

Networked Organizations of Music Cultures

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Abstract

As society continues to process the introduction of the computer, organizations also adapt to its networked potential. Cultural practice has often been on the forefront of such revolutionary social changes, and thus it comes as no surprise that the production and distribution of music as one of the first organizational complexes has undergone the radical shift away from an economy of commodities. On the quest for alternative concepts of organization, the netaudio scene has to establish pioneer knowledge in many fields while dealing with the vastness of linkage possibilities present in its informational surroundings. This paper discusses the rearrangements of social organizations that occur as cultures and economies adapt to the dominance of networked computing in today's music scenes.

I.

The Netaudio Festival is about music. This apparent truth breaks down into many facets as we subject it to further investigation. People come to play music in livesets or as DJs, and a crowd – many of them musicians themselves – gathers to listen to them and experience the event. At night, we don't discuss why we do this. Everyone has their own experience and shares it with others in the crowd or maybe writes about it in a blog or some type of magazine. During the day, we start to discuss the structures of these events, why all this happens, and how people can earn a living with it. What we don't talk about during the day, at least not officially, is what we experienced during the night, and how we liked it. The Netaudio Festival makes one point very clear: There are subjective, individual aspects of music, which we can try to share with others, but never quite succeed. On the other hand, there are social aspects, procedures in interaction and organization that we can dissect and describe in all detail. When doing so, it is important to know the limits, and accept the fact that, although subjective views on music come into play everywhere, they simply cannot be copied by any means of communication.

The organization within music cultures is a process where humans have to come together and join forces in groups, where they engage in interaction, just as in any other social activity. Undoubtedly, music creation and reception can be interlinked with the social aspects of music in various and potentially very complex ways, as we see in the emergence of social platforms in the realm of music production and sound design, as well as the immediate sharing of one's listening experience on a diversity of social music ventures. However, the mere subjective aspects have to be separated from the social process, if we are to investigate the conditions in which music cultures exist and develop today, in a society radically changed by the advent of communication in networked media. Organization and organizations within today's music cultures can draw upon established categories of styles and genres as well as respected authorities in aesthetic judgement, for example music magazines and special-interest radio shows. However, these helpful structures are nothing natural, but they are embedded in the evolution of society as a whole. Thus, when conducting research on how the computer changed and continues to change the way organization takes place in today's music cultures, we can and have to relate to the procedures being followed in other parts of society. Networked communication goes far beyond what was possible in the society of the printing press. The enormous potential of linkage provides a surplus of potential semantics as the context of each individual item, be it a text, an audio file, or control data for any type of machinery. So far, we have only seen the beginning of the power of digitalization and the algorithmic processing of symbols. Interestingly, however, we see more effects earlier in the realm of music cultures, where networked communication has begun to sweep away an entire industry with all its cultural paradigms, such as understanding music as a commodity. I will come back to this later.

The ability to handle this potential surplus of meaning in a medium is what sociological systems theory generally refers to as 'knowledge'. Derived from that, a specific and structured application of knowledge can be

called a 'culture' (Baecker 2007). With the networked computer succeeding the printing press as the key medium of communication in today's society, we see the rise of a whole new world of knowledge, and with it, the birth of countless new or fundamentally changed cultures. One of the most important aspects of knowledge is that it allows to estimate one's own radius of action. With networked communication, physical distance is no longer the most important limiting factor for one's radius of action, at least when only information and not physical interactivity is involved. In music cultures, this is partly the case. The online distribution and marketing of music as well as the organization of, for example, fan groups with similar interests do not rely as much on overcoming distances anymore as their print-media-oriented predecessors did. As a result, they would appear to lose grounding and be faced with a vast world, seemingly unmanageable, unordered, and unstable.

II.

In this apparent maze of complexity, linkage possibilities, and unclear semantics, how does collaboration work? Today, as at any point in the history of mankind, humans have to gather in groups and get organized if they want to administrate households, engage in trading, build settlements, and simply survive as a society. The term "social order" is used by social sciences to describe the way such groups are established and maintained. The economic sciences are also highly interested in this topic, especially in the aspect of organization, asking questions of efficiency and the implementation of strategic goals. This brings to light the strong interdependencies of economy and cultural practice, and targeting the question of contemporary social order from this angle appears as a promising approach.

