

# Could the professional music journalist vanish in the digital age?

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A study of music journalism with special reference to Drowned in Sound's 'Music Journalism RIP' week and the independent music scene in Scotland.



Image credit: BBC

by Steven A Kearney

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"This project is an original piece of work which is made available for photocopying, for inter-library loan, and for electronic access at the discretion of the Head of the School of Creative Industries.

Signed ....."

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## Abstract

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*There has been much discussion in the music press over the past two years about music journalism in the internet age, and whether there is still a role to be played by professional music journalists.*

*One of the core issues is the falling circulation of music magazines and the knock on effect for revenues of both music journalism publishers and the music journalists themselves, whether employed on a contract basis or working freelance.*

*By analysing existing literature within the music press, addressing academic texts and through a series of interviews with experts from the Scottish music industry, this dissertation assesses the traditional role of the music journalist and compares it to the functions carried out today. It also analyses the many possible alternatives to the role of the music journalist, such as blogging and audio-hosting files, with the aim of predicting the future of the profession.*

*The central findings were that music journalism has never had a credible, free alternative, but now finds itself battling against new technologies and methods of production. It is currently in decline and this is due to two major stages.*

*Firstly, music journalism is too concentrated on short reviews and grading records, generally trying to keep in with record companies and advertisers instead of meeting the needs of consumers; a trend which began in the mid-1990s. This has turned consumers off, as many music fans appreciated the long-form, opinion heavy articles they previously found in the music press.*

*Secondly, the internet has significantly lowered the barriers to entry for music writing and many well written blogs are taking consumers away from traditional journalism. A further replacement of the music journalist exists in the many audio-hosting sites, which allow consumers to listen to new releases themselves rather than rely on a music writer as their gatekeeper.*

*Overall, the music industry is likely to continue to exist, as professional journalists have skills which most bloggers lack, but there will be fewer paid contributions as the current trend of falling sales will continue to hit revenues hard.*

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## Chapter One: Introduction

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### **Background information**

"In music, everything must be free, all of the time".

This rather alarming statement came from music industry guru Martin Atkins at a recent conference in Macclesfield, with reference to new business models in the digital music age. Bands should not charge for music and authors should not charge for writing. He even offered attendees a free download of his new book, just to prove he was serious (Atkins, UnConvention, 08/05/10).

Musicians and music journalists are in the same boat, he argued; how can either charge for their products when supply so dramatically outstrips demand? According to Atkins, both business models are broken beyond repair. He claimed bands should look to make their money from gig ticket sales and merchandising instead of trying to sell the actual music. Writers, however, were afforded no such alternative. Music journalism, Atkins claimed, may cease to be a paid profession in the near future (Atkins, UnConvention, 08/05/10).

While startlingly bleak for the aspiring music writers in attendance, the idea of the death of the music journalist was not a new one. In July 2009, influential music magazine Drowned in Sound ran a week of articles on its website under the banner 'Music journalism RIP'. The rationale behind the headline was to explore the role of the music journalist in the age of Web 2.0 and to analyse whether there was a future for music journalism, or whether the music journalist had been marginalised in terms of importance by new publishing technologies (Adams, Drowned in Sound, 13/07/09).

There is no doubt that music magazines are in decline. Circulation figures indicate that the NME, the former flag-bearer for the rebellious music generation of the 1970s and 1980s, has seen its weekly sales fall from a peak of around 250,000 copies per week to around 38,000 (Times, 07/03/08, Guardian, 11/02/10). The latest annual figures, published in February 2010 by the Audit Bureau of Circulations, show the weekly paper has lost more than 20% of its readership in a year (Press Gazette, 11/02/10). Other famous names in music journalism are struggling too, with Kerrang! down by 21.3% over the same period. Word magazine lost 22.5% of its readership during 2009, Uncut 13.3% and Q lost 8%. Mojo replaced Q as the most popular music magazine in the UK in 2009, but still lost 2% compared to 2008 (Press Gazette, 11/02/10). Falling magazine sales hit revenues. The failure to deliver audiences to advertisers can also hit advertising incomes for magazines. Therefore, where does the money come from to pay journalists?

Music journalism has a young target audience compared to other types of journalism and it is the target age-group of 15-35 year olds who are turning to free online content in the largest numbers, according to a 2010 Mintel industry report (Mintel, 2010).

The Drowned in Sound series centres on several key areas. Essentially, it is about the changing role of the music journalist. Citizen journalism has thrown up some interesting debates in all areas of the trade; from news to sport and beyond. Anyone with a computer and access to the internet can set up their own site and express their opinions on a variety of topics, as discussed at length by Andrew Keen in *The Cult of the Amateur* (Keen, 2008). Music is a passion for young, technology savvy people and the number of amateurs writing about music online is huge, with over 350,000 music blogs listed on the site Technorati alone, according to one study (Wodtke, UWSpace, 2008, p7).

There are lasting debates within music journalism which penetrate beyond the mode of communication. There is nothing cast in stone to indicate what the actual role of a music journalist is, and whether this is separate from a music critic, music reviewer, music writer or any number of other terms given to the act of committing words to type on the subject of music. The lines are considerably blurred on this issue (Stacey, Drowned in Sound, 16/07/10).

With the rise in citizen journalism, this debate can now be extended to ask another question: where does the music journalist stop and the music blogger begin?

Music blogging, in terms of mass appeal, is essentially a phenomenon which is less than a decade old, so there are no set definitions. If a piece of music journalism is taken as something which is written for a publication by a trained journalist, and a music blog is an article written by an untrained amateur (Keen, 2008), then how do we define an article written by a professional journalist on his or her own blog? This is one of a multitude of grey areas and blurred boundaries created by the emergence of web technologies.

Is it the training which separates the professional music journalist from the bloggers? Keen argues that the trained journalist understands the value of in-depth, accurate research, while a blogger is unlikely to possess these skills, or indeed care as much about accuracy (Keen, 2008, p47).

Is it, perhaps, the act of payment which defines the profession? Therefore, a trained journalist writing for free would presumably not be producing a piece of professional journalism. This definition is also problematic.

Beyond the struggle for definition, there are other pertinent issues. Music journalism has to be a commercial product if its practitioners are to make a living, so the profession lives or

dies by the will of the consumers. As with any other product, it cannot survive without purchasers, and income streams, whether from the sale of the product or from advertising revenues.

The rise of blogging has created the potential for informed, localised and free information on music, especially with regard to emerging bands and specific 'scenes'. If this information is presented reliably and in a readable manner, then by its very nature, it is a threat to established music journalism, as it is imitating part of the role traditionally occupied by journalists. Blogging does not rely on revenue streams and can exist with or without an audience. Music journalism does not have this luxury and must meet the needs of paying consumers in order to maintain a paid workforce (Unconvention, 2010).

Also, as discussed at the Unconvention music conference in Macclesfield in May 2010, a music blog can appeal to a niche market with greater ease than a large publication. It is hard to imagine a national music magazine being able to give any sort of depth to emerging music scenes in the likes of Edinburgh or Glasgow, yet currently there are many successful blogs which provide a reliable source of information for those who live within these cities, such as Song, by Toad and The Pop Cop.

One of the challenges facing music journalism, highlighted by the Drowned in Sound series, is how to stop professional, paid, written music journalism becoming so general and mainstream as to become obsolete (Drowned in Sound, 2009). Even a publication such as The Scotsman relies on unpaid contributions in order to cover the country's music scenes. The newspaper's website section Under the Radar has around ten writers, but only the editors receive any payment at all, and even then it is nominal (Cranwell, The PopCop, 29/07/10). Those writing for the site hope to get paid for their endeavours, but also recognise the irony

of the situation, where they work for free and are as much a part of the problem as the solution (Cranwell, *The PopCop*, 29/07/10).

Aside from the threat presented by blogging, there are other technologies which could be seen as offering a replacement to the trained journalist. One of the possible roles of a music writer is to introduce readers to new music. However, through sites like MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, LastFM and Spotify, music fans are exposed to a vast amount of information and recommendations, all formed through automated programmes and without a music journalist in sight.

Music journalism faces many threats in the age of web 2.0 as the traditional role of writing about music and bringing new acts to the attention of fans now has many possible replacements, which will be analysed in this research.

### **Research focus**

This dissertation will explore the changing role of the music journalist in the digital age. The potential scope of this research is massive, as music is such a broad term. For the purposes of this research, the dissertation will focus mainly on the Drowned in Sound 'Music Journalism RIP' week and the localised music scene in Scotland, using examples from further afield only where they are part of a broader trend or theme which is relevant to the study.

Through analysing existing literature on the future of music journalism, with specific reference to Drowned in Sound's Music Journalism RIP season and by conducting additional interviews with experts from the Scottish music industry, it is hoped this study will be able to form conclusions on the current and future role of professional music journalists.

The research will focus on the opinions of those within the music industry - including journalists, bloggers, broadcasters and musicians - to analyse their views from the inside on how the music journalism profession is likely to fare in the future. It is not an attempt to apply academic models to measure consumer behaviour or audience expectations, although this could be a starting point for further research.

### **Overall aim and objectives**

The overall aim of this dissertation is to identify and analyse the functions of the professional music journalist, within Scotland's independent music scene and more generally, assessing whether this role has been marginalised by the existence of non-professional writing and other music-focussed websites. The study seeks to establish whether the multitude of online user-generated sites and music portals could have the potential to replace the professional music journalist.

The overall aim will be achieved through the following research objectives:

- 1) To analyse the role of the professional music journalist and compare this to the amateur music blogger
- 2) To identify alternative online technologies which could replicate or replace the professional music journalist
- 3) To assess the potential usefulness of these alternatives
- 4) To draw conclusions on whether music journalism has a future as a paid profession, or whether music blogs and online music portals could form a free replacement

**Value of the research**

No existing, up-to-date, academic research has been identified which addresses the function and future role of music journalists as a whole in the current era of internet technology. This study will draw on previous research into individual areas of the music journalist's work, the work of bloggers and the popularity of online music portals, and will address them as a whole, rather than separate issues. This will provide a valuable, authoritative and contemporary look at the current condition of music journalism, which will be useful to anyone who wishes to study the profession or for those involved in the production or publication of independent music. It will also provide useful information for individuals considering a career as a music writer, whether as a professional or an amateur.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

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Through a comprehensive review of existing literature relating to music journalism, this section will address several of the key objectives outlined in the introduction. Firstly, the issue of establishing the purpose of a music journalist can be discussed with reference to several existing texts. Having formed some conclusions on this issue, alternatives to the traditional music journalist can be identified and analysed as set out in objectives two and three. Each of the possible alternatives will be discussed and critically analysed with reference to existing literature.

As the subject matter in question relates to a very current issue in music journalism, there are few academic texts which can provide up-to-date information on the chosen topic. Much of the latest thinking and issues have been identified by analysing music journalism websites, with the Drowned in Sound series mentioned earlier providing a useful departure point for the study. However, Larissa Wodtke's University of Waterloo thesis, *Does NME even know what a music blog is?: The Rhetoric and Social Meaning of MP3 Blogs*, provided the best academic source of information on blogging as an alternative to traditional music writing (Wodtke, 2008).

Although there is not a vast amount of academic literature in existence dealing with the suggested marginalisation and/or replacement of the music journalist, academic texts were found which discuss the broader themes of reliability and quality in blogging, which will provide a useful background to the issues explored.

The first section of this literature review will identify and assess historical and contemporary thinking on the role of the music journalist, while the second section will list the main possible alternatives and will critically analyse literature relating to these.

### Section One: What is the role of a music journalist?

Drowned in Sound's week of articles, from July 2009, features many pieces which try to answer the issue of the purpose of a music journalist. Immediately, the problem of definition is widened by a lack of clarity on the term music 'journalist', and whether this is the same thing as a critic, writer, historian, analyst or commentator, as noted by Ringo P Stacey in the article *The Death of the Critic? That's the Least of your Problems* (Stacey, Drowned in Sound, 16/07/09).

Stacey says all of these pieces can form the role of the music journalist. The term 'critic' is often used interchangeably with other definitions, but, as Stacey highlights, "The death of the critic I can live with, though I'd rather not. If the music writer is dead, it's really time to stir shit up" (Stacey, Drowned in Sound, 16/07/09).

For the purposes of this research, it can be taken that the broad term of music journalist can, as Stacey attests, involve the role of writer and critic, although the importance of these will be explored later in this chapter.

As the debate over the purpose and functions of the music journalist has been discussed widely, opinions have varied from individual to individual. At the UnConvention music conference in Macclesfield in May 2010, an argument was played out between a music journalist and a blogger. The blogger insisted that the role of the music journalist was to write eloquently and with passion about the subject. The journalist suggested the role of 'tastemaker' was the main purpose of the author, essentially suggesting that the music writer

is someone who acts as a filter, sifting through masses of new releases and letting the audience know what is worth listening to and what is not. Again, the roles of writer and critic are seen as two different arts (UnConvention, May 2010).

In many of the Drowned in Sound articles, this theme is repeated. Stacey writes, "The critic dissects, the writer makes the music come alive" (Stacey, Drowned in Sound, 16/07/09).

Everett True, the former editor of the now defunct Plan B magazine, indicates that the role of the music journalist is to, "Engage, argue, inform, irritate...but above all entertain" (True, Drowned in Sound, 13/07/09). His words echo a theme that music journalists throughout the 1980s and 1990s felt their words could carry great influence; theirs is a romantic view of the music journalist, which can be attributed to their passion for their own profession.

True suggests that much of the success of the NME (New Musical Express) throughout the 1980s was down to the opinionated pieces of writers like Steven Wells, who courted controversy and flatly refused to give music a rating out of ten (True, Drowned in Sound, 13/07/09). The issue of rating music will be returned to later on.

Petra Davis' contribution to the site discusses True's remarks:

"True posits taste-making as both more than and outside of a consumer guide to art: it is the power of the critic's character, the depth of her conviction and the breadth of her understanding that carry the day, and a strong personal aesthetic outranks consistency or experience." (Davis, Drowned in Sound, 16/07/09)

Through Davis' comments, we can start to build the picture of what those within the profession feel is the purpose of music journalism; the music journalist not only has passion and the ability to write eloquent prose, but also great analytical skills and vast knowledge, built through a professional work ethic and dedication to research.

Andrew Ramadge, editor of Australian music magazine and website Mess+Noise, wrote on the site, "One of the most important roles of the music journalist is to record the history, or create the folklore, of a particular time" (Ramadge, Mess+Noise, 30/03/09). Again, we are presented with a romanticised view from an industry insider; the music journalist is an artist in his own right.

Finally, on summarising the traditional role of the music journalist, Meg White's article *Kissing without the sex - the role of the music critic* suggests again that there are many functions which make up the title, including "entertainer, specialist advisor, risk-manager, taste-maker, archivist and public whipping-boy". The assertion here is that the music journalist is a non-conformist figure who speaks their mind and argues with those who disagree. The music journalist is not there to form conclusions and tell the audience what to think, but is a subversive figure, designed to provoke debate.

### The tipping point in the role of the music journalist

According to much of the research, the position of the music journalist/writer/critic has been altered during the last 30 years and many articles find a consensus that there were two key stages in this change. Firstly, there was a swing towards grading music rather than describing it. Secondly, the growth of the internet had a huge effect.

