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Subversive technologies: web radio and cultural change

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A major cultural agent

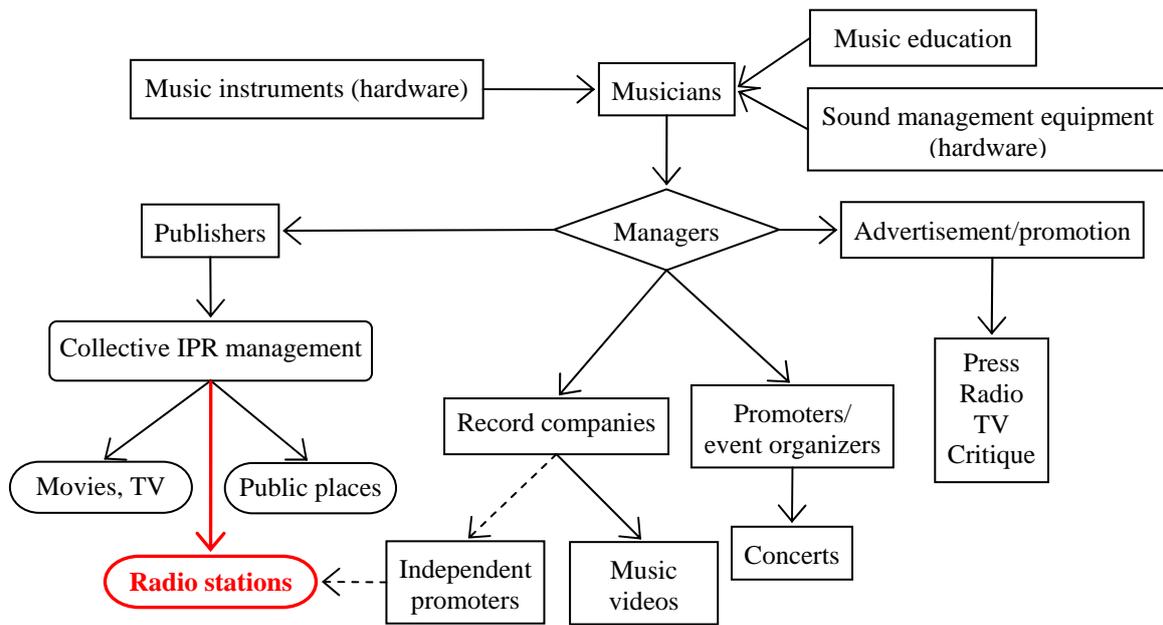
A sector of the music industries

Tim Wall, analyzing the political economy of the internet music radio, observes that although music and profit maximization are two central aspects of contemporary radio, they are neglected. I would like to focus precisely on at least one of those neglected aspects: the music.

As Antoine Hennion and Cécile Méadel (1986) have pointed out, radio is the medium *par excellence*. I think that it is not an exaggeration to add that it is a medium *par excellence* especially for the musical culture. Considering the history of the medium, regardless of its form as a public service, a business, a propaganda system, or some hybrid (Malm & Wallis, 1992), it is not very difficult to confirm its importance for the musical culture. Either as a major player in the local music life – as in the Greek case until the elimination of the state monopoly and that of Great Britain – or through its *symbiotic* relation with the other major player in the music life of the twentieth century, the recording industry, radio is nowadays more engaged in the workings of the musical culture than ever. In Greece, most of the approximately 1,300 radio stations are music stations and as several researchers have noted (Tacchi, 2000; Menduni, 2007), the fact that the radio set vanishes in the dashboard of a car, in the alarm clock, in the mobile phone etc., rather reinforces its power in everyday life. It also makes more difficult to establish its cultural significance. In the economics of culture and the arts, however, as well as in the economics of the recording industry and in the sociology of music, radio is considered a sector of the *music industries* (Fig. 1).

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Figure 1. The music industries system (adapted from Connolly & Krueger, 2006)



Several researchers – starting from Adorno with his social critique of radio music (1996[1945]) – through Hirsch (1972), Scannell (1981) Malm and Wallis (1992), Richard Peterson (1990) and Williamson & Cloonan (2007) more recently – to mention just a few of them – have shown, convincingly I think, that radio is a key player in the system for the production and consumption of music. It is then embedded in the complex system through which musical culture is produced within the broader mode of production in contemporary societies. From this point of view, a set of questions raised concerns the functions of the Internet radio in the production of musical culture and their changes. It is not clear yet whether these functions have changed, to what extent or whether new functions emerge in this field.

