

The new shape of online community: The example of Swedish independent music fandom

by Nancy K. Baym

Abstract

Online groups are taking new forms as participants spread themselves amongst multiple Internet and offline platforms. The multinational online community of Swedish independent music fans exemplifies this trend. This participant–observation analysis of this fandom shows how sites are interlinked at multiple levels, and identifies several implications for theorists, researchers, developers, industry and independent professionals, and participants.

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Introduction

The rise of social network sites is often taken to exemplify a shift from the interest–based online communities of the Web’s “first” incarnation to a new “Web 2.0” in which individuals are the basic unit, rather than communities. In a recent *First Monday* article, for instance, boyd (2006) states, “egocentric networks replace groups.”

I argue that online groups have not been “replaced.” Even as their members build personal profiles and egocentric networks on MySpace, Facebook, BlackPlanet, Orkut, Bebo, and countless other emerging social network sites, online groups continue to thrive on Web boards, in multiplayer online games, and even on the all–but–forgotten Usenet.

However, online communities are also taking a new form somewhere between the site-based online group and the egocentric network, distributing themselves throughout a variety of sites in a quasi–coherent networked fashion. This new form of distributed community poses particular problems for its members, developers, and analysts.

This paper, based on over two years of participant–observation, describes this new shape of online community through a close look at the multinational online community of fans of

independent rock music from Sweden.



Fandom

Those who study “fandom” disagree on its definition. At the least, most would agree it involves a collective of people organized socially around their shared appreciation of a pop culture object or objects (*e.g.* Jenkins, 1992, 2006; Baym, 2000; Hills, 2002; O’Reilly and Doherty, 2006). Since the mid–1990s, studies of fandom have increasingly focused on the Internet as a locus of fan activity.

Fandoms pool and generate collective intelligence and affect. Individuals create self concepts and self presentations within fan groups. Some become well known to other fans through fandom. These groups also develop a sense of shared identity. Personal relationships are formed amongst some members of fan groups. Particular fandoms may have a shared ethos, but disagreement within fan communities is both common and, often, desirable. Fandoms are often highly creative, a phenomenon the Internet has brought to the fore and enabled in new ways.

Fandom is a harbinger of cultural phenomena to come. Among the earliest creators, advocates, and users of the Internet were *Star Trek* and Grateful Dead fans [1] eager to use their new system to discuss those topics communally. Musicians and their fans were largely responsible for driving the development of MySpace. Online fan communities now sit at the cutting edge of “convergence culture” [2] in which popular culture materials and texts take form across multiple interlinked platforms.

In this culture, fans (and, by extension, consumers of any brand) have increasing influence in shaping the phenomena around which they organize. More than any other commercial sector, the popular culture industry relies on online communities to publicize and provide testimonials for their products. More industries are likely to seek to develop online ‘fan’ bases as they market their products in increasingly deterritorialized and interactive ways. Yahoo’s early 2000 launch of “Brand Universe,” portals designed specifically for fans of particular brands, suggests the breadth of this potential.

Music fans have been connecting online from the Internet’s beginning and continue to push boundaries today. Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the earliest music fan communities on the Internet were mailing lists and Usenet discussion groups, many of which still operate. In the mid–1990s, music fans were among the first to build websites to foster community interaction.

This development is nicely illustrated by the online fan activity around the American band, R.E.M. That fan base began its online life with a mailing list in the late 1980s. When the band’s popularity and the size of that list grew in the early 1990s, the list voted to disband and create a Usenet newsgroup, *rec.music.rem*, in its stead. Once the newsgroup was launched, a small group of insiders created an invitation–only mailing list.

Over time, *rec.music.rem* became filled with spam and limited by Usenet’s relatively thin communication platform in comparison to Web sites and forums. Into this breach stepped Ethan Kaplan, then sixteen years old, who built *murmurs.com*, an R.E.M. fan site in 1997. That site was so successful that R.E.M.’s label, Warner Brothers Recordings, eventually hired Kaplan as its director of technology. Today, *murmurs.com*, *rec.music.rem*, the spin off mailing list, and many other fan–created R.E.M. Web sites co–exist.

In the 2000s, music fandom has played a central role in social networking sites. Not all have been fueled by the band–fan relationship like MySpace, but most interfaces encourage people to list or friend the bands they like in constructing their on–site identity. Since 2005, at least two dozen music–based social networking sites have launched, including Last.fm, MOG, iLike, and Goombah.