While the emergence of the internet may be heralded by some as the single defining factor in the changing of the role of the music journalist, there is much discussion within existing literature of an important intermediary stage.

Music writing, it is argued, did not go from the 'glory days' of the 1970s, 80s and early 90s straight into the digital age. In between these two eras there was a shift in the role and

function of music writing from a descriptive art-form to the ratings-based music journalism still alive today across magazines, newspapers and websites.

According to Louis Pattison, a former editor of Plan B magazine, which folded in 2009 due to commercial pressures (NcNamee, The Guardian, 04/06/09), the music writing industry developed an obsession with overly-simplistic reviews, giving records marks out of five, ten or, in the case of the website Pitchfork, a mark out of ten to one decimal point. This latter publication's ranking system even spawned a satirical article from US site The Onion, entitled *Pitchfork gives music 6.8 (The Onion, 10/09/07)*, which mocked the need for conformity and consensus in the once rebellious music press.

Pattison's article *Making the grade: the strange and cryptic lore behind assigning numbers to records* states:

"From the mid-nineties onwards, it all began to feel like the grading of albums was not just a facet of the record review, but the distillation. Increasingly placed right up there at the front, rather than dispensed of in conclusion down the bottom, the figure screams its own judgement, and the words follow grudgingly, should you agree with the figure enough to care to read them." (Pattison, Drowned in Sound, 16/07/09).

Pattison indicates that the function of music journalism, outlined earlier, of provoking a two-way interaction between journalist and music fan was lost during this time, as the music journalist took on the function of grader rather than describer. The ability to evoke emotions and provide a narrative was lost in favour of the simplicity of a brief review which stated simply and with great certainty what a record was worth, on a pre-determined scale (Pattison, Drowned in Sound, 16/07/09).

While objectivity in other forms of journalism is generally considered to be of great importance, music writing was traditionally about the opinion of the writer. Pattison states that objectivity is impossible and any attempt to achieve this aim degrades the writer and the profession. The battleground was part of the fun. However, the writer suggests that the music press' reliance on record companies, PRs and agents for material and access produced a form of music journalism that was afraid to stray too far from the middle ground; instead looking to service commercial pressures at the cost of dissent, by faking objectivity (Pattison, Drowned in Sound, 16/07/09).

There appears to be some weight to this argument as most modern music magazines have the rating at the top of the review - something which can be seen in broadsheet newspapers and mainstream commercial websites such as NME.com and Pitchfork.

Everett True backs up Pattison's position when discussing the death of music journalist Steven Wells, who he says is likely to be the last of the forcefully opinionated breed of writers. He charts his own progress through the 1980s and 90s alongside Wells at the NME, where both writers rebelled against the rating system imposed by the paper's owners by giving every review either zero or ten out of ten (True, Drowned in Sound, 13/07/09).

True questions the shift, asking:

"Does the public really require - or even want - a faceless 'meta' critic, the lowest common denominator of countless opinions, where all opinion is reduced to a mean average mark? Isn't this taking all the fun away?" (True, Drowned in Sound, 13/07/09).

Again, here are the opinions of those writing in the music industry, tinged with a sense of nostalgia for a time when writers could do as they pleased and nobody questioned the power

of the critic. The weakening of the role of the taste-maker critic alluded to earlier in this chapter may have occurred through the introduction of the rating system for reviews, brought about by a perceived need for simplicity and the appeasement of record companies and commercial sponsors, but the explosion of popularity of the internet would become the single biggest factor in this issue.

## Section Two: The World Wide Web and the 'cult of the amateur'

Andrew Keen - "The simple ownership of a computer and an internet connection doesn't transform one into a serious journalist any more than having access to a kitchen makes one a serious cook" (Keen, 2008, p47).

Amongst much of the research, there is a common denominator in the discussion of the shifting role of the music journalist. That factor is the rise of the World Wide Web and the ability for anyone with internet access to publish their own opinions on music. Previously, fanzines may have filled this role on a localised level, but the internet has allowed for global musical discussions (BBC, 25/02/09).

### Alternatives to the music journalist

#### **Blogs**

Music blogs, written by fans or those keen to establish themselves as critics but lacking formal training or employment, are the most obvious alternative to music journalism in that they also take the form of written articles, posted online, describing musical acts, live performances and providing news and information on bands.

One of the main differences between music journalism and music blogging, as identified by Ringo P Stacey, is that "there aren't enough good editors working on the web" (Stacey, *Drowned in Sound*, 16/07/09). He argues that even the best writers need editing, while the unedited nature of blogs is detrimental to the overall quality.

Andrew Keen is strongly anti-blogging in his book *The Cult of the Amateur*, saying that the quality control of blogs is non-existent and journalism and the information business in general have become "the sheer noise of 100 million bloggers all simultaneously talking about themselves" (Keen, 2008, p16).

He also questions the impartiality of bloggers, many of whom operate anonymously and could represent any interest without having to declare their allegiances (Keen, 2008, p17). This is perhaps less of an issue in music journalism, where impartiality is not seen by all consumers as the essential element it is in news journalism, but still raises an interesting point about the freedoms which are available to bloggers that are not available to music journalists.

Keen also argues that the level of training and professionalism among journalists is vital for the industry and for consumers of information. On bloggers, he says, "On the blogosphere, publishing one's own 'journalism' is free, effortless, and unencumbered by pesky ethical restraints or bothersome editorial boards" (Keen, 2008, p48).

Anonymity of bloggers is also raised in research by Chesney and Su at Nottingham University Business School. They suggest that anonymity is not an issue for readers when choosing to trust a blog. The more important factor in gaining the trust of the reader is the way the site and its information is presented, with well written, attractive-looking blogs scoring higher for credibility than those with spelling, grammar and punctuation errors and poor presentation (Chesney & Su, NUBS Research Paper Series, June 2009).

While there may be compelling reasons to be faithful to professional music journalism from a quality and accuracy point of view, blogs are extremely popular and are used widely by music fans. Larissa Wodtke's research from the University of Waterloo, Ontario, makes an important distinction which is relevant to this work. She notes that not all music blogs are the same type and that it is the addition of MP3 files which go a long way to explaining the popularity of the blogging medium over traditional music journalism (Wodtke, 2008, p1).

Music blogging software allows users to attach audio files in MP3 format which, in many cases, can be downloaded without charge. Wodtke argues that this is the key aspect in explaining the popularity of music blogs, as music magazines cannot offer these files for free due to legal constraints, while bloggers generally ignore copyright laws (Wodtke, 2008, pp3-4).

She describes MP3 blogs as a sub-genre of music blogs and suggests that while non-MP3 blogs may have fans who appreciate the writing, it is the addition of free music which generates the most web traffic. This is not only steeped in the subversive culture of copyright violation which has characterised the genre since its inception, but also in the tradition of gift exchange which represents the alternative to the capitalist business model of music production. Bloggers provide free publicity for musicians and they, in turn, provide a track or two in MP3 format for listeners to download. This exchange process ensures both parties have their needs fulfilled, without the need for further bartering or financial exchange. While neither party is making money from this set up, it is self-perpetuating and allows both the music and the blog to exist without incurring financial losses (Wodtke, 2008, p4). In this sense, she likens blogging to a hybrid between music journalism and promotion (Wodtke, 2008, p51).

This is an important point when considering the viability of both traditional music journalism and blogging, and the values of trust and accuracy we place on both. While music magazines toil to make money in order to maintain a paid workforce, blogs can exist entirely outside of that system, thus potentially making the only cost associated with producing a blog one of time and effort, rather than monetary concerns. Following Wodtke's research, we could hypothesise that blogs could last for as long as the author is willing to write, while professional publications are constantly threatened by the imperative to make a profit in order to survive.

Wodtke's research also points out other differences between music journalism and blogging. Bloggers tend to put their own lives into their articles and write in the first person (Wodtke, 2008, p50), and write about music they love, rather than following what is new out of obligation (Wodtke, 2008, p55). She also suggests that there should be room for both professional music journalism and blogging in the competition for readers as blogging tends to concentrate on smaller bands which are often missed by mainstream press coverage (Wodtke, 2008, p50).

Blogs can also be set up by bands themselves, if they exist without a record contract. As in the case of US band the Nine Inch Nails, a blog can be set up once a recording contract has ended, and new music can be accessed directly by fans (Wikstrom, 2009, p176). With an internally-known band like this, the audience is already established and, by using social networking sites to publicise their work, the band could communicate directly with their fans, although the established music press may wish to cover the new release and would thus act as an extra publicity tool for the new work.

### **MySpace and other user-generated music websites**

Once seen by many as the central point of the online music revolution, MySpace has dwindled in popularity and has come in for criticism in several recent articles from The Guardian, Scotland on Sunday and The Scotsman's Radar blog (Mitchell, Radar, 22/07/10).

Many of the complaints were centred on the fact that the site had become too slow, full of unwanted adverts and was failing to do the job that it originally did so well, which was to provide a portal where bands could post their own work for free, and users could stream these tracks online, also for free. The comments page attached to the Radar article was also awash with complaints about the usability of the site (Mitchell, Radar, 22/07/10).

According to an article by Rosie Swash on The Guardian's website, Tech Crunch published figures in July 2010 indicating that MySpace's visitor numbers halved in the first six months of the year (Swash, Guardian music blog, 08/07/10).

However, none of the literature centred on the demise of MySpace suggested demand for online music portals had decreased; the complaint was directed very specifically at the way MySpace worked. A common theme was the search for a new site which could be a bit like MySpace used to be, only better. The search for a successor to MySpace was a central part of articles by Rosie Swash (Swash, Guardian music blog, 08/07/10), Nick Mitchell (Mitchell, Radar, 22/07/10), Sean Adams (Adams, Seaninsound, 07/07/10) and Andrew Eaton (Eaton, Scotland on Sunday, 13/07/10).

On the declining role of the critic, several articles in the Drowned in Sound series mentioned MySpace as a replacement for the professional music journalist in the sense that, in the words of Stuart Braithwaite, lead singer of Scottish band Mogwai, "The very mention of a new band's name and you can go to their MySpace and hear what they sound like" (Braithwaite, Drowned in Sound, 13/07/10). He compares this to 1995 - the year his band began - when

the only way to hear new music was to buy it or listen on the radio (Braithwaite, Drowned in Sound, 13/07/10).

Laura Nineham elaborates on this point by suggesting that music fans often find new bands they like by clicking on an artist's Top Friends list on MySpace, rather than reading music magazines (Nineham, Drowned in Sound, 14/07/10). Sean Adams describes the current situation as one "where clicking on an audiofile supercedes (sic) imaginative description" (Adams, Drowned in Sound, 13/07/10).

Sites such as SoundCloud, Bandcamp and Boomkat were all identified as being possible alternatives to MySpace, which was in itself a possible alternative to music journalism. The Guardian article *New Music: where's the best place to listen online?* describes Bandcamp as "MySpace's clearest rival", but suggests the interface is far more user-friendly and also comes with a tutorial for new users (Swash, Guardian, 08/07/10).

It can be taken from this, despite MySpace's documented failure to meet the needs of music fans, there are sites which allow direct access to music by bands and fans which could be seen as a replacement for the traditional role of the music journalist, mainly by removing the journalist as the describer of music and the gatekeeper.

However, as emphasised by Larissa Wodtke in her study of MP3 blogs, MySpace has in excess of 450,000 musical artists using the site to publicise their work, meaning the sheer volume is too much for individuals to use the site as a tool to browse and find new music; therefore music journalism as a whole can still maintain the role of filter and gatekeeper, pointing music fans in the direction of the worthwhile acts (Wodtke, UWSpace, 2008, p13)

### **Spotify and LastFM and blog aggregators**

According to Mintel, Spotify users have access to over 6.5 million tracks (Mintel, 2010, p51). The site has 7 million registered users in Europe and is planning to launch in the US market. It is funded by a combination of advertising and subscriptions, where those who use the free service have to listen to adverts after every three or four songs, while those who pay £10 per month get the advert-free service. Subscribers also get to access advance releases of new albums and can download tracks for 99p each. Spotify also operates a mobile phone application (Mintel, 2010).

Wikstrom describes Spotify as "an important milestone in the music industry's development since it is one of the first online music providers that seems to be able to negotiate agreements with rights holder which are both sustainable and fair for all parties" (Wikstrom, 2009, p175).

Sites like Spotify, and also LastFM, which is similar but involves more integration of social networking and user-generated playlists, are less well suited to covering unsigned bands and independent labels than MySpace or SoundCloud. However, much of music journalism is about covering mainstream acts and these sites, in the same way as the likes of MySpace, allow fans to listen online and form their own opinion on a release, rather than rely on a review.

According to Laura Nineham, the electronic categorisation of music on these sites allows for automated playlists, where the website will analyse the music the user has listened to and suggest similar acts which they may enjoy. Also, as she points out, these sites allow you to access playlists set up by your friends, cutting the music journalist out of the loop as "it seems like social networking is the only filter needed when looking for new music" (Nineham, Drowned in Sound, 14/07/10).

Meg White suggests a different role to the one mentioned by Laura Nineham; one where the music journalist is still used by fans, but as a reference point rather than a tastemaker. She says music writers will still have to be well informed and opinionated, but the audience will not invest any trust in those opinions because the audience can easily find out if they like something for themselves (White, Drowned in Sound, 15/07/10).

In the search for MP3 files, Wodtke notes that the site Hype Machine plays an important role. It is a blog aggregator, which means that users can search for an artist they wish to hear and the site will take them to a blog covering the act they seek. These blogs often have MP3 files and allow the user to download the music in order to form their own opinion. The Hype Machine, which gets around 900,000 hits per month, therefore performs the role of blogs and audio hosting sites all in one (Wodtke, 2008, p114).

In *The Music Industry*, Patrik Wikstrom writes about the rise in popularity of online audio-hosting sites.

"BitTorrent, Facebook, iMeem, iTunes/iPod, Lala, LastFM, LimeWire, MySpace, Napster, Pandora, Qtrax, Rhapsody, SpiralFrog, Spotify, are only a few out of an overwhelming amount of music technology brands" (2009, p8).

He describes these technologies as "markers of the new music industry dynamics" (2009, p8).

Steve Knopper, in his book *Appetite for self destruction*, notes that the record industry is finally coming round to the fact that it is pointless to fight against illegal downloads in a purely oppositional way (Knopper, 2009, pp229-31). Keen (2008) says only one in 20 music downloads are legal ones, and Knopper suggests that the tide may be turning from the record companies' point of view. Traditionally, they have tried to protect copyright stringently and have treated illegal downloads as if they were theft of actual CDs (Knopper 2009). However,

EMI have now made their entire back catalogue available online (Knopper, 2009) and this may signal an opportunity for music journalism to fight against MP3 blogs by offering music files to stream alongside music reviews.

### **Other social networking sites**

The role of friends as taste-makers is also a factor which has been looked at in existing research. As part of his research as a fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, Rory O'Connor studied issues of journalistic truth and credibility. He investigated the role of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and the impact they were having upon journalism as a profession. While not aimed specifically at music journalists, this research raised some interesting points about how people use such sites (O'Connor, AlterNet, 20/01/09).

