

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: Birmingham City University
Unit of Assessment: 36
Title of case study: Popular Music and Radio Organisations
1. Summary of the impact

We have worked with over 100 music and radio organisations to help them meet the challenges which have arisen due to innovations in distribution consumption and interaction technologies. Our impact has concentrated on responding to transformations in music consumption culture and has contributed to the enhancement of economic prosperity, public service and cultural life. Our work has been central to fundamental changes in the activities of several radio and music organisations, either significantly improving their economic position or changing the way they interact with their audiences. We have had further non-economic impacts through a contribution to grassroots music organisations worldwide.

2. Underpinning research

The underpinning research was carried out by a six-person academic team led by Prof Tim Wall. The team specialise in the study of popular music and music radio, and the interactions between institutions, technologies and culture, with a specific relationship to online communities. The origins of this research pre-date the survey period, but our work has entered the public domain within the period, or is awaiting publication.

Our research centre specialises in applied research and knowledge exchange, and this drives a model of working which is iterative: each act of KE generates new research data, which inform further acts of KE. Wall was accorded professorial status in 2006 and promoted to Professor II in 2012 on the foundation of this work. Andrew Dubber started collaborative work with Wall as a senior lecturer in 2004, and became a reader (2009), and then professor (2012) in recognition of his significant external role in music industries innovation. Simon Barber joined the group as a post-doctoral researcher in 2009, Sam Coley and Jez Collins have made important contributions as early career researchers with strong professional backgrounds, and Paul Long, who became a reader based upon his research and KT work during the survey period, has been central to our wider digital R&D agenda. The underpinning research can thus be found in individual scholarship by each author, along with several significant collaborative pieces. The sample of this work detailed in section 3 reflects Wall's originating interest in this area, work by Dubber and Wall, and by Barber, on the relationships between audiences, music and radio, and Dubber's work on music for social change. This foundational research can also be found in wider scholarship on the history of the mediation of music and its relationship to technological change, work to which the whole team has contributed.

Our impact arises principally from the following insights: that the changing relationship between music and cultural practice is a manifestation of changing technologies, currently related to digital and online platforms; that people's engagement with music online is a communal one; and that successful music and radio industry organisations must understand the complex relationship between their audience/customers and music, and the way that communities balance understandings of music as a cultural good and as a commodity. These insights can be articulated through three activities: modularisation of content, in response to a changing understanding of the basic unit of consumption; the engagement of tastemakers, grounded in the idea that audiences find music through the recommendations and testimonials of opinion leaders; and the mobilisation of communities, grounded in the idea that all of these activities take place in the context of processes of sharing and recommendation.

The research is also connected with a number of funded projects, predominantly knowledge exchange/transfer projects, including Online Music Enterprise (£95k LSC, 2004-5), BBC Listeners Online (£90k AHRC/BBC Knowledge Exchange Pilot, 2007-8); New Strategies for Radio and Music Organisations (£420k AHRC Knowledge Transfer Fellowship, 2008-10) and New Media Approaches to Jazz Marketing (£19k AHRC Cultural Engagement Fund, 2013). Our research and publication has gone hand-in-hand with our knowledge transfer work, and we were

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usually applying the insights of our research before our findings were published more widely. We have also capitalised on the knowledge exchange inherent in our iterative approach, and many of our research outputs set out both the principles of our core ideas and examples of their application. Collectively we have 14 additional outputs accepted for publication, but not yet in the public domain.

3. References to the research

Tim Wall 'The political economy of internet music radio' *The Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media* 2/1, 27-44, 2004.

Tim Wall and Andrew Dubber 'Specialist music, public service and the BBC in the internet age' *The Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media* 7/1, 27-47, 2009*.

Tim Wall and Andrew Dubber 'Experimenting with fandom, live music, and the internet: applying insights from music fan culture to new media production' *Journal of New Music Research*, 39/2, 159-169, 2010*.

Simon Barber 'Smooth jazz: a case study in the relationships between commercial radio formats, audience research and music production', *The Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media*, 8/1, 57-70, 2010*.

Andrew Dubber 'Monkey On The Roof: Researching creative practice, music consumption, social change and the online environment' *Creative Industries Journal*, 4:1, 19-31, 2011*.

