Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association

Volume 2013 *Proceedings of the 71st New York State Communication Association* | Article 4

2014

Be Careful What You Wish For: Popular Music in an Age in Which "Information Wants to be Free"

thom gencarelli
Manhattan College, thom.gencarelli@manhattan.edu

Be Careful What You Wish For: Popular Music in an Age in Which "Information Wants to be Free"

Cover Page Footnote

Thom Gencarelli, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Communication Department at Manhattan College in Riverdale,New York.

Be Careful What You Wish For: Popular Music in an Age in Which "Information Wants to be Free"

Thom Gencarelli
Manhattan College

This article posits that the widespread adoption of music recording files as the "preferred" form for the storage, retrieval, and dissemination of music is not, and never has been driven by users/listeners; that this is an oversimplified understanding of what has happened since roughly the turn of the century. Instead, the article makes the historically-based argument that what has happened has been driven by the industry side of the equation—even in the face of what is, again, an oversimplified understanding: that the record industry has undeniably suffered and contracted in size and revenue as a result of the digital turn. The overarching significance of this argument is an attempt to bring some much needed perspective to the many analyses of what has been going on in the realm of popular music and the music industry, and to suggest what the consequence of this state of affairs might mean for the future of both the music and its industry.

Let's be clear: The rush from tangible, hard copies of musical product—what the recording industry refers to for copyright and licensing purposes as "mechanicals"— and to digital files was not driven by the fact that this is what people, and young people in particular, want. This is certainly what people nowadays seem to believe, especially young people. As a result, though, the question that drives the present analysis is as follows: If the quantum shift to digital music files for the storage, retrieval, and dissemination of the record industry's product is not driven by us, by whom—or by what—is it driven? And with a nod to Harold Laswell's famous axiom about human communication: with what effect?

You certainly do not need to read any further to know that, some 30 years after its introduction, the CD is an endangered species; that "vinyl" has become a status symbol, a political stance, and something older bands and artists release as collectable merchandise to separate their fans from more of their money; and that cassettes have been cast off as the junk technology they always were. But CDs represent the last mechanical in a history that spanned more than five decades of preeminence for 78 r.p.m. or "gramophone" records, approximately three-and-a-half decades for 45 r.p.m. and 33 1/3 r.p.m. records, and two decades for audio cassette tapes—not to mention the marketing of less widely-adopted and less successful media including eight-track tapes, 1/4-inch open-reel tapes, and [insert chuckle here] Sony's mini-discs. And good riddance to all of this stuff, right? I will admit to owning something in excess of 1,600 CDs, which along with my collection of records and cassettes take up the greater part of a wall in my home. Why fill our living space with such material stuff when a 64 gigabyte iPod Touch can hold the equivalent of 1,400 CDs?

I could go into a diatribe based upon some other matters I have been thinking and writing about lately, such as the fact that while that wall of music in my home takes up space, removing such tangible goods from the marketplace will not save our environment—regardless of all of their plastic, all of the petroleum it takes to produce this plastic, and all of the space their discarded plastic, paper, and cardboard takes up in a landfill. As James Carey (2008) made clear to us, all of our media of human communication represent the transportation of information from one place to another. Add to this lesson the first law of thermodynamics—that "energy under normal conditions cannot be created nor destroyed, but simply transformed from one type of energy to another"—and it becomes clearer still that it will always require energy to transport, store, and retrieve media. In addition, we need even more, and more constant use of energy for our forms of communication media that are digitally encoded. Does the term "server farm" ring a bell—with all of the fossil fuel and electrical energy required to operate these vast greenhouse complexes of servers and cool the heat they produce despite the northern climes in which they tend to be built? A recent article posited that the information technology sector accounts for roughly one-tenth of our global energy demands (Can the IT Sector's Hunger…).

Regardless, what this has led me to is an examination of the reasons and the rationales for our acceptance of this transition from mechanical, hard-copy music industry product to the digital form—and which account, with respect to what we call the "diffusion of innovation," for both the speed and already almost universal breadth of this acceptance and adoption. Of course, one can simply write this off to progress and the natural order of things: that all things media are going digital and so music must necessarily go along for the ride. Moreover, such examinations are typically driven by value-laden arguments about the fact that the digitization of musical recordings has made downloading and sharing digitally-flawless copies all but effortless, and that, as a result, people come up with all manner of ways to justify behaviors that amount to the illegal obtaining, use, and ownership of intellectual property. I will address this latter point, as it is necessary to the argument I am making. However, I must emphasize that my primary purpose is to offer a more historical take on what has happened, and to attempt to situate this history on a continuum that suggests where we may be headed.

Sheehan, Tsao, and Yang (2010), in "Motivations for Gratifications of Digital Music Piracy Among College Students," point to the familiar litany of rationalizations. College students and others convince themselves it is okay to "steal" music online, even though they would not walk into a Gap clothing store and walk out with a pair of jeans they did not pay for, because, since only a handful of people have ever been prosecuted or sued for doing so, they are not worried about the consequences of their actions. At the same time, they realize the cost-benefit analysis: that illicit downloading means significant cost savings. All it costs them is the price of their gadgets and their subscription fee for their Internet access—which, at this juncture in time, also gives them access to most, if not all of their media content (a point I will definitely return to in the course of this argument). I would also add, however, that most young people do not pay for these things—their consumer electronics or the bill for their Internet and mobile data service—and thus often hold the mistaken belief that they truly are obtaining content wholly free of charge.

