

CREATING A CULTURE: *PITCHFORK* MEDIA'S TEXTUAL AND
CULTURAL IMPACT ON *ROLLING STONE* MAGAZINE

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And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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To my family, for always believing in me.

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this research is to demonstrate how cultures and subcultures can be created and disseminated through media, and how newer forms of media such as websites can have a tangible effect on the content of older forms of media such as print magazines. Specifically, this study uses the qualitative research methods of textual analysis and case study to explore how the music criticism website Pitchforkmedia.com creates and disseminates cultural capital in the form of “indie” music, and how this cultural capital is then reflected in the content of *Rolling Stone* magazine. A case study of the band Arcade Fire and its rise to the cultural mainstream demonstrates how Pitchfork can directly influence music culture and popularity; as well as how Pitchfork’s editorial choices are reflected by *Rolling Stone* magazine. A textual analysis of annual “Top 50” lists from Pitchfork and *Rolling Stone* reveals *Rolling Stone*’s implementation of the descriptor and label “indie” in its content a significant amount of time after Pitchfork thrust “indie” bands to the forefront of its editorial content. Through case study and textual analysis, filtered through the theoretical constructs of cultural theory, this research supports the hypothesis that Pitchfork could influence the editorial content of *Rolling Stone*.

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1. *Pitchfork's* Place in Media Evolution

“Dissecting how we got here seems unimportant. It’s simply comforting to know that we have arrived.”

So ends a 2004 album review of the band Arcade Fire’s debut record (Moore, 2004 para. 9). The review appeared on a website called Pitchforkmedia.com, and may have been the catalyst for launching the then-unknown band into relative superstardom. But before we get into an explanation of how and why this might have occurred, it is perhaps important to answer the question that provoked the review’s ending statements: “How did we get here?” (para. 1).

As we forge ahead into the unknown technological era of the 2010s, this study attempts to illustrate relationships between this fairly new online journalism and older print media. In 2000 Pavlik asserted that the advent of the digital, networked world of communication was fundamentally changing models of twentieth-century journalism. According to his article, no longer could most journalists and editors be content to merely publish the news, instead the process was becoming much more of a dialogue between the press and the public (Pavlik, 2000). This dialogue between the press and the public can be taken a step further with the help of the Internet and online publishing. As with Pitchforkmedia.com, a website in which virtually anyone with a talent for writing and passion for music can break into the journalism industry, the Internet provides the opportunity for almost anyone throughout the globe to be active participants in the

communication process online (Pavlik, 2000). Although Stöber (2004) asserted that the future of media and technology is always clouded and very seldom do we make the right prediction of how new media developments impact old media, this study attempts to shine a light on one piece of the vast, dark land of new and old media by comparing *Rolling Stone* with Pitchforkmedia.com.

Old and New Media

The development and confluence of media and technology throughout the ages, and how “new” media has historically had an impact on the old is explained in this section. Perhaps the most accurate description of the unforeseeable effects of new media on the old comes from Stöber’s article on media evolution. Stöber wrote:

Media seem to create themselves out of nowhere. Suppose contemporaries of Gutenberg had been asked about the social consequences of Gutenberg’s invention. Possibly no one would have given the correct answer; no one would have either foreseen the diversity of media or would have guessed its social use. This sounds trivial because more than 500 years have passed since the days of Gutenberg. But even if we had asked our hypothetical question in a more detailed way: no contemporary of Gutenberg would have had any chance to imagine newspapers and magazines. No contemporary of the ominous C.M. (perhaps Charles Morrison) or Thomas Soemmering would have imagined news agencies. Guglielmo Marconi and his contemporaries could not have imagined broadcasting; Paul Nipkow, Eduard Liesegang and Campbell Swinton were not in a position to foresee television broadcasting. Nevertheless, the chance of making

the right guess is very low; the future is always clouded. Only when we look back do the historical developments seem to have been rational and straightforward. (p. 484)

It is true that no contemporary of Gutenberg could have imagined newspapers or magazines, probably just as no contemporary of *Rolling Stone* legend Hunter S. Thompson or even Jan Wenner of the 1960s and 70s could have imagined the way online journalism has been thrust to the forefront of the industry and the way that niche publications such as Pitchforkmedia.com have exponentially grown in size and readership since their creations.

The journalism of the 1960s is of the most importance to this study, as much of what we call “alternative” journalism was spawned during this decade. As Hastings (2003) says,

In the 1960s, originally in the underground press but increasingly in more mainstream outlets, a “New Journalism” emerged, combining traditional reporting with more creative, “literary” methods of telling that included elements borrowed from fiction. In contrast to the aura of objectivity that had come to be seen as the objective of mainstream reporting, “New Journalism” often called attention to the journalist himself as a not-completely-unbiased observer, as in Hunter Thompson’s reporting for *Rolling Stone*.” (para. 37)

Although technology did not play a major role in the emergence of New Journalism, many alternative journalists in the 1960s took cues from the past and put a

new spin on the muckrakers' journalism to come up with their own brand of investigative, creative storytelling.

The birth of the digital age and online media is often attributed to the *Dallas Morning News*' breaking of the Timothy McVeigh story in 1997. The story broke on the newspaper's website rather than in the morning edition of the physical paper because the editorial team deemed the story important enough to break immediately. From that time forward, journalists and news agencies realized that they could participate in a 24-hour news cycle with the help of the Internet. As of the year 2000, John Pavlik reported that the growth of online publishing is tremendous, with more than half of the journalists who responded to his study on technology's impact on journalism indicating that they use the web to distribute news (Pavlik, 2000); we can logically and perhaps exponentially increase that number in today's modern journalism industry.

What is Pitchforkmedia.com?

The Web site, known simply as "*Pitchfork*," can be viewed as a cultural phenomenon. In short, the site is dedicated to reviewing albums on a 10-point scale in a signature creative way, creating "best of" lists and reporting music industry news. In June of 2006 Minneapolis/St. Paul's alternative weekly *The City Pages* declared that *Pitchfork* had become the "main arbiter of taste among independent music fans, a distinction once claimed by zines, college radio, and mainstream music mags that risked advertising dollars by taking chances on unknown bands" (p. 1). Some bands or artists that would not have been known to the public in the past for various reasons, such as lack of publicity by

mainstream music media, or media that have a circulation of 500,000 or more, have been claiming slots on the Billboard music charts and have graced the pages as well as the covers of such prominent music magazines as *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*. *Pitchfork* can also have the opposite effect on bands, however, as evidenced by an anecdote in *Wired* magazine's 2006 article on the "*Pitchfork* Effect"—a freelance writer gave Travis Morrison's solo debut album *Travistan* a score of 0.0, claiming that it "fails so bizarrely that it's hard to guess what Morrison wanted to accomplish in the first place." The article goes on to say that the effects of the review were "immediate and disastrous. Several college radio stations that had initially been enthusiastic said they wouldn't play it" (Itzkoff, 2006 p.2). According to a source in the article, one record store even said they wouldn't carry the album because of the *Pitchfork* review. "Not because they heard it," the source says, "Because of the review" (p. 2). A more comprehensive history of *Pitchfork* can be found in Chapter Three.

The power of an online tastemaker such as *Pitchfork* and the effect it has had on mainstream music journalism in print magazines has yet to be fully explored; through textual analyses of *Pitchfork* and *Rolling Stone*'s top fifty album lists of 2004 and 2007 and a case study of Arcade Fire, a band that *Pitchfork* almost single-handedly catapulted to star-status, this study will attempt to illustrate those relationships.

The purpose of this study is to investigate new media's impact on older media, specifically if and how the music criticism website Pitchforkmedia.com impacts *Rolling Stone* magazine's content.

Chapter One explores the evolution of “new” media through the ages, most recently the evolution of digital media and its effect on print media; a brief introduction to *Pitchfork* is given at the end of this chapter.

The theoretical constructs of this research are explained in Chapter Two, including cultural theory as defined by Bourdieu and Geertz. Chapter Three explains a bit about magazines, alternative media and music journalism before providing a background of *Rolling Stone* and *Pitchfork* and how the two music criticism mediums have progressed since their respective creations. The methods of textual analysis and case study—the two methodologies used in this study—are outlined in Chapter Four.

A textual analysis of both *Rolling Stone*’s and *Pitchfork*’s “50 Best Albums of 2004” and “50 Best Albums of 2007” is the main focus of Chapter Five; the texts of both lists are analyzed according to six criteria and then compared and contrasted in order to judge *Pitchfork*’s influence on the content of *Rolling Stone*. Chapter Six is a case study of the band Arcade Fire and how they came to garner both underground respect and mainstream notoriety; this research asserts that Arcade Fire’s rise to fame is due mainly to *Pitchfork*’s coverage of the band. The background of the band, its review on *Pitchfork* and subsequent press in both *Rolling Stone* and *Pitchfork* are presented in the case study.

Chapter Seven highlights the findings of the textual analysis and the case study are explained in order to come to a conclusion of how one specific medium can directly impact another, older medium. Assumptions and implications of this research are explored at the end of the study in Chapter Eight, along with suggestions for further research in this rapidly growing and exciting area of digital media.

2. Cultural Theory

Cultural studies and theory offers insights into this new digital era when a new culture is being created before our eyes and the old culture is slowly fading away.

Toynbee says of music writing, “Because it is premised on the need to supply change, the music press takes on a periodising role which involves, on the one hand, nurturing the new and, on the other, killing off the old.” (p. 297). This research takes on the challenge of demonstrating how a new music culture could be nurtured into existence while the old culture is forced to adapt – or die out.

Culture itself, not to mention cultural studies, is difficult to pack into a manageable and coherent theory. Geertz (1973) maintained that cultural theory could not ever be completely defined, nor could it ever be complete. In the broadest sense, “culture” is a term that American anthropologists since Boaz have used to refer to a semiotic dimension of human experience (Handler, 2002).

The concept of a human cultural experience can be traced back to the Ice Age, when the need for protection against predators and for security gave early men and women incentives to develop interpersonal networks or “cultures” of belonging and identity (Stewart 2001). Since then, people have developed these cultures of belonging and identity around everything from geographical location to taste in music.

For the purpose of this research, the meaning of culture comes from Geertz’s (1973) seminal book on the subject: cultures are “webs” of significance a person has spun for him or herself in an attempt to attach a meaning to the outside world. The study of

culture is not a science, but as Geertz argues, an interpretive analysis in search of meaning (p. 5). Music culture, therefore, is the web of significance a person spins for herself as it applies to music and how music belongs to a culture's system of social organization (Skelton 2004, p. 171).