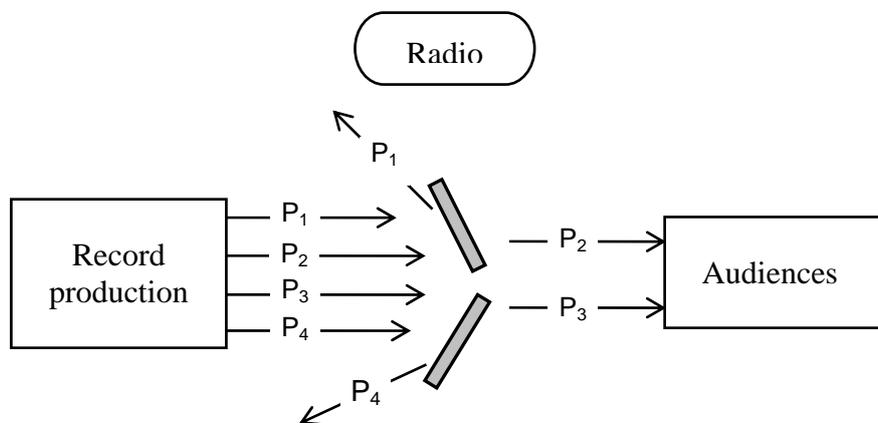
In the Greek case, for example, it is not very easy to establish how these functions are changed – if at all – since most of the Internet radio stations are an extension of their parent medium, the radio frequency stations (RF stations). An analysis of a small sample of their web pages, carried out as part of a COST action, revealed that most of them see the Internet just as another station promotion channel (Baltzis, Hahn, Hargitai, 2006). This is why these web sites usually look like station advertising booklets, the interactivity in them is very low and the use of multimedia content is rare. Rearviewmirrorism rather than innovation dominates the Greek Internet radioscope. More research needs to be done in this direction or perhaps it is too early in a country where about 35% of the population uses the Internet (taking the 24th position in the EU-27) and it is estimated that about 16% listens to radio or watches

TV through the Internet (approximately 1.7 million).

A medium par excellence

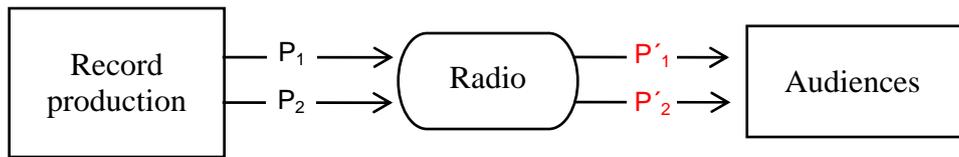
In the '70s the influential view about radio as a gatekeeper in the system for the production of music was suggested by Paul Hirsch (1972). A diagrammatic representation of this view is shown in Figure 2, where the grey rectangles represent the radio producers and “P” represents various music products. However, this approach was later criticized, as music – like all cultural goods – is not just filtered by neutral selectors, but *mediated*.

Figure 2. A schematic representation of radio as a *gatekeeper*.



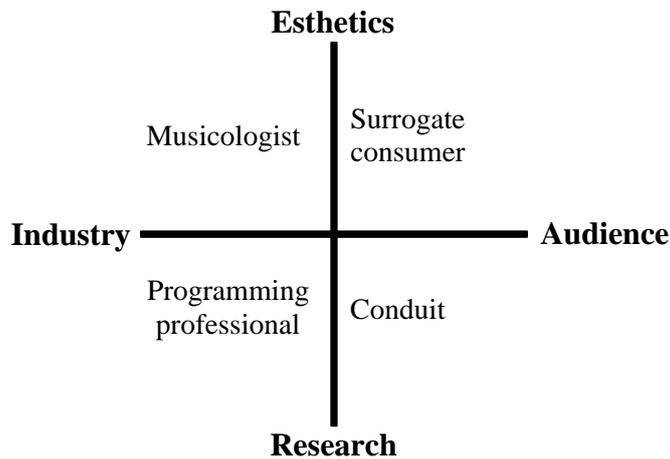
Radio producers and music programmers have their own cultural capital, their own representations about their audiences, their profession and their relations with the recording industry, their own professional habits, ethos etc. Besides, decision making in each radio station – like in every enterprise – is dominated by a specific *organizational culture* (which also includes representations about profitability and success). If the recording producer “represents the public to the artist and the music to the media”, as Hennion (1989) has shown in his “sociology of the intermediary”, the music radio producer represents the public to the advertisers on the one side, while on the other he represents the recording industry and the music to the public. Moreover, the music radio producer *frames* the presentation of the music to the public thus contributing to the creation of its value and meaning for the audiences. As Hennion and Méadel (1986) point out “Music is not delivered to the programmers with a ready made audience attached. They have to create that link”. And the creation of this link – which actually is the construction of an audience – is a far more complicated process than *gatekeeping*. This specific and more complicated function of radio is represented schematically in Figure 3, where radio “manufactures” its own products, based on the output of the recording industry.

