

The Online Music Dream

MP3.com pioneering new ways of producing, distributing and
consuming music online

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June 25th 2004

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Participatory Culture – Branding Online Communities Through Advertising

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“We didn't win. We didn't change the world.”

Michael Robertson, founder of MP3.com (Davies, 2003)

Introduction

What was MP3.com?

This paper refers to the original services of MP3.com before its domain and brand name were sold to CNET Networks¹. CNET Networks recently started a new service on the MP3.com domain called “MP3.com BETA”, but there is an obvious break with the services that the original MP3.com used to provide before the takeover.

The original MP3.com was started in 1997 by its founder Michael Robertson (Lessing, 2001, p. 127) and went public in July 1999 (Davies, 2003). It was the first big MP3² music service provider (MSP) and allowed visitors to find, purchase, listen to, store and organize music. The company offered access to free music, charts, hardware, software and related news articles (PiCarta Online Index, 2004). The service did not only provide these services to customers, but also provided specific services to artists.

“MP3.com offers the artist-around the corner to promote himself to the global public at no or very little cost. Wether you're a band, a solo musician or an entire orchestra, mp3.com is the place where you can showcase your work. Mp3.com features a lot of genres; no matter what kind of music you play, there's a spot for it on mp3.com.” (Eenennaam, 2003)

Problems first appeared when MP3.com started their My.MP3 Service in January 2000. For this service MP3.com copied 45,000 CDs to their servers without authorization. Users of this service could let their personal My.MP3 page identify CD's they bought and then be able to use the MP3 versions of these CDs from servers of MP3.com everywhere they would log into their My.MP3 account.

Because of this model you could, in theory, only be able to use what you already bought, so MP3.com argued the service was therefore legal. But obviously there were some ways around this system, like using CDs of your friends to add them to your own personal database. Soon MP3.com got sued by Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and had to settle (Lessing, 2001, p. 129).

¹ CNET Networks is a American company that owns a number of technology information sites. One of their sites called download.com also includes a music service amongst other assets.

² MP3 is a compression technology that makes it possible to compact the size of a digital music recording (Lessing, 2001, p. 123).

“A federal judge ruled against MP3.com, and the company later settled with the five major labels, paying more than \$150 million.” (Davies, 2003)

Because of this financial loss and the growing popularity of MP3 file sharing services like Napster³ the service had suffered a great deal. Because of this MP3.com couldn't refuse the offer that Vivendi Universal⁴ made in May 2001.

“The French media giant Vivendi Universal will pay \$372 million (£259 million) for online music site MP3.com. Which is kinda ironic, seeing as it was the only one of five record companies that refused to settle with the company last year over copyright violation. It got \$53.4 million. To the victor goes the spoils.” (McCarthy, 2001a)

After MP3.com was bought by Vivendi Universal they gradually started to change the service. A new attitude was chosen and Vivendi Universal got rid off the founder of MP3.com.

“Less than a week after it acquired MP3.com, new owners Vivendi Universal have kicked out the outspoken CEO Michael Robertson and replaced him with the far more corporate-friendly Robin Richards, who was previously president.” (McCarthy, 2001c)

The real end of the original MP3.com finally came when Vivendi Universal itself got into financial trouble and had to cut its losses by selling most of their Web music assets. The MP3.com domain, brand name and all property of the company was put up for auction. CNET Networks bought the domain and brand name on December 2, 2003 (Davies, 2003).

“The once-high-flying San Diego Internet music site MP3.com is being sold to CNET Networks, a San Francisco company that runs a number of technology information sites ... The current site will cease to exist as of Dec. 2, and CNET has not revealed when the revamped version will be launched ... CNET said it plans to use the MP3.com domain and brand name to provide information about online music but does not plan to compete with music download services.” (Davies, 2003)

General question

This paper wants to address the following question: How did the creators, owners, visitors and artists of the former MP3.com shape this music service provider?

It does that by focussing on three aspects; the organisation culture of former MP3.com, the services and possibilities on former MP3.com and participation on former MP3.com.

³ Napster was a technology simplifying file sharing for MP3 files (Lessing, 2001, p. 130). This technology enabled people to search for music on computers of other users all over the world and download it for free. After Napster got sued by the RIAA it turned into a legal service that people have to pay for to use.

⁴ Vivendi Universal is a French company that owns a lot of media companies like the television company Canal.