Although culture is indeed hard to manageably define, there are elements of cultural theory that pertain to this research that can be explained. These elements include elitism, legitimization and taste culture. The cultural elite is defined as “those members of a population who are distinguished from the rest by virtue of their productivity, their cohorts' regard, and their position in the population's social structure” (Rado, 1987, p. 43). If culture is thought of as a kind of capital (Bourdieu 1984), the elite are culturally rich and therefore superior to the “uncultured” masses. As Chaney (2001) says,

In the same way that mastery of a language is associated with high status and is a means of aggressively reminding inferiors of their lack of skills, mastery of cultural or symbolic capital enables high-status groups both to display their privileges and to manipulate cultural vocabularies to the continual disadvantage of those with fewer cultural resources (p. 80).

In music journalism, and journalism in general, the theory of these cultural high-status groups can be applied to editorial decision-makers at publications, the artists and bands described in the publications *and* to the sector of the public that avidly reads these publications. The editorial decision-makers, who are also defined as “opinion leaders” or

the “ideological gatekeepers of the community for which they write,” (McLeod, 2001 p. 47) are at the top of the strata in this cultural hierarchy; they are the elite that manipulate the cultural vocabulary in order for their audience to remain an elite group of individuals.

Legitimization can be described as the desire for approval by one’s peers in a given culture., as Berger (1998) says,

Advertisements that take advantage of our desire for the approval of others attempt to convince us that purchasing particular products or services will earn us the approval of those who are members of the ‘elite’ or who are ‘in the know.’ (p. 71).

Although this explanation deals with advertising, one can accurately recreate the sentence to say, “*Music publications* that take advantage of our desire for the approval of others attempt to convince us *that reading a certain publication or adhering to a particular culture* will earn us the approval...”. Members of a certain music culture may feel the need to be legitimized by their peers; a good way to accomplish this is through the consumption of music media.

Finally, taste cultures can be defined as, “clusters of cultural forms which embody similar values and aesthetic standards” (Ollivier and Fridman, 2001, para. 2). Ollivier and Fridman say that taste “serves as an identity and status marker, being used simultaneously as fences or bridges (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 12) in processes of exclusion and inclusion” (para. 2). The authors also say that taste is something that is subjective and individual in nature; it is a “discriminating faculty, through which individuals *discover* the amount of pleasure that things *ought* to give them by virtue of their objective

properties” (para. 3). Taste culture theory can be applied in this research to theoretically construct what constitutes “good” or “bad” taste according to the editorial decision-makers at different music publications or media. Their view of taste is the projected through their medium to the audience, which adheres to the concept of taste espoused by a particular medium as a form of identity or status marker.

Being part of the cultural elite, or being “in the know” about these new cultures is an important form of cultural capital; the taste cultures being created by media construct what constitutes “good” or “bad” taste. Concepts of taste are projected through media to the audience, who adheres to the concept of taste espoused as a form of identity or status marker.

As sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would have us know, judgments and definitions of art have as much to do with social and economic power as with ‘taste,’ which functions to naturalize and legitimize such power; while indie rock (independent rock music) marks the awareness of a new aesthetic, it also satisfies among audiences a desire for social differentiation and supplies music providers with a tool for exploiting that desire (Hibbett, 2005 p. 56).

3. Historical Context of Magazines, Music and Culture

Why Study Magazines, Niche Publications and Music Journalism?

Levy and Tischler contend that “Interpreting music as an integral part of culture rather than as an isolated artifact emphasizes the importance of social context to an understanding of musical text.” (Levy and Tischler, 1990, p. 69) Music is an essential part of culture, and with emphasis of social context as it relates to *music journalism* as a valuable piece of the puzzle in understanding American culture.

Contemporary music journalism is most frequently found in magazines, alternative media such as newsweeklies like the *Village Voice*, and new media such as Web sites and blogs, as well as niche publications that serve specific audiences of music scholars, fans and critics. Magazines serve a unique media function in that they are both products of social and cultural movements and catalysts for social change (Abrahamson 2007). They help disseminate culture; Abrahamson’s “magazine exceptionalism” concept states that magazines are different from all other media forms in this aspect. As traditional harborers of long-form, artistic and culturally relevant narrative techniques, magazines are the perfect medium through which music journalism is transmitted, and both *Rolling Stone* and *Pitchfork*, as a Web-based publication, utilize these journalistic techniques in the writing of their reviews.

Evolution of Rock Music Criticism and the Alternative Press

Although rock music emerged as a popular form of music in the mid-1950s, rock criticism in the United States did not develop until well into the 1960s (McLeod 2001).

The first rock criticism was written in the one- or two- line record reviews found in music trade papers like *Billboard* or *Cashbox*. McLeod quotes Ennis (1992, p. 341): “The shrewd reviewers of those papers were masters at identifying for each record its musical style, its ancestors and influences, the merit of its performance, and the likelihood of its commercial success” (p. 48).

Around the mid-1960s, a struggle to raise the artistic prestige of popular and rock music began. As McLeod (2001) writes, “No tradition in the United States has developed around rock music that corresponded to jazz music criticism, with its cultivated, articulate vocabulary and deep, penetrating analyses” (p. 49). During the mid-1960s, that started to change. Paul Williams founded *Crawdaddy!*, the world’s first rock magazine in 1966, and other publications followed that were dedicated to the criticism and ideology of rock, including *Creem* and of course *Rolling Stone*. McLeod (2001) notes that rock music magazines emerged not only from the foundations of trade papers like *Billboard*, but also from the underground or alternative press, “which was exemplified by the early publications, *Village Voice*, *LA Free Press* and *Berkeley Barb*” (p. 49). Alternative media also noticed the phenomenon of this new rock music.

Alternative media has been attached to a “heterogeneous set of media practices developed by very diverse groups and organizations, in specific and different contexts, and employing a great variety of media” (Paiva, cited in Rodriquez, 2001, cited in Harcup, 2005 p. 361). Harcup (2005) says that “journalism within alternative media exists, at least in part, as a critique of mainstream journalism: a critique of practice, conducted in practice,” (p. 362) and might provide a voice for otherwise disenfranchised

groups in society and/or serve “fringe” groups (p. 363). In the 1960s rock music fans and enthusiasts were definitely seen as fringe groups in the early days of the music press, so it was no coincidence that the foundations of rock music journalism were firmly set in the alternative press of the 1960s.

But what has the alternative press been historically? As previously noted, the alternative press is a critique of mainstream journalism that has its roots in the muckraking era from the period of 1900-1920. A group of journalists including Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens and Will Irwin wrote for a concentration of publications that hammered away at the ills of American society while inventing and perfecting the craft of investigative journalism (Holhut p. 1). Although the muckraking diminished until well after World War II, alternative journalism lived on through dissident publications like the Communist Party’s *Daily Worker* and its religious counterpart, the *Catholic Worker*. These publications flourished until the paranoia of the Cold War and the Communist witch-hunts effectively shut many of them down. By the mid-1950s, the *Village Voice* as well as other publications like it (*Rolling Stone*) focused on critiquing mainstream media and society; they are still in publication today.

The emergence of a music subculture, as in the punk culture of the ‘70s and the modern indie rock culture, is a phenomenon worth studying as well. Although the mass culture of pop and rock music is familiar to many and is readily available for consumption in mainstream music magazines, this research primarily focuses on the emergence of a music sub-culture and how that subculture affects mainstream music media. Lewis (1977) points Tom Wolfe’s theory on this emergence of music sub-culture,

saying that because of the affluence associated with post-World War II leisure culture “sub- or taste- cultures are, for the first time in history, creating and consuming their own cultural artifacts – because for the first time in history they can afford to do so.” (p. 41). American subcultures relate to both the alternative press and music press because these two media were formed primarily to serve these subcultures. Rock music, as an outgrowth of blues and jazz, is intrinsically linked to subculture and alternative media, especially in the era following World War II, as the timing was ripe for such media to surface. As Regev (1994) writes,

[Rock music] is the music of the generation which was born and grew up after World War II, mostly in the West; a generation that has been raised in affluence, but also under a continuous nuclear threat and in an alienated urban ecology. At its core, rock music expresses this group’s negation of and resistance to its condition of existence, against anything which is “square”: routine, expected, normative and conformist. In its sounds rock music expresses rage, alienation, anomie, anxiety, anger, fear. (p. 91)

The fact that a new sub-culture may be created out of access to materials and media and affluence supports the theory that a free website such as *Pitchfork* has incredible potential as a form of sub-culture. Technology also makes such a sub-culture possible; as more people gain access to the Internet and its free media, mainstream music magazines must improve content on their websites while also figuring out a way to gain and maintain readership of their print publications. As Maniates (1986) notes, technology is making the concert hall obsolete (p. 381). Whereas in the past one had to

have both the desire *and* the means to become part of a culture, technology such as the Internet makes only desire a prerequisite and created room for other niche publications.

The advent of niche publications, such as *Pitchfork*, has made it possible for people to gain insight and feel a sense of belonging to almost any group imaginable, including a music culture. The media, in essence, are responsible for the mass distribution of cultural capital. Even mainstream publications such as the *New York Times* have recognized the need to cater to the alternative in cultural institutions like art, music and entertainment. Massing (2005) notes that, “with the entertainment business expanding into a huge global combine reaching into every corner of the American psyche, however, the *Times* has recognized that, as a world-class newspaper – and one in need of younger readers – it must approach the subject with the same intensity and sense of purpose it brings to politics and economics...” (p. 1). If the *New York Times* has recognized the need for insightful and intelligent alternative music coverage, then the academic community should be equally involved in its pursuit of scholarly material that deals with the subject.

