

Crisis, digitalisation and the future of the internet

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Abstract

Purpose – *The goal of this paper is to explore how an approach upfronting the notion of crisis and related restructuring processes may yield certain strategic stakes and anchor points by which to identify and measure the forms and extent of unfolding changes or innovations broadly understood. One key objective of this exploratory project is to undertake a comparative investigation of the major commonalities and differences between the specific forms, features and manifestations of “crisis” tendencies and counter-tendencies in two sub-sectors of mediated “content”: the music industry and the news media industry.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The paper engages with issues and concerns relating to these two particular sub-sectors of the media and cultural industries and considers relevant concepts and indicators of crisis and recent developmental trends in these domains. It introduces the background setting and implications of “crisis” and introduces some distinctive concepts and other aspects of the approach of this exploratory study. It identifies key concepts in research literature surrounding deep economic crises akin to the current crisis and applies and advances initial conceptual frames further in light of manifest developmental trends and relevant indicators of crisis in the two sectors.*

Findings – *Drawing on recently completed research studies in the music and news media industries by the current authors, the paper highlights differences and specificities across the two media domains under study. This highlights the form, features and extent of some key changes and challenges unfolding in the media sector.*

Originality/value – *Its upfront engagement with the idea of “crisis” and related concepts of creative destruction, restructuring, multiple innovation and paradigm shifts makes this exploratory project distinctive, as does its efforts to conduct a comparative analysis of the relevant dimensions of “crisis” and restructuring based on the authors’ primary research in two distinct sub-sectors within the media “content” layers.*

Keywords Crisis, Digitalisation, Music, News media, Policy, Digital technology, Audiovisual media, Internet

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This article is centrally concerned with examining the notion of “crisis” in the context of recent developments related to two specific sub-sectors of the media and cultural services sector:

1. Music, an important cultural domain or sub-sector in itself but also viewed as pre-figurative of developments in other parts of the entertainment/cultural domain.
2. News media and the modern journalism model or paradigm.

What is interesting about the dual-sector approach of this article is that different sectors articulate differently with crisis, and express it in different ways.

Much recent commentary on the role of the internet in music and news media emphasises the significant level of disruption visited on these sectors by developments in the digital

Received 25 May 2012
Revised 9 July 2012
Accepted 12 July 2012

domain. The music industry in particular is frequently touted as being in a state of crisis at the hands of file-sharing technologies, and is widely cited as a primary “victim” of the “internet revolution”. However here, we recognise that the widespread adoption and appropriation of radical technological innovations must also be accompanied and facilitated by a diverse set of matching innovations, which must be considered as relatively autonomous from any inherent technical considerations, characteristics or trajectories. These include organisational, industrial, social and institutional (including policy) innovations. Hence, the precise outcome of any radical technological innovation such as the internet is always the product of conflicts and struggles between different interest groups in domains that are often far removed from any predominantly technological logic or trajectory.

So, we would argue at the outset the need for, and benefits of, adjusting our analytical lens to accord greater recognition and engagement with a certain sidelining of the salient role of the “digital” or technological moment (internet) in well-grounded analyses of economic and societal development. Equally we would argue a corresponding accentuation of the fundamental role of economic moments, especially struggles over distribution.

In our approach we consider how examining the notion of crisis and related restructuring processes in music and news media industries may yield certain strategic stakes and anchor points by which to identify the forms and extent of unfolding changes or innovations. Thus, we are embarking on a rather novel (but risky) and distinctive approach which foregrounds the notion of crisis in exploring the issues, concerns and recent developments in the “content layer” of mediated communication.

The music industry: recent developmental trends and issues

Dystopian and utopian visions of the internet’s future feed into what is now a well worn, stale rhetoric emphasising the transformative role of digital technologies in radically altering power relationships involving producers, distributors and end-users of media content.

The concept of crisis has been commonplace in much coverage of the media industries in recent years, particularly music. Headlines detailing the decline, or even the demise of the music industry have remained commonplace in news stories, features and opinion columns. These arguments are extremely persistent and have changed little over the course of the past decade. Likewise, the political establishment has fuelled the fire of internet “crisis”. Perhaps such sentiments are most vividly expressed by the former French president Nicolas Sarkozy when, as president of France he delivered a speech to mark the brokering of an agreement between entertainment corporations and ISPs by his government. Sarkozy remarked:

We run the risk of witnessing a genuine destruction of culture [...] The internet must not become a high tech wild west, a lawless zone where outlaws can pillage works with abandon, or worse, trade in them in total impunity (Nicolas Sarkozy, 23 November 2007).