The distribution of music is about to be remodelled completely, and business models along with their marketing strategies have to follow, if they want to become part of a 21st century success story. What we can see in the music economy as well as in many other economies closely linked to communication via computer networks is the effect of a "Long Tail", as proposed by Chris Anderson (Anderson 2006). He describes how an economy without artificial scarcity of commodities can work, as success is redefined as low, but sustainable demand for a multitude of products instead of high-demand for short-term hits. In this economy, a download store may offer millions of individual songs, most of which are not downloaded more than once per fiscal quarter. However, since they are not generating high running expenses, the small numbers of individual sales add up to a successful business model.

Anderson assumes that this demand on the fringes of profitability is what he refers to as the 'natural' state of consumer interest, with thousands of niche cultures being populated by individuals who turn to the big online stores to buy whatever they are interested in. However, what Anderson does not see or at least does not explicitly include in his study, is that, per definition, a culture is nothing natural, but, again, a genuine product of social construction. Thus, while Anderson gives a great insight into the sales and distribution part of the networked economy, the construction of the cultural part that actually drives these potentially successful microeconomies has to be subjected to further investigation. Any such niche culture has to emerge and continuously be re-actualized by practice. In order to manifest itself and become visible as an entity, a niche would have to offer a coherent semantics drawing people together and recognizing each other as members of the same cultural group. But how does this happen? How do social groups form in a society that is less inclined to bring people together on a traditional geographical basis, and that has rid itself from obstacles of physical distances?

III.

This freedom from distance offers the flexibility to focus on and make use of another aspect, and that is location. One's own location and that of current or potential participants in communication is of growing importance in the context of networked computing. Information architecture today integrates metadata of products and services with maps and other semantics of locality. One example of this would be the suggestion of live concerts and parties close to one's own location within the last.fm online platform. This brings to focus one important aspect of the renewed semantics of space: Whenever an organization defines its own action radius, this will inevitably have an effect on the outsider's pathways of social action as they get in touch with the organization. Thus, such definitions and decisions within an organization are automatically exertions of power, and as such

they have to be justified. Take for example the ongoing struggle regarding digital rights management for online distribution of media files. The implementation of DRM severely limits the action radius of the customer and is therefore often seen as an unjustified exertion of power, even more so as it seems to violate the basic and established principles of the underlying technology, summed up in the political claim that "information wants to flow freely". This is true on the large scale of political messages that just cannot be linked with the concept of territory anymore, and it applies just as well to a customer not understanding why the media file she downloaded can only be played back on a mobile device with a certain brand name, but not on her car stereo, which offers the same technological capabilities.

This negative example does however help to bring out the importance of such spatial semantics for networked marketing. It appears today that the most successful organizations offering their products and services in the realm of networked computing build consistent worlds for their current and potential customers, integrating the advantages of technology with real-life experiences, whether they be on- or offline. Such an effort might be seen as customer orientation, which in itself is nothing innovative in the field of marketing. However, the ability to create and offer consistent worlds of experience to one's demographic has only been made possible by the aforementioned freedom from the obstacles posed by distance and with it the leeway to refocus on location. The "Long Tail" effect that Chris Anderson has pointed out shows that these worlds of experience do not have to integrate a very large number of participants in order to be potentially profitable. Instead, such small worlds, as I will call them with careful reference to the work of Stanley Milgram (Milgram 1967), may be built around just one artist, band, style, sub-genre, or music label. Their identity is the basis for the emergence of social order.

