Anarcho-punk webzines – transferring symbols of defiance from the print to the digital age?

Intro

This presentation addresses the role that anarcho punk fanzines play in the consumer’s experience of subcultures, music and the shaping of its ideological meanings? This paper explores this role through the pages and practices of anarcho-punk fanzines, in their print and online incarnations.

My analysis focuses on the specificities of ‘British anarcho-punk’ fanzines of the 1980s, exploring the variety of discursive practices constructed around, and constructing, this music sub-genre of punk and subcultural scene. My concern is with the role of fanzine as arbiter of taste and as a site for the construction of musical scenes, its ideology of authenticity, and the identity and sub-cultural capital of its participants. Of primary focus is the fanzine as a site where discourses of defiance and opposition are constructed, embodied and reinforced.

The specialist publications that I have chosen to focus on are specifically anarcho punk fanzines of the early to mid 80s. While it may be assumed that the practices and associations of the printed fanzine have simply migrated online, I examine and evaluate the continuities and discontinuities between these incarnations, and the role that they play in constructing the ideology and identities of anarcho-punks. My investigation seeks to find whether the same discourses are apparent in anarcho-punk and punk webzines.

As an active participant in the early British anarcho-punk scene I was, and to some degree remain, a consumer of and contributor to punk fanzines. On a personal level the fanzines I read and accumulated over time became a sort of ‘guide’ or manifesto to the cultural and political ideologies that were being constructed and ratified within the developing British-anarcho punk subcultural scene. It was through those fanzines that my own love of punk developed beyond just the musical form and into a more politically and ideologically motivated participant inspired and informed by the lyrical content. That interaction with anarcho punk fanzines and the influence it had on my own political/ideological development made me think about whether those same or similar ideological discursive constructs of defiance, anarchism and anti-authoritarianism are apparent in the digital manifestations.

I set about this through some analysis of my own fanzine collection and made a comparison of these publications and by looking at present websites that identify themselves as webzines. I will discuss what I mean by a webzine as a later note on my methodology but first turn to a definition of fanzine from some published scholarly analysis.

Fanzines have long been seen as representing the underground, independent, or the alternative to mainstream publishing as the communities that develop around fanzines are both consumers and at times the producers. As Conway and Crowther argue:

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“However, what really distinguishes fanzines from magazines is that much of the content is submitted by amateur writers amongst the fanzine readership, with readers’ letters and discussion columns providing a crucial mechanism for interaction between readers” (Conway & Crowther, 2001:7)

When punk emerged, fanzines soon became one of the main means of communicating this new subcultural and musical style as they already embodied some of the developing cultural practices of the new punk DIY culture in the way that they were produced and distributed. (see Hebdige 1979 and Triggs 1995). Indeed “Zines are Punk” declared an anonymous editor of *Hippycore* (Rutherford 1992 cited in Atton 2001)

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Triggs argues that it is through fanzines that “many fans are increasingly rebelling against magazines which impose a certain set of values ideas and tastes on their readership” (1995).

Triggs also alludes to the fact that fanzines are publications for fans by fans that

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“provided a focal point and unifying vehicle for establishing and reinforcing shared values, philosophy and opinions” (1995:34) that existed outside of any institutional influence. By this I refer to the influence of the commercial music press, popular media and the music industry.

**#**  In this section I will focus on some of the common ideological and philosophical discourses present in the editorial and content of five editions of ‘Acts of Defiance’ an anarcho-punk fanzine that was published in the north-east of England during the early 1980’s. In doing so I will demonstrate how those discourses present in of Acts of Defiance establish and help reinforce the shared values, ideologies and philosophy of the British anarcho punk scene and allude to it being an arbiter of the ideological construction of anarcho-punks subcultural capital

Contextualising British anarcho-punk:

British anarcho-punk emerged as a subcultural DIY musical scene during the late 1970’s taking some of the earlier punk rhetoric of anti authority, anarchism and DIY culture and made them a central tenet of its scene. As well as having a vibrant musical scene British anarcho-punk encouraged people from all areas of Britain to collectively construct a politicised culture that encompassed ideologies and philosophies of anarchist/pacifist politics, personal freedom, anti-capitalism, animal rights amongst many others that challenged the politics of mass society, the political economy of the record industry and the commodification of ‘mainstream’ punk, through the emergence of a ‘DIY’ music culture. Such ideologies were promoted by anarcho-punk bands such as Crass, Poison Girls, Flux of Pink Indians and Conflict to name but a few. (For a comprehensive list see Ian Glasper’s book on British Anarcho punk “The Day The Country Died: A History of Anarcho Punk 1980-1984” published in 2006)

Anarcho-punk fanzines played a central role, amongst its readers, in disseminating and reinforcing these ideologies, philosophies and other alternatives to the mainstream and popular media’s representations of punk,. As Triggs argues :

**#** “As independent self-published publications, fanzines became vehicles of subcultural communication and played a fundamental role in the construction of punk identity and a political community.” (Triggs 2006:70)

I propose that the low tech cut and paste production of fanzines, the effort involved in their making, and the justifications that editors gave for producing them are an element of their character. The discursive practice of claiming an almost irrational passion for producing these fanzines, one could argue, gave the writers status as an arbiter of taste, through the ability to clearly articulate a specific ideological position, with the subcultural capital to allocate classifications of authenticity amongst their readership.

