Brokers and bricoleurs: entrepreneurship in Wales’ online music scene

Abstract The power of some new entrants to the music industry derives from their position as brokers in computer-mediated environments. Brokers act instrumentally to exploit their position within a network which, in turn, depends on their ability to build and sustain links (and, in computer-mediated environments, hyperlinks). Bricolage in computer-mediated entrepreneurship refers to the intuitive manipulation of resources in order to achieve (perhaps tacit) goals. Without careful stewardship of the new intellectual wealth thus created, bricolage may profit neither the individual nor the wider community.

Keywords Brokerage · Entrepreneurship · Intellectual property · Internet · Music industry · Networks

1. Spinning the web: music, enterprise and rhetoric

As the year 1999 rolled into the year 2000, fears subsided that the so-called ‘Millennium Bug’ would precipitate an electronic Armageddon. Computer panic was replaced by a speculative Internet mania. Internet company share values soared and then fell, and significant alliances were forged between ‘old’ and ‘new’ media multinationals.

On 10 January, media conglomerate Time Warner and Internet company America Online (AOL) announced plans to merge, combining brands such as CNN, Netscape, Warner Bros, CompuServe and Time Magazine in one company. The merger also allowed AOL to expand its operations from a narrowband telecommunications base into a broadband medium. Two weeks later, on 24 January, EMI Records and Time Warner’s music division announced a joint venture which would create the world’s biggest music company. EMI and its substantial catalogue of artists and copyrights was brought into the new AOL–Time Warner conglomerate in order to secure a large share of future Internet music business. Such business was predicated...
upon the potential of the Internet as a digital transport channel for music. Consumers would not only order and pay for tapes and CDs via online catalogues and Web-based merchants; they would also download music from the World Wide Web onto their computer, an MP3 player or even a mobile telephone.

Corporate creative industry was on the move. The developments outlined above might be consistent with what Robins (1999: 22) has identified as ‘the global political economic logic that is mobilizing new information and communications media to create an extraterritorial space of enterprise’, but anti-corporate rhetoric about the Internet as ‘corporate network space’ should not blind us to its potential as a network of resources for entrepreneurship in new business, small business or non-business activities in the creative sectors. This paper explores fragments of Wales’ online music scene, and the nature of entrepreneurship within it.2 My concern is not with those high-profile bands who have chosen a self-consciously Welsh identity – for example, Catatonia, the Manic Street Preachers and the Stereophonics – and have recently achieved considerable international success. Such artists tend to belong to production, management, marketing and distribution channels based outside the region. Indeed, retention of earnings from recorded music in the local (i.e. Welsh) economy is the exception rather than the rule, although successful bands may contribute to an overall Wales ‘brand’ (Bryan et al., 1998). Rather, my purpose is to give a voice to the experiences of a number of less celebrated creative workers who are based in Wales and are using the Internet to promote and/or distribute musical work.

The paper is organised as follows. First, I raise a general question about entrepreneurial intention and consequence in the creative field before going on to propose two models for entrepreneurship in the online musical industry. One is the broker, who is, perhaps, more efficient in commercially exploiting the potential both of the Internet and of creativity. The other is the bricoleur, who acts intuitively to use and recombine existing resources that are available on the Internet to create new resources and new conditions for further action. These new resources and conditions may be the intended or unintended consequences of action. I conclude that a failure to exercise stewardship over the intellectual

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1MP3 (short for MPEG-1, Layer 3) compresses CD-quality audio files to 10 per cent of their normal size thus making it possible to condense a 3 or 4-minute music track into a 3- or 4-megabyte data file for downloading onto a personal computer

2The information presented in the paper is drawn from a programme of interviews carried out among creative workers, policy makers and arts administrators in Wales. This was supplemented by an analysis of relevant websites. The research has also drawn upon the author’s participant observation at a number of events and meetings, including the Music Industry Research Network, an Arts Council of Wales task force on new technology, a European Commission DGHI workshop on the role of ICT in supporting business competitiveness and meetings of the B10c (pronounced ‘Bloc’) network, which is a forum for digital arts and technology in South Wales. To complement and contextualise the fieldwork, an analysis has been made of the following: government and industry-sponsored research studies; policy documents published by the United Nations, the European Commission, the United Kingdom Government and the Welsh Office; and articles from newspapers and technical and business magazines. With the exception of Dafydd Iwan of Sain Records, who has been featured in previous studies of Welsh music (e.g. Wallis and Malm, 1984), the names of respondents, URLs of their websites and other information that might identify them have been withheld.