Platform gatekeepers and platformisation of music curation

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“In the streaming era, a new gatekeeper stands between record labels and listeners: the
The growing power of playlists: playlists mean curation. Curation means gatekeeping (human vs. automated gatekeeping)

Playlists rather than albums, tracks or artists are becoming the primary commodity on streaming platforms

How do people mainly listen to music now?

|                | Overall | Free Streaming Listeners | Paid Streaming Subscribers |
|----------------|---------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| **ALBUM**      | 29%     | 31%                      | 60%                        |
| **PLAYLIST**   | 31%     | 45%                      | 68%                        |

MICRA Research survey of 1,500 U.S., UK, and French respondents (participants could choose more than one answer)
We investigated the logics that underpin music curation, and particularly the work of music curators, working at digital music streaming platforms. Based on ethnographic research that combines participant observation and a set of interviews with key informants, we questioned the relationship between algorithmic and human curation and the specific workings of music curation as a form of platform gatekeeping. We argue that music streaming platforms, in combining proprietary algorithms and human curators, constitute the “new gatekeepers” in an industry previously dominated by human intermediaries such as radio programmers, journalists, and other experts. The paper suggests
Our research aims to further the exploration of this emergent field, being inspired from and adapting the work done in the past by Gans (1979) and other scholars within newspapers and television newsrooms, onto digital music platforms. In so doing, we maintain that, following Bucher (2016), we need to move beyond the ideal of algorithms as 'black boxes' to study the social and cultural constructs that lie behind algorithmic infrastructures.
Methodology

Our research consists in a multi-site ethnography (Marcus 1995; Hannerz 2003) that entailed 17 semi-structured interviews with key informants working in the European music industry in London (UK), Gothenburg (SWE), New York (US), Berlin (GER), Rome and Milan (IT), between October 2017 and February 2018. The interviewees are data scientists (2), radio music programmers in public service media (2), marketing managers (2), software developer (1), music start up cofounders (2), director of streaming strategies (1), music curators for streaming platforms (2), company vice-president (1), music manager (3). Among them, some work for platforms like Apple Music, Spotify, Google Play Music, Shazam, while others work for record labels or digital music startups. All conversations were recorded with the consent of the interviewees and lasted between 45 and 80 minutes. Alongside interviews, we also performed a short participant observation inside the music department of two public service radio stations, BBC Radio 6 and Rai Radio 2, in London and Rome, in November 2017. This is complemented with a qualitative observation (Caliandro, Gandini 2017) of the Twitter profiles of music curators working for Apple, Spotify and Google Play Music, aimed at exploring the network of social relations in which they are embedded and how much they interact with the other actors of the music industry.
Methodology: ACCESS TO THE FIELD – the field as a “black box”

The access to the research field represents an interesting finding of this work in and of itself. We began the project with the aim of performing participant observation inside the music streaming companies like Spotify, Deezer, Apple and Google, but we were denied both access to their headquarters as well as formal contact with interviewees.

Hence, our access to the field was only possible through personal contacts from the London and Milanese music industry who acted as bridges and put us in touch with people who worked or had worked for one of the platforms above mentioned. Through these contacts we managed to arrange the first interviews, from which we snowballed onwards. Our approach therefore reflects the ethnographic method that Gusterson called “polymorphous engagement”: this meant “interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites and sometimes in virtual form; and it meant collecting data eclectically from a disparate array of sources in many different ways” (1997, 116, in Seaver 2017, 6).
The rise of non human, automated gatekeepers (or ‘infomediaries’)

The proprietary algorithms developed by corporations such as Amazon, Google, Apple, Facebook, and Spotify constantly track users’ reactions on their digital platforms in order to predict the rating or preference that a user would give to an item.

As Morris clearly explained, ‘These automated (sometimes autonomous) tools combine massive databases of digital goods with behavioural tracking technologies to create connections between purchases, listens and views that were previously difficult to make, or severely limited in scope’ (2015, p. 447).

‘An emerging layer of companies – call them infomediaries – are increasingly responsible for shaping how audiences encounter and experience cultural content’ (Morris 2015, p. 446).
Curation activity is no longer the reserve of human gatekeepers, but is also now performed by algorithms designed by other humans. The algorithms these services are based on therefore represent a new type of gatekeeper: after the human professional and amateur gatekeepers, we are witnessing the emergence of a new guard at the door, the algorithm.

