Communication and the creation of media content: A practitioner-based enquiry study of popular music songwriting

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Abstract

The author has argued that an investigation of creativity and cultural production is an important research concern for those studying communication (McIntyre, 2009, pp. 156-172). This concern is also highlighted in one of the research focuses put forward by Paul Cobley in The communication theory reader *(1996). Cobley posited a simple question, amongst quite a number of others, for those researching communication. His seemingly straightforward question was: "how are messages created?" (Cobley, 1996, p. 1). In reviewing the literature it can be seen that there has been substantial research already undertaken in other disciplinary areas apart from communication that has gained a rationally based understanding of creativity and how it works. Given this growing body of research we in the discipline of communication can no longer simply follow commonsense assumptions about the relationship between creativity and media practice. In pursuing these ideas this paper outlines the results of investigating the production of one of the major forms of media content for radio—that is, popular music and the application of the current ideas about creativity to it. The paper presents the findings of a study into songwriting carried out using the methodology of practitioner-based enquiry (Murray & Lawrence, 2000).The outcomes confirm the veracity of one confluence model of creativity—that is, the systems model as initially proposed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1988; 1997; 1999). In doing so this applied case contributes in its own small way to broader ideas and debates about communication, creativity and culture.*

Introduction

It can be argued that the process school of communication has tended to place power to control meaning at the level of the producer (for overviews see Blake & Hareldsen, 1975; Fiske, 1990), while the so-called cultural context school, which developed in reaction to it, has tended to place the power to control meaning at the level of reception and/or the context it occurs in (e.g. see Schirato & Yell, 1996; Schirato & Yell, 2000). Despite the differences in heritage and focus, both schools of thought have had concerns with and about the media (e.g. Taylor & Willis, 1999; Watson, 2003; O'Shaughnessy & Stadler, 2008). Absorbing the lessons derived from both the process and cultural context schools, there now appears to be an emerging synthesis in certain analytical

quarters which emphasises the notion of the co-creation of messages (Botan & Taylor, 2004), an emphasis seemingly prefigured by Raymond Williams (1961, p. 29):

> Communication is the crux of art, for any adequate description of experience must be more than simple transmission; it must also include reception and response. However successfully an artist may have embodied his experience in a form capable of transmission, it can be received by no other person without the further "creative activity" of all perception: information transmitted by the work has to be interpreted, described and taken into the organization of the spectator. It is not a question of "inspired" or "uninspired" transmission to a passive audience. It is, at every level, an offering of experience, which may then be accepted, rejected or ignored.

In placing importance on both production and reception as sites of meaning making, Williams highlighted the significance of creativity to the discipline and, in fact, began his analysis of communication and culture, "from an examination of the nature of creative activity" (Williams, 1961; p. xiii). This idea was not lost on Paul Cobley who, in *The communication theory reader*, posited a set of seemingly simple questions for those researching communication. One of these apparently straightforward yet important questions was: "how are messages created?" (Cobley, 1996, p. 1). While there has been some emphasis on this question from within communication and cultural studies (e.g. see Alvarado & Buscombe, 1978; Moran, 1982; Tulloch & Alvarado, 1983; Tulloch & Moran, 1986), little of this work has engaged fully with the research on the specific phenomenon of creativity that has taken place in other disciplines.

Literature review

Traditionally creativity has been viewed in the west from a Romantic or inspirationist perspective (Boden, 2004). This is not surprising since, as Heath and Boreham (2005, p. 172) argue:

> Many basic tenets of Romantic aesthetics have proved extremely durable—for example, such concepts as the "organic" art form, the artist-as-genius, the "authentic" artwork, and the cult of originality which established the idea of the avantgarde and the development of art through "movements" and "influences". In recent years, deconstruction, new historicism and postmodern approaches to culture have undermined these assumptions and pointed out internal contradictions in the foundations of Romantic thinking, but the fact that we are still raising these revisionist objections shows how pervasive the Romantic influence has been.

