

Beyond the crisis in the music industry: P2P networks, music and generational cultural experience

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1.- Introduction: In search of the P2P social context

There is no question that one of the great achievements arising from the boom of P2P systems-- regardless of issues related to whether they are legal or not—is that an unprecedented climate of social debate has been created in Spain. The ratification of the LSSI (Information Society Services Law) and of several modifications to Intellectual Property Law to adjust it to the digital environment have turned what could have been a dark area dominated by hackers and lawyers, into an everyday topic of conversation in classrooms, workplaces and busses. Surprisingly, it has even become one of the hot topics dividing the current administration and the opposition, in a rather curious role reversal between the Left and the Right, Social Democrats and Liberals.

However, this debate related to P2P has centered on whether file-sharing is legal or not and on digital fees, as well as on relations with the hard-hitting crisis in the music industry. Though these matters are relevant and lie at the heart of the most significant issues arising from P2P, they have overshadowed a reflection on how P2P networks have changed cultural experience as related to music.

For those of us who work in the field of communication and music, P2P networks are above all a social space, social tools providing people with new cultural materials that lend meaning to their experience, define their identity and express their cultural way of being. Therefore, when the Fundación Alternativas, through its “Observatory of Culture and Communication” (<http://www.falternativas.org/occ-fa>), asked me to carry out research on digital music in Spain (Fouce, 2009), I could hardly leave out a section that, while tentative and exploratory at this preliminary stage, examines the ways that P2P networks have changed the way people consume music, the social practices linked to that consumption, and how music is currently valued.

The idea was to explore how the experience of music has changed as the youngest generations—those who have lived in a digital environment since childhood-- have joined this cultural universe, compared to the experience of young adults who use digital environments at work and in their free time but came to them at a later age. I was interested in their different experiences as related to music. First, those of the generation that came of age using vinyl records and cassette tapes and experienced the first wave of digital music when CDs came on the market, and witnessed the first music sharing systems, from Napster to Kazaa. Second, in contrast, those who have recently entered adolescence and have never known what it is to flip over a vinyl LP or buy a

CD: instead, they constantly listen to music they download from the Internet. Third, between the two extremes, is the generation now at university, born when music was not yet a digital environment but just as it won its independence and reached young people, with the explosion of networks and the decline of the music industry.

Before sharing some of the value assessments made by each group, I would like to mention several considerations. First, as will be seen, the use of P2P networks, or digital environments of any type, cannot be considered isolated practices. Instead, they are part of a universe of diverse cultural practices, some falling within what can be called analogue culture, such as reading the newspaper or listening to the radio, which interact with new media that also characterize contemporary culture, such as mobile phones, in what has been called digital convergence.

A second consideration, which is obvious but no less necessary, is that both positions are legitimate in the debate that usually arises about P2P practices as to whether the subject is legal or not: those who wish to earn their living from music have a right to be paid for their work while at the same time those who demand an open culture that places our common heritage before attempts at privatization are also right (Lessig 2005, Fouce 2002, 2005, 2006). There are multiple possible positions that lie between the two and it is quite likely that the right answer lies somewhere in the middle. It is essential to accept this to understand that the problems generated in this digital music environment are more than just the excesses of a few crazy 21st century anarchists, or greedy multinationals who care only to make huge profits for their shareholders. It is true that each of those elements is part of this argument but they cannot be the only bricks used to build a debate that actually gets somewhere.

At this point, a new prior consideration must be addressed: the crisis in the music industry exists, it is deep, it will be lasting, and it will generate a new business model though, as Lasica (2006) wryly pointed out, very few people know what that will be like. In Spain, from 2003 to 2008, the recording industry generated revenues six times smaller than before. No business can hold out against this type of decline in its figures. Of course it is also true that record companies have shown –as has occurred historically since radio was invented- tremendous short-sightedness in understanding change, buttressing themselves behind aggressive legal measures, the use of defensive technologies whose only merit has been to offend and complicate users' lives, and a discourse that is both that of the victim and the victimizer.

The E-España report by the Fundación Orange presented the day before the public presentation of this article was happy to report that regarding cinema and music, the use of P2P networks had decreased in favour of a larger market share for streaming systems like Spotify. 42% of users used P2P systems while a growing 38.5% already used streaming systems. This news was without a doubt excellent for the industry but perhaps not very good for those who stand for a plural culture. That is because streaming systems reflect the logic of a portal, a centralized and therefore controlled space that grants users access to

contents filtered and organized by the server. That is, in contrast to the subversive potential (perhaps it will be necessary to address the extent of this term at another time) shown in the distributed scheme of the Internet, large corporations (not only recording companies but also those seen as their fundamental enemies in this scenario: telephone companies) are attempting to reconstruct the logic of a culture based on gate keepers.

