The evolution of music blogs: From a fan's passion to a promotional outlet

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Abstract

As music blogs have recently become an essential outlet for music and artist's promotion, this article looks at their evolution from simple fans' personal diaries to key collaborators of the music industry. Record labels went from suing blogs for digital copyright infringements to collaborating with them for the promotion of their artists. In particular, four different phases will be identified, each one characterised by particular blogging practices. It will be argued that the increasing influence of the blogosphere and the music industry on blog content strategies can be considered seminal factors in the evolution of music blogs. The emergence of new dynamics in blogging approaches may lead to a need to redefine what a music blog is. It also requires finding new theoretical frameworks to help analyse the newest version of a music blog.

Keywords: Music blogs, music industry, music scenes, music blogosphere, music blogs evolution

1   Introduction

In 2005 Gerd Leonhard, the tech sector's self-described media futurist, argued that music blogs would use their popularity and influence to build empires. The people running them would be those sharp, tuned-in, hyper-networked and resourceful BlogJs formerly known as bloggers (Leonhard 2005: 21). Today it is easy to regard Leonard's vision on the future of music blogs as not far from reality as their influence in shaping music taste has grown exponentially. They have been defined the new gatekeepers of taste (Jennings 2007) and marketers have realised their crucial position as tools for spreading their messages or advertising their products (O'Donnell & McClung 2008). However, the first music blogs to

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appear back in 2002 were just music fans looking for a space to express their passion for music.

This article will argue that music blogs went through a transition from a pure amateur space, mainly focused on reflecting the subjective taste of the author and adopting an archetypal fans approach, to being more professional, subsumed, to a certain extent, to the dynamics of the music blogosphere and the music industry.

As music blogs are primarily written by music fans, they started to develop a reputation for being a credible source of information. Their reputation for being online personae as opposed to the detached objectivity of traditional journalism, gained them greater credibility than the traditional media (Carlson 2007). This reputation garnered them increased popularity across fans communities to the point that, eventually, the music industry noticed their potential as promotional outlets (Bruno 2006). Additionally, the connected nature of music blogs through links and comments made them part of a bigger space: the music blogosphere.

2   Research methodology and data collection

The analysis centres primarily on an ethnographic study of Australian indie music blogs and, to a degree, of the music blogosphere at the broader level. Ethnography describes particular cultural practices, grounded in data obtained through fieldwork and situated in conversation with a broader theoretical framework (Boyd 2008: 46). Ethnography makes possible the analysis of the complexity of culturally driven practices and norms and produces a topological map of a particular set of cultural practices (ibid: 47). As a methodology for investigating the relationship between music blogs and the music industry, ethnography provides a mechanism for determining the norms and processes that inform the ways blogs select content as well as the values and routines that shape their practices.

The focus of this paper is predominantly on Australian indie music blogs. Choosing to concentrate a part of the analysis on Australian music

blogs was intentional; restricting the boundaries of observation to a particular music scene as the music blogosphere is too large and diverse for a consistent and homogeneous analysis. The data, consistent with Liav Sade-Beck's (2004) integrated ethnography, came from a variety of sources and were collected over an extended period of time. Liav Sade-Beck (2004) provides a good framework for developing an integrated ethnography. Online postings, interviews, discussions in forums, online and offline press were all taken into considerations when examining how music blogs' changed their practices over time. Specifically, ethnographic data collection took place over a period of two and a half years, beginning in March 2009. The body of data that informed such analysis consists of digital content captured online, semi-structured in-person interviews along with online and offline press content analysis[2].

From May 2009 to April 2010, 30 semi-structured interviews (Bogdan & Taylor 1975) were conducted[3]: 18 with Australian music blogs, three with PR companies, two with independent record labels, one with a major record label, and four with Australian artists[4]. Content analysis

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[2] Online observations were carried out for 30 months, spending between 10–20 hours per week online. Overall more than 1,000 hours were spent online observing music blogs. Between 10–15 music blogs profiles were scanned every day during the first six months, with the aim of grasping a general sense of music blogs content. The intent was to get a general sense of what type of content blogs were featuring, to establish whether it was possible to identify consistency across posts, and what type of interaction was occurring in the blog and, more broadly, to try to find some common denominators across blogs.

