

RADICALIZING THE RESISTANCE: THE REPRESENTATION OF POLITICAL IDENTITIES IN THE HEAVY METAL COMMUNITY OF PUERTO RICO VIA THE PRODUCTION OF RADIO SHOWS

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Abstract

This study focuses on how political identities are represented among members of the Heavy Metal community in Puerto Rico via their self-produced internet based radio shows. The objective of this study is to contribute to the academic discussion on how the underground media is used to represent identities in the Heavy Metal community in Puerto Rico; specifically political identities. This study used Metalurgia online radio show as a case study. This will help in understanding how the community uses radio as mechanism for political reflexivity.

Introduction

The emergence of Heavy Metal Studies in Puerto Rico brings the opportunity to analyze diverse aspects of this community. One of those aspects is the use of media as a way to represent and amplify political identities. To achieve that purpose, the construction of different forms of communication is vital. The use of the internet becomes fundamental to achieving that purpose. Now, more than ever, a lot of our communication resides on some type of internet format (blogs, social media, email, music sharing pages and radio stations). As a result, the internet becomes part of the “practices that only exist when individuals are joined by a phenomenon larger than themselves, in this case the music” (Varas-Díaz, Rivera-Segarra, Mendoza, González-Sepúlveda, 2014). This means that identities, including political identities, are not exclusive of the physical communal spaces. It is also not exclusive of the Heavy Metal Community. Other music communities, like Punk and Hip-Hop, use internet radio to represent their political identities. But for purposes of this research it will focus on the Heavy Metal Community.

One of the most consistent media formats used through modernity has been the radio station. Radio brings the opportunity to access a vast number of sectors of society. Particularly for the metal community, this means that it can obtain the ability to play all metal subgenres, therefore attracting and satisfying most of its members. This can be easily achieved via a random playlist playing in a loop or through a radio show that focuses on one type of subgenre. Radio also provides a platform for political, cultural and social discussions that affect the internal relations of the community, as well as those that affect the Puerto Rican society as a whole.

The main purpose of this paper is to comprehend the aforementioned process in which radio becomes a useful tool to represent the political identities of the

Heavy Metal community in Puerto Rico. To do this, I must begin by understanding how radio (using the internet) has inserted itself as part of the “practices” that constitute the community (Varas-Díaz et al. 2014). I will also have to dwell in the discussion of political identities and how the metal community represents them. I will use the online radio show *Metalurgia* (which translates to Metallurgy) as a case study to understand this. In this case study, I will focus on two important aspects of the radio show: first, the historical and sociological background of Radio Huelga (the independent media outlet that broadcasts the show) and of *Metalurgia* itself, and secondly, how the discussion of those political topics develops in on-air discussion.

Radio, someone still loves you! Radio as part of the Heavy Metal communal experience

To develop the discussion on how the online radio shows and stations have become part of the Heavy Metal communal experience one should start understanding the historical and sociological process of how this relation came to be. Radio came to Puerto Rico thanks to the invasion of the United States in 1898. Since that moment, the United States has imposed its own ideological hegemony on the island co-opting different levels of Puerto Rican society, like the political, economic and cultural (Mattos-Cintrón, 1988). Therefore since WAKQ, the first radio station in Puerto Rico went on air in 1922, radio has “worked as a persuasive agent par excellence” (Vega-Fontáñez, 2012).

Despite this overwhelming use of radio to impose ideological hegemony, some contradictions have emerged. For instance, most of the radio stations in the country maintain a solid latin format while playing music from the United States. This contradiction can be seen as a victory of the cultural resistance that some sectors of Puerto Rican society have been manifesting. In the case of most of the metalheads in Puerto Rico however, this means a more profound exclusion from mass media. The principal reason is because Heavy Metal “is interpreted as a threat to traditional cultural values” (Varas-Díaz et al. 2014). In other words, Heavy Metal is viewed as part of that imposed hegemony.