Motivation

The motivation to write this paper lies in the fact that MP3.com really pioneered the whole online music distribution, which recently became a hot item again with the popularity of services like iTunes⁵. Another recent development that motivated to write about MP3.com was the reappearance of an MP3.com service on the website, which is now owned by CNET, called “MP3.com BETA”.

There was also some personal motivation that sparked my interests in MP3.com. I was an active user of the service as both a visitor and multiple artists (both my bands) on MP3.com. I personally experienced all the changes to the service and the consequences this had.

Relevance

As being the first big MP3 site on the Net MP3.com explored the boundaries of the distribution of music in the Digital Age. Using the possibilities that came with the new MP3 technology they created their own model of production and distribution of music, which was quite different from the model used by major record companies. MP3.com showed an alternative to music distribution and paved the way for many of its successors.

Because of this MP3.com has played an important role in the future of music distribution as being a pioneer. This makes it worth while to study MP3.com.

Method

This paper tries to answer its general question in some different ways. First of all, more in general and throughout the whole paper, by restructuring the history of MP3.com. This is done with the help of news articles and other written work about MP3.com.

With the help of the concepts in the chapter “What is organisation Culture?” by L. Küng-Shankleman (2000), from the book *Inside the BBC and CNN: Managing Media Organizations* this paper will analyse the organisation culture of MP3.com.

This paper also gives an overview of the services and possibilities that MP3.com provided to its users. Some attention will also be given to the changes to the services over the years.

Finally we take a look at the role participation played on the former MP3.com. This section tries to reconstruct what the participatory culture on former MP3.com was like. The paper also tries to answer to what extend a sense of community existed on former MP3.com.

⁵ iTunes is a music service provider founded by Apple. They offer a broad collection of music that people can download for a small fee.

The organisation culture of former MP3.com

This section analyses the business practices of the original MP3.com using the concepts of “organisation culture” as explained in “What is organisation Culture?” by L. Küng-Shankleman (2000), from the book *Inside the BBC and CNN: Managing Media Organizations*. This will give some insight in the way the creators and owners of the former MP3.com shaped the music service provider.

Artefacts

“*Artefacts* are the ‘top’ layer of a culture, the superficial phenomena including everything that can be seen, heard and felt, including day-to-day behaviour, physical environment, communication style, dress style, rituals and ceremonies, publications, myths, stories and so on.” (Küng-Shankleman, 2000, p. 9)

Looking at the definition of “artefacts” of an organisation culture as stated above, what can we say about the “artefacts” of the original MP3.com? Phrases like; “the first MP3 site”, “free MP3 downloads”, “pioneer in creating new ways of distributing music” and “exploring the legal boundaries of copyrights” come to mind.

After the takeover by Vivendi Universal in 2001 the “artefacts” would be something like; “the perfect intermediary between the Recording Industry and online music sharing” and “the legal alternative to Napster”.

Espoused values

“The second level of culture comprises the *espoused values*, the group’s officially expressed strategies, goals and philosophies. This level of culture also needs to be interpreted with care. Mission statements and corporate philosophies may appear to reveal a culture’s underlying beliefs, but in reality represents little more than how a group feels it should present itself publicly to important audiences, or how it would like to be ideally” (Küng-Shankleman, 2000, p. 9)

The original MP3.com had expressed some clear definitions of what their goals and strategies were. They started with the intention to use the new MP3 technology to find new ways of production, distribution and consumption that would suit that technology.

“Robertson was simply an entrepreneur who saw the Internet as a great new opportunity. MP3.com was started to find new ways to use the technology to produce and distribute music.” (Lessing, 2001, p. 127)

MP3.com did this by letting artist produce their own music. By choosing this model they encouraged independent, Do-It-Yourself (DIY) and mostly alternative artists to join the

service, instead of attracting mainstream artists. MP3.com would then provide the artists with the means to distribute the music in two ways; first as free downloads on their artist page on the MP3.com website, second by taking care of the distribution of the whole CD of an artist that visitors could order directly from the artist page.

“Why don’t we let somebody else make the music and produce the music and do whatever they do in the creative process? And we’ll just pick up after that creation is already done, and worry about the delivery.” Michael Robertson (Lessing, 2001, p. 128)

McRobbie calls this approach “subcultural entrepreneurialism” which he defines as:

“acting as an intermediary between producers and consumers of popular music ignored or as yet undiscovered by the mainstream.” (McRobbie, 2002, p. 108)

After the takeover Vivendi Universal changed this attitude into something that didn’t oppose the mainstream ways of producing, distributing and consuming music that much. Because Vivendi Universal itself was part of the Recording Industry (they even were one of the companies that sued MP3.com prior to the takeover) they sought to deploy a service that would not oppose their own industry.