[3] The sample for the 18 semi-structured interviews with bloggers was chosen to ensure a representation of a range of cultural settings. Precisely, 10 interviewees were from Sydney, 4 from Melbourne, 2 from Brisbane and the remaining 2 from rural areas. The recruitment was done using a combination of networks of personal contacts and emails introducing the research and the researcher.
The 85 percent of the interviewed bloggers was males and the remaining 15 percent females. The majority of the bloggers was aged between 25 and 35 years old. Only four of them were younger than 24 and five older than 35. They were all English native speakers, coming from a mid-high socio-economic background.
Four of them were still studying and university and the remaining 14, they all had tertiary education, working in professional roles. However, only three of them worked in the music industry and only one as a journalist. Two of them considered themselves as musicians, 3 had their own radio show consistent with the content covered on their blog and one involved in radio programming.

[4] The sample was chosen to ensure representation of a range of cultural settings. In Australia, interviewees were from Melbourne, Sydney, and Brisbane, as well as from rural areas. The recruit-

of coverage of music blogs in the press usefully complemented the sub-jects' points of view, either confirming or invalidating the set of social and cultural practices revealed in the interviews.

3   Music bloggers as music fans: the amateur phase

Music blogs first emerged from a passionate community of music lovers posting MP3 files, usually from non-mainstream artists, accompanied by personal reviews of songs, information about the artists, and any other personal input that the author decided to include (Wodtke 2008: 8). As such, the personal touch of music blogs made them comparable to mu-sical diaries (ibid: 9). The music blog format started to emerge by 2003; a band or song is introduced with a paragraph describing the music fol-lowed by a link to download the MP3 from the artist (O'Donnell & McClung 2008).

A number of bloggers soon started to include the actual MP3 file of the song in their posts, which readers could download and listen to (Fox 2008). Avid consumers of music, music bloggers started writing because their passion for music pushed them to communicate to other people. According to Leung (2009), blogs are motivated by gratification, psycho-logical empowerment and a yearning to be a part of social group.

According to Eric Harvey, *"music blogs can be seen as indicative of a new agency possessed by music fans, and the desire of many to make their presence known to other fans"* (2005). As the Australian blogger Lee explains (2009): "*I guess the first music bloggers were just fans taken to the next level where they like someone so much that they want to write about it and let the people know about*".

Sean started his blog 'A Reminder' in October 2005 and he was one of the first music bloggers of the Australian music scene. He emphasises how bloggers have an urge for self-expression and communication with their peers:

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ment was done using a combination of networks of personal connections and emails introducing the research and the researcher. The formal in-person interviews were semi-structured and lasted 1–3 hours.

"All the bloggers that I personally know in Sydney are fans of the music and they started the blog because of that ... they wanted somehow to express themselves. I guess there is not much difference between a fan and a blogger. I am a music fan before a blogger and I am a blogger just because it happened to be a big music fans".

The first music blogs appearing in the Australian scene had a typical amateur approach rooted primarily in aesthetics and taste rather than in commercialism. Their discursive position as fans, presumably similar to their readers, but also as speakers from a position of expertise and authority, differentiated them from other fans. Comments, opinions and judgments were all central constituents of the information that could be found in music blogs, often accompanied by MP3s, videos, photos. Wayne from the blog 'Ocean Never Listen' says (2009):

"I guess what I mainly write about are shows I go to and review CDs I like and just give out any general music news that interests me. Anything other than just write about what I love. I post songs, MP3s when I can which, you know, obviously helps any readers to listen to it".

In this phase, one of the most frequent types of posts was the blogger revealing the releases they have been listening to with a critical comment accompanied by the MP3 file of the song to be listened to or downloaded by the reader.

One of the first roles embraced by music blogs was also as referral sites, pointing readers to other interesting music sites and blogs. For example, Sean says:

"I spend a lot of time reading other blogs, my RSS feed is huge ... when I find some interesting content, I like to make a post about it for my readers. But I don't like to just post a link, I like to add my personal commentary on it".

What is posted on the blog lies somewhere between the opinion making of music critics and journalists and the expertise of music fans. Fans as writers and professional writers as fans are very similar. Fans are meaning-makers of popular music and their knowledge, on the contrary

of professionals, comes from autodidactic enthusiasm (Atton 2009: 61). For Dan (2009), from the Sydney blog 'The Boudist'*, the* position of blogs lies between a music fan and a music critic:

"A music blog, if it is done well, is about one person's passion, one person's personality, it's kind of an opinion point of view paper. After reading it for a while you get to know that person personality and [their] likes and dislikes. And so you read it especially because you want to know what that person thinks about something. While fans is just completely bashing about absolutely everything and posting pictures about the bands they love, etc. A blogger is probably more considered and critical".