Such stark dystopian representations of internet futures are nothing new. In 2003 *The Financial Times* reported how the downturn in record sales revenues experienced by the Universal Music Group “underlined the severity of the crisis facing the world’s biggest record companies [...] a crisis created by the combination of stagnant sales, internet theft and rampant piracy” (*The Financial Times*, 17 June 2003). Some eight years later, “recorded music” was still being regarded as “an industry in crisis” (*The Guardian*, 28 March 2011). The same article cites a *Billboard* music industry analyst as labelling the digital age “been catastrophic for music companies, and the bottom isn’t in sight” (*The Guardian*, 28 March 2011). Such perspectives have, and continue to be frequently reinforced in media accounts.

However, while such techno-centric analysis points to transformation and a crisis of digitalisation, by extending our scope to consider the policy, economic and socio-cultural spheres as sites of innovation, we ultimately construct a more comprehensive and realistic scenario for digital media industries at the current moment. In the sections which immediately follow we will consider some of the “matching” innovations arising in the music

industry which combine to suppress the potential of the internet to radically disrupt existing power relations.

The extension and expansion of copyright law

The period since the late 1990s has seen the established music industry seek recourse to the courts in pursuit of the producers and suppliers of file-sharing technologies, individual network users, and subsequently internet service providers (ISPs). The reach of copyright law has been extended into and expanded through cyberspace.

The initial cases involved the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) suing MP3.com and Napster with copyright infringement in 1999. Napster ended up selling a controlling stake to the Bertelsmann Music Group. MP3.com subsequently settled with the major labels for \$160 million before being bought by Universal in early summer 2001. Also at this time Universal purchased Emusic.com and Bertelsmann usurped Cdnw and MyPlay.com. These outcomes formed what would become a firmly established trend over the decade that followed: those who supplied file-sharing technologies were sued, subsequently settled with the major music copyright holders, and ultimately signed licensing agreements with the established music companies, and in some cases were acquired by the major industry players.

The cases of Kazaa, Gnutella, Grokster and more recently the outcome of actions involving the music industry and social networks, the cases of Vevo, MySpace, YouTube are all illustrative of this ongoing trend.

The cases of social networks such as YouTube are particularly interesting here as they illustrate how royalties are also generated by users who perform or stream the songs in the making of their own content. Back in late 2007 YouTube obtained a blanket license from the British Music Industry (BMI) which covers the site's right to stream all of the society's repertoire and catalogue in return for an undisclosed annual payment. This particular deal covers a catalogue of some ten million songs.

So, as the sum of the previous indicates, while digital technological innovations have undoubtedly produced disruption within the record industry, the music industry has proved itself effective at edging control of increasingly significant cyberspaces through its recourse to copyright law and its subsequent colonisation of internet sites and platforms for the sale and streaming of its content.

The past decade has also witnessed the ongoing pursuit of individual network users through the courts by the major record companies on the grounds of copyright infringement and, more recently, the pursuit of ISPs.

Proliferating platforms for licensing music: digital and beyond. . .

In recent years, digital platforms for music have proliferated, as have digital music sales. Since the launch of iTunes in October 2003, licensed digital channels for music have grown phenomenally to account for 32 per cent of overall global record industry revenues. This represented estimated revenues of US\$ 5.2 billion in 2011 (International Federation of Phonographic Industries, 2012). There are, in 2012, in excess of 400 legal digital music services worldwide with approximately 20 million tracks licensed to these platforms by the record industry (International Federation of Phonographic Industries, 2012). Yet, back in 2004, fewer than 50 services existed internationally, with less than 1 million tracks licensed for download. As such, the past decade has witnessed the emergence and subsequent mushrooming of licensed digital music channels.

Equally, both subscription-based and ad-supported streaming services have also evolved as a significant sources of finance for music rights holders. Following a spate of lawsuits taken by the record industry against such sites as Bolt and Grouper circa 2006, revenue sharing models have emerged whereby companies streaming audio and music video content online have entered alliances and partnerships with the major music companies. Sites such as Spotify, Deezer and We7 offer some the most relevant examples here.

