it “was simply due to work load. This out-of-house company had three or four people working on the Spice Girls 24-hours of the day, seven



days a week, 365 days a year. Within a corporate company, a press office for a major label may be like five or six people. There's too many acts for them to dedicate three or four people to [only one]".

Independent PRs all talked of being much more 'hands-on' than in-house press officers and the artists were more able to dictate the amount and nature of press that they did and because independent PRs worked smaller rosters they had the time to respond to this. A recurrent criticism of in-house press officers at majors was that they were forced to work a great many acts quickly and did not have them time to work in collaboration with their acts, meaning the acts felt undervalued. Sandra McKay (press officer at RMP) stated that independents were "in a position to be able to devote more time to actually being strategic about how their time is used. That's certainly the intention". The working atmosphere was considered to be stronger at independents because they are generally smaller-scale, employing only four or five individuals within a less rigidly imposed hierarchical structure. Black (1989) suggests that one of the major drawbacks of independent PRs lies in what he regards as a lack of continuity in staffing. Personnel, he believes, are more likely to leave, but the findings of the research I conducted with both in-house and independent PRs contradicts this. It appeared that employees tended to stay longer at independents than they did in-house and, in fact, PRs tended to use their time in-house at majors to gain experience and contacts, effectively exploiting it as a stepping-stone towards independence. Anton Brookes, head of Bad Moon, argued that the office atmosphere at independents was informal and all employees felt that they are contributing ideas to the various campaigns they are working and that their involvement is encouraged. In terms of structuring, independent press departments, because of their size, were defined in discourses more commonly associated with new wave management (du Gay, 2000: 61) with employees describing them as 'organic', 'inclusive' and 'informal'. In-house press departments (particularly within the majors), however, were defined as 'monolithic' and over-bureaucratized, with employees feeling alienated. However these comments, while certainly true of certain organisations, need to be understood within the romantic ideology of the independent/in-house dichotomy described above.

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<sup>178</sup> This move cannot therefore be seen in the same cultural terms as an act that takes the decision themselves for either professional or cultural reasons.

At independents it is uncommon for individual press officers have a total monopoly over the acts they work, although at Bad Moon, for example, PRs tended to regularly work certain acts. Each staff member will be involved to a greater or lesser extent in the campaigns of all the company's acts and able to cover if anyone is out of the office. At RMP, however, all four PRs stated that they worked the company's roster of acts equally with no one having overall responsibility for a single artist or group. They felt that it was more efficient for anyone to be able to field questions, requests and enquiries from the press rather than having to wait until someone returned to the office. They also held a formal weekly strategy meeting to outline to each other what their workload was and their campaign strategies involved. Moylett stated:

Even though there are four of us, we aim to never have any particular band farmed out to a person, that we all work on everything. Because if someone phones in and Louise [Butterly] answers the phone, as far as they're concerned that person is speaking for Bono [from U2]. If someone calls in and is looking for Damon Albarn [from Blur] and Sandra [McKay] answers the phone, then [they think] "As far as I'm concerned, you're the person who can give me the answer". And that's how it should be and everybody should be equally able to answer whatever question there is. And that's why we sit around a table, rather than have separate offices. It's important that we communicate among ourselves<sup>179</sup>.

#### **IV In-House: Pros & Cons**

As noted above, the common criticism of in-house press officers was that they were working acts that they rarely, if at all, liked. Kate Stuart summed up the arguments about the occupational and structural contrasts between in-house and independents when she said:

A big thing for me [while at Polydor] was that I was having to work artists that I didn't believe in 100%. A lot of stuff gets farmed out via international deals ... They'll say "We'll take so many records from your label in Sweden and you have to release so many of ours". So you're working stuff that isn't going to work in the

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<sup>179</sup> However, the press releases they issued contradicted this notion of an egalitarian and collective working system. All four contact names were given on the press releases but one name would appear first on the list for certain acts thereby



market and is just really tedious to work ... The general perception – whether it’s right or wrong – with a lot of majors is that a record company which has an in-house press office, they’re not sure who’s going to be working their acts<sup>180</sup>. And they cannot guarantee that they won’t get an R ‘n’ B specialist working a dance act or they won’t get someone who’s a guitar freak working an act that they don’t really get or understand ... The way that I put myself [as an independent] to people is that I have a particular specialist knowledge and love of certain types of music. I firmly believe that to work a campaign successfully you have to really believe in the music. And if you haven’t got a fundamental understanding of that music then you’re not going to be able to work it properly.

The in-house press officer at an independent label exists on the axes of a number of distinct ideological debates. On the one hand, they are regarded as rich in cultural capital because of the myth of the independent record company and, on the other hand, dismissed (though in less vitriolic terms than major label PRs) for having a roster imposed on them rather than handpicking one. As Chris Sharp noted of the contradictions and ideological schism here:

It would be a very, very peculiar record buyer who had all of the records that we’ve released in their record collection ... I’d be lying if I said that my personal taste was equal for all the acts. There are obviously some acts that I really, really like and really love the fact that I’m involved with them. And there’s others that I don’t. However, it’s very, very important in terms of political reasons that I kind of disguise my enthusiasms internally a little bit and try to do my best to give all the acts a fair deal.

The important issue to note here is that the ideology of the independent PR is one that actively (and, arguably, exclusively) defines itself not by what it is but rather by what it is not (i.e. in-house). However, while independents criticise the restrictive corporate and bureaucratic nature of major label in-house press it is the scale of the infrastructure that is seen by in-house PRs as its strength. Battye talked of a wider industry shift towards acts going back in-house, saying that “more and more companies and artists are seeing that it

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engendering within the press the notion that they were the main contact for that act. While not explicitly stating they were the sole contact for that act there was the subtle imposition of a particular hierarchy in operation here.

<sup>180</sup> This goes against Black’s (1989) belief, noted above, that the strength of in-house press department is their continuity of staffing.

makes a lot more sense to have their stuff centrally located. Just a communication thing really” and Black (1989) singles out the ease of the inter-departmental communication flows as one of the major strengths of the in-house structure. Indeed, the press department in major labels represent an important link in the overall corporate promotional and development infrastructure (Negus, 1992: 118) and, as working practices develop, its position becomes increasingly central. These in-house press departments provide, in Gergory’s (1996: 19) eyes, an important “‘boundary spanning’ role as conduits of information to publics inside and outside an organization”. They relay outside (i.e. press) views on acts to the artists, management and other marketing departments as a type of ‘early-warning’ system to help refine corporate promotional strategies.

Word of Mouth (WOM) was set up in-house at BMG in the late-1990s, based on the US corporate promotional model and existed at the meeting point of the working practices of both independent and major label in-house press departments<sup>181</sup>. It covered what were classed as the (mainly US) ‘urban’ acts signed to BMG and its affiliated labels (RCA, Arista, La Face, Bad Boy and Deconstruction). It was explicitly based on the portfolio models more typical of the independents, where the staff were seen primarily as fans and experts (consciously the antithesis of what in-house have been criticised for), rich in cultural capital and expertise. The establishment of this distinct department within BMG can be considered in terms of a conscious attempt to annexe the cultural capital associated (in the eyes of certain sectors of the press) with out-of-house press companies by blurring the boundaries. Even its choice of moniker was of symbolic importance here, consciously tapping into discourses of ‘organic’ and ‘natural’ flows of communication and cultural worth while attempting to present, in corporate terms, an image of non-corporate business practice. WOM was made up of a head of marketing, a marketing assistant, two street teams, a clubs promoter, a press officer and an assistant press officer and was structurally distinct from (but linked to) the affiliated labels’ in-house press departments. It was based on the US ‘street teams’ promotional model (Negus, 1999: 97), adopting alternative promotional strategies outside of the mainstream channels (and, crucially, London) such as clubs and specialist record shops. In so doing, it attempted to tap into a complex (and, indeed, constructed) model of ‘authenticity’, netting regional

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<sup>181</sup> By 2000, however, restructuring within BMG removed WOM as an autonomous press unit.



and metropolitan ‘taste publics’ and demographics which had previously proved elusive. Street marketing filtered up, through grassroots support, into the mainstream media and commercial crossover. As Battye noted of the pseudo-authenticity the department attempted to project:

You lend an air of authenticity, you’ve got street teams that go out there and rather than the highbrow hack they never see, they’ve got an individual ... [W]e have two lads in the office and they have a team of people nation-wide that they would use for specific events. And not only is it a great way of getting information out, but it’s also a great way of getting information back ... [T]hrough the street team we have a web covering the UK of like sixty or seventy kids going to the places and they can report back to us. For example, “This Puffy track isn’t working but Mary J. Blige is amazing and the kids all want to speak to Donell Jones”. And that gives us pointers on what they are doing.

WOM represented, more than anything, a synthesis of what were previously considered two very distinct (if not antagonistic) sets of working practices, organisational structures and systems of cultural capital, although the divisions between in-house corporate structures and autonomous independents are far from clear-cut. Independent press departments must liaise closely with the record company head of press of the major label acts they are dealing with and there is professional and hierarchical crossover and mutual dependence here (leading into an occupational symbiosis). Costs for press trips and overall press budgets are determined in-house and the independents must work within this and any over-spending must be approved by the label head of press (or label head if it is a smaller independent without an in-house press department). Budgets will vary year to year and, as Black (1989: 24) notes, “cost bears a direct relationship to the work commissioned”. Sandra McKay noted how RMP, despite being independent, was absorbed into (both symbiotically shaping and being shaped by) the in-house marketing strategy of the labels they worked with, testing the water and providing cues to radio and TV pluggers and in-store promotional teams. Economically this is important because, as both Negus (1992: 116) and Théberge (1991: 284) note, press campaigns are relatively inexpensive early-indicators of an act’s market potential. Indeed, as Bloom (quoted in Pettigrew, 1989: 163) argues: “A PR campaign is just one of the many tools in artist development strategy. So we want to be cognizant of the artist development strategy and

contribute to it’”. Ultimately, promotional campaigns are never confined to a single medium and press departments (whether in-house or independent) must be aware that they are simply one part (albeit of crucial importance in the early stages) of wider media promotional activities and incorporate this into their campaign strategies and working practices.

## V Selecting Acts & Contracts

When independent press officers sign new acts, the small, insular and self-referential community of ‘cultural intermediaries’ that both Bourdieu (1986: 239-240; 1993: 94-96) and Negus (1996: 62) talked of, can be seen to be clearly in operation. When I interviewed John Best in late-1999, he talked of a new band, Sigur Rós, that his company had begun working with, noting that their demo tape was not sent to him unsolicited, but rather came recommended by an individual in the music industry whom Best did not name. These cultural intermediaries draw on a small circle of opinion and look to each other for cues and clues, between them gatekeeping a substantial percentage of new artists. There is a professional/economic crossover here also in signing acts and doing independent press for artists. The owner of Bad Moon PR, Anton Brookes, ran the independent label ZubiZaretta (licensed through Grand Royal<sup>182</sup>) and signed a number of the acts that Bad Moon did press for, such as Rosetta and Electric Music. Bad Moon, therefore, existed simultaneously as an independent press department and the in-house press department of an independent label run by the label’s owner, representing a similar conflict of interest to journalists who also run record labels (as noted in the previous chapter). Such contradictory boundary-spanning roles mean that they have an extra financial interest in the success of their acts and this works to overturn the belief that independent press companies structurally exist outside of record companies.

On the level of economic pragmatism, Best argued that marketability was the determining factor in working with new acts, saying that his company “quickly developed a sort of check-list. Because it’s one thing if you think a band are brilliant. It’s



another whether you're going to get them any press or not. They're not exactly synonymous". Best singled out acts such as Suede and Pulp as being marketable and having press-worthy personalities whereas, he argued, acts such as Spiritualised were problematic for PRs because they were resistant to doing press and 'playing the game'. Indeed, much of the myth of independent press companies rests on the fact that, because they chose the acts they wished to work with, their cultural and aesthetic priorities outweighed their economic ones. But, as Best noted, the economic survival of an independent press company is partly determined by the commercial potential of acts. If their artists break through into the mainstream they will re-negotiate the terms of their contract and how much they charge for press representation. Indeed, small acts will often be taken on by independent press companies for a low fee or no fee at all with a long-term view of aiding their commercial breakthrough and reaping the economic rewards that come with this. This also serves a cultural function which translates into economic benefits as a running a company with successful yet credible artists on its roster will work to attract new bands or already successful bands to the roster, thereby helping to ensure that its overall aesthetic and cultural agenda remains fluid.

Contracts were not uncommon for acts working with independent companies, although certain companies preferred not to work with acts in such a formal manner. Moylett argued that she has never had a formal contract with any of her acts, while Anton Brookes stated: "We don't have contracts at all. The only time we have contracts is when they've [the artists] fucked us over. My accountant thinks I'm mad. And he's probably right. But I think, well, if they've got a contract and they don't want to work with us, it doesn't matter. OK, you might get an extra couple of months [of money] out of them ... [but] ... once the trust's gone, or once the doubt's there [there's no point]". However, while there are examples of independent press companies working without contract, the norm is towards some type of formal agreement. The blurring of professional and personal interests that a lack of contract represents can result, in the long-term, in economic and occupational clashes that can ultimately threaten the survival and growth of the press company.

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<sup>182</sup> However, this agreement collapsed in 2000 following a budgetary review by Grand Royal, which did however retain

## VI Main Duties

Black (1989) suggests that the work of the press officer falls into three distinct categories: (i) issuing news and generating press interest to run reviews and features; (ii) answering enquiries from the press and being, in terms of information provision, a key point of press contact; and (iii) monitoring the veracity of press coverage (and correcting it where necessary) and evaluating the results and success (or otherwise) of campaigns. This is an overview of the mechanics of a press campaign and a press officer's long-term profile-maintenance duties based within professional discourses of information circulation. But beyond the purely informational, music press officers also play an important cultural role in the presentation of their artists. They are key in locating their acts within particular exegetical frameworks, translating artists and helping to define and refine the interpretative frameworks within which they are considered by the press. Press officers, when asked what their main duty was, all replied that it was, quite simply, to get press for their artists. Within this they all marked out both quantitative and qualitative concerns. They wanted the press to be positive, prominent and to, as Sharp noted, "make sure that what we [i.e. *Beggars Banquet* press] say is in some loose sense in harmony with the group's intentions; their artistic – to use a nebulous phrase – vision of whatever they do". Moylett also noted that there were pragmatic commercial concerns to the PR's job and cultural implications tied to the image of the artists they presented. These included alerting the public, via the media, that a record was coming out or a tour was planned but, within this, their exegetical obligation to their acts was to ensure that "an artist's self-expression is as accurate as possible in the print media. It is as accurate as it is in their songs".

PRs will, as routine, maintain a clippings file for all their clients, yet certain artists (or, more specifically, their management) will insist on monthly reports being written and formally presented to them. PRs are quite hostile to such formal imposition, arguing that their work (and its success) cannot be measured in a simple monthly report. They have, as Pettigrew (1989) notes, a dual-function. The first of these is, in the short-term, building



a press profile for their acts (which can be easily measured in terms of column inches and review averages). Secondly, in the long-term, the PRs are central in maintaining a profile and the exegetical frameworks within which the act is considered (something that is less straightforward to quantify on a monthly basis). This temporal distinction is an important one. Chris Sharp neatly summed up the frustrations felt by PRs when faced with over-insistent artists, arguing that much of their work cannot be measured formally:

There's lots of artists that I have very informal relationships with, see them at gigs, say hello and they'll let me get on with it and then I'll just ring them up every now and again and say "Can you do this? Can you do that?" Others, particularly with ... 'proper management companies' ... do things like *demand* reports and updates and all that kind of shit. Generally speaking, I always take the view that if you're not hearing from me, it's not going very well. There's nothing to do. Sometimes people *demand* that you put this down on pieces of paper so that they can prove in some sort of abstract way that you are doing some work.

In terms of this balance between the informational and the exegetical, Gregory (1996), drawing on the work of Grunig & Hunt, isolates two dominant PR roles. Firstly, there are what are termed 'the communication technicians' and secondly, the 'communication managers'. The former are more routine and mechanical in their tasks, issuing press releases, compiling press packs, filing press clippings and so forth. The latter, however, are more directly involved in the planning and execution of the marketing campaign as well as the aesthetic and exegetical packaging of the artist. Within this, the press officer deals directly with the artists' management and is granted conditional organisational autonomy to make important policy decisions for both short- and long-term activities and how artists are translated. This 'communication manager' role can be further subdivided into: (i) the 'expert provider' who researches and defines PR problems as well as implementing programmes; and (ii) the 'communication facilitator' who operates as a go-between between the public and the corporate organisation, both mediating and liaising. Generally, the office hierarchy in major label press departments work towards a clear division of these roles. The head of press in-house will fill the role of the 'expert provider' and the senior press officers will exist as communication facilitators. Finally, the most junior press officers will operate mainly as 'communication technicians', not

directly contributing to the definition of the aesthetic frameworks within which artists are located. In contrast to such explicit hierarchical distinctions at majors, independent press departments and in-house press departments at most independents will have, by necessity, more fluidity in the demarcation of roles. Because their office structure is so small, individuals will not solely occupy any of these distinct roles, but will rather switch between them when it is deemed appropriate or necessary. However, a 'referral-upwards' procedure will still exist as the most senior press officer or head of press will, in the last analysis, fill the role of the 'expert provider'.

## **VII Starting & Structuring Campaigns**

In devising a press campaign, there will be close collaboration between the 'expert provider', the A&R director, the artists and their management. The 'expert provider' and their team will be left with the role of reconciling, within a comparatively strict budget and timeframe (Gregory, 1996), the needs and demands of the artist with what can be achieved in terms of amount, type and prominence of coverage. The scale of campaigns and the strategies involved are determined by the commercial status of the acts, with new acts proactively seeking press in as many magazines as possible and established acts reactively filtering and prioritising particular titles (Negus, 1992: 124-125). John Best argued that it is relatively straightforward for a press officer to generate a buzz for a new act in the live and new bands pages of the inkiies. This is primarily because of the inkiies' need for a constantly (weekly) turnover of acts and renewal of the homology between them and their readers (as discussed in the previous chapter). But it is also possible because of the close socio-professional and shared cultural links and collaborations between journalists and PRs. The concern after the 'introductory' period for the PR is to build from this and to have the act in a commercially successful position that can justify a feature. Best implied that if an act has not made substantial cumulative sales advances by their third single, the press begins to lose interest and the campaign will lose momentum; something that is difficult to regain when faced with press apathy. There is a complex symbiosis in place here between the cultural and economic evaluation of the success of a



*press campaign* and the cultural and economic evaluation of the success of an act in the *marketplace*. Indeed, the PR is central in attempting to ensure that the cultural capital accrued in a press campaign can be exchanged into economic capital in the market.

For established acts, press officers work campaigns based on achieving cover pieces or major features and this is limited to a select number of titles as media-saturation is considered damaging to the public perception of the act. Titles will be selected for the target readership they attract and the perceived cultural position they occupy as an act attempts to extend their fan-base and tap into wider, previously elusive, taste publics. For the Puff Daddy 'Forever' album, Duff Battye stated that the WOM campaign was based on two dynamics. It firstly needed to capitalise upon the audience he had attracted with the Notorious BIG tribute single, 'I'll be Missing You', while simultaneously courting a wider, more urbane and style-conscious demographic who had possibly dismissed him as a gimmick-based pop act "who sang over a Police sample"<sup>183</sup>. The starting point and lynchpin of the Puff Daddy campaign, and the piece through which all subsequent features were defined, was a cover feature in *The Face*. The hope was that the magazine, because of its emphasis on strong imagery and innovative layout (Hebdige, 1988: 157; McRobbie, 1999: 13), would translate Puff Daddy into a whole new set of aesthetic and cultural frameworks, slotting into the homology present between a variety of titles and their respective readerships. The strategy was to portray him as a stylish and credible individual and "a hugely successful black entrepreneur, businessman, producer and musician" and, in so doing, "set the tone for the whole campaign". This was intended to allow Puff Daddy to crossover into a number of magazine aesthetics through the imposition of a core image that could be refined to co-exist within a number of distinct exegetical frameworks.

Chris Sharp argued that every press officer has an ideal campaign strategy based on a malleable but consistent exegetical angle mapped out at the draft stage. However, it is extremely probable that the strategy will run into complications at some stage and this should be anticipated. The campaign should be based on a very explicit angle with which to interest both the press and the public, but this is often one involving a process of multiple translation of aesthetic discourses designed to court particular taste publics. For

example, the pitch for the Puff Daddy campaign was that he was a credible crossover artist, simultaneously ‘populist’ and (via the work of the street teams) ‘authentic’. His presence in both spheres was to be rubber-stamped by *The Face*, which equally straddles this division. Unless there is an explicit and easily translatable angle, press officers and artists can and will run into a number of obstacles. John Best used Suede as a pertinent example. Their debut album campaign hinged around the 1992 *MM* cover which hailed them as ‘The Best New Band in Britain’ (and which immediately stimulated pan-press hype). The band’s second album’s exegetical angle was based on the acrimonious departure of original guitarist Bernard Butler while the third album’s pitch was that it was the first to be written without Butler. Best argued that the fourth album suffered in the press because it lacked such an explicit sales angle and became, as he saw it, “just another Suede album”. Implicit in his arguments is the fact that bands will have a particular aesthetic shelf life. The duty of the press officer here is to establish a consistent image and appeal, but often this is finite. As an act evolves and changes direction so too must the manner in which they are presented to and translated for the press. This symbiotic process must simultaneously ensure that the act’s appeal can conform to the revision in a title’s homology with its readers while broadening the range of titles the act can be located within.

Moylett noted that any press campaign is made up of two chief concerns. Firstly informing the public of an artist’s planned activities and secondly consolidating the sales angle by finding a writer “who will draw out of the artist an accurate portrayal of what this piece of work’s about”, although this is never straightforward. Negus (1992: 119-120) suggests that there is an overt process of ‘matching’ sympathetic writers to artists by press officers, yet all the journalists and press officers I interviewed agreed that this was far from the case and PRs rarely, if ever, determined, or even suggested, which writer should do the interview. This was subject to each title’s internal newsroom politics of the socio-professional relationship between the features editor and writers. The ever-shifting homology between a title and its readers coupled with the continual de-democratisation of freelance writers makes this fraught with complications. As noted in the previous chapter, each title’s agenda can be modified by a combination of factors, most notably the

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<sup>183</sup> The chorus of ‘I’ll be Missing You’ was based heavily around the melody line and lyrics of the Police single ‘Every



dynamics of the magazine market as well as a change of editor and the impact this has on the socio-professional discourses of the newsroom. The shifting hierarchical dynamic of the newsroom impacts both overtly and subtly on relationships between freelancers and ‘processors’, between ‘processors’ and PRs and between freelancers and PRs. This all impacts on press campaigns and serves to redefine each magazine’s criteria of inclusion and exclusion. In extreme cases, PRs can be dominant in the exchange and veto the choice of a writer they felt was unsuitable but they do so at the risk of losing the feature totally. However, they are only likely to succeed in this when the press’s commercially defined need to cover the act (and boost sales) is greater than the act’s need to court their readership.

Some established acts, as in the case of Puff Daddy, can command front covers and are selected carefully by the PR to mark the artist’s reintroduction to the public. McKay noted that the campaign for Blur’s ‘13’ album was more “high-brow” than the band’s previous campaigns<sup>184</sup> as it was “quite a thoughtful album”. They therefore prioritised the key rock titles (notably *Q*) and the broadsheets to communicate a seriousness, erudition and longevity that the group’s ‘indie’ image had previously negated. The campaign closely coincided with the publication of Blur’s official biography where they were hailed as “the most interesting English pop group of their generation” (Maconie, 1999: v) and attempted to locate them within a pantheon of British acts such as the Beatles, David Bowie, The Jam, The Smiths, The Kinks, Roxy Music and The Faces. The press campaign was perceived as part of this cultural re-positioning and re-evaluation, leading, ultimately, into a *South Bank Show* television profile. This conscious move to overturn the band’s ‘indie’ image tied into the shifting cultural and market agendas of artists who wish to ‘graduate’ through the youth-oriented music press and broaden their appeal into adult-oriented music title as well as the style and lifestyle press. The exegetical frameworks of artists must allow for a ‘maturing’ process such as this to occur. Press officers need, in order to have a viable campaign, to ensure that such ‘maturing’ artists are absorbed into the aesthetics of previously elusive titles as they will

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Breath You Take’.

<sup>184</sup> For this album, Blur took their press out-of-house for the first time and many press officers and journalists saw their move to RMP as symbolic, affiliating themselves with U2’s press officers in order to achieve a similar level of crossover success. The band hoped that the discourses associated with U2 would be assimilated into their exegetical framework.

be slowly excluded from the aesthetic of the titles they had previously been core to (as a result of the revision in the homology between these titles and their readers).

### VIII Building an Act

In contrast to such established acts, press officers agreed that new artists were the easiest to work with. They were, as Battye argued, “a lot more open to your ideas, they’re a lot more malleable as far as what they’ll do and what they won’t do”, meaning that the press officer is more involved at this stage in dictating the exegetical frameworks within which they are located. Kate Stuart marked out an important cultural and ideological distinction here between ‘artists’ and ‘performers’ and how central the press officer was in determining their image of the latter and relatively powerless in determining the image of the former. She had worked in-house at Polydor on Boyzone’s press until they broke into the mainstream. This commercial breakthrough was achieved through their migration from the teen press into more adult-oriented mainstream lifestyle titles while still holding on to consumers at the younger end. It can be seen in terms of an attempt to reconcile the exegetical conflict implicit in the fun/serious dichotomy active in the courting of a changing ‘pop’ market and the courting of a more stable adult market, without over-privileging the latter to the total exclusion of the former. In the early stages of Boyzone’s career, the Polydor press department was central in defining the parameters of their image and public perception as “clean-cut boys” and this image, revised for a older market, was carried through to those titles outside the pop press. Stuart argued that keeping scandal out of the tabloids was made straightforward by the simple fact that there “wasn’t really an enormous amount of scandal about Boyzone<sup>185</sup>”.

