

Case study: the evolution of mtv and muchmusic assignment



Case Study: The Evolution of MTV and MuchMusic P. J. Worsfold, 4/30/2007

What happened to all the music on MTV and MuchMusic? With its 24-hour broadcast dominated by music videos, MTV became “ perhaps the most influential single cultural product” of the 1980s (Williams), while with an equally heavy musical presence, in the mid-1990s, MuchMusic was “ the key to modern Canadian popular music, an indispensable myth-maker and... a deliberate nation builder in picture and sound” (Ward). Yet today, music videos account for just over 15% of MTV’s daily programming (altmusic.tv).

Similarly, MuchMusic’s video flow, at 50% of its daily programming, is at the lowest level that its licensing agreement requires; a sharp decrease from 2000, when video flow accounted for 87% of their daily programming (CRTC 2006-380). When they began, MTV and MuchMusic dominated their markets. In fact, one could argue that, MTV in particular, created a completely new market, a market that advertisers were willing to pay dearly to access. Yet today, competition for the ears, eyes, and minds of the youth is fierce and advertisers have many options to reach this fickle market.

Aside from traditional sporting and entertainment offerings, MTV and MuchMusic are in bitter competition with websites, video games, cell phones, iPods and a host of other technologies; each of which are teeming with some form of corporate sponsorship. With their dependency on advertiser revenue and their obligations to their respective parent companies, an economic imperative long ago eclipsed any allegiance to music that may have once existed in the upper echelons of these two music broadcasters.

MTV and MuchMusic are squarely in the business of providing advertisers access to a particular demographic, the nature of their programming is irrelevant, as long as it captures and holds the right audience. Through an endless cycle of focus groups, opinion polls, ratings reports, and schedule retooling, the former purveyors of music videos have found that the majority of their audience will visit their channels more often and stay with their programming longer if they are shown reality shows, celebrity gossip programs, and teen-dramas instead of music videos.

Consequently, the networks have adapted their programming accordingly. The music broadcasters that once seemed cutting edge and anti-establishment are now clearly as corporate and contrived as anything else on the dial. Yet, the last half-century of conglomerate era media operations demonstrates that, “ the free marketplace of ideas is not congruent with the capitalist free market” (Raudsepp). So, should anyone be surprised that a diversity of music videos, albeit within a broader pop genre, has been pushed out by half-hour portions of schlock aimed solely at generating ratings?

Through an analysis of MTV and MuchMusic, which will focus on their early development, this case study will explore the birth, growth, and, what many feel will be the end to music video based television in Canada and the U. S.. While highlighting the technological and circumstantial similarities and the ideological and regulatory differences that shaped these two broadcasters, the panoptic intent of this discussion is to demonstrate the inherent limitations of the free market’s ability to stimulate cultural diversity.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to provide a brief explanation of the structure that this case study will take. The majority of research on music video based television is American, thus many technological and economic observations are from an American point of view. Where possible, I have endeavoured to include Canadian perspective. However, given our cultural similarities, portions of this case study are based on the assumption that various economic and cultural factors, such as the late-1970s decline of record sales in the U. S. , were paralleled in Canada. Pre-MTV & Pre-MuchMusic

In the late 1960s, led by the Beatles, British pop acts began producing promotional short-films for their songs and eventually, this trend found its way across the Atlantic. Throughout the 1970s, stimulated by the emergence of videotape and probably the odd recreational drug, the production of such films became increasingly popular and their style became increasingly avant-garde. Although these promotional clips were occasionally broadcast on American television shows such as *Solid Gold*, Michael Nesmith, formerly of the made-for-TV pop group, the Monkees, is credited with creating America's first music video program.

Entitled *PopClips*, Nesmith's program aired from 1980 to 1981 on Warner Communications' Nickelodeon network. *PopClips* featured popular music videos of the day, introduced by Canadian comedian, Howie Mandel in the "quirky, humorous, frenetic visual style" (Austen 198), that would later characterize MTV. North of the border, music journalist, John Martin shared Nesmith's love of the music video aesthetic. A man passionate about both

music and journalism, in the late 1970s, Martin set about creating a TV program called The New Music.