Furthermore, a recent report by Juniper Research (2011) highlights the increasingly significant role of mobile music and predicted that revenues from this sphere would grow from the value of \$3.1 billion in 2010 to an estimated value of \$5.5 billion by 2015.

Also, we note that the major music companies have, over the past five years, been involved in an ongoing process of forging alliances and pacts with established and emerging social media networks and also other online and mobile content platforms. The range of this “new generation” of formats is illustrated most vividly through such recordings as Beyoncé’s 2009 album *I Am Sasha Fierce* was made available in no fewer than 260 different formats.

So, while the “crisis” being experienced by the record industry is evidenced by overall recorded music sales dropping from a record high of \$38.7 billion in 1999 to US\$24.3 billion in 2010 (International Federation of Phonographic Industries, 2011) as physical sales have plummeted, the concomitant mushrooming of online and mobile platforms for the sale and licensing of music offers a much more optimistic outlook for major music rights owners.

Despite these recessionary times, January 2012 saw the International Confederation of Authors and Composers Societies (CISAC) announce that global performing royalty collections rose to a new peak of \$7.5 billions in 2010, thus painting a picture of steady, although not uniform climb over a seven year period. CISAC note year-on-year growth of 5.5 per cent in the music publishing sector and celebrates the economic performance of this significantly growing sector which stands “in striking contrast to the performance of other cultural sectors” (CISAC, Global Economic Survey, January 2012).

Also, a recent study conducted in the Irish context by one of the present authors points to the growing value of synchronisation licensing through advertising as an increasingly significant pursuit of established recording and music publishing copyright holders. Equally, there is a significant picture of growth in the live music sector internationally over the past decade (Winseck, 2011; Panay, 2011).

Overall summary of recent music industry trends and stakes

While, as we indicated earlier, much of the media (but also academic and political) commentary on the role of the internet in the music industry reflects the pre-dominance of technological determinist thinking in society, such a perspective offers a very incomplete picture of that industry’s evolution in recent times. Such an approach largely points towards the radical disruption of pre-internet structures and relationships and emphasises that industry to be experiencing an ongoing state of crisis at the hands of digital innovations. However, if we move beyond the technological lens and consider political-economic and other socio-cultural innovations, we arrive at a distinctly alternative outcome.

All of the processes that we have explored are embedded in a socio-cultural geography and, they are also embedded in a way of doing economics, i.e. capitalism. There are routes that exist between media “content” producer and audience. While these routes exist in space and time, they also exist within a political-economic dynamic. The space and time within which, for example, recorded music is produced and accesses its audience is embedded in capitalism. The processes outlined previously reveal the dynamic nature of capital, the need to expand new markets. While the structure and organisation of the music industry has altered on a number of levels in recent years, no decentralisation of power has occurred. In the midst of the online music “economies” [both “legitimate” and “black market”], new business models have emerged and evolved. These do not constitute the “new music order” promised by the potential of internet technologies and those commentators and analysts who drove the transformative hype that accompanied the diffusion of the internet as a mass communication technology.

Furthermore, the commonly reported “crisis” that is largely attributed to digitalisation has, in light of the developments outlined, been much overstated. However, such a perception of an industry in crisis has served the interests of the major music companies when lobbying for policy change, particularly in relation to copyright law, and also in obtaining approval for mergers and alliances.

Overall, the music industry element of this research study illustrates that the music sector provides an increasingly suitable site for exploring the evolving meanings and relevance of processes of integration and synergy in media industries, and also in examining techno-social relations in the early twenty-first century. The study indicates how the music industry comprises, in many respects, the leading edge sectors in terms of the opportunities and challenges posed by radical technological change for the media and cultural industries more broadly. Thus analyzing how this sector has responded to new technological developments can serve to illuminate more general trends of the shifting global media, culture and technology.

News media: recent developmental trends and issues

Here we move on to consider some “concrete level” developmental trends or tensions in the news media domain. In doing so, we draw largely on a recent study by one of the present authors (Preston, 2009a, b) which examines the contours of change in mediated news making in Europe. This study addressed the role of digitalisation and was attentive to other features of the contemporary “network society” or “knowledge economy” setting. Thus, it provides a ready overview of major shifts and challenges facing the journalism profession in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In essence, this study indicates how the predominant “modern” model of professional journalism and news-making, which emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century, is now facing significant challenges and changes. Its findings indicate how the prevailing model of professional journalism, together with the associated conceptions of the relative autonomy of journalists, are being challenged by a news culture or “news paradigm” in the context of a neo-liberal knowledge or information society. It also considers some of the requisite innovations and changes if journalism is to renew itself in keeping with its own self-understanding of its distinctive professional role, values, norms and practices.