To this pop ‘performer’ paradigm, Stuart contrasted David Holmes as an example of an ‘artist’ whose image she argued she could not manufacture in the way that she did with Boyzone. He presented a different exegetical proposition for her as a PR. “David, when I took over his press, was a faceless techno DJ ... The perception of him was that he was this techno DJ from Belfast. He did have a profile, but mainly in the specialist



press. So when he came out with this album [‘Let’s Get Killed’], for me it was a case of making sure that the right people got to hear it ... So I sent it out to places like *The Face*, *Arena*, *i-D*, the broadsheets. The way the campaign worked was ... it was maybe three singles and the album, so basically we had a chance to build his profile through the singles. And by the time the singles has come out people know about him and knew that his music had changed”.

Implicit in the arguments here is the fact that artists are less ego-centric and less demanding in the early stages and, as such, more willing to listen to the advice of their press officer about how they should present themselves and what they can expect a campaign to deliver. Artists, at this stage, are more malleable in a press officer’s search for a viable and sustainable core exegetical framework while the induction of acts into certain titles’ aesthetics is key in their overall process of cultural evolution and maturation. The press, particularly the inkies and the teen titles, rely heavily on new acts and tend to think long-term with the hope that they will have access to these acts when they become established. The long-term press campaign – stretching over a number of releases and tours – is how press officers should be managing their resources according to Anton Brookes. His argument was that it is a (sometimes long drawn-out) cumulative process and not a brief flurry of activity around a particular record release or tour and, as he noted, “a good campaign is gearing it up for the next one, the next album”. This process of ‘gearing up’ for the next campaign is tied to a shifting in the frameworks within which journalists and magazines considered the band. Ideally there should be a natural progression from the discourses of certain titles’ homologies with their readers into other titles’ homologies with their readers.

## **IX Campaign Expectations: Good & Bad Campaigns**

A common theme in interviews with press officers was that an act’s success was never exclusively determined by their press coverage and print media campaigns made up just one part of a much wider promotional strategy which took in TV, radio, advertising,

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<sup>185</sup> Eventually one member of the band, Stephen Gatley, used *The Sun* to publicly announce his homosexuality in 1999

touring and fan clubs. None of these elements, they argued could, on their own, break an act but they all existed symbiotically, with the press campaign being one of the earliest indicators of how the other promotional strategies should be organised. Within this, the presence of an active and, indeed, respected press officer is never any guarantee of either positive or prominent press. As noted in the preceding chapter, the newsrooms of music magazines are complex social, professional and organisational structures, shaped by a myriad of discourses and ideologies and it is extremely difficult for an external party, such a press officer, to be able to cut through these convoluted internal dynamics and achieve their goals. Moylett argued that she could never guarantee positive press for any of her acts, “but I can tell them why they’re not getting it”. Brookes concurred with this but put it more bluntly:

Sometimes people just don’t like to hear the truth. Sometimes you’ve just got to tell people: “It’s easy – everyone thinks your band sucks!” [laughs]. You just sugar-coat it a bit but you try and be as honest ... as you can because there’s no point going “Yeah, yeah, it’s going well. Everything’s going well”. And then when the record comes out, everyone thinks you’re going to get this amount of press and you’ve actually got that amount of press. I never promise things when I go to meetings. Whenever I’m trying to get a band I don’t walk in and go “Oh, I can get you this, this and this” ... there’s no guarantee I can. All I can say is “I can try and get you this, this and this and we’ll try and do this”.

Of central importance here is a complex dynamic of both cultural/exegetical expectations and perceived economic expectations. Brookes argued that a strong campaign was one that secured a cross section of press coverage. This is not achievable exclusively within the pages of the mainstream titles, as subcultural titles (such as skateboard magazines or fanzines) are of considerable importance to a band’s grassroots following, meaning the act can tap into a variety of aesthetics that, while distinct and idiosyncratic, are not completely antithetical. The idea that success is necessarily measured out in national press front covers is something of a misnomer and depends on the demographic the artist is trying to reach through the print media. Both Julian Carrera (PR at Hall or Nothing) and Kate Stuart agreed that press officers are relatively powerless when they have to work a weak act or album with Carrera going as far as to say: “If you’re a good press

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(MacArthur, 1999). After this point the gay press became central to the band’s press strategy.



officer you don't have bad campaigns. You don't conduct bad campaigns. You are stymied by naff quality in areas of what you do, not in how you do it". Stuart built on this notion that an act's cultural worth as perceived by the press is key to the success of a campaign. She argued that if a press officer is working with high-quality material then press campaigns become self-fulfilling and any failure to substantially capitalise upon this is down to the press officer. She stated: "I'd say a bad campaign would be a good artist, producing amazing music, getting fantastic album reviews, getting album of the month, single of the month and there's no other activity going on around it. There's no features. That would say to me that the press officer is being lazy". However, the perceived aesthetic quality of an act is never a guarantee of press coverage. Campaigns will also depend on the power of the PR to ensure, through their socio-professional relationships with the press, that the act is heard. In addition to this, success also hinges on the PR's ability to locate acts within particular exegetical frameworks aimed at particular taste publics as well as how these translations operate cumulatively across a range of titles and their homologies with their readerships.

## **X Time-Frames & Budgets**

While Brookes talked of press campaigns as being technically perpetual (arguing that the building of a band's profile is a cumulative process and not confined to isolated bursts of press around particular product), Best stated that an ideal period of intense activity is five months. The first three months would be geared around the lead up to the release of an album (incorporating the singles releases and tours) and the next two months would be geared around consolidating on the build up. Running costs for campaigns are never fixed and for new bands are relatively inexpensive, generally covering mail outs and gig tickets. Best noted that for Sigur Rós' first wave of press for their debut single Best Est. was paid £500. However, because there was already an industry buzz about the act (due to the intensity of the professional and cultural links between the key cultural intermediaries), this translated into a substantial amount of press. In three months he had secured fifteen small and medium sized features on the band across titles as diverse as

*Select, Dazed & Confused, The Face, i-D, NME, MM, The Guardian, Time Out* and 7. PRs work within a finite budget and this is determined by the present or predicted commercial size of the act. Sharp noted how cost cutting is increasingly in operation in press departments. Review CDs, for example, were being sent out by second-class post (although done well in advance to ensure that their arrival fitted around the lead and review times of the different titles). Equally priority was being given to certain publications over others because it was felt that the costs of the mail out would be met by the potential sales the reviews would generate. This relates to wider cultural issues of a title's homology with its readers and the commercial leverage they are seen as representing. Indeed press officers need to target, in terms of the act's cultural capital, particular niche taste publics and opinion-leaders and, in terms of their economic capital, a large and broad range of record buyers.

With the proliferation (and comparatively low start-up costs) of music websites, press officers' mailing lists have grown exponentially and present the PR with a new set of dilemmas about overheads versus potential impact on sales. Sharp estimated that, excluding websites, he had somewhere in the region of 1,800 names on his press database (covering the national, the regional and the student press). He stated that budgetary restrictions meant that he could not economically justify sending review copies and gig tickets to everyone who contacted him (particularly because websites hits were not as tightly monitored as magazine circulation figures). He said: "Sending out a CD probably costs us [the Beggars group] four or five quid. Can we say that sending five quid to some kid who's setting up an e-zine on the Internet so that he can write something that says 'I think this record is alright' or whatever in the hope that someone will click by and buy it [is justified]? What are the chances of actually recouping that expenditure by someone buying it as a direct result of that site? The chances have got to be bewilderingly small". He did admit, however, that as the Internet proliferated, press departments would eventually have to employ web specialists (just as they employ regional and student PRs) to monitor and liaise with music website editors. In interviews I conducted with press officers there was a general sense of professional scepticism towards music websites. This carried through into a general organisational suspicion of sites not directly affiliated to either established publications (such as *nme.com* or *Music Week's dotmusic.com*) or



established by respected and known former print media editors (such as *music365.com* and *worldpop.com*). At the time the research for this Ph.D. was conducted, the Internet was still viewed as a 'novelty' by press officers and traditional print music journalists. However, it is apparent that music websites offer press officers new and alternative access points to particular taste publics and new types of media/readership homologies as well as new cultural and media agendas to negotiate. As a result, on-line activities will increasingly play a central role in press campaigns and how press officers occupationally define their goals and activities.

Press budgets are taken out of an artist's overall marketing budget and increasingly PRs are asked to justify their expenditure. Battye stated that the cost of the Puff Daddy cover on *The Face* was particularly high as they had to fly a writer to the States and then send a photographer and stylists to Paris for the photoshoot but was justified because the whole campaign pivoted entirely on this piece. Cover photoshoots for major acts, because each magazine insists on unique prints, eat substantially into press budgets with Kate Stuart estimating that a Boyzone photoshoot could easily run up to £20,000 per day (covering the photographer, the studio, the stylists and make up artists as well as clothes and props). Similarly, a Travis photoshoot in Germany (while the band were touring) for the cover of *Q* was eventually estimated at £10,000. This covered the journalist and press officer's travel expenses (as Bad Moon insisted that a PR was present at all interviews) but the major drain on resources was for the photographs. *Q* insisted that the shoot was done by Rankin<sup>186</sup> who, in turn, insisted on using his own stylist, Mark Anthony, who charged £80 for preparation and £80 a day as well as a 20% agency commission. After protracted daylong negotiations between Bad Moon, the *Q* art and editorial departments and Independiente (the band's label) it was agreed that *Q* would meet half the costs for the stylist (whose fee Bad Moon and Independiente were unhappy about paying). This, however, is at the extreme end of a press campaign and it should not be assumed that all acts are pitched so exclusively towards mainstream crossover. Indeed many acts are not regarded by either their record label or their press officers as representing a mainstream proposition. Their campaigns will therefore be structured differently with their operational budgets being determined by their perceived market

potential. The high costs tied up in both the Puff Daddy and Travis campaigns were justified because both were explicitly marketed as mainstream acts.

## XI Portfolios of Acts & Company Profiles

For independent press companies, just as for the major magazine publishing houses, the establishment of a strong, broad and identifiable portfolio is of great importance. Independent PRs talked of only being as good as the acts they worked and that the quality of the artists they dealt with determined how they were perceived and treated by the press, with key acts positioned as metonymic of the company's aesthetic. As noted above, there are commercial and cultural problems in being associated purely with a single genre or wave of music and generic eclecticism was the underlying principle informing most independent companies. John Best<sup>187</sup> suggested that during the high point of Britpop in 1995 (when he was working acts synonymous with this scene such as Suede, Pulp, Elastica and Menswear) he consciously diversified into dance music to extend the company's profile and operational base. He implied at the time that he was losing interest with guitar-based indie music and alluded to an occupational awareness of the temporary appeal of particular artists and scenes. It can be seen from this that independent PRs do not exclusively work with acts they are fans of and there is a clear economic priority (and set of aesthetic and cultural concessions) towards the company's interests rather than towards individual tastes. All PRs are inscribed within the *modus operandi* of their company and personal taste comes secondary to the company profile and portfolio and there can be a schism between cultural interests and occupational/commercial interests.

Eclecticism in-house comes at a price as Chris Sharp noted. The Beggars group is a federation of record labels (each with their own identity and aesthetic) guided by the taste of around nine label heads and senior executives, with an emphasis on alternative and underground acts (although they have signed breakthrough acts such as Prodigy, Basement Jaxx and The Avalanches). Sharp insisted that the signing policy of these

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<sup>186</sup> Q, in order to create a stronger branded identity and visual continuity over issues, made Rankin their cover feature photographer in 1999.

<sup>187</sup> During Britpop, Best, along with Phil Savidge, ran Savage & Best, but the partners split in 1999.



labels and sub-labels meant that he was “working with bands that were massively uncommercial. And if you’re massively uncommercial you’re likely to be massively unpress-worthy as well, because those two things ... go hand-in-hand”. The balance between the breakthrough and the alternative at Beggars was echoed somewhat in Duff Battye’s arguments for the scale and scope of acts that represented an ‘ideal’ portfolio to work on. He argued that a press department ideally should be working five major acts and five breaking acts, straddling the divide between the populist and the emergent so that PRs do not tie up their interests in a few major acts and become occupationally and culturally complacent. This portfolio fluidity directly echoes the continual revision by magazines of the homology between them and their readers as they need new acts (such as Suede in the case noted earlier) to come through and replace acts at their top end when their market and press appeal wanes. Battye argued that because the press required both established acts (to boost cover-sales) and new acts (to hold their readers’ interests and to show a commitment to new music) this double-dependency should directly inform the make up of a PR company’s roster.

As the number of independent PR companies has proliferated and inter-company competition has increased, the established PR organisations have begun to diversify into other cultural arenas. They argued that it is as commercially dangerous for PR companies to be tied to a single cultural sector (in this case popular music) as it is for companies to be tied to a musical genre or wave. For example, Julian Carrera (at Hall or Nothing) organised the Hillsborough Justice Concert that had a wider political agenda. Kate Stuart did press for the Morgan Spice drinks company while John Best represented the Clerkenwell Literary Festival, the Headstart club at Turnmills in London, the writer and author Miranda Sawyer<sup>188</sup>, the TV presenter Sarah Cawood and the fashion company Mickey Brazil. This diversification of interests must be managed carefully and can be seen in similar terms (as discussed in the previous chapter) to the possibilities and pitfalls offered to magazines through brand extensions. The movement by particular independent press companies into wider lifestyle PR cannot be seen purely as economic because it

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<sup>188</sup> To reinforce Bourdieu’s arguments (1986: 239-240; 1993: 94-96) about the closed and self-referential world of the metropolitan cultural intermediaries, it is interesting and illuminating to note that Best was in a long-term relationship with Sawyer. While not typical as a whole, the professional, occupational, social and cultural crossovers within this set of relationships are, however, of great importance for an understanding of the complex cultural flows both into and within the media industries.

also can be taken to represent (ideologically and culturally) a loss of faith in music PR and the music press tied symbiotically to a mono-thematic concern.

Such cultural diversification by certain independent PR companies is a comparatively recent phenomenon but it may set a precedent for the sector as a whole. Other independent PRs, when interviewed about this, were somewhat dismissive of the apparent trend but also admitted that there were many commercial uncertainties in dealing with acts that could split up, leave the company or lose their record deal. The instability of the careers of musicians (and the cultural industries as a whole) stands in stark contrast with the relative stability of more established companies. However, Tunstall (1971: 176) argued that such diversification in activities brought with it a number of occupational problems. He stated that journalists least favoured dealing with PRs who were “responsible for a bizarrely assorted collection of products and services from several different companies” with the implication being that the press only want to deal with ‘expert’ and ‘dedicated’ PRs who are mono-thematic in their promotional activities. The interests of PRs and journalists, ultimately, must be complementary and not contradictory. A commonly-voiced (if somewhat misconceived) argument made by music journalists (and some independent PRs) was that major label PRs were not fans of the music they worked and that music PRs, like music journalists, should be ‘music obsessives’ first and ‘music professionals’ second. Cultural diversification outside of music then was observed in certain quarters of the press as a dampening of PR enthusiasm for music in general and, more specifically, for the music they represent. This could create a degree of cultural and professional hostility between the journalist (the ‘obsessive’) and the PR (the ‘careerist’).

## **XII Over-Hyping Acts**

While all PRs agreed that their job was to ‘maximise publicity’ for their artists, they talked of the danger of over-exposure and over-hyping acts, although the point at which over-exposure occurred was difficult to actually quantify. Much like journalists talked of having a ‘nose for news’ (Tunstall, 1971) without actually being able to articulate this



beyond the most abstract of terms so the PR talked of having a ‘nose for hype’. McKay argued that at RMP “our general ethos is that less is more”, going on to argue that a media blitz becomes counter-productive as “you stop actually reading what people are saying if you see their face too much. So that’s a very strong aspect to putting a campaign together – to manage to get the maximum spread without actually overstepping the balance”. Following on from this, Best stated that he consciously kept Jarvis Cocker (singer with Pulp) out of the press in the wake of the group’s breakthrough with the ‘Different Class’ album in 1995. He felt that Cocker was becoming too ubiquitous and his media personality was detracting from (and even damaging) his and the band’s artistic profile. Stuart argued that it is not the quantity of magazine covers that is determinant, but rather the *quality* of magazine covers stating that if “they’re rubbish magazines, it’s not going to look good”. The intense competition between magazines, she felt, counteracted against over-exposure as they all wanted exclusives. A high-profile campaign should, she believed, stretch across a variety of titles that are not in direct competition (thereby extending the campaign’s demographic reach) illustrating this by saying: “[A] good campaign ... would be an *NME* cover, a cover on *The Face*, a cover on *Mixmag*. That would be a *fantastic* campaign because you’ve got three different areas but you’re not conflicting with any of those areas”. The artists would be located within a particular core exegetical framework and this would be open to refinement by the magazines so that the act would effectively exist simultaneously across a number of distinct magazine/readership homologies without alienating any of them.

Best, however, counter to what he suggested in relation to the public profile of Cocker, argued that Suede’s 1992-1993 press campaign achieved a balance because, he believed, they had both the material and desire for success. The Suede campaign was based on intense media coverage/hype within discourses of ‘Britishness’ (as an antidote to the dominance in the inkies of US grunge acts), most notably through *MM*’s ‘Best New Band in Britain’ cover feature before they released their debut single. The mechanics of the Suede campaign, interestingly, had been tested with another of Savage & Best’s acts the previous year. Best noted how Curve had a number of covers on the weeklies very early in their career but within eighteen months they were “kind of dead and wrung out”. The Suede campaign expanded on a revision of the blueprint for the Curve campaign

with the major strategic problems ironed out. In 1992 the band appeared on 19 UK music magazine front covers (including 6 for *MM*, 4 for *NME* and 1 for *Q*<sup>189</sup>) while Savage & Best won the *Music Week* award for the press campaign of the year (Leith, 1993).

However, the *MM* cover was done against the wishes of Savage & Best who considered it to have come too early in the campaign structure. For a time (because of *MM*'s immense rivalry at that point with *NME*) it looked as if it may have ruined the campaign as *NME* were hesitant to cover what they saw as a 'MM band'. This situation was exacerbated further by the 'dogshit/diamonds' incident (as discussed in Chapter 3) and Savage & Best had to call the *NME* editor, Danny Kelly, and apologise for, and disassociate themselves from, Steve Sutherland's attack on the *NME* aesthetic. The exegetical framework Savage & Best had proposed for the band was not intended to be defined through the aesthetic of a single magazine. The market politics tied up in *MM*'s decision to put them on the cover impacted directly on how the rest of the campaign was executed. Savage & Best had to move into damage limitation to ensure that one title's over-enthusiasm and attempted monopolisation of the band would not exclude them from the aesthetics of rival titles. Ultimately, what this reveals is that press officers have, at best, conditional control over not only when their acts are written about but also the exegetical frameworks within which the press position and consider them.

### **XIII Problems With Acts, Problems With Record Companies & the Processes of Re-Branding**

Press campaigns are structured within a number of professional concerns, particularly around the quantity, quality and prominence of coverage the acts receive in the press and the exegetical frameworks within which they are considered and mediated. The exchange between the press officer and the press, as noted above, is a complex and occasionally mercurial one. However, campaigns are not simply conducted between these two parties. Rather they are conducted within a wider set of professional, cultural and economic needs

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<sup>189</sup> Unusually for the more conservative *Q*, the band appeared on the cover several months before the release of their debut album. It is worth noting, however, that Sony had already bought 49% of Nude (the band's label) and had



expressed by the press officer, the press, the artists and their record companies. There is a need for the press officer to reconcile these diverse (and at times contradictory) interests and to have all parties moving in the same direction otherwise the structuring of the campaign will be jeopardised. A number of press officers noted that often campaigns are at risk not because of professional or cultural incompatibility between themselves and the press, but rather because of recalcitrance or awkwardness on the part of the artists. Artists may have problems in interview situations that are beyond the control of the press officer and this will have to be factored into the overall campaign structure to ensure that the interview, as the final stage in a long promotional process, is not at risk.

Certain acts are not prepared to speak to the press or to present themselves in a press-friendly fashion and John Best isolated Jason Pierce from Spiritualised as a case in point. The band had, because Pierce had been a member of the well-liked Spacemen 3, a great deal of positive press interest from the start of their career. Pierce, however, was reluctant to provide newsworthy soundbites and so the interest dried up and he was presented in the press as moody and awkward. Best stated that this negation of personality is what most dance music acts faced, meaning press officers could no longer rely on their acts to bring a carefully planned press campaign to fruition at the interview stage. Their work in positioning acts within particular exegetical frameworks and building up socio-professional relationships with section editors and writers could potentially all be undone as a result of one bad interview. Chris Sharp stated that Cornershop were similarly taciturn. The band members closed up when interviews began and when Sharp was doing their press he “did an awful lot of chivvying them up and trying to generate a little bit of energy so that they were in the right frame of mind” before meeting a journalist, making them confident in the hope that they would be better interviewees. Cornershop would not refuse to do interviews, but Sharp’s concern was their reserved nature would come across as arrogance in the feature as the flow of conversation was stunted, hesitant, reserved and unnatural. This meant potentially that the press could locate them within a contradictory exegetical framework to the one Sharp had intended and worked towards.

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signed the band outside the UK. That month’s *Q* was a promoted issue and featured a Sony minidisc (then a relatively new format) on the cover.

The cultural and professional dynamics of the interview situation were problematic for the artists of a number of press officers particularly for those artists whose schedules meant that all their press duties would have to be compressed into one or two days of back-to-back interviews. Artists, press officers noted, would become tired and impatient with journalists if they had to answer similar sets of questions all day and this could result in either a hostile or a sarcastic attitude towards the press. If the artist's answers were written up in a negative manner, this could have serious repercussions for their public image and future dealings with the media. The location of interviews is also an important factor for press officers to consider. Because the journalistic world hinged so heavily around bars and clubs, journalists preferred to do interviews in pubs for a number of reasons. Firstly, they argued that it created a relaxed atmosphere where conversations could flow naturally and secondly, they could get the press officer to pick up the bill. Press officers, however, had to be careful with certain artists and where the interview was conducted, to avoid alcohol if possible. Louise Butterly stated that they have a policy at RMP to advise certain artists not to drink in interviews in case they said something they regretted, and she singled out the singer-songwriter Paddy Casey as a prime example as he was "a ferocious drinker".

In order to avoid a number of the above-mentioned problems, Sandra McKay stated that Blur insisted on group members being interviewed separately. This was as a result of a number of difficult interviews that the band felt had been unprofessional and damaged their public profile. They stated that because conversations do not flow properly in a group interview situation certain voices tend to dominate over others and could project a sense of internal schisms or inter-band bickering. Keith Flint (from the Prodigy) was, however, much more difficult as he would refuse outright to do interviews or photoshoots if he did not want to. Sharp stated: "Even getting him to turn up to have his photograph taken is a fucking nightmare. That's why you still see the same old pictures. There are pictures of Keith that were taken five years ago that still circulate because he won't stand in front of the camera. He just won't do it. He fucking hates it". This attitude, however, became central in determining the exegetical parameters within which Flint was presented to the press (inscribed within discourses of a 'punk attitude' and a refusal to



‘play the game’) meaning that ultimately professional liabilities could be turned into marketing angles.

While certain acts project a consistent, yet evolving, image to the press this is done within a long-term view of sustaining press interest. Their press officer will be pivotal in the earliest stages of positioning the act within a particular core exegetical framework and maintaining and refining this as their professional relationship develops. There are, however, examples where press officers have to work on acts and reposition them within entirely new exegetical frameworks in order to overturn negative attitudes towards them within both the press and among consumers. Artists can become locked within an anachronistic exegetical framework and the duty of the press officer is to re-brand them within a whole new set of interpretative frameworks to target a once-hostile press or previously elusive consumer demographic. When I interviewed John Best, he had recently taken on the press for Jean-Michel Jarre and his campaign was to re-brand him and place him as central as Kraftwerk in his influence on contemporary dance and electronic music. Best was aware that Jarre was tainted by a certain cultural stigma and there was a conscious decision within his label to take his press out-of-house. The explicit move to an established independent press company can be understood in terms of an overt attempt to, though a process of cultural association with the other acts on Best’s roster and his socio-professional reputation in the press, exegetically locate Jarre within new cultural, aesthetic and historical frameworks.

The campaign was designed around historical revisionism and recontextualisation and involved numerous cultural and exegetical complexities in the negation of long-held journalistic prejudices. This reveals a professional awareness on Best’s part that music is not judged in purely musical terms by the press, but rather through much wider socio-cultural discourses and received opinion. Because of this, Best was given a great deal of autonomy and increased creative input into how the macro re-marketing campaign for Jarre would build on the intended aesthetic re-evaluation within the press. In terms of strategy, Best proposed that the press campaign avoid using Jarre’s name in the earliest stages as it would be seen as a barrier to entry. He planned to send out anonymous white labels to the press with remixes of his tracks and then, if the press expressed interest, reveal who the artist was. The re-branding campaign was designed to work quite quickly

and because of this was seen as high-risk as the historical precedents in the re-branding of artists in the media were more subtle and evolutionary. For example, Pettigrew (1989) noted how Howard Bloom took three years to turn around ZZ Top's press in the US because of the negative opinion about the band held by the major rock titles. Bloom's campaign of re-branding involved consultation with management and journalists to find out what problems the band had run into in the press and what it was, exactly, that the media's antagonism was based on. Ultimately, the pitch hinged on a re-focussing on (and explaining of) their deep-Southern musical heritage, which had been previously ignored. Bloom noted how press officers could not turn around a bad press image overnight. At the core of the campaign is an attempt to overturn long-held biases and negativity in the press and shift the artists from an exegetical framework hampered by a lack of credibility into a new antithetical interpretative framework inscribed entirely within discourses of credibility.

