“Let them go and listen for themselves”: The rise and rise of the citizen critic

Beatrice Jetto
Macquarie University

Abstract
This paper looks at issues of authority in the music blogosphere with particular focus on the main differences between the authority of traditional music critics and the authority of citizen critics. The relationship between music blogs and the music industry is also analysed with a consideration of how such a relationship might have an impact on a blog’s authority. The paper will argue that, despite the general belief that music blogs operate under parameters of independence from the music industry, in fact, over the last few years, they have developed a solid reliance on the music industry to the point of compromising their authority. The paper is based on thirty-one semi-structured interviews conducted with Australian music bloggers between May 2009 and April 2010.

Keywords: music criticism; blogging; web 2.0 environments; cultural intermediaries; music industry; citizen journalism.

The authority of music blogs
Literature on how music critics negotiate their authority is an important entry point to examine how music blogs’ authority is structured and how it is centred on different parameters than the authority of the music press. Arts and culture critics, just like traditional news reporters, utilise specific rituals to negotiate their authority (Klein 2005; Shuker 2007; Frith 1981). For example, Klein (2005, pp. 17-18) suggests that,
for music journalists, being a proficient writer, possessing depth of knowledge and
unbiased music judgment are key to asserting their authority as critics. Critics who
are able to negotiate their authority successfully in reporting arts and culture news
are also the ones responsible for shaping public opinion about popular culture
(Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen 2007; Klein 2005). The authority of popular music
critics is also linked to the publication they are writing for, as the reader's perception
of authority is frequently based on the symbolic prestige of the publication. Rolling
Stone is probably an example of a publication with a level of prestige that has far
exceeded its legitimacy, but which nonetheless allows the publication to maintain
a certain level of authority. In this case, it is the publication that ascribes authority
to the music criticism published in it (Klein 2005).

If popular music critics exercise their authority following the above parameters,
on the other hand, there are clearly many interfering issues that might jeopardize a
critic's integrity. The vague conception of critical authority of popular music critics,
further complicated by the lack of formal training, is often challenged by actions of
other groups of people that interact with the critic. Publicists, musicians, editors,
publishers, and other critics all interact with the critic, and the critic's relation-
ship with each one of these roles will shape his or her authority. For example, a
music critic's authority is frequently attenuated by the critic's relationship with the
music industry as it can manipulate coverage by controlling access and advertising
expenditure. Music journalists and rock critics belong to an industry (the press) and
to an organization (newspaper or magazine) whose primary concern is to sell. Their
practices are tied to the politics of the publication, which obviously depends on the
target-publics they are addressing. Frith (1981, p.173) sees the music papers and
their writers as “almost completely dependent on the record business”. The critic’s
position as employee in the media industry is crucial. The publication the critic
works for depends upon advertising, a large portion of which comes from record
labels (Fenster 2002, p. 84). This creates an uncomfortable environment for produc-
ing independent judgments of albums or artists. Furthermore, record labels can
manipulate coverage by controlling access. In order to get on mailing lists, music
critics need to establish good relationships with the label, which might lead a critic
to avoid writing negative reviews. Such dynamics undermine a critic’s integrity and
authenticity, minimising his or her authority.

With the emergence of the web 2.0 and its promises of promoting participatory
culture, democratization of access to information, and equality in the dissemina-
tion and reception of information (O’Neill 2005), the critics’ authority faces serious
challenges. In particular, the long-established power and authority of mainstream
institutions, that have guided the professional music press for years, is challenged
by an online environment where the-so-called “citizen journalists” have the ca-
pability to show where information comes from, provide background about their
sources, expand on the depth and breadth of the information, and receive feedback
from the audience. The boundless and interconnected nature of the Internet gives a
unique opportunity to build credibility through a form of information transparency
that was not possible earlier (Paul 2005). In the blogosphere, for example, personal
disclosure to readers about one’s actions, motives and financial considerations all facilitate transparency. Perhaps because of the intimate nature of the blog format (Bowman and Willis 2003), bloggers tend to be more upfront about their biases; moreover, they have greater autonomy to speak from the heart than journalists, who are constrained by institutional norms of objectivity and distance from any given subject (Lasica 2004). Some have argued that new media forms foster trust among users thanks to their democratic access to publishing platforms and to their openness to feedback from the audience (Bowman and Willis 2003). Transparency becomes then a key point to achieve authority. The authority of bloggers, for example, is derived primarily by their perceived sincerity rather than observation of professional standards. Furthermore, as it has been previously discussed, mainstream media principles of fairness, accountability and objectivity are often undermined by the well-documented impact on mainstream editorial choices of factors such as corporate culture, advertisers’ pressure or publicists’ press releases.

Music blogs represent an exemplification of such trends. Emerging out of music fandom, music blogs were initially fans’ personal diaries where they used to record their musical taste, talk about their favourite artists, upload their favourite songs, etc. Avid consumers of music, music bloggers started writing because their passion for music pushed them to communicate to other people. According to Eric Harvey (2005, p. 1), “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”. Soon music blogs started to spread across fan communities and music scenes as a major communication platform for fans to interact with each other and share information (Baym 2007; Hodkinson 2006). Bloggers are seen as ordinary people and, because of their transparency grounded in their personal tone of communication, they are often perceived as having greater credibility since most audiences find them more accessible than faceless institutions or elites of experts. The increased influence of music blogs eventually changed the politics of record labels and contributed to the acknowledgement of music blogs serving a crucial role of cultural intermediaries for the audience. In the light of independence from the market, they certainly contributed to the constitution of an alternative discourse to mainstream media (Wodtke 2008, p. 45).