“The Vivendi chairman and CEO Jean-Marie Messier said: “The MP3.com strategic acquisition is a big step forward for Vivendi Universal's priority to develop and implement an aggressive, legitimate and attractive offering of our content to consumers.”” (McCarthy, 2001a)

Basic assumptions

“*Basic assumptions* represent the third and ‘deepest’ level of culture and also its essence. These are unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions and feelings about the organisation and its environment which act the ultimate source of values and drives of action. By accessing underlying assumptions a researcher not only acquires a ‘key’ to the culture under review, but also the necessary clues to decipher the other two levels. (Küng-Shankleman, 2000, p. 10)

The original MP3.com was one of the earliest attempts to make successful use of the new MP3 technology and to incorporate it into a groundbreaking business model. This new technology would make it possible to change the ways music is produced, distributed and consumed. This model was going to be an alternative to the mainstream practices of the Recording Industry. The idea was that people who really love music like to be able to pick and try out their own (independent/alternative) music and don’t want to depend on the (mainstream) selection that the Recording Industry has to offer.

“It started off with the online music dream - that it would bring unknown musicians to the ears of millions of people and bypass the power-crazed music industry. Not a lot of

money in this of course, so it decided to go Napster-style into music storage. This rankled the status quo, which threw hundreds of lawsuits its way.” (McCarthy, 2001c)

Although the trend at that time seemed to be that cultural practices were more and more commodified, the model that MP3.com deployed was an attempt at being successful with letting the production cultural practices become a process of culture again.

“Increasingly cultural practices are seen primarily and immediately in terms of commercial opportunities; this eliminates the space, time, and rationale for an independent or alternative sector.” (McRobbie, 2002, p. 98)

This model of taking less effort to control the production of the cultural practices (in this case the production of music) does follow another trend in which the cultural industries are increasingly organised around the ownership and control of intellectual property. Copyrights are becoming more important than production (Nixon, 2003, p. 4).

Vivendi Universal assumed something else. They didn’t believe the original MP3.com model would ever become more profitable than the model that they had in mind.

“And so it was snapped up by one of the record labels and is now switching to the controllable subscription model that the music industry has dreamed up. Digital Rights Management and proprietary technology. Control of music to specific machines and so on.” (McCarthy, 2001c)

Michael Robertson and his role as the founder of MP3.com

“Schein, like other theorists ... ascribes to the founder of a culture a disproportionate and decisive role in shaping its subsequent development” (Küng-Shankleman, 2000, p. 14)

This also seems to be true for the original MP3.com organisation culture. Robertson, a UCSD grad, founded MP3.com during the New Economy and Dot-com hype when he found out about the new MP3 technology (Davies, 2003). Although he didn’t have any real relation to the development of the technology or the music industry Robertson saw the potential of this new technology and didn’t hesitate (Lessing, 2001, p.127).

“New products beget new markets. And new modes of distribution (including the removal of barriers to distribution) induce the creation of new markets of existing products as well.” (Lessing, 2001, p. 126)

The decisive role that Robertson played in the MP3.com organisation culture also shows in the sometimes extreme actions and moves the company made when he was still the CEO.

“...Robertson willfully – some would say irresponsibly – challenged the recording industry by copying 45,000 CDs to a commercial database without authorization in early 2000. The Recording Industry Association of America filed a copyright infringement suit, seeking billions of dollars in damages.” (Davies, 2003)

Because of his importance to the organisation culture of the company it was no surprise what happened when Vivendi Universal took over MP3.com in 2001 and wanted to change the course of the company.

“Less than a week after it acquired MP3.com, new owners Vivendi Universal have kicked out the outspoken CEO Michael Robertson and replaced him with the far more corporate-friendly Robin Richards, who was previously president.” (McCarthy, 2001c)

They were the last to underestimate the decisive role that Robertson played for MP3.com.

