

The Jersey Punk Basement Scene: Exploring the Information Underground

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ABSTRACT

This research project attempts to understand the complex information interactions between musicians, promoters, and audience members who perform/promote/transform residential basements into underground music venues. The goals of this project are (1) to obtain an understanding of the information-seeking practices that enable social actors to participate in an underground music scene, (2) to identify and discover the presence or absence of information-communication technologies (ICTs) within the communication network, and (3) to analyze the underground music venues as artifacts situated within a punk-rock subculture.

Keywords

Everyday life information seeking, diversity, deviant information seeking, qualitative methods, punk.

1. INTRODUCTION

Punk culture has traditionally maintained an adversarial relationship with the mainstream. Levine and Steven [1] explains that punk uses mechanisms such as formalized secrecy and indoctrination as a way to preserve itself as a subculture. An example of this formalized secrecy can be found in New Brunswick, New Jersey, where punk-rock shows have been consistently occurring in residential basements, away from mainstream music fans, for over twenty years. Basement parties typically feature known or up-and-coming punk bands, both local and those that drive hundreds of miles, performing in quasilegal venues for little more than donations. Promoters of these shows face both litigation risks from potential accidents and hefty fines for noise-ordinance violations if police are able to locate the shows. Community-driven information needs are at the center of this legally-nebulous, geographically-bound and intensely active intersection of music, subculture and media. Utilizing a transdisciplinary approach, this research project explores the complex information interactions between musicians, party promoters, and audience members who perform/promote/transform residential basements into

underground music venues. The goals of this project are (1) to obtain an understanding of the information-seeking practices that enable social actors to participate in an underground music scene, (2) to identify and discover the presence or absence of information-communication technologies (ICTs) within the communication network, and (3) to analyze the underground music venues as artifacts situated within a punk-rock subculture.

2. BACKGROUND

In order to understand punk as a subculture, an appeal must be made to its ideologies, which are frequently analyzed (both from within the community and from without) through the lens of capitalism. Punk appeals to a distinct set of economic goals and aesthetics, and furthermore the punk community, unlike an economic system, must approve the emergent products or texts as punk. Historically, punk labels formed as a way to forgo the “usual commercial division of labor” and vertical market integration [2]. By establishing autonomy through a transformation of exhausted habits and commercialist rituals, punk creates autonomy “through a radical notion of individualism, rather than a (sub)cultural homogeneity” [3]. This push for autonomy, which is reflected in the appropriation and transformation of legitimized symbols by the subculture to resignify the commodified object [4], is a primary agent in the conflict of punk versus capitalism and commodification. The ability to create a new personal narrative and a self-authorized perspective [5] provides those in the punk movement a sense of autonomy. Punk, when theorized as a rejection of capitalism, is continually searching to assign a unique set of use values to objects without a stable system for consumption. As a result of the individualism exhibited, vertical market integration is stifled. The “romanticized isolation” and outright rejection of commodification manifest in punk [6] creates an unbridgeable chasm between the subculture and capitalism.

Also central to the discussion of punk rock is the question of geography [7]. How do localized punk ideals reflect the dissemination of British and American traditions of punk aesthetics and discourse [8]? Discursively, late-seventies British

punk is constructed as postmodern rebellion and read as an attempt to destroy or undermine the status quo of an oppressive capitalist system [9]. Analysis of American, or hardcore, punk is less interested in producing a unified discourse; instead, conversations revolve around American punk as a plural subject requiring the larger framework of its diaspora [10]. When interrogating the commonalities of these literatures, media theorist Michelle Pjilipov [10] asks, how, beyond politics, does music function as a form of cultural exchange? Proceeding from Pjilipov, it is important to interpret the New Brunswick basement scene as a fundamentally discrete phenomenon. It is post-punk (reacting to the mainstream successes of both British and American punk ideologies) and heterogeneous (reflecting the convergence of several things at once). Additionally, it is utopic, dystopic, and geographically bound. These aspects completely differentiate information seeking behavior from topics of hardcore currency, politics, and postmodern ideology. Instead, this is a discussion of identity, resistance, and network.

