

Notes on MASHED interview and survey methods

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This document provides further information on the interview and survey methods used in the research project *MASHED: Mashup Music, Copyright, and Platform Regulation*.

MASHED is a three-year project funded by the Norwegian Research Council.¹ The project explores the relationship between the contemporary mashup music scene and Internet platforms' algorithmic platform regulations. Through this relationship, we investigate the tensions between the incentives of copyright law and the purposes of artistic appropriations. The project brings together scholars with diverse backgrounds in popular music studies, media and communication studies, and legal studies to generate new insights into the multifaceted tensions and feedback mechanisms between copyright regulation and mashup music.

As a multidisciplinary project, the interview and survey components discussed here are not the only sources of material for analysis. Research outputs from this project have drawn on comparative legal analysis, legal discourse analysis, critical hermeneutics, and more. However, since our research team will be drawing on interview and survey material as a shared central resource, we have compiled this document to provide additional context regarding the methodological choices (especially since journal article word counts often limit the extent to which one can prioritise a discussion of these choices). This document is not intended to replace methods sections in other publications (which will be tailored to fit their purpose), but as an addition. We hope it might also be of some use to our interview and survey participants seeking further context for their contribution, and thus form part of a continued knowledge exchange between practitioners and researchers.

Research population

The project's central research ambition to understand producers' experiences with online platforms provided the orienting justification for seeking to gather data from this population of mashup producers. For the purposes of our study, we define mashups as musical productions which are primarily based on samples of already-existing musical recordings, and in which the samples are generally recognizable. The project's focus on musical mashups also served to give shape to our definition of 'mashup producer' – by excluding broader remix practice, such as political remixes which 'chop' voice samples, memes, video 'supercuts', and so on. While we sought mashup producers from anywhere in the world, we

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had a particular interest in finding European and U.S. producers since a planned aim of the project is to consider European and U.S. law as part of comparative work.

Sample selection

We used a blend of diversity sampling and theoretical sampling to select a sample of mashup producers to approach for interview. Through this approach, we attempted to capture the full range of contributions to the mashup scene, while also ‘following’ our theories as they developed. To reflect the diversity of the scene – as we had encountered it online and in existing scholarly and journalistic coverage – we considered aspects including location, background, age, and gender (although some aspects of the identity of practitioners was not necessarily known to us). We also sought to provide diversity in participant’s choice of distribution platforms, mashup style, level of popularity, and the extent of their current involvement in mashups (a blend of theoretical sampling and diversity sampling). Some efforts to provide a diverse selection were more successful than others – for e.g. the mashup scene is predominantly male, and we struggled to (a) locate and (b) communicate with female producers. Our focus on U.S. and European law influenced our interview sampling in terms of producers’ location: 14 resided in the EU (then including the UK), 14 resided in the U.S., and 2 resided elsewhere.

Our survey was open to anyone who self-defined as a mashup producer based on our definition above. Initial screening questions confirmed this status, as well as that respondents were over 18. We recruited respondents largely via social media (primarily Twitter), as well as personal messages to mashup producers and posts on mashup and remix online forums. However, word-of-mouth, particularly when coming from trusted co-practitioners, was by far the more effective means of recruitment. Practitioners were helpful in drawing attention to the survey publicly over Twitter and Reddit, as well as privately – we understand – via messages and within closed groups. We remain very grateful for the enthusiastic response and cooperation of many mashup producers. The nature of online sharing is likely to mean that our survey has high representation of specific ‘hubs’ within the scene – i.e. groups of friends/acquaintances that are over-represented, and other groups that we didn’t reach.

Themes

Our interview guide (available from the MASHED project website) contained questions about the music that interviewees made, the scene and community they were part of, their perspectives on the music industries and copyright, on online platforms and their regulatory systems, and their experiences with and responses to these systems. However, our choice to format these interviews as semi-structured allow for our conversations with producers to expand to other areas, and thus place the intersection of mashups and platforms in the context of other social structures, industries, institutions, and the life-course of producers more generally. When coding the interview transcriptions, we combined our pre-established codes with unanticipated ones that emerged through thematic analysis of the data.

Our survey questionnaire (also available on our project site), which utilized the online survey service JISC, covered similar themes, but framed these themes in ways intended to generate a more overall picture of the mashup scene – e.g. by collecting data on

platforms used and formerly used, and framing questions quantitatively (such as a quantification of the frequency at which producers experience takedowns). We prepared, analyzed and presented the survey results using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

Interview medium

The majority of interviews were conducted via online video calls in order to reach mashup producers spread across several continents. Approximately one third of the interviews were face-to-face. We concur with Valeria Lo Iacono et al (2016) that the advantages of using Skype (and its equivalents) outweigh the limitations. Two interviews were text-only, using the private direct messaging system on Twitter, in accordance with practitioners' preferences. These interviews provided less time for deep reflection since conversations moved more slowly and formally via text.

