


NME: rock music media dinosaur or breakthrough act?

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2008-3-21


When I was a student in the 1980s the [New Musical Express](#) was a lifestyle Bible that had earned our respect with its political/punk coverage in the late 70s. Now my thirteen year old devours it with even greater enthusiasm as he practices his indie pop riffs in his skinny black jeans. So has  nothing changed as this music media legend celebrates over half a century of charting the charts? Of course, like every other bit of media it is under seige from the Internet and sales of the magazine have fallen. But it is also branching out online with social networking and broadcast plans. My son tells me that he knows that he can find stuff about bands via Myspace or YouTube and that he can watch endless music channels digitally. But he says he likes NME in its magazine form because it is 'excellent'. He loves the writing and the ritual of its weekly delivery. There's a lesson there for anyone defending a media brand in the digital age. Polis intern **Matt Lomas** has been looking at the prospects for the New Musical Express. Here's his article.

NME – New Musical 'Extinction'? – *It's the internet stupid!*

Matt Lomas

O.K. so you've heard a band on the radio, you've only heard one of their tracks but you like their sound. Where are you going to check these guys out further? How about buying the weekly NME? They sound like they could be 'the next big thing' and NME's sure to have a story about them. Or, alternatively, how about checking out their Myspace page? More and more frequently music fans are opting for the Myspace option – it's free, it's quick, it go's straight to the music and even gives a biography of the band from *their* perspective.

 Music mags sales, and particularly that of NME's, have been tumbling as the internet revolutionizes the media industry. NME was selling 300,000 copies a week in the 70's, now it is struggling to reach 70,000 copies sold; it was once a champion of up and coming bands, it is now mainstream and catering to teen pop. Since the NME has gone glossy it has become more worn. The magazine has even been surpassed by its competitors like *Kerrang!* and *Classic Rock*. Why is this? Is it that music fans are no longer interested in new music? Of course, this is not the case. Rather, NME's decline is a symptom of the changing we are witnessing in the music industry at the hands of the internet.

And it's not just NME that is suffering due to the internet; Ben Bland writes in *The Telegraph*  that "the growth of online social networking has shifted the epicentre of the music industry away from the major record labels." Radiohead bypassed EMI and decided to release their latest album *In Rainbows* independently via their website. Thom Yorke, lead singer of Radiohead, told *Time* in 2005 "I like the people at our record company, but the time is at hand when you have to ask why anyone needs one. And, yes, it probably would give us some perverse pleasure to say 'Fuck you' to this decaying business model."

Let's have a look at the facts: NME lost 12% of its circulation in 2007, whilst 86% of the population from 13-60 used a social networking site in 2007 – up from 74% in 2006. Record labels must be looking in dismay at the revelation by Entertainment Media Research that illegal downloads reached a record high in 2007.

When I asked Clare Whittington, a PR spokeswoman at NME, whether NME thought it was losing out to social networking sites such as Myspace she responded that Myspace in fact supports NME and reinforces the brand, pointing to NME's portal on Myspace.

Yet when I asked her what NME attributed its fall in sales in recent years to she initially had "no comment" to make but then on further reflection conceded that it was most probably due to the services offered on the internet.

In a sense, new media is helping to "democratize" the music industry by putting the power back in the hands of the consumer. No longer will the music fan be told who's cool, they can now decide for themselves. Music reviews can

also be obtained for free on websites such as *All Dig Down* and *Pitchfork Media*. In my opinion, this has to be a good thing.

artics.jpg But as NME celebrates its 55th anniversary, are we really seeing its extinction as a force in the music industry? True, NME is losing out to the internet but it can still adapt to changing circumstances. *Kerrang* and *Q* have successfully established TV channels on Sky Digital and NME did the same in 2007. NME radio will also launch in mid-2008 and will be available on the internet and as mentioned NME has a portal on Myspace. With the 2008 NME Awards to be held on the 28th of February, I had a look at what awards were up for grabs over the last few years' Award Shows. It's interesting to note that for a few years now NME has had a 'Best Website' award. This, until 2007, has always gone to NME.com! Perhaps this is symbolic of NME's rejection of changing times. However, the 2007 Award Show gave the prize to YouTube and this year Bebo, Facebook, Last.fm, Myspace and YouTube have been nominated. Yet NME could do a whole lot more, for example, it could allow new artists to post their music on NME's web site. One thing is for sure, the most prominent sources on new music in the future will be on the internet, especially on social networking sites, NME can either adapt to this and embrace the new opportunities the internet offers or it will face extinction as a brand.

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