

**Comments on Mark Pedelty's paper**  
**“Musical News: Popular Music in Political Movements”**  
**by Herman Wasserman (Newcastle University, UK)**

I found the topic of this essay fascinating, and its approach to journalism and politics an important one. Much has been written about the new forms political activism has taken in the age of digital journalism, but to my knowledge serious consideration of such activism can also take place through popular music, and indeed how this could be seen as a form of journalism, remains under-researched. Research into the political currency of popular cultural forms also remains important in the field of journalism studies, where political functions are still mostly attributed to elite media, and popular forms more often than not seen as contributing to the depoliticization or atomization of society. This paper broadens the definition of journalism in an attempt to acknowledge the agency of activists outside of the mainstream media channels, and in so doing validates the cultural expression of those whose voices are mostly marginalized and ignored in mainstream political journalism.

Because of the global reach of popular music (the author touches upon songs pertaining to South Africa, Central America, Iraq, the US etc.), the topic invites broader comparative work. Such comparisons could provide further insight into the relation between the political function of popular music and the social, political and cultural context of its production, distribution and consumption. A comparison between the content and reception of music produced ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ a given political context could also provide insights into the global cultural economy and circuits of production and consumption. How do the political discourses and their impact of, say, Peter Gabriel and Steve van Zandt’s anti-apartheid songs mentioned by the author and those of anti-apartheid activists within South Africa itself (see for instance Lee Hirsch’s film *Amandla!: A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*) differ? (It is also interesting to note that the struggles in that country continue to be articulated through music – the South African Anti-Privatisation Forum recently brought out a CD of protest songs).

While the author seems to focus largely on political functions of popular music of years gone by and seems to be more sceptical of the informational functions of popular music in contemporary society, this should not be done too hastily. Certain political and social conditions today still contribute to the emergence of popular music as a form of journalism. Mano (2007) has shown how popular music functions as journalism in Zimbabwe, where mass media are weak, opposition political parties are frail and the state exerts strong control over the media. Although the Zimbabwean context differs vastly from the one in the US, the author does note (with reference to Pratt) that the latter has a lively popular culture precisely because its political discourse is impoverished (albeit due to a very different political dynamic than in Zimbabwe). This inverse relationship between the richness of popular and mainstream political discourses is worth looking into further. But perhaps here the paper needs clearer definitions of news, journalism and ‘the popular’ to distinguish between the various informational and cultural functions popular music continues to have in contemporary societies, and to evaluate them.

The author seems to put his faith in the possibility of popular music to create a community of resistance, and convincingly points to several international cases where this has been noted. The question however arises to what extent music can indeed mobilize activists to rise up against oppression and injustice or whether popular music in today’s global market rather commodifies resistance and thus renders it politically impotent. One thinks here of the efforts of Bob Geldof, Bono and others whose political campaigns are predicated on consumption.

The emphasis the author places on local performers is therefore an important corrective in this regard, and could serve to avoid treating popular music as a homogenous form of cultural expression. The notion of activist communities created through popular music could be interrogated further. If music serves to build communities, how is the political message of popular music amplified within these communities to the extent that it translates into action? How strong or weak are the links in these communities – strong enough to persist when resistance meets with resistance?

The survey used to gather information yields useful information if the aim is an exploration of activists' attitudes towards popular music. When it purports to establish causality between music and activism it becomes slightly more problematic. Asking activists whether a song has ever informed them about a social or political issue or caused them to think differently about an issue could at best establish their own attitude towards popular music in terms of their activism, or whether popular music succeeded in articulating their political views. It is less certain that these survey questions can establish whether popular music did in fact inform them or mobilize them. A particular song might over time have become an anthem for a movement whose impulses came from a variety of sources which are now much more diffuse and difficult to recollect than a hit song. In this regard the one respondent's comment that music does not change his/her opinions, but confirms or intensifies them, poses a particular theoretical and methodological challenge if one were to disentangle the strands of cause and effect.

As the author notes in the discussion, the question of information selection, perception and retention is as relevant a question for conventional journalism as it is for popular music as journalism. Further work would therefore be needed to establish to what extent the political content of popular songs are retained and integrated into activist work. But the extent of this retention and integration would not necessarily depend on the 'quality' of information in the sense that the term is often used to distinguished between 'quality' and 'popular' journalism. Such a distinction often (barely) obscures a class distinction rather than a useful analytical one. The fact that journalism (whether conventional or in the form of popular music) does not provide the kind of 'in-depth' information seen to belong in the rational public sphere, does not necessarily mean that it cannot play a significant political role. Politics might just have to be defined more broadly than in the narrow sense of political journalism. The debates around tabloid journalism (see for instance Dahlgren and Sparks, 1992) have shown how the political is often articulated through the popular in ways which would not qualify as 'political journalism' in the elite press.

A further aspect that might be worth considering is how new technologies can facilitate the political function of popular music through its wide reach and powers of amplification. In addition, the very act of downloading, sharing and copying music with the help of these new technologies could perhaps even be seen as a form of anti-corporate resistance in itself (although one should of course remain aware that taking such a position might merely be expedient). Do these technologies contribute to the formation of new communities and political bonds, or do they serve the further fragmentation and atomization of the movement? Is Rage against the Machine downloaded on an iPod really as politically powerful as Pete Seeger on a stage?

In summary, I found it a stimulating paper that provides some fresh insights into how we define journalism and define its political functions. Further qualitative, ethnographic work into how political meaning is created from popular music in specific contexts will be important to build on this exploratory work. In this regard, the author's suggestion of

complementing the survey with participant observation is something to look forward to.

References:

Dahlgren, P., Sparks, C. (eds.). 1992. *Journalism and Popular Culture*. London: Sage.

Mano, W. 2007. Popular music as journalism in Zimbabwe. *Journalism Studies* 8(1): 61-78.