Blogs generally express their opinions based on knowledge acquired through a careful listening and consumption of music. This autodidactic display of expertise gives blogs a type of authority different to that of the traditional music critics. Their authority is displayed from personal experience of music. Music critics, on the other hand, tend to present their opinions not as personal views but more as historical and cultural claims about the artists and their body of work (Atton 2009). The fact that music blogs are inherently positive further substantiates their origin as an expression of fan culture. Among first generation bloggers, many said they rarely feature music they don't like and their choices are primarily based on their personal taste. Since taste is something, which revolves around a multitude of elements, often not related at all with the music itself, bloggers' discussions are generally based more on a personal and subjective connection, which then prompts the desire to create a post about it. In fact, Frith (1981: 185) argues that, historically, the meaning of music has always been articulated more clearly by fans and that the roots of rock journalism are in non-professional projects, following an ideology based on authenticity and originality. Accordingly, it can be argued that music blog ideology is not only built around values of integrity and opposition to the mainstream, but also originates from fans' desires to express their views and an urge to communicate them to other like-minded fans.

There is good reason for music blogs to remain distinct from mainstream culture, such as record labels and the traditional music press, in order to promote those artists who are not yet famous and who can afford very little promotion through mainstream channels (Wodtke 2008: 38). The writing comes from a fan's compulsion to express their opinion and curatorial subjectivity that are the main identifying features of the amateur phase. In this phase, music blogs not only started to become an essential resource of information for fans, but also for emerging artists struggling to secure coverage on radio or in the press. Emerging artists that were too small to get radio airplay or press coverage were often written about in blogs, triggering the interest of journalists and radio DJs. Often journalists and radio DJs are among the "lurkers" on some blogs to such a degree that, in certain circumstances, they have been accused of plagiarising blogs' content (Hardy 2008).

4   The diversification phase: music blogs as subcultural media

As music bloggers reputation as a trusted source for non-mainstream music information spread, they gradually began to become a major communication platform for fans to interact with each other and share information (Hodkinson 2006; Baym 2007). During this second phase their role as the major information platform for music scenes and fans communities consolidated. Getting news from an independent source rather from than a corporate-sponsored one sat well with the whole ideal of independent music and indie music scenes (Fonarow 2006). Most indie fans rejected the mainstream and blogs were thought to possess street credibility. In this phase blogs were primarily conceived as anti-corporate underground media. As Jenkins points out: "Many bloggers explicitly define themselves in opposition to mainstream media and what they see as its corporately controlled content (ibid: 220).

During this phase music blogs focused on trying to establish themselves within the music scenes through very niche music knowledge and taste. Thornton (1995: 186) considers knowledge about obscure music

as a form of subcultural capital because is the kind of information that can't be acquired from mainstream media. Thornton (1996: 11–12) states that:

"Subcultural capital can be objectified or embodied. Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircut and well-assembled record collections … Just as cultural capital is personified in good manners and urbane conversations, so subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being 'in the known', using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as you were born to perform the latest dance styles".

According to Thornton, subcultural capital is built up through style and consumption, through taste in music together with clothes, haircuts and so on. With reference to club cultures, Thornton describes how people owning subcultural capital (like DJs, club owners, music journalists) often retain a lot of respect not only because they possess a high level of it, but also because they have a role in defining it and creating it. For example, Lee says:

"I do a show on FBI and it's called Local Fidelity and it's all Australian music and a lot of the bands they only have demos and they send it to FBI and I was coming across a lot of really great bands but because they were so small you don't really get to read about them in Rolling Stone or anything, they're not big enough for big music magazines. So I wanted to have something that looked at these smaller bands".

Lee is trying to gain subcultural capital by featuring Australian artists, which are quite obscure, as they are not yet signed and are rarely discussed in other music outlets. Being on track with the emerging underground local acts, being active participants in the local scene, frequently attending gigs and writing about obscure acts long before they get signed, are all practices that sustain blogs in building subcultural capital. Another example is Cameron from '*Before Hollywood,*' a Brisbane based blog that focuses on the Brisbane music scene, featuring local acts only:

"A friend of mine from Brisbane raised the idea of starting a blog about the local bands, the local Brisbane music scene. The focus was on purely Brisbane music. We don't worry too much about writing about the bands that we see as not really needing our support anymore. Our focus is definitely on the new and the more unrecognised acts".