In addition, Sheehan, Tsao, and Yang point to the relevance of risk-taking behaviors among young people, to their anti-industry bias, to their bias against the perceived greed of already wealthy artists and groups, to their belief that the retail price of music is inflated and already too high, and to their perception that "everybody does it" and that it is, therefore, socially-acceptable behavior.

To this, I would add the near collapse of the album form due to the rationalization that one is held captive to paying a high price for the entire collection when only one or two songs in the collection are worth listening to and owning. I would add a lack of media education—media literacy awareness and training—including a lack of understanding of how the media industry and, in particular, the music industry work. And I would add, not former Grateful Dead lyricist John Perry Barlow's coining of the mantra that "information wants to be free," but the reversal of this mantra—in recognition of the human agency and individual responsibility at the base of all of our human affairs: that "everybody wants something for free," and that people will take it when they can get it, and when they can get away with it.

Many of you who are interested to read this analysis in the first place are also probably aware of the ruckus from two years ago, when Emily White, an intern at National Public Radio's All Songs Considered, published an article on the program's website centering upon her admission that, while her iTunes library contains a total of 11,000 songs, she had purchased only 15 CDs in her lifetime. (Needless to say, she did not purchase the other 10,850 songs as singles or album downloads from iTunes.) One of the most significant public and published responses to this admission—from a young woman who clearly, by her choice of internship, has some interest in a career in the music industry—came from David Lowery, a singer/songwriter and guitarist of some renown, on *The Trichordist*: a blog "for those interested in contributing to the advancement of an Ethical Internet, and the protection of Artists Rights in the Digital Age."

Lowery pointed out the following set of figures:

> Of the 75,000 albums released in 2010 only 2,000 sold more than 5,000 copies. Only 1,000 sold more than 10,000 copies. Without going into details, 10,000 albums is about the point where independent artists begin to go into the black on professional album production, marketing and promotion.

It is these figures that serve as the appropriate backdrop for this analysis. For while I could present you with all manner of facts, numbers, and statistics about the music industry from the perspectives of production, distribution, and consumption, it is this set of figures—if wholly accurate—that presents to us, in the starkest of terms, the landscape that is the contemporary industry. That is to say, the 75,000 CDs released two years ago represent the output of four major record labels—now down to only three: Sony Music Entertainment, the Warner Music Group (not owned by Time Warner), and the Universal Music Group (not owned by Comcast, which owns NBC-Universal). It also represents the output of any number of independent labels. And it represents truly independent releases: releases by individual groups and artists who may incorporate as a label or simply include the name of a label on their cover in order to appear legitimate, but wherein the "label" releases only their work or even just that one work.

The most significant figure Lowery points to, though, bears repeating: that in 2010 only 1,000 out of 75,000 CDs released—1.33 percent of all releases—sold at least 10,000 copies and broke even. No distinction is offered here with respect to classification or genre of music. And of course it is easy to rationalize this in a knee-jerk way and say to yourself—as I am sure many of you are right now—"I am sure the reason most of it did not sell is that it stinks." And you would be validated in this assumption, given that across all of our media arts, at least since the onset of the modern age, that proportion is about right with respect to what is below average and not worth our attention, what is demonstrably average, what is above average, and what is great and transcendent work.

I would add, however, another spin on this set of figures: Lowery says nothing about the proportion of releases that did break even or did slightly better than this: that sold 10,000 to 50,000 copies—which is nowhere near enough in sales for the artist, or especially a group, to make a living—versus those that attained sales of 100,000, 500,000, or even one million. And to borrow from popular parlance that should help me to hit my point home here, I would venture to say that 99 percent of these releases do not make enough money for the artist or group or their label to make a living and survive: that it is really only the one percent that is "making it" at this juncture in time. Furthermore, I would emphasize that this one percent does not make it to this level—to the "top of the pops"—solely as the result of some elusive intrinsic quality or value. Such artists, groups, and works also make it because of the influence and various mechanisms and structures that are responsible for placing them there.

But what does this say about, and what does it have to do with, the state of affairs that brought us to this place in the first place? How did we get here?

I don't think it is necessary for me to go all the way back to discuss the foundations of the Internet in the U.S. government/military project known as DARPANET. It is, however, important to note that the point at which the Internet became "cool" came when graduate students and then undergraduate students, who were connected to the departments of computer science and computer engineering that were awarded the grant money to develop and build this network, began to use it. They were able to do so because of the fact that it was constructed for use in the event of a cold war-based nuclear holocaust, and that there was a lot of "down time"; that this holocaust never happened.