Acts of Defiance was one of many anarcho-punk fanzines that carried on the aesthetic of earlier punk fanzines with its use of cut and paste bricolage, hand written and typed narrative content, combined with a mixture of music and political ideology. (see Stoneman 2001 and Triggs 2006)

The editorial of Acts of Defiance is very much centred around the construction of the fanzine as a site/ for identity, ideology, defiance and opposition...... and I was interested to see if they are replicated in the punk webzines later identified in this presentation:

**#** Editorial. Acts of Defiance 5, 6 and 7

**#** slide with quotes

What comes through in the discourses of the editorial in the 3 printed fanzines is an ongoing critique of the scene and the apathy that surrounds it and how certain punks claim to believe in the ideologies of anarchy and peace, associated with British Anarcho punk and then don’t act accordingly. Here the editors, through their seeming frustration and anger, are using the editorial to remind and reinforce what they think anarcho-punk is about and how it is down to individual responsibility to make it work as an ideological practice. The editors highlight/reinforce what they believe defines and constitutes anarcho-punk and anarcho punk identity in the editorial through the discourses of DIY ethics, anarchism and individual responsibility. They (the editors) feel that again people cannot be trusted to take on the personal responsibility of the ideologies of anarcho-punk.

**#**Slide with quotes

By issue 7 though there is a discernible SHIFT in the construct of Acts of Defiance and its discourses. Interestingly here the editorial talks about its success in the past 2 issues leading to greater circulation.

They state that they have cut down on the amount of music/gig/band reviews to include what they consider to be more interesting and important issues.

Even though they state that they have been accused of “preaching all the time” their circulation has increased. This may perhaps be due to the fact that the readership want to be informed more of the ideologies behind anarcho-punk

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The transition of Acts of Defiance s construct can be seen emerging on page 4 of Acts of Defiance Issue 3. Previous issues of Acts of Defiance mostly focussed on gig and music reviews but by issue 3 the writers had started to investigate and debate the ideologies of anarcho punk with a whole page dedicated to anarchism (the only page that carried any specific political ideology in that issue).

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By issue 5 more than half (thirteen pages) of the fanzine content) is given over to political/punk ideology covering animal rights/feminism/nuclear threat/police brutality/ and a critical view of state education.

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Looking through other British Anarcho punk fanzines of that era (Mucilage/Necrology/Harsh Reality/Allied Propaganda/Guilty of What) there are degrees of homogeneity present as these identical or similar constructs appear in the editorials of them all, though more importance is placed on some discourses over another. It seems that this homogenous construction of the British Anarcho punk fanzine, through its editorial, is central to the discourses of the scene, how they reinforce the (shared) values, ideologies and philosophy of the British Anarcho punk sub-cultural community and how it is very much centred around the construction of the fanzine as a site/ for identity, ideology, defiance and opposition.

My methodology

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My sample selection for print fanzines was based on what I had access to: my personal collections. I know of one university that apparently had a fanzine collection, yet many years ago when I tried to access it, no one knew where it was as the member of staff who instigated it had moved on. The British Library does have a collection with a catalogue that can be viewed on line and there are a number of websites that carry PDFs of fanzines but for this small piece of research I was happy to use my own resources.

In order to analyse trends in current online sites I was faced with the task of deciding how to select and research current UK based websites that self identified as webzines by using the phrase zine in their metadata. I took this inclusion of the term zine as their and to some degree my definition of webzine which could include e-zine and per-zine (a personal zine to some degree associated with blogs), though as Chris Atton points out in his study of zines and alternative media, defining and identifying e-zines are subject to the same problems encountered with defining and identifying printed zines. This term was then employed as part of my search criteria. I structured an advanced Google search using the following search terms and criteria.

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Search term: “anarcho-punk webzine\*” “punk webzine\*”

Search period: “during the last year”

Search Location:”UK only”.

I started off with “anarcho punk webzine\*” but didn’t find anything using these search criteria so I modified the search to “punk webzine\*” UK only, during the last year and again selected three web pages to look at.

From the list that was returned I selected the first 3 entries that had their own URL – ie – not Facebook/MySpace pages from my search on 19/02/2011 and again on 23/3/2011and finally on 01/8/11

Analysis of methodology:

At this stage for a piece of research with a relatively limited scope and nature I just wanted to generate some basic data and test out, even in its simplest form, my research question. My method of sampling is never the less repeatable and as I have found when repeated on different dates generates different results-which sometimes can be a problematic but equally interesting feature of internet research.

The three punk webzines identified by my first search were:

**#** SLIDE OF SCREEN SHOTS

Lights go out

No front teeth

Taped

Lights Go Out ([www.lightsgoout.co.uk](http://www.lightsgoout.co.uk)) identifies itself as a punk webzine on Google search but appears to be a shop front from where to buy back and current issues of its printed version.