Revolutionary for its day, The New Music would discuss music in a journalistic style, with a focus on “ reporting what was happening on the street and presenting music as news, rather than simply sound” (Creator). Martin described his production as “ the equivalent of Rolling Stone magazine on television” (Zerbisias). The New Music first aired on the City-TV network on September 22 1979 and it continues to air weekly on MuchMusic, representing one of the network’s last examples of credible music journalism.

Martin, who died of cancer in 2006, is often referred to as the “ father of rock video in Canada” (Creator) and his work on The New Music would be hugely influential in setting the initial tone for MuchMusic. As music video production grew, cable television continued to develop across the U. S. and Canada. Canadian technology and investment played a vital role in the development of the satellite technology, which would be crucial to cable television’s distribution. Yet ironically, CRTC restrictions meant that Canadian consumers would have to wait nearly four years before they could enjoy American-style pay-TV.

In the U. S. , early cable efforts were restricted by FCC regulations, which ABC, CBS, NBC tirelessly lobbied for (McGrath 14), yet by the mid-1970s, regulations had loosened and satellite technology had greatly improved cable’s distribution. Led by HBO, who experienced a 500% subscription growth from 1975 to 1978 (17), American cable outlets such as Viacom’s

Showtime and Turner Broadcasting's WTBS SuperStation began to make their presence felt on America's broadcast landscape.

With its greater channel capacity and less restrictive content policies, by 1980, American cable TV " had everything in place for a revolution in viewing - except the programming" (Williams). While music videos and cable television began to find their way, record sales sagged. The disco era was at an end, pop music sales were still largely segregated along racial boundaries, punk artists failed to generate sales comparable to their arena-rock peers, and the hip-hop and heavy metal genres that would be wildly successful in the decades to follow were still in their infancies. From 1977 to 1980, record sales declined 10% annually (Breithaupt) and music business layoffs abounded. Breithaupt notes that during this period, even " A-list stars (such) as Stevie Wonder, Elton John and Paul McCartney could no longer be counted on for (a) regularly scheduled blockbuster" (Breithaupt). While most fans were unaware of the sales slump, music executives were desperate, their business " was hurting and ripe for a shakeup" (Breithaupt). MTV

In December 1979, after having had some earlier success in cable and sensing a greater opportunity in the market, Warner Communications partnered with American Express, who were looking for a compliment to their financial services portfolio, to create a cable television distribution and production company. Structurally, this joint venture was divided into two groups; Warner Amex Cable Communications (WACC) would work to build and strengthen the technical infrastructure, while the Warner-Amex Satellite Entertainment Company (WASEC) was charged with developing new cable programming.

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John Lack, an executive vice-president at WASEC, was involved with the production of Nesmith's PopClips program. Recognizing the music video's promotional capacity, Lack spotted potential in Nesmith's show. In 1980, Lack began mulling over an idea to create a 24-hour music video station; his timing was impeccable. Lack astutely noted three factors that he believed would make his concept a success. First, at that time, there was no cost-effective vehicle for advertisers to reach the teenage and young adult market.

Secondly, the burgeoning cable television business was sorely lacking content, Lack recalls, "except for movies, cable was really a creative nightmare" (Williams). Finally, Lack observed that by broadcasting music videos, which promotion hungry record labels would gladly handover, MTV would have a free source of programming. Convinced his idea would be a success, Lack approached Warner Communications Chairman, Steve Ross and American Express Chairman, James Robinson for \$20 million (Williams) to make his idea a reality.

