

# Coldplay's success through a digital landscape



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## A Sky Full of Technology

It comes as no surprise that the music industry is changing with both digital technology and media. The way an audience consumes and experiences music is changing rapidly and is not slowing down as artists evolve with it (Pontara & Volgsten, 2017). Today, listeners can download as many songs as they want in the palm of their hand, for a low price. Additionally, concert goers can experience a whole world of visual appeal through a band's use of live digital technology. Artists like Lady Gaga, Justin Bieber, Calvin Harris, Shawn Mendes, Charlie Puth, etc., were all discovered and made a future music career through digital media, giving websites like YouTube some credibility in the music industry (Starr & Waterman, 2017).

One band, however, that is world famous today but did not get their start through social media platforms such as YouTube or SoundCloud is Coldplay. The band started as friends living in the same dormitory at the University College of London (UCL) and shortly after signed with a record label, allowing them to climb their way up the charts with seven albums to date (Timothy, 2015), making their way to the top 10 recording artists list multiple years in a row (Domingo, 2018). Coldplay had to evolve with the growth of digital technology and media, and has ultimately been able to use it to their benefit. This paper will analyze how the band Coldplay has navigated new digital content in order to keep their audience interested by using live digital technology and digital media involvement to grow their success. As a result, they are the most accomplished band to manage the evolving digital landscape.

Coldplay is one of the most popular bands to use technology as an integral part of their concert experience. Modern technology gives concert goers a chance to be participants in the concert experience rather than just a spectator (Maksymic, 2014). In some of the bands most recent tours, they presented the idea of Xylobands. Xylobands are controllable, multicolored LED wristbands that were passed out to every audience member at Coldplay's venues. Ryan Maksymic explains that the Xylobands are controlled with a radio transmitter and can control all of the wristbands to turn on and off their different colours at any time (Maksymic, 2014). Essentially, each wristband contains a small circuit board that holds an RF receiver and an 8-bit microcontroller, all powered by small coin cell batteries. It is estimated that this digital experience cost the band around \$680, 000 CAD per night (Maksymic, 2014). This one attribute of the bands concert experience shows the dedication and evolution of the artist's navigation through the new digital landscape. The band implemented an experience which audience members have never been through and enhanced their own show by making the audience a participant.

Another way Coldplay uses digital technology is through their music videos. Music videos have become one of the most important features in an artist's evolving career. Mark Romanek directed Coldplay's music video for " Speed of Sound" off their third album *X & Y* in 2005 (Keazor, 2014). The music video resembles the bands live performances, making it seem like they are just performing a live show in front of the camera. The musicians are playing their instruments while Chris Martin (singer) appears to be singing as though in front of a crowd. Henry Keazor explains that Romanek uses " 640 LED light

bars that are programmed to be triggered by the music and displaying colours and abstract patterns throughout the performance in synchrony with it" (Keazer, 2014). Similar to the band's use of wristbands, LED lights are used to visualize the music that the audience is hearing. As the song progresses there are light explosions, floating shapes, and vortexes, all representing different parts of the song. Another example of the band's use of digital technology in their music videos is the song "Adventure of A Lifetime" where they use some of the best CGI technology to present themselves as chimpanzees playing instruments (Keazor, 2014). The band gives their audience a concert experience and sometimes an experience far from reality from the comfort of their own home or cellular device. By using digital technology to enhance the viewing experience on a computer screen or live in concert, the band manages to take the technology available and change the way audiences experience music by making it visual.

With 38.6M likes on Facebook, 23.8M followers on Twitter, 9.9M followers on Instagram and music on YouTube, Spotify and Deezer, Coldplay has taken over the world of digital media (Domingo, 2018). Digital distribution started off in the 1990's with the introduction of the MPEG. This grew to downloading music and having easy access on devices such as the iPod (Starr & Waterman, 2017). The iPod soon made its way to iTunes where consumers could access and purchase music all in one place, until streaming came along and is still taking over the way music is distributed today. From Pandora to Spotify and Tidal, music is completely accessible through digital media (Starr & Waterman, 2017). In order for bands to support themselves and to get their music out there, social media accounts are also an asset.

Keeping the fans up to date on a daily basis keeps audiences interested and more involved through commenting and liking posts.

Spotify is an on-demand streaming service that gives users access to 30 million tracks of music (Starr & Waterman, 2017). Music listeners can purchase a premium service or can join the service for free (with ads included). Since the service fee is a small fare per month, big name artists have initially refused (although now on the service) their music for Spotify users because of their concern for poor royalty payments. These artists include Radiohead, Adele, Taylor Swift, and Coldplay (Starr & Waterman, 2017). This suggests that although Coldplay uses digital media to further their careers in many ways, they also show some resistance to certain platforms for the bands' overall success.

Coldplay uses their social media accounts to invite fans to vote on what songs they want to hear them perform in concert. This gives their fans a chance to be interactive outside of the concert stadium and give their opinion towards the music in a positive way (Bennett, 2008). This essentially increasing likability, followers, and status. An interesting way that Coldplay uses digital media is through connecting with the youth of today. In an article by Lance Bennett called *Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age*, he explains the importance of not trying to fix youths themselves to be interested and involved in civic life, but to use communication to support it. Chris Martin encouraged concert goers to join Oxfam's Make Trade Fair campaign (Bennett, 2008). Since the singer is so connected with his fans over digital media platforms, the fans took it a step further by gathering 10,000 postcards at the bands concert to send to President Bush directly.

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Bennett says that the postcards asked Bush: “ to stop dumping subsidized exports such as rice on poor countries where farmers could no longer profit from growing the same crops” (Bennett, 2008). This topic may not have anything to do with the band or music itself, but it shows the impact that a singer such as Chris Martin has on society, and how digital media has been used to further Coldplay's credibility.

It is extremely important for all artists to stay on top of new technologies when it comes to the music industry because when it comes to any sort of art form, the world will move forward if an artist chooses to stay behind. All artists must adapt to the technologies of the world for the sake of its audience and the chance to be seen or heard. If artists didn't stay on top of new technologies, then we would not have the same entertainment value and extravagance that we do today. In order for Coldplay to be the band that they are today they needed to be advanced with the technology on and off the stage. Generations have been getting more and more impatient, and artists need to get their music to their audience quickly and through technology (Pontara & Volgsten, 2017). Spotify is one of the most current streaming services that I think is a great platform for how music should be distributed given our current economy. Also, without social media platforms to keep fans attached to the musicians themselves, music then becomes something completely different and less of an overall experience. Coldplay fans are also Chris Martin, Will Champion, Guy Berryman, and Jonny Buckland fans because of the personal lives we see on social media. Music in the 21<sup>st</sup> century isn't just about what you hear, music is an experience with visuals, online content, distribution and overall technology.

In conclusion, digital technology and digital media has changed the way that music is made and heard. The band Coldplay is one the best examples when it comes to managing these digital landscapes and creating an environment that both the band and the audience benefit from. Coldplay uses modern technology to create a concert experience that incorporates the audience members in a personal way. By using LED wristbands, extensive lighting setups, paired with the bands' energy on stage, one can essentially view the music they are listening to (Maksymic, 2014). The band, however, realizes that this experience shouldn't just be on stage but through their music videos and online content. By making music videos an on-stage like experience or an unknown universe, either way the audience is brought into a world. The band uses their social media to evoke change in the world and involve music listeners in any way possible. Coldplay has used modern technology to involve the fans, which has ultimately made their careers successful because of it.

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