Tim Wall 'Mobilising specialist music fans online' in Helen Thornham and Simon Popple (ed) *Content Cultures: Transformations of User Generated Content in Public Service Broadcasting* IBTaurus 2013*.

All these publications have been through rigorous peer review processes to be published in leading international journals. Those with an asterisk are submitted in the REF2.

4. Details of the impact

Impact in this area has been achieved through three principal activities:

- **dissemination**, through 44 reports and other publications, a variety of online social media activity including well-respected industry blogs (for example, Dubber's contributions at newmusicstrategies.org), and nearly 100 presentations at industry events and symposia;
- **knowledge exchange and transfer activities**, directly with 102 music and radio organisations, often as part of externally-funded projects listed in section 2, and through our delivery of the university's strategy for business engagement;
- **taking roles in significant organisations** in the field, including Wall's role on a British Council digital R&D delegation to China in 2013, Dubber's appointment in 2013 as expert advisor to the European Commission's 'ICT & Art' Horizon 2020 Initiative at the NEM Summit (<http://nem-summit.eu/about/>), and Dubber and Collins' position as board members for Un-convention from 2009.

This impact has continued throughout the survey period, during which time it has shown growth in both significance and reach. This growth, and the scale and depth of the most recent impact of our research, can be seen in specific examples.

Growing significance

The increase in significance of our impact can be demonstrated with reference to a contrast of our work with two indicative organisations in 2008-9 and two in 2012-13. Here we have worked with small independent labels, especially in niche markets where it has been traditionally difficult to make a living, and with innovative companies taking a new approach to retailing music online.

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Fat Northerner, a Manchester-based social enterprise record company with a global reach and *Brownswood Recordings*, a London-based record company run by a BBC radio DJ, were typical of the 29 partners Wall, Dubber, Long and Coley worked with on the AHRC-funded Knowledge Transfer Fellowship in New Strategies for Radio and Music Organisations. We helped *Fat Northerner* build online communities around their catalogue of locally-produced experimental and alternative music. The label staff indicate that they learnt a lot about the possibilities of online culture and the cultural value of music to their audience, but there was only a small impact on the company's finances. Following our iterative process, we refined our approach, and towards the end of this 2-year project, we made a much more significant impact on *Brownswood Recordings*. Here we used key ideas about tastemakers and collective online activities to help the company mobilise its consumer base to engage consumers online. As the co-owner of *Brownswood*, remarked in a testimonial letter, 'The work you undertook in this project was invaluable to us in analysing and developing our audience interaction... these things have played a major part in the growth of our business and the increase in our audience, which has seen the numbers double since the start of the project'.

Thus the significance, in terms of the explicit outcomes linked to our work and, ultimately, the direct result of our research, has grown in substantial terms through 2012-13. This can be seen clearly in our most recent work with *Edition Records*, a jazz record company with a Europe-wide consumer base, where we supported the label owner in shifting his business model to one of online sales, and in developing new ways to engage jazz fans as customers. This three-month AHRC-funded project, delivered by Barber under Wall's guidance, produced substantial impact. Since the project began in February 2013, there have been 20,000 new streams of *Edition* recordings and 2,200 new followers on Soundcloud, as well as 2,500 new followers on Twitter and 400 new likes on Facebook. Drawing on our collective research into online culture, we helped Stapleton focus on opportunities to sell music to a younger, more digitally engaged audience by digitising and uploading the entire *Edition* catalogue to the Bandcamp music service. This resulted in 15,000 new streams, over £1,500 in digital sales and over £1,200 in physical sales, at least doubling the label's business. We also collaborated with *Edition* to create a weekly podcast that is published through iTunes. There have been over 2,000 downloads of the podcast via iTunes, plus over 1,700 streams of episodes via Soundcloud. The show has already been featured several times by Apple in the iTunes store and is receiving positive reviews from the fan community. We helped the label to enhance its presence on YouTube, developing 'behind the scenes' content for their channel to further engage listeners. We have observed over 20,000 new plays on this channel, and over 200 new subscribers. Finally, we developed plans for a new *Edition* website set within the principles for online engagement we developed through research, aiming to articulate the label's philosophy online and more effectively integrate social media services. The site was completed and launched on 15 October 2013, attracting over 10,000 new visitors to the *editionrecords.com* website. Barber and Wall's work with *Edition* is paralleled by Dubber's involvement with *Bandcamp*; a successful online platform for independent music, featuring over a million albums, and representing hundreds of thousands of artists. The core architecture and strategy of the site was based on Dubber's popular ebook 'The 20 Things You Must Know About Music Online', itself born from Wall and Dubber's research into the digital music ecosystem. Today, *Bandcamp* makes over \$2m for independent musicians every month.