**Music blogs and the music industry**

Baym (2007 and 2009a) and Wodtke (2008) argue that music blogs have become influential across fan communities because their subcultural authenticity, and presumed integrity, conferred them indie credibility and trust among indie fans. Because of such an increasingly influential role of music blogs, in more recent years, the music industry – especially independent labels – began to realize their importance as intermediaries between artists and fan communities as well as their influence on other fans’ taste. Yet, record labels started to seek music bloggers’ collaboration for the promotion of their artists. Of crucial importance here is the idea that the readers of music blogs are a small but culturally important and influential
group of people (Jennings 2007). A substantial part of the music blogosphere embraced such collaborations by featuring certain artists on their blogs, starting proper collaborations with the music industry for artist promotion.

A crucial aspect of how promoters manage their relationship with music blogs is the offer of freebies such as CDs, merchandise, free tickets, invitations, etc. These are all things that might appeal to music bloggers, allowing them to increase their status as professionals in the local scene. According to the Australian blogger Daniel Boud (2009):

As soon as you are a music blog [sic] you start receiving free CDs, tickets to shows, people offer you merchandise to give away, they invite you to listening parties. The PR industry has realized how influential a music blog can be and they are now chasing music bloggers as back then the traditional press [sic]. I know a blog that is giving away CDs for free of an American band and I know that a representative of Sony gave them these CDs.

It can be argued that this type of influence-peddling is a sort of payola with no direct cash exchange, or blogola, as some bloggers calls it. For some bloggers, the immediate payoff is an increase in their professional status. According to Jason from the blog One Louder (2006):

If you’re breaking the news – supplied by PR releases –, going to all the hot shows – with free tickets –, offering exclusive contests – with prizes supplied by promoters –, then you are seen as an insider. The audience might also drastically increase.

The relationship between bloggers and the labels they promote directly or indirectly is one of mutual convenience. Promoters provide the freebies and exclusives while the blogs legitimize their music by providing street credibility. If the relationship between music blogs and the music industry is one of convenience, it also is one of struggle because both sides operate with very different values and develop different perspectives over the same subject. Therefore, conflicts might often arise. On one side, music bloggers’ values are rooted in music fandom and indie culture, and they try to establish themselves in opposition to mainstream media through values of authenticity and autonomy (Wodtke 2008). Record companies, on the other side, want their acts to be promoted in music blogs, ignoring that music blogs theoretically should write about what is of interest to themselves or to their audience. Therefore, the incorporation of music blogs into the commercial system might destabilize a blog’s original indie values and its ideals of integrity and autonomy. Of particular interest here is the struggle of the blogger between indie values of integrity and authenticity and values subdued to the commercial logic of the market. Some bloggers might then become more dependent on their sources and will develop professional relationships with promoters or record labels. Though mostly
informal, such relationships will allow the bloggers to gain access either to a new album release, a press conference or a gig.

So are music blogs an independent form of intermediation or not? The argument lies not in whether music blogs can operate outside of a relationship with the labels. It lies, instead, in the ability of the blog to manage that relationship in a proactive way, matching a good use of resources with their subcultural ideology. The independence of the blogger is, therefore, achieved in their capacity to understand the industry’s logic and to act above and within the industry. That could be the reason why they often experience a struggle, in Bourdieu’s (1993) terms, between the autonomous and the commercial pole of cultural production, which translates in an apparently contradictory behaviour of some blogs.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the indisputable relevance of music blogs as cultural intermediaries. The fact that the same music industry, which allegedly prosecutes file sharers for copyright infringements, is also providing music blogs with music that might end up in the same file sharing communities is a further sign of the indisputable power of blogs. The paper has shown a transition from a type of blog concerned with promoting underground artists and reflecting the blogger’s personal taste – following a typical fan impulse – to a type of music blogging more subservient to commercial logics. Such a dynamic occurs when the search for professional status translates into the search for relationships with the music industry. As Bourdieu (1996 and 1998) discusses, with the increasing displacement of the cultural pole by the commercial pole, it can be argued that such changes mark a shift from the idea of music blogging as rooted in fandom and subjectivity to the idea of a commercialization of music blogs. In the search for professional status, blogs’ coverage tends to privilege what record labels want to promote, thus reducing, to a certain extent, the autonomy of bloggers.

Therefore, despite the general belief that music blogs could operate as more democratic cultural gatekeepers of the music industry and as independent filters between the music industry and its public, in fact, they act in a similar fashion to traditional gatekeepers such as journalists and radio DJs, allowing the industry to influence the content of their sites. Instead of approaching music blogs either in a positive way as autonomous cultural intermediaries, or in a cynical way as by-products of the music industry, a discerning examination should consider the degree of autonomy achieved by bloggers and read it against the constraints of operating within the music industry.

REFERENCES