The study commenced its substantive analysis of the explanatory perspectives and influences on news making and journalism by identifying five (overlapping) layers of key influences shaping news media and journalism culture in the relevant research literatures. One concerns work focused on the individual characteristics and professional values or norms of journalists. A second concerns those institutional, organisational and occupational factors most directly involved and manifest in the day-to-day operations of making the news, both within newsrooms and in those institutions with which they are most actively engaged. However, we also recognised that this does not exhaust the relevant range of “institutional” influences or modes of explaining the making of news. Studies of journalism and news making must also be attentive to the influences and factors operating outside as well as within newsrooms, as Gans (1979), Schudson (2010) and others have recognised. In essence, there is also a wider institutional level of influences on journalism and news making.

Key trends in media routines and organisational factors

Turning towards the issues of industry routines, institutional practices and organisational factors, we have identified multiple shifts and innovations, many of which exert pressures on the autonomy or potential influence of professional norms and values. Many of these shifts have been enabled but not determined by technological innovations. The techno-economic features of new ICTs have helped to reduce the start-up costs required for new entrants in both television as well as internet-based sectors. Policy and regulatory changes, at national and EU levels, have also encouraged the proliferation of media outlets. But the growth of media outlets has not been accompanied by any parallel increase in the numbers of professional journalists capable of engaging in investigative or deliberative journalism. Rather we have observed a marked trend in news industry routines towards channelling the same news content across different platforms. This has been paralleled by a general tendency towards speed-up in news production practices and schedules and a concomitant diminution in the human, time or other resources required to check and interrogate information from sources. These shifts in industry routines reduce the capacity of

journalists to undertake original research or perform the other time-intensive tasks related to investigative journalism in line with the tenets of the dominant modern model of journalism.

We have observed many significant changes concerning the forms, role and extent of organisational factors operating as “powerful contexts” and influences on news making. For example, new ICTs have not only enabled product innovations in the form of new news services, but they have also been appropriated by media corporations as the basis for multiple process innovations. In many cases, these organisational change strategies involve not merely significant changes in working practices and news production routines, they also serve to restructure the formal and informal power structures and processes of control within news organisations. The empirical evidence reported in the recent study (Preston, 2001) suggests that the general drift of such process innovations and organisational change strategies has been to erode the prior boundaries between the space of professional norms and practices and that of the business and commercial aspects of news businesses. Such changes serve to weaken the supports for professional norms and values, eroding the potential for the relative autonomy of journalism. The power of commercial, managerial and ownership interests and norms over those of professional journalist is further amplified by the growing tendency of news media organisations to employ journalistic staff on precarious (temporary or part-time) contracts. At the same time, managerial strategies tend to nurture and promote a small minority as star journalists or celebrities who are very well paid for their role as flagship personalities in promoting the appeal of the brand.

Broader political economic, cultural and ideological trends

The research reported earlier points certain common trends including the pervasive pressures of increasing commercialisation and competition between media. Our own studies suggest that the media are increasing their role, scope, reach and power within every country surveyed. We observe an increasing orientation of journalistic practices and content towards entertainment, personalities and sports related genres. At the same time, the media are playing an increasingly important role in the very definitions and performance of formal politics, as the concept of mediatization indicates. This occurs as prior forms of popular participation in “democratic” political processes and institutions continue to decline in the older-established capitalist democracies.

The key recent trends include increasing media commercialisation and competition and this is accompanied by growing pressures on public service broadcasting. Some of the pressures on PSB arise from EU and national policy changes, while the latter in turn are influenced by demands from commercial media operators. Despite the relatively minor changes in the numbers of professional journalists we observe a significant growth in the numbers and influence of public relations specialists and related promotional functions.