Lack recalls the meeting's conclusion where, "Robinson turned to Ross and said, 'listen, Steve, I don't know much about the music business, but it makes sense to me. I'll buy it if you'll buy it'" (Williams). Consequently, MTV, the world's first all music video network, was set to begin operations, serving an estimated 2.5 million subscribers (Williams). On August 1 1981 at 12:01am, John Lack commenced MTV's broadcast with his famous introduction, "ladies and gentlemen, rock and roll", which was followed prophetically by the Buggles' video, Video Killed the Radio Star.

After broadcasting a few more videos, MTV got down to business, airing commercials for a 3-ring binder, the Superman II movie, and Dolby's Noise Reduction technology (McGrath 64). In the words of Robert Pittman, who Lack recruited to be MTV's programmer and who would later become the network's president and CEO, MTV was to be "a channel with no programs, no beginning, no middle, (and) no end" (Williams). Based on Lack's concept, Pittman, who is largely credited with defining the essence of early MTV, devised an around the clock schedule of prerecorded video blocks connected with bits of video jockey (VJ) banter.

Although music videos were gaining popularity, the vast majority of songs airing on pop radio had no accompanying video. Thus, early MTV relied on a small number of videos from a diverse group of artists. Austen notes, "a block of videos could go from heavy metal (Iron Maiden) to rootsy rock (Rockpile) to artsy new wave (Talking Heads) to power pop (Shoes) to singer-songwriter (Carly Simon) to classic rock (the Who)" (Austen 199). Brand conscious from the beginning, the network "lavished great care and artistry on the few bits of programming it did create" (Williams), its own commercials and bumpers.

With a style similar to the music videos that they played, MTV's advertising featured quick edits, vibrant colours, iconic imagery, and innovative animations, wrapped in a "raw, amateurish, do-it-yourself aesthetic" (Austen 199). Perhaps the network's most famous ad featured Buzz Aldrin's 'moon-walk' where, through altered NASA footage, the astronaut is seen planting an MTV flag on the moon's surface. Between the relentless sights and sounds of

VJ banter, music videos, and self-promotions, the pace was frenetic and MTV was completely unlike anything before it.

Pittman argued that this was TV for “ people who grew up with television... who learned to do their homework, listen to the radio and watch television all at the same time. For these people, we needed to create a form that was nonlinear, using mood and emotion to create an atmosphere” (Friedrich). Although hampered by various technical, organizational, and distribution issues, MTV quickly gained in popularity. However, the music industry and the mainstream press really began to take notice in the summer of 1982, when MTV added I Ran, by England’s Flock of Seagulls to its play list.

Relatively unknown in the U. S. before entering MTV’s rotation, within a few months, I Ran entered Billboard Magazine’s top 10 (McGrath 86) and sales soared. What followed for MTV was a level success and growth that nobody could have predicted. New and visually conscious artists such as Prince, Duran Duran, and Madonna became MTV staples and quickly conquered the charts. While thanks to MTV attention, established artists such as Bruce Springsteen and Tina Turner found that they could reach “ audiences daily in a way six months of touring couldn’t match” (Breithaupt).

Although in its first three years, MTV lost “ as much as \$50 million” (MTV Profit) in 1984, the network posted a profit of \$11. 9 million and in three years it became “ the world’s first profitable cable network” (Breithaupt). With 25. 4 million subscribers (MTV Profit), MTV had become a cultural phenomenon. Gunther summarizes the network’s status best by observing that, while no one had ever said, “ let’s watch some CBS tonight,” the

phrase, “let’s watch some MTV” (Gunther) had become a common element in America’s cultural lexicon. 1984 was also the year that MTV caved into record label pressure and agreed to pay a licensing fee for its video content. However, the network wisely negotiated exclusivity agreements with major labels (Denisoff 150), which sealed the fate of emerging competitors such as Ted Turner’s Cable Music Channel. With revenues remaining strong, in 1985 MTV created VH1, a sister station aimed at the 25-50 year old market, and in 1987, the network expanded into Europe. However, by 1986, MTV’s ratings began to drop.