Just as Best had used Curve's press campaign as a testing-ground for the Suede press campaign, so he based the re-branding of Jarre on his exegetical revisions of both Pulp and Texas which were seen as central to their mainstream crossover success. With both these acts, their re-branding involved a dismantling of the 'gang'/'group' motifs they had previously drawn on and re-defining them by positioning the lead singer as metonymic of the whole group<sup>190</sup>. Best argued that Pulp, in the early-1990s, had been dismissed by the press as a kitsch curio and their insistence on being photographed together was, in Best's eyes, a barrier to the formation of a solid and identifiable branded identity with a single personality as the focal point. By placing the photographic and interview emphasis on Jarvis Cocker, the band were exegetically redefined through his public persona. Best said of the re-branding programme: "It was difficult but gradually we put the focus on Jarvis, got him to do more press on his own. It's not rocket science. Put the emphasis on the singer. But sometimes it's quite hard to do that with a band. Because if a band is a gang, they always want to be on the cover in total". Such re-branding works as a form of visual and aesthetic shorthand and creates a clear public and press profile for the act and the singer becomes both the public face and the public voice of the band.

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<sup>190</sup> Certain acts, such as Travis, remain highly resistant to this and insist on band shoots rather than lead singer shoots.



This re-branding of Pulp provided the template for the re-positioning of Texas. Best argued that bands eventually reach a point of cultural stasis and are no longer capable of transcending their existing profile. With Texas, the lead singer (Sharleen Spiteri) was in a relationship with Ashley Heath (the executive editor of *Arena*, *The Face* and *Arena Homme Plus*) and he was able to suggest and liaise with photographers and stylists to re-package her as the public face of the band. The band had initially been resistant to this, but Best argued that the public thought of her as the 'face' of the band and so it was only natural for the stylists and press department to emphasise and capitalise upon this. The band were sold explicitly to a style magazine reading demographic rather than to the traditional rock press, with the notable exception of *Q*. Within the context of declining sales in the music magazine market and the diversification of independent press officers into other cultural areas the Texas case reveals important cultural and professional dynamics within press departments. Most notably there is a detectable socio-professional loss of faith with the music press and rise in the belief that music campaigns should be no longer necessarily confined to, or defined through, coverage in music titles.

While the re-branding of Pulp and Texas were economic successes, the repositioning of Jarre was less efficacious and Best suggested that, even before the campaign had begun, it ran a high risk of failure because of record company incompetence. The campaign and exegetical transition of Jarre hinged on the anonymous white label remixes which were intended to go to the press several weeks before making the campaign public and arranging interviews. However, the record company only sent Best the remixes the day before Jarre was due to arrive in the UK for press duties. He did not have time to get them out to the press thereby ruining the whole operational agenda of the campaign. Best talked of his frustrations with the record company arguing that it was impossible to re-brand an artist musically if there was no music to send out. His original plan was to mail out the white labels, call the journalists and reviews editors a week later, get their feedback and then reveal who the artist was. But because of the label's delays in organising the pressing of the tracks he had to call up the journalists and ask them if they wanted to interview Jarre knowing that their old prejudices would taint the manner in which Jarre would be approached and reviewed (if at all).

Sharp faced similar problems of access to material with the campaign for Prodigy's 'The Fat of the Land' album in 1997, although there was no process of re-branding and retranslating the act involved in the campaign. The band had released 'Firestarter' as a stopgap single eighteen months before the album came out and its success generated immense press interest and requests for interviews and album release dates. He stated that the album had still to be written when 'Firestarter' went to number one and from that point he had to field calls from the press. The album did not have a confirmed release date until five weeks before it came out because Liam Howlett, the group's chief songwriter and producer, was late delivering the final mix to XL. Sharp's campaign had to focus on the weeklies and the dailies as he had missed the cut off point for features and reviews leads for the monthlies. He stated: "The issue was complicated even more by the fact that the band were about to go off to America to tour. So we had to do all the features in America. I remember I had this crazy three-week period where I was literally shuttling backwards and forwards to different cities in America, dragging people out there. Nobody had the album. Meeting people at airports with CD-Rs, saying 'Right, you can listen to it on the plane'. It was complete lunacy". Press campaigns have to work within strict timeframes and budgets as well as around the production cycles and socio-professional dynamics of two distinct organisational structures - record companies and music magazines. It is by no means uncommon for a single complication at the level of either the record company or the magazine newsroom to have a direct structural influence by putting the timing and the dynamic of the rest of the campaign at risk.

#### **XIV Media Training for Acts**

Because of these structural, organisational, professional, cultural and exegetical problems with artists, record companies and the press, press officers take steps to make interviews as straightforward, effective and efficient as possible. Negus (1992: 117) suggest that press officers give artists a degree of media training, telling them what type of questions to expect, how to prepare quotable soundbites and even running mock interviews to acclimatise them. However, press officers denied that there was such explicit and direct



training, although Kate Stuart noted that the biggest acts could demand a list of questions in advance so that they can prepare answers. They can also request copy approval on features, although acts with the power to dictate to the press so directly are rare. One high profile case occurred when Hole's management company, Q Prime, issued a five-page legal document to the press in 1998. The conditions of the document stated that journalists could not ask Love about any "sensationalized rumours and half-truths regarding Courtney Love and Hole" (Q Prime, 1998: 1). Writers were expected to sign the document in to order gain access to the band. However, a number of editors I spoke to about this stated that they refused to sign the document as it would set an industry precedent for how major stars would deal with and dictate to the press.

A number of press officers argued that, generally, artists have grown up reading the music press and are quite media-literate as a result, aware of how the press works. McKay stated that at RMP they would know in advance which writer was assigned to do the interview. RMP would then give the artist (if they were unfamiliar with the writer or the magazine) an example of their features and reviews so that they will be familiar with their interviewing approach and technique. McKay said "it's not to rehearse them, but just because it's useful to have an idea of whether someone's going to go for a very personal angle, or whether they're very technically involved in music. It just helps to prepare yourself a little bit that way". Here the press officer is key in creating a sense of cultural proximity and familiarity between their artists and journalists. They can help to train acts to define the exegetical discourses within which they should present themselves to the press and how they can adapt this to find compatibility with a variety of different writers/titles. While there is a core exegetical image to be projected, it must be fluid enough to appeal to different writers and different titles. The press officer's knowledge of the press should ideally help to refine the interpretative frameworks within which artists both are presented and present themselves at different times.

The press officers I interviewed made a qualitative distinction between *media-training* and *media-guidance*, seeing their role as more in keeping with the latter and arguing that they could not tell artists what to say. Tunstall (1971: 185-186) noted that it is common practice for hard news PRs to sit in on interviews to both 'protect' their clients from uncomfortable lines of questioning and to 'assist' the journalist to ask more

‘fruitful’ questions (with a subtext of explicit media-management). However, it is rare for music press officers to sit in on interviews and when they do they rarely interrupt. Several journalists I interviewed confirmed that this was the case. Sharp stated that he sat in once on a Prodigy interview with a journalist from *Select* because the band were on tour and there was physically nowhere else for him to sit or go. He read a paper while the interview was conducted, making no attempt to speak for Liam Howlett. However, after the interview he was chastised by the writer who was concerned that Sharp might manipulate the interview situation and object to certain lines of questioning. Duff Battye argued that, because the majority of the acts he worked with were North American, it was essential for him to give guidelines to the artists as they would be unfamiliar with the aesthetics and target markets of the British press. He stated the reasons behind this were more cultural than ideological:

I can't tell them what to say. I can't force them to do something. Obviously we constantly give guidelines to the artists. If, for example, they're talking to the teen-press ... we would guide them as to what they should say and what they shouldn't. "Don't mention drugs. Mention that you're mates with Britney [Spears]". Or if they're talking to *The Sun* "Don't mention the kinky sex you're into. Mention that you love Britain and it's great". That kind of thing ... But we can kind of ease the artist in by way of the image ... [W]e can get them to portray a profile that suits the market.

## **XV As a Buffer Zone Between Acts & the Public**

PRs have to act as a double buffer zone. Firstly, they must patrol the boundaries between the artist and the print media by regulating contact as much as they can. Secondly they must filter public access to their acts. An interesting, if somewhat atypical, event unfolded during participant observation in the Bad Moon offices in London which illustrates an extreme example of this. Anton Brookes was out of the office and a ‘Mrs. Taylor’ repeatedly rang the office asking to speak to him claiming that he had arranged for her son to meet Dave Grohl (whose band, Foo Fighters, were playing Brixton Academy in London that evening) as a birthday present. Brookes had arranged for another fan to have his guitar signed by the singer at an earlier gig in Manchester but it



was made clear in the office that this was not something that they did (or, indeed, wanted to do) very often. ‘Mrs. Taylor’ called back several times during the course of the day, at first asking for Brookes and then asking for the band’s tour manager. She was repeatedly informed that both were unavailable. The concern in the office was that this fan ran a website and was known to both the press company and the band’s record company and treated as a nuisance at best and a borderline stalker at worst. Because of the acts Bad Moon represented in the past (most notably Hole and Placebo), they would be contacted by obsessive and occasionally abusive fans who had got their number from the record company. As a result of this history the office policy was not to acquiesce in such requests or demands. While such events are rare, they do reveal that a press officer’s job can be defined along three distinct levels. Firstly, there is the short-term formal-professional, covering their liaisons with section editors and journalists at particular titles regarding confirmed reviews and features as well as their dealings with both the acts and their record companies. Secondly there is the long-term informal-professional, which relates to their wider dealings and relationships with assorted writers, section editors, artists and record company employees they work with where the division between the social and the professional is blurred. Finally, there is the long-term informal, which exists outside of the normal record company/artist/press triangle with requests from fans being one example of this.

## **Conclusion**

As argued at the beginning of this chapter, while the academic work on the professional and organisational activities of PRs is limited, it is important to mark out music PRs as necessarily different from ‘hard news’ PRs in terms of their role definitions and goal orientation. Their work is primarily *promotional* as opposed to being primarily *informational*, although the latter does play an important function in their activities. General theories of the PR profession do, however, offer some important conceptual entry points to a discussion of music PR, most notably in the organisational and occupational distinctions between in-house and independent PRs. In terms of popular

music PRs, it is possible to identify three main types - the in-house at major record companies, the in-house at independent record companies and, finally, the independent/out-of-house.

The basic activities of these three main types of PR are in many ways similar. They must establish, maintain and revise a press profile for their artists (tied mainly to product releases and tours) as well as give them (through a detailed knowledge of journalistic taste cultures and newsroom politics) media guidance when being interviewed. However, there are a number of important differences between the organisational and hierarchical structures these three different types of press departments work within and the cultural capital they are regarded as holding (by themselves, by the artists they work with and by the press). Indeed, artists choose to take their press out-of-house (from independent and major labels) for a number of cultural and professional reasons and this is seen by independent PRs as having an important impact on the formal professional and informal cultural exchanges between themselves and the press. They have argued that particular ideologies and levels of cultural capital are at stake within these exchanges and these distinctions between themselves and in-house PRs (particularly at majors) impact on and shape the professional activities and the socio-occupational discourses that link them to the press in general and certain music titles in particular. While there are numerous cases of independent PRs having strong working relationships with the press and key 'processors'/gates it is impossible to generalise from this to suggest that in-house PRs do not have similarly strong working relationships. Indeed, as the following chapter will illustrate, professional relationships between PRs and the press are shaped within a number of distinct discourses. These include the long-term formal and informal socio-professional links PRs establish and maintain with journalists and editors and how each title's journalistic community views and evaluates particular press departments and their roster of artists. This exchange is also dependent on how the newer acts a PR works with slot into a title's aesthetic and help refine its homology with its readers in addition to the possible sales boost and demographic penetration the PR's major acts can offer a title.

In terms of the key activities and obligations of music PRs, it is necessary for them to balance short-term promotional requirements with the longer-term (quantitative



and qualitative) dynamics of exegesis. In the short-term, PRs have to promote, within a particular budget and timeframe, a particular product and work around the macro marketing activities of record labels and their release dates that are subject to change. They must also work around the idiosyncratic traits of their artists and all these factors can jeopardise a PR's press campaign strategies. In the long-term, PRs play a central role in helping to revise the exegetical frameworks within which artists are located to ensure that they adapt, building and shifting as their career develops in order to hold press interest. At its most extreme this can involve a total negation of previous exegetical discourses by re-translating and re-branding acts within new interpretative frameworks. This is, however, necessarily high-risk as preconceptions and prejudices must first be overturned within the press. Just as artists must evolve and titles revise their homology with their readers, so press departments must revise their rosters, as their power and future survival are determined to an extent by a fluidity here. In building up a roster of acts, it is essential to strike a balance between major acts and potential breakthrough acts to avoid the cultural and professional stasis linked to a never-shifting roster of acts and genres. Major acts can tip the power balance in the favour of the PRs, but their selling power is finite and therefore new artists must be nurtured through their roster hierarchy to eventually replace the major artists when their career goes into decline.

Ultimately, as will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, PRs must reconcile their professional and exegetical obligations to their artists with the professional and market dynamics of a diverse number of titles. Within this, there is an important dynamic of pre-planning to account for shifts in a title's homology with its readers as well as any change in staff or editor which could have complex and far reaching socio-professional implications for each title and the cultural dynamics within which they are produced. Having considered in isolation the music magazine market, the music journalism profession and the music PR profession, the final chapter will attempt to synthesise the key debates that have been raised in these chapters. This will be achieved through a detailed analysis of the journalist/PR nexus and how the different organisational, socio-professional, cultural and market factors shape, condition and complicate this relationship and exchange and how power is negotiated within it.

## **Chapter 6 – The Journalist/PR Nexus**



## **Introduction**

In the preceding two chapters, the roles of music journalists and music PRs and the occupational conditions under which they work were considered in isolation from one another. It was important to firstly treat them as separate areas of analysis and to then discuss how they operate together and to consider how and where the roles are mutually dependent, where and how hierarchies are established (and, indeed, struggled over) and finally how and why they exist symbiotically. This chapter will consider the complexities of the organisational, socio-professional and cultural links between music journalists and music PRs. It will analyse: how they co-exist as ‘cultural intermediaries’; how the boundaries between collaboration and control are defined; how press gatekeeping operates and how press officers attempt to circumvent the normal channels; how journalistic detachment is threatened; how industry control is exerted both overtly and covertly over the press; and finally how the routinised activities of PRs can break down and what the consequences of this (for both the press and PRs) are.

### **I Press Officers & Journalists: Cultural Intermediaries & Relationships of Dependence**

Davis (2000) notes that the convoluted socio-professional relationships between arts critics and PRs is a highly difficult one to chart because both parties believe that it is in their best interests to conceal this from both public and academic scrutiny. As a telling and illustrative example of this the journalist Steven Wells (1998) noted in an article written for *Vox* magazine that many press officers either lived with or were married to journalists. Because of this, a limited pool of resources and contacts existed and their ‘community’ has become highly self-referential. The article revealed how small, interconnected and self-referential these worlds were. However what Wells failed to mention was that he himself had been in a long term relationship with one of the press

officers (Amanda Freeman<sup>191</sup>) he interviewed for the piece, thereby proving Davis' (2000) point.

The issue of how these personal relationships configure professional practice is interesting and does go some way towards explaining how the press and PRs operate cheek by jowl. PRs obviously are granted a line of contact outside of the normal, organisationally-conditioned, channels, but the exchange is not necessarily always one-way nor does it solely benefit the PR. Ruth Drake, from *Sainted Press*, was in a relationship with Frank Tope (the assistant editor at *Muzik*) while representing Basement Jaxx before their breakthrough. In the previous chapter, Chris Sharp argued that the commercial breakthrough of the group was inevitable and the press campaign was incidental to, rather than determinant of, their success and therefore the *Sainted-Muzik* link was one which launched the campaign<sup>192</sup>, but which did not *determine* it wholly. Andy Perry, assistant editor at *Select*, argued that while it was quite common for press officers to be involved in relationships with writers as their socio-professional spheres overlapped so much, he admitted that he, personally, found it claustrophobic and untenable: "I very rapidly discovered that it drove me insane. Not being able to shut the door on it and just talk about other shit. Human shit rather than music shit. I just couldn't manage it ... Some people love it and get really absorbed in it".

As the work of Bourdieu (1986: 239-240; 1993: 94-96) reveals, the professional spheres occupied by these 'cultural intermediaries' are complexly linked in a myriad of ways (beyond the sexual) and made all the more ambiguous as they exist at the point where the professional blurs into the social. For example, Chris Sharp stated that his strong socio-professional relationship with writers such as Taylor Parkes, Sharon O'Connell and Simon Reynolds was made possible because there was congruity between their taste cultures and the acts he was working: "I knew all those people because we shared an interest in bands. We'd go and see bands together". Accurately charting the

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<sup>191</sup> Wells (under the name Seething Wells) was a 'punk poet' in the late-1970s and used to write under the pseudonym of Susan Williams for the *NME* (Steward & Garratt, 1984: 87-88). Interviewees commonly referred to him as 'Swells'. Caroline Sullivan says of his relationship with Freeman: "He [Wells] went out with a friend of mine [Freeman] – a press officer, funnily enough. In fact – you know Swells is like the voice of socialism. He actually went out with U2's press officer for four years, five years. Apparently he was castigating himself the whole time saying 'But I'm going out with U2's press officer!'"

<sup>192</sup> The band appeared on the cover of *Muzik* four months before their debut album was released, hailed as 'The Best New Band in Britain'. The magazine benefited in the long term from this because they had direct access to a commercially successful crossover act that could boost their cover sales.



webs here is nigh on impossible as they are determined as much by the personalities of those involved as they are by the professional channels through which they operate, which in any case shift and adapt over time. Having said this, however, this chapter will present a critical interpretation of a number of these interconnections at a particular point in the British music press's history (namely the late 1990s) in order to understand how the spheres interact (both in terms of acquiescence and in terms of antagonism).

The dominant motif in the academic analysis of this professional nexus (Chapple & Garofalo, 1980; Evans, 1998) has presented the press as passive and compliant, economically “dependent on the industry which they service” (Frith, 1985: 127) and manipulated by officious PRs through their promotional strategies (Gillett, 1972: 63-64; Frith, 1978: 153-154; Frith, 1983: 173-174; Harley & Botsman, 1982: 250; Breen, 1987: 210; Negus, 1992: 124-125; Kane, 1995: 14). However, as has been noted in the earlier chapters, the methodological and conceptual limitations of a number of these studies have been that they have either conducted no primary research with either party in this relationship or they used the music industry PR as their focal point and looked at the relationship solely from this perspective (Negus, 1992). The purpose, then, of this chapter is to consider both sides in this professional exchange as equal and to draw on first-hand research in order to understand the nature and shifting dynamics of their relationships. Hierarchies and dependencies exist on both sides and it is important to consider how they are negotiated and contested by both the press and PRs.

A common critical argument has been that the press is complicit in the promotional drives of the industry PRs because they are all engaged in the same pursuit – that of promoting and selling artists and their products. Indeed, from a purely economic perspective, the music press, despite being organisationally-distinct from record companies, survives only as long as the music industry survives (Stratton, 1982: 269), with the fortunes of the press fluctuating in accordance with those of the industry. Negus (1992: 121) argues that the press relies heavily on the free review CDs and gig tickets that the industry provides, and that as stringently controlled economic enterprises they could not meet these overheads themselves. Jones (1993: 86-87) argues that within this the press's tendency is ideologically and culturally to identify more with the industry than with their readers. Chapple & Garofalo (1980: 168) extend this model of dependency to

explain why the music press relies so heavily on industry ‘favours’ (such as free review albums and tickets). It is because their future survival is symbiotically linked to that of the industry they serve to the extent that they will go out of their way to ensure that it prospers and do all in their power “to keep the promotion system rolling”. Editors and journalists agreed that while it was the case that they were economically dependent on free review material they refused to believe that this relationship compromised their journalistic autonomy and integrity. Hoskyns (1992: 112) argued that “this system does not work to corrupt”, stating that he was sent on press junkets to the US to review both Prince and Talking Heads and the fact that he slated both acts did not result in him being black-listed by their record companies and he could still go to their offices to “scrounge free records and meals” (ibid.).

A common argument voiced by journalists was that free CDs, concert tickets and hotel and transport costs for reviews and features outside London are so ingrained in their working culture that they are expected by journalists and, as such, do not sway their opinions. In fact, a substantial percentage of the free CDs sent to music magazines are unsolicited. Gillett (1972: 63) argues that free records operate as a form of “bait” for the press to tempt them to review albums, but they also operate as “currency” (ibid.) as they can be sold on to second-hand record shops. During participant observation at *Select* it was quite common for John Harris (the editor) and Andy Perry (assistant editor) to be sent promotional copies of CDs they had not requested and had no intention of reviewing. Their instant reaction was to sell them to a second-hand record shop, which was a very common practice for the London-based magazines. Outside of the full-time staff, the large banks of freelance writers were (as was noted in previous chapters) poorly paid, yet did not receive the same amount of free CDs to sell as review and editorial staff did and increasingly PRs have been forced to prune their mail-out lists. Frith (1985: 127) argues that the music press, “[i]n material terms ... is parasitical” on the music industry and this leech-like bond is, according to Chapple & Garofalo (1980: 165-169), at its most pronounced at the level of the under-paid and the freelance, implying that they are so badly paid that they must rely on the industry for free lunches. This assertion is perhaps something of an over-exaggeration as industry functions are by no means as regular as Chapple & Garofalo (ibid.) would suggest. However, it is true to say that a substantial



number of journalists can be found at those record company events, such as album launches, where free drinks are supplied.

It should be noted that senior editorial staff are invited out to lunch less and less as the industry cuts back on their press budgets and freelancers are seldom or never taken to lunch unless they are on a press trip for a feature. The quantity and intensity of social interaction between PRs and writers is certainly important, but it is erroneous to suggest that it is one where the PR constantly foots the bill. Both writers and PRs agreed that expense accounts were visibly being cut in the late-1990s. The nature of their relationship has shifted as a result, with the press having to adapt to become less reliant on PR largesse. Perry stated: “Stuff like lunches – most of the people I know, they don’t have huge budgets to buy you drinks all night. That very rarely happens now. And when it does it’s all the more pleasant because it happens so rarely. I get wined and dined hardly ever. In a way I’m quite pleased not to be as well, as you’d feel a bit of a whore”. Chris Sharp argued that if the culture of the ‘free lunch’ still existed, it was really only at the major label in-house press departments, as their promotional budget was more elastic. Sharp, at the time I interviewed him, took the example of Mark Blake who had that week been promoted to reviews editor at *Q* to replace John Aizlewood to illustrate this point. He suggested that numerous press officers would almost immediately contact Blake. Within this the approach of the in-house PRs at the majors and at the independent labels would be characteristically different and somewhat at odds:

You can’t do anything other than call them up and introduce yourself and have a bit of a chat and then the next time hopefully you ring up and they’ll know who you are and gradually ... If I was working for Warner’s or some enormous major company, I’d be ringing him up. I’d probably send him a bottle of champagne and invite him out to lunch and all that shit. That’s not really my style. I prefer things to happen fairly organically rather than in this big, slightly threatening way. I think if I was a new recruit at somewhere like that, I’d be pretty uneasy about being bombarded by lunch invites all of a sudden - which I’m sure he is being. This is maybe not the time that he needs lunch invitations from me as well.

Linked to the arguments arising out of this promotional culture of the ‘freebie’, Evans (1998), Jones (1993) and Chapple & Garofalo (1980) all locate the debates more explicitly within political economy theory. They raise the point that the music industry is

the key source of advertising revenue and therefore positions the industry as inescapably dominant in power relations. Indeed, as Gillett (1972: 64) notes, “journalists are paid out of money which comes from the advertising by record companies<sup>193</sup>”. This, however, ignores a number of important factors that serve to question this hierarchy. Firstly, as magazines struggle in an unpredictable market, they have increasingly taken on a lifestyle agenda and advertises for music products (albums, singles, tours and so forth) sit alongside adverts for products such as soft drinks, alcohol, clothes, movies and cigarettes. The former editor of the Australian rock title, *Juice*, argued that the economic control the music industry held over the music press was not as pronounced as was commonly believed. He stated that because they did not run “that much advertising from record companies so they don’t really have a hold over us” (quoted in Evans, 1998: 42). The ultimate point is that while the music industry undoubtedly remains a key advertiser, it is not the *sole* advertiser and, as such, a direct hierarchy of dependency, within a political economy framework, becomes much harder to establish.

The relationship of influence inferred by these writers is that the advertising revenue comes from the record labels and this economic fact somehow dictates or sways editorial policy<sup>194</sup>. English (1979: 101), Stratton (1982: 268) and Théberge (1991: 286) argue record companies and instrument manufacturers<sup>195</sup> consider the press to play an important role in directing consumer-purchasing habits. As such, they attempt to exert external economic pressure on editors in exchange for positive reviews by either threatening to withhold advertising revenue or by promising to book a substantial amount of long-term advertising space in “a simple trade-out” (English, 1979: 101). However, the main industry points of contact for the press are PRs, a considerable percentage of whom work as independents rather than in-house. They do not deal with advertising on behalf of the artists or labels they work for. In-house PRs work in conjunction with their label’s marketing, promotions and advertising departments (Negus, 1992: 116), but their actions

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<sup>193</sup> It should be noted, however, that staff and freelancers are also paid from overall revenue that is generated by both advertising and cover sales.