The earlier research study points to a general tendency whereby increased commercial and competitive pressures combine to diminish the extent and diversity of foreign news and current affairs coverage. This is an important if somewhat ironic finding in an era so frequently characterised as one of deepening “globalization” as well as Europeanisation. Examples noted by our research include reductions in recent years in the numbers of permanent foreign correspondents employed by two major national media organisations in Britain – despite some of these posts being long-established (Preston, 2009a, b). We find that European and EU related news and current affairs topics tend to play a relatively minor and sporadic roles in the overall content of the mass media. This trend is not necessarily the consequence of deliberate anti-European or anti-EU bias (although that may feature in some cases). Rather, to a great extent, it merely reflects the usual operations of news selection processes, routine industrial practices and more general shifts in news values or journalistic practices, including:

- the long-established pattern whereby national news and current affairs topics have always had a privileged status relative to the seemingly “foreign”;
- the declining role of “hard” news in favour of softer and more celebrity-focused news;

- the related shift towards more entertainment, sports and lifestyle orientated media content; and
- a consequent squeeze on “foreign” news and current affairs reports (other than sports, travel and tourism issues).

If “the revolution will not be televised”, will it be online?

Whether or how the internet – or other features of the “new media” landscape – may support new forms of journalism which reinvigorate the occupation’s role and self-image as the public’s watchdog or independent fourth estate is not pre-configured or encoded in any technological scripts. Rather it crucially depends on how the internet is appropriated and used in practice by the interplays between the professional, organisational and institutional factors within the newsroom and in its immediate environment.

First, in terms of personal and professional factors, this means existing and new cadres of journalists orientated towards an old, but still fundamental and relevant core professional value: serving the public interest rather the mere pursuit of personal fame and fortune. A renewed news culture depends on journalists with the individual dispositions, professional competencies and values orientated towards informing, educating as well as entertaining their audiences, not least by investigating the uses and abuses of power or other resources. This also implies journalists equipped with critical and reflexive competencies as well as technical skills required for monitoring and interrogating the hidden or unspoken faces of social and political power, not merely the more familiar or explicit forms. Such a renewed model of journalism will also engage more with its public, addressing its members as citizens as well as mere consumers or eyeballs, and it will also need to creatively and productively engage with the various new forms of alternative media, citizen-based journalism and social mobilisations being facilitated by the internet. Indeed, the latter may be creative partners for a new journalism orientated to more diverse and pluralist sources of news. They may be treated as new resources to assist professional journalists in engaging with powerful sources, in interrogating and de-coding the increasing arrays of promotional information and flak orientated towards the interests of the wealthy and powerful in an increasingly monetised “knowledge” culture.

But if these individual and professional orientations, competencies and values are to have any significant impact on news practices and cultures, they must be complemented by shifts and reforms related to the institutional and organisational influences shaping the news. The essential requirements here include new roles for independent and self-organising collective formations, such as journalists trade unions or professional associations, capable of exerting pressure at both the news organisation and industry-wide levels. This will not be easy as it will have to counter the pervasive influence of competitive individualism which is a marked feature of the media sector. Yet, such collective forms seem essential requirements to foster and assert the role of modern journalism’s “professional” values and norms and to counter the growing power of managerial norms and business aspects of the news media.

The recent empirical research indicates that the autonomy of professional journalists, while always relative or vulnerable, is being further eroded by the new managerial strategies, organisational regimes and industrial routines within newsrooms and their surrounding contexts. For example, the processes of speed-up and increased throughput and time-pressure, dependence on machine or screen or mouse-minding have not only reduced time for deliberation and impacted on news content. They also serve to amplify the trends towards individualisation, undermining the older forms of sociability between professionals in the newsrooms which served as an important base for collective resistance to managerial power as well as business and commercial criteria. For sure, these new industrial routines and organisational factors have been enabled by internet and other new ICT-based technical innovations but not determined by them. The latter could just as easily support quite alternative news making routines and arrangements. Rather the key or determining factor, as noted earlier, is the relative of power of instrumental managerial and business norms, alongside commercial criteria and ownership interests including the pursuit of profit, over those of mere professional values and norms in such settings.

A new or revamped model of professional journalism will also require reforms that engage with the critical issues of resources. Any worthwhile reforms towards a new news culture will include a significant increase in the numbers of journalists, at least in line with the quantitative growth in news outlets and platforms over the past decade. A significant quantitative increase seems a necessary requirement if the norms for a “deliberative” journalism or the proclaimed goals of greater diversity in news content and forms are to be realised. A further challenge to be addressed concerns the trends towards increasing use of precarious (part-time and temporary) employment contracts by news media organisations. Such employment conditions and managerial policies are strictly incompatible with the requirements for professional autonomy of journalists. Any valid twenty-first century model of professional journalism, especially one with pretensions to high quality or “deliberative” standards, must engage with these and other crucial material resource factors.