O'Connor interviewed Randi Zuckerberg, who is part of the creative marketing team at Facebook. She said the internal studies conducted by the organisation suggested that users were much more likely to access links sent by friends, which she describes as the power of the "friend referral". She added that while experts were vital for the consumer, oversupply was causing problems and many people rely on links from friends via social networking sites as a way of filtering the huge amount of information available online (O'Connor, AlterNet, 20/01/09).

In a music journalism context, this does not necessarily mean that consumers will be finding information on music on social networking sites instead of reading professional publication, as the links could well be to sites like Pitchfork or NME.com. Zuckerberg added that big media companies were well aware of the power of social networking sites and had a

significant presence (O'Connor, AlterNet, 20/01/09). Equally, the links could be to a MySpace page or a LastFM playlist, but social networking sites are not an alternative to the music journalist per se, as the major music magazines, newspapers and websites can all use these sites to drive online traffic to their work.

### Literature review conclusions

The opinions expressed in the Drowned in Sound series demonstrate that music journalists, unsurprisingly, feel their profession involves an extensive array of roles, from critic to writer, to taste-maker to gatekeeper. This may have been the case when music journalism was unopposed in these roles, but the two important stages identified in the research - the obsession with prioritising the grading of music and the emergence of the internet - have altered the landscape dramatically.

The profession has changed and blogging, along with audio hosting sites, represent a credible threat to the economic viability of paid music journalism. MP3 blogs in particular offer music writing with free music, and so have a strong appeal to consumers.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

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The dissertation objectives will be achieved by using two main research methods.

Firstly, existing literature on the subject will be identified and analysed, helping to establish some of the core issues underpinning the research. As mentioned earlier, many of the issues are currently the topic of discussion in the media, from the changing role of the music journalist to the demise of MySpace. The opinions of those within the industry - whether journalists, bloggers, musicians or broadcasters - are frequently expressed in both old and new media and will be dissected in the discussion stage. Academic books and journals will also be used to add to arguments and provide context for the discussion.

Secondly, there will be original research in the form of interviews with figures from the music industry, who will be selected on the basis of their experience and knowledge of the subject matter involved and on the basis of maintaining a balance of backgrounds within the interview group.

Thanks to the author's previous work writing about the music scenes in Scotland and Manchester, many contacts have been established which will be useful when requiring informed interviewees.

The interviews will be used to elaborate on points raised in the literature review and expanded upon in the discussion. A list of question will be compiled which will effectively help to build conclusions on each of the four objectives of the dissertation, which are:

- 1) To analyse the role of the professional music journalist and compare this to the amateur music blogger
- 2) To identify alternative online technologies which could replicate or replace the professional music journalist
- 3) To assess the potential usefulness of these alternatives
- 4) To draw conclusions on whether music journalism has a future as a paid profession, or whether music blogs and online music portals could form a free replacement

The interviewees will vary between music journalists, music bloggers, broadcasters and musicians, in order to take as many viewpoints as possible. As identified in the literature review, journalists may have a lot of nostalgia when it comes to the changing function of their work, but this may be out of touch with an audience which has a preference for peer review and social networking.

As mentioned earlier, the interviewees are to be selected on the basis of their knowledge of the subject area. These interviews will be purely qualitative and the responses will be collated and analysed in the next section. Having completed this stage, the discussion section will compare the feedback from the interviews to the analysis of existing literature to form conclusions on the research aim of analysing the ways in which the role of the music journalist has been altered by online technology.

## Interviewees

The number of interviewees was based on what was considered to be a manageable amount within the scope of a Master's dissertation. Fewer than five interviewees would not have given enough depth to the discussion and would not have been sufficient to attach any real significance to the answers. However, with seven questions to answer, more than ten interviews would have created an unmanageable workload. Therefore, between five and ten was considered to be the ideal amount. As the research is qualitative, and the interviewees are considered to be experts in the subject under investigation, the focus was on getting the right interviewees and the right balance of backgrounds, rather than simply attaining a certain number. In total, nine experts were identified who were deemed to be able to contribute significantly to this work.

In order to maintain balance in the discussion, the group is made up of two music journalists, two music bloggers, two broadcasters, two musicians and one individual who has fulfilled all of these roles at one stage.

The interviewees who were identified as experts in the subject area and who agreed to participate in the research are as follows:

## Bloggers

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**Matthew Young** is the founder of the Song, by Toad music blog, which is one of Scotland's most popular blogs about independent music. He is also founder of Song, by Toad records, which is an independent record label based in Edinburgh and features acts which have achieved mainstream success, including coverage on BBC Radio 1 and BBC 6Music, as well as playing the Glastonbury festival. Matthew was also a panellist at the UnConvention music

conference in Macclesfield in May 2010, where he spoke about the differences between journalists and bloggers.

**Jason Cranwell** runs Scotland's other popular independent music blog, entitled The Pop Cop.

#### Broadcasters

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**Vic Galloway** has worked on BBC Radio 1 for eleven years and BBC Scotland for nine, and currently presents two weekly radio shows dedicated to finding emerging and alternative music talents in Scotland. He writes a weekly music column and also does work for television and BBC 6Music.

**Jim Gellatly** is a well established radio personality, who works in both national and local radio, with much of his focus on emerging musical talent in Scotland. He works for BBC Scotland and Clyde1 and is a previous recipient of the Radio Academy John Peel award for Outstanding Contribution to Music.

#### Music journalists

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**Nick Mitchell** is a journalist employed by the Scotsman, as well as the founder of the Scotsman's new music website, initially called Under the Radar, but now known as Radar.

**Billy Hamilton** is an Edinburgh-based music journalist who has written for Drowned in Sound, Clash magazine and The Skinny. Billy is also co-founder and editor of the Scotsman's Radar website.

## Musicians

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**Peter Kelly** is the man behind Beerjacket - a Glasgow-based music act which has been championed by many bloggers and publications and his work has even featured as Track of the Week on the prestigious US-based Rolling Stone website - the only unsigned Scottish act ever to do so. Peter has been involved in Scotland's independent music scene for over a decade and he has released seven albums.

**Dan Willson** is the musician behind the band Withered Hand, who have been championed by Mark Riley on BBC 6Music. His debut album - Good News - received significant amounts of positive press from bloggers and journalists and his sales and subsequent European tour success indicate that he is one of the most successful singers to emerge from Edinburgh in recent years.

## All of the above

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**Milo McLaughlin** is a journalist and blogger specialising in local music in Scotland's central belt and has written for The List, Edinburgh Evening News, The Skinny and Is This Music?. He previously had his own column in The Skinny magazine, where he championed emerging music acts. Milo also has experience of podcasting and radio presenting, with shows featuring local music acts, while he has run his own music blog for around five years and he also has experience as a musician.

The mix in backgrounds of the above group of experts is vital to this research. By having journalists and bloggers, both sides of that particular debate can be analysed. Some of the participants are both journalists and bloggers, which could provide some useful opinions. The

inclusion of two prominent music broadcasters is also useful as they are heavily involved in emerging music in Scotland but do not have ties to journalism or blogging - they rely on both for their research. By including two musicians in the work, the research aims to identify more opinions from those who work within the industry and can directly relate the usefulness of music journalism, blogging and other online technologies in gaining exposure for their work.

### The interview questions

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All of the questions will be aimed at achieving the four objectives of the dissertation.

In order to achieve objective one - comparing the roles of music journalists and music bloggers - interviewees will be asked the following questions:

- What do you consider to be the role of professional music journalism?
- How does this differ from the work of music bloggers?
- What do you consider to be the main differences between a piece of professional music journalism and a music blog article?
- Do you think you are more likely to get a balanced, impartial review from a professional music journalist or from a music blogger?

To help achieve objectives two and three - the identification and assessment of potential alternatives to the professional music journalist - interviewees will be asked the following questions:

- Do you feel the role of the professional music journalist has been replaced by blogging and podcasting?

- To what extent do you feel the professional music journalist has been replaced by technologies where people can find their own music, such as MySpace, LastFM, Spotify and Hype Machine, as well as Twitter and Facebook?

Finally, to aid the achievement of objective four - analysing whether the professional journalist could eventually be replaced by online alternatives - the interviewees will be asked to summarise via the following questions:

- Do you think there is a future for professional music journalism, or will music magazines continue to vanish and be replaced by fan sites and blogs?
- Do you have any other comments related to the above questions/debate?

In the only change to this format, the interview with Dan Willson was only agreed to on the basis that it would be shorter, as he was on tour at the time. In order to try and add context to the discussion and have an informed musician's angle on the debate, he was asked the following questions:

- Do you think you are more likely to get a balanced, impartial review from a professional music journalist or from a music blogger?
- Do you think more of your fans find your work through music magazines and professional online music sites or through blogs, podcasts and the likes of Spotify, MySpace and LastFM (or even Facebook and Twitter)?
- As a musician, do you think there is more to be gained by getting music blogs to back your work, or music journalists and magazines?

All of the above questions are designed to add expert analysis, in the form of original research, in a purely qualitative form. They are meant to build upon the issues identified in the literature review, where blogs were suggested as the main possible replacement for the music journalist, while other, less similar, technologies were identified as having the potential to be alternatives too.

#### Time frame for interviews

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The interviewees will all be contacted during June 2010 and asked whether they can spare an hour during July to answer the research questions by email. If any of the selected interviewees cannot commit to the research during July, a replacement will be sought by the end of June. This will allow sufficient time ensure a total of nine completed interviews will be returned prior to the writing of the discussion stage of the dissertation.

#### Conclusions

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Through the dual methodology of a comprehensive analysis of current thinking within the literature review and the addition of expert, informed opinion via the interviews, it will be possible to form conclusions based on the knowledge of those on both sides of the journalism versus new media debate as to whether the professional music journalist has a role to play in the future of the industry.

#### Limitations of the research

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In terms of scope, the original research has deliberately concentrated on those within the music industry, from various backgrounds, within Scotland. Although the technology of the

internet allows for the potential of global communications, the scope was restricted to Scotland for the interviews as this is where the majority of the contacts of the author are based. Also, this allowed the research to be of a manageable size for a Master's dissertation.

Also, there is no attempt within the methodology to identify the opinions of the audience - namely the music buying and consuming public - through original research. This would have required significant amounts of quantitative research, in several geographical locations, and could not have been representative of public opinion with a project of this scale.

This dissertation is therefore solely looking at the opinions of music journalists and other writers and broadcasters as they are the ones working on the front line of the industry and on both sides of the debate discussed within this work. In order to fully assess the potential future role of music journalism within the music industry, further studies could look to build upon the work contained here by analysing audience consumption habits, values and expectations, although, as identified within this work, there is already research in existence which is sufficient for the purposes of this work.

As with any piece of research which involves interviews, there is always the concern that interviewees may not be available during the time-frame required. All interviewees were contacted during June 2010 and confirmed that they would be willing to participate and available during the month of July. This stage of the work can tolerate a failure rate of one or two and still form a significant part of the research, but a response rate of five or lower would not be considered enough to include the interviews in the completed research.

## Chapter four: Analysis of Interviews

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### Background, response rate and introduction to interview analysis

In total, nine individuals were identified who could contribute significantly to the research through interviews. Each of these individuals was contacted during June 2010 and asked if they could commit one hour of their time during the following month to answer seven questions via email. All nine individuals agreed to complete the questions and all of the answers were returned in time to be included in the research.

Rather than go through the responses of each individual one by one (these are available in Appendix 1), the best method of analysing the interview responses is to deal with one question at a time and highlight important and significant answers from the selected participants.

### **Question 1 - What do you consider to be the role of professional music journalism?**

In defining the role of the professional music journalist, several key points emerged from the responses. One of the core themes was trust, which was deemed to be of great importance. Journalists should behave professionally and in a manner which inspires trust in the audience, the responses indicated.

Among the music journalists, Nick Mitchell said it was the role of the professional music journalist to "behave like a professional [and] be the most knowledgeable person in their area

of interest". Fellow music journalist Billy Hamilton suggested the role was primarily "to inform readers through well sourced, well structured, concise, articulate and engaging copy. He places the music journalist within a triangle of competing forces; the consumer, the advertisers and the record companies. The journalist has to form a bond of trust with all three. "Without trust there is no role for professional music journalism in this triangle, particularly in the modern era", he added.

Milo McLaughlin, who has fulfilled the roles of journalist and blogger in his career, again emphasised the 'professional' part of music journalism as being the most important. He said that as music journalists are employed to carry out their tasks, there is a reasonable expectation that the highest possible journalistic standards will be adhered to. In order to do this, music journalists should, "use their professional journalism skills such as proper research, skilful interviewing and insightful commentary, and knowledge of journalism law and suchlike (including behaving professionally both online and off)".

His attitude reflects many of the opinions expressed within the interviews and throughout the literature review, where the act of payment is seen as something which should produce a higher quality of journalism. However, McLaughlin added that, in reality, he feels these standards are rarely achieved.

Jason Cranwell, the blogger behind the Pop Cop website, said simply that the role of a professional music journalist is to write about music and get paid for it. The act of payment is what defines the professional and distinguishes him or her from the amateur. He elaborated on this point in the next question.

With many years of experience in broadcasting, Jim Gellatly suggested that commercial considerations were the main defining characteristic of professional journalism. "I think a

professional journalist needs to focus on the target audience, and delivering what they want to read", he said. Unlike other responses, Gellatly also suggested there may still be a role for the professional journalist as 'taste-maker', as discussed in the literature review, where the majority of the texts analysed suggested this was now confined to the past.

Another broadcaster, Vic Galloway of the BBC, discussed the professional music journalist as a critic in the truest sense. He wrote that the professional should "shed a constructively critical light on music". When it comes to independent music in Scotland, he suggested that this approach would allow for some quality control, while not destroying careers before they started. Too much praise for everything would be too sycophantic, while too much criticism for emerging acts would be equally counter-productive, he argued.

Peter Kelly backed up this assertion, responding, "The role of the professional music journalist is to exercise the expertise of analysis and accuracy of evaluation that the title of 'professional' suggests".

It is interesting to note that the music journalists involved answered this question by emphasising the more neutral roles of their job, such as trustworthiness and accuracy, while others, such as Jim Gellatly, Vic Galloway and Peter Kelly, saw the role as involving opinions and personal input on the part of the journalist.

## **Question 2 - How does this differ from the work of music bloggers?**

Having asked the interviewees to clarify the role of the professional music journalist, the next stage was to ask how they felt this role differed, if at all, from the work of a music blogger.

Again, with his journalist hat on, Nick Mitchell made the point that as bloggers are not paid for their work, they are not bound by the same standards as the professional. He noted that bloggers have more freedom, but suggested that this did not mean better quality in the end product, but merely a wider variation in quality.

Billy Hamilton noted that bloggers can be amateur or professional, with many journalists using blogs now as a way of connecting with the target audience in a less formal manner. This suggests a shift for music journalism, where it is becoming more like its rival in order to win back consumers.

He believes strongly that professional music journalists are in a much better position to meet the needs of the audience, and wrote, "Amateur music bloggers lack the tools to compete with professional music journalists. Be it contact-wise or just stylistically". This is another important point, as professionals often have a budget for what they do, and the weight of the name of their publication behind them, which are generally luxuries unavailable to the amateur blogger.

Hamilton also notes that bloggers do not have editors to inform or improve their work, and nobody to answer to when standards are not met.