<sup>194</sup> In its earliest years *Rolling Stone* faced a number of financial problems and was kept afloat by the overt help of the major record companies. “WEA loaned the paper \$100,000, CBS helped with distribution and administration, record companies supplied virtually all of *Stone*’s considerable revenue from its beginning. They believed that ‘the paper was good for music’ and agreed with Clive Davis of CBS – if *Stone* ‘blasted us occasionally’ it was simply to ‘protect itself against the charges of ‘selling out’ from its ‘allegedly anti-establishment readership’” (Frith, 1983: 171).

<sup>195</sup> Théberge (1991) wrote about musicians’ magazines rather than consumer magazines and so the key advertisers were equipment and instrument manufacturers rather than record labels.



are not determined by this. The ultimate point, however, to note is that the major magazine publishing companies have dedicated and organisationally distinct advertising departments covering their different portfolios of titles. The head of advertising for the portfolio of titles (rather than the editor him or herself) will deal directly with the advertising departments for the various record companies. They will liaise with the editors in long-term strategy and finance meetings but this advertiser-editor connection is structurally and organisationally mediated through the advertising department and by no means as direct as these writers have implied.

Pettigrew (1989) attempts to move beyond such a rigidly political economy framework by stating that PRs and journalists are united in a common drive to inform and entertain readers and fans, but the fact remains that they both need artists to be commercially successful in order to thrive as businesses. English (1979: 83) suggests that “[m]ost critics don’t believe they are in business to help [individual] artists stay in business”, but they are in the business of keeping the *music industry* in business. Yet this does not lead to an understanding by these authors of the complexities of the relationships and professional exchanges that take place on a daily basis between the press and PR departments. The music press is organisationally distinct from the music industry and to simply state that it is wholly economically dependent (and, through this, to infer that it is little more than the promotional wing of the industry) ignores very complex social, organisational and professional dynamics. The purpose, then, of this chapter is to re-think the dominant arguments about the nature of this relationship and to consider in detail how this exchange actually works.

Much of the critical work in this area has talked of the ‘service role’ of the PR, explaining the dichotomy through gender discourses, where the predominately female PRs ‘serve’ the predominately male journalists (Fudger, 1973: 45-46; Negus, 1992: 126-128; Wells, 1998: 22-23). Vivien Goldman (Bob Marley’s PR at the time of his commercial breakthrough in the UK) explained the ‘service’ nature of this professional relationship through a prostitution simile: “‘It’s like a hooker thing, you have to please and try to elicit the desired response’” (quoted in Steward & Garratt, 1984: 68). Such a model of influence and manipulation, based as it is on elementary notions of gender relations, serves to over-simplify and, ultimately, to detract from the rather more complex

sets of socio-professional relationships at work here. Under close scrutiny, this model of power relations collapses. While the music press remains a male-dominated environment (as noted in the previous chapters), it is not exclusively so and the music PR profession is far from a female-dominated one. While official statistics do not exist, my own research and interviews with both PRs and journalists suggests that the profession has roughly a 50/50 male/female split.

In terms of professional pragmatism, Negus (1992: 125) and Pettigrew (1989: 14-16) both talk of a 'mutual dependency' characterising this occupational nexus. Within this, then, the "press officer and journalist mutually make each other's lives easier" (Negus, 1992: 125) by, respectively, granting access and providing coverage. Davis (2000: 39-40) suggests that the formal institutional and informational links between the press in general and press departments positions the press as editorially passive as they become increasingly reliant on press departments as their sole source of contact and information. The emergence of this "increasingly powerful class of professional communicators" for Davis (*ibid.*) means that the press have surrendered a great deal of their autonomy in exchange for a routinised, stable and *conditional* flow of approved information and access from the industry outwards. In becoming the dominant source of information, the press departments, then, can be seen to have simultaneously legitimated themselves as the 'approved' voice while delegitimising other possible news and information sources, thereby ensuring their organisational and ideological hegemony.

It is important to rethink the models of control and influence that have thus far dominated academic discussion in this field. Tunstall (1971) offers an interesting angle of critique by noting that press departments, like the press, have a particular set of professional obligations they must meet and it is therefore misleading to suggest that they completely dictate the conditions of the relationship and, within this, the press's agenda. PRs, he notes, have an organisational and occupational duty to provide the press with a certain amount of information while the press has a particular obligation to print a certain amount of this information formally issued to them. In this context, then, neither side can fully withdraw "from the information-publicity 'exchange'" (*ibid.*: 186), locked, as they are, into a state of mutual compulsion. It is equally misleading to suggest that this relationship is one free from dissension and that the nature of the exchange is wholly



conditioned by the organisational and bureaucratic links. Journalists are highly suspicious of PRs and PRs equally regard journalists with scepticism, often toppling over into disdain (Davis, 1988) and professional relationships are frequently inscribed within social ones as their occupational spheres overlap so much (Bourdieu, 1986: 239-240; 1993: 94-96).

As Collins (1999) notes, a PR's strength lies in their social skills as so much of their work occurs at an informal level, and the personalities of writers mix well with certain PRs and badly with others. As an illustrative example, one PR described their relationship with *Uncut*'s Paul Lester as extremely strained, and said that this personality clash directly impacted on the amount of coverage their acts received in the magazine. Lester was referred to as:

... the world's biggest pain in the arse to deal with. He's a flippant, arrogant and generally small-minded and unattractive little man, really. While I'm sure you're not interested in that in a scholarly analysis of what people actually think, it does come down to individuals ... He was a hard person to deal with on the *Melody Maker* and now he's a hard person to deal with [at *Uncut*], but even more cynical, I think, than he was before ... If you ring him up you just generally get something between unfeigned lack of interest in anything you might want to say, to outright rudeness.

This was a common criticism among certain PRs who clearly had numerous personal and professional clashes with Lester. It is perhaps interesting to note that the relations between Lester and the press seemed to be inscribed within gender discourses, as male PRs found him difficult, while female press officers argued the opposite. Two female press officers stated that he was difficult to work with while still at *MM* but was "so much more relaxed now he's at *Uncut*" and, "It's true. Paul Lester's a new man!" As Negus (1992: 126-128) has noted, the press is a male-dominated sphere and female press officers are seen as being able, socially and professionally, to ease the communication flows by adopting a 'service' role. As was noted in the above quote, 'it does come down to individuals' and often the personal will impact on and direct the professional on both sides of the PR/press divide. From interviews it became clear that a history of clashes, grudges and damaged pride determined the nature of relationships between particular writers/editors and particular PRs. To illustrate this antagonism further, during participant

observation at *Uncut*, Terry Staunton had to check an album title but did not want to ring the band's press officer to check as "he bugs the fuck out of me" and Paul Lester added, "I don't blame you". However, Julian Carrera (at Hall or Nothing) suggested that professionalism was paramount at all times on both sides of the relationship and personality clashes should not interfere with or shape the outcome of what is a professional exchange.

If you're working on a record and it's good enough to be reviewed everywhere and you're talking features to people ... [who are polite it should be a straightforward exchange] ... If you're talking to some monosyllabic fool, who has got no conversational sense and no manners then you should still be able to get reasonably what you expect to be getting out of him as you would from your best mate. It doesn't make any difference. Those people do it and, yeah, it's a pain dealing with them, but then everybody's different. Some journalists have a feeling that press officers are out there just to make their lives difficult. It's tricky. We're not universally liked by journalists.

What this illustrates is that the close socio-professional spheres that Bourdieu (1986: 239-240; 1993: 94-96) identified between cultural intermediaries are not exclusively defined through consensus and collaboration, but often through distrust, misgivings and friction. In interviews with PRs, they were asked what basic skills new employees needed and social and literary skills were singled out as the most important. The likelihood of personality clashes between writers and PRs cannot be anticipated, but journalists stated that basic literacy among PRs was poor and did impact on the professional respect and authority they were afforded by writers. During access to the *Uncut* offices, Paul Lester read out in scorn and disbelief a press release that had arrived with a review CD. The PR had spelt the name of the act incorrectly and Terry Staunton added that the PR firm in question had a bad professional reputation and that spelling errors were par for the course. Within newsrooms, a particular professional culture is generated and particular professional attitudes can, through a process of osmosis, become hegemonic. It was apparent in newsrooms that a certain consensus of opinion about certain individual PRs and PR firms characterised how they were viewed, approached and evaluated by the staff and freelancers. Certain PRs will be defined, after a professional or personal clash, as



'unprofessional', 'incompetent' or 'difficult' by senior staff and through repetition these beliefs can be absorbed into the professional dynamics and become received opinion.

Caroline Sullivan equally complained that she consistently had to "deal with lots of press officers who aren't very good. Particularly in terms of literacy, you wouldn't believe some of the press releases I get. You just wonder where they learned to write". This, she suggested, meant that certain PRs were professionally devalued in her view and she found it difficult to trust their judgement. Beyond such basic professional competence she stated that certain PRs, like certain journalists, have very poor social skills. She went so far as to suggest that rudeness and an unhelpful nature organisationally inscribed the activities of a whole independent PR firm and they were "known for an absolute lack of warmth. When journalists ring up they make you feel as though you're bothering them somehow". The idea of professional respect and trust is an important one and does shape and direct the nature of the relationships between writers and PRs. Writers will only approach taciturn and churlish PRs when they work with artists the journalists or their editors want to cover and will keep all dealings on a functional and formal level. This results in a restriction of their relationship, marking it as professional rather than socio-cultural so that PRs will find the writers resistant to assisting them with the early stages of a new act's promotional campaign. The subtleties of this type of relationship are complex to chart but it is apparent that journalists will (as Tunstall (1971) has noted) only do the professional minimum when dealing with such PRs. The mutual dependency that exists at particular points between the press and PRs means that grudges cannot stand in the way of the communication exchange. There is a complex tilting power balance and set of dependencies here. While PRs cannot sever completely all ties with certain titles, journalists can be dominant at points by refusing to cover certain PRs' new or small acts. However, they do so at the risk of access being withheld from those major acts whose presence can boost sales.

Linked to this issue of professional antagonism and approachability, Negus (1992: 119-120) and Pettigrew (1989: 14-16) note how PRs require an encyclopaedic knowledge of the press and journalistic taste cultures. This is essential in order to determine the most 'sympathetic' writers to approach with acts and also to avoid, where possible, the 'unsympathetic' writers and section editors. In interviews with journalists, a common

theme that arose was professional disbelief that in the PR community there was a pronounced *lack* of knowledge of writers' tastes and the routinised activities of magazine production. Terry Staunton stated that junior press officers increasingly knew less about the workings of the music press, how lead-times differed for weeklies and for monthlies and that review editors, rather than freelancers, should be sent initial review copies. Caroline Sullivan complained that even long-established PRs had a slender understanding of journalistic taste cultures, stating:

I think the real hallmark of a bad PR is a failure to grasp what that particular writer is into and just trying to flog their thing anyway. I realise they have to, but ... I would imagine it's well known by now that I absolutely hate REM and Elvis Costello and any of those sensitive white boys. And yet you wouldn't believe how many zillions of people ring and say, "Oh, they sound so much like REM." [Sarcastically] "Oh great!"

Journalists equally need to understand the PR community in order to know who to avoid, but at this point the hierarchy of dependence discussed above shifts and places the press at the top. Kate Stuart stated that when she was a junior press officer she held little or no cultural capital among established writers because "they didn't really know me and they had no way to measure my personal taste ... Which is the major difference now because ... I've been doing it for five years. Then you develop more of a level of trust". On the antithetical side of this need to build a relationship of professional respect and trust, antagonistic attitudes at the points of contact between PRs and the press can and do scupper campaigns. While individuals in newsrooms operate within structures of power and routinisation, the personal will serve in various ways to shape and condition the professional. It was not uncommon for PRs to visit the newsrooms of the major magazines they deal with and visits such as these were conducted within a professional framework of helping to improve relations and channels of communication. However, it was quite uncommon for journalists to establish and maintain good contact the other way by visiting press offices<sup>196</sup> meaning that in socio-professional terms the onus lies with

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<sup>196</sup> When *MM* redesigned in 1999, Ian Watson (the features editor) visited a number of the PR offices they dealt with to inform them of and discuss with them the new direction of the paper. He came to the offices of Bad Moon and was non-committal when asked if the paper would decrease its coverage of hip-hop as they had suspected. He was asked repeatedly but would not confirm either way. It was felt in Bad Moon that they could not dictate the extent of genre coverage the magazine should have. They also stated that it would have been unprofessional for them, in dealings with journalists, to as vague and non-committal in their answers as Watson was. The ultimate point of this was, they felt, that they would have to work around the problem as it was beyond their powers to change it.



PRs to actively maintain such semi-formal contact. Writers can be obstinate and rude to PRs if they know the PR is desperate to secure coverage for their acts (Pettigrew, 1989: 14-16), knowing that in this regard they hold the upper hand.

Several PRs talked of having had to deal with rude, and occasionally aggressive, journalists on the phone, but had to accept the abuse calmly knowing that it would be professionally dangerous for them to speak back to writers in such a tone or to treat them with equal disdain. Indeed, the PR needs to initiate and maintain regular contact with a variety of writers and not merely come to them when a story breaks or when it suits them (Black, 1989; Wragg, 1996) because, as Gregory (1996) notes, the maintenance of good and consistent long-term contact allows the communication process to run more smoothly. PRs are aware that conflict over short-term campaign issues can and will sour long-term relations and therefore must moderate their actions and attitudes so that future communication and professional links are not lost or damaged. The dynamics of the long-term socio-professional relationships are clearly of paramount importance for music PRs and the discourses of mutual distrust and mutual dependency characterising the links between themselves and the press must be carefully negotiated within a framework of professionalism.

## **II Close Collaboration or Complete Control?**

While Tunstall (1971) has suggested that the relationship of dependency between the press and PRs can be, under particular conditions, two-way, he remains highly dismissive of the PR profession. He regards it as an occupation based around the projection of facades representing little more than an insidious attempt at news management by outside forces (although the actual success of their 'news management', he admitted, is open to question). The organisational reliance of the press on press departments arose, according to Davis (2000), because of both economic reasons and an occupational shift in control. Journalists have increasingly had to intensify their output while the resources available to them have been depleted. As they have become less proactive, investigative reporting has become a misnomer, resulting in "a massive transfer of news-gathering resources, away

from ‘independent’ journalists and towards partisan resources. This trend has in turn created a rapidly growing employment sector for professional communicators: individuals whose main role is to access and manage news to the benefit of their source organisations” (ibid.: 44-45). The institutional legitimacy of these professional information-providers translates into a form of ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 43-45; Davis, 2000: 50) and there has been a related “increased dependency on ‘information subsidies’ ... supplied by sources” (Davis, 2000: 44), having important organisational, democratic and economic implications.

The idea of the ‘information subsidy’ has been discussed in depth by a number of theorists, mainly in relation to hard news provision and management, but it serves to raise an important set of debates that impact equally on the music press. Gandy (1982) (quoted in Golding & Murdock, 1997: 23) defines the ‘information subsidy’ as “an attempt to produce influence over the actions of others by controlling their access to and use of information relevant to those actions” which can have two major outcomes. Firstly, in the democratically healthy sharing of information and secondly in the democratically detrimental suppression of information for political and economic reasons. Blumler & Gurevitch (1997: 127) have termed ours a “communications-dependent society”. They lamented that Habermas’ (1989: 1-5) notion of the ‘public sphere’ has been debased to that of a ‘promotional sphere’ as the “news management techniques” of press departments (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1997: 127) negate the possibility of an independent and critical press and argue that this has important structural and social implications. What happens, they argue, is that PRs calculatedly craft press releases in a manner that can be regurgitated by journalists faced with tight deadlines. PRs structure news conferences and events to fit into daily or weekly news production cycles allowing time only for journalists to reactively report rather than critically analyse. “Such measures not only make a reporter’s job easier and less costly; they also stand a chance of converting him or her into an unwitting vehicle of group propaganda” (ibid.). As the routinised practices of the press have become increasingly reliant within the information-exchange on this institutionalised news source (Morgan, 2000), PRs have become legitimated as the primary (and at times, sole) external definers of the news agenda. Frith’s (1985: 127) contention is that this leads into a type of blind ‘pack’ journalism. He states: “[W]hat’s



most striking [about the music press] is how similar they are, how much their coverage – in terms of both form and content – is determined by that week’s press office activity”. However, this is perhaps to take an over-homogenised view of ‘the music press’. While certain major acts, as their promotional campaigns are generally designed to synchronise with release dates or tours, will be featured in a number of titles, this is far from universal. Not all titles, because of the complex homology tying their agenda to the cultural needs of their readers, will operate with an identical core aesthetic of artists. In a fragmented and over-populated marketplace, magazines must simultaneously cover what their direct competitors do while also offering their readers something unique. Magazines, for explicit economic and cultural reasons, must necessarily define themselves against the aesthetics of their rivals much more than they do alongside them.

Expanding on this notion of news management and the ‘information subsidy’, a number of writers have suggested that the press, PRs and artists all collude in the writing of features and (to a lesser extent) reviews. The music press, as argued above (Gillett, 1972; Frith, 1978, 1983, 1985; Harley & Botsman, 1982; Breen, 1987; Negus, 1992; Kane, 1995), are seen as being so reliant upon, and subsumed within, the music industry that they are merely one part of the industry’s promotional wing. Pettigrew (1989: 14-16) and Negus (1992: 121) both agree that it is common for artists and their PRs to discuss the angle of features with journalists and features editors and to liaise closely with them during the writing of the piece. This was an issue that was raised in interviews with both journalists and press officers, and while PRs claimed to have influence over section editors in their choice of reviewers or feature writers, it was conditional and far from total. The nexus here is characterised by a dual dynamic of compliance and resistance on the part of both the journalists and the PRs and the contexts within which these exchanges happen will make it difficult for the outcome to be predicted or directed.

There is often a two-way negotiation process between press officers and features editors about how pieces should be angled, and while PRs have a degree of input and control it is far from total. The PR must liaise with the artists they represent and reconcile the needs of the features editor and the artists (and their management). As an illustrative example, *MM* had proposed a Travis cover feature and their exegetical pitch was to have the lead singer, Fran Healy, standing alone with a flag on top of a mountain (under the

title ‘Scaling New Heights With Travis’). Healy, however, refused to do it, stating that they did band shoots and never solo shoots, thereby setting particular exegetical parameters on the way the band were presented in the press. There are also occasions where bands have agreed to a feature editor’s ideas only to have their PR veto it. The *NME* had approached Anton Brookes (of Bad Moon) with a cover feature idea for Travis, involving them ‘recreating’ the *Blair Witch Project* film, by camping overnight in the woods for a Halloween-themed issue. The band were enthusiastic about this idea, but Brookes was concerned that it would be on the band’s only day off and they ran the risk of getting ill and thereby jeopardising the remainder of their tour and other promotional obligations. The eventual compromise agreed between Brookes, the band and the *NME* was to re-create a photo-shoot the band had already done for a US magazine and have them appear soaked with water – a visual pun on their single, ‘Why Does it Always Rain on Me?’<sup>197</sup>

In contrast to this ability of PRs to directly intervene in feature commissioning, there are occasions where control lies almost exclusively in the hands of the press. During observation research at *Select*, the press officer for Underworld rang John Harris to discuss a possible feature. The PR had requested a cover piece, but Harris had deemed the band “too boring” to be a cover act. He agreed to run a feature, but stated that it would get the band to talk about a list of pre-agreed topics and present the feature in this manner. This was a tactic that Harris believed had worked for Super Furry Animals who they had considered too “anonymous” to have a feature hinge exclusively on their personalities. What this reveals is that prominent feature coverage must fulfil, in the press’s eyes, a simultaneous exegetical and economic function by presenting and translating artists in a manner that would appeal to a major proportion of their readers.

Negus (1992: 119-120) suggests that PRs closely monitor the different taste cultures of freelancers and they ‘match’ their acts with sympathetic writers. He states that PRs can get certain writers ‘on side’ and use them to lobby on their behalf and influence the ‘gatekeeping’ of features or reviews editors. However, due to protracted organisational restructuring during the 1990s within magazines, freelancers have been greatly depoliticised and have little or no input into the editorial direction of the titles

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<sup>197</sup> This was an idea Brookes had originally taken to *MM*, but the paper rejected it in favour of its own (eventually



they work for (Forde, 2001). Negus' (1992) arguments were based on interviews with press officers and methodologically they are limited by the fact that they unquestioningly accept PRs' claims to directly influence newsroom policy. The socio-professional relationships between section editors and freelancers are much more complex than Negus (ibid.) allows for here, and he overlooks a secondary dynamic of negotiation through the numerous editorial gates within the newsroom. While section editors have a degree of autonomy, it is conditional and decisions they take can and will be overruled by editors above them in the office hierarchy. Indeed, Chris Sharp argued that the influence freelancers have in editorial decisions has been greatly etiolated and PRs, as a result, have little external influence over either complex internal editorial decisions or the hierarchical dynamics of the series of newsroom gates. He stated:

It's an age-old press officer thing to say, "It's OK, we'll talk to the freelancers and we'll have them go into the office and talk up the record" and that kind of stuff. I confess I'm slightly dubious about how much difference that makes. Chris Roberts, for example, who writes for *Uncut*, is a big fan of a lot of the things we do. He has said to me on a number of occasions "Oh, I'll talk to Jonesy [Allan Jones, editor] about it". Significantly he'll talk to Jonesy about it before he talks to Paul [Lester, the music features editor] about it. Even if a respected and as talented a freelancer as Chris Roberts, who is a *damn* good writer, and a good bloke as well, goes in and says "I've got this act ... and I think it's great" even that doesn't mean they'll go "OK, Chris you want to do a feature, do a feature". There has to be, in the case of *Uncut*, from Allan or from Paul some degree of agreement. They must think that something's worthwhile doing.

Beyond their limited ability to suggest reviewers, PRs can, in extreme cases, actually veto the magazine's choice of writer. This, however (as noted in the previous chapter), is only possible with major global acts and PRs risk, in the long-term, damaging the socio-professional relationships that they and their rosters have with those titles they attempt to dictate journalistic and editorial policy to. In the case of features, because of the advance planning necessary to work around magazine production schedules, features editors will liaise closely with the press officers to determine which journalist will write the piece, what type of feature they intend to run, its proposed publication date and finally its size and prominence. Sandra McKay stated that it was quite uncommon for a PR to actively

resist a magazine's choice of feature writer because of the advance planning involved as they will have been discussing the piece with the features editor for several weeks or even months: "Generally it's consensus. Because you are working from the same agenda. Both sides want an interesting piece from someone who will be able to develop a certain depth ... [I]t certainly is rare in my experience that you would actually come in and block something. Hopefully it shouldn't come to that because you've discussed it all beforehand". Kate Stuart added that it would only be in instances where a writer was known to be hostile to an artist that a PR would object, but argued that the hierarchy and bureaucratic activities of magazines are such that a PR has little or no editorial or organisational sway: "[G]enerally it is down to the magazine. You'd have to work round that".

Danny Eccleston (features editor at *Q*) stated that "[c]ertain PRs have favourite writers and they do tend to try and push them on the phone" but said that it was unwise to let particular writers monopolise the coverage of particular acts as their journalism would homogenise. Reviews editors stated that in the early stages of an act's career, a few, highly supportive, writers would exclusively write about them. However when the act reached a certain point, other (possibly unfavourable) writers would express an interest in the act and the editors would therefore have to reconcile the needs of the different writers and ensure that particular writers did not become synonymous with their 'pet' acts. Sharon O'Connell (then live editor at *MM*) stated that particular PRs would attempt to dictate which writers would be allowed to review which gigs: "And it'll come down to 'No, you can't do that gig or that gig but you can do that gig. No, it can't be that journalist or that journalist'. And my response to that is [laughs] – I find it very hard to keep my temper". Indeed, in terms of live coverage, the PR has little sway in the title's choice of writer. There is less long-term planning on this desk than there is on the features desk and often the choice of reviewer and the choice of concerts are subject to change. On top of this the live editors will have a number of wider issues impacting on their decisions. Because, most obviously on the weeklies, the live editor is the key recruitment point for new writers they will have an obligation to assign work to the writers they have recruited as well as distribute work among the existing freelancers. There are a number of important professional, organisational and personal dynamics at



play in their decisions and they must reconcile the economic needs of their freelancers with the aesthetic needs of the title. In terms of the distribution of work, the live desk is highly politically charged and therefore the most resistant to outside interference.

Chris Sharp proposed that the ability of the PR to control which writers covered their acts depended heavily on the socio-professional relationship they had with the reviews editor in each title. However, PRs have, within this, little scope to suggest writers because the commissioning of reviews is a heavily institutionalised process and conducted within a particular organisational framework and there is not the same amount of pre-planning which goes into features. For example, Anton Brookes discussed how he had no control over the choice of a live reviewer for a Travis gig in Scotland. He had liaised with James Oldham (then live editor at the *NME*), and agreed that a writer would go to Glasgow to review the band and that it would be the following week's lead review. Oldham called him back to apologise that Steven Wells (who was known to dislike the band) had been selected. Oldham implied that the decision to send such an unfavourably disposed writer was made, not by him, but by either Steve Sutherland or John Mulvey, both of whom were of a similar opinion to Wells about the band. This reveals the nature of the newsroom hierarchy, where senior editorial intervention ensures that section editors' power remains conditional and open to review at any time. Brookes admitted that he knew the piece would slate the band, but had to resign himself to the fact that neither he nor Oldham could change the choice of writer. Wells, when he was informed that he would be doing the review, called Brookes in order to goad him, making it clear that the band's performance at the gig would have no bearing whatsoever on his evaluation. This was a situation Brookes was obviously not pleased with but he admitted that he was powerless to intervene in the choice of live reviewer, accepting that the decision that had been taken in the senior *NME* editorial strata overrode and excluded the views of the live editor meaning that he was incapable of opposing or changing it.