Figure 3. A schematic representation of radio as a *mediator*.



From this point of view, and following Keith Negus’ analysis about the importance of the *culture of production* in the recording industry, Ahlkvist (2001) identified four knowledge frameworks, the “programming philosophies” as he calls them, deployed by music radio programmers in order to understand the world of musical consumption and guide their activities (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. The discursive field of music radio (Ahlkvist, 2001).



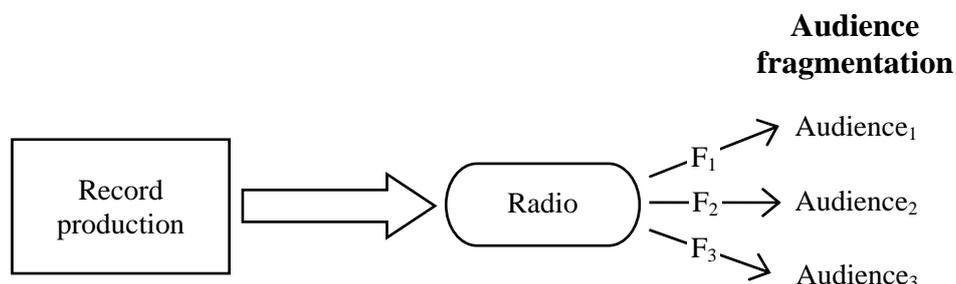
According to this view, there may be either an *esthetic* or a *research* approach to music programming, complemented by an orientation toward either *industry* or *audience*. Another question, then that can be raised concerns the changes the Internet radio brings about – if it does at all – to the complexities of mediation and to the knowledge frameworks of the music radio programmers.

A music and audience typology developer

The complexities of mediation extend to the management of the music formats. The music formats – according to Ahlkvist and Faulkner (2002) and other researchers – serve an important coordinating function by providing a common *frame* of reference for professionals in the radio and the recording industry, as well as for audiences. Formats then are a way to *frame* the presentation of music to the public and – as it is known – they are used for audience frag-

mentation and targeting (Fig. 5).

Figure 5. Radio as a developer of music and audience typologies.



Conceptualizing programmers as managers of music formats reveals them analytically as intermediaries between “primary” creators of cultural objects – in this case the recording industry – and audiences for “finished” cultural commodities. Simon Frith also suggests that radio programmers play a determinant role in music “genre labeling” and also that in circulating expectations about music genres, radio is pivotal. According to this view, formats are the basis of the “uneasy symbiosis” between radio and the recording industry in which the record companies use radio to promote their records and stations use music to target listeners that are attractive to advertisers. As Jody Berland (1990) has pointed out, formats are important for the differentiation of the station and listener identities. From this point of view, they also reveal an important aspect of the ways radio produces culture. Even radio as a public service has to deal with different groups of people with different preferences and interests. A set of questions then, that future research has to answer concerns the audience fragmentation and the formats in Internet radio.

In certain cases, like the Greek one, the formats of music radio programming are not very well established, in terms of a generally accepted classification, although for marketers format orientation is important. Also, the divergence between the self-presentation of a music radio station and the actual content of its program is not that unusual, as revealed by a sample analysis of radio stations web sites (Baltzis, Hahn & Hargitai, 2006). Peculiarities like these make research more complicated and difficult. An analysis of the real formats and a classification of various types of music programming in Greece are still tasks of future research.

Structural and functional changes

Lowering the barriers(?)

In March 2007, the Copyright Royalties Board in Washington, approved a wholesale change in the royalty structure paid by Internet radio. Instead of paying a percentage of gross royalties, as cable and satellite radio do, webcasters would suddenly have to pay a small fee per listener and per song. Depending on the specifics of a given webcaster’s audience, the new rules could mean a 1000 percent increase in royalty payments; in many cases requiring payments that actually exceed gross revenues. And the rates were supposed to be retroactive to the start of 2006 (Korman, 2007).