Cameron tries to accrue subcultural capital by featuring music, which belongs firmly to particular niches and is localised in opposition to other blogs, which might only feature more popular or international music. Essentially, music bloggers' subcultural capital is communicated through the music they choose to post: the more obscure, localised, new, and alternative the posted artists are, the more likely the blogger is to gain credibility. The indie community, which also includes other music blogs, is more likely to judge and classify bloggers by which bands and artists are featured and written about than any other criterion. In this way, the subcultural capital becomes a means of distinction articulated through unique and specialised knowledge. Wodtke (2008) argues that those in possession of subcultural capital are able to set the parameters of what is "cool" in the indie scene and thereby be credited with subcultural status. As Ned (2009) from 'Electrorash', a well-established Australian blog, believes:

"Certain blogs have got an audience of people who come back there to regularly check out, they like that style of music that's coming out of the blog or that voice that's coming out of it and they'll come back regularly to see that and find out what these people are talking about. And that includes people in the industry, managers, record labels; it also includes advertising people. I wouldn't say we've really broken anyone, we've been the first to post stuff about many artists that after got signed by a label".

In this phase, therefore, the subcultural capital of music blogs is primarily expressed through the music they feature. When music blogs gain the status of sub-cultural insiders within a music scene, other scene members will automatically trust them. Artists and music featured on their sites will gain a sort of subcultural credibility, making it easier for

people to like the artist and accept their music. For example, among Sydney bloggers there are a few, such as 'Polaroids of Androids', 'Oceans Never Listen', and 'Who the Hell', which gained a reputation among other bloggers for being credible blogs and they became the kind of 'place-to-go' to find out what is happening at a local level. As Sean (2009) says:

"So, I read everything that Wayne writes, everything Johnny writes. I read every word those people write even if it's about a band I don't like. If 'Electrorash' writes about a band I don't know I might look at it quickly and then say no I'm not going to read anymore, but if Wayne writes about a band I don't like I will still going to read it because just because I know him and so I might be able to convince me to check this band out".

This purpose of music blogs points to a new type of authority quite different to that of music journalism, whose authority comes from their institutionalised position of credibility (Carlson 2007). Music blogs' authority comes from their subjectivity and their sub-cultural status. 'Who the Hell', for example, is considered to be one of the most influential blogs in Australia because, over the years, it built its subcultural capital by being one of the few blogs focusing only on Australian music. As Lee (2009) says:

"I read 'Who the Hell' more because I feel like I have to because all their content is Australian. Because I don't love everything that's in that blog, in fact I read it less to find out about music I like, more to know what people are talking about. I guess that's the difference between a blog you read for fun and a blog you feel you need to read".

The sociological effect of the work of these blogs, which emerged during the second phase, was the creation of a select crowd of Internet savvy music consumers in touch with the new trends and proudly aligned with an indie ideology and values. The idea of good music being an exclusive privilege for the few who did not conform to the dominant taste of the mass that feeds the charts was predominant in this phase. As Crossfield (2010) argues:

"Some of the first music blogs on the scene were known as MP3 blogs. Sites like 'Fluxblog', 'Stereogum', and 'Buzzgrinder', offered the music geek a chance to hear music outside of the TRL mainstream. Since its beginning the sites have offered a way for those interested in indie rock a way to hear new up and coming artists".

As Wodtke (2008: 14) argues, bloggers came to fill an important gap between the music industry and what was happening in the underground circuit, especially at a local or genre-based level, particularly considering the shifts in music journalism that made it more impotent and less relevant socially and politically. While publications such as 'Rolling Stone' were taking broader approaches to music coverage, and music reviews were becoming more and more like consumer guides, music blogs, like 'Argued by Baym', were very niche-oriented, focusing on specific music-genres and connecting with music communities (2007). In doing so, music blogs changed the politics of record labels and contributed to the acknowledgement of music blogs as serving a crucial role as cultural intermediaries for the audience.

5   The promotional phase: music blogs and the music blogosphere

This promotional phase sees the establishment of music blog aggregators as a new category of website that aggregates MP3 blogs' posts into the same platform. They compile lists of all the files being hosted or linked to on hundreds of different MP3 blogs (Goldstone 2006). Users can look for an artist they desire to hear and the site will take them to a blog covering the artist they are looking for. MP3 blog aggregators have introduced a search function for music that would not have been available with just the disparate blogs themselves (Wodtke 2008: 6). One of the most popular music blog aggregator is considered to be 'The Hype Machine' (ibid: 114).