When I argue that metalheads in Puerto Rico suffer a more profound exclusion, I do it by recognizing a two-fold process. On the one hand, an exclusion from the cultural setting they were born into and on the other hand, an exclusion from the ideological hegemony imposed by the United States. This hegemonical notion sees Heavy Metal as an outcast rock genre. The main reason for this is that Heavy Metal does not conform to the prevailing social norms and narrative of the prevailing cultural discourses. As a result, the powers that be put into operation different types of mechanisms of control. Varas-Díaz (2012) argues that Heavy Metal is going through a process of stigmatization and criminalization in which government institutions take a main role in allowing “particular social sectors” to maintain “social control over others” (p.215). In a similar line of thought, Deena Weinstein (2000) argues that the media tends to exclude or control the cultural forms that are not in line with the “codes for screening and filtering cultural objects that originate with some degree of independence from their cultural-fabricating and cultural-promoting apparatus”. (p. 145).

The organic response from the Heavy Metal community to that exclusion has been to create its own media outlets through the use of the internet. Weinstein (2000, pp. 145-146) calls this response “specialized media”. In a way, specialized media is a political response to that exclusion because it tends to “fortify

the particularity of the subcultural core audience by defending the traditional standards of the genre” (Weinstein, 2000, p. 146). In other words, the “codes” used to exclude Heavy Metal from participating in mass media are now being excluded from the definition of Heavy Metal given by the community. Aesthetic elements (enjoyable sounds, sweet vocals and short length songs) that are requirements for a song to be played in commercial radio, are no longer requisites in specialized radio.

Another thing to consider about the use of specialized radio by the community are the resources available to create a radio station. When the aforementioned cultural exclusion process occurs, the community is also excluded from the physical space of a radio station. Meaning that access to professional sound equipment, airways and trained professional staff, is few to none. In that precise moment the internet becomes a very useful tool. It provides access to local and global audiences using few and accessible resources with just minimum technological knowledge and from the comfort of home.

As a result, the internet becomes a safe haven from everyday cultural exclusion. In another sense, the internet turns itself into a virtual space in which band webpages, global and local news, videos, online radio stations, etc. are accessible at all hours, everyday of the week, without any cultural restrictions. This is vital for Heavy Metal as an underground community because a member doesn't have to wait for the next show to feel part of the community, therefore the strengthening of communal ties becomes an ever increasing reality. Weinstein (2000) saw that same process at the time she made her analysis. She categorically says that “The metal underground has been flourishing since the mid-1990s in large measure through the internet” (p. 285).

The best example that shows how internet has helped flourish the Heavy Metal community in the island is one of the most renowned online metal radio stations, Heavy Metal Mansion. This online station that now enters its thirteenth year of existence, has been the main point of access for the community to local and globally produced radio shows. Hence it gives the opportunity to have contact with most of the elements that are part of the communal practices (bands, merchandise, shows, venues, etc.) Another show is Local Steel, conducted by JC River, which gives exposure to the local scene about its own activities on the island (Local Steel, n.d.) while La Nueva Lechonera del Rock, conducted by Lechón Atómico, brings the audience closer to the underground Heavy Metal being played in Latin America. Other radio shows from Argentina, Spain, El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, United States, Canada and New Zealand are part of the programming of this radio station (Heavy Metal Mansion, n.d.). This is a categorical example on how the local Heavy Metal community is conscious of the need to integrate to the global community.

Another radio show that airs through the internet is Metalurgia, conducted by Ironjack and Espada Negra. The show's main structure is the discussion of political, social and cultural topics from a left-wing point of view. That factor makes Metalurgia the most politically outspoken of the metal radio shows. This doesn't mean that the other radio shows do not discuss political issues. The difference resides in that Metalurgia's producers have a clear agenda to try and sway the community into their political identity. If they cannot achieve that, they at least try to demonstrate that Heavy Metal is not apolitical as is commonly believed. To understand the significance of this, I have to address the discussion of the political identities and how they are represented by the community.