The publications of Stanley Milgram lead to the notion of the whole society existing in just one small world where everybody is linked by the now infamous "six degrees of separation". However, this theory has been heavily contested by scientists from very different fields (e.g. Kleinfeld 2001), suggesting that indeed social barriers within society are effectively preventing certain links between people from certain different background schemes. Instead of one small world, these contributions suggest the existence of numerous small worlds with more or less permeable social barriers as boundaries. Today, such small worlds would increasingly have to be defined and maintained according to the rules of the networked media, and especially so in the technology-prone realm of music cultures. The early stages of research on this suggest that participants of small worlds in music cultures might be ordered in a system of one or multiple centers and a fuzzy, constantly changing periphery. That way, the semantics of distance come into play and are used to claim scarcity within a small world. However, thanks to network-based communications technology, these distances can easily be overcome from the center – and only from here –, with social gravity pulling peripheral agents – the recipients – together. Such implementations of social control might be live concerts, frequently updated and seemingly personal blogs by the artists, or special versions of songs and tracks. The latter can even be used to bridge the semantic gaps between small worlds and the mainstream, as is the case with remixes of mainstream songs by artists with high credibility in their respective small world. This effect is one of comparison between the procedures in different semantic worlds, be they large or small, and thus, it fits the description of culture as stated earlier in the context of knowledge.

Small worlds of experience can provide the necessary common ground for manifold shapes of such cultural practice. At first sight, they may look like an undue reduction of semantic possibilities, but there are reasons why this is most likely untrue: Again, small worlds are fuzzy sets rather than hermetically sealed entities. Their integration of participants fluctuates, and many of them are only included on a timeshare basis anyway. This is actually a great benefit, as it allows for a potentially prolific cultural exchange and reciprocal opportunities of review. At the same time, the semantics of each small world can stay consistent for the runtime of its operation.

The role of record labels today can be seen in the creation of such small worlds of experience, centered around a new album, an artist, or the brand itself. Maybe all these levels can be included in a self-similar way, but they always will have to stay consistent. Referring to an artist or an album must not infringe the image of

the label's brand. In terms of distribution, many labels today seem to gain more self-confidence in that they offer their content at better conditions in their own online shops than with big content aggregators such as iTunes or Amazon. For the consumers, it can pay to get involved with the small worlds a label has to offer. Once involved, the technological means of distribution matter less, as long as they do their job correctly. This is one point that often gets overlooked: Small-scale economies in the society of the networked communication enjoy the same benefits from globalization as the big players do. The technological basis of all societal operation we discuss today is the product of a radically globalized economy of scale. The internet and all its services heavily depend on the large production volumes and resulting low prices of computer and network technology. In the semantics of the small worlds we dwell in, this aspect has become more and more ecological.

IV.

The question remains whether organizations within music cultures will be able to maintain the music market as a trade of commodities, or if the entire industry will eventually move over to services. The DRM-aspect already touches the service-attributes of music released under a commodity paradigm. But what would music cultures on the economic basis of a service paradigm look like? We are only just beginning to see hints at the direction in which this development may lead us. One aspect is the renewed economic importance of live performances. The live concert is the epiphany of a service within a music culture, and it is usually backed with several types of marketing activities, including location-oriented communication as well as the strategic placement of produced music to overcome distances in small semantic worlds.

We can at this point only speculate as to which elements of today's music industry will be able to integrate themselves in the evolution whose opening stages we begin to investigate. The building of consistent worlds of experience can happen on very different scales. Small and mid-sized music labels may very well be able to build a strong coherent brand referring to and being referred to by its artists and customers. These branded semantics will then be coupled with location-based information to form a cultural architecture to which everybody involved has limited access. This is important to note, because as soon as an organization enters into open multichannel communication with artists, customers, and stakeholders, as is the case with the so-called „social web“, it has to give up its demand for the more controlled ways of corporate communication. This means to embrace uncertainty, and continuously refer to one's ecology. For mid- or large-scale organizations such as the big independent and the major labels, it might be interesting to team up with other organizations that are already well established in the experience worlds of their target groups. This could include cooperations with telecommunication service providers or other brands with widespread operation.

Summing up, there is a good chance that our local record dealers, small music labels, specialist music magazines, and radio stations will still exist ten years from now. This may depend on how they see themselves as integral part of an ever evolving architecture of information, offering an attractive radius of action to their demographic. And, possibly, the small-scale organizations, such as netlabels, have a head start against large bureaucratic organizations as they are able to adapt to this social evolution that is linked to technology, take in feedback and offer custom-tailored services to the small, but loyal groups they are part of themselves.

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