Looking at the content via the tabs it’s;

News section reproduces press releases and lists tour dates

Interview section gives links to the online shop to access them through purchasing the printed version

A page of online exclusives (appears to be one per issue) to tempt/tease the reader to purchase printed version

Shop page gives the opportunity to buy theirs and others fanzines

About-identifies an editor and other regular contributors-no online editorial

No Front Teeth ([www.nofrontteeth.co.uk](http://www.nofrontteeth.co.uk)) identifies itself as a punk webzine on Google search.

This webzine again appears to be a front for a punk rock record label:

News is its homepage and is about forthcoming releases on their label

Label links to shop and PayPal

Radio-no active link

Contact-hyperlinks to outlook

NFTMS-my space page

Friend’s links to other websites based around skateboarding

No online editorial or ‘zine’content

Taped ([www.taped.org.uk](http://www.taped.org.uk)) also identifies itself as a punk webzine and fanzine on Google search. Under further investigation, through their unique URL as set out in our methodology, they are perhaps the closest of the three to what we associate with punk fanzines.

Here the homepage acts as a sort of editorial as it describes the author’s account of where he is regarding the lack of recent content (15 months) and the restructuring of the site

Other pages contain interviews, reviews, forthcoming gigs and releases on the Taped D.I.Y label (as free downloads on this site)

Focused discussion about the local Dorset music scene (though not restricted only to punk).

Lights Go Out and No Front Teeth didn’t appear to replicate any of the discursive practices and constructs that appear in the print fanzines I analysed. They seemed to be using their “webzine” or “zine” status as a promotional tool rather than as a site/ for identity, ideology, defiance and opposition.

In discussions around John Labowitz’s archive of e-zines Chris Atton (2001) highlights the fact that the majority of e-zines are primarily interested in ‘product’ and the promotion of that product. He goes on to say that Labowitz admits that the term zine has been co-opted by the commercial world.

The content of Taped however seemed to draw close comparisons to some of the other discursive practices found in the print fanzines I analysed, such as interviews/reviews and discussions around a local scene. However it/they did not display the characteristics of identity, defiance and opposition found in the ideologies present in Acts of Defiance and similar fanzines. It may appear that for these “webzines” issues around identity, punk ideology, defiance and opposition are not as important in their construct and discourses. It could be argued that there may be a disjuncture between contemporary punk rock and the ideologies of punk that emerged with the early punk scene in the late seventies/ early eighties.

Conclude/suggest further work

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This paper has considered and analysed the extent to which webzines replicate the discursive practices of the print fanzine and in this my initial thoughts were that a webzine might be an online version of a fanzine.

The use of the phrase zine in the webzine writer’s classification and meta data of their output is of significance. In using the phrase webzine it could be argued that writers align their works with subcultural capital and ideologies that have been associated with fanzines in popular culture. In his discussions around John Labowitz’s archive of web based zines (http://www.e-zine-list.com/) Chris Atton points out that few e-zines/webzines seem to accord with the principles and interests of the printed zines that he researched and referenced. It could be argued that the same is present here. In fact spreading my net further looking through John Labowitz’ archive and using keywords from his own listings of punk/anarchy/punk politics there are over 100 e-zines listed but the majority of them are dead links. One can only assume that they are either no longer in production or have moved address.

Perhaps there is a resistance amongst anarcho-punk and punk zine producers to using the web as an alternative to the traditional physical form of the fanzine. I discussed earlier that the low tech cut and paste production of fanzines, the almost irrational passion and effort involved in producing fanzines gave it its essence of authenticity. This DIY practice is central to the ethos of anarcho-punk. There is also the physical act of selling and distributing fanzines at punk gigs, the face to face interaction that holds cultural value amongst punk’s subcultural groups. Perhaps it is because of those things that constructing an on-line version of a fanzine takes away that core notion of authenticity.

LIPTROT (2011) argues that as part of punk’s evolution anarcho-punk, as a musical genre and subcultural scene, has now been absorbed into contemporary DIY punk and particularly DIY hardcore punk / where the anarcho-punk DIY ethic is still prominent and the fanzine remains one of the key means of ideological communication within the subcultural scene. So perhaps this could account for why my search, using the term anarcho-punk webzine, proved to be problematic as the term no longer holds value in contemporary punk subcultural scenes.

However, my analysis of selected print fanzines and webzines has found that the discursive practices of the print incarnations are not present in the webzines to which my methodology directed me.

That is not to say that content which does display these practices does not exist on the internet. Had I perhaps conducted different searches or looked for these specific constructions and discursive practices on websites I may well have found them. For instance, the anarcho punk site old punks never die.com describes itself as an e-zine but the term e-zine as part of its metadata does not bring it into my search criteria boundaries. It certainly demonstrates some of the language and format of the print zine associated with punk/anarcho-punk. The website anarchopunk.net is another example of a site where some of the language of the print fanzine can be found.

However, it does not allude to a fanzine/webzine identity. This is what makes the fanzine identity and its association interesting in the way it invites audiences to engage with the material presented under this banner. I did e-mail the webzine writers/editors of the 3 I identified and asked why they deploy the term ‘zine’ to describe their texts? I am yet to receive a reply.

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At this stage what I would welcome any thoughts or suggestions from the audience.

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