Along with the work in literary criticism (summarised in Pope, 2005), the disciplines of psychology, sociology and communication and cultural studies have also focused varying degrees of attention on the phenomenon of creativity. Much of this work has been summarised adequately elsewhere (Rothenberg & Hausman, 1976; Zolberg, 1990; Sternberg, 1999; Runco & Pritzker, 1999; Negus & Pickering, 2004; Pope, 2005; Sawyer, 2006; McIntyre, 2009) but a very brief overview can be given here.

Where once research into creativity was primarily psychologically reductionist, a reaction to this focused investigation of the individual took place through what have been labeled socio-culturally reductionist approaches (Simonton, 2003). However, more recent thinking has tended to reconcile or synthesise these two seemingly antithetical approaches (Negus & Pickering, 2004; Pope, 2005; Sawyer, 2006).

Current research suggests that the phenomenon of creativity comes about via the confluence of a set of multiple factors in operation (Amabile, 1983; Amabile, 1996; Gruber, 1988; Dacey & Lennon, 1998; Simonton, 2003; Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi &

Gardner, 1994; Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Weisberg, 1993; Sternberg & Lubart, 1991; 1992). These so-called confluence approaches include to varying degrees social and cultural factors as well as psychological factors pertinent to the individual, all of which need to be in place for creativity to occur. Two of these approaches, one coming from psychology and the other focused specifically on the sociological aspects of cultural production, have been useful in giving an account of how creativity and cultural production occurs.

Working from the position of an empirical sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1990; 1993; 1996) argues that:

> it is the interplay between a *field of works* which presents possibilities of action to an individual who possesses the necessary *habitus*, partially composed of personal levels of *social, cultural, symbolic and economic capital* that then inclines them to act and react within particular structured and dynamic spaces called *fields*. (cited in McIntyre, 2009, p. 161)

From this perspective, *fields* are arenas of production and circulation of goods, ideas and knowledges and are inhabited by competitive agents who use various levels of the forms of capital applicable to that field in their struggles to dominate the field. It is from the interplay of all of these factors that cultural production and practice arises. This explanation seems quite similar to the systems model of creativity developed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1988; 1996; 1999). Csikszentmihalyi proposed that three major factors—i.e. a structure of knowledge manifest in a particular symbol system (*domain*), a structured social organisation that understands that body of knowledge (*field*), and an individual agent (*person*) who makes changes to the stored information that pre-exists them, are necessary for creativity to occur. These factors operate through "dynamic links of circular causality" (1988, p. 329), with the starting point in the process being "purely arbitrary" (ibid.) indicating the systems essential nonlinearity. Each component factor in the system is as equally important as the others as each "affects the others and is affected by them in turn" (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, p. 329; McIntyre, 2009, p. 161).

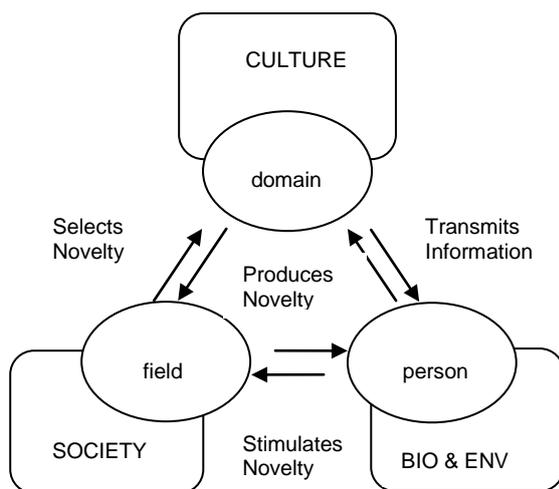This systems approach can be represented in the following way:

Figure 1   The systems model of creativity

This model has been applied to various forms of cultural production (e.g. McIntyre, 2004; Sawyer, 2006; Kerrigan, 2006; 2008; Fulton, 2008) and it has been directly

applied in a sustained way by the author to songwriting as it occurs in contemporary western popular music (McIntyre, 2001; 2006; 2007a; 2007b; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; 2009; 2010).

Popular music is one of the chief sources of content material for the medium of radio and since radio, both free to air and online, is still one of the more ubiquitous forms of communication worldwide (Thussu, 2002) it would be pertinent to gain an understanding of how the suppliers of this omnipresent media content actually go about the activity of creating their music.

