

Left Behind

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“Studying the Process of Disintermediation: Why Now? Why Ever?”

I don't think much of the term “new media”. The emphasis on “new” is all too often a harmful distraction. Implicit within the term is a timeline, one that is all too often viewed as progressive, almost teleological. It often reduces the study of new media to media forms that are firmly implanted in the now, which means digital. I've complained about this elsewhere but allow me to extend that complaint for a minute: the collapse of digital media into any form into the “new” prefix for “new media” is unfortunate as it all too often erases the processes of change that make the new possible. To be short, it erases history. And despite the landmark works regarding New Media and history by Friedrich Kittler, Carolyn Marvin, Lev Manovich, Jonathan Sterne and Lisa Gitelman, our field continues “look forward” rather than trying to understand how media become “new”. I believe that the processual point of view is the most interesting and the one that we must adapt if we are to train media scholars worth their salt. As such it also means that as focus on what becomes news we must focus on what is being replaced, left behind and forgotten. In this room alone all of us have lived through the wholesale move from analogue to digital, which has meant the abandonment of specific materials, practices and spaces (both online and terrestrial). As VHS tapes, CDs, Mass record retail, print newspaper, and home phone lines have receded from many of our daily lives in processes of disintermediation, this abandonment comes with substantial consequences: The potential loss of numerous best practices and, more importantly, the practitioners themselves.

My own work has recently been focused on the changes involved in the so-called “new music industry”. I am most interested in the rearticulation and/or loss of best practices. For example, one the significant spaces and set of practices that have been the loss of the record retail spaces. It is easy to gloss over this loss by assuming it is part of an antiquated form of distribution, one that has been simply replaced by licensed online stores and file sharing technologies. However, this would be a profound mistake. The physical record/cd retailer was more than the endpoint of commercial distribution concerns. Rather record retailers were an essential part of a longstanding media ecosystem, a species that came in numerous varieties that adapted themselves to a variety of geographies, communities and economies. These specific adaptations were key for they allowed for a specific flow of cultural goods and capital alike. They incentivized specific consumer behaviors such as catalogue acquisition and collecting (both for artists and labels), record recycling, credit and even local performances. Also, the loss of these retail spaces has forced the industry to rethink the "discovery" aspect of the music business, an absolutely essentially element for the functioning of any ecosystem of experiential goods. In short, this is where the “relationship” aspect of the music industry existed in a very refined and local sense. This aspect has been conveniently ignored. Worse yet, the celebration of community by so many new media discussions in the press seem to assume community was previously non-existent and is the result of niche-based, web 2.0 digital media. In the rush to understand the new, many of us scholars, myself included, assumed that we somehow fully understood how retail spaces worked and what composed its many economic functions. Without an

understanding of how retail works we have forgotten the many social formations and practices that generated recommendations, determined prices and kept the system of goods lubricated.

By studying the disintermediation of this and other systems we begin to understand what best practices may be lost, why they were developed and their position within long-development of these and other media ecosystems. With this in mind we may judge their value and work toward their adaptation or adoption in an as-needed basis. For example, Jeff Scheible's work on the way that many used VHS videos have recirculated into local, underground retail stores is a fascinating corrective to the common assumption that VHS is a completely dead medium. As he is on this panel, I hope we can hear more about this topic. Finally, we can also use a focus on disintermediation to measure the trauma that such processes exact upon both workers and their products. While many media workers have bemoaned the loss of jobs, particularly in print and music sectors, we forget that these process force existing workers to take on practices for which they have had no adequate training or interest in adopting. By analyzing these processes, we learn what we have left behind and what the consequences of this ignorance is.