Milo McLaughlin raises the issue of personality as one of the key differences between the professional and the amateur. As noted in the literature analysed in Chapter Three, many within much writing feel the personality and opinions of journalists have been replaced by the need for consensus and neutrality. Following this line of argument, McLaughlin suggested that bloggers have an advantage over professional music journalists when it comes to online publishing. The role of the blogger is to fill the void left by the shift in music journalism, by

expressing strong emotions as "people seem to respond better to personalities and strong opinions".

Matthew Young suggested that the role of the music blogger was essentially the same as the role of the professional music journalist, but without the need to be commercially viable, which in itself creates extra freedom for the blog author. However, he did concur with Billy Hamilton's point about contacts, suggesting that a lack of name-recognition was a limiting factor for many amateurs.

He also made the point that, as a blogger, he would expect someone who is being paid to produce music writing to be a much better writer than he is, but suggested that this is not the case. He said the professional music journalist uses many styles of writing and the boundaries between journalists and bloggers are now extremely blurred. Interestingly, he takes the opposite point to the music journalists on the issue of professionalism and journalistic standards with one of his typically outspoken comments:

"If anyone mentions journalistic ethics or objectivity in answer to this question I would like to punch them, because in the field of journalism this is nothing but a vain conceit perpetuated by journalists who want to feel special now that their profession has been devalued by excess supply and unchanged demand."

Jason Cranwell also suggests that, stylistically, there may not be much difference between bloggers and journalists as many bloggers try to emulate the style and structure of professional music writing, while the reverse also happens, where paid music journalists attempt to recreate the informal tone of blogging.

According to Jim Gellatly, the blogger is freed up by a lack of commercial responsibilities, as they do not depend on circulation and advertising income as revenue streams.

The niche nature of blogs is one of the most notable points for Vic Galloway, who said blogs often have a very narrow scope in terms of musical genre, whereas professional music journalists have to cover a wider range of music. Blogs appeal to small interested groups and are often written by those involved in a local scene, so favouritism may be an issue. Importantly, he does not suggest this is necessarily a negative side of the role of the blogger. He said:

"Don't get me wrong, I'm a big fan of blogs and bloggers but I don't always get a wide-screen or open-minded view of Scottish music from one. I may have to read a few to get the bigger, more diverse picture."

As a musician, Peter Kelly is well placed to judge the merits of music journalism and blogs. He emphasised that bloggers are often driven by their passion for music, rather than writing by professional obligation. On the role of the blogger, he said:

"A good blogger acts as a bridge between the everyman and the connoisseur, essentially, combing the Internet for anything good under the radar of TV, radio or print press and presenting it in a friendlier, less corporate context than advertising-reliant, trend-driven London-centric magazines."

The point about advertising as a source of revenue and trust in writing is expanded upon in question four, but Kelly's analysis clearly portrays the blogger as a sort of anti-hero, driven by their need to show their local scene in its best possible light, without compromise or even a much consideration for the audience. The role painted here is that of the filter for music, which some also see as the function of music journalism.

**Question 3 - What do you consider to be the main differences between a piece of professional music journalism and a music blog article?**

This question was designed to investigate the stylistic differences in the actual writing, rather than the overall function of journalists and bloggers, but there is some inevitable crossover with the last two questions.

Again, taking the music journalists first, Nick Mitchell reiterates the modern music journalist's outlook that their work should be objective. He said, "Professional music journalism assumes objectivity, even if it doesn't actually attain it". Blogs, by contrast, are "personal and subjective". This argument provides a useful departure point for the discussion stage of this dissertation and will be revisited in chapter five. For now, the interesting point is that he considers objectivity to be crucial to good music, in the way that it is to news journalism. Some of the older music writers identified in the literature review wrote that this was not always the case, and many argued that indeed it should not be the case.

Billy Hamilton suggested that bloggers simply lack the tools to produce good quality journalism and this is the fundamental difference between the two. He contrasts the writing on Matthew Young's Song, by Toad site with that available on the NME, saying that the blog is all about the amount of content, while the professional site concentrates on quality.

Controversially, he also suggested that bloggers are simply aspiring music journalists who lack formal training and contacts. Here, the mindset of the music journalist and the blogger are clearly different. Matthew Young suggested that music journalism should learn lessons from blogging. He sees it as a separate branch of the same tree; each has their own style and each is equally valid. However, he contends that blogging is more popular because it is a conversation between blogger and audience. The blog article is often just the start of a long

thread of comments of interaction between interested parties. With an informal tone and one-to-one style, the blog can achieve an affinity with the reader which has been lost in music journalism, Young said.

By expressing strong opinions rather than attempting neutrality, there is more interaction with the audience, Young's argument indicated. Again, this reflects themes already discussed in this chapter and during the literature review. If music journalism is all about consensus and giving marks out of five instead of expressing personal opinions, it is likely the audience will look elsewhere.

Milo McLaughlin and Jason Cranwell both pointed to the lack of editorial control as the main difference between music journalism and blogging, with positive and negative outcomes. Quality can suffer without skilled editors he said, but creativity is increased in many cases by the freedom afforded to the blogger, McLaughlin noted. Cranwell emphasised the point that factual inaccuracies were more common in blogs, as were spelling and grammatical errors.

Jim Gellatly answered that music fans would read blogs they like and which reflected their tastes, so trust would already be established between blogger and reader. This gives rise to the blogger in the role of taste-maker, while the journalist is seen as having to cover certain acts for commercial reasons. Again, this is discussed further in the next question.

The freedom to write whatever the author wishes is the main difference between blogs and music journalism, according to Vic Galloway. He said a blogger, "can rant and rave and be as rude or politically incorrect as they like. Sometimes this is wonderfully free and exciting, sometimes this can be petty and close-minded". The professional has to think more about their audience than a blogger, he notes.

For Peter Kelly, "The problem with blogs is the same as with music: the freedom of the Internet has presented an opportunity for talentless people to put their work out in the public domain". Again, this echoes earlier themes connected to the lack of editing on blogs, but Kelly suggests it is more than editing that is at stake; some writers are simply not good enough and should not be in the public sphere.

### Summary of questions one to three

There are certain themes which are repeated throughout the first three questions in these interviews. Blogs are unedited and therefore vary wildly in quality. Music journalism, while not always reaching the standards, does generally have a minimum expected standard, which is higher than that of a blog. Bloggers have more freedom and less need to meet the needs of the audience. Bloggers, in general, do not have the same commercial restraints and need to please sponsors as music journalists. However, music journalists have better contacts and bigger budgets. They have formal training, which helps them with their research skills.

However, the issues to be explored further in the chapter five will be around whether bloggers are trying to emulate music journalists, or whether they are two separate disciplines, appealing to different audiences. One of the key questions to emerge from this section is to ask whether music bloggers have picked up the opinionated, taste-maker role previously occupied by music journalists, while the journalists have concentrated on neutrality in the name of professionalism.

**Question 4 - Do you think you are more likely to get a balanced, impartial review from a professional music journalist or a music blogger?**

The earlier questions may have involved the issue of impartiality and balance on some level, but question four asked the interviewees to assess the issue directly.

Both music journalists agreed that the reader is more likely to get a balanced view from a professional journalist. Nick Mitchell and Billy Hamilton stated that a truly impartial review was not possible but, as Mitchell said, "you are more likely to get closer to it from a journalist than you are from a blogger". Again, as with the discussion before about the lack of editing, he cites the role of the editor in maintaining balance in professional publications. Editors will ask journalists for an explanation if they feel a review is biased. "Not so with a blogger who just hits publish", he wrote.

Hamilton suggested subjectivity was preferred over impartiality and provided the best read for the consumer. One other point he noted was that bloggers often operated in small, localised settings, where they knew the musicians they were writing about. This creates a situation where a negative review is unlikely to occur as personal relationships could be at stake. Bloggers may well be too close to their subject matter to be anywhere close to balanced, he argued, while journalists are in a much better position to provide balance.

This position is backed by Milo McLaughlin, who asserted that bloggers often lack objectivity and lack editorial control. However, with regard to professional music journalism, he said that the quality and balance varied between publications and it was impossible to generalise about balance and impartiality within the discipline.

Unsurprisingly, Scotland's most well-renowned indie music blogger, Matthew Young of Song, by Toad, took an entirely different line to those who work in paid music journalism.

He suggested that bloggers rarely pretended to be impartial, while music journalists have to at least aspire to it, which makes the stance of the blogger more open and honest. His second reason for bloggers being more trustworthy than journalists is that bloggers are not subject to commercial pressures and do not have limits on how many words they can use, or how much space or prominence their work is given on a site. This, he argued, allows bloggers to express themselves as they wish, without restraint.

Finally, Young asserted that bloggers are not involved in "intra-industry politics" and do not have to worry about keeping in with record labels or agents as they receive no favours from them to begin with. While it certainly may be true that professional publications have relationships to maintain, Young's view may in itself be biased as he is a blogger; he does not mention the need to keep in with the local scene and labels/musicians, as in the point raised by Billy Hamilton about the personal relationships between bloggers and those creating and distributing independent music.

The bloggers are, however, split on this issue. Jason Cranwell suggested that the pressures on paid music journalists are so great that it acts as another filter, ensuring impartiality. However, neither Cranwell nor any of the music journalists give any time to considering the point that perhaps impartiality is not the ultimate aim of music writing, whether paid or amateur. Matthew Young is the only one of the writers who suggested that impartiality was not mandatory in blogging.

Jim Gellatly suggested that impartiality was as likely or unlikely in an amateur as a professional writer, as it varies on a case to case basis. Vic Galloway, writing from his experience working at the BBC, said impartiality was to be prized and the BBC manages to maintain this to a much higher standard than other professional media outlets. He did contradict this when he went on to write, "I like strong opinion, but not to the detriment of

strong critique". This sums up much of the dilemma of the music journalist; how to express strong opinions without standing open to accusations of bias.

The musicians' point of view is an interesting balance. Peter Kelly said that both journalists and bloggers are open to political pressures of one sort or another, but backed up the opinion of the journalists when he said, "If the person writing is also apparently editing their own work, they are much less likely to exercise objectivity".

He noted that bloggers in general did not like criticising local acts, but felt compelled to rip apart groups achieving national or international success. He also indicated that the only bad reviews he had received from bloggers may have been out of spite as he had been unable to agree to an interview or to give guest tickets.

Dan Willson also agrees that both groups are subject to pressures which could produce bias; the journalist has commercial considerations while the blogger has peer pressure. Both musicians here take a neutral point of view on impartiality, with the others split over who is likely to give a more balanced review. As the musicians have no ties to either blogging or journalism, but have experience of both, their views can be considered significant within the context of this discussion.

**Question 5 - Do you feel the role of the professional music journalist has been replaced by blogging and podcasting?**

Although podcasting has not formed part of the discussion to this point, it was included in the questions, which were written prior to the literature review. As two of the experts

interviewed work in radio and podcasting, the inclusion was considered relevant when establishing alternatives to the music journalist.

Amongst the music journalists, the feeling is that the profession has not been replaced by blogging, but they disagree on why this is the case. Both agreed that the role of the music journalist as gatekeeper has been replaced. Nick Mitchell said blogs have "taken away the mantle of authority", while Billy Hamilton indicated that sites which offer the consumer the chance to listen to new music without making a purchase have had a far bigger impact. As he wrote, "Who gives a toss about what someone's opinion is if you can find out for yourself?". This is addressed in more detail in question six.

The issue of supply and demand is key to the answers of Milo McLauchlan and Matthew Young. Both see problems for professional music journalism in that there is so much content out there for free, that it is often not necessary, even for supposedly professional publications, to pay a fee for articles.

Jason Cranwell, Peter Kelly Jim Gellatly and Vic Galloway all responded by saying there was a role for both blogging and music journalism. Cranwell pointed out that some professional music journalism articles involve a depth of research, travel and time commitment that is almost impossible for a blogger to achieve.

Peter Kelly, writing from the artist's point of view, extolled his love of the written word and suggested high quality music writing would always have its place: "I love music journalism, sometimes even more than I love music, as it is a reflection of the role of music as the beginning of a dialogue between people".

Jim Gellatly wrote that blogs has now picked up the taste-making mantle and had thus become more important, as has podcasting, as a way of hearing new music and strong opinions.

In summing up his opinion, Vic Galloway wrote:

"I wouldn't want to see talented, educated critics who are passionate about music and writing/broadcasting being lost on a sea of ignorant loudmouths with a personal agenda and no sense of awareness or musical history."

This backs up the view that there is a place for both blogging and podcasting, while the role of the journalist has had to adapt to accommodate its amateur offspring. While most of the respondents suggested there was room for both professional and amateur work, it was not made clear whether paid music journalism is still commercially viable or not. This issue will be investigated in the next chapter.

**Question 6 - To what extent do you feel the professional music journalist has been replaced by technologies where people can find their own music, such as MySpace, LastFM, Spotify and Hype Machine, as well as Twitter and Facebook?**

Expanding on the last question, and with some crossover in the answers, question six sought to assess alternatives to the written word which may contribute to a lessening of the influence, and thus the commercial viability, of paid music journalism, as set out in objectives two and three.

As Billy Hamilton summarised in his response to the previous question, music journalism is as much under threat from new modes of engagement with the consumer as it is from the

more similar discipline of blogging. Nick Mitchell wrote that, while there was "unprecedented access to an unprecedented amount of research", this made the role of the music journalist more important, as someone has to act as a filter for the seemingly endless amounts of music and associated writing and broadcasting currently circulating on the internet. He suggested there was "choice fatigue" and that by choosing to cover a band, the journalist was still performing the gatekeeper role. This backs up the assertions in the literature review in relation to sites like MySpace, which are not user-friendly and give users too much information and too little guidance.

Journalism should embrace these technologies and work within social networking, according to Milo McLaughlin. As a music journalist and blogger, he suggests that both disciplines can benefit from new media technologies, but notes that blogging is better suited to including links than a music journalism, especially when it comes to magazine journalism.

Although clearly an advocate of the merits of blogging, and despite earlier comments doubting the supposed objectivity of music journalists, Matthew Young suggested that the sites mentioned in the question were of little use when attempting to find new music worth covering or listening to. He asserted that, if a journalist is fulfilling the role of being informed, trustworthy and readable, then a website which aggregates playlists and comes up with automated suggestions could never replace that function. He stressed the need for music to be a conversation, which is out with the remit of sites like Spotify and LastFM.

The value of these sites, Young wrote, was that he no longer spends hours in record stores listening to tunes there, as he can now do this at home. The music journalist thrived in an age when record stores allowed fans to listen in the shop, and that is the activity which has been replaced by Spotify et al, he argued. This is an important point as the previous discussion

have not noted the fact that 'try before you buy' is not something which is unique to the online age, although the web does make the practice much simpler and offers a far wider selection.

Fellow blogger Jason Cranwell suggested that such sites mean consumers are unlikely to make purchase decisions based exclusively on a review by a music journalist, due to sites like MySpace, LastFM and Spotify. He noted that the value of Facebook and Twitter was that friends' opinions on new releases could be gauged, leading to a potential change in purchasing behaviour on the part of the consumer.

The two broadcasters participating in the interviews both suggested the music journalist will always be required to act as a filter as there is simply too much information out there. Vic Galloway said:

"It's great to use all these technologies and find music in different ways, but I still think you need a filtration system with passionate and knowledgeable people who have good taste, good ears and a sense of independence and impartiality."