Last.fm, the oldest and largest music–based social networking site, allows users to download software that tracks their listens and generates personal listening charts which are displayed on their profile. Last.fm users can also use their profiles to write self–descriptions and blogs, to ‘friend’ other music listeners, to see their ‘musical neighbors’ (users who, according to Last.fm’s algorithms, have taste most similar to their own), to join groups, to build playlists, to access personalized radio streams, to write and read private personal messages, and to leave messages in one another’s public ‘shoutboxes.’ Widgets based on users’ Last.fm charts and tags can be exported to create radio streams of users’ favorite music on other Web sites.

Another important development in online music fandom has been the rise of fan–authored MP3 blogs, in which individuals post sound files of songs accompanied by brief description and/or analysis [3]. Though it’s easy to dismiss this as “pirating,” these blogs serve crucial publicity roles, especially in independent music scenes. Indeed, many such bloggers are deluged by requests from independent labels and bands to write about their music. Craig Bonell, who writes the MP3 blog SwedesPlease reports, “bands and labels seem generally thrilled to get the attention.” [4]

Many of these bloggers link to one another through blog rolls, creating a multi–sited community of like–minded bloggers who interact through their posts and comments. As a general rule, however, commenting on MP3 blog sites is very light.

As each new incarnation of online fandom has emerged, previous forms have not disappeared. Instead, fan communities have distributed themselves more widely. Individuals can become increasingly selective about which places they want to spend time. Online platforms and locales have become increasingly specialized in the functions they serve for fans.



Swedish popular music

Sweden is one of the world’s most successful exporters of popular music. Music exports have accounted for between three and seven billion Swedish Krøner annually in recent years, according to industry site Export Music Sweden (<http://www.exms.com/>). Sales of Swedish popular music rose more than 50 percent in the 1990s, but has been impacted by the general decline as the music industry struggles to adapt to the changes wrought by the Internet (Burnett and Wikström, 2006).

The international popularity of Swedish music has early roots in the 1840s when P.T. Barnum brought opera singer Jenny Lind, “the Swedish Nightingale,” to America, effectively making her the first international Swedish star. In the 1970’s, ABBA became Sweden’s most successful band ever. Their international success was followed to a lesser extent by major–label bands including Europe, Roxette, and the Cardigans. Since the early 2000s, the independent music scene in Sweden has gained increasing international prominence.

Discussing the reasons for this scene’s fertility and international appeal is beyond the scope of this paper [5]. The country provides an excellent infrastructure of recording studios, producers, and

support for the pursuit of musical education. The scene is deeply incestuous, with many musicians and producers involved with multiple bands. It also surely helps that so many sing in English.

Most of the Swedish music business operates within the global music industry now dominated by four multinational conglomerates (EMIGroup, Sony/BMG Music Entertainment, Universal Music Group, and Warner Music Group) that control approximately 80 percent of the global music market (Wikström, 2006). A surprising percentage of top hits by global superstars such as America's Britney Spears are written and produced in what are often referred to as "Swedish song factories."

However in Sweden, as elsewhere, there is a thriving independent music scene, releasing records through small independent labels [6]. Independent music scenes are generally place based (see Kruse, 2003). The Swedish scene has interdependent hubs in Gothenburg, Malmö, Umeå, and Stockholm. Swedish indie bands play around Sweden and make brief forays to neighboring countries, but few launch international tours. Swedish indie music spans many genres including death metal and its sweet and wimpy opposite "twee," electronica, progressive rock, hip hop, jazz, Americana, punk, and indie-scene starwatt genre "indie-pop."

Indie labels are also associated with particular locations and scenes [7]. Among the most prominent Swedish independent labels are Labrador Records (Stockholm and Malmö), Hybris (Stockholm and Malmö), and Adrian Recordings (Malmö). Although they account for only 20 percent of record sales, Burnett and Wikström (2006, p. 576) argue that independent labels are particularly important "because they are often at the leading edge of developments in popular music."

Swedish indie labels promote their music on their own Web sites, on MySpace, on Last.fm and other social network sites, and through MP3 blogs. They sell their recordings through web retailers such as Amazon and smaller independent record shops such as America's Parasol Records. Swedish bands promote themselves on their labels, Web sites of their own, and most make heavy use of MySpace.

Sweden is not the only Scandinavian country producing independent music, but it produces far more of it than its Nordic neighbors and it is far more successful at gaining audiences outside its national borders.