Media also serves as a filter or gatekeeper for music. In his analysis of the British press and its changing coverage of modern rock and pop music, Toynbee stated, “By the end of the 1950s, then, the British press had developed into a well articulated media ‘gatekeeper’.” (p. 290), and by the 1970s the underground British music press, led by Charles Shaar Murray, re-established a high/low culture demarcation in music coverage and a method of highbrow writing based on “a language register that was a credible complement to rock itself.” (p. 291). Modern music writers and editors are

turning to the same highbrow tastes in their music coverage today, especially those writers and editors involved with the underground or indie press. This melding of highbrow language with the traditionally lowbrow area of pop and rock music is nothing new to the music press, although this research seeks to find out if it is making a comeback in more mainstream music magazines like *Rolling Stone*. In its heyday during the late 1960s-70s, writers like Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson developed a kind of writing style known as New Journalism or, more affiliated with Thompson, “gonzo” journalism. This writing features the author at the center of the piece and does not assume the guise of objectivity; much of the written material is in narrative, story-like form complete with dialogue and sprawling metaphors. As Hirst (2004) put it:

New journalism was already a decade old when Thompson finally made his mark as a practitioner of the gonzo arts. Gonzo is an extreme version of the new journalism style. It can be categorised as a sub-genre. The literary style of American new journalism is associated more with disaffected group of feature writers on the daily papers in the early 1960s. According to one of its leading members, this group had come to the realisation that it was possible to write journalism “that would...read like a novel” (Wolfe 1977, pp.21-22). Certainly Thompson became involved with these writers and others, but Tom Wolfe already had a doctorate in American studies when he joined the New York *Herald Tribune* in 1962. (p. 3)

This literary and experimental kind of writing was perfectly suited to music journalism; it a postmodern melding of high and lowbrow cultures that actively tried to erase the boundaries between the elite and mainstream. As Lindberg et al (2005) state,

Today nobody really “knows” what is high and what is low—or lacks the authority to make a certain conviction binding. Instead of a few strongly hierarchical cultural divisions we are confronting a horizontal plurality of part cultures, each with its own hierarchies, distinctions and preferences, as well as an increasing amount of cultural hybrids. Also, it seems that high culture has not only become decentered, one pocket among others, but increasingly—or perhaps more openly—dependent on other sponsors than the state for survival (p. 26).

Toynbee makes the point that many mainstream music magazines feature bands or artists that are “media sponsored pin-ups... artists actually launched on Saturday morning TV shows and the pages of the teen press, rather than gaining access to those slots through chart success,” while it is “‘minority’ indie rock, with its grass roots, record buying fan base, which has had increasing chart success while traditional teen acts have struggled in the record market.” (p. 294). It is the phenomenon of these “minority” indie groups appearing in mainstream press such as *Rolling Stone* that this thesis is concerned with. Niche publications and websites such as *Pitchfork* cater to these sub cultural groups that were once united under one publication, *Rolling Stone*. Given the speed of which society is fragmenting into digital groups on the Internet, a place of nearly limitless space where

any and all subcultures and tastes can find a home, and given the fact that high and low cultures are quickly becoming indistinguishable, *Pitchfork* is in an ideal position to take the reins of cultural trend-setting from *Rolling Stone*.

A Brief History of Rolling Stone and Pitchfork

Rolling Stone.

Founded by Jan Wenner in 1967 with a budget of \$7,500 collected from family and friends and a mailing list obtained from a local San Francisco radio station, *Rolling Stone* promised to not just be a run-of-the-mill music tabloid, but a magazine about the “things and attitudes music embraces” (Carlson, 2006 p. 2). Although the magazine got off to a slow start, as Wenner printed 40,000 copies of the first issue and 34,000 of them were returned unsold, it soon found a niche: it was “cooler” than mainstream newspapers but not as radical or raunchy as the underground press (Carlson, 2006 p. 2). The early *Rolling Stone* mainly covered the newly flourishing rock music scene and was considered one of the cornerstones of modern music criticism in its time. As Paul Gorman (2001) writes in the introduction to *In Their Own Write: Adventures in the Music Press*,

During that period [the late 1950s to the late 1980s], the standards of critical excellence and sheer good writing in this field were raised in America by an array of periodicals, from the celebratory *Crawdaddy!* and the radical *Creem* to the hilarious *Rock Scene*, the fantastic *16* magazine, the historically aware *Who Put The Bomp?* and, let’s face it, the mould-breaking, genre-defining, corporate-cock-sucking but frankly unbeatable-in-its-time *Rolling Stone*. (p. 13)

Three years after *Rolling Stone* came into being, Wenner hired the now

(in)famous Hunter S. Thompson as a feature writer after Thompson showed up in Wenner's office with a two six-packs of beer, pitching a story about his campaign for sheriff of Aspen, Colorado on the "Freak Power" ticket. Thompson went on to become one of the magazine's biggest stars with his gonzo-style of writing and drug-fueled, autobiographical features including "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" and "Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail."

The years 1970 through 1979 was the golden age of *Rolling Stone*, as Peter Carlson wrote for the *Washington Post* in 2006,

Soon Rolling Stone was America's hot mag, filled with amazing stories: Joe Eszterhas on crooked cops and hippie murders; Timothy Crouse on the Washington press corps; Howard Kohn revealing the inside story of the Patty Hearst kidnapping; Tom Wolfe on the Mercury astronauts, rough drafts of what later became "The Right Stuff." Plus great rock profiles by a teenager named Cameron Crowe, who later went on to direct "Almost Famous," a movie about his experiences as a teenage writer for Rolling Stone. (p. C01)

In 1977 Wenner moved the magazine's headquarters from San Francisco to New York City, where he expanded the magazine as well as founded other publications including *Outside* and *Men's Journal*. He also briefly ran *Look* and bought a piece of *Us*. According to Stuart Zakim, Wenner's PR man who was hired and fired twice, *Rolling Stone* became more of a business throughout the 1980s and 90s, as it took on a more corporate tone and started to focus on advertising revenues (Carlson, 2006). The late 1990s saw the once counter-culture mainstay concentrate much of its energy on covering

teen pop and boy band phenoms, in its infamous “Britney Spears” era. Carlson wrote that, “for a while, it seemed as if the magazine had hit bottom. Alas, it hadn’t. ...Even in its darkest days, Rolling Stone still published some serious political and cultural stories” (p. C01). This is where we find the magazine today, still corporate, still spinning out zippy album reviews of mostly mainstream music, but still straddling the line between counter culture and pop culture with its focus on politics and rare review of off-the-mainstream-radar bands.

Pitchfork.

Ryan Schreiber, founder of pitchforkmedia.com, grew up in the Minneapolis suburbs where he spent his high school years steeped in indie rock. In 1995, at nineteen years old and just out of high school, Schreiber launched *Pitchfork* from his home computer, posting a few album reviews each month and interviewing any band he could talk to. He named his site after a tattoo that Al Pacino has in *Scarface*, a pitchfork, which he told *Wired* magazine seemed to him concise and easy to say with “evilish” overtones (Itzkoff, 2006 p. 2).

Schreiber and *Pitchfork* moved to Chicago in 1999 and soon after the site began to attract a following for the vast amount of content it had and for the counter culture genres of music it gave preference to; in 1995 Pitchforkmedia.com received a mere 300 hits a day, by the year 2006 it was getting more than 160,000 visitors a day (Thomas, 2006). In 2006 *Wired* magazine claimed that *Pitchfork* “developed a reputation as the Tony Montana of music criticism—a kind of cultural assassin, stirring up electronic waves

whenever it affixed its dreaded, bottom-of-the-barrel 0.0 rating to such seemingly untouchable targets as Sonic Youth and the Flaming Lips” (Itzkoff, 2006).

As *Pitchfork* has surfaced on the cultural radar, many magazines and other music publications have compared it to *Rolling Stone* in its prime (Butler, 2006; Itzkoff, 2006; Kot, 2005; Thomas, 2006), making a point to separate the site from the more corporate, mainstream magazine.

Rolling Stone chased movie stars and teen-pop performers for its covers and slashed away at the length of the average review—most are now a paragraph, and featured reviews are just four or five times that long. A path had been cleared for *Pitchfork* to earn the trust and deference of a rock-starved readership desperate for a more comprehensive and reliable filter (Itzkoff, 2006).

Although the *Pitchfork* is most often cast as the antithesis of *Rolling Stone* because of its focus on indie as opposed to mainstream bands, several music critics and publications are being forced to reckon with this one site’s tremendous taste-making influence. In 2005, *Pitchfork* was one of the first to discover “Clap Your Hands Say Yeah,” an unknown band from Brooklyn. The band’s album received a 9.0 rating on *Pitchfork*’s ten-point scale, and in the months that followed,

critics at major papers (*The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*, to name a few) weighed in. ‘Pitchfork is taken seriously,’ says the freelance rock critic Jason Gross. ‘To print critics, it’s like, “We’re going to look like a bunch of old stupid sourpusses if we don’t get in on this ASAP”’ (Butler, 2006 p. 2).

In her article about *Pitchfork*'s enormous influence on music criticism, Butler goes on to say that "As it has influenced everything else, the Internet is influencing rock music criticism, and in the rock criticism community, *Pitchfork* has become the first major Web-based tastemaker" (p. 54). This thesis attempts to support the hypothesis, with the aid of textual data and evidence from a case study, that Butler's assertion is indeed correct and that *Pitchfork* is directly influencing other media, most notably *Rolling Stone*.

4. Methodology

To better understand whether and how a new media outlet exerted influence on an older media form, this study employed a combination of qualitative research methodologies. Qualitative methods “usually employ verbal data, begin with few or no preconceived notions, seek to comprehend and explain or describe phenomena, maintain little or no control and structure, explore with the aim of discovering what exists that is of importance in the situation, engage in a more natural function, and are carried out in natural environments” (Books, 1997 p. 3). Two methodologies are employed in this thesis, textual analysis and a case study; although the case study is pure qualitative methodology, the textual analysis borders on quantitative due to the nature of the analysis performed.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis is a methodology widely used in the cultural and sociology fields, as well as in the field of mass communication.

Grounded in the discipline of cultural studies, textual analysis as defined by Hall (1975) comprises the identification of a particular subject or theme, the definition of a particular text, and the analysis of that text independent of production, author intention or audience reading (Slagle, 2006 p. 20).

Although this definition fits many modes of textual analysis, this research was performed with the notion in mind that the text conveys meaning to the reader in a

specific context, and therefore Hall's definition of textual analysis, with its emphasis on independence from production, author intention or audience reading was not strictly adhered to. The meaning and culture conveyed by a text are not created or consumed in a vacuum, so an analysis of the text with reference to historical and sociological context was performed.

Although many semiologists claim that meaning resides in the semantic content of the text itself, textual analysis theorists claim meaning resides in the dialectical process between the text and the reader, which takes place in a particular social and historical context (Curtin, 1995). Language is the means by which the role of the media is changed from that of conveyers of reality to that of constructors of meaning; media actively labor not to reflect reality, but to construct it (Curtin, 1995). The textual analysis for this study was performed with this construction of reality concept in mind; the analysis was not concerned with what the text said, *per se*, but *how* it was said and *how* the audience perceived its meaning.

Textual analysis is closely related to content analysis, in which the researcher most commonly

'comprises techniques for reducing texts to a unit-by-variable matrix and analyz[es] that matrix quantitatively to test hypothesis' and the researcher can produce a matrix by applying a set of codes to a set of qualitative data... Classical content analysis is essentially a quantitative method with the core and central tool being its system of categories... The simplest type of content evaluation

consequently consists of counting the numbers of occurrences per category (Kohlbacher, 2006 p. 7).