Rock and roll and the MTV aesthetic were now a pervasive element of popular culture; network dramas featured music video style slow motion effects and sports broadcasting had adopted MTV’s flashy animations. MTV “had become what you can never afford to be when you’re trying to lure a young demographic: stale and predictable” (McGrath 147). The network had long known that the combination of the remote control and an eclectic mix of videos was not great for ratings, if a video caught a viewer’s attention, they would likely stay on the channel and watch, but as soon as something came on that they did not like, they would be off. Making matters worse, the music market was growing progressively more fragmented. Perhaps a product of the niche market mentality that the cable industry catered to, “there was no longer a big fat middle to appeal to, as there had been in 1983, 1984, and 1985, when Michael Jackson, Bruce Springsteen, and Cyndi Lauper had ruled” (190). To keep ratings up and advertisers happy, MTV began creating more genre specific shows with the intent of catching and holding audience attention for a longer period of time.

Examples of such shows include 120 Minutes, which was geared toward alternative music; Yo! MTV Raps, a hip hop show; and Headbanger's Ball, a hard rock and heavy metal program. Although these genre specific shows bolstered ratings, it was the inclusion of the network's first sitcom in 1986 that would mark the beginning of the end for the music video on MTV. Ironically, the show was the 1960s hit, The Monkees, featuring Michael Nesmith. Surprising many at the network, The Monkees garnered the highest ratings that the network has seen in two years (147).

Eager to build on the success of more predictable, genre specific and longer format programming, MTV began to reinvent itself in a spirit that was sharply at odds with Pittman's notion of nonlinear programming. Not surprisingly, Pittman left MTV in 1987. Throughout the next two decades, MTV released a barrage of progressively less musically oriented programming including Remote Control (1987), a game show; The Real World (1992), a reality show that is often recognized as the first of its genre; Beavis and Butthead (1993), a cartoon; and The Osbournes (2002), a celebrity reality show that is also recognized as genre pioneer.

McGrath observers, " no longer was [MTV] just a music video channel (FM radio with pictures, as the pioneers used to call it)... it was now a full-fledged television network, albeit one aimed at teens and young adults" (173).

Underscoring the economic motivation behind MTV's transformation, in 1997, then MTV President, Judy McGrath said, " the unfortunate truth... is that anytime you put a show on, it does five times better than a video hour" (Gunther). Judging by MTV's programming a decade later, this unfortunate truth has persisted and translated into economic success.

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Viacom, MTV's parent company since 1985, does release year-by-year revenue numbers for each of its holdings. However, 2004 estimates placed MTV's annual revenue at \$1.1 billion (Mucha) and in 2005, MTV accounted for 17% of the total revenue for Viacom's cable division (Martin). MuchMusic, a property of Canadian broadcasting conglomerate, CHUM Limited, was founded by John Martin and Moses Znaimer. With his experience on The New Music, Martin acted as the station's director of programming and Znaimer, the broadcasting savvy, owner-operator of City-TV, was MuchMusic's first president and executive producer.

While MTV was unabashedly a moneymaking operation, made possible in part by America's more libertarian broadcasting regulations, Martin and Znaimer's take on what an all music channel should be, was uniquely Canadian. Following Lack's lead, Znaimer observed, "the earning potential of [an MTV] copycat cable channel" (Breithaupt), while Martin visualized a "channel about music as well as for music" (Zerbisias). Both protected and restricted by the CRTC, MuchMusic would serve two masters, it would make money and it would be a worthy patron of pop music. For a time, MuchMusic successfully struck the balance.

At 6:00am on August 31, 1984, MuchMusic began broadcasting with Rush's *The Enemy Within*. "More SCTV than MTV" (Hooper), MuchMusic stood in stark contrast to MTV's shrewdly calculated 'cool'. Znaimer believed MuchMusic "could be profitable without the studied and often painfully choreographed hip of MTV" (Armstrong). Christopher Ward, one of the station's first VJs recalls, "here was MTV all organized and scripted and taped, and MuchMusic was just chaos by comparison" (Hooper). In order to <https://assignbuster.com/case-study-the-evolution-of-mtv-and-muchmusic-assignment/>

ensure smooth operations, the majority of MTV's programming was prerecorded.