The Swedish indie music fan community

Swedish indie music fandom could arguably not exist outside of Sweden without the Internet. Swedish independent music gets little radio airplay, even in Sweden, and its fans depend on the Internet to locate new music and to connect with one another. Though there may be particular bands getting buzz at any given moment, Swedish indie fandom as a whole is more concerned with monitoring and promoting multiple bands on multiple labels than with supporting any particular band or bands. The fan group I describe here is diverse in its tastes, but the common core is a shared affection for indie-rock and indie-pop.

These fans may be found on band or label-specific sites, but as a fandom, they do not congregate on single sites. Instead they build community through a network of sites, building their own and taking advantage of those already on offer to strengthen their engagement with Swedish indie music and their social ties with one another. In doing so, they exemplify the new form of online

community with which this paper is concerned, one which extends far beyond fandom.

Mapping the boundaries of this online community is a challenge, both for the scholarly analyst and for the fan. I speak from both perspectives as an active fan of music from this scene and as a scholar who has been engaging in this online fandom almost daily for over two years.

There is no “swedishindiefans.com” that serves as an all–purpose go–to site. There are official sites associated with the scene, most notably those of the bands, their labels, and the independent music retailers that specialize in this music. These sites publicize and distribute the music, and are therefore important stops for members of the Swedish indie fan community. However, they do not generally serve as spaces in which those fans can engage one another and hence cannot themselves foster fandom.

For example, Parasol Records (<http://www.parasol.com/>) in Urbana, Illinois, both sells and releases Swedish indie music on their in–house labels. Their Web site offers a guide to the Swedish scene and their Swedish expert, Jim Kelly (who has never been to Sweden), recommends best new Scandinavian music and provides streams of select songs. However, their site’s infrastructure does not offer any means for fans to talk to one another. Some band sites, which include Web sites, blogs, and profiles on social network sites, do enable discussion, although it is most likely focused just on that band.



Figure 1: For example, Parasol Records in Urbana, Illinois, both sells and releases Swedish indie music on their in–house labels.

Several fan–authored MP3 blogs focus on the Swedish indie scene, the most enduring of which have been SwedesPlease, Absolute Noise, and Hello!Surprise! SwedesPlease (<http://swedesplease.blogspot.com/>), written by an American, has offered near daily updates

highlighting songs from Swedish bands since January, 2005. Bonell estimates that SwedesPlease has around 700 unique daily site visitors [8], and several hundred more read through feed subscriptions.