“While Robertson was out there philosophising about what digital music and MP3 meant and all that, he was the one running the show. He's a practical businessman and that's why Vivendi likes him. If it didn't, it would have kicked him out as well and put in a Vivendi man. And he knows it.” (McCarthy, 2001c)

Mission

“Schein defines mission as ‘an organisation’s primary task, or reason to be, a set of beliefs about its core competencies and basic functions in society’ while ‘strategy concerns the evolution of an organisation’s basic mission’ (Küng-Shankleman, 2000, p. 19)

The mission of MP3.com can be summarized in twofold. First providing visitors with a broad collection of free MP3 song downloads. At the end MP3.com hosted 750,000 songs by 250,000 artists (Davies, 2003). Second encouraging artists to produce and distribute music across its site (Lessing, 2001, p. 127).

After the takeover by Vivendi Universal this mission changed into providing visitors the change to subscribe to the service (which cost money) and be able to make a selection from a (mainstream) collection of MP3 music. Encouraging artists to use MP3.com was given less priority. Changes to the service even made it less profitable for artists to use MP3.com.

Stakeholders

“Stakeholders groups are various constituencies of an organisation which have a legitimate interest in its activities and the ability directly to affect its performance” (Küng-Shankleman, 2000, p. 19)

The MP3.com story goes to show how important the identity of the stakeholders is. When Vivendi Universal took over MP3.com and became the biggest stakeholder of the company the whole organisation culture was instantly transformed.

Competencies

“Competencies have been a dominant concept in contemporary strategy literature. They are traditionally understood as distinctive organisational attributes that create sustainable competitive advantage and, critically a platform for future growth” (Küng-Shankleman, 2000, p. 21)

The main competency of MP3.com would be they way they quickly dealt with estimating the importance of the new MP3 technology. They were smart enough to be the first to claim the MP3.com domain that helped them to become know as THE MP3 site on the net. Another competency would be their innovative new model of the production, distribution and consumption of music online, made possible by (again) the new MP3 technology. These competencies can all be traced back to the founder and founding of MP3.com, Michael Robertson, who started the company based on the competencies mentioned above.

“The roots of distinctive capabilities often extend back to the foundation of an organisation, emerging originally as a means by which an organisation could fulfil its primary mission.” (Küng-Shankleman, 2000, p. 21)

Services and possibilities on former MP3.com

This section gives an overview of the different services and possibilities offered by the original MP3.com service. This overview is based on online tutorials made by former users of the service, old documentation of MP3.com itself and personal experience with the services. There will also be some focus on the changes in the services over the years in this section.

Services for visitors

The original MP3.com website offered visitors a broad collection of free downloadable music from various artists (ranging from amateurs to well know artists like Eric Clapton). Visitors could also play virtual radio stations, view charts and use the message boards to talk about their favourite music and lots more. But MP3.com also offered some services specifically meant for artists that produced their own music.

“...in my opinion, the MP3.com site is the best site for indie⁶ musicians with MP3 tunes available. The site is very useful to it's members by providing them with viewing stats of the artists actual page, download stats, etc.” (Jacobson, 2003)

Artist services

The policy was rather simple. An artist could sign up on the website. They would receive an artist page (typically <http://www.mp3.com/artist>). Artists could put some free MP3 files of their music on this page (they could also put some additional information on this page if they wanted). Visitors could listen to the free MP3 music and if they would like it they could buy the artists whole CD on this artist page or download more music from that artist. MP3.com kept track of all songs that were played or downloaded and with this data they created charts that were divided into different genres.

“On the MP3.COM site, artists make some of their material free and available to the public, hoping that they will generate some interest amongst listeners and hopefully sell their cd ... even though you have to make a song available for free download, the rest of your material receives excellent exposure to over 6 million visitors to the site each month. (You usually get around 300 hits per month to your site)” (Jacobson, 2003)

This service could even turn out to be profitable for artists because of two additional services by MP3.com. The first service was “payback-for-playback”, this meant that artists would receive ½ cent for every time their songs would get played. The second service was letting MP3.com take care of the distribution of your CDs with the so called “D.A.M. CDs”. You

⁶ Short for independent.

could upload all the songs of the CD to MP3.com, include some artwork, and people could order you CD directly from your artist page. MP3.com would take care of the rest.

“Once they approve your work, you can make a D.A.M cd available to the public. If a cd sells for \$7.99, you will receive \$4.00 for every copy sold.” (Jacobson, 2003)

Changes to the services

When Vivendi Universal took over MP3.com in 2001 they divided the artist services in three different services that each had their own possibilities and limitations. Only one service continued to be free (of course this one had the most limitations).