In this study, genre of music, whether a record label is independent or not, and usage of the word “indie” were counted and quantified for each of the four lists analyzed. But the analysis is not a quantitative analysis, per se, due to the fact that the context and in which the data were given was taken into account, and what that context means for the audience’s cultural interpretation of the text. A research method that relies more on qualitative orientation provides leniency for the researcher to explore her hypotheses in richer detail and depth, while the quantitative orientation neglects the particular quality of texts and makes it difficult to show the different possibilities of interpretation of multiple connotations (Kohlbacher, 2006 pp. 7-8).

As Kracauer (1952) pointed out, “The potentialities of communication research can be developed only if... the emphasis is shifted from quantitative to qualitative procedures” (p. 631). He goes on to say that “qualitative analysis proper often requires quantification in the interest of exhaustive treatment. Far from being strict alternatives the two approaches actually overlap, and have in fact complemented and interpenetrated each other in several investigations” (p. 637). This study, in attempting to explain how *Pitchfork* is influencing *Rolling Stone*, employs a textual analysis that is quantitative in that coding and counting were involved, while the connotations and discussion of that analysis is qualitative in nature.

Case Study

This case study will support the theory that alternative online media directly influence mainstream music magazines by exploring the rise of the band Arcade Fire into the cultural mainstream. The case study approach to research is an in-depth study of the particular, where the researcher seeks to increase his or her understanding of the phenomena studied (Johansson, 2002 as cited in Ruddin, 2006 p. 798). As Dooley (2002) stated, “The researcher who embarks on case study research is usually interested in a specific phenomenon and wishes to understand it completely, not by controlling variables but rather by observing all of the variables and their interacting relationships. From this single observation, the start of a theory may be formed, and this may provoke the researcher to study the same phenomenon within the boundaries of another case, and then another, and another...” (p. 336).

The particular phenomenon studied in this case is the rise of the band “Arcade Fire” into mainstream music consciousness and how *Pitchfork* might have helped make this possible. The relationship between Arcade Fire’s ascent to fame, *Pitchfork* and *Rolling Stone* are observed and conclusions as to whether new media directly influence the cultural mainstream and old media are drawn from this particular case through document analysis.

5. From *Pitchfork* to *Rolling Stone*: A Textual Analysis of “Top 50 Albums” Lists

In order to gauge how *Pitchfork* may have affected *Rolling Stone*'s content and focus, a textual analysis was performed on the annotated “Top 50 Albums” lists from both publications. These were the annual year-end lists from the years 2004 and 2007, which were analyzed according to three criteria: 1) record label of band or musician included in list and whether that record label was a major label or affiliated with a major label, or if the record label was “independent;” 2) Genre and style of music of band or musician included in list, with special attention paid to bands or musicians that fit the “indie” category; and 3) Use of the word “indie” or derivatives of the word in the description of each top 50 album, and the context in which that qualifier was used.

The years 2004 and 2007 were chosen for this textual analysis because 2004 was the year that the band Arcade Fire, the band that is the subject of the case study in Chapter Four, released its debut album and appeared on the cultural radar. The year 2007 is the most recent year that top 50 lists are available from both *Pitchfork* and *Rolling Stone*, and is also consequently the year Arcade Fire released its second album. The annual top 50 lists were selected for analysis as they are year-end culminations of what the publication had been covering and advocating. A good year-end list should be an accurate barometer of what music styles, trends and albums influenced the publication. Each list featured the artist, album name, and record label of the entry. *Pitchfork*'s lists were published in descending order from 50 to one, while *Rolling Stone*'s lists were

published two different ways in the two years: in 2004 the top albums were alphabetical by artist and in 2007 the albums were listed in ascending order from one to 50.

The lists were first analyzed according to what record label put out the album; each album on the list included this information directly under the album title. The reasoning behind this was to find out how many record labels in each list were considered “independent” record labels, that is, they are not affiliated with a major record company such as AOL Time Warner, Universal, Sony Music, BMG, and EMI as well as sister labels or affiliated labels that are owned by a major corporation. Each record label was separately researched using the Internet to decipher if the label was considered independent or not; the research found that most, but not all, independent record labels will publish the fact that they are considered “independent” on their websites. Major music companies also own and distribute some labels that are considered part of the indie cannon. For example, Cherry Tree Records at first seems like an independent label, but upon further examination and research it was found that Cherry Tree is owned and operated by Interscope, a major label. If two record labels were cited as putting out an album, for example the Cure’s 2004 album *The Cure* was cited as being part of both I Am and Geffen labels, and one or both of the record labels cited was a major label or part of a major label, the entry was put into the “not indie” label category. Some albums were also self-released, meaning that they were not part of any label, and these were placed in the “indie” category.

Each list was then analyzed to associate each entry with a specific music genre and music style; the website allmusic.com was used to research what genre and style

category an artist fit. Allmusic was created in 1995 as a comprehensive music reference source, and the website features album reviews and information about artists and genres of music. The fact that placing any kind of music into a preconceived category is a subjective venture was taken into account while this research was performed, but it was decided that allmusic would be the reference point for genre and style due to its comprehensive coverage and independence from both *Pitchfork* and *Rolling Stone*. The website has 20 different genre categories it divides all music into, and although these categories range from Celtic and Cajun to Rap and Rock, for the purpose of this study each artist was placed on one of five genre categories: Rock, Rap, Country, Electronica, R&B or “Other.”

Once the genre category was established, the main style of the artist, a genre sub-category, was researched and recorded. As there are literally hundreds of styles a particular artist may be associated with, and many artists had several styles listed under their genre, only the first style listed was recorded. It was the most apt at describing a particular band or artist. For example, the artist Iron & Wine was placed into the Rock genre category, but three styles were listed on allmusic: alternative singer/songwriter, indie rock, and lo-fi. Rather than listing all three styles, Iron & Wine was placed in the alternative singer/songwriter style category. In order to make the style category more manageable, after the main style of each artist was recorded, the list was divided into four major style categories: indie, experimental/postmodern, alternative, and “other.” These categories were selected because the purpose of this research is to explain how and if

Pitchfork, a website that is known to be indie-focused, is having an effect on *Rolling Stone*, a magazine that is today seen as more mainstream and less indie-focused.

There were several different styles that featured the words “indie” or “experimental” or “alternative;” if the style featured any of those words it was put into the corresponding category. For example, the artist Northern State was classified as “indie electronic,” so it went into the indie category, while the artist The Field was listed as “post-rock/experimental” so it was placed in the experimental category. Artists that had straight “rock” or “hard rock” styles were placed in the “other” category, as this study is mainly focused on counter cultures and the effect that these counter cultures may be having on mainstream media.

The last part of the textual analysis involved looking for the word “indie” or any derivatives of that word (i.e. indie rock, indieland, indie pop) in the description of each album on the lists. The word “twee” was also counted once as a synonym for indie; a 2005 *Pitchfork* article describes in great depth why “twee” is another form of indie (“Twee As Fuck: The Story of Indie Pop,” *Pitchfork* 2005). When the modifier indie or its counterparts were found, they were analyzed with reference to the context in which they were used and the meaning the reader would associate with them. According to allmusic’s database, in its most basic sense, “Indie rock takes its name from ‘independent,’ which describes both the do-it-yourself attitudes of its bands and the small, lower-budget nature of the labels that release the music” (allmusic.com, 2008, para. 1). But “indie” also carries with it an entire set of connotations and ideals, as *Pitchfork*’s founder Ryan Schreiber told CNN.com in 2006, “[The term] has also, for

years, been sort of the de facto label for an entire subculture of idealistic arts and music fans who place a lot of stock in the idea of making music for yourself or your friends, rather than for profit or opportunity” (Andrews, 2006 para. 8). A more in-depth discussion of what “indie” means and why it is not a mere adjective or music style, as well as why it is pertinent to this study can be found in the conclusion of this thesis.

6. Arcade Fire: A Short Case Study

The purpose of this case study is to explore, through analysis of magazine articles, web-based music and arts criticism outlets, and interviews how the band “Arcade Fire” came to garner both underground respect and mainstream notoriety, and if *Pitchfork* influenced the trajectory of the band as well as their mainstream success. A history of the band is followed by the analysis and consequences of *Pitchfork*’s review of *Funeral*, the group’s first album; the ascent of the band to mainstream fame and implications of *Pitchfork*’s initial review conclude the case study.

In the Beginning: A Brief History of Arcade Fire

It started out innocently enough: boy meets girl at a University cafeteria in Montreal, he goes to see her play in a band and decides they should “jam” together sometime, the musical pair end up hitting it off not only instrumentally but romantically and before you can say “cliché,” they’re married and heading up a band together. But in the usual version of this story, the main characters are not poised to be the front-couple of one of the most critically acclaimed indie bands in recent memory, a band that collects hipster-kid fans by the subway load and mainstream fans by the SUV load. That’s why this story is different.

Edwin “Win” Butler grew up listening to Dylan, Springsteen and Neil Young and taught himself how to play an electric guitar given to him by his grandfather, Alvino Rey—the man credited with more or less inventing the pedal steel guitar (Morely, 2007).

Maturity and higher education opened the musical doors of indie and alternative rock to Butler, who was turned onto Radiohead and credits ‘The Bends’ as being a ‘huge record’ for him, personally. Morely, 2007 wrote:

Slowly, he was becoming Win Butler, obsessed music fan, restless thinker, separated from his loving, encouraging family, vainly looking for some kind of relevant replacement. There were various false starts. After a frustrating year in Boston, where he was just another earnest indie kid with vague ambitions, giving up on a photography course, writing songs non-stop but getting nowhere, he loyally followed his high school friend Josh Deu to Montreal. It was early 2001 (p.1).

It was in Montreal that Butler met his future wife, Régine Chassagne, who was studying jazz singing, playing mandolin in a medieval ensemble and doing compositional experiments with fifteenth-century music (Frey, 2007 p. 1) After seeing her singing jazz one night, Butler decided the two needed to play together and Chassagne agreed. As she told *New York Magazine* in 2007, “I was from another planet. I didn’t even know what an ‘indie’ band was—it sounded so vague and mysterious. But Win wrote really good, catchy melodies (though with fairly typical chord changes, I thought), and right away I had all these ideas I wanted him to try: strange progressions, beats, instruments. And: enough with the acoustic guitar!” (p.1).

Indeed, the acoustic guitar became merely a back-up instrument for the soon-to-be-completed “Arcade Fire.” With their mish-mash of accordions, a hurdy-gurdy, violin,

and Caribbean steel drums, just to name a few of the instruments they fervently play, taking up the space, who has time to think about a simple guitar?