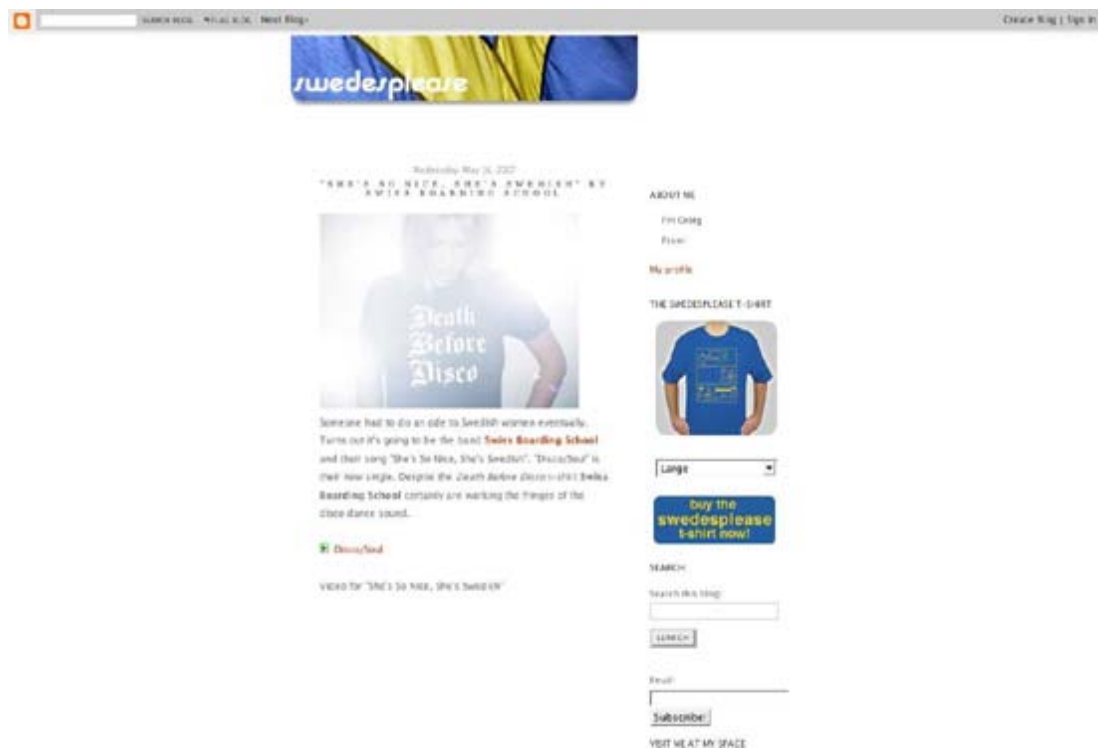


Figure 2: SwedesPlease, written by an American, has offered near daily updates highlighting songs from Swedish bands since January, 2005.

Absolut Noise (<http://absolutnoise.blogspot.com/>) is a French fan MP3 blog providing both English and French updates on new Swedish songs and videos since early 2006. The person who writes that site does not track unique visitors, but describes it as one of the three top French audioblogs.



Figure 3: Absolut Noise is a French fan MP3 blog providing both English and French updates on new Swedish songs and videos since early 2006.

Hello!Surprise! (<http://www.hellosurprise.com/>) is an English–language Swedish Web site that describes itself as an “always–in–progress pop music guide [...] supposed to cover the Swedish pop scene.” Hello!Surprise! lists over 500 bands on 47 labels, and offers MP3s from many of those bands. It receives 200–300 unique daily visitors.



Figure 4: Hello! Surprise! is an English–language Swedish Web site that describes itself as an “always–in–progress pop music guide [...] supposed to cover the Swedish pop scene.”

None of these sites hosts much fan interaction despite minimal infrastructural enabling of that potential. Both MP3 blogs have comments turned on, but rarely garner comments. Hello! Surprise! offers a guestbook, but opportunity for fan interaction through the site is minimal.

The closest to an all purpose site (and therefore potential home) for this fandom is IT’S A TRAP! (IAT at <http://www.itsatrap.com>), which covers Scandinavian music. Though its focus is not just Swedish, the size of the Swedish scene relative to those in the other Scandinavian countries ensures that much of the music covered on IAT is Swedish. Started by an American, Avi Roig, in 2002, IAT is updated six days a week. The site is visited by 2,000–3,000 people each day, more than 12,000 each month. As many as 25,000 other people access IAT each month through RSS feeds and hotlinks. Approximately 57 percent of IAT site visitors are return visitors. Like the other sites mentioned, many of the site’s readers are Swedish, but the majority are American and non–Scandinavian European.

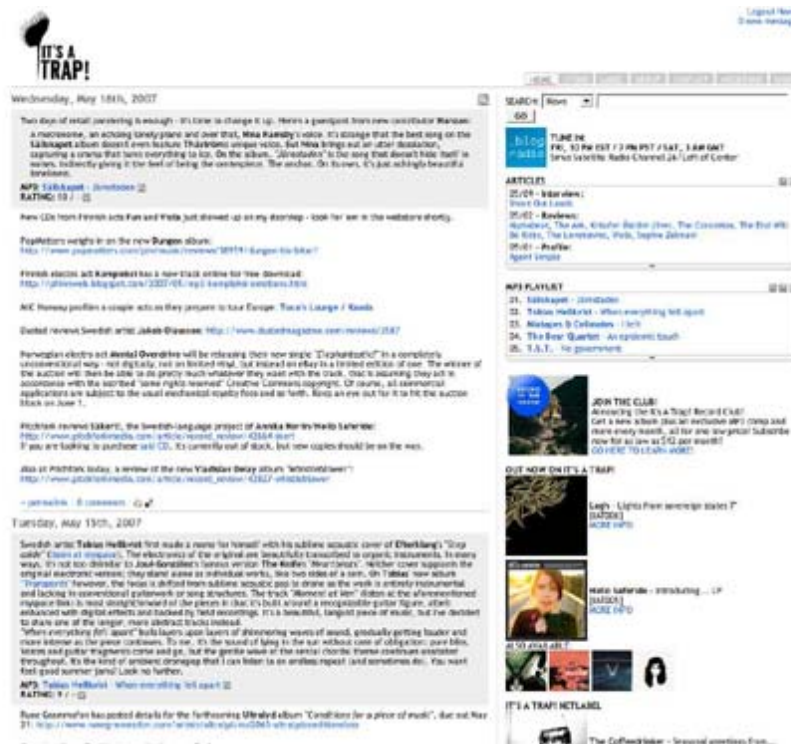


Figure 5: The closest to an all purpose site (and therefore potential home) for this fandom is IT'S A TRAP! (IAT), which covers Scandinavian music.