Through its organisational and selective functions, aggregators have given to music blogs more power as a collective entity than if they existed as scattered opinions across cyberspace. Wodtke (2008: 25) explains

how MP3 blog aggregators accomplish an editorial role in helping readers to find and read blogs. The importance of aggregators is further confirmed by the fact that many blogs aspire to be included on them and in their most popular blog lists (ibid: 24). Being included on aggregators started to become an important practice for blogs to promote themselves and gain validation in the music blogosphere.

The music blogosphere is composed of all the music blogs and the interconnections they have with each other. Music bloggers perceive the music blogosphere as a virtual environment where they all share the same values and where, as in other music scenes, social hierarchies based on status exist. Status in the music blogosphere can be established across different dimensions. In broad terms, the blogs with the highest status are those considered to be most worth reading. The music blogosphere, like other blogospheres, is dominated by A-List blogs, a small minority with a large influence on the smaller blogs that comprise the vast majority (Adamic & Glance 2005). The A-List usually includes early starters, blogs who show persistence and, broadly speaking, those blogs with very high numbers of readers and links (Mortensen & Walker 2003). This happened because *the number of sites has been growing exponentially since the inception of The World Wide Web, which means that there are many more young sites than older ones"* (Huberman 2002: 5). For example, in the Australian music blogosphere, 'Who the Hell', 'A Reminder' and 'Oceans Never Listen' are considered to be the A-List group because of their considerably higher number of incoming links. They were also among the first music blogs to appear on the Australian scene. The prominence of these sites was confirmed during the interviews with Australian bloggers, as many of them mentioned 'Who the Hell' and 'A Reminder' among the most influential blogs on the local scene.

In fact, because network forces favour early entrants through linking patterns, older blogs have more opportunities to acquire links. This highly unequal distribution of links in the blogosphere constitutes a "power law" distribution model (Shirky 2003), which arises from a process called preferential attachment where blogs with higher numbers of

links are more likely to receive new links than less connected ones (Barabási 2002). Shirky used such a framework to argue that in the blogosphere, the "rich get richer", implying that the best positions in the network are reserved for those bloggers with a longer history. Hence, the hierarchical structure of the blogosphere gives A-List blogs a position of authority, not necessarily through quality content, but because of their links and early presence in the field (Marlow 2004). Marlow (2005) argues that links are so important to blog social hierarchies that they have been defined as the currency of the blogosphere and those with a high number of links tend to have higher status. Thus, linking practices, which normally lead to a larger audience, create a hierarchical structure led by the A-List followed by the thousands of smaller blogs.

Because the group of A-List blogs is relatively small, it has an increased importance in terms of defining what matters, and what they consider important becomes the agenda. A-List blogs earned their status over a number of years, building up trust and respect together with readership and links.

Despite their genuine motives for expressing unique taste or promoting niche artists, music blogs would still like to build up some sort of reputation as well as a following. It can be argued that the majority of blogs would prefer to gain an audience as well as esteem from their peers. In general, being linked by other bloggers is seen as a sign of reputation and respect. Nonetheless, as previously argued, overcoming the linking dynamics of social networks can be very difficult. One way for blogs to defeat such a dynamic is to link to other blogs, especially the more established ones, in the hope that the target site will notice them, visit them, and link back to them (Mead, 2000). According to Eric Harvey (2006):

"It's probably not a surprise that music bloggers are the biggest commentators on other music blogs. Comment boards and link lists are the most prominent self-promotional, self-sustaining and provincial aspects of the network of music blogs."

Another practice used by bloggers to increase readership is trying to be the first one to post the newest content available, as it might lead to increased readership and linking. New music, for example, especially if it is from artists already established in the blogosphere, is considered to be content worth of attention.

Because the Internet is such an immediate medium, and because the genre of blogging, with its posts stamped in real time, is a genre based on immediacy, music blogs can often be affected by the need to compete with other music blogs in the discovery of new music (Wodtke 2008: 65). The reality is that the act of writing about music in the music blogosphere is greatly affected by the environment of cyberspace immediacy and this hyper-immediacy results in the constant need to stay as current and forward thinking as possible. Being the first to post about a new song or artist will make a blogger's popularity increase very quickly. Aggregators and their practice of listing only the first sites to post a specific track, amplify this need, reinforcing a culture of "must post first" in order to get the traffic, often at the expense of content quality. Being able to post fresh content before others is seen as a faster way to gain readership. The enormous importance given to publishing new content is becoming a crucial aspect of music blog practices as it forces blogs to rely on the music industry to obtain new information. As Matthew Perpetua commented in a recent interview (Smith 2009):

"A lot of it comes back to exclusivity—what can you post that other people are not? That's not just a question of obscurity from the past; the other model is to create relationships that will allow you to have exclusive, new content."