We have already indicated some of challenging sets of professional, institutional and organisational innovations and reforms which form essential prerequisites for any renewed professional journalism and news paradigm. But it should also be clear by now that these prerequisites or conditioning factors may not fully reside within the power and control of professional journalists or news organisations driven by market criteria. The issues and remedies identified previously also spill over to, and in part depend on, wider categories of influences including the political economic, regulatory, cultural and ideological factors. For example, any self-organised efforts by journalists associations to expand the resources for investigative journalism, or to increase the numbers of reporters or to enhance their professional autonomy by reversing managerial trends related to employment contracts and practices will be much enhanced by matching reforms in public policies and regulatory innovations. The latter in turn will be enhanced to the extent that the political elites can be persuaded or compelled to end their ever-growing dependency relations with the owners and executives of media corporations.

Comparing key concerns, issues and trends in the two “content” domains:

Here, it is worth considering some of the fundamental points of correspondence and difference between the two media domains under study in this article.

As cultural forms, there are certain points of correspondence and difference between our two chosen media domains. For example, news media form a crucial pillar of the “political public sphere”. Modern journalism has a special role as “watchdog” on behalf of the public within the liberal model of representative democracy. Equally, music “reflects and creates social conditions” (PRS web site).

With the music industry, emphasis in “crisis times” tends to fall on economic concerns. Much of the public debate has centred around the decline in revenues from recorded music activities, defined as arising from piracy. In news media, regarding journalistic and public-interest concerns, key concepts tend to emphasise certain “extra-economic” issues and more qualitative stakes linked to the news media’s “public interest” role or agenda in this domain.

Considering technological dimensions and the major issues or trends related to the internet or new ICTS, organised news services evolved across various platforms from handwriting, to print, to radio/TV “flow” platforms to the internet and Web 2.0, etc. In contrast, the “recording” sub-sector of the music industry was largely a stand-alone, product-based activity until advent of internet. Here, the internet is widely perceived as producing a rapid and massive “shock” to the established order. Unlike news, here the “flow” platforms [of radio/TV] were largely applied for marketing and promotional purposes only.

What is interesting about the dual-sector approach of this article is that it illustrates how different sectors can articulate quite differently with crisis. There are certain commonalities in terms of the ongoing processes of commodification and concentration. Revenues have certainly been affected within the news media sector and this can be seen to have significant implications for the quality of journalism, or even the future of journalism. People are talking about a major crisis in the modern Western model of journalism that emerged at the turn of

the twentieth century. However it is interesting to observe that music has remained significantly insulated. The crucial thing in terms of the current crisis is that the biggest cause of the financial/revenue drop in the news media is that sector's reliance on advertising, a factor that is not shared with music. This is a crucial factor in explaining the dip in news media revenues and highlights a very specific institutional feature of the differences between the two sectors.

The expanded sway of IP control mechanisms in cyberspace has enabled reconfiguration of the media industries aimed at bolstering economic performance and sustaining established corporate power in an era of "limitless substitution". The deployment of copyright in such a process ultimately suppresses the transformative potential of the internet and undermining its ability to enable radical or "emancipatory" modes of mediated content production and consumption. Media corporations have launched an unprecedented wave of legal attacks on individual users through the courts – aided by mediated tales of a non-existent "crisis" in revenue generation and sloppy, fact-free journalism. Equally, as the increased reliance of the music industry on licensing and synchronisation indicates, the internal industrial culture and aesthetics of the music industry have been marked by an extraordinary shift towards more blatant modes of commodification and commercialism in recent decades (for example artist branding; sale and use of music to advertising).

Public interest and public policy issues

The key implications to emerge from our analyses and primary research on these two sub-sectors is that they are marked by crisis tendencies that cannot be readily or effectively addressed by policies defined solely or mainly in terms of the internet and/or its future.

Rather, in strategic terms, they indicate the need for a dramatic shift towards a radical new policy paradigm – one that departs radically from the assumptions, values and ideological obsessions of the neo-liberal regime that has been hegemonic over the past three decades.

For example, our analysis and primary research on the music sub-sector reveals major shifts in recent times towards increasingly intense relationships between recorded music and advertising, signalling a significant change in attitude towards the interface between music and advertising/marketing functions. When we consider the range of artists and repertoire used in advertising campaigns, and how aggressively they are promoted, this trend runs directly against the traditional trope or standards for authenticity in rock/critical music culture. Such trends also underline the increased commodification of this cultural form.