Lastly, it must be taken into account that the distributed architecture of P2P shows a marked asymmetry between providers and consumers. As pointed out in the report *Navegantes en la red* (AIMC, 2009), very few people admit to uploading music to P2P networks (only 7.1%) while a good percentage of surfers (36.2%) download songs from the Web. In light of this data, one must insist that although P2P networks permit exchanges among peers, that equality is more theoretical than real.

2.- The digital environment: natives, immigrants and accents

This research is based on the premise that digital culture marks a significant generation gap. Mark Prensky (2001) coined the terms distinguishing between digital natives and immigrants to try to understand the different ways of relating to knowledge that take place among those who grew up in the culture of videogames, computers and the Internet and those who approach these cultural environments with interest but maintain other cultural logics. In Prensky's words, these digital immigrants keep their accent; that is, the ways they think, work and organize information belong to analogue lettered culture. Digital natives (Prensky, 2001, 2), among other things,

are accustomed to receiving information quickly. They like parallel processes and multitasking. They prefer graphics to text instead of the reverse. They prefer random access, such as hypertext. They operate better when working in a network. They are motivated by frequent, instantaneous gratification and rewards. They prefer games to serious work.

In his report *El tam-tam de los nativos digitales*, Joseba Elola (2008, 36) adds other elements that define digital culture:

They can't stand waiting—everything they want is just a click away. They don't want to listen to anything long or boring, they flee from a linear sequence of information, they want to take part in the process, and click on what interests them. They are not passive content consumers, they are active: they create contents, send each other videos, photos they have retouched and edited, they are very creative. (...) They pay partial attention to several things at once. Their brains have a more complex processor.

This research, therefore, used age as a variable in selecting interviewees, in view of the different life experiences set forth in the introduction. Three group interviews were held, one with students in the 3rd year of ESO (Obligatory Secondary Education) (GESO), one with university students

(GUNIV) and one with young adults between ages 25 and 35 (GJA). It is evident that both the methodology and samples are limited and the applicability of the findings can be criticized due to this underlying simplicity. However, I hope that this research serves as a way of identifying major aspects that can be covered in greater detail in subsequent work.

All the age groups admit to using the Internet to download large quantities of music. However, the groups value it differently: the adults compare new music-related practices to those formerly used. “Buying a CD was a whole ritual. You bought the CD, you got home, you opened it, and you looked at the booklet: wow, it’s gorgeous! You read the lyrics while you listened to it... Sometimes you had to go to a bunch of shops looking for a CD you couldn’t find. Now all you’ve got is a file you can erase if you don’t want it” (GJA).

Among the youngest group, it is striking to see how advanced the media convergence is between personal computers and mobile phones. The latter is just another musical accessory: songs are downloaded from the Internet, sent to the mobile and then sent to friends, using Bluetooth if they are nearby, even sharing the mobile or the headphones, each friend using one ear bud to listen.

Each age group downloads different kinds of music. While university students and adults continue to download entire albums --“then if you don’t like a song you just click and skip it” (GJA)—of their favourite groups, the youngest group download single songs that are currently in vogue. Instead of talking about groups or performers, their discussion is about genres and songs. When asked what kind of music they listen to, they mention a remarkable variety of styles: the same person may like hip-hop, reggaeton, Bisbal and heavy metal. This is surely linked to the fact that adolescence is the time when one discovers and defines one’s musical identity, and to do so one must explore all the available music on offer.

Adults use P2P to try to manage albums they already had in a digital format. “I had all the Violent Femmes’ vinyl albums and I downloaded them in MP3. I still listen to the same rock music as 15 years ago, I don’t keep up with new stuff” (GJA). The youngest group shows little interest in using the option of free downloads to explore new music or new groups, compared to university students and adults. “Thanks to YouTube, MySpace or Last.fm you often end up listening to things that have nothing to do with the group you started out with and that’s good” (GUNIV).

The adults see continuity with analogue-type cultural practices, such as buying the newspaper and specialized music magazines: “I buy *El País* newspaper on Fridays, I get the list from the EP3 supplement on new trends, I look up the names of those groups on Google, and I download their music and listen to it” (GJA). Downloads are thus seen as a complementary form of information, as a

way of being able to judge whether the music critics are right about their assessments, and as a way of accessing new territories.

Assessments of the influence of the quantity of music available or the quality of what is heard varies with age, although one must take into consideration that with age, the amount of free time individuals have to spend listening to music and providing themselves with musical resources (not only songs but also newspapers, magazines, concerts and so on) also varies. If we consider that adults are interested in finding new things along with rebuilding their music collections in digital format, listening related to the vast amount of music on offer loses value. “You want to have it all, although sometimes you don’t have time to listen to it. That creates a certain anxiety. You say, “Oh God, there’s so much I still have to get” (GJA).