Again, this reinforces the fact that knowledge and taste are prized as assets and the role of music journalist as gatekeeper will be as important, if not more so, as the shift to online consumption continues.

As Peter Kelly eloquently stated, "More roads only mean we need more maps". The music journalist provides the map and he agreed with the points made by Vic Galloway; that the music critic will become more important, not less. Again, the commercial viability of this assertion is not considered.

Withered Hand founder Dan Willson noted that it can be difficult for emerging bands to get column inches with the important magazines, newspapers and online sites, so websites like Facebook and MySpace are useful starting points, from a musician's point of view. However,

this does not indicate the role of the journalist is lessened by these websites. What he alluded to was quite the opposite in fact; that getting a review from a respected publication was highly prized, but difficult to come by. MySpace and Facebook are tools for building towards the kind of coverage afforded by the top music publications, indicating their filtering system for new music is working.

**Question 7 - Do you think there is a future for professional music journalism, or will music magazines continue to vanish and be replaced by fan sites and blogs?**

The final question was designed specifically to sum up the previous questions and relates to objective four, which is to draw conclusions on whether music journalism has a future as a paid profession, or whether music blogs and online music portals could form a free replacement.

Taking the journalists first again, Nick Mitchell suggested that the big players, such as Pitchfork, NME, Q and Rolling Stone will survive, but only by adapting to the online landscape. He does point to a worrying trend though, where the next level of publications will no longer pay for content due to the oversupply issues identified earlier. He suggested this would have "a ripple effect" through the profession, bring standards down and driving many good writers to other professions.

Backing this opinion up to a certain extent, Billy Hamilton said, "Of course there is a future", but only alluded to the need for big record companies to appeal to the top music publications. He makes no mention of how the lower level paid publications will fare, in the way that Nick Mitchell expressed his concern.

Fears for the lower level, and thus the future top music journalists, were also expressed by Milo McLaughlin, who noted that, himself included, many aspiring music writers were being forced to take full time jobs in other sectors. He said he hoped there would always be room for good writing, but feared most would be driven away by financial concerns in a time where supply outstrips demand.

This issue was also included in the answer of Matthew Young, who suggested that while revenue streams for writers still existed, they were few and far between. He noted that writing is already used as a loss leader as it does not pay for itself directly, but helps deliver audiences to advertisers. He said the role of the traditional journalist was an outmoded way of thinking and any writer who fails to adapt to the changes taking place will be "in for a very difficult time over the next few years".

Jason Cranwell also indicated that free content was making it very hard for journalists to get paid for their work, although he added that it would be a great loss to music if top quality professional journalism were to be lost. This is presumably a given, but does not address the reality of the lack of finances available to proponents of the illuminating musical anecdote.

Vic Galloway is confident that there is a future for professional music journalism, but in a different form and with the sphere of the digital revolution. Magazines may become forgotten, but good quality music writing will still exist online, he asserted. "It will mutate and morph into different shapes, alongside blogs, podcasts and fan sites. As I say, there is room for all of these," he added.

Jim Gellatly suggested the music journalist will find their role is one of aggregator for a user-led revolution, rather than being prized for great writing and taste-making.

Music journalism is in the middle of a cycle, argued Peter Kelly. He suggested that music magazines will disappear, but could make a nostalgia-tinged comeback, presumably in the way that music fans still crave vinyl, despite the supposed replacements of compact discs and then MP3s. He argued that there is a market for good writing and once the magazines die and the advertising money moves elsewhere, the magazine may be reborn in an age relatively free of commercial pressures.

"Maybe once the money drops out of advertising in music magazines, we'll see a return to form – wouldn't that be nice?", he added.

#### Conclusions on the interview stage

The response rate of 100% was extremely useful for the interview stage as a balance was achieved by having two music journalists, two bloggers, two broadcasters, two musicians and one interviewee who had fulfilled all of these roles at various stages.

In general, the responses of the journalists backed their trade, while the bloggers suggested the tide was turning towards their discipline. The broadcasters, who had the most music industry experience of all the participants, provided some useful insight while the musicians managed to be fairly balanced in their responses; neither coming out in favour of one side of the debate nor the other.

Opinions were mixed on whether blogging and other online technologies could or should form a replacement for paid music journalism, but a general tone of pessimism was evident as very few of the interviewees envisaged a bright future for those seeking to earn a living from music writing.

## Chapter five: Discussion

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By comparing the literature in chapter three to the expert opinions sourced in chapter four, the broader themes and answers to the research objectives can be identified and analysed.

A number of key issues emerged from both sections and will be discussed in this chapter.

### **The role of the professional music journalist in the digital age**

There is slight confusion among the literature and expert interviews on what the actual role of the professional music journalist involves and what it should involve. The two are, of course, separate issues. Much of the debate at the UnConvention music conference centred on some people arguing that music journalism should be about quality, illuminating prose, written with knowledge and passion. This is also emphasised in many of the Drowned in Sound articles and is a common theme throughout the interviews. The counter argument was that, regardless of whether this should be the case or not, the reality is that much of music journalism has become about rating music out of five, suppressing opinions and keeping in with record companies (UnConvention, 08/05/10, Pattison, 2009, Doran, 2009).

The best definition of the current role came from the interview with Billy Hamilton, who described the professional music journalist as being within a triangle of competing forces: the consumer, the advertisers and the record companies (Hamilton, July 2010). The journalist can move closer to one side as and when required, but must always try and be as central as possible.

The problem with life in this triangle, and the problem for music journalists in general, is that two sides - the advertisers and the record companies - have an interest in gaining favourable

coverage, while the consumer simply requires an honest appraisal of the music. This throws the integrity of the music journalist into doubt.

So, it is an over-simplification to go with the view expressed by Jason Cranwell, who suggested payment was the defining factor of a music journalist, as opposed to other types of music writers, such as bloggers (Cranwell). With that payment comes expectation and this was the point made by several others. The paid professional is expected to be able to resist potential bias wherever it may occur. They should also be trained to research properly, ask the best possible questions in interviews and produce the best copy, as highlighted by Milo McLaughlin (McLaughlin, July 2010). As Peter Kelly and Vic Galloway noted, the journalist should be an expert at balanced analysis (Kelly, July 2010, Galloway, July 2010), but if we are to understand why most of the major music magazines are haemorrhaging readers at a rate of 20% per year, we must look beyond the 'should' of music journalism and peer at what is actually happening.

Long-form music prose is not where the owners of music journalism outlets are looking. A Drowned in Sound article by John Doran, entitled *Rubbing sh\*t in God's eyes*, gives an illuminating view on the mindset of magazine owners and market research. Doran wrote that when he set up a new music magazine, many experts in the field told him to keep all reviews to 100 words or fewer, do market research and only target well-known bands. This, he argued, is the problem with music magazine journalism - that it is trying to become a science when it is in fact an art and is pandering to market researchers who know little of the fickle nature of the subject (Doran, Drowned in Sound, 16/07/09).

As emphasised by 'old-school' journalists like Everett True and Ringo P Stacey, music journalists used to write what they felt themselves, not what they thought the audience or sponsors wanted to hear (True, Drowned in Sound, 13/07/09, Stacey, Drowned in Sound,

16/07/09). If we are to understand why the music consuming public is abandoning music magazines and turning to music blogs, we must note the point that music journalism is not what it was and commercial interests and market research has interfered with the fabric of the trade.

Take, for example, Nick Mitchell's comments about objectivity. "Professional music journalism assumes objectivity", he wrote. It depends entirely on what type of objectivity we are looking at; being objective in the face of commercial pressures is admirable, but taking what is essentially a news journalism value of objectivity and turning it into neutrality in music writing is an entirely different matter. Music journalism cannot be objective in the latter sense because it is based on qualitative critical assessment (Galloway, July 2010). As Stacey noted, "The critic dissects" (Stacey, Drowned in Sound, 16/07/09), and much of music journalism is based on opinion, whether it is a record review or a gig review.

Matthew Young's comment about wanting to punch anyone who said that music journalists are objective and have a higher code of ethics than amateur writers shows his passion for the issue, but also raises an interesting point (Young, July 2010). As the layers of music journalism unravel, and replacements are found for the various roles music journalists traditionally embodied, are music journalists just hiding behind this supposed objective DNA as a final attempt at distinguishing themselves from other writers? "A vain conceit" as Young puts it. Certainly the paid professional will need more in their locker than their objectivity if they are to stand head and shoulders above the millions of bloggers operating online. If the music journalist is not producing content that is noticeably better than what is available for free, then how do they justify their fee when supply so heavily outstrips demand? (Young, July, 2010).

This gulf between the 'should' of music journalism and the reality of what is produced is one element which has contributed to the discussion about the death of the profession. While the act of payment can be regarded as the difference between the professional and the amateur, as stated by Keen (2008), and Cranwell (2010), it is the expectation of what this payment actually buys which defines the music journalist. They are expected to produce illuminating prose, which is rigorously researched and presented without bias to the commercial needs of their publication's owners. This is often not the case, as expressed by Pattison (2009).

While there was a general consensus between the literature and the interviews that the role of the music journalist is to analyse critically and express opinions, the move to rating music instead of describing it has been a very important stage when comparing music journalism during its most successful days of the 1970s and 1980s to today's situation of falling magazine sales. As noted by Pattison (2009), the online revolution was the second stage in the demise of the prevalence of traditional music. The first nail in the coffin was the general dumbing-down of content, where the mark out of five became far more important than the well-articulated thoughts of the music scribe and where articles became ever shorter, as noted by John Doran and discussed earlier (Pattison, 2009, Doran, 2009).

This viewpoint ties in with Hamilton's triangle model of competing interests and explains, in part, why music fans may have reason to suspect a lack of integrity in professional music journalism, while also craving longer-form pieces than were previously found in most commercial publications (Pattison, 2009, Hamilton, 2010).

It was this stage, which began around the mid 1990s, and can still be seen today in almost every music magazine, newspaper review and professional music website, which created a void and began the process by which journalists effectively de-specialised (Pattison, *Drowned in Sound*, 16/07/10). If the work of the music journalist became less of a skilled

craft, indeed less of an art, than all that separated the music journalist from the average music fan was the means of mass communication.

### **Could bloggers replace music journalists?**

That means of mass communication arrived with the World Wide Web and exploded throughout the last decade as blogging became quicker and easier and connection speeds increased.

Atton (2008, pp83-84) summarises that blogging can involve the best aspects of fanzines and local alternative journalism. The writing is more informal and constitutes a more personal more of communication. He notes also that professionals can produce blog-style articles if required, thus making the blog an alternative and mainstream medium at the same time (Atton, 2008, p84).

Wodtke (2008) states that music blogs have increased in popularity as commercial music publications have dropped in popularity, not because of the actual writing, but due to the addition of MP3 files. This may indeed be one of the main contributing factors to the shift, as fans want music to make up their own minds, rather than relying on journalists to interpret music for them.

By largely ignoring copyright laws, websites like Song, by Toad and The Pop Cop have been able to build up loyal followings in Scotland and much further afield, offering downloads of MP3s. This is, however, in conjunction with lively and informal prose, and certainly plenty of opinion. Matthew Young revels in the role of blogger, where far greater freedoms of expression exist than in paid music journalism. It is the combination of writing which appeals to the audience and the addition of MP3 files which helps these blogs to increase

their readership, developing a personal relationship with their readers and often opening up lively debates on the comments pages attached to each article. It is a non-commercial, two-way exchange. Music as a conversation, as Young noted (Young, UnConvention, 08/05/10).

Also, if the bloggers are covering music on a local level, such as in Scotland, the tracks supplied by the bands may not be in violation of any copyright if the band is not signed to a record label. As the copyright would technically belong to the band, and the MP3 file is freely given, the gift exchange model noted by Wodtke (2008) would also be legal.

So, blogs are not a direct replacement for professional music journalism as they often deal with different areas - blogs tend to be more localised, journalism aiming at a much wider audience - so there is potential for the two to coexist, as suggested by Atton (2008, pp83-84) and Galloway (2010). However, it is effectively irrelevant if blogs are a direct replacement or an indirect one; what matters is that they have the potential to lower the income streams of paid publications and therefore threaten their commercial viability. This has already been shown in the circulation figures of music magazines. Blogs have the power to increase interest in localised music scenes, so by providing free articles and MP3 files, blogs could certainly take consumers away from music's 'mass media' of magazines and newspaper reviews, as well as these publications' websites, which cannot offer free downloads without the expressed permission of the record company which owns the copyright.

Once a blog becomes established and has a regular and growing fan base, it is effectively a threat to paid music journalism as it is increasing the amount of knowledgeable, free content available. Keen's (2008) point that amateurs cannot match professionals for quality and accuracy is limited, in that, within Scotland's music scene, there are few who can match the intricate knowledge of sites like Song, by Toad and the Pop Cop. The authors of these sites may be amateurs, but they are watching live music almost every night and their passion

informs their knowledge. There may be a huge number of poorly written, ill informed blogs cluttering up the web, as Keen suggests, but that is not true in all cases.

One argument is that consumers will go to established sites like the NME, Pitchfork or many of the newspapers and magazines dealing with music as there is a minimum expected standard on these sites, but this could be said to be true of well-established blogs too. Once a blog gains fans, word of mouth and social networking sites can be used to publicise this work. The "friend referral" mentioned by Randi Zuckerberg (O'Connor, 20/01/09) has an important role in helping blogs to gain readers. Links via sites like Facebook and Twitter help people to find good quality blogs and free downloads which may interest them. This, combined with the subversive nature of blogging discussed by Wodtke (2008), could certainly amount to a substantial threat to paid music journalism as consumers look for something new and professional journalism struggles to keep up with the changing landscape.

Professional music journalism is better equipped to cover nationally and internationally recognised bands as it has the budget to travel, the connections with the record companies, access to the artists and established readerships (Young, 2010). Music blogging is ideally suited to covering emerging bands and music on a more localised scale. The two should be able to coexist, and indeed the Scotsman newspaper has tried to bridge this gap by launching the Radar site, covering emerging music in Scotland by having unpaid contributions from young writers looking to boost their experience (Cranwell, *The Pop Cop*, 25/07/10).

Falling sales of music magazines is likely to be due to a combination of two factors. Firstly, music fans may be using the online version of their preferred magazine instead of buying the print version. This would show a preference for professional music journalism, but does not generate the direct income of a cover price on a publication. Secondly, music fans could be

switching from music magazines to blogs and thus significantly reducing the potential income of music journalists.

As Martin Atkins stated at the UnConvention music conference, the advertising revenue for online music sites is not enough to sustain even 50% of the current staffing levels of existing music publications (Atkins, 08/05/10). Therefore, the number of music journalists receiving payment for their endeavours is highly likely to be significantly reduced, meaning that while the profession may survive, it will exist on a much smaller scale, with music blogs continuing to grow based on a non-capitalist business model of gift exchanges (Wodtke, 2008).