There would, however, be occasions when the reviews editor had not yet commissioned the piece and would turn to the PR for suggestions, but the ability of the PR to externally dictate the internal magazine policy was never assured here. Ultimately it is determined by firstly, the socio-professional relationships between the PR and the section editor, secondly the socio-professional relationships between the section editor

and the other senior editorial staff and, finally, by the temporal dynamics of the production cycle and availability of resources and writers (i.e. if a freelancer should be paid a word-rate or if a staff writer or section editor would have to review it in order to cut costs). Sharp, when interviewed, provided the following example of the process at work:

The Breakbeat Era album, there wasn't particularly anyone who liked that at the *NME* ... David Stubbs [staff writer] did that review. It got a pretty good review – seven out of ten. And that was fine. He's got a history of liking avant-shit and for a drum & bass record it's a pretty interesting thing. There's a lot going on in there. So I kind of thought he'd pick up on that. He kind of liked it. Ted Kessler [features editor] fucking hates Roni Size. He thinks it's shit. So it could have been a lot worse. There's lots of people there really don't like that music. Even Piers Martin, who is ostensibly their dance person, didn't really like that record. At the end of the day we kind of lucked into it ... If I'd have had ... [a] ... conversation [about who should review it] with John [Robinson, the album reviews editor], which I didn't in that instance, I just let him commission it, if I'd had that conversation with John ... and he'd said "Who do you think should do it?" I would actually have been at a loss to suggest somebody. It doesn't always happen like that.

While such complex relations are more typical of the rock and, to a lesser extent, the dance press, McRobbie (1991: 145) suggests that collusion is at its most pronounced within the teen-press. Here a clear 'information subsidy' has been created by an industry over-willing to "offer a great deal of support at short notice" in the form of exclusive photographs, phone interviews and so forth to a passive and complicit press to the extent that they become the sole and legitimated voice and agenda-setter. The teen-press, it should be noted, are also complicit in the manufacturing and selling of teen-acts (particularly boy-bands). Alex Needham (acting editor of *Smash Hits*) said that it was common practice for the editors of the main teen-titles to be invited to industry showcases of new teen acts and asked for their feedback about whether or not the act was marketable and if they would write about them. Needham suggested that if the teen press editors voiced any reservations about the act, the marketing department would redraft their campaign accordingly. It can be seen from this that the teen press (more so than any other music titles) represents the most extreme blurring of the journalism/promotion



dichotomy in the collusion with record companies in the selling of particular acts to their readership.

Kate Stuart worked as a PR with Boyzone until their mainstream breakthrough and agreed that there was a very close working relationship established between her and the teen-press to the extent that she had a great deal of control over what was written about Boyzone, how it was written and where and when it was published. Her argument was that the teen magazines developed a relationship with a small number of acts that they would write about in every issue. This was something Needham said happened because their readers developed a very intense (if short-lived) interest in artists and wanted to read as much new information about them as often as they could. Teen titles, because of the limited long-term selling power and appeal of many of the acts they cover, are forced, perhaps more intensely than any other type of magazine, to continually revise the homology between their aesthetic and their readers' interests. The turnover of both artists and readers is at its most pronounced in these titles and the record market niche they are symbiotically tied to. Stuart suggested that the teen titles were dependent on PRs representing acts aimed at pre-teen and young teenage audiences not just for access and exclusive photographs, but also for journalistic angles to the pieces they were writing. She implied that the press department could carefully construct and monitor the discourses within which their artists were presented by defining and revising the dominant exegetical frameworks:

The teen magazines ... *every* single issue they want to put in something about the band. So you have to find new stories for them and help them out. Because it's very difficult talking about the same thing over, and over, and over again. And they constantly need new pictures. It's quite high maintenance ... I'd talk to the magazines and ask them what they want. They [Boyzone] had an official photographer. He used to go round the world with them all the time and would constantly be feeding pictures back to us via an agency for approval. And then we'd farm the pictures out via an agency. So, if the worst came to the worst, *Smash Hits* could always phone up the agency ... and get them via the agency. But it's just a constant flow of pictures and information.

Giles (1989a: 10-11) and Negus (1992: 120-125) however, agree that the ability of the press officer to dictate to the press is never total throughout a long-term press campaign. In the earliest stages of an act or artist's career, the PR's priority will be focused on the

quantity of coverage. S/he will court as much press in as many dedicated music titles as possible, only shifting to conditional qualitative exegetical control when the act is at a commercial stage where they can actually boost sales of the music title and the relationship of dependency tilts in the PR's favour. Negus (1992: 122) concedes that when an act reaches such a point of commercial crossover the tabloids will become interested. This is an area of the press that the PR (because they deal with them much less than they do with the music press) is less able to predict and control. The outcome of interviews is more mercurial as the press agenda shifts from beyond the discourse of the musical and into the less calculable and malleable discourse of gossip (mainly drugs and sex-related scandal<sup>198</sup>). Rimmer (1985) suggests, however, that this press/PR relationship is by no means mercurial and tempestuous, but rather it works along very similar lines to the press/PR nexus of collusion outlined by Negus (1992: 121). Rimmer (1985) cites the example of the Thompson Twins working in conjunction with *The Sun's* pop writer, John Blake, in the 1980s in a conscious attempt to 'spice up' their public image, even going so far as suggesting the apposite adjectives that should be used to exegetically anchor the piece. Blake stated:

"The Thompson Twins were desperate to do a series in *The Sun*. I said look, the group are so withdrawn that I don't think I can do anything. So it went backwards and forwards and then they said, all right, we're going say some amazing things. I sat down with them and [singer] Alannah [Currie] said, 'Oh yeah we have affairs intermittently' and said 'I'd love to be called - what is it? - the tasteful scarlet lady.' We worked it all out. It's all a joke. You work it all out with their co-operation" (quoted in Rimmer, 1985: 157).

### III Gatekeeping and the Rush of the New

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<sup>198</sup> The music press (most notably *NME* and, before its closure, *MM*) run gossip columns but this is far from their journalistic priority and, with a few minor exceptions, these columns do not adopt the doorstepping policy of the tabloids. *MM* did adopt such an approach in the build up to the release of Radiohead's 'Kid A' album in 2000. However, this was a cause of professional tension within the office with several writers arguing that this was not the purpose of the music press and it only served to blur the lines between the press and the tabloids. Mark Sutherland recruited Andre Paine to the paper because of his willingness to doorstep. This became a contested issue within the newsroom and one (anonymous) freelancer was informed by Sutherland that they would not be promoted to a news reporter post because of their refusal to doorstep.



White (1950: 164), in his locating of the newspaper wire editor as pivotal in the construction of a particular news agenda through the inclusion or exclusion of agency copy, provided an important news production metaphor - that of the 'gatekeeper'. Potential news stories must be negotiated through the wire editor 'gate' and meet a particular set of criteria (ideological slant, perceived political or cultural importance, perceived interest to target readership and so forth) to warrant inclusion. This has remained an important paradigm in the sociology of hard news production (Tunstall, 1971; Schlesinger, 1978; McNair, 1999). Yet, as has been argued in the preceding chapters on music journalism production and PR activities, the flows of 'raw' information are different in popular arts criticism from the flows in hard news journalism and, as such, this conceptual model needs to be rethought. Toynbee (1993: 290) suggests that, during the 1950s, the music press operated as cultural gatekeepers, but because of the organisational rise of the PR profession (Pettigrew, 1989; Garnham, 1992; Blumler & Gurevitch, 1997; Golding & Murdock, 1997; Davis, 2000) the press-source relationship has changed considerably, with the promotional dynamic of the PR eclipsing their informational drive.

The weekly music press was considered by press officers to be the important first rung in the press campaign for new or underground (mainly rock) acts. They stated that, for established PRs, it was quite straightforward to get coverage on the live and new bands pages (and to a lesser extent the singles page) in the *NME* and (until it closed) *MM*. The writers on the weeklies agree that there is a rapid turnover of new artists in their pages and, as a result, a continual revision of both their place in the magazine market and the homology uniting them with their readers. Editors and section editors on the inkies stated that their primary duty lay in the fostering and promotion of 'new' music, with a culture of 'gig-going' encouraged heavily in the office and within both their office and freelancer communities. Stapleton (1982: 14) suggests that this emphasis on the 'new' arises out of a particular professional desperation to be seen to be the first to back and break an act and can be explained as contributing to the accumulation of a particular form of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1993: 43-45) - that of being 'in touch' and 'ahead of the pack'. Negus (1992: 119-120) argues that often the interest of freelancers in new acts is quite opportunistic with the writer hoping to play an early role in a band's breakthrough.

Through this they can build a professional or personal relationship with them and then have access to them when they are famous (a common tactic in hard news production (Tunstall, 1971)) or possibly write their biographies. Indeed, it is quite common for early champions of an act to be approached by publishers or record labels to write official or unofficial profiles (Rimmer, 1985; Mathur, 1997; Robb, 1997; Maconie, 1999; Price, 1999; Wills & Sheehan, 1999).

Because of this organisational and structural *idée fixe* with the new and esoteric, the press are somewhat organisationally reliant on PRs to point them in the direction of emergent acts. Despite the proclamations by the editors of the live pages on the weeklies that they set the agenda for the industry and operated as ‘unofficial A&Rs’, only a small percentage of acts which are not ‘industry approved’ (i.e. already signed) make it into the weeklies. *NME* assistant editor, John Mulvey, stated that: “The features editor is the guy who does most of the deals with press officers. And obviously the reviews editor as well ... I mean, everyone’s talking to press officers all the time. You have to. It’s your way into the music”. The subtext of this, of course, is that the press deals principally with ‘officially sanctioned’ artists. Gillett (1972: 62) argues that “[t]opicality” is key to the agenda-setting of the weekly press but in their over-reverence for the new, quality control slips and musically-dubious acts get a initial press build-up and rush of press interest. This was a common complaint among former freelancers on the weeklies. They argued that the demands for new artists on the London gig circuit by the live editor far eclipsed the actual number of quality acts and so acts were written about, not because they were good, but because they were new, thereby confusing aesthetic worth with novelty. This occupational and organisational bias towards the ‘new’ and acceleration of turnover works to ensure an important dynamic of fluidity in the title/readership homology. However, it can have important and detrimental cultural and economic consequences for the title if it is not managed and monitored carefully.

#### **IV A Need for Detachment & Conflicts of Interest**



As noted above, the music press is organisationally distinct from the music industry, but a number of economic and source links means that, at particular points, it is in a position of either symbiosis or dependency. The issue of economic dependency is an important one to consider. While the press is not wholly reliant on the music industry for advertising revenue (as 'lifestyle' advertising becomes increasingly important to their generated revenue), they must be seen by their readers to be detached otherwise they lose their credibility as "mediators or cultural brokers" (Stratton, 1982: 272). They cannot be seen to be aligned/aligning with the industry as it is "their perceived independence of the [record] companies which legitimates their position and which, correspondingly, gives a taken for granted credibility to what they write or say" (ibid.).

Beyond the purely economic links, other sets of cultural forces are at play, serving to negate journalistic objectivity. The close professional worlds of the 'cultural intermediaries' (Bourdieu, 1986: 239-240; Bourdieu, 1993: 94-96; Negus, 1996: 62) are such that the distinction between the social and the professional often dissolves. Within this all arts critics (not just music critics) run the risk of losing objectivity so that the close friendships they develop with their subjects and sources "can limit the amount of unpleasant news published" about them (Nowell, 1987: 76). A former Fire Records press officer, Billy Reeves, exploited his professional position and expenses account to build up friendships with *NME* and *MM* writers. He did this not to promote his artists, but rather to lay the groundwork for the launch of his own band (the audience) and club nights. The connections he made were at their most extreme in the case of *NME* news editor Jody Thompson, who (as noted in the previous chapter on the music journalism profession) DJ-ed at his Saturday night club in King's Cross (Uncle Bob's Wedding Reception) under the moniker of Miss JT.<sup>199</sup>

*NME* writers during punk (1976-78), Tony Parsons and Julie Burchill, somewhat quixotically argued that they were outside of the music industry and therefore untainted by payola (Burchill & Parsons, 1978; Harley & Botsman, 1982). This idea of somehow being 'outside' of the industry was a very common theme in interviews among writers and senior editorial staff at the weeklies. Interestingly, however, writers and senior editorial staff at the monthlies argued that this was a 'false consciousness' and the press

was unavoidably part of the industry (although they were at pains to point out there was a 'healthy antagonism' between the press and record companies). Andy Perry, however, argued that the extent of this schism was unhealthily over-romanticised by certain writers:

Yeah, of course we're part of the industry ... You know, I hate all that stuff in our rival publications where they constantly go on that it's 'us' and 'them'. 'We' as people that are disenfranchised from the industry. It's just bollocks. Of course you're part of the industry. I hate to name names, but John Mulvey. The guy, I don't know what he's on but he must, salary-wise, be on, the *NME* I'm sure pay reasonably well for their high-ranking staff. He must be on 32-35 grand I would have thought ... To have the cheek as a non-musician [laughs] with no formal training whatsoever to say that you're not part of the industry, you're not in some way part of this floating mass of people that don't really have anything to offer apart from their opinion about pieces of music. I find that absolutely preposterous ... [In the case of] ... a little guy sitting at a typewriter in Balham unable to afford to put on his one-bar fire ... I can see why he or she would not feel part of the industry. But once you're actually working on the editorial of a magazine you *are* the industry.

As has been noted a number of times above, the socio-professional spheres of the UK music journalist and music PR are complexly and unavoidably entwined, but the occupational roles remain distinct within this relationship: PRs promote their artists and journalists write about artists. What really, then, is at stake within the relationship is how control is negotiated and maintained. This professional (and, indeed, ideological) dichotomy involves distinct differences between the norms, roles and goals of each party, yet this set of distinctions becomes obfuscated when there is a clear conflict of interests with individuals simultaneously (occasionally under pseudonyms) working both as journalists and PRs<sup>200</sup> (Stokes, 1974: 67; Jones, 1993: 85). Tunstall (1971: 137) found that broadsheet newspaper editors organisationally discouraged such career overlapping, believing that the autonomy of the news organisation and publisher was greatly compromised and their independence from outside or corporate influence was threatened.

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<sup>199</sup> Uncle Bob's Wedding Reception was regularly mentioned in the 'Public NME' gossip page and promotional stories for guest music star DJs feature in the news pages that Thompson edited.

<sup>200</sup> Indeed, similar arguments have been made for writers who attempt to become professional musicians or run the two jobs simultaneously (Dalton, 1999).



Stokes (1974: 67), however, interviewed several music magazine editors in the US who were “curiously uninterested in the problem”. Joyce Becker, the former editor of *Hit Parader*, even went so far as to admit that she invited publicists to write pieces about their own artists in the magazine because she felt that they understood the artists better than any of her writers could. The magazine, she stated, “had always tried to ‘tell the truth, but the *nice* truth’” (ibid.). Chris Sharp, as well as being head of press at Beggars Banquet, worked as a freelance contributor to *The Wire* but argued that there was not a conflict of interest as very few of the acts he worked were “eligible by *The Wire*’s terms for inclusion” because of their editorial emphasis on the avant-garde and experimental. He suggested, however, that if he freelanced for *NME* there would be an unavoidable ethical clash in such boundary-spanning activities because the type of acts he worked were perfectly suited to the magazine’s agenda and aesthetic.

Judy Lipsey, the head of an independent PR firm, argued that operating simultaneously as a journalist and as a PR actually worked to her advantage, resulting in an increase in professional respect rather than being a conflict of interest and the pursuit of two irreconcilable ends: ““When people find out you write I think they somehow have a bit more respect for you. I think there’s this attitude that PRs are simply there to pay for lunch and prostitute themselves to the advantage of the journalist”” (quoted in Giles, 1989a: 11). The subtext of Lipsey’s justification for her dual career was that she was in a unique position and had an empathetic understanding of the needs and goals of both professions and was therefore more likely to be able to reconcile them. It is quite common for PRs to have worked as journalists and because of this, suggests Davis (1988), they know that free lunches and expenses will not corrupt or sway writers. The resultant cultural and professional empathy that arises from such career crossovers and self-referentiality will also help them to understand the professional and organisational dynamics shaping the newsroom and the politics of the commissioning process.

In an attempt to confront the professional, ethical and ideological tensions of such a double career, the Rock Writers Association (a short-lived US body) used their opening meeting to discuss the issue of writers working concurrently in press departments, but concluded that it was a clear conflict of interest and they needed to be organisationally distinct and impartial from the industry. However, they, without sensing the irony of the

situation, suggested that rock bands should stage annual benefits for their organisation as they “owed us a favour” (quoted in English, 1979: 6). In the UK press it remains common practice for journalists to write artist biographies for press officers. The obvious cultural and occupational parallels here mean they have a professional understanding of what journalists require in press packs and so can exploit this cultural capital in order that PRs can exploit their insider knowledge. In addition to this, music journalists (in their capacity as ‘expert’ fans) will often be approached by record labels to write liner notes for compilation or reissued albums<sup>201</sup>. However, in an interview with a press officer, it was alleged that a senior reviews editor at *Uncut* wrote liner notes for a reissues label and would then review the albums himself under a variety of pseudonyms<sup>202</sup>. This was, the PR believed, a clear breach of professional ethics as the same individual was being paid to write the liner notes, being paid to review the albums, using their position within the newsroom hierarchy to ‘gatekeep’ albums that another reviews editor might exclude and finally, giving them excessively high star ratings. The PR’s argument was that it would be equally unethical for him to review his own roster of acts in a magazine. He was piqued that the reviews editor in question refused to either acknowledge the conflict of interest or to make this practice explicit to the readers by reviewing under his own name. This boundary spanning opens up a number of important ideological and ethical debates about professionalism within the press and the formal and informal economic and cultural links that writers forge with the culture industries they should ideally be independent from. While this is an extreme example of a writer establishing formal, but concealed links, with a record company, the worlds of the metropolitan cultural intermediaries are so entwined that writers may be friends with record company employees. Indeed, these less visible links operate more insidiously and thereby serve to negate the writers’ institutional autonomy and critical objectivity.

## **V Industry Control: The Covert (Junkets & Payola) and the Overt (Contracts & Interventionism)**

<sup>201</sup> Jon Landau’s liner notes for an Otis Redding album is taken as the first example of this (Chapple & Garofalo, 1980: 166).

<sup>202</sup> Two other *Uncut* freelancers backed up this allegation.



Press junkets have been generally viewed as ‘sweeteners’ for compliant and grateful journalists (Negus, 1992: 121; deRogatis, 2000: 162) and as constituting little more than a covert form of payola. The low paid freelancer will be taken away for several days (usually abroad) with a band and have all their expenses covered by the industry and then return to the office to submit a highly positive review or feature. Tunstall (1971: 73) notes how such trips “are merely the most visible sign that a journalist’s style of life is often higher than his salary would seem to allow” and are, according to Steven Wells (1998: 22-23), abused by greedy and petulant journalists. Wells, however, was something of a notorious figure in the PR community in regard to junkets. Several PRs have talked of him adopting a neo-Marxist and anti-industry stance in his writing, criticising record companies for their excesses, only to repeatedly and hypocritically exploit junkets to their full potential. These issues of hospitality and largesse, while not as pronounced and essential to a freelancer’s basic survival as Chapple & Garofalo (1980: 165-169) suggested, have shaped the socio-professional spheres of these cultural intermediaries. Despite industry cutbacks the perks of junkets were expected by writers and somewhat ingrained within their professional ideologies. A number of writers argued that because only senior and experienced freelancers would be selected by the features editor to do the piece they would have become, through familiarity, resistant to the persuasive power of ‘freebies’, having attended numerous launches and other industry events.

Paddy Davis, a PR at Bad Moon, stated that it is not the subject of a feature that sways a journalist, but rather *where* the interview for the feature will be conducted. During participant observation at both *Uncut* and *Select*, it became apparent that this did play a role in the commissioning of features. Kate Stuart, when asked if she considered foreign junkets an important part of a campaign, stated: “Absolutely. What’s the point in hanging around London in a bar when you can take journalists off to New York for four days, put them in a hotel, schmooze them, look after them?” However, several editors stated that the number of foreign junkets had visibly declined since the mid-1990s (possibly because magazines were increasingly expected to meet some of the costs themselves). The lure of the foreign junket became obvious while I was in the offices of Bad Moon waiting to interview Anton Brookes. He was on the phone to Paul Lester of

*Uncut* enquiring if the magazine would run a piece on Travis in an attempt to extend their market potential by courting a press/readership homology that had previously eluded the band.

Lester informed him in quite explicit terms that the band was universally despised in the magazine office, they did not fit the title's aesthetic, were contradictory to the title's homology with its readers and therefore he would not consider commissioning a piece on them. Brookes then mentioned that the press junket he was organising was to Japan and Lester immediately volunteered to do the feature himself. He initially denied saying that he disliked the band and attempted to persuade Brookes to invite him on the junket. Brookes refused to agree and therefore lost the feature. Afterwards he justified his decision by saying that while he knew Lester would compromise and write a neutral piece, the magazine had a history of deriding the band. Brookes would therefore (because the budget was limited) rather a writer who was interested in them got the opportunity to go rather than a hostile writer swallowing his pride in exchange for a foreign trip. In this exchange between Brookes and Lester a number of important issues and dynamics are exposed. Lester, while aware that Travis were antithetical to the *Uncut*/readership homology, was prepared to revise this not for any reflexive need for fluidity in the title's aesthetic, but for more subjective reasons, ensuring that he, rather than a freelancer, would do the piece. The shift in the power balance here is also interesting, in terms of how the relationship of dependency swung so quickly in the opposite direction. Lester, as a key gate into *Uncut*, was initially dominant in the exchange but when the details of the trip were made apparent, Brookes became dominant and, if he had wished, could have abused this power to have Travis absorbed (albeit begrudgingly) into the title's aesthetic. The ethical debates are also interesting to note within this power balance, with Lester prepared to compromise in exchange for a free trip and Brookes refusing to compromise by letting the band be interviewed by a writer feigning interest and enthusiasm.

It has been argued that foreign junkets and the positive press coverage they are assumed to generate amount to little more than a cheap form of advertising for the industry (Frith, 1983: 173-174; Negus, 1992: 120-122) and that the UK press would not foot the bill themselves. The dynamic here suggests that the PR actually 'buys' coverage in magazines that would not otherwise write about the acts. However, this is not always



the case as the Travis/*Uncut* example reveals. Indeed, a reverse dynamic to the dominant arguments about the ‘cheap advertising’ junkets offer the industry can be seen in the case of the Sex Pistols’ Scandinavian tour of 1977 at the height of their infamy. Virgin had insisted that the UK press accompany them on the tour, but Johnny Rotten stipulated that if they did they would have to pay their own expenses. The industry fear was that the press would not agree to this and the tour would go unreported, but the opposite happened. The press all wanted to cover the tour and the band actually received more coverage than they would have normally as the editors of the main rock titles reasoned that if they had to pay their own expenses they should get their money’s worth and run lengthy features (Savage, 1991: 382).

Several editors have suggested that they are increasingly being asked to pay part or all of the junket expenses for their writers and photographers. As noted in the previous chapter with regard to the Travis feature in Germany, the final cost can be extremely high as a PR, a writer, a photographer and possibly stylists are all sent. Tony Herrington claimed that *The Wire* met as much of the cost of junkets as possible in order that they would remain detached and under no economic pressure or obligation to write a feature in a particular way. To illustrate this he gave the case of a Sonic Youth cover story where Geffen paid for the writer’s expenses but the magazine paid for the photographer. In a discussion about press junkets with Ted Kessler (features editor at the *NME*) I mentioned this claim by Herrington and he refuted this and suggested that while particular titles attempt to project an image of being ‘outside’ of the industry, a visible economic relationship exists between them. He said of *The Wire*’s claim to cover or part-cover junket expenses:

Bollocks! That’s a lie ... I know it’s a lie because my wife’s a press officer and she recently did a cover story for *The Wire* which involved a trip abroad which she paid for ... I may be wrong. I may be wrong. But I think that’s wrong. I know my wife picked up the hotel bill and I’m pretty sure she picked up their travelling expenses ... That’s a terrible lie. *The Wire* – how on earth could they possibly do that? How could they afford it? To be fair, they probably don’t do that many things abroad and they have got correspondents in America.

A popular, and oft-repeated, myth about the music industry is that it is fuelled by payola and the relationship between the press and press departments is based heavily on bribery, with the industry working to offer ‘inducements’ to compliant journalists (Giles, 1989a: 10; Wells, 1998: 20). The US critic, Ralph Gleason (in Jones, 1992: 100), argued that the payola scandals in the US during the 1970s (Flippo, 1974c: 283-284; Pettigrew, 1989: 26-27; deRogatis, 2000: 162), along with other instances of bribery had important ramifications. These events ensured the hegemony of a ‘PR culture’ where the rock press had been co-opted and the aesthetic and ideological boundaries between rock and commercialism had blurred. Ultimately this has meant that rock, as a result, has lost its revolutionary edge. Wells (1998: 20) stated that while the excesses of ‘cocaine bribery’ in the UK industry had subsided in a climate of cost cutting in the 1990s, its presence was more insidious. He interviewed a PR who stated that positive reviews in the press could be bought for £100, although another PR suggested that the price in the late-1990s was £60, which Wells notes was the street price of a gram of cocaine.