Participant safeguarding

To provide an informed consent process we made the aims of the project clear and comprehensible to (potential) participants. In particular, we outlined our project at the beginning of interviews. This effort to establish informed consent was also a primary motivation for the creation of two project videos, made in collaboration with filmmaker Joshua Perrett, which accessibly outlined the purpose both of the project, and the survey specifically, for research participants. Before and after the data collection process, we also maintained the project Twitter account which we set up to reach producers, in an effort to stay contactable beyond the formal, institutional context of University webpages and emails.

Our interviewees had the choice to be quoted anonymously or by their artist pseudonym (i.e. their "stage name" or production alias). Downes, Breeze, and Griffin have suggested that in research on DIY cultures specifically (of which mashup is arguably a form), "removing identifiable information can undermine participant labour, power and agency", and that "the explicit naming of participants can become a moral and ethical obligation" (2013). The vast majority of our participants chose to be referred to by their pseudonym, and we are pleased to be able to attribute the many illuminating reflections to them directly. Some of our interviewees felt they were taking a risk, but a necessary one, in providing us with information. As mashup producer KapSlap said: "I'm a little reluctant to tell you all this [...]. But it's a risk you gotta take to inform people about this."

However, we have tried to manage the risks of naming individuals (even under a pseudonym) who participate in a legal "grey area". A related concern regards divulging the strategies producers use to avoid or "mislead" content ID systems, which are crucial to their continued capacity to make and distribute mashups. One important consequence of this risk management is that, in our published outputs, we remove the names of some mashup-specific websites, since we felt that our publications might draw undue and unwanted attention.

Responses to our survey were anonymous, a decision we made largely to fulfil our responsibilities under the EU General Data Protection Regulation (or GDPR). We recoded some demographic information to maintain anonymity; for instance, responses relating to

nationality and country of residence were re-coded to larger geographical regions. Any identifying material provided by respondents in free text answers was removed.

Relationship between interview and survey

Our use of both survey and interview material – combining, as it does, quantitative and qualitative approaches – places our work within the sphere of mixed-methods research. However, unlike much mixed-methods work, we give epistemological primacy to a “qualitative-interpretivist” approach rather than a “quantitative-experimental” one (Howe 2004). Rather than positioning the measurable data of the research as the most ‘meaningful’ aspect of the project, we looked to interview material and free text survey responses for ontological depth regarding producers’ experiences.

The overarching methodological approach of the project is in keeping with a critical realism paradigm – although this is not to say that all MASHED researchers’ outputs would necessarily be characterised as such. In this paradigm, statistics and other quantitative findings may “quantify certain characteristics of a structure or object”, and therefore act primarily as “descriptive summaries rather than predictive tools” (Zachariadis, Scott, and Barrett 2013, 862). Critical realism also helps to clarify why the co-presence of qualitative and quantitative data does not constitute an epistemological clash since, in this approach, “methods are seen to be *redescriptive devices* uncovering alternative views of objects of analysis in order to compare their relative standing (and therefore the validity of the findings produced) as well as allowing them to mutually inform each other” (ibid., 877).

Another consideration in the simultaneous use of interviews and surveys is that, because of anonymization or survey results, we cannot be sure of the precise extent of overlap between our samples. However, given our awareness of where the survey was circulated, we feel confident that the two sources of data are a meaningfully coherent representation of the same actors, institutions, and phenomena.

Reflection on methodological limitations

One limitation of the project is that our choice to focus on mashup producers give us insight into their individual motivations, but not into the motivations of other actors. For example, we do not have interview or survey data reflecting a music industries (i.e. rightsholders) perspective. We have generally drawn on trade press and existing scholarship to gain insight into this perspective. Initial plans to also interview and/or survey representatives of online platforms did not come to fruition.

A further limitation is that there is no comparative aspect to our empirical material – i.e. no direct attempt to relate the experiences of mashup producers with other kinds of musicians, or with other online content producers. While we draw on existing material where relevant to situate the experiences and perspectives of mashup producers, future research could focus more directly on comparing mashup production with other forms of work and or online production. We have been able to provide some comparison in terms of historical scope – interviews with producers with lots of experience making mashups provided a sense of the changing options and opportunities for mashup forms of remix creativity.

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