### **The impact of alternative online technologies**

As noted by Mogwai singer Stuart Braithwaite, prior to the internet-era, the only way to hear new music was to buy it or listen on the radio (Braithwaite, Drowned in Sound, 15/07/09). Young added another method to this, which involved going to a record shop and listening instore (Young, 2010). The potential selection of available music was restricted by what the record store stocked and what the radio producers and presenters deemed worthy of airplay. In the internet era, the shackles are off and the amount of available music is almost endless. The method of production has changed and home recording and publishing is easy, while generating good quality audio is as simple as spending £100 pounds on a USB microphone. This explosion presents opportunities for websites which host music files, but also for those who have an expansive knowledge of music, as someone or something is required to navigate the music fan through the fog created by this vast amount of content.

That role, the guidance of music fans on a journey of discovery, is the best chance for music journalists to remain relevant, important and, above all, employed. However, not only are

bloggers queuing up to do this for free, but many websites have automated playlist systems which point users in the direction of artists they may like, based on their previous choices. With sites like LastFM, huge amounts of music has been made available for users to listen to and the more the users interact with the site, the more intuitive it becomes at picking similar artists as recommendations.

As discussed by both Laura Nineham (14/07/09) and Sean Adams (13/07/09), there is a trend among music fans to find their own music through their own path. Then there is a personal attachment, as they found it themselves, whether through MySpace, Spotify, LastFM, Soundcloud or any number of other audio hosting sites. They may bemoan the fact that some music fans are clicking on MP3 files rather than reading what a music journalist has produced for their employer, but it does not change the fact that it is happening. Music journalists may not want it to be happening, but it is - as demonstrated by Hype Machine getting close to one million hits a month (Wodtke, 2008).

### **The future role of professional music journalism**

Throughout the history of music journalism in the popular music era, there has always been a need for professional music journalists to describe music, to provide background information on it and write the stories behind the tunes, to be taste-makers and filters to keep the good from the bad. With the exception of fanzines, which were always small and niche in nature, music journalism has been largely unopposed as a profession. Now, there is some serious competition and it comes from forces largely outwith the traditional capitalist system, so conventional business rules do not apply. Music journalism, as a profession, seems unsure of how to compete as the rules have been altered and the game has changed.

Within the articles written by music journalists for the Drowned in Sound series and the interviews conducted as part of this research, there are plenty of compelling reasons given for why we need good quality professional music journalism. Larissa Wodtke's research indicates that MP3 blogs are a valid alternative to traditional music writing as they offer something extra, which is the lure of an audio file. Those within the profession may wish to emphasise why they are important, but this does not explain how they plan to be commercially viable in the face of the competition.

For example, if 25% of music fans prefer to get their information from blogs and another 25% prefer to use web technologies available with audio hosting to find music themselves, then that represents half an industry immediately gone. Obviously, any such transition takes time, but the falling circulation figures indicate this process is already well underway.

In the face of this competition, there is little optimism in the research conducted for this study. Louis Pattison suggests music journalism has taken the wrong turn in responding to the threat (Pattison, 2009), by shortening articles and generally pandering to the will of market researchers instead of music fans. Stevie Chick suggests the industry has been "too covetous of the success of magazines like Heat" and has made the error of underestimating the intelligence of its readership (Chick, 2009).

He also added that the success of the internet proved that words still mattered and that communication was crucial. Readers could handle long-form articles, but were not getting the chance as nobody was writing them. The major problem is that the key to making a commercial success of this, in the online age, remains "a mystery" (Chick, 2009).

The consensus among many of the interviews conducted for this study was that advertising revenue will remain the only significant income stream for music journalism, for better or for

worse (Young, 2010, Kelly, 2010). A reduction in the numbers of paid journalists seems inevitable, with Mitchell, McLaughlin, Young and Cranwell all predicting a comparatively bleak future, despite earlier emphasising a need for professionals to be writing about music.

According to the opinions expressed here, the most likely future is one where the big publications survive, such as Pitchfork and the NME, but only in digital format (Mitchell, 2010, Hamilton, 2010). Beyond that, most magazines and paid publications could vanish in the face of stiff competition, with much greater convergence predicted between journalism, blogging, podcasting, radio and other media (Galloway, 2010). The number of jobs will be heavily reduced unless a business model can be created which provides sufficient income to sustain current staffing levels. On the evidence discussed here, this business model does not yet exist (Chick, 2009, Young, 2010). As Mitchell (2010) said, the professional aspect of music journalism will be lost even if some publications survive, as they will increasingly rely on unpaid contributions from emerging young writers who are willing to work for free in order to try and get a paid position. This is, he added, highly likely to have a detrimental impact on the quality of music writing.

## Chapter six: Conclusion

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Music journalism is suffering from two evolutionary stages which have altered the landscape permanently. The move from writing lovingly about music in long-form pieces full of opinion, to the current stage where the music journalist is essentially reduced to the role of grader, offering a score for everything and avoiding contentious opinions, was a turn off for the music loving public (Pattison, 2009, Chick, 2009). This, in turn, combined with the emergence of the internet to give the profession a set of serious rivals, both in terms of other written content and also in the creation of new technologies which remove the need for the music journalist in the gatekeeper role (Nineham, 2009, Braithwaite, 2009, UnConvention, 2010).

Many of the interviewees and articles reviewed stressed all the benefits to having paid music journalists. They act professionally and are authoritative (Mitchell, 2010, Hamilton, 2010, McLaughlin, 2010) and have an extended network of contacts and skills to draw upon (Hamilton, 2010, Young, 2010). They have editors, while blogs are often poorly written and have no editing (Hamilton, 2010, Keen, 2008).

All of these are factors in why it is important to have professional music journalists. However, this does not mean that the profession is safe and is about to stop the slide in readership numbers and revenues. Many music magazines have already vanished, such as Plan B and Melody Maker. Several of the top UK music publications has 20% of their readership in the past year. Many others, including newspapers such as the Scotsman, are relying on unpaid contributions in order to try and get readers back from the bloggers (Cranwell, The Pop Cop, 25/07/10). This demonstrates that it is irrelevant whether music writers consider paid music journalism to be important as the reality is consumers are going elsewhere and are looking for free content. It also shows that Keen's arguments about blogs

often being of very poor quality is also irrelevant in the face of the collective will of the crowd; in this case the consumers, who vote through their selection of media.

This does not mean that paid music journalism will vanish altogether, but the trend points to a smaller paid workforce of music journalists and an increasing reliance on unpaid contributions, which, as Mitchell pointed out, will have a serious knock on effect on the quality of writing (Mitchell, 2010).

Blogs do not have to replace music journalism entirely to have an effect on the trade. As noted in Larissa Wodtke's work, and backed up by interviewees such as Vic Galloway, the two should be able to co-exist as they have slightly different target markets (Wodtke, 2008, Galloway, 2010). However, with *The Hype Machine* getting in excess of 900,000 hits a month, there is a clearly demonstrated demand for music blogs and MP3 downloads (Wodtke, 2008). This is inevitably taking some consumers away from the work of paid music journalists, which will in turn affect revenues and potentially jobs, unless legal audio file streaming can be included on sites produced by professional music journalists (Knopper, 2009). However, these are unlikely to be offered for free, so the blogger would still have an advantage in that the consumer could own the music.

Equally, some music fans are using sites with audio hosting to access music directly. Many of the *Drowned in Sound* articles, along with several of the interviewees, suggested the music journalist is still required to guide the consumer through the fog created by near endless amounts of user-generated content (White, 2009, Gellatly, 2010). There may be a need for this, but that does not necessarily make it commercially viable. This need can be filled in part by unpaid contributions from aspiring music journalists. Also, through social networking sites, record companies can cut out the music journalist as the middle-man and market directly to their target audience. This role can also be fulfilled by musicians

themselves, who could set up their own blogs and market their work directly to the consumer (Wikstrom, 2009).

There is a definite trend away from paid for content and towards free online content, and this presents a major challenge to music journalism as a profession. As Martin Atkins said, there is no business model in existence at the moment which can slow this trend and provide sufficient financing to maintain current staffing levels, which can only lead to a continued reduction in the number of paid positions for music journalism (Atkins, UnConvention, 2010).

The professional music journalist is unlikely to disappear completely in the near future, but, for the first time since the boom of the music press, there are credible alternatives to their work, whether through blogs or audio hosting websites. These sites are growing in number and in popularity, with paid for music publications becoming less popular. This makes the market for paid for content smaller, thus making professional music journalism smaller.

If current conditions continue, the trend which has seen sales of the NME fall from 250,000 per week to 38,000 is likely to continue, while sites like The Hype Machine receive upwards of 900,000 hits per month.

The only way paid music journalism can redress this slide, in an age where supply so dramatically outstrips demand, is by being markedly better than the free content on offer (Young, 2010). As Louis Pattison notes, this is unlikely to happen when market research replaces passion and opinion as the driving force behind content, and 'professional' music journalism amounts to little more than a mark out of five and a bland 100-word review (Pattison, 2009).

Perhaps "Everything must be free, all of the time" will become the mantra for a non-monetary music industry after all.

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### **Conferences:**

UnConvention music conference, Macclesfield, 08/05/10. Speakers included Atkins, A & Young, M.

**Interviews:**

The following people gave their permission to be interviewed by email as part of this research and have their comments published:

Cranwell, Jason.

Galloway, Vic.

Gellatly, Jim.

Hamilton, Billy.

Kelly, Peter.

McLaughlin, Milo.

Mitchell, Nick.

Willson, Dan.

Young, Matthew.

## Appendices

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Appendix 1 - Original qualitative research - email interview responses

**Your name:**

Nick Mitchell

**For the benefit of citation, please summarise your involvement with the music industry:**

I run a music blog for The Scotsman's website and have daily contact with labels and PRs.

**What do you consider to be the role of professional music journalism?**

I think the 21st century professional music journalist is in a privileged position that many others would love to be in, so they should behave like a professional, be the most knowledgeable person in their area of interest and uphold traditional journalistic values in their approach.

**How does this differ from the work of music bloggers?**

Simple really. Bloggers don't get paid, so they're not bound by the same standards. Although many of them would like to think of themselves as journalists, they have complete freedom, within the laws of copyright etc, to do and say whatever they like, and they generally do, for better or worse.

**What do you consider to be the main differences between a piece of professional music journalism and a music blog article?**

Music blogs are personal and subjective by definition, whereas (traditional - not gonzo etc) professional music journalism assumes objectivity, even if doesn't actually attain it. Blogs usually imagine an audience of dozens or hundreds, while journalism is intended to be read by the masses, not all of whom will share the same niche knowledge.

**Do you think you are more likely to get a balanced, impartial review from a professional music journalist or from a music blogger?**

Of course there's no such thing as a completely impartial review, but you're more likely to get closer to it from a journalist than you are from a blogger. If only because there will be a few more layers of control before publication. So you might get an editor on a magazine reading a blatantly biased review and rejecting it, or at least phoning the journalist and asking him to explain or rewrite his piece. Not so with a blogger who just hits Publish.

**Do you feel the role of the professional music journalist has been replaced by blogging and podcasting?**

Not replaced, but it has taken away the mantle of authority. Nowadays journalists aren't the only ones to get their hands on advance copies of albums, so they're no longer the gatekeepers. But the divide between the two disciplines is still there, because human beings just aren't very adaptable: journalists are good at being journalists but reluctant to learn digital skills, while bloggers are specialised in online communication but usually make for poor print journalists.

**To what extent do you feel the professional music journalist has been replaced by technologies where people can find their own music, such as MySpace, LastFM, Spotify and Hype Machine, as well as Twitter and Facebook?**

These websites have allowed unprecedented access to an unprecedented amount of music for the consumer, but people still value the crap filter that is professional music journalism. There's a growing trend of 'choice fatigue' in our culture, and a page of reviews from a well respected journalist is still something to value. But this may become less important within a generation, when social networking becomes the norm for old and young alike.

**Do you think there is a future for professional music journalism, or will music magazines continue to vanish and be replaced by fan sites and blogs?**

I think we'll see the big names like Pitchfork, Stereogum, Rolling Stone, NME, Q etc survive, but only because they have shown an early ability to adapt to the digital marketplace. It will be a case of adapt or die, and at a lower level, we're already seeing the 'professional' part of the definition disappear as even paid-for magazines stop paying journalists and rely on younger writers who will work for free, which inevitably will cause a ripple effect up the payscale.

**Do you have any other comments related to the above questions/debate?**

Only that we'll see an increasing trend towards convergence in all areas: magazines with internet radio, podcasters with blogs, blogs with labels and perhaps even professional music journalists who blog. I think the traditional career path of the music journalist is consigned to the history books. If you want to make your name in the music writing game these days, you need to be multi-skilled, open-minded and ready for disappointment. You'll probably end up in music PR if you're lucky.

<b>Your name:</b>	Billy Hamilton
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For the benefit of citation, please summarise your involvement with the music industry:	Music writer/editor for The Scotsman's Radar site. I have also written for Drowned in Sound and The Skinny, among other publications.
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Please give as much detail as you can in answering the following questions:

<b>Question 1:</b> What do you consider to be the role of professional music journalism?	<p>Primarily the role of professional music journalism is to inform readers through well sourced, well structured, concise, articulate and engaging copy/audio/video that people will pay to consume or pay to advertise next to.</p> <p>Secondarily, the role of professional music journalism is to act as a trusted conduit between A&amp;R and people who buy music. Trusted is the key word there. Without trust there is no role for professional music journalism in this triangle, particularly in the modern era.</p>
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<b>Question 2:</b> How does this differ from the work of music bloggers?	<p>Let's get this straight: Amateur music bloggers lack the tools to compete with professional music journalists. Be it contact-wise or just stylistically.</p> <p>An amateur blogger's target audience is particularly localised and I think that's apparent in the language, content and general quality they produce. They have no subs, no house style and no editor to contend with if they fuck up.</p> <p>A professional music blogger is completely different. Their role is to incite discussion through traditional journalist techniques using the colloquialism associated with blogs these days.</p>
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<p><b>Question 3:</b> What do you consider to be the main differences between a piece of professional music journalism and a music blog article?</p>	<p>Like I said: bloggers lack the tools to produce a quality piece of journalism. And, let's face it, that's exactly what they aspire to be: music journalists. It's very rare that you'll find it the other way round.</p> <p>If you compare content on Song By Toad against something like NME – it's clear what the professional online outlet is. Most bloggers have the 'happy amateur' mentality, where they can produce screeds of copy, reels of audio and cans of film, but they lack the experience/education to produce it to a professional standard.</p>
<p><b>Question 4:</b> Do you think you are more likely to get a balanced, impartial review from a professional music journalist or from a music blogger?</p> <p>Please explain your answer.</p>	<p>I think most people agree impartiality in any music writing is a fallacy. Subjectivity often makes the best and most entertaining read. Balance, however, is completely different and you're less likely to find that balance from a blogger than a music journalist. Much of it is down to the blog's localised setting. It's difficult to critique the people you socialise with without sounding like you're slagging them off. Likewise, it's much easier to rip into something produced by someone from a far off land. Doesn't make it right, but then again does it make it wrong? Personally, I think so, but then I (and a lot of other music journalists) have come under a lot of criticism for writing balanced reviews of local bands from the Scottish blogging mafia. So perhaps others don't think this way about the ills of one-sidedness.</p>
<p><b>Question 5:</b> Do you feel the role of the professional music journalist has been replaced by blogging and podcasting?</p>	<p>No. The role of the traditional music journalist has been replaced by the internet and sites like indietorrents, ISOHunt and Piratebay. Who gives a toss about what someone's opinion is if you can find out for yourself?</p> <p>Today, Music journalism is a multi-skilled occupation. It's not Paul Morley sitting in his pants writing about The Smiths. It's getting out there with a mic, getting to the front of a gig, getting a chat with the band, editing the audio, writing the review, getting them both online immediately – because if you're not on the ball, you quickly find someone else out there is (usually the bloggers who have designs on becoming music journalists).</p>