An additional tactic for music blogs to gain fast readership, other than new content, is by blogging about music or bands, which are already receiving attention in the music blogosphere. The fact that aggregators place disparate posts into a more collective context generates a sense of hype around the artists and bands that most bloggers post about. Consequently, the hyper immediacy of the blogosphere often pushes bloggers to become popular by blogging about what is already

popular. Smaller blogs are likely to pick up information generated on A-List blogs and, through the hype generated by aggregators, spread them into the blogosphere. According to Cameron (2009), from the Brisbane blog 'Before Hollywood':

"I guess there's a bit of a domino effect in that if one blog writes about something, especially if it's one of the more influential blogs, then the rest of the blogs say "okay well if I am to be seen as a legitimate source of information then I should probably think about writing about this band too."

This practice can be explained as a phenomenon of social contagion due to normative pressure (Coleman, Katz & Menzel 1966). This can be explained as the discomfort felt, when peers have adopted an approach one feels obliged to consider (Kaya et al. 2010). According to Burt (1987), the degree of pressure relates to the intensity of socialisation of the parties involved. Recognising this type of influence is important for understanding music blogs practices. It can be argued that a blog's musical preferences can be influenced by what other blogs like, especially if they feel a normative pressure toward them. There is also another type of social contagion emerging from competition among persons, called the structural equivalence model (Burt 1987: 1291):

"This model applies more generally to the competition of people merely using one another to evaluate their relative adequacy … The more similar ego's and alter's relation with other persons are – that is, the more that alter could substitute for ego in ego's role relations, and so the more likely it is that ego will quickly adopt any innovation perceived to make alter more attractive as the object or source of relations."

In relation to blogs dedicated to the same music genre or which belong to the same indie scene, Cameron (2009) states:

"I think there's definitely an element of trying to keep up appearances and keep up the idea that your particular blog is just as good as the other blogs and whatever and trying to be, not missing out on a band

that takes off, and, you know "okay that band's taken off now and we missed the boat, everyone else wrote about them and we didn't."

This quote clearly confirms that competitive concerns do occur among bloggers. The collective hype generated by social contagion might have some side effects on the supposed curatorial purpose of music blogs. Some of them might actually feel that they have to feature a particular artist or music because others are doing it. Preferring what catches public attention over what is considered important usually helps the blogger to reach the maximum audience. Carles (2008), author of the blog Hipster Runoff, cynically articulates the problem:

*"All bloggers get the same emails from the same marketing companies who are getting paid to let me know about crappy new indie bands. I think the difficult part about 'creating a good blog' is a blogger being able to ask himself 'Do I **really** care about this band/newsbit/mp3 or do I feel pressure to blog about it because I think it's what people want to hear about? You can call this theory the 'Popular Artists on HypeMachine' theory. When entry-level bloggers see that 'a lot of people are downloading Radiohead, they think that their blog becomes a more valuable resource if they re-blog a popular song to increase their traffic. At the same time, entry-level alts see that Radiohead is #1 and feel like 'I am supposed to appreciate this band/music because a lot of other people are appreciating it."*

This emerging practice, as the above shows, has become particularly prevalent among new blogs, which, instead of following their personal taste, tend to feature artists that are already hyped on the blogosphere. This is an efficient tactic to remain relevant and quickly gain popularity with the audience. Therefore, blogs who want to increase their popularity in the music blogosphere will tend to feature music they believe will promote their blogs in the most effective way. The purpose of self-promotion is further confirmed by the desire of some blogs to monitor site traffic, to be linked to other blogs, to be included in major aggregators and then to be popular on these aggregators. Sean Michaels (2009), founder of the music blog 'Said the Gramophone', remarked:

"I had hopes for music blogs – Finnish hip-hop fans, explaining how their favourite music makes them feel; Havana jazz blogs, describing their Friday night out; Japanese avant-gardists, writing about new noises. That really, really, really hasn't materialised. Instead it's hundreds of bloggers writing the same sort of things about the same sort of songs. This tendency of blogs to imitate other blogs causes saturation and over-repetition of stories, which have become a common feature in the music blogosphere."