In a recent article of this year on digital copyright royalties and Internet radio, Kellen Myers (2009), shows convincingly enough, that “the royalty increase for most small webcasters could possibly reach as high as 1,200 percent of revenues”. Table 1 shows the rates decided by the US Copyright Royalties Board for webcasting, after strong lobbying and pressures by SoundExchange, the royalty collection organization of the recording industry.

Table 1. Commercial webcasters, per performance rate (Myers, 2009).

Year	<i>2006</i>	<i>2007</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>2009</i>	<i>2010</i>
Rate	\$0.0008	\$0.0011	\$0.0014	\$0.0018	\$0.0019

Considering the dispute about webcasting royalties since the end of the '90s, I would like to add that the unclear situation related with the legal status of the Internet in general – and the web radio in particular – gave the recording industry several advantages in its struggle for domination in this field. It is I think more than clear that it sees the Internet radio as an easy source of revenues. In the Greek case, like in other cases as well, the major organization for collecting royalties (AEPI) also believes that Internet radio is an easy source of revenues. There is, therefore, a very strong battle going on between various players with different motivations and interests, and – this is I think an important aspect of the problem – with different *cultures* about widening or even opening the access to music.

From this point of view, although the benefits of the Internet radio are usually discussed in detail, and occasionally some kind of *Internet Nirvana theory* is elaborated, it seems that the complexities and their consequences for the Internet radio and its future – especially concerning *the culture of the producers* need to be explored further. Professor Bélanger in his presentation on the Canadian radio gave some interesting observations and hints in this direction, when he spoke about the differences between the old generation of traditional radio pro-

ducers and the new generation of the audiences (Bélanger, 2009). Having said that and considering the disputes and the afore mentioned struggle, it seems that lowering the barriers is not that an easy and sure outcome as it seems at first glance.

It should also be taken into account the fact that while the start-up costs for an Internet station are very low, compared to a radio frequency station, the on-going costs are several times higher, because adding any extra listener has some cost.

Enabling new models

During almost fifteen years of Internet radio, a discussion is going on about the new models of radio. As portability of the Internet radio will soon cease to be a problem, new models may appear. Portability is about to be provided, since by the end of 2008 Blaupunkt – the manufacturer of car audio systems – has made an agreement with the inventor of miRoamer, a device that allows wireless access to the Internet using Bluetooth technology. If Internet radio can be accessed from cars, drivers will have access to more than 16,000 radio stations and the possibility to customize the content.

Some researchers, like Gartley and Smith (2006) suggest that a synergistic alliance might enable both radio frequency and Internet radio to survive and develop in an ever-broadening competitive landscape. They suggest that because Internet radio is an ideal medium for individually tailored, customized programs, it provides advertisers a way to hit a variety of specific targets. This is also supported by others, like Tim Wall (2004). The traditional model of selling audiences to advertisers, then, may survive in the Internet, under certain conditions as well as subscription based models. However, as Tim Wall suggests, there are new models like music programs that can be listened to on demand (e.g. podcasting). “These programs often offer a distinctive style of music programming that is not available in mainstream music radio, and again the aggregate audience achieved through global reach and on-demand technology can create a sufficiently large, and economically viable audience” (Wall, 2004). Others have also suggested that Internet radio offers the possibility to create programs that could have no chance in the traditional radio. This might also increase the variety of content. However, for the time being the economics of strongly branded companies seem to favor such provision.

Several questions – which also need to be studied – are raised from the structural changes brought about by the Internet radio. These concern changes in its cultural functions and the ways producers perceive the digital environment and its potential.

Changes in the *production of culture* and the *culture of production*

Future research directions

As it is well known, the broad use of the Internet as a distribution channel has undermined the equilibrium of the music industries system. For example, musicians realize that the traditional modes of cultural production with their inflexibility and well established system of power relations may be bypassed. There are already some examples of musicians that became famous and well known through the Internet and without using a single minute of airplay. It is hard to deny that the Internet has created new possibilities for the radio that might loosen its relation with the recording industry, despite the struggle of the latter to dominate the field.

In conclusion, my suggestion is that the analysis of the impact the Internet has on the cultural functions of radio should include an analysis of the ways in which *the culture of the producers* is also changing along with the culture of the audiences without – in any case – neglecting the changes in *the production of culture*. Because changes occur in rather unpredictable directions – as the case with the wireless and mobile Internet suggests – and because they are accelerated, perhaps it would be more productive to insist on studying what is happening rather than what might happen in the future.

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