Whether or how current "crisis" changes or amplifies any issue/concern

Our respective studies on the recent evolution of specific media sectors has examined, and emphasises the importance of a focus on the complex relationships unfolding between technology, socio-economic factors and media cultures in the new millennium. One clear implication arising from our studies on music and news media is that they combine to emphasise that it is now time for more forthright rejection of the transformative hype and digital deliria that characterises so many of the utopian/dystopian visions of future social and economic development. While, as we indicated earlier, much of the media (but also academic and political) commentary on the role of the internet in the music industry reflects the pre-dominance of technological determinist thinking in society, such a perspective offers a very incomplete picture of that industry's evolution in recent times. Such an approach largely points towards the radical disruption of pre-internet structures and relationships and emphasises that industry to be experiencing an ongoing state of crisis at the hands of digital innovations. However, if we move beyond the technological lens and consider political-economic and other socio-cultural innovations, we arrive at a distinctly alternative outcome.

"Tragedy" of onward commodification and market-based inequalities

The developmental trends discussed previously serve to highlight the many manifestations of the "tragedy" associated with the extended sway of commodification and market based

competition – as prescribed in and through the hegemonic ideology of neo-liberalism over the past 30 years.

For sure the growing influence of this particular policy prescription or “paradigm” has enabled a certain milieu of investors, bankers and executive to enhance their income flows, wealth and (discursive) power within the news media industry. But this has been at a huge cost in terms of “public” interests and welfare. The resulting “tragedy” here has been an impoverished form of professional journalism and news culture – a truly spectacular subversion of the much-heralded disruptive “potential” of the Internet and other new ICTs.

That same hegemonic ideology of neo-liberalism over the past 30 years has enabled or facilitated the continued entrenchment of concentrated political economic power in the music industry. Here too, despite the much touted “disruptive” or “democratising” potential of new technological innovations, the basis oligopolistic structures and the dominating role of a few major corporations remain firmly in place at the commanding heights of the sector. If anything, the hegemonic ideology and practices of neo-liberalism over the past 30 years have only served to amplify the “winner takes all” logics that have long marked this and other media industries. Essentially, this means that a relatively small number of star artists and performers (as with corporations) end up appropriating the vast majority of the revenues (royalties, etc.) and extravagant expenditure and lifestyles to match. Meanwhile, thousands of other artists and performers are excluded from even basic or subsistence level incomes that might enable them to have a half-decent living from their creative talents.

Conclusions and implications

The approach adopted for this exploratory project remains distinctive on two counts. First, its upfront engagement with the idea of “crisis” and related concepts of creative destruction, restructuring, multiple innovation and paradigm shifts. In many respects, this is an experimental project, aiming to test how the “crisis” idea may help or hinder novel insights on the scope or forms of future policies for the content layers. And second, its efforts to conduct a comparative analysis of the relevant dimensions of “crisis” and restructuring based on the authors’ primary research in two distinct sub-sectors within the media “content” layers.

One aim of this particular exploratory project and its approach has been to yield some novel insights on the form, features and extent of main changes and key challenges unfolding in the media sector – the “content” layers of mediated communication services today, and also the implications for “future” political strategies and policy initiatives related to the mediated “content” sector. For example, our unpacking of these concepts and analysis of unfolding developmental trends in the music sector leads us to pay special attention to one particular site/arena of conflict and struggle over “matching” policy innovation – that related to the intellectual property rights regime, and more specifically for the case at hand, copyright.

Equally, this approach challenges and undermines the dominant framing of current debates around the form and extent of “crisis”. It ultimately suggests that the current situation and longer-term outlook for the established media companies in the music sector is significantly different, and ultimately more positive, than many recent commentaries and analyses tend to suggest.

One clear implication of the foregoing discussion of the current “crisis setting”: It suggests that now is a time for forthright rejection of techno-centric visions of social, economic or political “futures” within the EU setting. The technological moment can now be (or bear) the primary burden of valid political economic analysis very much less than before the advent of the current deep crisis. Instead it is time to focus more firmly on the various forms and processes of creative destruction, intensified restructuring and innovation as well as socio-political and ideational struggles attendant on such deep and historically-rare crises.

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