“Mp3.com is both for the hobbyist and the semi-professional, although lately major artists such as Limp Bizkit, Enya and Eric Clapton signed up. I think this is a way of mp3.com to generate more traffic, which I greatly appreciate. Mp3.com offers roughly three types of service to artists; free service, premium artist service and signed artist service. Of these three only the first two are of interest, since the third option is often used by agents marketing work by artists such as Madonna.” (Eenennaam, 2003)

The free service had the basic options. You would get an artist page with some fields you could edit yourself to include information and pictures. You could upload an unlimited amount of MP3 files with two week of approval time (MP3.com screened all songs to fit the specified genre, for correct encoding and copyright violations). Your songs could be streamed at various speeds (for dialup connections and broadband) or downloaded from the fast MP3.com servers. You could also let your songs feature on internet radio stations and set up your own stations (Eenennaam, 2003).

The premium artist service (P.A.S.) had all basic features mentioned above plus some handy extras. You had to pay a monthly fee of \$20 to use this service. Using this service entitled you to earn “payback for playback” (artists that used the free service couldn’t earn money through this service anymore). You would get an artist page without additional advertisements on it. You would get increased control over the content of your artist page. And last but not least you would have the change to get into a monthly \$50,000 promotion. You had to meet several requirements such as increase in plays over last month or a set number of plays. All premium artists meeting these goals got a share of the \$50,000 promotion (Eenennaam, 2003).

Although these changes to the services seem like a cheap way by Vivendi Universal to earn more money with the artists on MP3.com being an artist on MP3.com could still be profitable.

“The PAS might seem like a rip-off, pay \$20,- a month to be enabled to make 1/2 cent per play. But if you work it well with promotion and get your songs on many stations. You 'only' need 133 plays / downloads a day to break even, every play over 133 a day is profit. I have over 150 tracks on mp3.com, this also helps. If you're in more charts, more people will check you out.” (Eenennaam, 2003)

More changes

As MP3.com started doing worse and got into more (financial) trouble, more changes were made to the different artist services. The core of these changes constantly were making it harder for artists to make money through the service by putting limitations on ways to earn money and by charging money for additional services that used to be free.

“Mp3.com's belt tightening is giving rise to a series of annoying of policy changes. 'Basic' (meaning: non paying) artists as of the beginning of this year have seen the number of tracks displayable on their artist page being reduced from virtually unlimited to only three. However, there wasn't any limit set on the number of uploadable tracks, and neither on the number of tracks available for inclusion on 'stations' ... I don't know whether this kind of a paradox was the reason, but recently, without warning, the policy changed again, and the only basic artist tracks available for stations now are the three displayed on the artist's page. This sudden change of heart has virtually swept clean hundreds, maybe thousands of playlists, by removing much of its content.” (HarS, 2003a)

Because of all of these changes being an artist on MP3.com started to become less profitable and some artists stopped putting their effort in the service because of this.

“There have been considerable changes to the rules on mp3.com, as is the case with paying for services which used to be free. I still have my songs on there, but don't waste any more precious time on it because since Vivendi / Universal bought the once succesfull mp3.com it has been going downhill ever since. With the loss of artists and the loss of their songs came the loss of visitors, and I doubt their web servers are ever busy beyond 5% load. Sorry to pop your balloon.” (Eenennaam, 2003)

My.MP3

Another service that has been important to the original MP3.com was the My.MP3 Service mentioned before in the introduction of this paper. After all the legal hassle MP3.com relaunched the service.

“MP3.com relaunched its virtual CD collection, My.MP3.com, today after an seven-month hiatus ... The relaunch follows the final settlement between MP3.com and the major recording companies of their copyright infringement lawsuit. Most labels settled out of court, but Universal pursued the online music operation to the bitter end. MP3.com will pay Universal \$53.4 million in damages and music licence fees. It has already paid EMI, Sony, Warner and BMG around \$20 million apiece.” (Smith, 2000)

The relaunched version of the service is available in two forms. One free service (paid for by advertising) that allows users to access up to 25 online versions of CDs they already own. By paying an annual subscription of \$49.95 you can listen to up to 500 online CDs without being bothered by advertisements (Smith, 2000).

After the takeover by Vivendi Universal more priority was given to the paid services like the above because these services were seen as the future of MP3.com.