Monday through Friday, Roig posts an MP3 and also a continuous stream of news items (records due to be released, bands in the studio, bands breaking up, tour dates, etc.) [9]. He also publishes profiles of new bands and record reviews written by a volunteer staff of readers [10]. IAT is also a small Web-based record store and even smaller record label that distributes and sells Scandinavian music.

As of late 2006, IAT offers platforms for social engagement: in addition to leaving comments on each day's entry and each article (which they rarely do), readers can now register to participate in a discussion forum, create a profile of themselves, and send and receive private messages. Discussion on the site is growing slowly.

Yet even given the possible home of this site, Swedish indie fans do not limit their community building to it. We can see this by tracing IAT out through other Web locations. In addition to maintaining the IAT site, Roig has also created a presence for the site on three social networking sites: MySpace, Virb, and Last.fm.

The MySpace and Virb sites function primarily to publicize the label and the Web site, but the opportunity to friend and be friended by the IAT persona means that people can affiliate with IAT and, in so doing, mark themselves as participants in Scandinavian music fandom (which may or may not be Swedish) in a way that other participants will recognize.

On Last.fm, however, IAT can be found as both a persona (where Roig's own listening habits and 'friends' are displayed) and as a group which anyone on Last.fm can join (<http://www.last.fm/group/itsatrap>). While IAT's own message board has 114 registrants and 48 topics, the Last.fm IAT group has 320 members, far more topics, and far more discussion on many of its posts. Arguably, then, the community development amongst IAT readers is stronger offsite on Last.fm

than it is within IAT.

It's not surprising then that Roig draws on Last.fm to enhance his site's sense of community. Roig posts the automatically generated weekly top charts for the IAT Last.fm group weekly on IAT with a plea for more listeners to sign up. IAT message board registrants can enter their Last.fm user id so that their IAT profile will display the last ten songs they have listened to.