While Keith Negus and Michael Pickering argue that a "critical interrogation of creativity should be central to any understanding of musical production" (cited in Hesmondhalgh & Negus, 2002, p. 147), knowledge about this area of creativity is, according to Roy Shuker (1994, p. 99), decidedly sparse. Despite this there have been some fruitful attempts within popular music studies to tackle this central aspect of making music.

Peter Wicke, for one, contends that creativity, postulated as the Romantic ideal, enabled the "criticism of commerce, which was seen as the opposite of creativity and communication" (1990, pp. 98-99). However, in refuting the Romantic ideal in favor of a collectivist approach, Wicke problematically turned to Theodor Adorno in presuming that the constraints of the culture industry were antithetical to creativity, ignoring the idea that institutions and structures of this type can also be enabling (Wolff, 1981).

Keith Negus, in a minor section in his book, *Popular music in theory: An introduction* (1996), revealed a central point in the nature of creativity. He realised that some musical creators, in particular the ones he labeled "synthesists", "are not unique individual geniuses but synthesists working at the fuzzy boundaries where generic codes and stylistic conventions meet and create new musical patterns" (Negus, 1996, p. 146). Simon Frith also rejected the idea that creativity resulted from a deep connection to an external muse by arguing that "skill and creativity are the result of training and practice" (1978, p. 75). In essence creative individuals need to be immersed in the domain of knowledge they work with.

Echoing William's claims about communication and creativity cited above, Antoine Hennion also made a case that de-centres the individual in preference for what he calls the "creative collective" where:

> the final product, consisting of highly disparate elements that can be considered individually and as a mixture, is the fruit of a continuous exchange of views between the various members of the team; and the result is a fusion between musical objects and the needs of the public. (cited in Frith & Goodwin, 1990, p. 186)

In his book, *Making popular music: Musicians, creativity and institutions* (2000), Jason Toynbee joins these sets of ideas together by grappling with the same thought that Pierre Bourdieu had made his central philosophical quest—i.e. how to reconcile agency with structure? While asserting that production and consumption are part and parcel of the same phenomenon, once again echoing William's claim, the book emphasises production over consumption tackling the notions overt in anti-authorism. In doing so he, like Hennion, also sees innovation as collectively produced but, unlike Hennion, also the result of a modest degree of agency. In making the claims, Toynbee draws primarily on Bourdieu's work. Musicians, Toynbee argues, identify and select musical possibilities

from within a radius of possible choices within the field of works that also intersect with the musician's habitus plus the rules of the field they operate in.

Reinforcing and expanding on these positions Roy Shuker (1994, p. 99) asserts that:

> a central role must be accorded to those who actually make the music. This is not, however, to concede full validity to the "creative artist" view of cultural products, which sees "art" as the product of the creative individual, largely unencumbered by politics and economics. Those involved in making music clearly do exercise varying degrees of personal autonomy, but this is always circumscribed by the available technologies and expertise, by economics, and by the expectations of their audience.

In making this argument Shuker's ideas intersect, albeit inadvertently and indirectly, with Csikszentmihalyi's confluence view of creative activity as Shuker (1994, p. 99) goes on to assert that "once again, it is a question of the dynamic interrelationship of the production context, the texts and their creators, and the audience for the music".

Methodological approach

In order to test the idea that creativity is the result of the interplay of a confluence of factors at work, as suggested by the above literature review, one could employ a number of methodological approaches. These could range from the more traditional objectivist paradigms, such as experimental procedures, through to the more qualitative research approaches, which include ethnographies and case studies that have typified most research into popular music.

For this paper, a more recently developed methodology has been employed—that is, practitioner-based enquiry. As outlined by Louise Murray and Brenda Lawrence (2000), practitioner-based enquiry relies for its validity on the assumption that all research must not only seek the truth about its object of study but must also comply with the same basic framework applicable to the more traditional research approaches mentioned above. This framework, variously spelled out by Michael Crotty (1998), Andy Ruddock (2001) and Jonathan Grix (2004), suggests that "ontological assumptions will give rise to epistemological assumptions which have methodological implications for the choice of particular techniques of data collection" (Murray & Lawrence 2000, p. 124).

