Understanding Identities, Segmenting Audiences: Changing Dynamics of Popular Music Production, Promotion, and Distribution

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The popularity of peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing and new mobile music devices has caused considerable shifts in how audiences consume music. The heightened emphasis on personalization spurred by these new products and practices has rendered the idea of “mass” musics and audiences problematic. Due to the threat to profitability posed by new means of digital distribution, the music industry has become increasingly reliant on co-promotional licensing agreements with advertisers, film companies, and television companies. As music assumes a role as branding device, it is increasingly consumed in relation to other media products and as a complement to activities not primarily associated with listening. The opportunities afforded by new digital technologies are arguably helping musicians and audiences create and consume music in ways that pose challenges to the traditional organization of the music industry. Yet, these shifts are suggestive of a trade-off: as musicians become reliant on licensing agreement income, they emerge as the authors of the sonic infrastructure of the broader promotional culture. Contemporary post-Fordist popular musical production, promotion, and distribution, then, are characterized by a dynamic of both rupture and recuperation.

This paper will explore early outcomes of my field research on the changing conditions of production currently experienced by three groups of commercial players at the heart of this dynamic: record companies, advertising agencies and brand managers, and digital content aggregators. All three cohorts face singular challenges in their working environments as a result of ongoing changes in their respective industries brought on by digital innovation. Also, because the interests of each group are distinct, it is anticipated that the interviews will shed light on varying perspectives on music’s promotional deployment. Likely outcomes of these interviews include:

- Independent record label resignation regarding licensing agreements, but acknowledgement of them as a less oppressive option than major record label domination;
- Major record label concern regarding P2P and the possibility of wholesale industrial reorganization;
• Advertising agency championing of these new commercial realities and possibilities for popular music—part of the pitch they are selling to consumer brand managers; and
• Digital content aggregator excitement regarding the new musical economy.

The findings of these interviews will be explored in relation to an analysis of the productive aspects of consumption itself. Market research is becoming increasingly sensitive to the relationship between musical taste, emotion, and identity, leading to an ever-quickening feedback loop between the practices of audiences and the products then sold back to them. In addition to considering how this capitalization on cultural taste positions citizens as consumers, this paper will also explore how tangible shifts occurring in the music industry are affecting cultural labourers. It will be argued that in the case of promotional ubiquitous musics, both the affective labour of audiences and the creative autonomy of many musicians are functioning as key resources within the reproduction of contemporary promotional hypercapitalism, precarious though it may be.