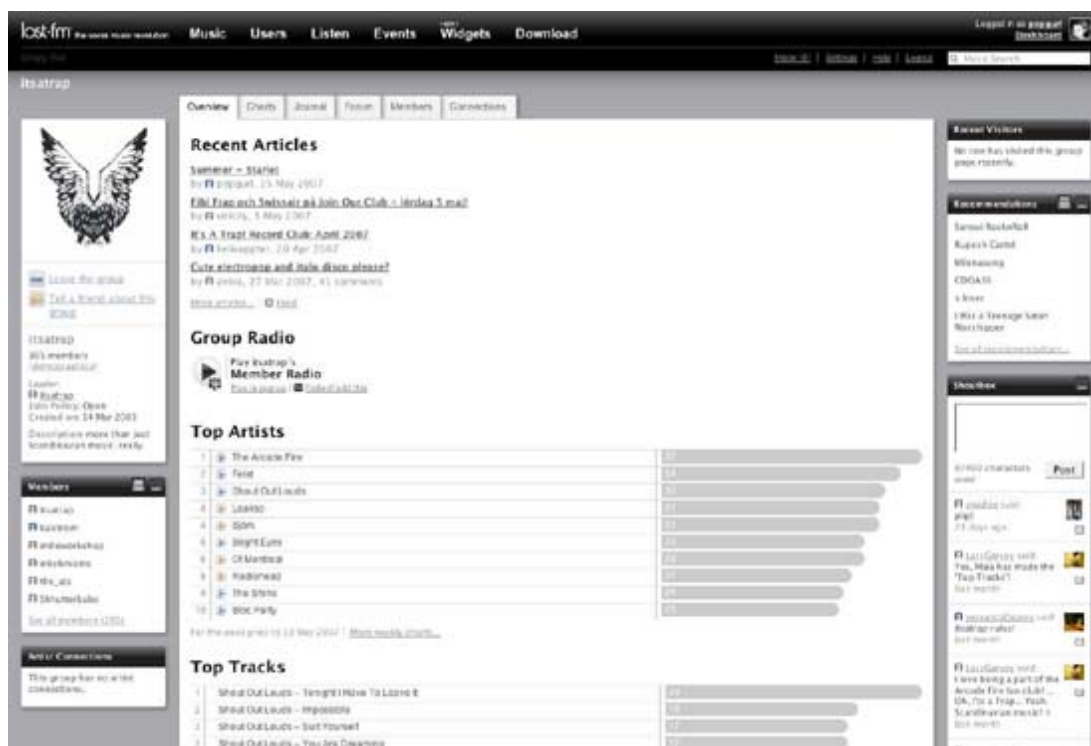


Figure 6: While IAT's own message board has 114 registrants and 48 topics, the Last.fm IAT group has 320 members, far more topics, and far more discussion on many of its posts.

One of the most successful threads on IAT is titled “Last.fm” and has been used to encourage others to sign up with Last.fm, to answer questions about Last.fm, to discuss what others are listening to, and to compare listening habits using Last.fm–based memes such as calculations of how “mainstream” or “eclectic” they are (high scores on the former is bad, on the latter is good).

Individual fans participate in Swedish indie fandom in numerous ways. The majority read one or more of these sites without ever registering or leaving messages, as the huge gaps between IAT's site visitors and registered members, even in the larger Last.fm group, demonstrates (see <http://www.last.fm/group/swedish+music>).

Those who make their participation visible may do so by becoming writers (of fan sites or of contributions to those sites), leaving comments, or, more likely, linking their profiles on social networking sites such as MySpace or Last.fm to bands, groups, and labels that mark them as members of this fandom. Some fans create YouTube profiles to which they upload Swedish bands' videos and/or build playlists of such songs for themselves and others to enjoy. Fans also use these sites in conjunction with one another, exporting charts from Last.fm into MySpace, Facebook, LiveJournal, Virb, and elsewhere to display that this is the kind of music they listen to.

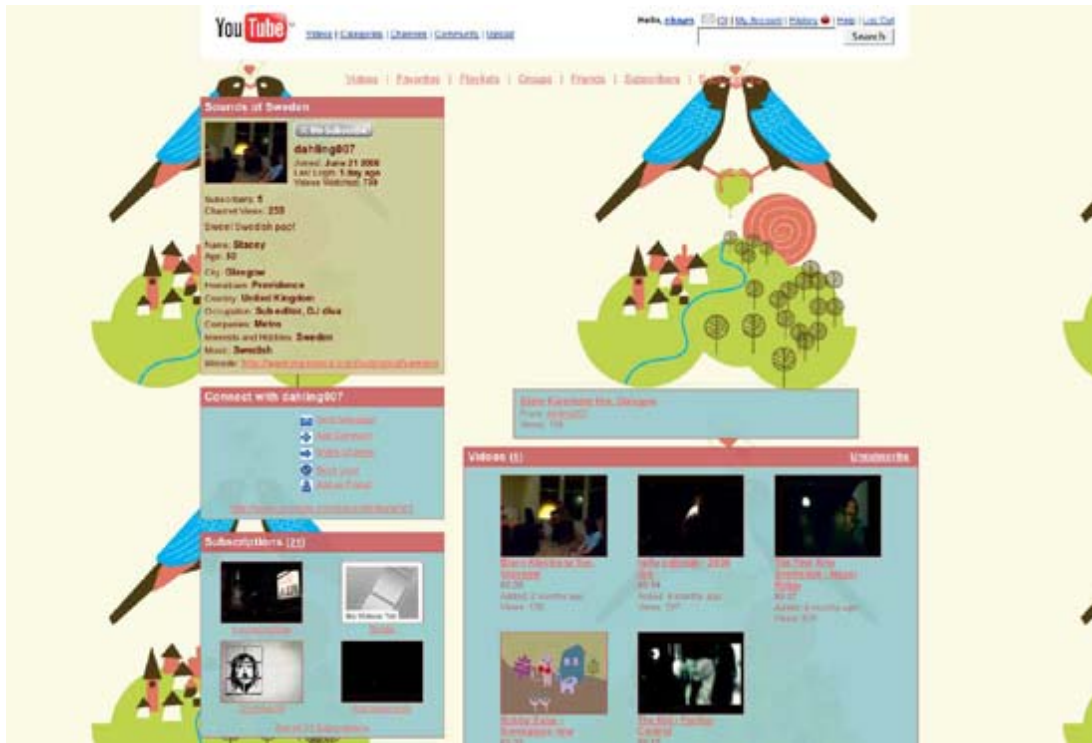


Figure 7: Some fans create YouTube profiles to which they upload Swedish bands’ videos and/or build playlists of such songs for themselves and others to enjoy.