After Butler and Chassagne added a few more members to the band, Arcade Fire started playing hole-in-the-wall clubs in Toronto and Montreal to audiences of 100 or 200 people. But things began to change when the band recorded and produced their album *Funeral*.

Funeral: The Pitchfork Review and Its Consequences

In the fall of 2004 Arcade Fire was just another indie band trying to make a ripple in the ocean of modern music. The day before the band's first album, *Funeral*, was to debut, a review of the album appeared on *Pitchfork*. That review would soon turn the ripple into a tidal wave. David Moore, the author of the review, raved about the album, saying it was "at least capable of completely and successfully restoring the tainted phrase 'emotional' to its true origin" (Moore, 2004 para. 9) and ultimately gave *Funeral* an unheard-of-for-*Pitchfork* rating of 9.7 out of 10. The review went on to make waves around the indie music community; waves that eventually spilled over into the mainstream. As Matos wrote for MSN Music in 2007,

That an indie-rock Web site took so ardently and instantly to a new indie band wasn't itself news—but the fact that Pitchfork's print rivals (Spin, Rolling Stone, Blender) hadn't yet caught the Arcade Fire's spark was. So were some other numbers inspired by Pitchfork's review: The album made it to No. 131 on the Billboard 200, the highest rank its label, the North Carolina indie Merge, had ever attained. The Arcade Fire became an overnight success: The manageable kind that

indie rockers, who view a group such as Sonic Youth as the model for how to make it in the business without succumbing to the Biz, dream of (Matos, 2007 para. 2).

Soon Arcade Fire's shows were selling out and the music press scrambled to line up interviews and make sure that *Funeral* was listed as the top indie album of the year. The album went on to sell 750,000 copies, a lot for an album that was recorded for only \$10,000. The small sold-out shows turned into "larger gigs that also sold out, and before long the Arcade Fire was touring North America and Europe and playing to rapt audiences in Japan and Brazil" (Frey, 2007 p. 1). *Funeral* was also the fastest-selling title in the history of Merge Records (Freedom du Lac, 2006 p. N01).

Almost every Arcade Fire blurb, review or interview one comes across also somehow involves *Pitchfork's* contribution to the band's success. In 2007 *New York Magazine* noted, "It was a symbiotic event: Pitchfork made Arcade Fire and Arcade Fire made Pitchfork—criticism fuelling commerce!" (Lindgren, para. 2). Indeed, partly due to *Pitchfork's* 9.7 review, the album took off and captured the attention of not only music fans but music icons, as well. David Byrne wrote the band a fan letter and joined them onstage for a cover of one of his songs, and David Bowie declared *Funeral* his favorite album of the year and asked the band to cover "Queen Bitch" at one of their shows where Bowie also made a surprise appearance onstage (Frey, 2007 p. 1). Arcade Fire opened for U2 at three arena-sized shows in Canada and U2 tried to persuade the band to join them on the rest of their world tour; Bono declared Arcade Fire his new favorite band and apparently told the group that he would not want any other group to support U2 ever

again (Morely, 2007 p. 1). Arcade Fire's guest list at their shows even included underground legend Lou Reed, pop poet Beck and Coldplay's Chris Martin, who proclaimed them the "greatest band in the history of music" (Lindgren, 2007 para. 3).

Was *Pitchfork* responsible for this collective gushing on the part of both critics and artists? *Pitchfork* was the first publication to put the band's name into widespread use, and all other mainstream music publications did not pick up on the band until *Pitchfork* had declared them the band of the year. *Rolling Stone* did not publish a review of *Funeral* until December of 2004, almost three months after its release and the *Pitchfork* review. The evidence found in review of magazine articles, web articles and interviews with the band support the hypothesis that *Pitchfork* was partly responsible for this indie band's success.

Of course, there are those who would deny the Web site's impact on the band's rise to fame, most notably *Pitchfork* founder Ryan Schreiber. In an interview with Win Butler six months after the debut of *Funeral*, the following exchange took place between Schreiber and Arcade Fire's frontman:

Pitchfork: It's pretty weird that we keep getting tied together in the press. Like, a lot of the features I've read on the Arcade Fire mention Pitchfork and vice versa.

Win: They could be asking you a lot of the same questions you could be asking me: How does it feel? How's the hype? Is it weird to be mentioned in the *New York Times* and the *L.A. Times*? I'm like, 'No, how's that feel?'

Pitchfork: It's really funny. It's like we can't exist independently in the press. I mean, are you as sick of that as we are?

Win: I don't know. I think that people have a narrow view of things. You definitely get a lot of lazy, weak features. And I'm sure you guys probably experience that as well.

Pitchfork: I suppose people need their angle. But I almost just feel bad for you guys. Like we tend to get really carried away when we love a record, and while that tends to help a lot of bands we think deserve attention, there can also be negative repercussions if we go *too* nuts (Schreiber, 2005 p. 1).

In this exchange, Schreiber seems almost upset at the amount of publicity *Pitchfork* and Arcade Fire have been given. Perhaps this is only natural for an "indie" Web site and an "indie" band, because an important component of indie culture is that it is distinct from mass culture and instead a culture for the elite and the "in the know." In the indie culture, "Obscurity becomes a positive feature, while exclusion is embraced as the necessary consequence of the majority's lack of 'taste' (Hibbett, 2005 p. 57).

It is this obscurity that "Arcade Fire" once thrived on and which, according to subsequent interviews, they felt a keen sense of loss and unforeseeable, at times unwanted, responsibility. Richard Parry, who plays upright double bass for the band, told *New York Times Magazine*, "Somewhere along the line we became the band that was supposed to save rock 'n' roll" (Frey, 2007 p. 2).

In a way, Parry was right: if one simply looks back at the gushing language of Moore's initial 2004 review on *Pitchfork* and at subsequent album reviews, it would seem that "Arcade Fire" was the band in which critics placed their hope of indie rock revival. NPR called *Funeral* "one of the decade's most remarkable rock albums," ("Live in Concert from All Songs Considered, 11/15/07, para. 1) and in an article titled "The Great Rock Hope" (3/13/07), *Slate* music critic Jody Rosen unabashedly declared her and other critics' adoration of the band:

This last gasp of rock triumphalism helps explain the critical adulation poured on Arcade Fire. (Disclosure: I'm one of the adoring critics—I gave *Neon Bible* ["Arcade Fire's" second album] a rave in *Entertainment Weekly*.) Most music writers, even those who love hip-hop, remain invested in the idea of rock's relevance and in a heroic lineage that extends from the Beatles and the Stones down through U2 and Springsteen to the present day. Arcade Fire fits squarely into The Tradition—its fans include Hall of Famers like David Bowie, David Byrne, and, sure enough, U2... The band's [Arcade Fire's] sonic grandiosity turns out to be, of all things, topical—a shattering sound of and for our time (paras. 6 and 8).

The paradox here lies in the fact that Arcade Fire is an indie band, and by definition, "indie" bands thrive on obscurity (Hibbett, 2007). After the release and

subsequent praise of *Funeral*, Arcade Fire did its best to balance its newfound fame and indie rock group persona. As Frey (2007) put it,

Wild, sudden success for a band is often the moment Puccini takes over the script... but the Arcade Fire has managed to avoid any gestures toward the operatic... The musicians seem to have strengthened their collective immunity to hype by resolutely doing what they want: they turned down the chance to tour with R.E.M. so they could continue performing their full-length shows; they refused to play Britain's 'Top of the Pops,' on which bands traditionally lip-synch their material, until they were permitted to play live; and they resisted the entreaties of several major record companies, made over a series of lavish dinners, to leave Merge, the independent label that released 'Funeral' (p. 2).

Win Butler also held fast to the beliefs of art-for-art's sake and avoidance of mainstream culture. He told the *Guardian*, "It's the creative challenges that excite us, not the everyday business of being in a band. Whenever anyone wants to package us as just another band, or process us into mere product, we get pretty restless pretty fast" (2007, para. 32). The article went on to say that Butler appeared to take the band's success for granted, or

...is just coolly, possibly superstitiously, hiding his staggered delight, that his little quixotic group who started out playing Saturday afternoon shows in Montreal art spaces that would cost you two dollars and a can of food to watch is now poised on the verge of an old-fashioned rock fame not seen this century" (2007, para. 35).

Rather than meet this fame head-on and be swept up in the current of mainstream hype, the band retreated to Montreal where they bought an old church and converted it into a recording space/dormitory/cafeteria. Here the group wrote and recorded their second album, *Neon Bible*, which was to debut in the spring of 2007.

Whether the band's popularity or the Web site's influence on this popularity makes either of them less "indie" is the subject of another study; it is interesting to note however, that *Pitchfork* was notably less enthusiastic about Arcade Fire's second album, *Neon Bible*, but still placed the album on its top 50 year-end list. The purpose of this brief case study was to simply make a conclusion, through document analysis and data, as to whether *Pitchfork*'s review and coverage of Arcade Fire and *Funeral* impacted other music media. The research and data have shown that a positive conclusion to this question may be asserted, that *Pitchfork* did indeed have an influence on other publications.

7. Findings and Discussion

Textual Analysis: 2004

In 2004 *Rolling Stone* included only eight artists out of 50 (16%) in its year-end list that released albums on an independent label. Five out of the eight, or 62% of those independent-label artists were also included in *Pitchfork*'s list (see Table 1). *Pitchfork* included 34 independent artists out of 50, 68%, on its 2004 list that released albums on an independent label; six out of 16 of the major-label artists that *Pitchfork* included in its list were also included in *Rolling Stone*'s list, a percentage of 37.5% (see Table 1).

Rolling Stone listed 33 artists that were considered part of the "Rock" genre in 2004, seven artists in the "Rap" category, four in the "R&B" category, three in the "Country" category, two in the "Electronica" category, and one in the "Other" category (see Table 2.1). The style category was dominated by "Other" in *Rolling Stone*'s list, with 32 artists placed in it. This is due to the fact that many of the styles were pure "rock" styles and did not fit into any of the three previously established style categories. Twelve artists were placed in the "Alternative" category, four in the "Indie" category, and two in the "Experimental/Postmodern" category (see Table 3.1).

Pitchfork included 29 artists in their list that were part of the "Rock" genre, 10 in the "Electronica" genre, seven in the "Rap" genre, three in the "Other" category, one in the "Country" category, and none in the "R&B" category (see Table 2.2). *Pitchfork*'s style category was also dominated by "Other," but the results were evenly split between

straight “rock” and hip-hop for this categorization. Fourteen artists were placed in the “Indie” category, 12 in the “Experimental/Postmodern” category, and seven in the “Alternative” category (see Table 3.2).