Thus, the Internet as we know it began as a groundswell, growing from the bottom up and out of the interests of young people, rather than according to the top-down model of all prior media and mass media in the electronic age. And it was as the result of this course of events that many of us developed a kind of idealism about it. It was going to be "democratic." It was going to be used for our purposes, and toward our ends—good purposes and ends—rather than toward the ends of the powers that created it or other media and commercial powers that would exploit and corrupt it.

It was during the heady times of this burgeoning idealism that computer scientists developed perfectly average and even below-average platforms and protocols such as .mp3 encoding and the MIDI (musical instrument digital interface) standard. (Jaron Lanier, in his 2011 book *You Are Not a Gadget*, does a wonderful job of exposing MIDI for what it is and for what it is not.) It was also during this time that the enthusiasts for open code, railing against the proprietary, protective, and commercially-oriented coding practices of companies like Microsoft, with their average and below-average products, began to conflate the idea that "information as code wants to be free" with the idea that the information with which we interface also wants to be free. To say this another way: Code is the underlying architecture we use to digitally enable and create text, graphics, illustrations, photos, video, and sound. The rest of what we refer to as information is the stuff we use, as media, at the surface level above the underlying infrastructure. It is what is otherwise known as content.

Finally, it was during this time, in the late 1990s, that Shawn Fanning came up with the original iteration of what came to be known as Napster: showing the world that the simple little .mp3 file for a three- to four-minute musical recording could easily be transmitted or transferred via Internet protocol. This is the moment when the hacktivists, the open code guys, and the "information wants to be free" idealists realized the pinnacle of their technological prowess and where it meets with consequence.

The result, however, was the following: Shawn Fanning, John Fanning, and Sean Parker taught the very industry their peer-to-peer network and its offshoots almost destroyed how to do business in the digital age. Think of it this way: If we are going to continue to provide an incentive for people who are musically- and compositionally- inclined to create the intellectual property from which they can profit and try to make a living in an age after Napster, we have no choice but to make obsolete the model that requires mechanicals to be manufactured (with all of the raw materials, energy, and human power this necessitates), be warehoused on the manufacturing and wholesale side, be shipped via trucks to retailers where they are again warehoused, and then, in the case of brick-and-mortar stores, be shipped yet a third time for point-of-sale—or, in the case of an Internet retailer like Amazon, be located in aircraft hangar-sized warehouse, plucked from a shelf by a runner with a forklift, carried back to the mailroom, packaged, stamped with postage, and shipped for that third time via direct mail to the customer.

The new model is simply this: (1) Create a webpage for the product. (2) Create the underlying architecture that connects this webpage to the consumer's ability to pay via credit card or PayPal. (3) Connect the two. In this way, the only costs of distribution are the one-time work to program the page and connect it to the pay system, and running the server. Everything else is pure profit. Of course energy is required to operate and maintain the server. However, once the system is in place and operating, this is the only constant cost incurred.

This is the reason we are here. It is a supply-side reason, not a demand-side reason. It is about cost savings for the manufacturer/producer and for the retailer.

But where does this leave us? I must admit that, on the one hand, there is very little innovation going on in the realm of music creation and production at the moment.

However, the system for promotion and distribution of music, as I have partly laid it out here, creates something of a moebius loop with this state of affairs. That is to say, the recording industry of the latter half of the 20th Century, for all of its corruption, greed, and waste, all of its exploitation of artists and groups, all of its involvements with organized crime, served a critical purpose. It was, and still is, comprised of people who care about music as a significant art form within a world of commerce. It was not perfect. But nothing is. And the fact is that a world of Pandoras, Spotifys, and iHeartRadios, of algorithms helping people discover new music based on the idea of "sounds likes," and of individualized advertising appeals, is perhaps leading us further down the road that was Adorno's nightmare of sameness within our popular culture, and of us heading to the trough of culture like cattle. However, to pursue this line of thinking about our future, at this juncture, can only be my recommendation for future research on the subject.

References

Can the IT sector's hunger for electricity be tamed? (2013, March 1). *YLE Uutiset*. Retrieved March 1, 2013 from http://yle.fi/uutiset/can_the_it_sectors_hunger_for_electricity_be_tamed/6519130

Carey, J. (2008). *Communication as culture: Essays on media and society*. (Rev. ed.). New York and London: Routledge.

Lanier, J. (2011). *You are not a gadget: A manifesto*. New York: Vintage.

Lowery, D. (2012, June 18). Letter to Emily White at NPR All Things Considered. *The Trichordist*. Retrieved October 17, 2012 from http://thetrichordist.wordpress.com/2012/06/18/letter-to-emily-white-at-npr-all-songs-considered/

Sheehan, B., Tsao, J., & Yang, S. (2010). Motivations for gratifications of digital music piracy among college students. *Atlantic Journal of Communication 18* (5), 241–258.

The history of the CD—The introduction. Retrieved October 15, 2012 from http://www.research.philips.com/technologies/projects/cd/introduction.html

White, E. (2012, June 16). I never owned any music to begin with. *All Songs Considered: Music You'll Fall in Love with*. NPR Music. Retrieved October 17, 2012 from http://www.npr.org/blogs/allsongs/2012/06/16/154863819/i-never-owned-any-music-to-begin-with