The above quote shows the emergence, during this phase, of blogs without any particular music taste or musical knowledge, replicating the taste of more influential blogs and basing their agenda on which artists are popular at a particular point in time. Stuart (2009), from 'New Weird Australia', explains how Australian bloggers often try to gain cultural cachet by replicating what is happening overseas while, he asserts, in order to gain status overseas, music blogs should not replicate what is on other overseas blogs. He criticises Australian bloggers who ignore Australian music:

"There are still Australian blogs talking about Grizzly Bear and still doing what the Americans are doing, what the English are doing. Hey guys, watch what's in your backyard, there are bands as good if not better that those bands and the world he's not used to hear them. If we don't blog about it, no one else is going to find bands playing at warehouses in Marrickville. We do have a responsibility because if we don't blog about it none of the Americans are going to blog about it, they are never going to find their work."

Stuart seems to suggest a sort of provincialism among Australian bloggers, which emulate more established American or English blogs. According to Stuart, the excessive attention given to certain artists or music phenomena can lead to the alienation of the blogger from local production. Bloggers might, in fact, experience a struggle between the *"motives of altruistic promotion of music that the mainstream media ignores"* and *"the reality that MP3 bloggers are often blogging to promote themselves and gain validation"* (Wodtke 2008: 80). The central

idea of music blogs to promote music that they truly love, often clashes with the fact that many want more traffic to their blog; so they post what they believe will most effectively popularise their blogs. Often music blogs might only post hyped artists occasionally, simply to boost the traffic of their blogs through new readers that might navigate to their blogs to download popular MP3s. They hope that a portion of that audience will keep reading the blog and become regular readers. 'Squashed' (2006), a member of the Elbows forum, says:

"After a spike one should be able to retain 20–25 percent of the spike. If after repeated spikes the number keeps dropping back that means the blog design/content needs retooling."

Aiming at "spikes" is frequently legitimised by claiming that more readers are only desired in order to improve awareness of bands that do not get enough attention. The above analysis shows how during the promotional phase a divide in the music blogosphere emerged between those blogs mainly concerned with popularity and those concerned with the quality and uniqueness of the content. While the latter group will aim to achieve subcultural status through their cultural capital, the former will aim to achieve popularity status through their social capital (Bourdieu 1973). Drawing on Bourdieu's definition (1973), social capital comes, not from what one knows or owns, but from whom one knows. Therefore, during the last phase music blogs started to see social capital, especially in relation to their connection to the music industry, as a way to gain reputation.

6. The professional phase: Music blogs as collaborators of the music industry

Until this point it has been argued that blogs reached an influential position of authority as subcultural media. Because of their increasingly influential role, the music industry, especially independent labels, began to realise their importance as promotional outlets (Jetto 2014). Therefore, the professional phase is characterised by the music industry ac-

tively seeking the collaboration of music blogs for the promotion of their artists. It seems generally agreed that music blogs, although only read by a very small part of the music market, have a positive influence on fans' preferences. Of crucial importance here is the idea that the readers of music blogs are a small, but culturally important and influential group or people (Jennings 2007). Jennings calls music blogs: savants, music experts, and musically literate opinion leaders who occupy an important and persuasive sphere between music and the wider public. They are people that others turn to for advice on record purchases. Nonetheless, the important role that some of the more established music blogs have played in the discovery of new talent, which eventually get signed to record companies, has contributed to their relevance as intermediaries. This kind of indirect artist promotion made the music industry recognise their importance in promoting new music and convinced record companies and others to include music blogs in their promotional strategies. This is when a further shift in their practices began.

A substantial part of the music blogosphere has embraced such collaborations by featuring certain artists on their blogs (Jetto 2014). In exchange, labels and PR companies provide music blogs with free supplies of the latest music and promotional material. Such emerging practices have decreased the independence of bloggers to some degree, as bloggers have started to rely more and more on the music industry for access to information. This interest of the music industry in music blogs was a determining factor in their evolution from fan-based personal outlet toward a more professional outlet centred on the ideas of becoming popular and collaborating with the commercial interests of the industry. The fact that the music industry, which prosecuted thousands of file sharers for copyright infringements, started to provide music blogs with music that might end up in the same file sharing communities, was a further sign of the indisputable power of blogs.