3. RATIONALE

Within literature that attempts to take a user-oriented approach to human-information behavior, two approaches relevant to this project are to emphasize the social concepts and the situational components at work in information seeking. Both have been developed within the scholarship on everyday life information seeking (ELIS) and will be applied to the information practices of musicians, promoters, and fans participating in the underground music venues. Savolainen's [11] influential paper rejects the categorization of information searchers based on socio-demographic variables, focusing instead on the spatial and temporal circumstances that inform an information-seeking session. These factors are fundamental to McKenzie's [12] work on the information-seeking behavior of women pregnant with twins, which advances a model of information seeking that "reflect[s] the idiosyncrasies present in accounts of ELIS" and identifies four models of gaining information: active seeking, active scanning, non-directed monitoring, and by proxy. Where Savolainen sought to emphasize the context in which individuals acquire information, Chatman [13] has used community as a lens through which to understand information seeking behavior. In order to examine how obtaining information often takes place strictly within the perceived confines of a community, we will investigate the underground music scene in the context of how it is opposed to and outside of mainstream music. Referring to information within a single economic class, Chatman has written that "whether they are seen as seekers of information from others much like themselves or skeptical of claims not personally experienced, the conclusion is that they live in an impoverished information world. This world can be viewed as one that has a limited range of new possibilities, and that other perceptions about reality are not adequate, trustworthy, and reliable" [14]. Knowledge about the basement scene in New Brunswick is bound geographically as well as (sub)culturally, which renders the process of identifying sources for obtaining relevant information less visible and more complex. Fisher, Landry and Naumer's work on information grounds [14] provides a framework to parse this complexity, where their analysis of atmospheres in which information is transferred and obtained includes describing specific environmental factors and social roles that contribute to the utility of gaining knowledge. Ultimately, the authors suggested that "information grounds are fertile territory for non-purposive information behaviour [sic] ... and facilitate the social

construction of information needs, and thus, information itself." In identifying the basement music scene in New Brunswick as a community, there is a contingent identification of information needs, which can be (and are) in turn met by a number of different actors operating in different places. As information travels through a cluster of people, the connections made between nodes of data identify gatekeepers of knowledge. In this way, tracing paths of information reveals the stakeholders and power dynamics of a subculture.

4. METHOD

This qualitative study combines interviews, focus groups, and participant observation in order to understand the information seeking practices of participants in the New Brunswick underground music scene. Data collection will be situated within the context of everyday life information seeking behavior [11, 12, 13, 14]. By participating in a natural research setting, the research team can develop a tacit understanding of everyday actions that could be missed or "factored-out" in a lab environment. All members of the research team are musicians and participants in non-mainstream subcultures, and this tacit understanding of the phenomena will help to expose multiple realities within the research setting. By participating in the daily events of a community, participant observation may allow a researcher to see and better understand underlying complexities of these multi-faceted situations. The purpose of observational data in qualitative research is to take the reader into the place that was observed, meaning the reporting of the data will be richly descriptive in-depth and detailed [15].

5. SIGNIFICANCE

Approaching the topic of punk-rock subculture from the perspective of information seeking allows for nuances in the analysis of the ways in which subcultures traffic information, as well as a perspective on information-seeking behavior that analyzes counterculture. This is not to argue that ours is the only method of examining a subculture; it does, however, offer an analytical approach to understanding a topic that is often only considered interpretively. Thus this project aims not only to study information-seeking behavior in a particular subculture, but also to provide a richer understanding of how group identity can be constructed through information.

Tracing patterns of communication that are at once a convergence of subversion, culture, music, and analytical behavior gives us an access point for multidirectional inquiry. When research on information-seeking behavior has examined particular groups, it is often groups belonging to mainstream culture (e.g., office workers, children and young adults in public libraries, or medical professionals). By applying these tools to subculture, we hope to bring a fresh perspective to normative methods and debates. Ideally, this work will function as an intervention in these two discourses, and it should be read in that sense. What fresh perspectives can we bring to two discussions used to traffic normalized ideas?

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