Participation on former MP3.com

In this section we take a look at the role participation played on the former MP3.com. Mainly by using personal accounts of former users of the services, this paper tries to reconstruct what the participatory culture on former MP3.com was like. In this section we will try to analyse to what extent a sense of community existed on former MP3.com by looking for; feelings of membership and belonging, feelings of having influence on and being influenced by the community, integration and fulfilment of needs (support) and a shared emotional connection.

Participatory culture

“MP3.com pushed production by encouraging artists to produce and distribute music across its site.” (Lessing, 2001, p. 127)

By choosing to enable virtually anyone to become an artists on the MP3.com service and to distribute their music via MP3.com, instead of searching, selecting and screening artists they would want to promote, means MP3.com chose a model of participation. People could choose to be part of the MP3.com services because MP3.com (using the benefits of the new MP3 technology) enabled them.

Because artists could choose to sign up to the MP3.com service they remained in control of what they would produce because they would get distributed almost no matter what they would produce. Visitors also had more power because they could choose themselves what they wanted to listen to, for example by picking their own favourite virtual radio station or browsing the charts of their favourite subgenre.

“Technology now makes possible the attainment of decentralization and democratization by enabling small groups of constituents and individuals to become *users* – participants in the production of their information environment – rather than by lightly regulating concentrated commercial mass media to make them better serve individuals conceived as passive consumers.” (Benkler, 2000, p. 562)

MP3.com, as a result of their model, also had to rely on this participation. They needed people to become artists so they could distribute free MP3 songs. In this sort of “everybody gains” construction, they would supply the means and technology and the artists would produce the music. On the other end they also needed people to come to the site and listen to the music. The model that MP3.com deployed has a lot in common with what Jenkins (2002) calls the “new participatory culture”:

“The new participatory culture is taking shape at the intersection between three trends: (1) new tools and technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content (2) a range of subcultures promote Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media production, a discourse that shapes how consumers have deployed those

technologies (3) economic trends favoring the horizontally integrated media conglomerates encourage the flow of images, ideas and narratives across multiple media channels and demand more active modes of spectatorship.” (Jenkins, 2002, p. 1)

Sense of community

Among the active users of the service there was a strong sense of community. A feeling of membership and belonging was created in various ways. They got into contact with artists through the artist pages for various reasons (collaboration, appreciation for example). They could use their artist pages to link to other artists as a means of helping them get more exposure. They discussed various aspects of the MP3.com services on message boards (MP3.com had its own message boards that were very popular). Also most users were very satisfied with the services and opportunities that MP3.com had to offer that they “spread the word” to other people, hence promoting the service and its artists through “viral marketing”:

“Although the practice has been around for millennia, viral marketing, sometimes called ‘buzz marketing’ is the newest recognized type of virus. Viral marketing refers to the marketing of a product or service by word of mouth.” (Wellman & Boase, 2001, p. 3)

The feeling of membership and belonging, and a shared emotional connection, can also be sensed when reading all the comments by (former) users about the plans that CNET Networks had about deleting all content of the former MP3.com after their takeover.

“That is a shame. I wish somehow it would be possible to archive the site's content. Of course the files are not owned by the company, but by the people that uploaded them. Often they did that hoping to cybercatch some ears. But most of it hardly got heard, except by those that had heard it already.” (HarS, 2003b)

Having influence on and being influenced by has always been very important in the MP3.com community. For many users this was even seen as one of the biggest advantages of the MP3.com service. Feedback about the music could be given in various ways. People could contact each other through the artist pages or music could be discussed on the message boards. Another way to get some indication about how your music was doing was through the charts and stats MP3.com supplied.

“I think that this service is beneficial to the indie artist. It gives us a louder voice to cover a much larger area, and it also allows us to monitor what material is strong and weak which is a very powerful tool!” (Jacobson, 2003)

Other forms of support were part of the MP3.com community. On the message boards and personal websites of some artists you could find guides about various aspects of MP3.com. Recording music, producing music, promoting your music, creating virtual radio stations and much more. This was all broadly discussed on the message boards.

The shared emotional connection on MP3.com was quite simple. The community loved creating, discussing, producing, recording and listening to music and all artists wanted to get their music “out there”.

A huge variety in participants

Because of the freedom in participation and the low demands on the production of the music that could be put on MP3.com a huge variety of artists participated. They did not only vary in genre or popularity, but also in skill and attitude.