<p><b>Question 6:</b> To what extent do you feel the professional music journalist has been replaced by technologies where people can find their own music, such as MySpace, LastFM, Spotify and Hype Machine, as well as Twitter and Facebook?</p>	See the above question
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<p><b>Question 7:</b> Do you think there is a future for professional music journalism, or will music magazines continue to vanish and be replaced by fan sites and blogs?</p>	<p>Of course there's a future. It's probably not in traditional print magazines but online there's a wealth of brilliant music writing in Pitchfork, NME.com, Drowned In Sound, Prefix, The Line of Best Fit, The Skinny...</p> <p>Aye, there's always going to be blogs and fan sites but these all smack of little league and that just isn't going to cut it when big music companies need big bands to sell their big records. If you want to punt records you're not going to do it through a blog, that's why PR people will always make their first port of call Pitchfork. Someway down the ladder you get to blogs and, in my opinion, that will probably never change. Nor should it.</p>
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<p>Do you have any other comments related to the above questions/debate?</p>	
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<b>Your name:</b>	<b>Milo McLaughlin</b>
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For the benefit of citation, please summarise your involvement with the music industry:	<p>I've written about music in particular the local music scene for about 5 years for publications like The Edinburgh Evening News, The Skinny Magazine, Is This Music? and The List. I've interviewed quite a few musicians including Will Oldham aka Bonnie Prince Billy, King Creosote, Steve Mason and Regina Spektor.</p> <p>For over a year I had a monthly column in the Skinny called I Hear a New World which had an accompanying podcast. My column was one of the first to champion local Edinburgh bands such as Withered Hand, Meursault, eagleowl, Wounded Knee and the Japanese War Effort. I also did a radio show on the local student radio station under the same name and have appeared on BBC Radio Scotland.</p> <p>I've also been blogging for about the same amount of time in various places. I have my own blog <a href="http://www.gaseousbrain.com">www.gaseousbrain.com</a> and I have also contributed to a number of other well known music blogs/websites including <a href="http://www.songbytoad.com">www.songbytoad.com</a>, <a href="http://offthebeatentracks.tv">offthebeatentracks.tv</a> and the Scotsman's Radar blog.</p> <p>Before I started writing about music I was a member of a local band for about 5 years so I've also seen the other side of the coin.</p>
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Please give as much detail as you can in answering the following questions:

<b>Question 1:</b> What do you consider to be the role of professional music journalism?	<p>A very good question. I don't know if I can claim to have been a professional music journalist as I have rarely been paid anything at all for any of my work - it was mostly done because I wanted to support local bands I liked and because I enjoy writing. Therefore I consider myself somewhere in between a blogger and a journalist, having done a good deal of both.</p> <p>Theoretically the distinction should be that the professional music journalist gets paid to write objectively and critically about new bands and new records. In doing so, they use their professional journalism skills such as proper research, skillful interviewing and insightful commentary, and knowledge of journalism law and suchlike (including behaving professionally both online and off).</p> <p>In an ideal world this is not only useful for readers in discovering new music but also in increasing their knowledge and understanding of the medium and industry itself.</p> <p>In practice, a large proportion of music journalists are a bunch of chancers and wannabes who think they can write but clearly can't, bigging up their mate's bands and trying to get freebies into gigs and music festivals.</p>
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<p><b>Question 2:</b> How does this differ from the work of music bloggers?</p>	<p>See my last paragraph above. This probably describes most bloggers as well. But blogging can also potentially involve a whole new skillset including editorial skills, web publishing and more technical skills, and internet marketing/networking in order to get the word out about their blog.</p> <p>Also, not being professional seems to be a distinct advantage online - people seem to respond better to personalities and controversial opinions. Plus bloggers can build their own communities on their sites whereas music journalists have very little control over such things if they are just writing for someone else's publication.</p>
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<p><b>Question 3:</b> What do you consider to be the main differences between a piece of professional music journalism and a music blog article?</p>	<p>To be honest, it all depends on the publication and what they demand of their writers. Some music writing is dreadful, unstructured, unresearched and idiotic. Some is poetic, highly informative or inspiring. I don't think music journalism even exists to be honest because it's mainly just people's opinions anyway.</p> <p>Bloggers don't have editorial control for the most part, so they can write and produce what they want. This can have a downside in terms of quality and objectivity but can also mean a lot more creativity is involved - in particular with multimedia.</p>
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<p><b>Question 4:</b> Do you think you are more likely to get a balanced, impartial review from a professional music journalist or from a music blogger?</p> <p>Please explain your answer.</p>	<p>See above. It's impossible to generalise given that the quality varies so wildly in both "disciplines".</p>
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<p><b>Question 5:</b> Do you feel the role of the professional music journalist has been replaced by blogging and podcasting?</p>	<p>If my experience is anything to go by, there are very few who are employed as music journalists. Most people, even those who get published in established magazines, get paid nothing or a pittance. Blogging and podcasting etc hasn't helped matters but the fact is there is far too much supply and not enough demand when it comes to music coverage across the board, whether it be magazines, blogs, TV or radio.</p>
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<p><b>Question 6:</b> To what extent do you feel the professional music journalist has been replaced by technologies where people can find their own music, such as MySpace, LastFM, Spotify and Hype Machine, as well as Twitter and Facebook?</p>	<p>No, not replaced, but journalism has to now encompass social media and accept it as part of the process and way of the world. these things can complement writing, but admittedly they can be more integrated into a blog post than a published piece.</p>
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<p><b>Question 7:</b> Do you think there is a future for professional music journalism, or will music magazines continue to vanish and be replaced by fan sites and blogs?</p>	<p>There's always space for good writing and it would be nice to think it still stands out and is appreciated, but alas I fear that only the independently wealthy writer will be able to spend the necessary time establishing themselves, networking, making contacts and promoting themselves online. For those of us who need a day job to survive, it's really difficult to make inroads, though some of the most committed do manage it.</p>
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<p>Do you have any other comments related to the above questions/debate?</p>	<p>I think journalism as a whole is currently in disarray, not just music journalism. But blogging is also unlikely to lead to financial reward unless you have a concrete way to monetise it. Personally I have drifted away from music journalism because there was not any money or opportunity there. Music will always be one of my biggest passions and I enjoy supporting excellent local bands but in the end if I am to get paid for my work then I need to look elsewhere.</p> <p>Others who are more tenacious or more willing to compromise may fare better than I have, but I only ever wanted to write about the music and bands I really love and in the end that's not what a music journalist does - you can't pick and choose if you're paid for it so maybe that's my downfall. Either way I would suggest people consider other ideas if they want to make money.</p>
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<b>Your name:</b>	Matthew Young

For the benefit of citation, please summarise your involvement with the music industry:	I run an independent record label, write a music blog, and have also written for a few other publications on a freelance basis occasionally.
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Please give as much detail as you can in answering the following questions:

<b>Question 1:</b> What do you consider to be the role of professional music journalism?	<p>I don't really see there being a difference, particularly given a blogger is free to define themselves however they please and can therefore overlap with professional journalists as much as they like. Also so many professional journalists are using blogging techniques these days, that blurs the line even further.</p> <p>More particularly though, if I am not getting paid for this and some professional journo is, then I would expect them to be a fuck of a lot better at it than I am. So far, allowing for experience and so on, I have seen no evidence that this is really the case.</p>
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<b>Question 2:</b> How does this differ from the work of music bloggers?	<p>Well, if a blogger wants to write like a professional journalist, then there is no difference, assuming they can make up for the disadvantages in contacts and name recognition (which are also faced by smaller publications).</p> <p>However, the most obvious difference is that bloggers can revise their mandate down as low as they please, have no obligation to be relevant or commercially viable, or even to do much real work if they don't choose to do so. So I would imagine that there is an awful lot of drop-off in the quality of amateur blogs because the market (being free) can tolerate that, whereas in professional terms you'd be out of business or sacked.</p> <p>If anyone mentions journalistic ethics or objectivity in their answer to this question I would like you to punch them, because in the field of music writing this is nothing more than a vain conceit perpetuated by journalists who want to feel special now that their profession has been devalued by excess supply and unchanged demand.</p>
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<p><b>Question 3:</b> What do you consider to be the main differences between a piece of professional music journalism and a music blog article?</p>	<p>The tone of a blogger is generally more informal, and often written in the form of a one-to-one conversation with the reader. It is also often much more personal, and describes why that particular person enjoys or does not enjoy a particular piece of music, rather than pretending to be objective.</p> <p>Professional music journalism would do very, very well to learn some of these lessons if it wants to remain at all compelling in the future, because the process of analysing and reviewing culture is a conversation, not a lecture.</p> <p>Having said that, access to influential people, and the time to research and construct a genuinely scholarly piece of work is rarely ever within reach of an amateur blogger, and if the capacity to do that kind of in-depth work is lost then I think the world of music writing will be very much the poorer for it.</p>
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<p><b>Question 4:</b> Do you think you are more likely to get a balanced, impartial review from a professional music journalist or from a music blogger?</p> <p>Please explain your answer.</p>	<p>I would say you are more likely to get a balanced and impartial view from a blogger, by some distance.</p> <p>Firstly, there is no such thing as an impartial music review, and bloggers at least rarely pretend that they are being impartial, which makes the whole thing more honest to begin with.</p> <p>Secondly, bloggers are rarely subject to commercial pressures, and are thus much more likely to be trustworthy. Although many will whore themselves for hits, they have far more opportunity to write about music just because they like it, and won't find their column inches squeezed by editors who need to see more commercially friendly material being covered, and won't have to battle word counts in order to say exactly what they want to say.</p> <p>And thirdly, bloggers are not generally as subject to intra-industry politics. I doubt a blogger would often give an album a good review in order to maintain a good relationship with such and such a publicity agent or label or band, and that happens all the time in the world of professional music journalism, from what (admittedly little) I have been told by people who actually do the job.</p>
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<p><b>Question 5:</b> Do you feel the role of the professional music journalist has been replaced by blogging and podcasting?</p>	<p>No, but I do think that the removal of the barriers to entry now means that journalism is facing the same pressures as any other creative industry: near-infinite supply and limited demand. That drives prices way, way down and is simply a fact of life.</p>
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<p><b>Question 6:</b> To what extent do you feel the professional music journalist has been replaced by technologies where people can find their own music, such as MySpace, LastFM, Spotify and Hype Machine, as well as Twitter and Facebook?</p>	<p>I don't really value these things at all. A really good music journalist should be informative, have a readable style, and a trustworthy opinion. This should hopefully allow them to be part of a wider conversation amongst fans about music, with their extra knowledge allowing them to bring a little more to the equation.</p> <p>I don't really see how these sites compete with that, honestly. I always found new music by finding trusted sources to recommend it to me, be it a writer at Uncut or my friend James. That still happens today.</p> <p>What these technologies have replaced, arguably, is the process of browsing. I used to spend hours in record shops listening to stuff, but why would I do that now? Part of the pleasure of discovering new music is the sharing process and finding like-minded souls to bicker about it with.</p> <p>A good journalist should be able to be part of that, even if they are removed from your peer group, but I don't see technology being able to intrude on that aspect of music very much. It's culture after all, not a bloody competition.</p>
<p><b>Question 7:</b> Do you think there is a future for professional music journalism, or will music magazines continue to vanish and be replaced by fan sites and blogs?</p>	<p>It is simply a matter of someone having to find where the money is hiding. The laws of supply and demand, as I alluded to earlier, suggest it is going to be very hard.</p> <p>Writing is already used as a loss-leader to deliver advertising to people, and it could be that this is the only way to make music journalism commercially viable. Command a large audience and you can command money because someone, somewhere will want to get a hold of your audience and try and pimp their shit to them.</p>
<p>Do you have any other comments related to the above questions/debate?</p>	<p>I think the concept of 'journalism' is becoming too narrow these days. I think of myself as a journalist, a commentator, and a broadcaster. And yet the only authority by which I can call myself any of these things is because I actually do the work I am myself commenting on. If you try and restrict yourself to simply writing about things in the style of a traditional journalist then I think you are going to be in for a very difficult time over the next few years.</p>

<b>Your name:</b>	Jason Cranwell
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For the benefit of citation, please summarise your involvement with the music industry:	I run a music blog called The Pop Cop ( <a href="http://thepopcop.co.uk">http://thepopcop.co.uk</a> )
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Please give as much detail as you can in answering the following questions:

<b>Question 1:</b> What do you consider to be the role of professional music journalism?	Writing about music for a publication and being paid to do so.
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<b>Question 2:</b> How does this differ from the work of music bloggers?	In most ways there is no fundamental difference other than the fact that a professional music journalist would expect to get paid for what they write and would generally be working for an employer. Stylistically, a professional could these days just as easily be asked to write in a 'blogger style', e.g. more informal/personal or first-person narrative or in a diary form.
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<b>Question 3:</b> What do you consider to be the main differences between a piece of professional music journalism and a music blog article?	Most music blog articles are not edited or proof-read by anyone other than the author so they are likely to have more grammatical and spelling errors as well as factual inaccuracies.
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<p><b>Question 4:</b> Do you think you are more likely to get a balanced, impartial review from a professional music journalist or from a music blogger?</p> <p>Please explain your answer.</p>	<p>Because most music bloggers do not have an employer or superior you would assume that they would also be more likely to write from an impartial point of view. However, I believe the opposite is true. There is much more pressure on a professional to conform to the expectations and possible ‘agendas’ of the publication they are paid to write for. One pertinent example would be the new Prince album 20ten, which was given away free in the Daily Mirror. Some critics called it "utterly boring", "clunky", "snooze-funk". The Daily Mirror reviewer called it Prince's best album in 23 years. You could look at this and jump to the conclusion that the Daily Mirror review was not balanced or impartial. However, you could just as easily question the impartiality of negative reviews from rival newspapers. An independent music blogger would be more likely to give you a fair assessment of the album’s merits.</p>
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<p><b>Question 5:</b> Do you feel the role of the professional music journalist has been replaced by blogging and podcasting?</p>	<p>No. There is, and should always be, a place for professionally-written music journalism. Some of these articles involve extensive research, lengthy travelling and a commitment of time that could not happen without a level of financial investment only available to paid-for publications.</p>
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<p><b>Question 6:</b> To what extent do you feel the professional music journalist has been replaced by technologies where people can find their own music, such as MySpace, LastFM, Spotify and Hype Machine, as well as Twitter and Facebook?</p>	<p>In terms of record reviews, the role of a professional music journalist has certainly lessened in importance. Someone is unlikely to purchase an album or single solely on the strength of a written review, when they could use MySpace, LastFM, Spotify and Hype Machine to ‘try before they buy’, while Twitter and Facebook are also useful for gauging a consensus of how a record is being received by the general public.</p>
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<p><b>Question 7:</b> Do you think there is a future for professional music journalism, or will music magazines continue to vanish and be replaced by fan sites and blogs?</p>	<p>I think the future of professional music journalism is bleak, as it is for professional journalism in general, given that people are becoming increasingly used to getting their media content for free on the internet. However, I certainly hope that professional music journalism continues to exist as it facilitates work of a certain quality that music blogs may not be able attain without a similar level of financial investment.</p>
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<p>Do you have any other comments related to the above questions/debate?</p>	
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<b>Your name:</b>	Jim Gellatly
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For the benefit of citation, please summarise your involvement with the music industry:	I'm a broadcaster and podcaster, including music shows on both local and national radio. I have worked for the BBC and Clyde1, amongst others.
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Please give as much detail as you can in answering the following questions:

