

Alexandre Frenette

Gabriel Rossman, "Climbing the Charts: What Radio Airplay Tells Us about the Diffusion of Innovation". Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012, 200 pp.n, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012, 200 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/78834)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2014

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book Review

Gabriel Rossman, *Climbing the Charts: What Radio Airplay Tells Us about the Diffusion of Innovation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012, 200 pp.

doi: 10.2383/78834

Since the 1970s, scholars have become increasingly interested in understanding how cultural industries operate. Richard Peterson and others developed the “production of culture” perspective, which takes into consideration the wider conditions in which cultural products like music are created. During the same period, Howard Becker developed his “art worlds” [1982] paradigm, which analyzes how an artist’s work is informed by, shaped, filtered, and disseminated by others – and thus, shows how artistic work is produced within a dynamic framework of creation. These approaches highlight how organizational forces and the context of cultural industries shape which products (e.g., which songs) will get produced and become popular.

Studies in the production of culture and art worlds traditions bridge two key interests: on one hand, such works substantively illuminate how cultural industries – socially and economically important fields – operate and, on the other hand, due to their focus on how organizational forces shape media production, such studies have contributed considerably to our understanding of organizations more broadly. Building particularly on the production of culture paradigm, Rossman similarly marries a substantive empirical interest in ‘how radio works’ with organizationally driven theoretical questions. By asking how radio stations start playing new songs, he is studying the adoption of innovation, a topic that extends beyond the cultural industries. How do farmers decide to begin planting a new type of corn? When do doctors begin prescribing an alternate drug? Is innovation imposed by corporate entities or does it spread via word of mouth? Rossman therefore aims to better understand the diffusion of innovation by using songs on the radio as a case study. He considers how radio stations adopt songs and, in turn, focuses on several factors: the coordinating role of corporate radio chains; promotional efforts by record labels; social networks among radio station personnel; and genre conventions.

But, in this digital age, why study radio? Despite the rise of Spotify, Pandora, iHeartRadio, iTunes Radio, and multiple other sources of online music curation, traditional radio retains a significant role within American popular culture. The average American over the age of twelve listens to FM radio for about fifteen hours per week. The weekly figure is much smaller than it was in the Twentieth century, but nonetheless highly valuable for a record industry competing with other media for consumers’ finite attention. According to Rossman, record labels might spend more than \$300,000 to get a song on the radio – he contrasts this figure with the \$78,000 it cost to assemble a dream team to produce, write, perform, and record Rihanna’s hit song “Man Down.” The first pages of *Climbing the Charts* present these disparate figures to successfully establish the pertinence of studying radio in the digital era. After all, why does it cost so much to get a song on the radio? More broadly, how does a song climb radio charts (or not?)

The book reiterates the importance of the gatekeeping process that separates artists and consumers. Rossman particularly draws on Paul Hirsch’s gatekeeping model to

understand how popular culture is made [Hirsch 1972]. According to Hirsch, cultural products (e.g., music recordings) flow through cultural distributors (record labels) and surrogate consumers (radio stations) before reaching consumers. While recent technological developments have certainly complicated Hirsch's original model, Rossman quickly establishes the salience of the *cultural distributor/surrogate consumer* boundary. Essentially, the author persuasively argues that radio stations add songs to their playlists in response to promotional efforts by record labels.

Instead of focusing on why a particular station adds a song to its playlist or on the day-to-day practices of radio personnel.¹ Rossman uses radio airplay data to graph "diffusion curves" for individual songs. With the x-axis representing time and the y-axis reflecting the number of stations playing a song, the shape of such a graph indicates the type of diffusion process taking place. An "s-shaped" curve represents a brief period of slow adoption, followed by incremental increases, and eventually a popularity plateau – such a shape is consistent with diffusion via word of mouth. Conversely, radio stations generally adopt pop songs extremely rapidly, and therefore Rossman's diffusion curves predominantly have a concave shape; the almost immediate adoption of pop songs by radio stations suggests some sort of outside influence on radio stations rather than peer imitation. The first two chapters methodically test and clarify this key finding that songs chart due to some external coordination.

Playlists from various radio stations are remarkably similar to one another. Rossman hypothesizes: perhaps this is simply due to radio stations' corporate ownership? One might expect two rival chains like Clear Channel and CBS to start playing a song at different times, but individual stations under each corporate entity to follow similar patterns. However, using airplay data for Rihanna's song "Umbrella" as an example, Rossman shows that diffusion curves for radio chains as a whole follow a concave (i.e., rapid adoption) model and yet "the extent to which sister stations cluster their add times is no greater than what we would expect by chance" [p. 20.] So, while a large radio chain might send advice to the company's stations regarding what music to play, Rossman finds no evidence of an imposed, centralized playlist. Instead, he argues, radio stations tightly coordinate their behavior due to the promotional efforts by record labels.