Some fans build presences on file sharing sites such as Soulseek to locate and share Swedish indie music. Invisibly, they may participate in Swedish fan community by uploading and downloading recordings through peer-to-peer services that do not require public profiles.

Social networking sites support fan community by providing launching pads for individuals to contact one another. People may build personal relationships. These go beyond simple friending to include sending one another personal messages that lead to other kinds of interpersonal contact. Trading music files through e-mail or upload sites such as YouSendIt or SendSpace is common, for instance, and friendships also develop through e-mail and instant messaging.

Fans also connect in social network sites by creating groups. In addition to the Last.fm IAT group, for instance, are dozens of Last.fm groups devoted to Swedish music. Searching groups using the terms “Sweden,” “Swedish,” “Sverige,” “Svensk,” and “Svenska” pulls up over 60 groups, suggesting how redundant, disorganized, and chaotic community formation in these new individually-oriented sites can be. The group “Swedish Music” which focuses on all bands from Sweden is the most successful of these, with over 2,300 members and, like the IAT Last.fm group, a moderately active if not thriving discussion component.

Some participants in this online fan community engage in local fandom-building activities in their hometowns. One contributor to IAT hosts “Sounds of Sweden” in Glasgow, Scotland, a monthly concert series featuring Swedish indie bands. Other IAT contributors host “Tack!Tack!Tack!,” a similar series booking Scandinavian bands in London. Both Sounds of Sweden and Tack!Tack!Tack! have Facebook groups. Others are less ambitious, but share the music they have found online with friends offline, integrating this scene into their local relationships as well.

To summarize, the Swedish indie fan community is distributed throughout many places on the Internet and off. Its online form dwells in neither the site-based communities of interest that earlier incarnations of online music fandom entailed, nor in the individualized social networking spaces that have purportedly replaced them. Instead it is in all of these places and others, spreading itself through a network of sites. Few if any fans frequent them all.

Over time, active fans will find that they bump into many of the same people wherever they go. Through this process, a sense of “community” may be formed. For instance, I have found rare videos on YouTube and then realized they had been uploaded by ‘friends’ on Last.fm, one of whom I also knew through participation in IAT and private e-mails. I have begun conversations on IAT that ended in my Last.fm profile shoutbox.

In this regard this new form of online community may have more in common with geographically place-based communities than previous online communities of interest. Few people visit every place in a town, but if they frequent a regular collection of shops, streets, restaurants, clubs, and so on, they meet the same people again and again. Some become friends, others acquaintances, some familiar strangers.



Discussion

Swedish indie fandom exemplifies a new form of online social organization in which members move amongst a complex ecosystem of sites, building connections amongst themselves and their sites as they do. They avail themselves of multiple communicative platforms across the Internet: blogs, social networks, comments, discussion forums, private messages, shoutboxes, MP3 files, and videos.

Only a few make themselves visible on the sites dedicated to the topic of their fandom, but many make their identification with the fandom visible through profiles on MySpace, Last.fm, and other social networking sites. The fans use these varied sites and platforms to get one another excited about relatively obscure new music, to share news, to compare perspectives through reviews and discussion, to create public identities as members of this fandom, and to form personal relationships with one another.

The recording artists and labels are actively engaged in this community, providing steady streams of music for free legal distribution, friending their fans and one another, and often acting as fans themselves. This paper has focused on fans at the expense of detailing the involvement of the labels and artists in the community it describes. The success of the fan-authored sites discussed, however, points to important changes in the music industry.

Fans such as those who run sites like IAT or SwedesPlease are functioning in new roles. To a modest extent, fans have always been publicists, but there were clear lines between those who did so professionally and fans. That is changing. Furthermore, fans are using the Internet to publicize and distribute pop culture materials across international boundaries in ways that reshape traditional markets.

The relationships amongst fans, performing artists, and industries are changing. Burnett and Wikström (2006) claim that independent record labels are often at the forefront of change. Labels and independent artists in scenes like this provide early models of how roles will be reshaped in this new ecosystem.



Conclusion

One could argue that the social formation I have described should not be labeled “community,” a challenge that harkens back to longstanding definitional debates. I have been intentionally vague in my use of the term. Ultimately it matters less what we call it than how well we understand it.