With respect to the moral assessment of using P2P systems, the issue is again perceived differently according to age and circumstances. Pure digital natives, who have grown up with the practical experience that music is like water from the tap, show no reluctance about downloading music from the Internet. Among adults, however, past and current experiences are compared: “I stole some records from El Corte Inglés and when I did, I felt so guilty, a sweaty, nervous wreck, terrified they’d catch me. That doesn’t happen when you download music from the Internet”(GJA).

However, there is no age difference when it comes to finding a justification for using P2P systems: everyone does and it is impossible to persecute all citizens for something that is socially acceptable. In this respect, the campaigns carried out by the music industry and the Ministry of Culture seem to have no effect on the public, regardless of age. “Nobody pays any attention to those campaigns, if you go to the movies and they put one on, you keep talking to your friends till the movie starts (GESO). “They hit you over the head with it so often, you just ignore it. Plus, the punishments for this kind of thing make no sense, you get more years for downloading something from the Internet than for stealing it from a shop” (GUNIV).

Across the board, the industry is criticized for defending a washed up business model—“The companies make albums worse” (GESO)-- and there is distrust of the radio, which is seen as subject to the recording industry’s criteria. “I don’t trust the radio much. I used to listen to Top 40 but at some point you realize what’s really behind it all and then you stop listening to it” (GUNIV). Among the adults, who are generally better informed about how the music industry works, suspicion extends to include royalty management companies as well, as

personified in Spain by the SGAE: “There are fees on a lot of things and I don’t know if the charges are made in a fair manner” (GJA).

In answer to these criticisms and distrust of those who usually “prescribe” music, strong tendencies—which are even stronger among younger people—are arising where people turn to recommendation systems linked to groups (MySpace) and users’ tastes (Last.fm). “I use MySpace to find out about the groups that interest me” (GESO) “When I hear about a group, first I look them up on MySpace, because you don’t have to download anything, and plus, it takes you from one group to another” (GJA) “MySpace is much better than the radio, and you choose what you listen to” (GUNIV)

There is lukewarm protest against the royalty tax, which increases with age and the amount of information, but generally, the common attitude is that the tax makes it legal to download music. “If you have bought a CD, you can do whatever you want with it” (GESO).

A large percentage of the opinions expressed in the three groups lend credence to those who, like Anderson in *The Long Tail* (2005), claim we are dealing with a new paradigm in the music industry. Prior to the appearance of P2P systems, only the sale of a few albums was profitable: the ones in the centre of the sales curve. “It’s not sufficient for a great documentary to have a potential audience of a half a million people around the nation; what counts is how many of them are in the northern part of Rockville (...) In the tyranny of physical space, an audience that is too widely spread geographically is like no audience at all.

In an abundance-based economy, however, like P2P distributions, popularity no longer holds a monopoly on profitability: thus, business in the music era will be done by making available to users the greatest possible quantity of options so the total of bit by bit demand yields profits.

In this new type of economy, it is more costly to assess products than to produce them. This is the new innovation of the digital economy: to date, the industry acted as a filter that determined what deserved to be recorded, interacting mainly with the radio, which favoured the maintenance of the *mainstream*. Now, the ability to filter, and therefore, control of what is available, has been distributed.

The cultural consequences arising from this new model, produced by the confluence of recommendation systems and the ability to find material through P2P, is that, as pointed out by Anderson (2005), many users are discovering that their cultural tastes are not as *mainstream* as they had thought, and that they like some things that only a few other people also like.

In addition to providing the model for a new form of culture and economy, P2P music networks have proved to be an interesting laboratory for economic analysis. Economists Sandulli and Martín Barbero (2004) stated it thus: “P2P networks have shown that for an extremely large network of anonymous, non-

altruistic members, behaviour guided by each member's own interests is sufficient to generate sustainable cooperation over time without free-riding behaviours posing a threat to the existence of the network”.

3.- Conclusions: continuities of experience, needs for research

One of the first lessons to be gleaned from users of P2P music networks is that these networks are not only technological environments. If we want to understand this boom, they must be understood as phenomena occurring within cultural experiences and contexts: they are not a radical break, even for those who lived through the boom of CDs and the radio. We are all both digital and analogue: our everyday activities and social experiences establish continuities in which one can buy the newspaper and read it in a bar and later download the album praised by our favourite music critic. These continuities are also time-based: no matter how much technologies may change, there are ways of making things like personal preferences and customs last, habits that are generational at times.

The research I have presented here is clearly only a glimpse offering a limited view of the complexities offered by the new musical environment. More research is needed to find out what cultural signification P2P has on our way of life and our culture. More extensive and more intensive research over a longer time period and a larger number of interviewees will offer elements serving to create a more detailed cartography of a phenomenon that has clearly changed the cultural and economic—and maybe also the political—forms of our contemporary environment.

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