Wall (1999: 56-57), in his account of being both a press officer and a rock journalist in the 1980s, graphically detailed how press/PR links were framed explicitly within a ‘cocaine relationship’. He argued that it was common practice to attach a gram of cocaine to a record sleeve and bike it over to a reviewer, suggesting that this was accepted industry practice. On the ethics of such industry practice, he quoted his former boss at an independent PR firm as saying:

“Coke can write you any headline ... Coke can turn bad reviews into good ... But it’s not bribery, remember that ... More like a friendly bit of encouragement. Like buying them a drink. You’re not making them say or do anything, you’re just putting them in the right frame of mind. Creating the right mood. Most of these guys go to two or three different shows a week; your job is to make sure it’s *your* show they remember. Or can’t remember! Whatever works! And you can’t leave something like that just to the band. You have to look after them, hold their hands. Make sure they *enjoy* themselves...”

This idea of cocaine being seen not as a bribe but rather as a way of ‘creating the right mood’ represents an interesting intrusion into dynamics of the critical and commercial exegesis of artists, by creating an entirely ‘unnatural’ framework of reception. Nowell



(1987: 76) argues that writers can be “perverted by ‘freebies’ or payola”. However, in the music press it was argued by several journalists that such practices were inescapably woven into the fabric of their relationship with PRs. Chapple & Garofalo (1980: 168) suggested that because payola is continuous it propagates an atmosphere of co-operation between the press and the industry. The socio-professional spheres inhabited by journalists and PRs are based on fraternising at gigs, bars and parties and PRs suggest that cocaine often provides the backdrop (Wells, 1998: 20). Black (1989) is damning of the practice of using hospitality in order to influence writers. He argues that it is often only outside of working hours that journalists and PRs can meet and that such socialising should never be the goal of the relationship. PRs admit that they will give journalists drugs, but present it as a ‘social thing’ when they meet at gigs or parties and that it would be doltish for a PR to believe that a journalist would write a positive review in exchange for drugs (Wells, 1998: 20). The common argument among those journalists and PRs I interviewed who were prepared to talk about this practice suggested that, much like air fares, hotel bills and expense accounts on press junkets, it was part of the social culture. They indicated that the presence of drugs was, however, not widespread or deployed in such an overt or studied manner. Johnny Cigarettes stated:

The days of payola were pretty much in the Sixties and Seventies where you’d be given cocaine and maybe given a blow job off of one of Led Zeppelin’s groupies if you were lucky. That just doesn’t happen any more. Well, you might share a line of charlie in the toilets, but that’s not to sweeten you up. That’s just something that goes on really. And they [press officers] might buy you a drink or two at the gig you go to, but ... in their dreams they might think that it affects how we cover the band. But you’re a pretty poor journalist if you’re affected by that.

The issue of control and intervention in the press is contested and, for the most part, too mercurial, covert and subtle to satisfactorily prove. However, there are cases where record companies, press officer and artists have taken very direct and overt steps towards controlling not only what is printed, but also the manner in which it is presented. Hollywood PRs are overtly protectionist to the extent that they will sit in on interviews, veto particular lines of questioning and screen writers before allowing them contact with their clients (Hattenstone, 1998). In the late-1990s there was a symbolic crossing-over

into music journalism of this interventionist approach to press management as discussed in the previous chapter with regard to Q Prime's interview contract for Hole/Courtney Love. The conditions, as noted in the previous chapter, of the contract included no discussion of any "sensationalized rumors [sic] and half-truths regarding Courtney Love and Hole" (Q Prime, 1998: 1), Kurt Cobain or the Nick Broomfield documentary, *Kurt & Courtney*, unless first raised by Love herself. This approach was - according to several editors I spoke to who had been faxed the document - something that Love had carried over into the music industry from her experiences in Hollywood (having starred in *The People vs. Larry Flynt*). Many of the editors refused on principle to sign the document, thereby scuppering their chance of an interview and a possible sales boost. The reasoning behind this was that acquiescence would set a precedent for increased PR-interventionism leading to journalistic passivity and compliance in a sanitised promotional drive.

In particular cases PRs will inform journalists in advance that certain topics (generally to do with an artist's private life) are off-limits. Kate Stuart stated that, because of this, the PR must have a very close relationship with their artists and know what they are prepared to discuss in print. She stated that in the case of David Holmes, the press would often pick up on the fact that he came from Belfast and attempt to use the Northern Irish political situation as an exegetical angle for their piece, rather than consider the musicological aspects. She would have to inform the journalists, when discussing the angle of the piece, that this was too delicate and emotional a topic for him to discuss and they would therefore have to rethink their journalistic angle. Similarly, Duff Batty stated that he was under instruction from Puff Daddy's US label to warn journalists in advance that he would not answer questions about the murder of his friend Biggie Smalls. Additionally, the press was pre-warned that he would not talk about the court case (unresolved at the time of the 'Forever' campaign) over a dispute about him appearing in a Naz video being crucified. Batty stated that Puff Daddy had requested that the record company did not use his scenes in the video:

They agreed. Then went back on their word and showed it. Puffy went round to the office. There was 'an altercation' which involved this executive Steve Stoughton from Universal getting 'injured' in some way. This was kicking off when Puffy came over here to do press and because it was a legal matter, because it had gone to the courts, because they were in a settlement, I had to say to people ... basically what I



said to them was “You can ask him about it, but he’ll say ‘No comment’ because he can’t comment. But if I was you, just don’t mention it, because if you ask him something that you know he can’t answer and he knows that he can’t answer it to you, it’s just going to fuck him off. So the best thing to do is just leave it. You’ll find out what happens soon enough”. I wasn’t gagging them effectively, it was just pointers in what to say and what not to say.

While requesting photo-approval is common practice in Hollywood (Hattenstone, 1998), it is present, but less so, in the UK music press, with the notable exception of global ‘mega-acts’. Artists are concerned with retaining control of how they are visually presented in the press and can insist on photo-approval or, as in the case of Culture Club in the 1980s, enforcing a contract stipulating how and where photographs could be used (Rimmer, 1985: 142). In promotional campaigns, official shots will be included in press packs (Pettigrew, 1989: 32; Negus, 1992: 67), but magazine, in order to stand out amongst the competition, will insist on original pictures, rather than ‘stock’ photos. The major magazines employ (generally on a freelance basis) a number of photographers who either specialise in live or studio work, although certain artists will insist that all press shots are taken by their official photographer. The Prodigy worked closely with Steve Gullick (who also freelanced for the *NME*) and insisted that magazines used his shots. Chris Sharp, the band’s press officer, noted how this caused a number of problems when the band did a *Q* cover feature because Gullick freelanced for IPC rather than for Emap, but the editor had to acquiesce rather than risk losing the feature.

Beyond industry intervention in aspects of feature writing, there are points where the industry will impose listening embargoes on major releases. Their concern, however, is not with what the journalist will write, but rather with the problem of bootlegging and copyright infringements, made all the more pronounced by developments in MP3 technology and file-sharing services such as Napster and Gnutella. Battyé stated that this was at its most extreme with the major US R&B and hip-hop releases and because of this, he could not send out review copies to the press until the albums were available in record shops. This was less of a problem with UK acts, but there were occasions where reviewers will have to sign contracts agreeing not to copy or let ‘outside’ parties hear advance review copies of major releases. In the case of Oasis’ ‘Be Here Now’ album



campaign in 1997, Mat Snow stated that a Creation representative came to the *Mojo* office to play them the album but would not let them keep the review copy. Along similar lines, the John Lennon estate insisted that advance copies of a Lennon box set were not sent out to the press and reviewers had to go to a listening room at the EMI offices where they were expected to base their review on a single hearing. John Aizlewood, reviews editor at *Q*, stated that there are around six major UK releases each year where the label will try to impose such listening embargoes. He would, however, attempt to oppose this by arguing that reviewers need to spend at least a week with an album before they are able to review it properly (thereby avoiding the critical limitations inherent in “instant criticism”) (English: 1979: 11)). However, it did not always follow that the label would reverse their decision.

As music titles have multiplied and the publishing market has further fragmented, the press officer (as a buffer-zone) has become increasingly central in the adjudicating of journalistic access to artists: the end result has been that access has exponentially decreased as it has become increasingly more complex and protracted to secure. When artists reach a particular peak commercially, access is spread much thinner (and has to be negotiated between press officers and features editors much more) as yet more titles have entered the market and the wider print media encroach on the music press’s beat. At the high-point of a campaign, there are enormous pressures on artists’ available time and the PR must work around their other promotional duties. In late-1999, as Travis were breaking in the UK, Anton Brookes discussed the scale of the demand on their time<sup>203</sup>:

[T]hey’re on tour. Yesterday was their day off. They travelled down from Hull. They did a *Melody Maker* photoshoot. They did a sound-check for the *Q* Awards ceremony. They did TV and press afterwards. And radio. Then they did a *Maker* interview. Then they did half an hour live set at the *Q* awards. And then they hung around to do the meet & greet things and say hello. That was their day off. Their only day off in a week. Their next day off is next week.

Press officers quantitatively and qualitatively gatekeep access to the biggest commercial artists because, as Kate Stuart noted, “an artist gets to a level where you stop having to be

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<sup>203</sup> At the same time as the Travis campaign, Brookes was working on the Foo Fighters and described a similar intensity of promotional duties placed on Dave Grohl, their lead singer. He had flown from the US to London for two



proactive and it becomes reactive as they're so huge everyone wants them". As a result music journalists are increasingly distanced both organisationally and occupationally from their subjects (Forde, 2001). New Journalism writers in the USA during the 1960s held the belief that "personal involvement and immersion were indispensable to an authentic, full-blooded account of experience" (Pauly, 1990: 114). They argued for a need to be directly connected to the people they wrote about and then to be able to articulate the nature of this connection to their readers (to experience vicariously), but such connection is increasingly being subjected to a complex nexus of organisational gatekeeping.

The PR's role as a bulwark between artists and the press is at its most explicit when acts are on tour<sup>204</sup>, as the PR must ensure that the reviewers get to the concert and have their allotted interview time. All other access is either carefully controlled or withheld completely (Wall, 1999) and in extreme cases, such as Culture Club's 1984 US tour, the press can be explicitly banned (Rimmer, 1985: 126). In the case of writers who are there "without official sanction" (Rimmer, 1985: 125), steps will be taken to ensure that access and all (official and non-official) information is denied or stemmed completely. While Davis (1988) argues that the PR must simultaneously operate as a facilitator and as a barrier to protect their artists' press and public profiles, Black (1989) suggests that the PR is there to assist the press and should not attempt to set or dictate an agenda by denying access. Indeed there is a clear conflict between the press's desire for access and the PR's desire for control. While this can be negotiated and worked around (in, for example, the case of exclusives being granted) in certain cases the irreconcilable needs of both parties in the exchange ensure that a mutually beneficial consensus or compromise cannot be reached.

Tunstall's (1971) assertion that there is a contractual obligation between the press and press departments means PRs cannot deny specialist writers a basic stream of information and, as Black (1989: 41) notes, a "press office is not a policy-making body; it exists to serve the press" and, as such, PRs are failing in their duties if they place

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days of press and radio and was being interviewed from 10:00am until 10:00pm on both days. The demand for non-UK acts is more intense as access is much harder to secure for the UK press.

<sup>204</sup> PRs are most concerned about backstage behaviour leaking into the press and damaging the act's constructed public image. Giles (1989a: 10) states that PRs need to be able to step in and ensure that not everything a band does on tour gets reported.



impediments in the press's way. However, sometimes the press can circumvent the normal channels and access artists without consulting the PR, thereby undermining the overall structure of the campaign and possibly placing it in jeopardy. Chris Sharp, at the highpoint of the Prodigy's 'The Fat of the Land' campaign in 1997, had to appease the major titles by distributing access in a manner which did not exclude any of them, aware that if he did, it would cause long-term political problems. However, the demands were exceptionally high as the band's genre crossover appeal meant that they simultaneously tapped into multiple title/reader homologues with the dance press, the 'indie' press, the mainstream rock press, the metal press, the broadsheets and the tabloids all requesting access. He had agreed exclusives with particular titles and had to inform the other titles that they would be granted access at a later date because the band were limiting the number of interviews they were doing. While those temporarily excluded editors were irate about this, they were aware that press interest was high and agreed to wait.

However, *Kerrang!* chose to find alternative forms of access to the band without consulting Sharp and, in the process, impaired his long-term relationship with other titles. He said of the political problems (in terms of his loss of quantitative, qualitative and exegetical control) the magazine's duplicitous tactics caused for him by running pieces on the band that he had no involvement in or say over:

Well, they're fucking massively into the Prodigy and it's a pain in the arse to be honest. Meaning they kept, kept, kept, kept doing it over and over and over again. Mainly because ... they had one or two slightly underhand 'ins' to the Prodigy touring party. So they kept getting material not through me. It was very awkward and difficult ... [I]n the case of the Prodigy ... a lot of extra information can ... [pause] ... matter a great deal. That issue was problematic for me. One, because I really cared about them. Not that I didn't want them to be in *Kerrang!* If someone's ringing me up from another publication saying "I want an interview with the Prodigy" and I say "They're really not doing any interviews at the moment. They're having a break from doing interviews". And then three weeks later, there's a feature in *Kerrang!* and they ring up and say "Well, while I was on the phone, some cunt from *Kerrang!* was talking to them!". And I go "Well, I didn't actually know they were doing that, I'm afraid". And they think "Well, you're fucking shit at your job", as they have every right to think. I was annoyed about that and I put a stop to it. I won't go into the details. There was some guy who wrote for *Kerrang!* who was mates with somebody who was in the Prodigy touring party. So he'd do a lot of casually turning up at gigs, getting a quick chat and – hey presto! – there's a feature.



In terms of the ‘official’ flows of information and access, the press and artists might be at odds with artists and have different interests in a particular story running or not running (Wragg, 1996). Here the PR must operate “in the middle of a constantly changing business relationship” (Pettigrew, 1989: 11) and mediate in a manner which reconciles the needs and demands of both sides and allow their (occasionally differing) worldviews to meet. The artists might have a message that the media does not want to carry and equally they might not wish to speak to the media. Within this, the communication-exchange can break down due to institutional and/or professional recalcitrance (ibid.) and the PR must arrive at conciliation, otherwise long-term relations will be jeopardised.

During participant observation (February 1999) at *Uncut*, Paul Lester (the music features editor) was (as discussed in Chapter 4) negotiating access with Suede’s press officer for an eighteen-page cover feature on the band. The access he was trying to secure was for Simon Price who had known the band professionally for seven years and had been one of their earliest champions. In the end, access for two days (as a face-to-face interview) was agreed upon and this was considered, in the late 1990s climate, somewhat exceptional. Duff Batty echoed this point about the erosion of ‘immersion reporting’ noting that for the Puff Daddy ‘Forever’ album campaign in 1999 “[j]ournalists would be lucky to get 35-40 minutes”. He stated that *The Face* was key to the overall Puff Daddy campaign and the access their writer was granted amounted to spending a day and evening with him in the States, then following his entourage when he came to London, and finally a 40 minute face-to-face interview. This was supplemented with a photo shoot in Paris (a European exclusive). “But that’s an exceptional case. They had an amazing amount of access”.

*NME* editor, Steve Sutherland, argued that an increasing problem facing music titles was that “you don’t have the access you used to do. You can’t go on the road for a week with Led Zeppelin anymore. You can’t go on the road for a week with any fucker any more. You’re given half an hour and ten minutes of that is for the photos. So it’s tough. You don’t get the access”. Kate Stuart, however, noted that while access to artists is increasingly difficult for magazines to secure, the features editor would place certain demands on the PR depending on the scale and prominence of the coverage the act will



receive. While standard features might be agreed with limited access of an hour or less, the features editor will demand greater access if it is for a cover piece and PRs cannot expect that limited access to a major artist will necessarily result in a lead piece. Magazines will be aware that their competitors will have access to the same artists and will, if they are doing a cover piece, insist they have a greater amount of access and a unique exegetical take on the artists. As Stuart noted, “you wouldn’t get a cover from *Smash Hits* just by putting them in a room with Boyzone for an hour. You’d need to have a whole day of pictures and interviews. Maybe hanging out with them. It all has to be very, very active”. The socio-professional dynamics of music journalists here mark them out as distinct from traditional news journalists (including investigative reporting), as the blurring of the division between formal and informal access is an editorial requirement for many features. The press officer is generally unable (and, indeed, unwilling) to intervene and attempt to ‘manage’ formal interview questions but they will take explicit steps to monitor and police not only the amount but also the type of informal access that journalists are allowed to their artists. While they acknowledge that informal access is an essential part of a title’s ‘exclusive’ access to and exegetical take on artists, it will be subject to particular regulations.

Negus (1992: 124) has noted that a PR’s power increases when one of their artists reaches a sales point where they can boost the circulation of a music title (rather than depend on a title to raise their public and commercial profile). However, it does not follow that the PR is elevated to an autocratic position, where they can interfere directly in editorial policy. Pettigrew (1989: 14-16) states that the long-term success of a high profile act is never certain and competition among titles for access is short-lived. Rebuffed editors or magazines will seek revenge on the press officer’s roster at a later stage when the PR is desperate for press attention for an unknown act. Added to this is the fact that titles continually review the homology between themselves and their readers and acts that were once central to their agenda can become aesthetic pariahs. Johnny Hopkins, former head of press at Creation, was singled out by a number of editors and writers as a PR who attempted to exploit the commercial success of Oasis to barter for coverage for lesser-known acts on the label’s roster. While they all argued this gave him



a degree of control<sup>205</sup>, they believed that his (small-scale) victories would be Pyrrhic as he did not have any other acts of a similar scale to cement his position of power. This served only to create a poor working relationship between Hopkins and the press and was seen by a number of journalists and editors as a dangerous professional move as all his power hinged on one act and depended entirely on the longevity of their career. Indeed, in 2000 Creation folded and Oasis took their press to Hall or Nothing. One journalist I spoke to about this argued that Hopkins, because his relationship with editors was poor and over-reliant on the career of Oasis, would face immense hostility from titles for the remainder of his career.

Steward & Garratt (1984: 68) note that, while PRs will attempt such trade-offs, it ultimately comes down to the quality of the music and only a few acts ever command such power. Chris Sharp, when discussing the immense press interest during the Prodigy's 'The Fat of the Land' campaign, was asked if he used their success to insist on coverage for his other acts stated: "You have to have balls of steel to say it that overtly. Ringing up Steve Sutherland, to take an example, and say 'Right, Steve, you can have this, but I want this'. I don't think, at the moment, I've got the portfolio of acts that gives me enough power. I've got one act that gives me a lot of power. If I did Prodigy, *and* Chemical Brothers *and* maybe one other of a similar kind then suddenly you'd have a stable and it'd begin to look a bit dangerous". Duff Batty, of Word of Mouth, stated that his roster of acts (Puff Daddy, Prince, TLC and Run DMC) was such that he would deal directly with the editor rather than the features editor and that granting *The Face* an exclusive interview with Puff Daddy was done explicitly so that he would establish direct contact with the editor and be able to call him directly in the future and therefore have an 'in' into the magazine for his other acts. He suggested that because he worked so many globally successful acts the press would approach him for interviews meaning the professional relationship he had with the press was "not a case of 'Will you?' It's a case of 'We'll let you'". However, within this, is a professional need to carefully manage a roster of artists and ensure that new artists are built up to replace those artists at the top end. This is because the importance to the press of these major artists is conditioned by,

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<sup>205</sup> In the wake of Oasis' mainstream success following their 1995 'What's the Story (Morning Glory)?' album, Hopkins was described as being "the most important publicist in Britain" (Cavanagh, 2000: 476).



firstly, their selling power and, secondly, in their centrality within a (necessarily fluid) title/readership homology.

While certain PRs will have a roster that gives them a degree of power, there is still a process of negotiation with the press. Section editors stated that they were resistant to PRs using such direct pressure tactics, and often they would react by insisting on their own terms and conditions. Danny Eccleston argued that when dealing with PRs with sought-after acts he would outline what he was prepared to offer them (amount and prominence of coverage), but would demand in return a certain amount of access (formal and informal) and exclusivity. In a saturated mainstream marketplace, magazines constantly look for exclusives or scoops in order to boost circulation figures (Pennell, 2000) and Eccleston stated that in protracted negotiations with PRs he insisted that the PR imposed a three or four week embargo on interviews in rival magazines. While this refers to the negotiations behind features and cover features, there will also be a degree of negotiation on the news pages. Carol Clerk, then *MM* news editor, stated:

Certain press officers will want to do exclusives with you in return for more space ... It's like "If we give you this story without giving it to *NME*, what will you give us?" And invariably you'll say "Colour page" for example. Depending on the strength of it. If it's some shitty little story we'll say "Come back when you've got something decent to talk to us about".

There is a complex mutual dependency here between the PR and the press and the socio-professional dynamics of negotiations and trade-offs serve important economic and cultural functions for both parties. The power of the PR rests here on the press's evaluation of the 'news-worthiness' and 'exclusivity' of what they are being offered. A title will want to cover everything that their direct rivals are covering, but also be able to offer a story or exegetical take that their rivals have not been able to secure. However, this will all be conditioned by the act's perceived selling power and their centrality to the title's aesthetic. This, it should be noted, all relates to PR/press links in regard to the 'predicted' and the 'pre-planned' promotional activities of artists but this nexus becomes characteristically different and more mercurial when the 'unpredicted' and the 'unplanned' happens. Here the power balance tilts away from the PR as they are forced to



become professionally reactive rather than proactive in regard to those (admittedly rare) events that they are powerless to control or predict.

## VII Managing Scandals, Campaign Hitches & Unknown Unknowns

As noted above, tabloid newspaper pieces are the most difficult for a PR to control or predict (Negus, 1992: 122-123) and PRs talk of tabloid journalists being the most perfidious. It is because of this that most PRs I interviewed stated that they either avoided dealing with the tabloids completely or only worked with them with great caution and reluctance. Jayne Houghton took the example of Right Said Fred's lead singer, Richard Fairbrass, being deceived by the popular press into talking about his partner (who had been diagnosed as being HIV positive). She was the band's press officer at the time when the tabloids got hold of the story:

“So, to try and limit the damage and hurt, Richard and his partner gave one of the tabloids an exclusive interview. It was going to be a small, newsy story on an inside page and we were guaranteed copy approval. The headline on the front page was something like ‘MY AIDS HELL’ and it totally destroyed Richard and his partner. It was terrible. When you play with the tabloids you are *always* playing with fire” (quoted in Wells, 1998: 20).

Much of what a PR deals with will be routinised to a certain extent, working around release dates and tour schedules when their artists will be on the promotional treadmill. As noted in the previous chapter, the major difference between music PRs and PRs for government departments or corporate organisations is that the music PR's primary function is *promotional* rather than *informational*. However, there are occasions when events happen outside of their control or that of the promotional and marketing strategy and they switch to information-management and adopt a reactive stance. However ‘hard news’ PRs must also operate proactive and reactive campaigns and strategies concurrently (Gregory, 1996). When campaigns are proactive they serve a purely economic function (drawing attention to and promoting a tour or release), but when they



become reactive they are geared around damage limitation and preventing press intrusion (Pettigrew, 1989: 14-16).

Black (1989) notes that there are two main types of 'Crisis Management'. The first is what he terms 'known unknowns': this is where PRs operate in areas where there is a pre-known risk of danger (the illustrative example he draws on is the nuclear power industry, where there is an ever-present risk of safety problems through leaks). Activities are geared around the possibility of the worst case scenario actually happening. For music PRs, the only 'known unknown' is that a band or an artist's career is finite and they eventually split up or stop performing. This can happen either benignly or acrimoniously thereby presenting the PR with two possible sets of issues, one easier to work around than the other. The second type of 'crisis management' Black (ibid.) outlines relate to 'unknown unknowns' which are events which can never be anticipated and, as such, never prepared for; they will catch the PR completely off his or her guard. Pettigrew (1989: 14-16) warns, they must never feel pressurised into answering press questions if they are unsure of the bare facts. In general, PRs work around campaigns and processes anchored around, or building up to, predicted events. There may be points in their campaign which are unpredicted or do not go according to plan, but it is very rare that they are confronted with an 'unknown unknown' in its truest sense.