Radicalizing the resistance: Representing political identities

Discussing politics in Puerto Rico is a very complex but fascinating thing to do. The capitalist colonial state in which Puerto Rico has been under since it was invaded has created a wide political spectrum. The base in which this political spectrum operates is the discussion on how to resolve the colonial relations between Puerto Rico and the United States. Because of that debate, the history of Puerto Rico has been a very convulsive one: armed uprisings, violent worker's strikes and clandestine urban guerrilla movements, among other things, have characterized the past 116 years of our history. In spite of this history of resistance, the colonial hegemony has increased significantly through the years.

Three major ideological tendencies that have shaped the aforementioned debate are: (a) statehood, which looks for "the admission of Puerto Rico as a federal state" (Rivera, 2001, p.22); (b) commonwealth, the actual status of the island, which could be defined as the "acquisition of an extended self-government under US sovereignty" (Rivera, 2001, p.66); (c) independence which means "a sovereign nation and totally independent from the United States" (Comisión Estatal de Elecciones [CEE], 2012a, p. 4). Of all three, statehood is the one that most of the population of the island supports. In the last consultation to resolve the status, statehood obtained 61.16% of all the emitted votes (CEE, 2012b).

The Heavy Metal community reproduces similar numbers. Statehood has the majority of the support with 35% of its members identifying themselves as pro-statehood (Varas-Díaz, 2014). Despite this fact, the other status choices (commonwealth, independence and free association) are very popular among the community. Of all these status formulas, independence shows the most interesting numbers. The support for independence in the national elections was 5.49% (CEE, 2012b). However, Varas-Díaz (2014) reported that 29% of the Heavy Metal community identifies themselves as pro-independence.

With these numbers and the complex historical background in which the members of the community are embedded, one would think of seeing a very politically active community. A careful look could tell otherwise. Kahn-Harris (2004) explains this paradox with what he calls "reflexive anti-reflexivity": scene members seek to separate music from politics as part of a wider set of practices that render the relations between theory and practice and public and private, contingent and disengageable. These practices are reflexive in that they demonstrate a considerable awareness of the structuration and politics of scenes and the wider society. Yet they are also anti-reflexive in that they wilfully seek to exclude that awareness from scenic practice.

In other words, members of the community tend to separate their political views from their communal practices to protect what matters most, the music (Kahn-Harris, 2004). The only way in which politics surface in communal practices is when it is used as a transgressive narrative and, in some cases, when it is used to produce controversy (Hjelm, Kahn-Harris, LeVine, 2011).

We can see that the above discussion throws another paradox. When political views leave the reflexive anti-reflexivity realm and enter the controversial realm, it then becomes an active political move. A possible answer to that paradox is to understand that being apolitical is a political standpoint (Scott,

2011). This means that the use of political narratives plays a complex role in the community: (a) it is used as a reaffirmation of the “proud pariah” (Weinstein, 2000); (b) it highlights the reflexive capacity of the community (Scott, 2011); (c) it delimits the boundaries between mass culture and the community (Scott 2011); (d) it strengthens the “DIY ethic” for “counterculture production” (Hjelm et al.,2011); (f) it impulses the politically active sectors to be more open with their political identity in the communal spaces.

As we have seen, radio has embedded itself as part of the communal practices; and the reflexive character of the community is what guides the political representations of the community. If we add to that mix particular historical circumstances and the need for countercultural production, we have the foundations for the creation of Metalurgia.

Welcome to Metalurgia... The representation of political identities through radio

The formation of Metalurgia is due in part by the love of the music, but also a particular historical circumstance. In April of 2010 the students of the University of Puerto Rico in Río Piedras, the biggest campus of the only public higher education system on the island, concluded a set of protests that culminated with a system-wide student strike. The main purpose of the student strike was to fight against the neo-liberal policies imposed by the government and the university’s administration. Most of the claims were against the elimination of the enrollment fee exemption and the creation of a \$800 special fee (Ayala, 2013).

