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### Guest editors: The Internet and the engendering of transnational alternative soundscapes in the Asia-Pacific - introduction to the symposium on popular music and the Internet in Asia

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## **Guest editors: The Internet and the engendering of transnational alternative soundscapes in the Asia-Pacific – introduction to the symposium on popular music and the Internet in Asia**

Kai Khiun Liew\* and Brenda Chan

Until the computerization of music making and the ‘napsterization’ of its consumption into downloadable soundtracks by the late 1990s, popular music flows had been largely determined by the corporate networks of record companies, distributors, and retailers. With the expansion of cyberspace coupled with the decreasing costs and increasing simplifications of operating audiovisual technologies, the digital sphere is now an indispensable platform for the production, distribution, and consumption of popular music. From the circulation of musical performances and tracks via video-sharing and file-sharing Internet domains to the proliferation of related informational and promotional websites, the world of popular music has undergone significant transformation within this decade by the rapid advancement of social media. Such new technologies have led to what Jones (2002) describes as the *disintermediation* involving the removal of routinized practices of the analog era and *reintermediation* of music in the digital age that in turn redefines the accessibility of music to the public (222–23). Aside from the challenges posed by the new intangibility and transferability of digital music content on the issues on ownership, copyrights, and patents in the music industry (Styvén, 2007), the Internet’s role in decentering and deterritorialization of popular music has also gained scholarly attention. As the ‘Internet-based scenic infrastructure’ (Moberg, 2008, p. 91) of previously locally confined alternative and independent music genres develops transnational circulatory networks, the centrality of the Anglo-American neoliberal mainstream in determining popular music flows may no longer be taken for granted (Cammaerts, 2011; Seago, 2004; Williams, 2006).

In this respect, the Asia-Pacific region becomes a fertile ground for looking at the dynamics of computer-mediated communication. The region, particularly in the emerging economies of China and India, has a densely wired consumer base keen on seeking information and entertainment online, driven by high rates of Internet penetration, growing literacy, rapid economic development, and urbanization, as well as relatively lax intellectual property regimes. It is estimated that the region will take up 35% of the market share or US\$7 billion out of a total of US\$20 billion by 2015 even as digital piracy continues to be rampant especially in the largest consumer base in Mainland China (Watkins, 2012). Apart from lowering the prices for consumers, this trend may also potentially loosen the creative energies of artistes. Previously stifled by a mixture of repressive censors, unsupportive commercial distributors, and limited local markets, the otherwise more obscure and independent music groups can now project their voices across broader global space.

In turn, these projections are instrumental in forging what Rene Lysloff describes as technocultures of networks and communities with creative strategies of technological adaptation and resistance (1997, p. 207). Compared to the extensive studies on the socioeconomic and political aspects of the Internet in Asia, scholarly attention on the ethnomusicological aspects is only recently emerging from research on Asian-based diaspora and ethnic minorities communities (Chapman, 2004; Murthy, 2010) and alternative music genres (Chu, 2011) as well as politically subversive podcasts (Tan, 2011). Moving onto the mainstream, as a global internet sensation registering more than a billion views on Youtube several months after it was uploaded, South Korean rapper PSY's *Gangnam Style* highlights the significance of the social media for the Korean popular music industry (Kim & Lee, 2012). At the other end, as Jung (2011) has indicated with her study on the use of Twitter by Indonesian fans of Korean popular music groups, the social media has also given music fandom a greater degree of connectedness and collectivity. With the intensification of Internet use by a growing multiplicity of social groups, particularly in the burgeoning urban centers, the deployment of the tools of Web 2.0 to amplify otherwise suppressed musical expressions is expected to redefine the scope of Communication Studies.

This symposium came about from the collection of selected papers from the Second Inter-Asia Popular Music Studies Conference that took place in Hong Kong from 22 to 23 June 2010. From the trends of the papers, one sees the growing engagement of musicians and listeners with the Internet as an increasingly critical platform in the production, consumption, and circulation of content that has facilitated the flows of more fluid music soundscapes that have been previously limited by regulators and industries. After a rigorous peer review process, three out of an initial seven papers have been finally selected for publication in this symposium.

A common thread across the selected papers is the exploration of the projection of alternative soundscapes by artistes of otherwise peripheral communities onto the cyberspace with the deployment of the Internet. In 'Vedic Metal and e-mediated space', Eugene Darinathan provides insights into the relationship between cyberspace and the musical practices of an ethnic Indian Extreme Metal band in Singapore, while Wendy Hsu's 'Mapping the Kominas sociomusical transnation' is illustrative of these new networks, as she studies Asian American punk band Kominas' use of digital media to establish transnational networks in their attempt to forge links with the larger South Asian and Muslim diasporas in other parts of the world. Rebekah Moore's 'My music, my freedom' observes that the better-educated rock musicians in Indonesia are able to exploit the Internet to represent the rock music scene, while those who are less skilful in using and writing on the Internet are marginalized. Moore also attempts to contextualize the struggles of these independent rock musicians against the assertiveness of Islamist hardliners in cyberspace. With a broad geographical coverage from North America to the Malay Archipelago, this symposium explores the impact of cyberspace in changing the sociocultural appropriation of popular music in the Asia-Pacific context.

Collectively, these papers would help to provide more incisive insights into the sociocultural complexities of the digital age in the Asia-Pacific through the lens of popular music. On a broader scale, the micro-struggles within the realm of popular music are indicative of the macro-contestations for more democratic, connected, and

autonomous voices in the region. We believe this symposium would attract interest across different scholarly disciplines that would in turn spur further research on the intimate relationship between the Internet and popular music.

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