Radio airplay builds awareness for a release, though as previously mentioned, it does not exactly amount to free advertising for record companies and artists. A record label (or an intermediary) sends an artist's music to radio stations and specifies a date ("add date") when a song should begin airing, but stations might start playing the song weeks later, if ever. Record companies go to great lengths to get their artists' music played on the radio, ranging from legitimate practices such as mailing several promotional copies of CDs to radio personnel, to illegal tactics like bribing those workers ("payola.") Rossman surveys the history of payola scandals from the 1950s to today and points out that such scandals seem to emerge approximately every fifteen years (1950s, 1973, late 1980s, 2005.) Also, he notes, payola has increasingly shifted from an explicit exchange of airplay for cash, drugs, and/or sex, perhaps brokered by independent promoters, to various subtle, in-kind, loose, and flexible forms of exchange.

¹ For an excellent example of research on the latter see Ahlqvist and Faulkner [2002].

The 2005 payola scandal investigation unearthed documents providing evidence of an elaborate gift economy between record companies and radio stations. By providing in-kind gifts like electronics, free tickets for shows, or even office equipment without explicitly tying these to airplay for a specific artist, this gift economy is marked by “the tactful avoidance of directly discussing reciprocity” [p. 32.] Comparing songs named in the 2005 investigation documents to a control sample, Rossman found the former’s diffusion curves to be especially concave compared to the latter (consistent with central coordination.) Overall, during periods of increased regulatory scrutiny, such as the 2005 investigation, diffusion curves are noticeably less concave and therefore “record labels [are] unwilling or unable to exert substantial pressure on the radio industry” [p. 36.] Nonetheless, after a brief decrease of record label influence during such investigations, diffusion curves quickly return to similarly concave patterns, thereby setting the table for the next payola scandal.

The latter chapters in *Climbing the Charts* consider instances when songs spread through different diffusion processes. The author provides two key exceptions to the typically concave (i.e., record company-coordinated) diffusion pattern of hit songs: when songs become hits without being officially selected as singles by the record label (this rarely occurs) and crossover hits. In a sense, almost every radio hit is a crossover hit because a song can only get so much airplay in a narrowly defined format; ideally, a song’s airplay grows by spreading to several formats. Paradoxically, reception suffers for a song that does not have a clear format (i.e., it has a fuzzy identity). While Rossman argues that record company promotion trumps other factors in terms of getting songs on the radio, the chapter on radio formats and crossover hits (“But Which Chart Do You Climb?”) shows how peer imitation by radio personnel and the corporate ownership of stations play important roles in structuring diffusion behavior.

Since the 1950s, radio station programming has become increasingly specialized, meaning that corporate radio station formats fall into ever more narrow categories; simultaneously, the diversity in programming at respective stations has declined. Rossman describes how this institutionalization of genre categories structures diffusion behavior. As Keith Negus [1999] argues, “genre” powerfully informs the organization of the music business, including record companies, which follow genre-based categories to structure their divisions (urban, rock, etc.). Record companies usually promote a song within one or a few closely linked formats – hopefully the song will become a hit and cross over to even more radio formats (e.g., spread from Modern Rock to Top 40 radio stations.) A song’s diffusion pattern assumes a concave shape at radio stations in its “home” format, but it spreads differently if or when it crosses over to formats that fit the song more loosely – the latter diffusion curves are s-shaped, which suggests that stations do imitate peers, but only those from their own format. Before playing a Modern Rock song that loosely fits its Top 40 format, a radio station might wait for the song to be validated by other Top 40 peers.

Although its seven chapters total only 121 pages, *Climbing the Charts* is far richer in insights and examples than its length suggests. Nonetheless, the book has a few limitations (or points worth debating.) For example, when tabulating airplay for a song, Rossman considers a single spin on a radio station as an “add.” However, there is a significant difference between a radio station adding a song to its playlist vs. playing a

song several times per day, yet this difference is not reflected in the book's diffusion curves. The author addresses this point in an appendix, using Rihanna's singles to illustrate that this is a non-issue, but providing more examples (or considering the case of a non-superstar) would have been more convincing. Also, Rossman conducted a web survey to better understand the social networks of radio personnel (and ultimately discount the role of opinion leaders in diffusion), but one would expect music personnel to be unwilling to admit to outside influence in their aesthetic decisions, so qualitative interviews would have yielded more authoritative data. Lastly, readers may rightly question whether Rossman's account of the United States radio case remains consistent in other markets; the book does not make international comparisons, which is a gap future research needs to address.

Despite these quibbles, I must applaud the author's astute decision to "follow the innovation" (instead of the actor) to understand the diffusion of innovation. Due to Rossman's clever use of radio airplay data and rigorous treatment of his case study, *Climbing the Charts* represents an important contribution to the sociological study of diffusion and music. In the end, we know much more about how innovations diffuse and Rossman updates our understanding of gatekeeping in the music industry.

Alexandre Frenette
Arizona State University

References

- Ahlkvist, J.A. and Faulkner, R.
2002 "Will This Record Work for Us?' Managing Formats in Commercial Radio." *Qualitative Sociology* 25(2): 189-215.
- Hirsch, P.
1972 "Processing Fads and Fashions: An Organization-Set Analysis of Cultural Industry Systems." *American Journal of Sociology* 77(4): 639-659.
- Negus, K.
1999 *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*. New York: Routledge.