“The amateur stuff. The dorm room freak outs. The 'recorded in my bedroom' songs. The high school bands. All of the 'I just bought myself an electric guitar and here is what I do with it ... (Hi mom !)' tracks. The tens of thousands of 'sounds just like X' and 'trying to sound like Y' recordings. But also, yes, I found them: the occasional gems, the originals.” (HarS, 2003b)

It was probably the largest collection of self-produced music by independent artists ever. Some people therefore argued it also had some historical value.

“I'd say this is what's sitting there, though not for much longer, on mp3.com's servers: it's this past decade's "noise made by the people". Mp3.com had all of it. Or, at least, a lot of it. And it is not so much some of it in particular that interests me. It is "the whole chaotic noise together”.” (HarS, 2003b)

The founder of MP3.com shared this sentiment and put some effort in convincing CNET Networks of the value that the site’s content had.

“Robertson said he was especially sad that all the site's unique content, much of it self-produced music from artists without record contracts, would disappear on Dec. 2. MP3.com now features more than 750,000 streaming and downloadable songs from more than 250,000 artists.” (Davies, 2003)

Structure vs. agency

Although all these means of participation would almost suggest that the participants ruled MP3.com there are some cases in which MP3.com enforced their superiority in power towards artists. Sometimes clearly because of legal issues:

“MP3.com has banned a song that witters on about the DVD hacking code DeCSS. In the song, Joseph Wecker sings a version of the code - which is subject to various lawsuits in the US over its being a hacking tool.” (McCarthy, 2000)

But sometimes reasons were a bit less clear:

“MP3.com has mysteriously dropped one of its best known online groups Analog Pussy - sparking concerns that the music industry may be trying to kill autonomous music on the Internet ... The conspiracy behind this bizarre behaviour, however, is that a week after Analog Pussy received the email, music industry giant Vivendi -

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which owns Universal among other companies - bought MP3.com for \$372 million.”
(McCarthy, 2001b)

The changes that Vivendi Universal made to the service are of course another example of how the company enforced their vision of MP3.com on its participants.

Conclusion

The creators, owners, visitors and artists of the former MP3.com shaped the music service provider in very different and sometimes conflicting ways. While the creators (and first owners) had a utopian idea of MP3.com becoming a successful innovator in the production, distribution and consumption of music in the Digital Age the next owners sought to deploy another more conventional model to MP3.com. They didn't share the online music dream that they could make money on getting visitors to listen to free self-produced music created by independent artists.

Artists on MP3.com gratefully used the services that MP3.com provided (for free) and was positive about the utopian vision of the original MP3.com and participated to be able to live the dream and enjoy the opportunities that MP3.com offered. Because of the level of participation by the artists on MP3.com a great sense of community emerged among them. They were very negative and sceptical about the changes that were made by new owners of MP3.com. Artists started to become less active after the changes to the services and didn't want to pay for the extra services.

Visitors did mostly appreciated being able to download free music and explore unknown artists on MP3.com. They also were enthusiastic about the fact that later some mainstream artists started to use the services for a small amount of their songs. But because of file sharing technologies like Napster the paid services of MP3.com were less successful at that time.

Discussion (The Demise of MP3.com)

It would be interesting to combine this research with economic research about former MP3.com because that would give some more insight in how successful the service economically really was at its different stages. Because MP3.com faced a lot of different influences (legal hassle, the coming of Napster and corporate takeover for example) more research is required to gain full insight in why certain services were changed and how successful the different services really were.

It could give an answer to some interesting questions like: Why did they innovative model of the original MP3.com fail? Why are paid music service providers (like iTunes) suddenly getting successful?

Notes

¹ CNET Networks is a American company that owns a number of technology information sites. One of their sites called download.com also includes a music service amongst other assets.

² MP3 is a compression technology that makes it possible to compact the size of a digital music recording (Lessing, 2001, p. 123).

³ Napster was a technology simplifying file sharing for MP3 files (Lessing, 2001, p. 130). This technology enabled people to search for music on computers of other users all over the world and download it for free. After Napster got sued by the RIAA it turned into a legal service that people have to pay for to use.

⁴ Vivendi Universal is a French company that owns a lot of media companies like the television company Canal.

⁵ iTunes is a music service provider founded by Apple. They offer a broad collection of music that people can download for a small fee.

⁶ Short for independent.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Martijn van Eenennaam (Mc Galactix) for his comments and support by sharing his experiences as a former premium artist of MP3.com.

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Note

All internet hyperlinks were last visited on June 25th 2004 to make sure they hadn't been changed or disappeared.