Rolling Stone used the term “indie,” or a version of the term four times in its 2004 list (see Table 4.1). Win Butler, Arcade Fire’s frontman, was described as an “indie-rock mastermind,” (p. 141), while Rilo Kiley’s front-woman Jenny Lewis was described as an “indie-rock heartthrob” (p. 151). The term “indie-rock” was used to refer to the circuit that platinum artist Modest Mouse toured, and TV on the Radio was described as an “indie-rock outfit” (p. 152).

Pitchfork employed “indie” or a version of it a total of seven times in its 2004 year-end list (see Table 4.1). The word was used twice in the description of The Concretes’ “indie pop” album (p. 1); indie pop was also used in reference to Glaswegian band Camera Obscura’s album. “Indie rock” was used along with “discopop” to describe a Franz Ferdinand song, “indie rock” fused with dance music also described Erlend Øye’s 2004 album, and *Pitchfork* called its artist of the year, Arcade Fire’s album “indie rock’s *de facto* album of the year” (p. 5).

Textual Analysis: 2007

In 2007 *Rolling Stone* included 16 out of 50 independent-label artists on its top 50 list, doubling the number from 2004; five of these 16 were also included in *Pitchfork*’s list. *Pitchfork* included 40 out of 50 artists that released an album on an independent label in 2007; seven of the 10 major-label artists included in *Pitchfork*’s list were also included in *Rolling Stone*’s list (see Table 1).

Rolling Stone listed 35 artists in the “Rock” genre in 2007, five in the “R&B” category, four in the “Rap” category, three in the “Other” category, two in the “Country” category, and one in the “Electronica” category (see Table 2.3). Again, the style of the artists was mainly classified as “Other” due to the fact that most artists included in the list were of a pure “rock” nature. But *Rolling Stone* more than doubled the number of artists in the “Indie” category, including 10 entries from indie artists. Ten artists also fit into the “Alternative” style category, while only three were placed in the “Experimental/Postmodern” category (see Table 3.3).

Pitchfork included 34 artists on their list that were part of the “Rock” genre of music, nine in the “Electronica” category, five in the “Rap” category, two in the “Other” category and none in the “R&B” and “Country” categories (see Table 2.4). The number of artists in the “Indie” style category stayed the same as 2004, with 14 artists included; 32 artists were categorized as “Other,” eight as “Alternative,” and six as “Experimental/Postmodern” (see Table 3.4).

Rolling Stone doubled its usage of the term “indie” or affiliated terms in 2007, employing it a total of eight times in the year-end list. Although “indie” was used more often, its primary employment was to describe the nature of people or band members, not necessarily to describe the music or album itself. Rilo Kiley’s album description again merited the usage of “indie,” but this time *Rolling Stone* called the band members “ex-indie rockers” (p. 108) instead of “indie heartthrobs.” The magazine also interestingly used the indie-derivative “twee” in two separate places in the album descriptions.

While *Rolling Stone* collectively jumped on the indie bandwagon in 2007, *Pitchfork* used the term about the same number of times as it did in 2004, with a total of 5 uses of the word; four times it was used as part of the adjective “indie rock,” and in the other instance the word was used it referred to indie as a cultural category (see Table 4.1).

Discussion of Textual Analysis

As expected, the data shows that *Pitchfork* may be influencing the list content of *Rolling Stone*. In 2004, *Rolling Stone* was just coming off of its “all Britney all the time” phase, wherein the musical content of the magazine was mainly devoted to mainstream pop and rock icons and teen sensations. In 2004 the magazine only listed four bands that were considered “indie” in style, three of which *Pitchfork* also listed in its top 50. The lack of albums by bands on independent labels could also confirm that *Rolling Stone* was not at the pinnacle of its subculture coverage, as it once was. By 2007, however, *Rolling Stone* had beefed up its subculture supply, doubling the amount of indie artist it included in its top 50 list. This research’s data showed that the magazine could have also taken cues from the language employed by subcultures and *Pitchfork*, using the trendy modifier “twee” to describe two artists in its 2007 list. Although this study focuses on indie music, it is interesting to note that both *Rolling Stone* and *Pitchfork* included about the same amount of rap artists on their lists in both years. There are a few possible explanations for this: first, both publications tend to focus more on the rock genre than any other genre, so it would make sense that rap (or any other genre) isn’t highlighted as much as rock. A second cause could be that rap is, in and of itself, a kind of separate subculture with an array of publications dedicated to it.

Finally, as would be expected, the textual analysis gave no evidence of influence flowing the opposite way—from *Rolling Stone* to *Pitchfork*. This further emphasizes the theory that *Pitchfork* is performing the role of tastemaker, while it would seem *Rolling Stone*'s main role is to reflect already established trends.

Although this data did show that *Rolling Stone* could be taking cues from *Pitchfork* it is also important to note that there are countless influences on how a media outlet chooses its angles of coverage and what that content might look like. Perhaps most importantly, the economics of *Pitchfork* and *Rolling Stone* are not explored in-depth in this study, and it must once again be emphasized that *Pitchfork* is a free online publication that does not rely on large amounts of revenue to keep it afloat. Unlike *Rolling Stone*, this frees *Pitchfork* from the necessity of taking into account advertising, sponsorships, and corporate funding when deciding on content. Another factor that might influence the outcome of data in this study is the demographics of each publication. *Rolling Stone*'s media kit describes the age of its average reader as 34 years old, while *Pitchfork*'s average reader is described as 18-24 years old (Quantcast.com, 2013). In order to keep readership and loyalty at a high level, *Rolling Stone* could be making editorial coverage choices that appeal to an older demographic than *Pitchfork*, thus possibly eliminating the need for “cutting-edge” coverage of indie bands and trends that a younger demographic expects.

8. Conclusion

The research conducted for this study has shown that in the years 2004 and 2007, the online publication *Pitchfork* could have affected the content and editorial focus of *Rolling Stone* magazine. The ensuing discussion of the research results and conclusions can be broken down into two parts: 1) What kind of effect *Pitchfork* is having on *Rolling Stone*, and 2) How *Pitchfork* is making this happen.

Defining the Cultural Effect of Pitchfork

As the textual analysis and case study have shown, *Pitchfork*'s focus on indie artists and its lack of focus on what is traditionally understood as the cultural mainstream is in turn influencing the content and direction of *Rolling Stone*, insofar as that *Rolling Stone* has taken cultural cues from *Pitchfork* and included more "indie" coverage in the magazine. By focusing on subculture and indie artists, *Pitchfork* is essentially flexing its cultural muscle; as the cultural theory overview stated, new media like *Pitchfork* have the ability to nurture new cultures into existence while the old cultures, here represented by *Rolling Stone*, are forced to adapt or die out.

If awareness of and knowledge about indie rock is a new form of cultural capital, then *Pitchfork* can be seen as the bank where this capital is stored and disseminated to audiences. In order to maintain its legitimacy within the cultural and music industry, *Rolling Stone* is being forced to obtain some of this indie cultural capital for itself in order to pass it along to its audience as well as to continue to be considered a cultural mainstay of American society.

As evidenced by its coverage of Arcade Fire and other indie bands, *Pitchfork* is considered a provider of valuable knowledge in the cultural field. Foucault contended that power and knowledge directly imply one another, and there is no doubt that possession of cultural capital can be translated as knowledge of culture, which can therefore be translated as power. As Hibbett put it, “Masquerading as taste, knowledge can be applied toward the acquisition and maintenance of social distinctions, which ‘are never just assertions of equal difference; they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of others’” (pp. 56-57). In order to maintain its status, *Rolling Stone* cannot become one of these “inferior others” and consequently must take cultural cues from *Pitchfork*, an establishment that has proven to provide more valuable cultural capital (hence knowledge and power). The most valuable form of cultural capital at the moment seems to manifest itself in the guise of indie rock, which can “open up vast spaces for the management of power and the manufacturing of identities: purposes far removed from the innocuous pleasure of listening (p. 57).

Rolling Stone is also forced to take editorial cues from *Pitchfork* due to the nature of indie rock music, which in today’s society is seen as a form of “high” art as opposed to “low” art of the mainstream. Normally high art is thought of as “classical” music, so-called “serious” literature and the like (Johnson, 1993 p. 15); for traditional consumers of high art, indie rock would likely be relegated to the nebulous and “inferior” world of popular or mass culture.

But as Hibbett declares, “To be sure, the respective codes are miles apart” (p. 57). He goes on to support the point:

Even without the powerful sanction of a scholarly institution, indie rock demonstrates the principles and politics of a ‘superior’ art and applies them within the immense and multifarious domain of popular culture. As an elite sect within a larger field, indie rock requires its own codes, i.e. cultural capital, and therefore can be used to generate and sustain myths of social or intellectual superiority. Obscurity becomes a positive feature, while exclusion is embraced as the necessary consequence of the majority’s lack of ‘taste.’ Indie rock enthusiasts (those possessing knowledge of indie rock, or ‘insiders’) comprise a social formation similar to the intellectuals or the avant-garde or high culture (p. 57).

This positive feature of obscurity is what ironically catapulted *Pitchfork* to the forefront of cultural taste making; the bands and artists featured on the site were unknown to mainstream audiences and therefore the elite indie rock audiences found *Pitchfork*’s content to be congruent with their need for knowledge to be cultural “insiders” in order to maintain their status as members of high culture. In the years leading up to 2004, *Rolling Stone* was considered by many to be pandering to a mass audience and some considered the magazine’s editorial content too “mainstream” (Gorman, 2001 p. 13). If the concept of *Rolling Stone* was as this cultural majority, then a lack of “taste” could also be ascribed to the magazine, repelling high culture seekers. Recognizing the need to be legitimized in the eyes of those who sought high culture, *Rolling Stone* took editorial cues from *Pitchfork* in order to cater to a more “obscure”—and therefore highbrow—audience.

But it may already be too late for *Rolling Stone* to save its highbrow cultural face from the popular mainstream, and *Pitchfork*, with its increasing popularity, may not be far behind. As more and more publications join the “indie” bandwagon, the concept in and of itself loses its credibility as a high culture taste marker. As Hibbett puts it:

The very name ‘indie’ denotes a more concerted effort to separate the ‘good’ from the ‘popular’—to be not just an ‘alternative to,’ but ‘independent of.’ Indie rock claims for itself a kind of vacuous existence, independent of the economic and political forces, as well as the value systems and aesthetic criteria, of large-scale production. At the same time, in its manifestation as ‘indie,’ (*not* ‘independent’), indie rock mystifies itself, its more literal meanings giving way to something both trendy and exclusive (p. 58).