The most extreme case of an 'unknown unknown' in recent years was the suicide of Kurt Cobain in April 1994. Anton Brookes had worked as Nirvana's UK PR since their early releases on the Sub Pop label. He described how drug rumours constantly circulated in the press following their commercial breakthrough in 1991 with 'Nevermind' (after signing to Geffen), meaning that the campaigns he worked on were predominantly reactive, geared around either damage limitation or quashing rumours. Brookes was described by one journalist as atypical of PRs in the sense that "he always tries to be friends with the artists [he works on], perhaps more than a lot of other people would and maintains less professional distance". Brookes stated that overdose and suicide rumours were common during the band's final tour and he would be called regularly by the (mainly tabloid) press for official comments. He claimed that rumours of this nature were so commonplace that he did not treat them seriously which meant that when initial calls about Cobain's suicide came through to the office, he dismissed them as 'another



rumour'. In the following lengthy quote, Brookes described how the confirmation of the story was treated insensitively by the press who focussed on the sensationalist angle and because of this how, as a PR, the personal can override the professional:

Well, the phone started going off. Someone phones up and you get your "Kurt is dead. Is it true?" And I'm like "Just tell them to *fuck* off". It's six o' clock on a Friday night, the last thing we want is 'Kurt is dead' stories. And from there, then there was another one and another one and you're thinking, "There's no smoke without fire. Best call management to find out what's happening". So you put a call into management and you get a call going "There's been a body found. Police have not identified it". And you're thinking "Oh my God!" And then you get a call going ... [long pause] ... "Um, he's dead". And you're just like "Fucking hell!" ... [Pause] ... That was the first time I had ever lost a friend. The first time anyone close to me had ever died ... And then you get people phoning up going – some people were just like *so* callous about it all. Just *so* meticulous. "What size was the *fucking* hole in his head? What cartridge did he use? How much blood was on the back of the wall?" ... Things like that. And you're sat there just going [in monotone] "I don't know. I don't know. There's been a body found. Yes. It's been identified as Kurt Cobain. And no, we don't know the reasons why he died. No, we don't know if he was on heroin at the time". "Was anyone else involved?" Some people were like "Did he shoot all his family? Did he do this? Did he do that?" And to some people you'd be like "Look, he's a *fucking* person at the end of the day. He might be a rock star and he might be dead, but he was a *fucking* person. *Fuck off!*" Some people you get angry with because they were so [insensitive] ... Thankfully, one saving grace was it happened Friday night. I was getting calls at home from people who knew my wife or know me through a friend of a friend, for quotes. I tried to be dignified and tried to be as respectful of him and represent him in this situation, in this tragic situation, as best you can. But some people were just so *fucking* callous. And you were just like "Fuck off! You're just a fucking parasite. Are you happy?" I remember going off on a couple of people, going "He's dead now. You should be happy. You've got something to write about. The story you've always fucking wanted! Just leave him alone".

As well as a totally unpredictable event such as this, PRs can be faced with crises of their own making. They can overreach themselves in trying to secure too much from the press and end up losing everything resulting in an 'unknown unknown' and a switch from a pre-planned promotional campaign to a complex 'crisis management' campaign. While major campaigns are judged by artists and record companies by the quantity and



prominence of positive coverage across a variety of titles, PRs need to be aware that all magazines, even those within the same portfolio of titles, are in competition for exclusives and unique access. Indeed, Danny Eccleston stated that if certain bands were being written about in a vast spread of titles, this would make him turn down interviews. It is because the act would, he argued, be too prominent that their coverage in *Q* would not stand out from the competition. PRs can attempt to offer pseudo-exclusives to the press in the hope of maximising their pan-title coverage, but do so at great risk. As noted above, in regard to cover features, the features editor and the editor will demand that the PR provides access or information that rival titles do not have so that they can offer their target demographic a unique angle and, through this, lure potential new readers. Often features editors will, in exchange for a guaranteed cover feature, insist that an embargo is put in place on cover pieces in other magazines for up to several weeks or months from their publication date. As the example of *Kerrang!*'s underhand access to the Prodigy illustrates, editors closely monitor their rival titles and how access is being prioritised and distributed by PRs.

As has been discussed in depth above, the journalistic and PR communities are small and tightly knit together by a complex network of interconnections and gossip channels. In this regard, magazine editors are made aware of the immediate and (in certain cases) long-term editorial plans of their closest rivals and are aware that their own activities are being closely monitored. In interviews, several press officers independently raised the example of the Charlatans' campaign for the 'Us & Us Only' album in 1999 as an illustrative example of how the gossip network operates and how a PR can overreach themselves and cause irreparable damage to a campaign. John Best stated that the band's PR had attempted to synchronise several cover features (most notably *Select* and *Uncut*), but ended up losing them all: "It was a complete farce ... We were all having a laugh about it because we could see the PR was going 'Arrggh, fuck!' because they'd lost every front cover by trying to get too many. If one gets wind that somebody else has got a front cover they'll pull theirs. I think the whole domino chain of front covers fell because they were promising them to too many different people. Be careful about who you tell what".



Régine Moylett argued that the Charlatans campaign imploded not because of inter-title rivalry, but because of *Select* reneging on a promised cover piece, which she argues was typical of the magazine's editorial and professional approach. She says:

They were meant to be on *Uncut* and *Select* and ... *Uncut* trailed it ... *Select* saw it, dropped their cover even though they had been told that it was going to be on the cover of *Uncut* and the *Uncut* cover was appearing after *Select*. And they still dropped it ... The negotiating that goes on, you do deal with people on their word. The press officer in this case ... told *Select* that *Uncut* was coming and then *Select* decided not to put it on the cover after he had turned down others. So he's really pissed off. Every press officer you meet has a story like that about *Select*.

To confirm Moylett's claims about *Select*, several press officers discussed cases of where they had been deceived or misled by the magazine. There was, as a result, an undercurrent of distrust and caution in their future feature negotiations as they could not completely terminate the relationship because of the target demographic the magazine offered. There is a very clear tension here between personal/professional grudges and a professional/economic obligation to artists. Moylett stated that the magazine had negotiated an exclusive U2 cover feature with her. However, Andrew Harrison [the former editor and at that point a contributor] claimed that the cover and the piece were changed without his approval. This represented an intentional editorial shift in *Select*'s homology with its readers, setting up a dichotomy between Radiohead and U2 with the former's promotion in the title's aesthetic clearly designed to lead into an exclusion of the latter. In regard to the mechanics of this shift, Moylett argued that:

He [Harrison] says that John Harris changed his copy at pertinent places to change the slant of the piece. The captions for the photographs were all very unfair. They had stuff like "The tour's not selling. Here's a picture of Larry Mullen in an empty stadium because they can't sell any tickets" and it was done at rehearsal. And it wasn't on the cover. I knew that something was going wrong ... you just know because they go all quiet. I phoned John Harris and said, "I've heard it's not on the cover". "Oh it is" ... I had tried to pull it because it was Bono's birthday the day we were meant to be doing the interview. His wife came out to see him and he decided to take the day off. I tried to pull it about a week beforehand. I had Andy Perry and John Harris on the phone – *crying* down the phone "If we don't do this, we're going to have a hole on the front page! The front page is going to be empty. We held this up to our production deadline. You *cannot*



let us down now. You mustn't". And so I made him come back from his birthday and forget about his wife being off where she was. It was really horrible. I phoned John after the piece had gone to print and said, "I've heard it's not on the cover". "It is". "I've heard it's not". "U2 *are* on the cover of the magazine". When it came out it was [laughs] postage stamp size picture of U2 and Radiohead on the cover. And it said, "U2 are dead! Long live Radiohead!"<sup>206</sup> ... The Radiohead piece was done in the studio three weeks beforehand and was nothing to do with that at all. They were really embarrassed about and they got in touch and said, "I can't believe they're doing this. It's nothing to do with us" and I don't think they've spoken to them either since.

Following on from this, John Best stated that the magazine had put Elastica on the cover early in their career in a thematic 'Sex Issue' with the band's lead singer, Justine Frischmann, recreating the naked Christine Keeler photograph. Best stated:

We didn't want to do the cover. We said "Yeah, OK". She didn't really want to do it but we said, "Oh, go on. It'll be alright". Andrew Harrison [then the editor] stuck it on the front. They were supposed to be on the cover the following month. We'd already done the photo session for the cover on the following month ... But he put Justine on the cover on her own. We pulled the interview. We wouldn't let him do an interview for the cover thereafter so things got kind of ugly. Because they'd fucked us, we decided to fuck *Select* ... Everyone knows – they get angry with us and we get angry with them ... I'll talk to John Harris and say "Are you going to put it on the cover John?" And he'll say "Yes". He'll lie to you. He will definitely lie to you. Just to get what he wants ... Some of them you can trust and some of them you can't.

What is important to note about the above 'unknown unknowns' is that they are inscribed within a complex set of competitive professional and occupational ideologies. Here editors clash with both PRs and their own writers over the exegetical frameworks within which acts should be interpreted and how their translation will sit alongside those of rival titles on the newsstands. This results in the titles either slipping into amplified sensationalist stances to reposition acts outside of the normal promotional discourses prevalent in rival titles (as in the case of Elastica and U2) or de-prioritising artists rather than go head-to-head on a cover story with another title (as in the case of the Charlatans).

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<sup>206</sup> The actual cover line was "U2. The kings are dead ... Radiohead ... Long live the kings!" and appeared in the July 1997 edition of the magazine. The headline of the U2 article read "Where is everybody?" below a photograph of the band sound-checking in an empty stadium (Harrison, 1997).



As has been noted through this and previous chapters, the channels of promotion and communication between the press and press officers are far from straightforward or assured. Magazines are simultaneously independent of and dependent upon record labels and PRs, and within this uneasy and problematic relationship, the normal channels can break down. This is due to a variety of internal factors (such as editorial and journalistic clashes and professional distrust) and external factors (market forces, the activities of rival titles, the historical and professional discourses shaping title/PR relationships). There are, however, exceptional instances when the third party in this nexus (i.e. the artist) simultaneously works against the interests of the PR who represents them and the journalist or title sent to interview them. It is extremely rare for an artist to consciously sabotage a feature negotiated by their PR. Indeed, artists choose to veto titles they either disapprove of or have had problematic dealings with in the past rather than speak to them. They (like their PRs) are complicit in stepping onto the promotional treadmill. They know that features are (almost always) favourable and positive promotional vehicles that grant the artists the opportunity to construct and present a particular image or version of themselves to tap into the title's homology with its readers.

However, as already shown, there are examples of artists objecting to a journalist's line of questioning and they refuse to be drawn on particular issues. In extreme cases, PRs will pre-warn journalists that certain topics are taboo and advise that they do not raise them. Often artists, when questioned about topics (often drugs or sex related) they will not or cannot speak about, offer the euphemistic 'no comment' and refuse to be drawn. When presented with over-zealous and persistent journalists they will threaten to or actually terminate the interview.

One such example was an interview in the *NME* with Robbie Williams in 1998. Steve Sutherland, after protracted three-month negotiations with Williams' hesitant management, had secured an interview with Williams, but had to sign a legal document before the interview could take place. The contract "stipulates the exact date that the article should run in *NME* and threatens injunction if this date is breached. It also promises to 'procure' Robbie Williams for interview. It's rare for a contract to be this stringent. The whole thing stinks of a desperate need to maintain control. Only Courtney



Love<sup>207</sup> currently has a more infamous contract. Still, at least *NME* is not being told what questions to ask. *NME* duly signs” (Sutherland, 1998: 20). While the *NME* was not explicitly being told what they could and could not write here there was a clear process of news-management in place. It was designed to control the timing of the coverage so that it would synchronise with the record company’s wider promotional and marketing strategies and the *NME*, by agreeing to the terms of the contract, was complicit in this macro economic drive.

Williams insisted that Guy Chambers, his song-writing partner sit in on the interview, despite the fact that Sutherland has arranged a one-on-one interview. Williams deferred the first few questions to Chambers and then asked to be excused. When he returned he informed Sutherland that he felt uncomfortable, that he distrusted the *NME* and then terminated the interview by walking out saying “‘I’m finding it really difficult ... Because you’re the *NME* and I don’t like you ... Really fucking really difficult to do this ... I really can’t. I’ve tried me best. I really can’t. I’m gonna go home. I’m sorry”” (quoted in Sutherland, 1998: 20). Sutherland believed that Williams had mistaken him for *MM* editor, Mark Sutherland (who had been negative about Williams and Take That several times in print when he freelanced for *Smash Hits*) and several calls to Williams’ PR were unsuccessful in rescheduling the interview.

Sutherland argued that the *NME* piece was originally intended to be highly positive. Perhaps over-estimating the cultural influence of the paper, he believed that a cover feature would reposition Williams within an exegetical framework of ‘credibility’ and that no other title had the cultural capital to be able to bestow this upon him<sup>208</sup>. However, the decision to run with Williams on the cover must also be considered within the *NME*’s attempts to simultaneously shift its homology with its existing readers while courting a broader and elusive readership (i.e. Robbie Williams fans) to boost its ABC figures. The feature eventually ran as a substantial cover piece after protracted office discussion in the paper. Sutherland stated that “it was a genuine and honest piece that I

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<sup>207</sup> Interestingly, Sutherland was one of the few UK editors to agree to interview Love during this period. Sutherland claimed when I interviewed him that he refused to sign the document. However, a former *NME* freelancer stated that Sutherland was approached to do the interview by Love’s PR as he was known to be favourably disposed towards her, if not sycophantic.

<sup>208</sup> In the feature, Sutherland imagined the reverberations of the walk-out in Williams’ management company: “You can just hear them now: all those festival appearances leading up to this, the *piece de résistance*, the jewel in the crown of credibility, the *NME* interview, and he goes and blows it!” (Sutherland, 1998: 20).



think we knew would tap into the confusion that our readers feel about Robbie Williams – all that love/hate thing ... I'm an editor [and] that's a soap opera thing. People will be discussing it and they did in the letters page. That's a perfect kind of feature for the *NME*". Ted Kessler, the features editor, suggested that the piece was perhaps not as newsworthy as Sutherland had claimed, implying that its cover status came about not because of the piece's inherent journalistic qualities, but because "we were stuck for a cover that week". Kessler said that the office discussions about what to do with the piece resulted in a three-way split. The first option was to refuse to run it and the second option was to run it as a standard feature rather than a cover piece. "Or the third option, which was the one we went with, was to really make a big fuss about the fact that Robbie Williams ... [was] ... teetering on the edge of something very strange and acting in a bizarre manner. So we went for that one". From this it can be seen that exegetical frameworks are negotiated within the key newsroom roles and the editor is never fully autonomous within this exchange and can be overruled or forced to compromise<sup>209</sup>.

Just as with the U2 and Elastica pieces in *Select*, this was (as far as the PRs were concerned) a sensationalist 'unknown unknown', a piece which fell outside of their normal promotional activities and strategies and, in so doing, exposed the whole process. The fact that the feature did not happen as predicted became the angle of the feature and serves to open up a number of important debates about the nature of the PR/artist/press nexus and what expectations were at stake. While PRs can construct complex promotional strategies, negotiating exclusives with particular titles to deliver their artists to a specific demographic, it does not necessarily follow that the piece will run as intended. Occasionally editors or journalists will consciously pursue a conflicting agenda to that of the PR, yet this is extremely rare in features (with such critical discourses being more typical of reviews) as they risk not only losing access to the artist in question, but also to any of the other acts on the PR's roster. What the Williams case reveals is that

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<sup>209</sup> A former *NME* freelancer gave another example of this power dynamic in operation. At the height of Britpop (in 1995) Sutherland had (because he played football with Damon Albarn) sided the *NME* with Blur against Oasis. While this had ensured good relations with Blur's PR, it served to sour relations with Oasis and their PR to the extent that the band refused to do interviews with the *NME*. The band's success, by that stage, meant that they were not reliant on the *NME* for press and their presence on the cover of the paper would have significantly boosted its sales. Sutherland, in an attempt to get access to Oasis wrote a feature about the band (without any original interviews) and how Noel Gallagher was "king of the world". He took the feature to the other senior *NME* editorial staff but they rejected it as being too sycophantic. At the same time, Sutherland was editing *Vox*, but that magazine's editorial staff rejected the piece, even after a number of rewrites, for precisely the same reasons.



even when an editor and a press officer are congruent in their agendas and expectations for a feature (where both sides stand to benefit – the PR getting prominent and positive coverage for their acts and the title getting exclusive access to an act which can attract a previously elusive readership demographic), events (or, indeed, artists) can conspire against their constructed and mutually-beneficial consensus.

## **Conclusion**

Having considered in the previous chapters the music magazine market, the music journalism profession and the music PR profession in isolation, it was essential in terms of the overall conceptual and structural approach of the thesis to consider them all together. By analysing the various occupational and organisation factors, socio-professional politics, relationships of power, relationships of dependency and cultural discourses at stake within these complex interconnections it is possible to determine how, why and when artists are written about in the consumer music press. It was essential to, as was argued in the preceding chapters, consider the professional and cultural dynamics circulating within the press/PR nexus separately from the dominant (hard news-centric) sociological paradigms of news production and source relationships as a distinct area of sociological enquiry. Of course, there are a number of important similarities between what music journalists and music PRs do and what their hard news counterparts do, but there are also a series of important differences and distinctions at stake here. In terms of the music press these include important differences in music journalists' professional links, their organisational working structures, their goal orientations and the tensions between a journalist's obligations to an impartial critical standpoint, their place within a office politics hierarchy, their title's place in the market and its homology with its readers. In terms of music press officers as a distinct type of PR, there are important differences in their professional and exegetical obligations to the artists they represent. Also important are the formal and informal socio-professional links they establish and maintain, as cultural intermediaries, with writers and editorial staff and the PRs' place within a wider organisational hierarchy. In addition to this are the levels of cultural and



economic capital their roster of artists represent and how this is revised as well as their structural and organisational position as merely one part of macro record company promotional and marketing strategies inscribed within an economic need to meet particular goals.

As both Bourdieu (1986: 239-240; 1993: 94-96) and Negus (1996: 62) have argued, the socio-professional worlds of cultural intermediaries are tightly interconnected and heavily self-referential and this is nowhere more apparent than in the music journalist/music PR nexus. There is a very clear, and indeed intentional, blurring of the boundaries between the formal and the informal in how these two distinct and organisationally defined professions work and socialise together. The flows of communication between these two groups are not exclusively formal as they (for the most part) socialise in the same metropolitan cultural spaces and, within this, this is a very complex overlapping of taste cultures, determining to an extent what cultural ideas are circulated and artists are promoted. The occupational dynamics of these two groups become inscribed within a complex cultural and professional exchange that operates and is maintained simultaneously on a formal and an informal level. These dynamics, however, cannot be completely described within gender discourses of a male-dominated press being 'served' by a female-dominated PR profession as Negus (1992: 126-128) has suggested. The exchange is more complex than this not least because the changing recruitment dynamics within both the press and the PR profession have negated such a clear gendered dichotomy.

The academic work on the press/PR nexus has tended to establish a mono-directional flow of music industry influence and control over the music press. The PR has been positioned as dominant within this power structure while the press has been positioned as compliant and subsumed within the promotional wing of the music industry it is wholly or substantially economically dependent upon (Gillett, 1972: 63-64; Frith, 1978: 153-156; Frith, 1985: 127; Frith, 1983: 166/173-174; Harley & Botsman, 1982: 253; Breen, 1987: 210; Pettigrew, 1998: 14-16; Negus, 1992: 118; Kane, 1995: 14). However, this view of the press/PR power relations is rooted in economic reductionism. As such, it fails to recognise the important social, organisational and professional dynamics that tie the press and PRs into a relationship of mutual dependency where



power structures become negotiated rather than imposed. Such economic reductionism tends to approach the 'press' as a single, unified entity, wholly at the mercy of the music industry. It is also based on an assumption that, within this relation of presumed economic dependence, PRs can determine every aspects of how their artists are written about, including prominence of coverage, exegetical angle, critical tone and when it will be published.

However, as this thesis has shown, the power of a PR within this exchange is never guaranteed nor is it total. This is because a number of factors and forces exist outside of their control (at the level of record companies, at the level of the artist they represent and, finally, at the level of the idiosyncratic professional cultures of the titles they work with) shaping, directing and limiting their socio-professional activities. PRs can attempt to exploit the commercial success of the major acts on their rosters, using them as a negotiating tool for positive and prominent coverage for *all* their acts. Indeed certain major acts will be seen by editors as a way of boosting their circulation figures and extending their homology with their readership by appealing to their core readers while simultaneously tapping into previously elusive demographic groups. However, the market success of these acts is temporal and so, ergo, is their PR's lobbying power. Acts can lose their market appeal, split up, take their press representation out-of-house or find themselves excluded from a magazine aesthetic they were once metonymic of as the title revises its homology with its readers. There is a constant turnover of acts in the press (particularly in the inkies) and within this a complex dynamic of editorial and aesthetic inclusion and exclusion. The criteria of entry can and will change and therefore PRs cannot assume that once their artists are within this aesthetic that they will automatically remain there.

It is essential, as has been discussed in this and the previous chapters, to move away from a homogenised view of 'the press' in general and individual titles in particular. Magazines are commercial enterprises with distinct goals and norms and, as such, they are produced under particular organisational conditions, shaped by particular economic pressures and structurally reoriented as a result of changes in editorial staff (throughout the editorial hierarchy) and socio-professional relations/politics. It is therefore important to account for these forces and the short- and long-term impact they



will have on each title's aesthetic agenda and the homology that ties them to their readers. The aesthetic of each title must be seen as necessarily ever-shifting and subject to change as a result of editorial and staff turnover and the power and influence that a PR has at individual gates at any given time is determined by the combination of all these complex factors. There is additionally a complex dynamic of exegesis here, in terms of how exegetical frameworks in the press are established, maintained and revised and how the PR reacts to these changes by re-evaluating, in accordance, the exegetical frameworks and discourses within which they position their acts. PRs cannot automatically assume that just because they have an act, the press will want to write about them or write about them within the exegetical framework proffered by the PR.

Additionally, simply because an artist passes through the gates, it does not follow that they will play the game and will not scupper a PR's strategy (as the Robbie Williams example revealed). There are numerous 'unknown unknowns' that the PR can and will encounter. For the most part their work is planned around record company promotional schedules, but this promotional activity can break down or be supplanted by external events or scandals and the PR will have to shift to deal primarily with the informational, moving from a proactive promotional campaign to a reactive damage limitation campaign. For example, the PR can overreach themselves and risk damaging both the campaign and their artists' profile (as was the case with the Charlatans) or they can be 'stitched up' by titles working from a different agenda to the one they have planned for (as with U2 and *Select*). These events can sour socio-professional relations, but the PR cannot fully sever ties with a title as a punishment. They are locked into a mutual dependency and the press needs access to artists just as much as PRs need to get their artists' message/promotional activities across. In attempting to limit the number of complications that a campaign for a major act can run into, the PR will take steps to control the amount of access that the press has to avoid over-saturation and negotiate exclusives. However, access can be negotiated outside of the control of the PR (as was the case with *Kerrang!* and the Prodigy) and this informal access can damage the PR's long-term relations with other titles that has played by the rules of formal and approved access. There exists here an ever-shifting power balance and exchange and, as such, press campaigns can never be assured or predicted.

Certainly, the consumer music press is part of the wider music industry and their economic fortunes are closely linked to record companies' fortunes but the press needs to be considered as organisationally distinct, with particular norms, professional codes and pressures distinct to each newsroom. It is misleading then to generalise and take a homogenised view of the music press and how PRs operate here. While it has been suggested that advertising revenue and advertising trade-offs are a/the determinant force in ensuring industry control over the press, this serves only to simplify a convoluted set of dynamics. In an over-saturated magazine marketplace, mainstream titles have increasingly adopted a lifestyle agenda and now much of their advertising revenue comes from outside the music industry (mainly from clothing, alcohol and tobacco manufacturers) and record companies are no longer their sole or even majority advertisers. In terms of organisational structures, the major magazine publishers (IPC and Emap) operate centralised advertising departments overseeing their portfolios of titles and individual editors or advertising managers do not negotiate industry advertising spending for their titles. It is therefore misleading to suggest that record companies use this as leverage to secure either prominent or positive editorial coverage for their artists. In terms of long-term corporate strategy editors will, of course, liaise with the advertising department to boost advertising revenue and opportunities, but ultimately they will be sent flatpacks each issue to fit copy around the ad pages they themselves will not have negotiated.

Outside of the political economy paradigm, bribery and payola have also been seen as the PRs' way of creating a professional culture of compliance and reliance. This is seen as working both legitimately (creating a climate based on 'handouts', junkets and the engineering of the 'right' mood for exchanges) and illegitimately (such as cocaine and attempts to impose contracts, as was the case with both Q Prime/Hole and Robbie Williams). However, journalists have suggested that foreign trips and free alcohol/drugs are so ingrained within their professional dealings with PRs that they are taken for granted and, as such, do not sway their opinions. Additionally, in recent years industry cutbacks have impacted directly on the budgets of both in-house press departments and independent press companies, meaning that the amount of industry 'handouts' and junkets have exponentially declined and therefore cannot any longer be presented as



influential in determining editorial content. The offer of junkets can be used as a form of leverage but the Travis/Paul Lester case reveals that this is never assured and is based to an extent on personal and professional histories and politics. Junkets must not, then, be viewed as simply a way of 'buying' positive and prominent coverage. They are very costly and linked to the perceived market potential of the act and not all acts are pitched at the mainstream. Beyond this, the attempts by the industry to impose interview contracts or restrictive conditions for their major artists (as the film industry has done) is a comparatively recent phenomenon and should not be seen as commonplace. Of course, this possibly will set a precedent for future press/PR exchanges, but the risks for press officers in attempting to dictate so overtly are high and, for the most part, have met with resistance from editors.