In this case a researcher working from a constructionist ontological and epistemological position (Blaikie, 1993) could undertake a self-reflective approach to researching creative activity by examining their own creative practice. The techniques of action that constitute this methodology include the process of making the object, an examination of the artefact itself and the keeping of field notes in the form of a journal as the participant observes their own actions and those of others. As Murray and Lawrence (2000, p. 15) assert:

> The journal is not conceived as a descriptive, chronological diary of events. Rather, it is a literary device through which the problematic nature of educational enquiry is rendered intelligible, first to self . . . the journal proposes to offer the practitioner's account as primary source material that may be later included in the data analysis section of more formal reports.

In this case the journal entries are treated as field notes, written in an informal style, kept by the researcher during practice and drawn on as evidence to be quoted from for reporting purposes. Practitioner Based Enquiry as a methodology therefore encompasses a self-reflective examination of the practitioner's own activity through a

process of participation in that activity. As Gary Bouma (1997, p. 177) suggests, "the observer's subjectivity is an explicit resource used to enable the research". In practical terms, practitioner-based enquiry is a process in which practitioners "enquire into their own practices to produce assessable reports and artefacts" (Murray & Lawrence, 2000, p.10).

As the author has discussed elsewhere (McIntyre, 2006, pp. 8-9), there are, as in all research methods, limits to the knowledge that can be obtained in following a self-directed, self-observational, self-reflective or self-analytic research method. However, to reiterate the advantages of practitioner-based enquiry, these can be seen in its expose of an "insider" perspective and "the notion that this perspective is as vital and necessary as all others if a 'complete' understanding of creative activity is to be achieved" (McIntyre, 2006, p. 9). Using this as a basis, the author set out to write a song, document the process and report on the findings in this paper.

Writing the song

If Csikszentmihalyi is correct in locating an individual within a system of creativity, then domain acquisition (McIntyre, 2007b), a way to engage with the domain or field of works, is necessary in order for a person to write a song. In this regard it needs to be stated that the author has been involved in the field of popular music and the domain of songwriting for the past thirty years. He acquired the rudiments of his domain knowledge through a process of predominantly informal interaction with the domain.

Growing up in a musical family where there were piano teachers, amateur singers and musicians that existed across at least four generations afforded the author contact with a wide variety of songs, especially at family "singalongs". The number of songs engaged with via listening to the radio was also significant. The music played on the regional station he listened to was diverse, eclectic and typical of the period. The author now also has an extensive collection of recorded songs ranging from West African music, Broadway musicals, western swing and rockabilly through to new wave, reggae, early hip hop, pop and rock. After building his first guitar at age twelve, he remains as an autodidact primarily self-taught on the instrument. He has been, and continues to be, a self-published songwriter, instrumentalist and musical director for various groups. His latest recorded release was in 1997 for his current band Texas Radio and the Big Beat. He not only wrote the majority of songs on this album but also arranged, produced and engineered it. Some of these recordings have received radio airplay, with one song having minor chart success on ILR Radio.

He is a member of the Australasian Performing Rights Association (APRA) and has taught songwriting in the Basic Music Industry Skills course at the Hunter Institute in Newcastle. In this capacity, he was fortunate to have the members of the internationally successful band Silverchair in his classes, along with a large number of students who were also playing in the Newcastle, NSW, region. He has worked as a music journalist, which afforded him insight into how local, national and international songwriters worked and his position as a manager of a young band from Newcastle, NSW, allowed the author access to the way the field of popular music makes decisions. This included working with a variety of local and international record companies, attending various writing and recording sessions, organising live work and dealing with radio and television promotion.

In this case, one can argue that the author acquired a songwriter's habitus—that is, a set of structured pre-dispositions that is unique to him but also one that is certainly shared by many others. This experience not only demonstrates the author's own particular enculturation into songwriting's domains of knowledge, but also his idiosyncratic socialisation into the field of popular music, all of which have been highly important to the individual, as argued by Csikszentmihalyi (1988; 1999), as the author sat down to write the specific song that is the subject matter of this paper.

The author, as the "individual" component of the tripartite creative system outlined by Csikszentmihalyi (1988), had been improvising on the guitar using a commonly used chord sequence (i.e. E-EΔ7-E7) as the basis for that improvisation. At the same time he was idly engaged in watching a television interview with Tim Rodgers, songwriter with 'You am I', on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC TV).