Conversely, MuchMusic aired live daily in six, and later eight-hour blocks, which would then repeat for the rest of the day (Krewen). However, like its American counterpart, MuchMusic aired plenty of commercials.

Unfortunately, a comparable number for MTV is unavailable, however, in its early days, MuchMusic aired roughly eight minutes of commercials an hour (Fraser), which is markedly below both the twelve-minute limit that the CRTC sets today (CRTC Advertising) and the 15-minute average of American broadcasts (Gough). At first glance, MTV and MuchMusic would have appeared quite similar in the mid-1980s.

MuchMusic's play list included MTV favourites such as Duran Duran, Prince and Madonna, and " its use of hand-held cameras, quick-cut editing and flashy graphics" (Hooper) were obviously MTV inspired. However, given the dearth of early video content, diversity was thrust on MTV, whereas MuchMusic's early format embraced a broad spectrum of acts. Ward observes, " while MTV was lily-white until Michael Jackson's *Thriller* got too big to ignore, MuchMusic folded soul, R&B, then rap and hip-hop, into its play list from the start" (Ward).

David Kines, MuchMusic's vice-president recalls, " you'd see [country artist,] Dwight Yoakam right before [the heavy-metal group,] Motorhead and it didn't matter and people accepted that because it was visual and new and cool" (Hooper). Although MuchMusic soon incorporated genre specific shows into its programming, such as a weekly heavy metal program called the

Pepsi Power Hour, its commitment to diversity lasted well into the 1990s. The most important and the most enduring difference between MTV and MuchMusic is MuchMusic's commitment to Canadian content.

As long as their programming adheres to the FCC's decency regulations, MTV is free to play whatever they please. However, MuchMusic, like all Canadian broadcasters, is required by CRTC regulations to include a certain percentage of Canadian content in their daily broadcast. When MuchMusic first began in 1984, 10% of the videos they aired had to meet Canadian content requirements. In 1987, based on the growth of Canadian music video production, the CRTC raised MuchMusic's Canadian content quota to 20% and in 1989, the CRTC again raised the quota to 30%, where it stands today (CRTC 88-777).

Perhaps the best example of MuchMusic's early commitment to both profit and music was the establishment and continued support of an organization called, 'Video, a Foundation to Assist Canadian Talent' (VideoFact). Created by Znaimer, as part of MuchMusic's original licensing proposal, and funded by a percentage-based portion of MuchMusic's revenues, VideoFact provides grants to Canadian artists to assist in the production of music videos.

Although VideoFact is in some ways self-serving, as it ensures a steady stream of content and no doubt helps to ingratiate MuchMusic within Canada's regulatory and musical circles, the foundation has been a tremendous help to many Canadian recording artists. Although the CRTC's programming requirements restrict what MuchMusic can play, its restrictive licensing policies have provided the broadcaster with a highly lucrative,

government-sponsored monopoly. With an audience of 558, 000, MuchMusic posted a profit in its first year of operations (Zerbisias). By 1988, MuchMusic's audience reached 1. million and by 2001, MuchMusic earned a pre-tax profit of nearly \$11 million, serving 6. 9 million subscribers (CRTC FDB10). Following MTV's example, MuchMusic expanded in the early 1990s, setting up MuchMusic Argentina in 1992 and MuchUSA in 1994. By the late 1990s, a decade after MTV had begun to turn its back on music videos, MuchMusic was proudly standing by its more eclectic format. In 1998, MuchMusic's director of marketing, David Kirkwood argued, MTV's " style is more Beavis & Butthead... [while] we've stuck to music. It's a predictable destination: Punch Channel 18 for music" (McDonald). Yet by the year 2000, changes were afoot.