As publications catch on to this “indie” phenomenon and incorporate it into the mainstream consciousness, it begins to lose its value. If, as Hibbett suggests, the notion of “indie” must exist outside of mass production and culture, *Rolling Stone* cannot wholly claim it for itself; the very act of such a mainstream publication advocating indie rock renders the concept useless. As indie culture is assimilated into mainstream culture through dissemination by publications such as *Rolling Stone*, obscure highbrow publications will have to change their focus in order to maintain credibility. Right now, indie rock is still a young enough phenomenon that *Pitchfork* may still claim highbrow legitimacy from it, but because of the enormous influence the Web site has on mainstream publications, the time is quickly approaching when *Pitchfork* will be forced to change its direction or join the ranks of the mainstream and popular.

This research has shown that *Pitchfork* may in fact already be doing this. According to the textual analysis, in 2004 *Pitchfork* successfully advocated the-then-culturally-obscure indie rock and affiliated artists like Arcade Fire, and *Rolling Stone* followed suit—to a point. Seeing that indie rock was a tool capable of restoring highbrow credibility to the magazine, *Rolling Stone* continued its inclusion of indie rock in its content, effectively doubling the amount of indie coverage by the year 2007. But in 2007, *Pitchfork* did not mirror *Rolling Stone*'s amped-up coverage of the indie scene; instead, *Pitchfork* took their editorial content in a slightly different direction—that of experimental and postmodern music. Perhaps the powers that be at *Pitchfork* realized that they must jump the fledgling indie ship before it sinks into the waters of mainstream music, and are attempting to flex their cultural muscle in the direction of experimental music, which could be seen as a new taste marker. We must remember, though, that at one time *Rolling Stone* was considered the voice of high indie culture, although at that time it was known by a different name: rock 'n' roll. If *Pitchfork* is destined to follow the same trajectory as *Rolling Stone*, in the future it might be taking its editorial cues from another, newer and more obscure publication.

How Do They Do It?

Pitchfork sets cultural standards and credentials for what is considered high culture in the musical mainstream. As the textual analysis demonstrated, since its inception, *Pitchfork* included obscure indie bands as the bulk of its editorial content long before *Rolling Stone* did so. The editorial decision-makers at *Pitchfork* recognized a gap in music culture they thought was not being sufficiently covered, and it was proven they

were right in their assumption by the way the Web site has been successful in dictating taste. The textual analysis showed that as time went on, *Pitchfork*'s writers and editors did not prove their "indieness" by solely focusing their editorial content on indie bands or using the term "indie" to describe the bands they covered. Instead, *Pitchfork*'s "indieness" was inherent to the Web site and so its content managers were able to explore that cultural realm without explanation to the audience, who would presumably be "in the know" anyway. On the other hand, *Rolling Stone* was forced to conspicuously increase its coverage of indie bands as well as their use of the word "indie" in its editorial content in order to effectively "prove" to its audience that the magazine could also be "in the know" and a reliable source of taste with regard to indie artists. It is worth noting, too, that *Rolling Stone* made use of the word "twee" not one time but twice in its 2007 year-end list; the word, which is a synonym for indie pop, was the subject of a lengthy *Pitchfork* feature article in 2005 ("Twee as Fuck," 10/24/05). Yet *Pitchfork* did not use "twee" at all in any description of artists on its lists in either 2004 or 2007, perhaps reinforcing the point that it is "above" such usage as its audience would not find the word to be anything novel or different, in contrast to the typical mainstream audience of *Rolling Stone*.

This research has also proved that *Pitchfork* is able to maintain its cultural status by successfully breaking bands into the mainstream, as was the case with Arcade Fire. Because it is a Web site owned and operated under independent guidelines, and because the editorial decision-makers place importance on maintaining their Web site without corporate influence—and consequently without corporate pay, each writer for the site gets \$25 per article—*Pitchfork* has considerable leeway in the kind of music it advocates

and the way in which it advocates it. Obscurity plays a positive role here, as well; since *Pitchfork* is a somewhat obscure publication it can take chances on reviewing artists who might not be big enough to be picked up by mainstream giants like *Rolling Stone*.

Importance of Study and Suggestions for Further Research

This study has emphasized the importance and meaning of culture to the human experience, and pointed out that music and music criticism are central to the creation, understanding and dissemination of culture. Given this, a study such as this that attempts to explain how culture is being manufactured by certain media and disseminated to the masses is of academic and cultural significance. As consumers of media and culture, the public should be aware of where this culture is coming from and how editorial decision-makers at various publications effectively control the type of culture in which the audience is immersed. Media should also be aware of where their influences lie in order to be responsible agenda-setters for other publications as well as the general public.

Although this research deserves merit as a self-contained study, it can also serve as a building block for other studies of the music press and music culture. A future study involving interviews with the editorial decision-makers at *Rolling Stone*, *Pitchfork* or other music publications would be of much significance, as the editors could explain to the researcher in their own words how the editorial process is conducted at each publication and what, if any, overt effect other media have on the editorial content of such publications. Interviews with band members from groups that have been catapulted into the mainstream spotlight from relative obscurity, such as Arcade Fire, would also add depth to the study; indie artists could give their perspectives on how different media

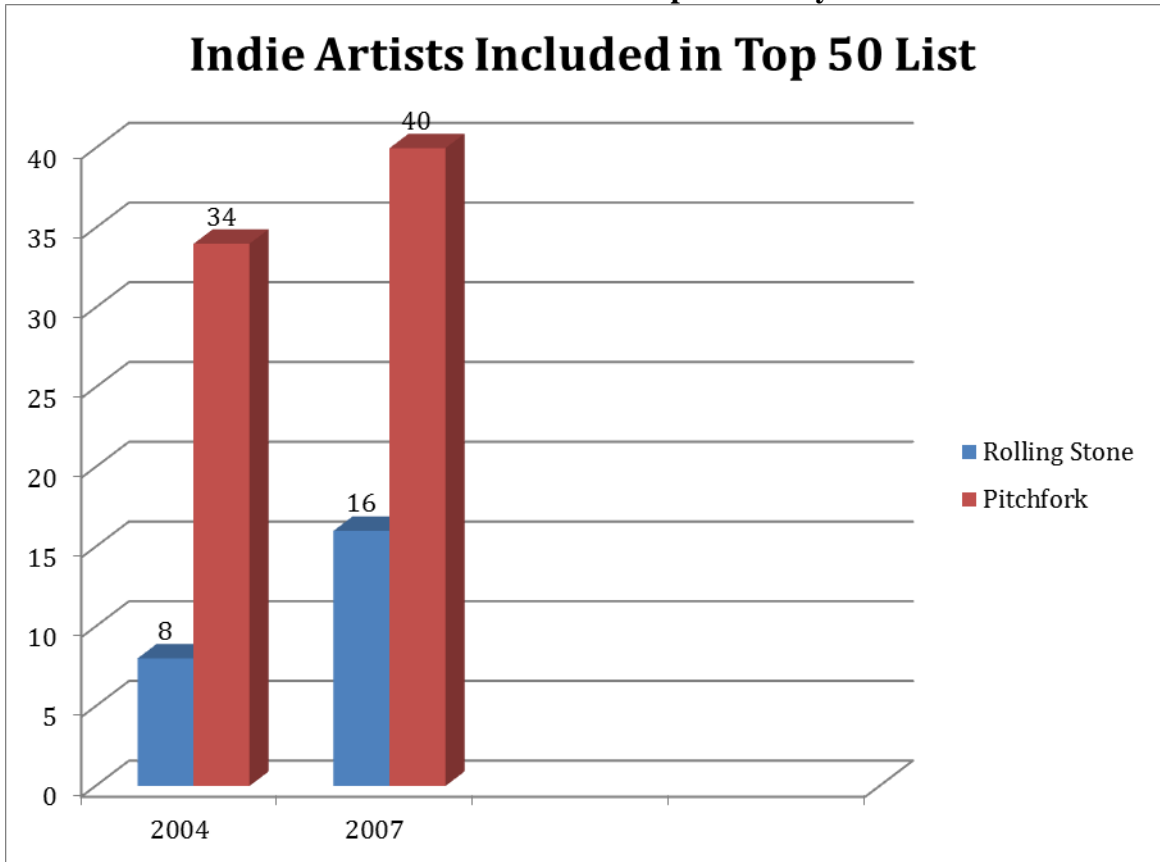
may positively or negatively impact their art and/or careers. Since it was demonstrated that *Pitchfork* seems to be headed in the direction of experimental and postmodern music, another study based on the same parameters this study employed but using experimental music as opposed to indie music for its mainstay would also serve well. Finally, as this thesis was being written, *Pitchfork* launched a new concept called “Pitchfork TV,” in which an “online channel will bring you closer to the artists you love, through original mini-documentaries, secret rooftop and basement sessions, full concerts, exclusive interviews, and the most carefully curated (sic) selection of music videos online” (*Pitchfork* News 3/4/08). The birth of this concept and its fruition would make an excellent subject of study, especially if compared to other, similar endeavors both in Web and broadcast media.

Arrival

This thesis opened with a quote from *Pitchfork*’s review of “Funeral,” and even though David Moore declared it was unimportant to dissect “how we got here,” this study has attempted to do exactly that. Through textual analysis and a case study filtered through the lens of cultural studies, it was demonstrated how new media could affect older media; specifically the research supports the hypothesis that *Pitchfork* could indeed be making a visible impression on the editorial content of *Rolling Stone*.