Is there close and mutually beneficial collaboration between the press and PRs or a climate of dictatorial PR power? Having considered in detail the formal and informal press/PR exchange it is clear that PRs have to compromise at particular points as much as journalists do. The uni-directional flow of power and influence does not exist and is more mercurial and subject to change and complications than previous authors have assumed or suggested. Although there are two distinct social, professional and organisational structures with their own norms and expectations, meaning that there are a great many complexities tied up in reconciling their different needs and often personal politics impact on the exchange. Dealings here, as has been discussed in this chapter, are subject to clashes and grudges, meaning that nothing is ever assured as the requirements of each side and their socio-professional attitudes will change. The social and professional barriers here serve only to ensure that the flows of communication are never fluid or predictable. In order to succeed, PRs must understand the complex taste publics and professional and political dynamics within which titles are produced. Within each title there exists an intricate series of hierarchically structured editorial gates (for example, the live editor, the album/reviews editor, the features editor, the assistant editor and the editor). There must be harmony or consensus across all these gates (albeit sometimes imposed by a senior editor) before anything can pass through. Because of ever-shifting socio-professional discourses, a great many obstacle and barriers to entry exist. PRs cannot simply find a culturally sympathetic or malleable individual writer willing to do

the review or interview and assume that the piece will progress upwards through all the title's gates and emerge exegetically in the way they intended. There has been, in the UK music press, a concerted shift in employment terms and conditions since the mid-1990s towards the imposition by the major publishers of highly restrictive freelance contracts for reviewers and writers (Forde, 2001). Their position outside of the newsroom power structure means freelancers hold little sway in the discussions about which types of acts are written about and the exegetical frameworks within which they are considered. Even within the editorial/staffer structure, often decisions will be made at the highest editorial level that will overrule the decisions of those gates at the middle or the bottom of the newsroom hierarchy. Only in accounting for the elaborate and, indeed mercurial, professional discourses linking and positioning these various gates and the PR's position with this process is it possible to arrive at a full understanding of the exchanges that take place within each title in particular and the music press in general.



## **Chapter 7 - Conclusion**

This thesis has presented a critical analysis of a topic that has been much under-theorised and under-researched in both popular music studies and media studies. Popular music studies has produced a number of full-length and other detailed studies on other media forms, most notably video and MTV (Kaplan, 1987; Lewis, 1990; Cubitt, 1991; Goodwin, 1992) and radio (Barnes, 1988; Barnard, 1989; Negus, 1992), but analysis of print media has been limited. Popular music journalism and the popular music press represent important organisational, cultural and economic sites of activity and detailed academic frameworks of interpretation and understanding are therefore needed. The conceptual and methodological approaches adopted here can be located within theories of media production and the thesis takes the existing dominant paradigms and revises and reworks them by taking music journalism as a particular strand of popular arts criticism. As noted in the literature review, the existing academic work that has considered aspects of this topic is both conceptually and methodologically restricted by theorising the music press from *without* rather than from *within*. This thesis set out to address this theoretical and research gap. The UK music magazine market has become, since the mid-1990s, over-saturated and fragmented (as new titles have entered the market and existing titles have been either folded or re-designed). However, the present scale of the market, the cultural links titles have with their readership, the professional/organisational/economic links they have with the music industry (particularly record labels) and the press's simultaneous role of promotion and interpretation make this a rich and important area of academic inquiry.

The approach of the thesis has been production-centric in order to gain an understanding of how music titles work as economic entities and how they are organisationally and professionally distinct from, yet tied to, the wider music industry, and in particular record companies. The work avoids a static and homogenised notion of the 'music press', considering instead its heterogeneous nature and how individual titles evolve and adapt under changing market, professional, organisational and employment conditions. Rather than offer a detailed historical analysis of the UK music press, the thesis focused instead on dynamics during a particular historical period (from the late-1990s to 2001). There is, of course, consideration of the various market and occupational conditions that led to this point and how the period is located within a historical



continuum. The first-hand research conducted (interviewing and participant observation, supplemented with secondary sources drawn from journalist trade titles, most notably *Press Gazette*) was essential in order to gain an understanding of the various forces at work here. The findings were then used to reconsider the existing academic work on music journalists, arts critics and the print media in general.

The analysis of the music magazine market drew chiefly on political economy approaches in order to consider business structuring and how media organisation middle management plays a determining role in media production. It is essential to view music titles as businesses in their own right (rather than reduce them to the level of being merely an ancillary wing of record label promotional departments) and to consider the market dynamics within which magazines compete and court particular readership demographics. Within an overall trend towards concentration of ownership, the major publishers (Emap and IPC in particular) are complexly structured and ordered organisations. Individual titles have increasingly been positioned within (and determined by) broad corporate portfolios of titles, existing not autonomously but as merely one link in a wider chain of titles, designed to hold readers within the company, rather than to a particular title, for life. Within this strategy of portfolio management, individual titles have been forced to establish a particular core agenda and aesthetic to complement the agendas and aesthetics of the other titles around them in the portfolio. Corporate strategy has impacted on titles in other important ways, seen most obviously in the push towards lifestyle journalism as well as multi-media brand developments and extensions which are intended to increase overall revenue and stabilise each title's position within the marketplace.

These corporate dynamics and market expectations impact directly in a number of ways on editorial activities, and the editor must reconcile these needs with the needs of their staff and their overall vision for their title. Long-term strategy meetings within publishing organisations have increasingly shifted the editor's duties away from day-to-day office activities and towards more corporate and market-centric duties. Editors have become caught between two sets of tensions and obligations (to their publishers and to their staff) and they must create consensus and reconciliation here. Increasingly their loyalty is towards their publishers and this has had important ramifications for the socio-

professional dynamics within newsrooms. In terms of overall budgets and employment conditions, a programme of increasing corporate control has been imposed from the top down. Within this, a small group of carefully positioned editorial ‘processors’ impose and articulate publishing policy set by executives upon an increasing raft of de-democratised freelancer writers/‘gatherers’ who, in order to make a basic living, are forced to acquiesce in and absorb, through socio-professional osmosis, company and editorial policy. However, it must not be assumed that the drafting and imposition of policy and editorial direction is uni-directional and non-negotiable. Newsrooms, as distinct professional organisms, work as complex sites of negotiation, adaptation and resistance and the research basis of the thesis was designed to define and account for these dynamics.

Music journalists are, as English (1979: 20) argued, “‘journalists with a difference’” in that they do not (with the exception of the news editor) require formal journalistic qualifications. Indeed, this notion of ‘difference’ is typical in the professional evaluation of arts critics in general (Steinberg, 1979) and, as an argument, was repeated by several journalists I interviewed. Many described themselves (and each other) as ‘writers’ and this had important ramifications for their professional activities and their career prospects (in terms of what opportunities were open to them should they leave music journalism). While Bourdieu (1986: 94-96) has argued that writers are the ideal/typical readers of their own titles, many journalists seemed to assume cultural proximity with their readers, suggesting that they themselves read the title and so knew what their readers were like and what they wanted. This, however, was by no means universal as the example of Sharon O’Connell at *MM* illustrated. She admitted the type of artists she wanted to write about would not fit into the *MM* aesthetic and so freelanced simultaneously for *Time Out* to cover the acts she, personally, was interested in and enthusiastic about. Additionally, many of the *Select* senior editors admitted they were not fans of the Stereophonics but believed the band to be core to their readers’ interests and so covered them in the title. Often age was taken by journalists as a key factor in the loss of empathy with their readers. Indeed, John Harris cited this factor when he left the editorship of *Select* as did Scott Manson when he left *Ministry* and Allan Jones when he left *MM* to launch *Uncut*. There is, at times, an ‘imagined’ empathy in the readership/title



homology and journalists felt that they had to display, for economic reasons, a detachment here. As Mark Ellen noted:

When I was at *Smash Hits* we were all in our twenties ... I think in a way that really helped because we had a critical distance from it. You used to get to work and you used to have this mental image of a fourteen-year old who lived in, I think it was Grinstead or somewhere. We had a fantasy perfect reader that we used to try and imagine we were [laughs]. You had to sit there and think "Right. Toyah. I'm fourteen, I'm a girl, I live in Grinstead. What would I be interested in about Toyah?" ... I thought that was quite a good discipline really. And in a way, because we weren't particularly attached to any of the artists we wrote about, we were able to evaluate very clearly which ones most captivated the audience and why.

Within the newsroom's division of labour, how processors are positioned affects how goals are pursued both individually and collectively and what tensions may arise. Editors, because they are increasingly pulled towards a corporate middle management role, have to delegate newsroom power and authority across the other key processor and editorial roles and, within this delegation, there is scope for subtle negotiation and revision of policy. Indeed, newsroom policy, while being shaped generally by middle management via the editor, is also shaped and refined at particular points by other editorial staff members. This is most obvious at the level of the reviews editor in general and the live editor on the inky in particular. They are responsible for recruiting and mentoring a constant influx of freelance writers who, because of their cultural proximity to the title's readership, can introduce and circulate new ideas within the office. The homology that exists between a title and its readership is ideally fluid and reflexive and the live desk and reviews desk operates as the key entry point of this fluidity into the press embodied in both the writers and their ideas.

The key processor gates within each newsroom must be considered under conditions, in turn, of conditional dependency and conditional autonomy and newsrooms cannot be considered as monolithic and inert. Each section editor operates simultaneously in the pursuit of individual goals and collective goals and their contribution to their title's homology with its readers operates both overtly and subtly. Music magazine newsrooms, in this regard, cannot be seen as purely professional spheres. They are also cultural and personal spheres and while overarching editorial and organisational norms and goals are

imposed, individual personalities also help shape production activities. The relationship that individual processors have with their editor and the relationship freelancers have with section editors (particularly reviews editors) will be a contributory factor in the extent and amount of autonomy they have as well as how their career path develops. The thesis provides a detailed analysis of all these forces at work and how dynamics of production are influenced here. It was important for the thesis to build on this by considering the socio-professional dynamics of different music magazine newsrooms as simultaneously similar (in terms of orienting activities around the production cycle, the structural and hierarchical division of labour and the allocation of resources and goals) and dissimilar (in terms of how different editors operate, how this filters into the social and professional dynamic of the office space and how the holder of each processor role considers their position within the office hierarchy). While editorial policy may be imposed to synchronise activities and determine collective goals, it is far from the case that its imposition brings routinisation and harmony. The turnover of staff and a change of editor will introduce new social and professional dynamics into the office space as well as a revision of the title/readership homology. Within this, there exists a complex process of aesthetic and professional inclusion and exclusion, as staff and freelancers find themselves at odds (either through age or through personality and policy clashes) with editorial and market policy and either leave or are removed. There is a constant dynamic in operation within each newsroom and the thesis locates the personal, the cultural and the aesthetic as being of equal importance to the professional and the organisational here.

Existing academic work on this topic has tended to view the music press from the perspective of the music industry, rather than vice versa. Here the music press officer has been positioned as the key (and, in many cases, sole) point of contact for the music press and music journalists. It was important in the thesis to extend these arguments and consider in detail the occupational and organisational activities of music PRs. However, music PRs have tended to be defined in homogenous terms (much like the 'music press' was previously considered in homogenous terms), with no accounting for the distinct types of PRs and the different PR departmental structures. There are important cultural and professional issues at stake here and the thesis defined music PRs along three distinct lines: firstly, the in-house PR at major record companies; secondly, the in-house PR at



independent record companies; and, finally, the independent/out-of-house PR company. While sharing broad goals (i.e. a duty to promote and represent their artists and their material), these distinct PR departments necessitated individual analysis in order to account for and critically discuss their differences as well as their similarities.

Just as the dominant paradigms of hard news production were revised in order to critically understand music journalists and their organisational and professional activities, so music PRs had to be considered as a distinct type of PR because their activities are primarily *promotional* rather than *informational*. As a result, the existing conceptual frameworks, because of their emphasis on PRs working within hard news production rather than the arts, had to be reworked and reformulated. Music PRs exist at an important structural position in relation to artists, record companies and the music press and, as a result, are presented with, and must reconcile, a number of distinct (and, at times, antagonistic) needs and obligations. In relation to record companies, they must locate their activities within wider promotional and marketing strategies with a view towards achieving particular economic goals and often press campaigns work as ‘early indicators’ of overall promotional media campaigns, helping to establish the cultural discourses through which artists are mediated.

Through their links with the music press, PRs must negotiate their artists through a complex series of hierarchically structured editorial gates across a variety of titles, tailoring their artists’ exegetical frameworks to the particular market and title/homology needs of each magazine. They must have a detailed knowledge of each title, its hierarchy and internal politics and be able to interpret the professional and cultural shifts that take place within each title in reaction to staffing changes and market forces. Initially proactive in establishing a foothold in particular titles, as their artists’ market profile increases PRs become more reactive and distribute or restrict access and exclusives across titles. However, their ability to use their artists’ commercial status as leverage is both conditional and precarious. Attempts by PRs to use a major act as leverage to dictate the nature of coverage or to gain coverage for smaller acts on their roster is high risk and often serves to create greater long-term complications than the short-term problem (for the PR and their campaign) it may resolve.

As cultural intermediaries, their activities are neither exclusively formal nor informal, and they must be seen as operating simultaneously on both levels. While promotional campaigns are conducted, in the short-term, within particular timeframes, the PR must also monitor and revise their artists' press profile and their relationship across all titles on a long-term basis. Indeed, while the majority of their work is geared around release and tour dates, dates may change, affecting the timing and overall strategy of the campaigns. Events can shift the PR's activities from promotional to informational, leading them to take on a role professionally similar to that of hard news PRs, in terms of news management and damage limitation activities. Finally, their obligations to their artists mean that they must establish, maintain and revise the core exegetical frameworks and cultural discourses within which artists are presented to the press in general and the distinct frameworks through which they are presented to individual magazines. This is, in part, determined by each title's aesthetic and market position that are subject to change through both market-led redesigns and staffing and employment patterns.

The three distinct types of PR organisations present particular organisational and professional dynamics as well as having particular levels of cultural capital attributed to them (by themselves, by their roster of artists and by the press). Artists choose either to stay in-house or take their press out-of-house for a number of economic, structural, professional and cultural reasons and a press department or company's roster of acts is continually evolving and subject to change as a result of all these factors. While in-house press departments at both major and independent labels have their roster of acts 'imposed' on them by the record company, it does not follow that these artists choose to remain (or even begin) in-house. Independent press officers suggest that there are complicated cultural dynamics caught up in this as the press will view in-house PRs with distrust as having to work on behalf of artists they do not 'believe' in. However, this argument is based on an assumption that independent PR companies are universally viewed within the press as somehow more 'ethical' and 'committed' than in-house press departments. Indeed, this is far from the case as particular journalists view certain independent PR firms and independent PRs as unprofessional and problematic to work with. Economically and culturally there are greater risks associated with independent PR companies and this uncertainty does, to an extent, shape their activities. They must build



and maintain a fluid roster of artists by balancing established acts with emergent and breakthrough acts to replace those artists at the top end (accepting their marketability as finite) in order to avoid cultural stasis. They cannot rely, in their long-term activities and relationships with the press, on a single successful act or commercially buoyant genre. There is greater economic insecurity associated with out-of-house press departments as their fees and budgets are determined by the labels their artists are signed to. The flows of communication are also more problematic as in-house press departments enjoy spatial proximity to the marketing and promotional departments within the label and these different departments are more able to liaise closely.

In terms of how PRs deal with the press and how the press deals with PRs, a complex series of relationships, dependencies and a shifting power balance has been mapped out in the thesis. Rather than accept the argument that press officers can control (through payola and press junkets) and set the agenda of the music press (Negus, 1992), the thesis considered instead the myriad of cultural, professional and organisational factors that shape media production and source relations. It is important to analyse the music press and PR departments as professionally and organisationally distinct yet linked and to then consider how power and influence is negotiated and imposed by *both* sides in the exchange at particular points. This relationship cannot be reduced to one of economic dependency, with the press financially disadvantaged and reliant on record company advertising revenue. Indeed, the magazine market shifts since the mid-1990s has seen a push towards lifestyle advertising opportunities, processed in the major publishing organisation through a centralised advertising department across a portfolio of titles rather than through editors directly.

The existing studies of the music press have tended to adopt a homogenised internal view of the 'music press' and consider only a single type of entry point/gate into the press. They do not consider a diversity of titles, their distinct professional and organisational activities and the complex series of hierarchically structured gates that exist within each of these titles. It is essential to understand the business practices and market activities of magazine publishers and to then extend this to consider how external market forces impact on, shape, direct and condition the activities of music journalists, both individually (in the pursuit of individual goals and career paths) and collectively (as

one part of a much wider media organisation infrastructure). White's (1950: 162) concept of the 'gatekeeper' within the press was revised within the thesis to consider how a newsroom operates as a series of editorial gates whose dynamics either include or exclude artists from a title's aesthetic and its homology with its readers. Negus (1992: 119-120) suggested that press officers locate empathetic journalists and use this to negotiate coverage for their artists, but this view reduces newsroom power structures to a single point rather than consider the convoluted internal professional, organisational and personal forces that exist across the various gates here. While press officers can locate favourably disposed 'gatherers' or 'processors', it can never be assumed that consequently their acts will be written about by a title as the complexity of the internal newsroom power structures ensures an act's passage through a title is fraught with uncertainty (as the examples of U2 and *Select* and Robbie Williams and the *NME* illustrated). Press officers (both in-house and out-of-house) are also constrained by the need to position their structured activities within wider record company promotional strategies, working around release dates that are subject to change and revision (as revealed in the case of John Best's attempts to exegetically reposition Jean-Michel Jarre).

While press officers and music journalists operate within their own distinct organisational and professional structures, as cultural intermediaries their socio-professional activities blur the division between the formal, the semi-formal and the informal as journalists and PRs often circulate within the same cultural spaces (bars, clubs, gigs and so forth). As Bourdieu (1986: 239-240; 1993: 94-96) has argued, the social and professional spheres of cultural intermediaries are complexly linked and the professions are highly self-referential. This is nowhere more apparent than in the links between music journalists and music PRs. It is not uncommon for journalists to share flats with PRs, be friends with PRs and even be married to (or in relationships with) PRs. There are also various 'overlaps' between the two professions in terms of individuals acting simultaneously as journalists and PRs. This can be seen in the overt case of Chris Sharp writing for *The Wire* and in the more covert case of the senior reviews editor at *Uncut* who wrote under a pseudonym when reviewing albums for the magazine that he had written liner notes for. While Negus (1992: 125) argues that journalists often become PRs as they have 'inside' knowledge of the press and music PR offers them greater career



stability, the exchange is more complex than this. There exists a two-way traffic between the professions, with journalists leaving the press to become PRs (as was the case with Julian Carrera) and also PRs leaving to become journalists (as was the case with both Angus Batey and Sarah Edwards). These complex exchanges provide important insights into how these two careers operate both separately and together as well as into how socio-professional dynamics operate both formally and informally in the circulation of artists and ideas. These different relationship levels must be accounted for in order to provide a detailed analysis of how these professionals, as representatives of two structurally distinct but linked organisations, work together. The power balance here is necessarily two-way and negotiable. Press officers and music journalists/the music press are equally subject to particular if different forms of control and, as a result, both sides must frequently make and work around certain concessions and compromises.

This thesis has presented a market, organisational, professional and socio-cultural analysis of a particular strand of the music press (the UK mainstream consumer titles) and the relationships that link titles and writers to music PRs at a particular historical point. Within this, the thesis considers how power and dependency is imposed, negotiated and resisted by *both* sides. In so doing, it fills an important conceptual gap that had previously existed in popular music studies and media studies. The thesis makes no theoretical assumptions about audience reception and how readers of the music press negotiate the discourses and exegetical frameworks established within the press/PR nexus. Such empirical work on the readership, while important, was outside of the scope of this thesis. However the existing work on arts critics' cultural and economic function at the level of the audience (Lang, 1970; Farber, 1976; Burzynski & Bayer, 1977; English & Martin, 1977; Steinberg, 1979; Austin, 1983; Wyatt & Badger, 1984, 1987; Schrum, 1991) offers important conceptual entry points for such work. The research does, however, demonstrate the importance of the image of the ideal/typical reader for music journalism and the title/reader homology as well as touching on the role of market research and micro-testing (as discussed in relation to the launching of *Uncut* and *Q* in Chapter 3) in corporate planning by publishers. Ultimately, the thesis was intended to make a significant contribution to the study of the music press, music journalism and music PR and to underline its importance as an area of academic inquiry.

## **Appendix – List of Interviewees in Alphabetical Order**



This interview name index provides a list all individuals interviewed for this Ph.D. It details the positions they held at time they were interviewed, their career background (where relevant) and the type of interview conducted.

## **I Journalists/Magazine Publishers**

Aizlewood, John – reviews editor at *Q*. Face-to-face interview.

Alexander, Phil – editor of *Kerrang!* Face-to-face interview.

Batey, Angus – reviews editor at *music365.com*. Former reviews editor at *Vox* before its closure and *NME* contributor. Previously worked as an independent PR. Face-to-face interview.

Burnett, Neil – art editor at *Select* and former art editor at *NME*. Face-to-face interview.

Cigarettes, Johnny (real name – Johnny Sharp) – staff writer at *NME*. Face-to-face interview.

Clerk, Carol – news editor at *MM* and *Uncut* contributor. Face-to-face interview.

Davies, David – editor of *Q*. Former editor of *Mixmag* before its acquisition by Emap. Face-to-face interview.

Eccleston, Danny – features editor at *Q*. Former *NME* contributor (under the pseudonym of Danny Frost) and various instrument magazines. Face-to-face interview.

Ellen, Mark – editor in chief of Emap Metro music titles. Former *NME* contributor. Part of editorial team that launched both *Smash Hits* and *Q*. Telephone interview.

Farrell, Judith – editor and publisher of *BBM*. Face-to-face interview.

Fitzgerald, Brendon – editor of *music365.com*. Formerly part of *NME* editorial team and former *nme.com* editor. Face-to-face interview.

Fortnam, Ian – freelance writer for *Vox*, *Kerrang!* and *NME*. Face-to-face interview.

Fyfe, Andy – production editor at *Select*. Former *NME* sub-editor. Face-to-face interview.

Harris, John – editor of *Select*. Former *NME* live editor and staff writer. Face-to-face interview.

Harrison, Ian – ‘Primer’ section editor at *Select*. Face-to-face interview.

Herrington, Tony – editor and publisher of *The Wire*. Face-to-face interview.

Irvin, Jim – ‘Mojo Filter’ reviews editor at *Mojo*. Former reviews editor at *MM* (under the name Jim Arundel). Face-to-face interview.

Jennings, Dave – news assistant at *MM*. Face-to-face interview.

Jones, Allan – editor of *Uncut*. Previously editor of *MM*. Face-to-face interview.

Kelly, Danny – publisher of *music365.com*. Former *NME* and *Q* editor. Face-to-face interview.

Kessler, Ted – features editor at *NME*. Face-to-face interview.

Lester, Paul – music editor at *Uncut*. Former *MM* features editor. Telephone interview.

Lewis, Alan – editor in chief of IPC Music & Sport titles. Former *NME* editor. Face-to-face interview.



Manson, Scott – editor of *Ministry*. Telephone interview.

Martin, Gavin – Film and Media editor at *NME* and *Uncut* contributor. Telephone interview.

Mellor, Chris – editor of *DJ*. Face-to-face interview.

Mulvey, John – assistant editor at *NME*. Telephone interview.

Murphy, Peter – freelance writer at *Hot Press*. Face-to-face interview.

Needham, Alex – acting editor of *Smash Hits*. Face-to-face interview.

O'Connell, Sharon – live editor at *MM*. Face-to-face interview.

Oldham, James – live editor at *NME*. Face-to-face interview.

Perry, Andy – assistant editor at *Select*. Face-to-face interview.

Sheehan, Tom – staff photographer at *Uncut* and *MM* freelance photographer. Previously *MM* chief photographer. Face-to-face interview.

Sinclair, David – rock critic at *The Times* and *Q* freelancer. Face-to-face interview.

Snow, Mat – editor of *Mojo*. Former *NME* contributor and *Q* section editor. Part of editorial team that launched *Maxim*. Face-to-face interview.

Staunton, Terry – news editor at *Uncut*. Former *NME* news editor and staff writer. Face-to-face interview.

Stevenson, Neil – editor of *Mixmag*. Face-to-face interview.

Stubbs, David – staff writer at *Uncut* and *NME* freelance. Former *MM* staff writer. Face-to-face interview.

Sullivan, Caroline – rock critic at *The Guardian* and former *MM* freelancer. Face-to-face interview.

Sutherland, Mark – editor of *MM*. Former *NME* features editor. Face-to-face interview.

Sutherland, Steve – editor of *NME*. Previously *MM* assistant editor. Face-to-face interview.

Thompson, Jody – news editor at *NME*. Telephone interview.

Trynka, Paul – features editor at *Mojo*. Face-to-face interview.

Wilkinson, Roy – reviews editor at *Select*. Face-to-face interview.

## **II Press Officers**

Battye, Duff – head of press at Word of Mouth (in-house press division at BMG). Face-to-face interview.

Best, John – head of independent PR company Best Est. Former in-house PR at Virgin. Face-to-face interview.

Brookes, Anton – head of independent PR company Bad Moon. Face-to-face interview.



Butterly, Louise – press officer at independent PR company RMP. Face-to-face interview.

Carrera, Julian – press officer at independent PR company Hall or Nothing. Face-to-face interview.

Davis, Paddy – press officer at Bad Moon. Face-to-face interview.

McKay, Sandra – press officer at RMP. Face-to-face interview.

Moylett, Régine – head of RMP. Former in-house PR at Island. Face-to-face interview.

Sharp, Chris – head of press in-house for federation of independent labels within Beggars Banquet. Face-to-face interview.

Spear, Justin – in-house press officer at 4AD (part of Beggars Banquet). Face-to-face interview.

Stuart, Kate – head of press at independent PR company Casablanca. Former in-house press officer at Polydor. Face-to-face interview.

### **III Unofficial Interviews/Conversations/E-Mails with Journalists & Press Officers**

Ashon, Will – *Muzik* contributor and head of Big Dada records (imprint of Ninja Tune).

Bee, Sarah – freelancer at *MM*.

Bonner, Michael – film editor at *Uncut*. Former TV & Film editor at *MM*.

Edwards, Sarah – press officer at Bad Moon.

Parkes, Taylor – former *MM* and *Ikon* freelancer.

Roberts, Chris – freelancer at *Uncut* and former *MM* contributor. Former editor of *Ikon*.



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