While partly due to CRTC programming requirements, MuchMusic had spared its audience an MTV-style descent into reality shows, the overwhelming commercialization of the pop music landscape, which many attribute to MTV, spelled the end of MuchMusic's musical diversity. Governed by the same need to please advertisers and sustain market share that controls MTV, " MuchMusic's programming, like that of FM radio, [took] on a strip-mall sterility" (Hooper). Longtime MuchMusic VJ, Terry David Mulligan remarked, " if the MuchMusic I joined 15 years ago was a six-lane freeway in terms of music, they're down to a single lane now.

It's narrow-casting to an extreme" (Hooper). In November 2000, Denise Donlon, MuchMusic's vice president and general manager left the station to become the president at Sony Music Canada. Shortly before her departure, Donlon defended MuchMusic's programming while perhaps demonstrating <https://assignbuster.com/case-study-the-evolution-of-mtv-and-muchmusic-assignment/>

some of her personal frustration. Donlon remarked, " some people say we're selling out, but you have to give the audience what they want and if the audience is saying I'm going to triple your numbers if you do a Spice Girls weekend, who are we to deny them that? " (Hooper). In 2003, Znaimer followed Donlon and left MuchMusic.

As the decade continues, progressively more non-music related and highly commercial programming has dominated MuchMusic's schedule.

MuchMusic's original production, Much in Your Space, a teen-oriented, interior decorating show, and its rebroadcast of the E! Network's celebrity reality show, House of Carters, are two recent examples of MuchMusic's MTV-style programming transformation. Yet with 2005 revenues of \$54. 8 million and a pre-tax profit of \$15. 5 million, MuchMusic's revenues and profits have increased 7% and 9. 3% respectively since 2001 (CRTC FDB10).

Given CTVglobemedia's acquisition of Chum Limited in 2006 and a CRTC decision in the same year that reduced MuchMusic's daily video requirement from 65% to 50%, MuchMusic's programming is likely to stay its current course. Conclusion Like other media systems before them, the transformations of MTV and MuchMusic demonstrate the conflicting goals of business and culture. Although change is vital to the evolution of each, business thrives on efficiency and predictability, while culture thrives on diversity and random chance. When business and culture come together, one must take primacy at the expense of the other.

Although MTV and MuchMusic were first heralded as an instance of business responding to the cultural needs of a niche market, even if they were strictly

moneymaking ventures from the onset, their evolutions demonstrate the incompatibilities between business and culture. While niche programming is a great way to build a core audience and a sense of brand excitement, in an environment of advertiser-based revenue streams and concentrated ownership, noble ideologies of cultural service are a distant second to the urgency of profit. Works Cited altmusictv. 2007. "MTV Then and Now." April 30 2007 <http://altmusictv.blogspot.com/2007/02/mtv-then-and-now.html>. Armstrong, John. "Canadian Station Has Kinder, Gentler Format." The Vancouver Sun 3 August 1997: D7. Austen, Jake. TV a-go-go: Rock on TV from American Bandstand to American Idol. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2005. Breithaupt, Don. "Video Saved the Talentless Star: The 20th Anniversary of MTV and How it Changed Popular Culture." National Post. 28 July 2001: W1. Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. "Advertising/Commercials." 30 April 2007 http://www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/INFO_SHT/b300.htm. Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. "Decision CRTC 2006-380." April 30 2007 <http://www.crtc.gc.ca/archive/ENG/Decisions/2006/db2006-380.htm>. Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. "Decision CRTC 88-777." April 30 2007 <http://www.crtc.gc.ca/archive/eng/Decisions/1994/..%5C..%5CDecisions%5C1988%5CDB88-777.htm>. Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. "FDB10: Pay and Specialty TV Financial Summary." April 30 2007 <http://www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/publications/reports/BrAnalysis/p/individual/314600545.htm>. "Creator of The New Music Was 'Brilliant' Video Pioneer." Times - Colonist. [Victoria] 1 March 2006: C19. Denisoff, R.

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