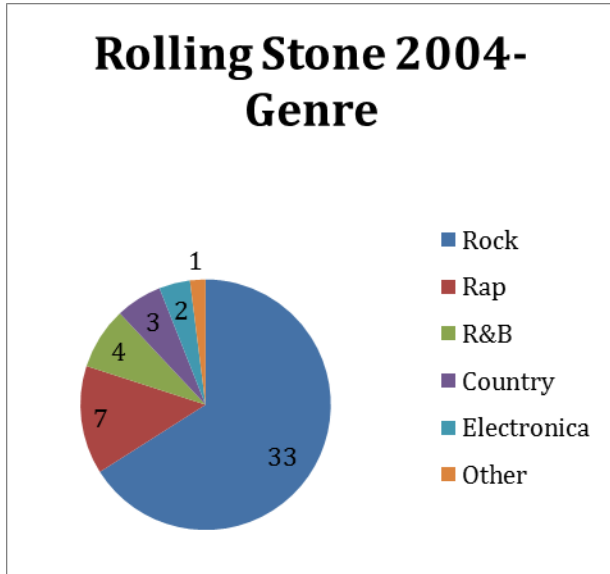
APPENDIX

1. Table: Number of Indie Artists Included in Top 50 List by Year

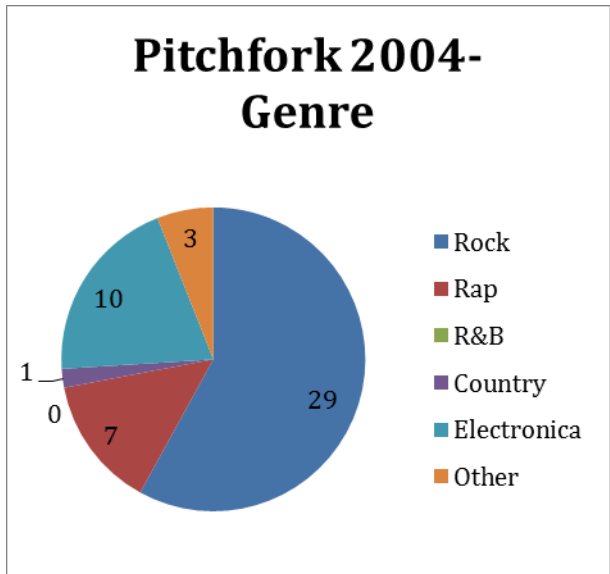


2. Table: Genre Breakouts by Year and Publication

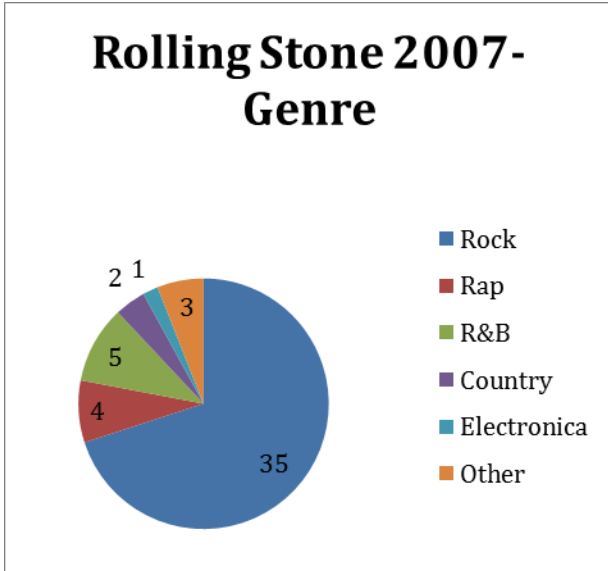
2.1



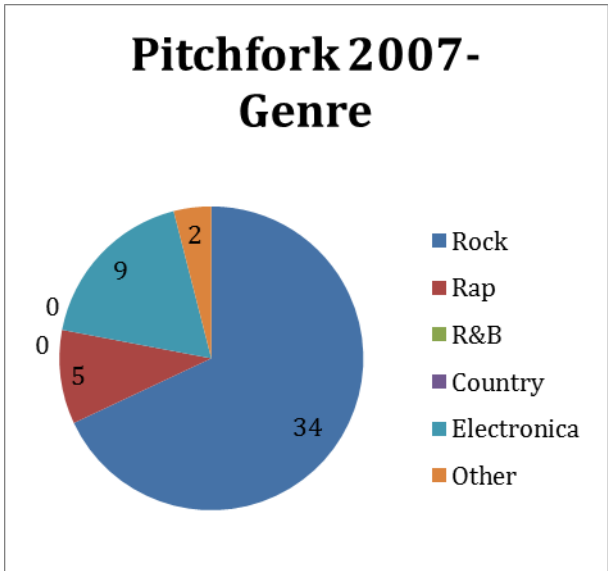
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2.3

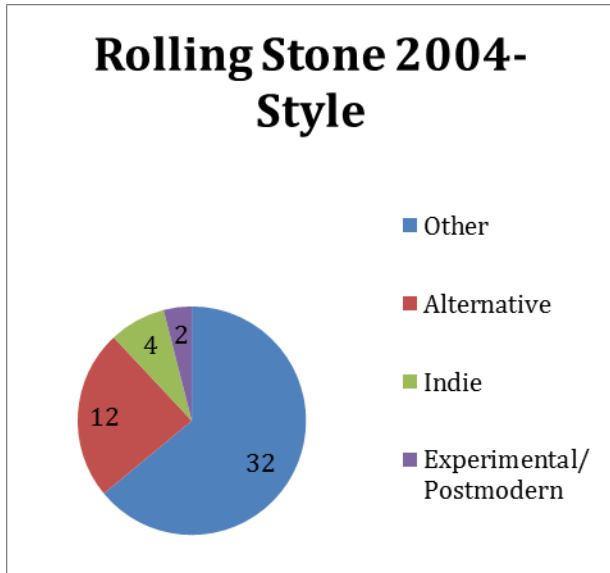


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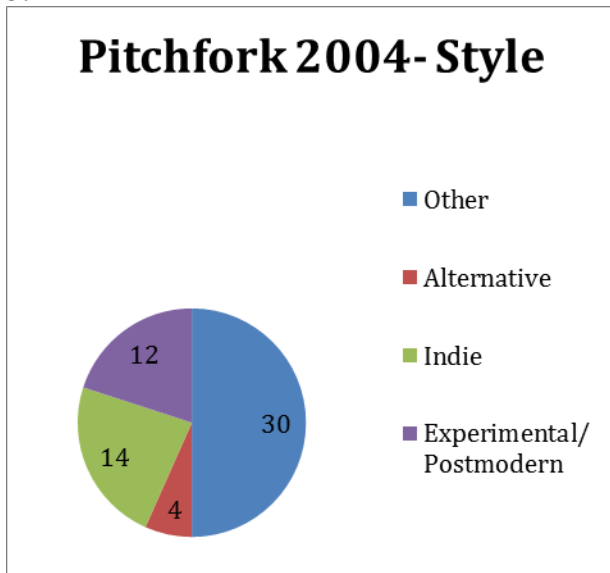


3. Table: Style Breakouts by Year and Publication

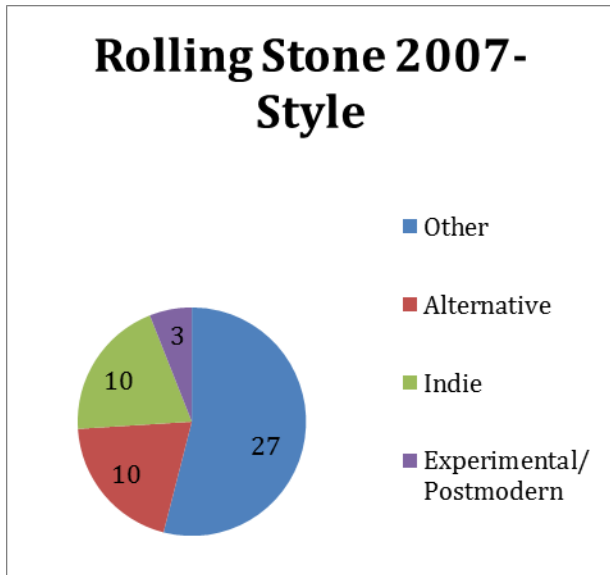
3.1



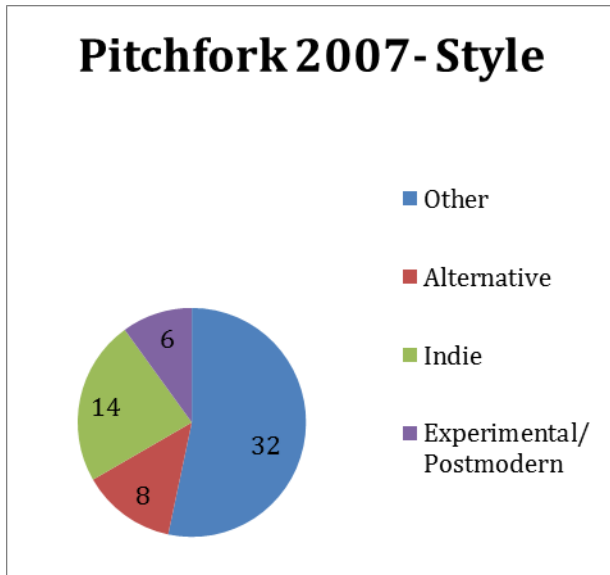
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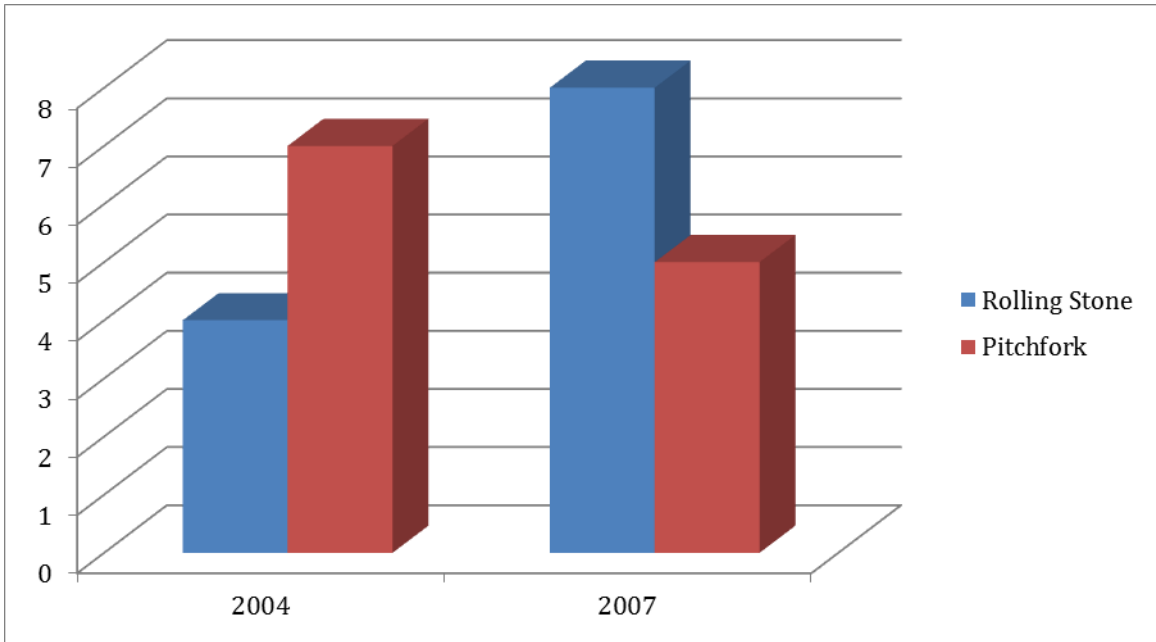


3.4



4. Table: Use of Term “Indie” in Text of Top 50 by Year and Publication

4.1



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