Increasing Reach

As well as working directly with SMEs we have had an equally significant cultural impact through contributions to organisations engaged with an increasingly international focus. Firstly, we have developed expertise around specialist music markets and communities, especially those involved in public broadcasting and live music and, secondly, we have worked with communities around the world to develop support for public radio, the independent music sector, and organisations involved in music for social change.

At the start of the survey period, Wall and Dubber were already involved in a knowledge exchange project with the *BBC*, which allowed us to study production practices within their specialist music programming and interactive media departments, and to draw upon our earlier research on online fan communities to make recommendations to programme makers and managers. Our widely circulated *BBC* report and presentation initially received a varied response

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across departments but it is notable that the research-informed principles we espouse – modularisation, tastemakers, communities – have since become prominent in the *BBC's* approach to specialist music. Equally, our notion of community lies at the heart of our work with the *Scarborough Jazz Festival* in September 2009, where Barber, Collins, Dubber and Wall worked with key festival staff and musicians to produce user-generated content and multi-narrative texts, in order to extend the experience of the festival to an international audience through the *Just Like Jazz* website (justlikejazz.org) we established. These approaches also lay at the heart of our work with the international online project *Aftershock*, allowing audiences to engage with a community of musicians through individualised documentary content as they used workshops to prepare for a live event.

The most significant extension of the reach of our research impact can be found in our work with the international independent music network Un-convention from 2009 onwards, through the *Music Basti* project in 2010, and most recently with *Fora do Eixo* in Brazil. The role that Collins and Dubber have on the advisory board of Un-convention addresses these notions of engagement with music, and the impact of our research-based ideas around music as a tool for social change and music as culture are articulated in that organisation's work. This is evidenced in the initiation of cultural archiving projects in Venezuela with Proyecto de Caracas Memorabilia (<http://proyectocaracasmemorabilia.wordpress.com>), and Uganda with The UG - Hiphop - Archivist/Celebrate your History (<https://www.facebook.com/TheUgHiphopArchivistCelebrateYourHistory> - also referenced in our other case study) and the short film *In the Streets of Medellin* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMDonRucMk>). Our insights into how people engage online have also been instrumental in Un-Convention's recent *33RPM: Voices of the Revolution* (<http://33rpmvoices.wordpress.com>), a free digital-download album created, produced and disseminated by Un-Convention's global network of tastemakers and their respective communities through multiple social media platforms. In the first week of its release it attracted an audience of 6,110 people, who downloaded and streamed the album on Bandcamp (<http://33rpmvoices.bandcamp.com/>). Monkey on the Roof was a project based on the research Dubber undertook into digital media as vernacular forms and his collaborative, practice-based work on music as a tool for social change. We recorded an album of songs by children affected by extreme poverty in Delhi, and used Flip video cameras to document the process and promote the album. This was then put on sale online to raise money for the *Music Basti* charity, which facilitated the workshops. The project raised awareness for the charity, along with several hundred pounds in donations, and shared a whole set of new approaches and thinking amongst the organisation's members. Dubber's work with Music Basti continues through the 360 Deal book project (<http://the360deal.com>). Likewise, his recent research into the alternative economics of the global independent music industries has centred on the *Fora do Eixo* collectives in Brazil and he is currently making a documentary, 'Occupy Music', with the film production company Blue Hippo. This is currently being edited for broadcast and general release.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Testimonial letter from the Director of *Fat Northerner* records.
2. Testimonial letter from the co-owner of *Brownswood Recordings*.
3. Testimonial letter from the co-founder of *Un-convention*.
4. Testimonial letter from the owner of *Edition Records*.
5. Testimonial letter from the co-founder and CEO of *Bandcamp*.
6. BBC report at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/knowledgeexchange/birmingham.pdf>.