This phase was also characterised by older blogs becoming extremely influential. Some of the so-called A-List blogs adopted proper business models, with some of them turning into record labels, organising events, and making music videos. Their role in influencing fan practices has been

compared to that of traditional media such as magazines and radio (Wodtke 2008). For example, in the April 2008 issue of 'Spin' magazine, David Browne (2008) included music blogs in the list of how much people involved with music industry earn. The inclusion of music blogs in this list pointed to a legitimisation and recognition of music bloggers as professionals in the music industry. This has furthered the divide in the music blogosphere between blogs that positively embraced such collaborations in an attempt to get a foot into the music industry, and others, which remained committed to their original subcultural purpose (Jetto 2014). As Scott Tennent (2007a), author of the blog 'Pretty Goes with Pretty', argues:

"It seems that there are less and less MP3 bloggers out there who are purely concerned with sharing their personal discoveries (and hopefully articulating what they like), and more and more who have become a conduit for press releases … The 'professionalisation' of the blogosphere toward what amounts to a big network of cable news tickers is disheartening."

Hence, in order to have a complete understanding of the intermediary role of music blogs, it is important to recognise the transition from a service promoting artists and reflecting personal taste, following a typical fan's impulse, to a type of music blogging more subservient to commercial logic. This dynamic occurs when the search for professional status translates into the acceptance of collaborations with the industry, which are generally achieved by featuring music pushed through by the labels or PR agencies. Reaching for professional status might compromise the support of the indie community, which would consider such practices as inauthentic and could accuse the blogger of 'selling-out'. The increasing influence of the industry on music blogs' editorial strategies is therefore important in tracing the evolution of music blogs.

7   Conclusions

Music blogging as a phenomenon is less than two decades old, and it is still evolving. This article examined their history and the cultural and social practices typical of each phase. It has emerged that music blogs have evolved over the last 15 years from fans' diaries to spaces grounded in the 'indie' values of authenticity and independence to spaces more aligned with consumer guides. What was important in this shift was the transition from blogs focused on promoting artists on the basis of the blogger's personal taste, following a typical fan impulse, to a kind of music blogging more subservient to commercial logic. This evolution has led to a fragmentation and differentiation within the music blogosphere. The different types of blogs analysed in this paper still exist today, each one with its own very different sets of practices leading to very different blogging approaches. Such variations can be explained by the fact that music blogs are influenced by different values and motivations that legitimise particular blogging practices. Notably different and often opposing dynamics guide music blogs in how they define their content. While, on one side, music bloggers are music fans and they operate under fans' impulses, on the other hand, they are also players within the music industry. In summary the music blogosphere has changed over time toward a more fragmented and diverse space where the genre of the music blog is dynamic and continuously negotiated among its users.

Many music fans have embraced the music blogging culture as a core component of their musical experiences, changing not only the ways that popular music is consumed, but also how it is promoted and discussed in the commentaries that surround it. As Wodtke (2008) argues, there are a number of different types of music blogs, many of which can remediate different media such as radio, fanzines, music magazines and personal diaries. The emergence of web technologies has blurred previously clear demarcations in a number of media industries. Music blogs are no different. Music blogs are vehicles that, while not directly involved in music production and reception, are crucial in mediating between the two. Popular music is a global industry that crosses geographical and social boundaries. Between the artists and the public

there are opinions and choices that play a key role in the music that becomes available to the public. Among the many different forms that mediate the artists and the public is the music blogosphere. Music blogs play an important role as intermediaries for the music industry and they have assumed an important status as gatekeepers of taste. New talent has been discovered and later signed to major record companies and a new generation of artists eventually made their mark on the history of indie music. This article has emphasised the significance of accounting for subjectivity in the decision making process in the study of cultural gatekeepers. Music bloggers' opinions, although lacking the authority of traditional music critics, are still an important source of opinion formation. Their credibility stems from their transparency, reinforced by the fact that the actual MP3 file of the music they are discussing, often accompanies their posts. However, the collector/show-off tendency, that became a predominant practice of music blogs during the most recent phase, makes them more comparable to DJs rather than critics. Therefore, in relation to their potential for promoting discussion and reflection on popular music, this article suggests blogs might not be as relevant. Although blogs could potentially represent one of the few spaces in which music is discussed, we have seen, using an in-depth empirical approach, that this potential is not fully realised.

Finally, it is recommended that future research, rather than considering music blogs as a non-differentiated bloc, should acknowledge their use of different strategies in how they organise their content and how such variations might account for very different blogging practices. Frameworks that categorise music blogs into different typologies according to the subjective approach that the music blogs uses in the decision making process should be developed.

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