<b>Question 1:</b> What do you consider to be the role of professional music journalism?	I think a professional journalist needs to focus on the target audience, and delivering what they want to read. That may be interesting interviews or reviews with name bands, but also an element of tastemaking depending on the publication or the journalist's reputation.
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<b>Question 2:</b> How does this differ from the work of music bloggers?	A journalist is likely to have more commercial restraints.
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<b>Question 3:</b> What do you consider to be the main differences between a piece of professional music journalism and a music blog article?	The reader is likely to read the blogger's output as they trust their judgement. Because of this, the blogger has a stronger role as a tastemaker. While a newspaper/magazine may have a duty to feature particular acts (because the reader will be interested in them), a blogger has a bit more freedom.
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<p><b>Question 4:</b> Do you think you are more likely to get a balanced, impartial review from a professional music journalist or from a music blogger?</p> <p>Please explain your answer.</p>	<p>I think this is down to trust. A blogger may ruin their reputation and credibility by not being honest and impartial. That is of course true to an extent with "serious" music journalists, but I think it differs from case to case. I don't think you are particularly going to get more balance from a professional.</p>
<p><b>Question 5:</b> Do you feel the role of the professional music journalist has been replaced by blogging and podcasting?</p>	<p>Blogs tend to (generally) deal with more "opinion". Both have their place, but when it comes to fulfilling a taste-making role, blogging and podcasting have become more important.</p>
<p><b>Question 6:</b> To what extent do you feel the professional music journalist has been replaced by technologies where people can find their own music, such as MySpace, LastFM, Spotify and Hype Machine, as well as Twitter and Facebook?</p>	<p>I think they can still act as a filter, much in the way you rely on recommendations on the sites mentioned.</p>
<p><b>Question 7:</b> Do you think there is a future for professional music journalism, or will music magazines continue to vanish and be replaced by fan sites and blogs?</p>	<p>I think they will continue to have a role to play, but may become more like aggregators for user led content.</p>
<p>Do you have any other comments related to the above questions/debate?</p>	<p>Mainstream media (especially radio) has yet to understand the new media revolution, and better watch before being left behind.</p>

<b>Your name:</b>	Vic Galloway
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For the benefit of citation, please summarise your involvement with the music industry:	I present 2 weekly new music radio programmes for BBC Radio 1 and BBC Radio Scotland. I have been on Radio 1 for 11 years and Radio Scotland for 9 years. I search out and champion new and emerging Scottish talent across genres, mainly from the leftfield/alternative side. I write a weekly music column, occasionally present on TV and also do programmes for 6Music here and there.
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Please give as much detail as you can in answering the following questions:

<b>Question 1:</b> What do you consider to be the role of professional music journalism?	I think music journalism should shed a constructively critical light on music. It shouldn't simply be enthusiastic and sycophantic, but neither should it be needlessly destructive. I personally try to filter the best music from Scotland and beyond, across all genres and styles, and showcase it to as many listeners and interested parties as possible. With a large, publicly-funded platform such as BBC Radio, it is essential to give small, local and less-established artists the opportunity to gain some serious recognition, national airplay and possibly a live studio session. This quite often is the start of their careers and offers valuable experience in interviews and a live broadcast setting. My role is to try and offer listeners an alternative to the mainstream pop culture.
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<b>Question 2:</b> How does this differ from the work of music bloggers?	Bloggers tend to be interested in only 1 or 2 types of music and can be insular in their musical tastes and outlook. I play indie, rock, hip-hop, dubstep, electronica, metal, punk, acoustic singer-songwriters, electronica etc etc on my shows, whereas most blogs may have a particular 'taste'. Blogs are also usually run by 'scenesters' and so personal politics and peer-group pressure can have an influence on their writing and musical tastes. At the BBC, my producers and I try to give a complete and fair appraisal of any style or genre from any part of the country. Don't get me wrong, I'm a big fan of blogs and bloggers but I don't always get a wide-screen or open-minded view of Scottish music from one. I may have to read a few to get the bigger, more diverse picture.
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<p><b>Question 3:</b> What do you consider to be the main differences between a piece of professional music journalism and a music blog article?</p>	<p>A music journalist tends to be a little more considerate than a blogger. If you are being paid by a company or corporation, you may have a 'party-line' or 'remit' to adhere to, whereas a blogger who does something for the fun of it, they can rant and rave and be as rude or politically incorrect as they like. Sometimes this is wonderfully free and exciting, sometimes this can be petty and close-minded. A professional generally has to think of their potential audience as well as the company's aesthetic and manifesto. That isn't necessarily a bad thing. The BBC tries to consider all races, nationalities, classes, creeds and philosophies – it helps the broadcasters and the production teams be more open-minded and careful in their approach, without necessarily compromising the content of the programmes.</p>
<p><b>Question 4:</b> Do you think you are more likely to get a balanced, impartial review from a professional music journalist or from a music blogger?</p> <p>Please explain your answer.</p>	<p>As I have stated above in my last 2 points, I think with an impartial organisation like the BBC you will get a far more balanced view than a blogger or than other sections of the professional media. Most other media/press/news organisations are notoriously left or right wing, so you will get a very biased view-point. I don't think it's conducive to people making their own minds up and deciding for themselves. I'm against politically biased media personally, as a general rule. Bloggers can potentially be impartial, but are probably aligned to a certain scene or musical style. I like strong opinion, but not to the detriment of a constructive critique.</p>
<p><b>Question 5:</b> Do you feel the role of the professional music journalist has been replaced by blogging and podcasting?</p>	<p>I like to think there is room for both. Everyone likes to read a strongly opinionated blogger or journalist, but I also like to see fair and unbiased criticism by knowledgeable music lovers and journalists. I wouldn't want to see talented, educated critics who are passionate about music and writing/broadcasting being lost on a sea of ignorant loudmouths with a personal agenda and no sense of awareness or musical history.</p>

<p><b>Question 6:</b> To what extent do you feel the professional music journalist has been replaced by technologies where people can find their own music, such as MySpace, LastFM, Spotify and Hype Machine, as well as Twitter and Facebook?</p>	<p>This has happened to a certain extent, but once every person on the planet has an opinion on their blog/twitter/facebook and are letting the world know what it is, we may get lost in a morass and need experts to help us out. It's great to use all these technologies and find music in different ways, but I still think you need a filtration system with passionate and knowledgeable people who have good taste, good ears and a sense of independence and impartiality. Everyone is empowered just now and that's a great thing, but I don't think professionals will be completely replaced. It gives professionals a good run for their money though, and keeps people on their toes. No bad thing.</p>
<p><b>Question 7:</b> Do you think there is a future for professional music journalism, or will music magazines continue to vanish and be replaced by fan sites and blogs?</p>	<p>I think the old-fashioned print model may well eventually be pretty much replaced by digital formats, but I don't think professional journalism will disappear altogether. It will mutate and morph into different shapes, alongside blogs, podcasts and fan sites. As I say, there is room for all of these.</p>
<p>Do you have any other comments related to the above questions/debate?</p>	<p>I'd like to see professional media outlets and blog/fan-sites work more closely together. I don't think there has to be an 'us and them' mentality, especially when talking about niche areas of interest... e.g., Scottish independent music. This actually seems to be happening more and more today, with a fiercely independent but friendly situation arising. This is healthy, and ultimately helps the musicians and artists.</p>

<b>Your name:</b>	Peter Kelly
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For the benefit of citation, please summarise your involvement with the music industry:	I am an independent musician writing, recording and performing music under the name Beerjacket. I book my own shows, release my own albums and do all my own PR.
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Please give as much detail as you can in answering the following questions:

<b>Question 1:</b> What do you consider to be the role of professional music journalism?	If amateur writers are often accused of sloppy writing, lazy comparisons, tendency towards clichés and a lack of objectivity, then it's a shame that many apparently professional journalists are guilty of these sins. A good music writer is able to contextualise what they hear, taking into account the 'when' and 'where', the cultural significance – by all means, the zeitgeist – or impact of the music, the character of the musicians... in other words, the role of the professional music journalist is to exercise the expertise of analysis and accuracy of evaluation that the title of 'professional' suggests.
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<b>Question 2:</b> How does this differ from the work of music bloggers?	Bloggers write because they want to; professionals write because they have to: it's their job. Most bloggers have a full-time job and write as a hobby, which makes them more honest as they needn't be scared to say what they think. Bloggers also tend to support their local scenes, often at risk of being seen as too insular or, at worst, simply supporting their friends' bands. A good blogger acts as a bridge between the everyman and the connoisseur, essentially, combing the Internet for anything good under the radar of TV, radio or print press and presenting it in a friendlier, less corporate context than advertising-reliant, trend-driven London-centric magazines.
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<b>Question 3:</b> What do you consider to be the main differences between a piece of professional music journalism and a music blog article?	The main difference occurs when the blogger simply isn't a very good writer, which is rather embarrassing to read and gives the culture of blogging a bit of a bad name.  The problem with blogs is the same as with music: the freedom or the Internet has presented an opportunity for talentless people to put their work out in the public domain. There is too little quality control and with many blogs, we miss the presence of a sharp editor. Few bloggers are really great writers and the point in a blog surely has to be more substantial than simply linking to MP3s or You tube clips. There arguably has to be some sort of voice and purpose in the writing if it is to compete with traditional music journalism.
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<p><b>Question 4:</b> Do you think you are more likely to get a balanced, impartial review from a professional music journalist or from a music blogger?</p> <p>Please explain your answer.</p>	<p>Not necessarily, as there are politics involved with both. It comes down to editing again, as the person who is ultimately in control of the output will most likely direct what is written or published towards their own (or the publication's) interests. If the person writing is also apparently editing their own work, they are much less likely to exercise objectivity.</p> <p>Many bloggers seem averse to criticising local acts, yet will tear apart national ones, presumably as they seem them as fair game.</p> <p>In my experience, I've only ever really had poor reviews from bloggers who I've not guest-listed or agreed to interviews with. In contrast, I've really only ever had good reviews from magazines and newspapers.</p>
<p><b>Question 5:</b> Do you feel the role of the professional music journalist has been replaced by blogging and podcasting?</p>	<p>Writing will never be replaced by any other medium; the written word (and that is, surely, the printed word, rather than one which can be erased or lost in the mire or the Internet's sprawling maze) is paramount and carries more weight than something spoken.</p> <p>One can always reflect on what is written in more depth than in what is spoken. It is there in black and white, indelible and definite – a commitment from the writer. A contract. What I have written, I have written.</p> <p>Podcasting is interesting but is surely a cousin of radio rather than journalism, strictly speaking. Radio blogging?</p> <p>I love music journalism, sometimes even more than I love music, as it is a reflection of the role of music as the beginning of a dialogue between people.</p>
<p><b>Question 6:</b> To what extent do you feel the professional music journalist has been replaced by technologies where people can find their own music, such as MySpace, LastFM, Spotify and Hype Machine, as well as Twitter and Facebook?</p>	<p>There might be more outlets where one can find music but if anything, that only makes it more difficult to search out the good stuff. Arguably the wise old music critic is all the more useful following the dawn of the blogging generation, as otherwise one can be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of music available.</p> <p>A criticism which is often made of buzz bands or musicians on the 'blogosphere' is that someone who is lauded by the little guys in front of their computers is most likely only going to be popular within a certain demographic, where radio hits are so because they fit the status quo. There may be some validity to this argument as for every act who successfully crosses over from blog hype (e.g. Vampire Weekend or The National) there are millions more who simply cross over from the 'Downloads' folder to the 'Recycle Bin' on surfers' PCs. Therefore, the notion that through simply going onto Myspace (which is terrible now anyway) one is going to find your new favourite band is a bit of a silly one. More roads only mean we need more maps.</p>

<p><b>Question 7:</b> Do you think there is a future for professional music journalism, or will music magazines continue to vanish and be replaced by fan sites and blogs?</p>	<p>People will always write about music but if music magazines disappear, they will eventually come back again as if such a publication is a new idea. After a while, people will tire of the black hole of the Internet and desire a return to the traditional format. We'll miss the character of music magazines and, by the time such things as music magazines become perceived as an outdated oddity, the nasty proliferation of advertising will be gone too. Why would a hair wax brand advertise in a music magazine once they are so partisan as to appeal only to music fans? How many real music fans will be left by that point? Would it be worth their while, or more importantly, their cash?</p> <p>Blogs and fan sites are great and, as I said, are usually written from the point of view of the passionate hobbyist. This is not to say there isn't great journalism to be found in these places but few blogs offer great writing as the primary feature, where usually they exists ostensibly to offer free (and possibly illegal/unofficial) MP3s and You Tube links.</p>
<p>Do you have any other comments related to the above questions/debate?</p>	<p>I miss the days when, as a 12 year old boy at school, I used to sneak off to buy the NME at lunchtime on a Wednesday and quickly stuff it in my bag so that no-one thought I was strange. I was the only kid in my class (probably my year) who read music journalism and wasn't interested in chart nonsense.</p> <p>Nowadays, the NME is considered to be weakly written and trend-based in contrast with its cutting edge glory days where its reportage was art reflecting art; great writing about great music.</p> <p>Maybe once the money drops out of advertising in music magazines, we'll see a return to form – wouldn't that be nice?</p>

**Interview with Dan Willson of Edinburgh band Withered Hand**

**Do you think you are more likely to get a balanced, impartial review from a professional music journalist or from a music blogger?**

Neither. I think both are subject to outside pressures as to what they are writing about and why. Definitely the professional music journo will be more obviously swayed by commercial considerations. But dedicated bloggers are often hopelessly pandering to their established audience and you could swap commercial considerations for peer group considerations and end up in a similar place.

Please explain your answer.

**Do you think more of your fans find your work through music magazines and professional online music sites**

**or**

**through blogs, podcasts and the likes of Spotify, MySpace and LastFM (or even Facebook and Twitter)?**

I suppose through the latter, to get column inches in shiny music mags there is often a whole apparatus of pluggers and PR to make that happen. So, without going there, it's mostly word of mouth and MySpace, blogs etc. I guess some people see the reviews and then check u out online. A decent website of your own is best, I think. But I don't have a decent one.

**As a musician, do you think there is more to be gained by getting music blogs to back your work, or music journalists and magazines?**

It's hard to answer. I think music journalists and magazines can probably open new audiences and have more authority, as I suspect blogs are preaching to the converted in most cases. I have seen some wonderful music blogs but they are rare I'd say. But as blogs tend to be dedicated music fans foremost, sometimes the writing or editorial content is very variable and often really quite poor. It's almost too easy to blog. Personally I miss fanzines - they at least forced more imaginative approaches to formatting content and distribution.