Social media platforms, search and recommendation engines affect what a daily user sees and does not see. As knowledge, commerce, politics and communication move online, these information intermediaries are becoming emergent gatekeepers of our society, a role which once was limited to the journalists of the traditional media (Bozdag, 2013, p. 209).
| socio-economic background | nature of work | media | bias | expertise |
|--------------------------|----------------|-------|------|-----------|
| **Professional/traditional gatekeepers** | belonging to social/cultural/economic elites | paid | Media companies conglomerates, Commercial media, Public service media | Cultural/social/economic biases | Gatekeeping based on validated professional experience |
| Traditional cultural and creative industries (radio + tv) | non-elitist outsiders | un/semi-paid | Free radio and tv; fanzine; civic/community media, Blogs, Social network sites | Cultural/social/economic biases | Gatekeeping based on unvalidated personal experience, legitimazed by peers |
| **Amateur gatekeepers** | New creative industries (digital media companies) | Paid curators + Automation of cultural curatorial work | Commercial digital platforms, Platform Capitalism | cultural/social/economic bias, Data bias | Gatekeeping based on a mix of data-driven and editorial choices |
| **PLATFORM gatekeepers** | New elites (software developers, interaction designers, venture capitalists) | | | | |
The music trip to get into the ears of the listeners

**Professional gatekeepers**
- Music industry professionals
- Radio programmers
- Television producers
- Music journalists
- Sponsored music festival directors
- Online music magazines
- Concerts organizers
- Music curators at digital music platforms
- Distributors, music promoters

**Amateur gatekeepers**
- Offline Fandom
- Digital Fandom
- Music bloggers
- Community media producers
- Independent music festival organizers
- Independent concert organizers
- Gatewatchers

**Amateur gatekeepers (produsers; micro-influencers)**

**Platform gatekeepers**
- Digital music platforms
- Recommender systems
- Algorithms
- Automated playlists

**Listeners**
The Music Industry Gatekeeping Matrix

- Human
  - music journalists
  - sponsored music festival directors
  - music promoters
  - concert organizers (aided by data analytics)
  - human curated playlists
  - music bloggers
  - independent music festival organizers
  - independent concert organizers
  - community media producers
  - offline fandoms
  - digital fandoms

- Professional
  - television producers
  - radio programmers
  - music curators at digital music platforms (aided by algorithms)
  - Online music magazines (Pitchfork)
  - music festival directors
  - concert organizers (aided by data analytics)
  - digital music platforms
  - recommender systems' algorithms
  - automated playlists (Topsify, Filtr, Digster)
  - personalized playlists

- Amateur
  - digital music platforms
  - automated playlists
  - personalized playlists
  - music curators at digital music platforms (aided by algorithms)
  - music bloggers
  - offline fandoms
  - community media producers
  - independent music festival organizers
  - independent concert organizers
  - gatewatchers
We call 'platform gatekeepers' all those workers within music streaming platforms, who are able to decide, filter and select what to expose listeners to and which songs to direct their attention to.

We focus in particular on the human music curator: this role
Radio stations’ Playlists (BBC playlister)

Online music Magazines’s playlists (Pitchfork)

User-generated playlists

branded playlists

human-curated playlists (aided by algorithms)

automated playlists (Top 50, Top 100…)

personalized playlists (Daily Mix; Discover Weekly; Release Radar…)

human professional

automated amateur

The Spotify Gatekeeping Matrix
Professional playlist curators

Around 300 human curators in the world. Our thesis: they represent the emergent «class», or the new «elite» of music gatekeepers.

»Curatorial Turn« (Erikson et al 2019) happened in 2014-2015

Apple Music playlist:

Artists John Peel Helped Make Famous
22 songs (1967–2016) — Open in iTunes
Human curation based on a mix of algorithmic and editorial logic:

the algorithmic and editorial logic merge together and are actually mutually dependent. As one curator told us, her choices were:

“10% personal taste-driven, 40% editorially driven, 50% data driven”.

“I do not have a background in music, I'm not even a great expert or passionate about music. I'm an Art historian and when we create playlists we base our choices on data and other algorithms”.