This strike lasted two months, with the students camping to block the entrances to the campus. Camps were built in each gate to restrict access of cars and pedestrians. In the midst of the camps, a group of students, members of the Heavy Metal community, set up their own camp, called “Pirate Camp” by everyone. This name was given with affection by the rest of the students, because one of the metalhead students had gone to the protests with a pirate flag. Their participation in the strike was notorious, because they stayed for the whole two months of the strike and helped with the various tasks as such a process requires. It was in those moments that conversations to create a Heavy Metal radio show began. Taking advantage of the creation of Radio Huelga, they would do a radio show that could respond to the major music genre being played at that moment in the strike (Salsa, Protest Music, Hip Hop, etc.)

Radio Huelga developed as a project to help the student camps communicate with each other, and solve the problem of the distance between them due to the size of the Río Piedras campus. Ricardo Olivero, founder of Radio Huelga, created the radio station to solve that precise problem (Saker-Jiménez, 2014). After the strike ended, the people that were working in Radio Huelga decided to request radio show proposals. The conversation about a Heavy Metal show had the opportunity to be concretized. Shortly after, Metalurgia hit the airways. Their Facebook page explains very clearly their aim:

Metalurgia, broadcast through the student/alternate media outlet "Radio Huelga", is the first puertorrican metal show that theorizes on metal culture. We cover topics ranging from lyrical content through subgenres to socio-political debate on different aspects of metal culture and its relation to other cultures or movements (gay rights, feminism, cooperative movements, worker's movements and creative freedom). Also, we debate issues of social importance in Puerto Rico and the world, giving our own radical take on the is-

sues. In between, lots of metal music from across all subgenres, without distinction. From black, thrash and death to power, progressive and doom. (Metalurgia, n.d.)

From this explanation given in the Facebook page of the radio show we can see that they represent their political identity in a reflexive manner.

For them, reflexivity is focused on the politics of the community while also on the broader sense of politics. Therefore they are critical of the apolitical stance of most of the community because they understand that this is also a political stance. In this sense, Metalurgia is anti anti-reflexivity which is a rare notion in the community. It is here that the militant background the producers acquired during the student strike comes into play. That background reinforces the notion of the “proud working-class heritage” of the Heavy Metal community (Scott, 2011). They see a capacity of the community to integrate the debate of other identities without sacrificing what is most sacred, the music. Getting a more politically active attitude could help strengthen the Great Refusal that Scott (2011) talks about. If this happens, the future of Heavy Metal as a counterculture that could influence mass culture is a possibility. Maybe that is what it already happens in the countries in which Heavy Metal is part of the everyday life of its culture.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the use of online radio stations and radio shows in the Heavy Metal community in Puerto Rico is organic in relation to the communal practices it has developed. Radio is part of the media outlets adopted by the community to help in the communication of everyday practices (shows, activities, bands, interviews, etc.) but also of their political identities. It is also a response to the mass media marginalization that the hegemonic cultural discourses has imposed on them. The reflexive character of the community helps strengthen the use of radio as a form of political practice. Here the transgressive nature of the community comes into play. One immediate result is that the community can expand their countercultural production to new grounds. Therefore reflexivity, and the transgressive narrative that results from it, turns globalized. This is what has happened with Metalurgia. This radio show has projected its reflexivity of the community and of the Puerto Rican society to audiences from other countries. At the same time both producers of the show have used transgressive narrative to shock both the audience from the community and the left-wing audience of Radio Huelga.

Hence radio has become a powerful tool for the Heavy Metal community in the same manner that has been for other music communities. Therefore, comparative research between music communities can be develop in the future. At first glance one should find that music scenes like Punk and Hip-Hop in Puerto Rico work in the same manner as the Heavy Metal scene. Other research topics could develop around the historic documentation of the use of radio, and other forms of communication, by the whole Rock community in Puerto Rico. Hopefully we will see more research about the development of all the media outlets use by the Heavy Metal community. Development that is growing strong in this robust but incipient community.

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