From these initial stimuli, the author made a conscious decision to write a song as, importantly, he was in preproduction for his current band's second album and required usable pop/rock material to record (examples of the types of songs being written for this band can be found at: http://texasradio.com.au). Documenting this process for later use also provided a way to analyse songwriting, as the author is also an academic researcher interested in the creative process.

One of the questions that had intrigued the author about Rodgers' past work was the use of certain chords that Rodgers typically employed. The author's journal from this period, written as suggested as a set of informal field notes, notes that:

> I played around with chords using rhythm of You Am I's *Purple Sneakers*—needed to change so fiddled with chords to The Beatles *In My Life*—changed E7 to A—therefore sequence became E-EΔ7-A-AΔ7—didn't like the last chord in sequence—too much like others—looked for some sort of diminished chord—remembered Cº7 chord moved across to middle four strings was usable so tried it as Bbm7b5—worked—then needed conclusion to sequence so moved straight back to E. (Journal entry, October 22, 1997)

In this trial and error process there were, nonetheless, a set of tacit decisions (Schon, 1983) being made by the author. He was drawing on a depth of knowledge that not only included the necessary musical information to recognise and use certain chord sequences as appropriate to the domain but was also drawing on the field of works, the accumulated body of songs, the author had accessed over a lifetime of playing. Access to this structured domain knowledge enabled the author to move quickly through the decisions being made (McIntyre, 2007b). Once the chord sequence of the verse had been settled the author:

> started looking for melody – liked some images in *Heavy Heart*—then thought of rhythm and let my mind go—started singing scat style mixing odd words with noise but melody appearing—word sounds—at this stage like sculpture—digging and finding what's there— started learning melody as at this stage knew I had a song. (Journal entry, October 22, 1997)

At this point the author also realised that the melody he had produced was similar to one he had heard before, that is Paul McCartney's *Power Cut*, and amended it accordingly, demonstrating a sensitivity to not only his domain knowledge but also the criteria of judgment used by the field (McIntyre, 2001), since for contemporary western popular music, and increasingly other forms of cultural production such as film, copyright is an omnipresent issue (McIntyre, 2007a). What this melodic change eventuated in was the fact that the author was no longer pursuing a verse-chorus structure, although he was not fully aware of this alteration at this point.

> Tried F#7—no reason other than I was mulling over Everything's O.K. [a tune already written and rehearsed for the new album]—tried F#7 to A to E—melody now sounded similar to last song I had written—started to get emotionally involved. (Journal entry, October 22, 1997)

While extrinsic motivators were important to start the writing activity—i.e. an album was due to be recorded—it can be seen that the exercise was now intrinsically motivated in line with Teresa Amabile's (1996) understanding of this process. The author now began pursuing the song in earnest.

> Worked up M8—went straight to 5th (A) and B to get out—changed rhythm to more staccato one—A to E, A and B—looked for diminished chord up near B7 bar chord—added melody and slowed down tempo a tad—a little corny but okay. (Journal entry, October 23, 1997)

The author knew that an audience for this song, a major constituent of the field (Sawyer, 2006, pp. 126-127), would quickly dismiss it if he didn't make changes to the middle section as it was, for him, stereotypical. With this realisation the author demonstrated, albeit tacitly, that he had absorbed years of experience working in the industry, in that he knew almost intuitively (Bastick, 1982) that there were certain things that were acceptable to the field in terms of taste and certain things that would be considered passé. His songwriter's habitus—"a set of dispositions which generates practices and perceptions" (Johnson cited in Bourdieu, 1993, p. 5)—enabled him to act accordingly. "I used it as a mock up—knew it wasn't a keeper but was working it out—at same time kept fiddling with melody of verse/refrain" (Journal entry, 23 Oct 1997). At this stage the author:

> realised I had abandoned verse-chorus form when I changed melody down to B (didn't resolve)—needed new section—started to look at overall structure (Vr1-Vr2-M8-Vr1 (rpt) - Solo on verse - M8 - Vr2 (rpt)) looked at tag ending—thought about *Here Comes The Sun* as lots of Beatles references already (Journal entry, October 23, 1997)

While the song was now developing as a ternary form, as yet very few lyrics had been finalised but the overall shape of the melody and song structure was now in place. The author then began to consider some arrangement features before taking the song to the band for its appraisal.