Whether one calls it a community or not, this is an important new online social formation that raises many theoretical, methodological, and practical problems. How are these ecosystems organized and navigated? What are the consequences for social coherence if groups are spread through multiple sites, only some of which are explicitly linked to one another?

Barry Wellman and his colleagues (*e.g.*, Wellman, 2001) have written of “networked individualism,” positing that social organization is increasingly accomplished through individuals who connect loosely–bounded networks rather than through tightly–bounded networks constrained by geographical locale.

The Swedish indie fans practice what might be called “networked collectivism” in which loose collectives of associated individuals bind networks together. On the one hand, this means that groups can avail themselves of many mediated opportunities to share different sorts of materials including text, music, video, and photographs in real time and asynchronously. On the other hand, this creates many problems, particularly with coordination, coherence, and efficiency (*i.e.*, the same materials must be distributed in multiple places, and sometimes there are many replicated efforts).

For those seeking to study online communities, this sort of social formation poses the methodological challenge of how to bound the object of study. It has long been the norm to go to an online space and study it. We have countless studies of particular newsgroups, Web forums, social network sites, and blogs. We have few studies that explore the connections amongst these disparate online platforms, despite the fact that people’s online activities are almost always distributed across multiple sites. It is no longer clear that going to a site is an appropriate strategy for studying community on the Internet.

One might liken the problem to that of a “pub crawl” [11] in which a group goes from bar to bar drinking. One can do a fine study of any one of those pubs, and likely find something resembling community at play. Yet a slight shift of perspective from the space to the patrons reveals that for them, whatever community might be happening at that pub cannot be understood without reference to other spaces in which those people also meet.

From a practical perspective, this form of social organization poses problems for both individuals and those who want to connect and be connected with them. When a community is spread across multiple online spaces, it requires more time and effort for people to figure out what there is and to what extent in which spaces they will develop a community–specific identity. The analysis presented here suggests that with so many places to have discussion, it may be hard to reach the critical mass necessary to sustain ongoing conversation anywhere, with potential negative consequences on the development of shared meanings within groups.

Developers face the practical problem of how they can make sites that serve as both locations of activity and which can be exported to other sites in order to build connectivity across locations. Last.fm’s exportable charts are one example of responding to this emerging demand, as is Virb’s

built-in capacity to import blogs and photo feeds from other sites into one's profile.

At a time when organizations from rock bands to public health services are increasingly turning to the Internet to reach their audiences, it is not enough to create one's own site or to get on MySpace. Like the community members, they need to immerse themselves in this ever-more distributed and complex terrain in order to understand which online sites to target and how. End of article

About the author

Nancy Baym is an Associate Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas where she teaches communication on the Internet, interpersonal communication, nonverbal communication, and qualitative methods. Her ethnographic research into online community and television fandom appears in the book *Tune in, log on: Soaps, fandom, and online community* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2000) and several articles in journals and edited collections. Baym was a co-founder and is Past-President of the Association of Internet Researchers. She serves on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Communication*, *New Media & Society*, *Information Society*, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, and *Research on Language and Social Interaction*.

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Notes

1. John Perry Barlow, one of the Internet's seminal early users and thinkers, was not just a fan of the Dead, but a lyricist for them as well.
2. Henry Jenkins's phrase.
3. Readers unfamiliar with MP3 blogs are encouraged to browse through the MP3 blog aggregator site The Hype Machine (<http://hypem.com/>) which indexes hundreds of blogs.
4. <http://www.onlinefandom.com/archives/interview-with-an-mp3-blogger/>.
5. Burnett and Wikström, 2006, have more to say on this.
6. Some of the better known indie musicians from Sweden include the Soundtrack of Our Lives, Peter Bjorn and John, Hello Saferide, Jens Lekman, Jose Gonzalez, and the Knife.
7. For instance, Factory records in England was inextricable from the Manchester scene. Other examples include SubPop, tied to Seattle Washington, Rough Trade in San Francisco, and Saddle

Creek in Omaha, Nebraska.

8. Unique visitor figures for this and the other sites I discuss should be interpreted with caution as most tracking programs rely on cookies to determine uniqueness. Hence people who have cleared cookies from their computers will be overcounted as new visitors.

9. On Saturdays in 2007, he posts a song by The Bear Quartet.

10. I have been one such contributor to IAT since early 2006.

11. I thank Trevor Pinch for this metaphor.

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