“There is a big misconception that it's just a one-person show, running the whole things. That's totally not the case. We take decisions as groups regarding the bigger playlists,” he said. "The decision on where we put a song, in what playlists, is based on historical data, but also in all honesty on the gut feeling of the editors.”
Human curation based on a mix of algorithmic and editorial logic:

“week 1 is editorial, week 2 is algorithmic”

(interview with a digital music promoter, London, 13th November 2017)
Curation on music streaming platforms in other words is the intermingling process that results from combining human activity 'augmented' by algorithms, and non-human activity designed, monitored and edited by humans. Machines (algorithms) do not replace nor are they separated from the work of human curators. Spotify has continued to hire music curators while investing in “technology for music intelligence” (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 65). Machines both automate the creation of playlists, making their production more efficient, and improve - like an ‘exoskeleton’ - the skills of human curators, making them faster in their choices and speeding up production times. Pelly (2017), after a conversation with a playlist creator for Spotify recounted that “these human curators are responding to data to such an extent that they’re practically just facilitating the machine process”. On the other side, humans intervene on automatic playlists to make their output less predictable and constantly improve their code.
Instead of contrasting editorial and algorithmic logics, we should thus frame these logics as stacked and entangled, both shaping the outputs of platforms. These two logics are always present together, but with different weights. Each platform articulates these logics by giving them a different relevance. In some Spotify playlists the algorithmic logic weighs more, while in other playlists editorial logic is more relevant.
Drawing from the expression used by Austin Daboh, above (in Ramirez, 2017), we define this combined logic as an “algo-torial” one.

“Spotify’s playlist curation is a mix of human curation based on a mix of algorithmic and editorial logic: The rise of algo-torial logic.”

Staff of editorial tastemakers, in combination with a suite of proprietary machine-learning algorithms, an approach to song selection that Spotify execs describe with the gruesome neologism “algotorial.”
“The data is compiled in a Google spreadsheet, with each song in the playlist ranked by “Song Score,” a multipoint metric that, like Spotify’s PUMA, accounts for things like average play length, skips, and number of thumbs-up or thumbs-down. Editors typically access this data via a Google-designed content management system called «algo-torial» form of Hegemony?"
An «algo-torial» form of Hegemony?

«If you enjoy your Discover Weekly and you listen more and more to it then yes, the more you listen to it the more you are listening to things that are predetermined by a machine.»

(interview with a Spotify software developer, October 29, 2017)

New regimes of visibility for music artists (what is positioned first in a playlist is going to be listened more)

- **PLATFORM GATEKEEPERS EXERT AN AGENDA SETTING POWER**: they are becoming hegemonic in setting the global agenda of music listening.
The (so far limited) rise of counter-hegemonic struggle?

First symptoms of counter hegemonic practices, aimed at gaming the algorithms, are emerging:

Some music promoters have organized prize competitions in which they ask listeners to listen more times to a song in order to detect which word is spoken 5 times within the lyrics of that song. To answer the contest, listeners have to listen to the song several times and this generates traffic that the algorithm can understand as an increase in interest for that song. Or, other examples: fans are organizing campaigns to mobilize traffic toward a specific song recently released by their favourite artist, in order to allow him to climb the position in the playlists. Other case histories: the bulgarian hackers.
Qualitative observation on 
Twitter:

The new gatekeepers’ network

asymmetrical surveillance: «He is seen, but he does not see; he is an object of information, never a subject in communication» (Foucault 1975)

We want to «reverse» the panopticon
Data activism (Milan & Treré 2017)

crowdsourced database of music curator’s list
Conclusions

The nexus between human work and machines is a central issue for further research in the platformization of culture. We think this is better understood if framed not as a dualistic opposition (machines vs. humans) but as a complex relationship, in which machines automate some human skills while, at the same time, act as an increasingly influential aid for human decisions and extend productive capacities. This combination of human labour power and machinery is typical of industrial capitalism, even before the rise of online platforms, as stated by Eriksson et al. (2019, p. 65). What is new here is the relevance that automation processes fueled by data and organized by algorithms have acquired within the new platformed cultural industries. The decisions of platform
Conclusions

While the power of traditional gatekeepers was mainly of an editorial nature, albeit data had some relevance in orienting their choices, the power of platform gatekeepers is an editorial power 'augmented' and enhanced by algorithms and big data. Platform gatekeepers have more data, more tools to manage and make sense of these data and thus more power than their predecessors.

This makes the platform capitalistic model (Srnicek 2017) potentially more efficient than industrial capitalism in transforming audience attention into data and data into value.