> Started work on solo—not linear but chordal typical of style—invented new melody with octave harmonic at end (a la *Norwegian Wood*). At this point took song to piano as good learning exercise—discovered entirely new arrangement based on chord progression—changed M8 to A6-E-A6-AΔ7 x 2 - Cº7—fits melody better. (Journal entry, October 24, 1997)

While these activities were occurring the author was thinking through the lyrics substituting various words and sounds until they fitted neatly with the melody. The lyric developed from the first two lines, a throwaway comment on the author's immediate circumstance, but then developed intentionally as a more universal song about new love and the promise it holds. As the journal eventually indicates:

> The lyrics solidified at
>
> V1   And I can't get to sleep
>
>   It's playing with the hours that I keep
>
>   But I hope, I hope you really care
>
>   So how come I don't see you around here?
>
> V2   (more throwaway—still not happy but it works for now)

I'm getting in too deep

(used [above] as it refers to songwriting itself)

But I just miss your company (autobiographical)

It's true, it's a case of do or die

but I know, somewhere, some time, we could fly

M8   We could be free of this world,

but we shy away (like double meaning in equine reference) like we're boys and girls. (Journal entry, October 24, 1997)

Once the song had taken shape, at least to the point of being recognisable as a nearly complete song, the author began "playing it to various people" (Journal entry, October 26, 1997), including one fellow musician who "pointed out the opening lines similarity to an MAW tune—needed to change melody—damn, as I liked it!" (Journal entry, October 26, 1997). Once the melody had been altered again, the as yet to be fully finalised song was taken to the author's band who had been rehearsing their new album material. The song was now titled 'And I can't get to sleep'.

After listening to a spare acoustic version of the song, the band reacted favorably to the song. They were pleased to include it in the list of songs to be considered for the new album. One more change was made, however. The tag ending was repeated but the chord sequence was altered from F#7-A-E on the last sequence to include two extra bars prior to the final E. This change emphasised the final word "fly" with a parallel chordal shift which moves from C to D and then resolves to E. This change was designed to aurally lift the end sequence and allow for a fuller orchestral build and resolution to the song.

Conclusion

Given the above evidence and argument, and coupled with other studies into the same topic using differing methodologies (McIntyre, 2001; 2006; 2007a; 2007b; 2008a; 2008b; 2008c; 2009; 2010), it can be reasonably claimed that the domain and field of popular music are indeed important to the act of creativity just as it has been previously recognised that the individual's psychological and biological make-up has been. The journal evidence, reflected in the song itself, suggests that this song could not have been written without the individual songwriter's unique but shared access to a pre-existing set of domain knowledges and a broad access to the field of works pertinent to songwriting. It can also be seen that the tacit knowledge of the field's reaction, held idiosyncratically by the songwriter, and the field's direct contribution, were also important to the completion of the song. The inclusion of these factors adds to, rather than detracts from, the individual agency of the songwriter, as both Bourdieu's ideas and Csikszentmihalyi's model of creativity propose. Agency must therefore be seen as conditional.

Finally, given the dynamic nature of the system at play, where each component may be more operative than the others at varying times, as also demonstrated in the evidence above, it can be concluded that while each component in the system needs to be in place for creativity to occur, the tripartite domain, field and person relationship may not be absolutely equal at all times during creative activity.

What this outcome suggests for the discipline of communication are concerns about the balance of meaning making existing between producers of media content and the social and cultural contextual structures they engage with. Since part of the structure of the field of popular music is the audience that engages with it (Sawyer, 2006, pp. 126-127) these results seem to reinforce the notion of co-creation currently being suggested as a possible crux of communicative activity. However, one could mount a critique of this co-creational perspective in terms of power relationships (James, 2009) without losing sight of the fact that there are multiple sites of meaning making for, in this case, the popular song (McIntyre, 2008b). This situation points to the degree of subtlety needed in setting out the precise relationship between producers of media content and the dynamic structures and contexts this creative activity occurs within.

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