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Middle Eight

Learning from inexperience: consumption 'made strange' in the digital music economy

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A couple of months ago, in a Sheffield branch of one of my least-favourite but (for some reason) most-frequented chain cafés, I was called into action as an ad-hoc tech-troubleshooter for an elderly couple who were struggling to navigate the new vagaries of the digital music economy. They were delicately holding a brand new iPhone, its open box placed gently on the next seat along, and had been tentatively prodding at it in the way that one might attempt to wake an unidentified and potentially life-endangering animal: awed by novelty, keen to appease, wary of unexpected movements. At the next table, my simultaneous engagement with multiple devices – working on my laptop and avoiding work on my phone – identified me as the closest available digital native. I heard a muttered 'well, *he'll* know', accompanied by a furtive glance in my direction, and so leaned over to ask if I could be of any help.

'We just want to know how to get music on this thing', said the woman, with a note of despair. 'I'm going in for an operation, and I have to stay overnight. I just want to have something to listen to whilst I'm in there.' Their situation, with resonances both specific and universal, triggered for me a dense choreography of emotions. Concern and sympathy for the woman's ill health, of course, along with an unhelpful smidgen of curiosity; admiration for the man's supportive demeanour, plus a nasty pang of recognition at his evident desire to switch focus from the emotional realm of illness to the technological domain; a sadness and anger at the imposition of unwieldy consumer electronics into this loving relationship; and, with shameful prominence, a deep and real fear at being the person charged with navigating them through what ought, theoretically, to be a fairly simple process.

'Hmm', I said, considering the multiple paths, products, and platforms through which one might access music using a smartphone, and concluding that I ought to make an executive decision regarding the best option, rather than overloading the couple with new information. What seemed to me the primary sticking point in any attempt to offer help was the clear implication (made explicit as the conversation progressed) that they assumed the music would be *free*, and had bought the device in expectation that this would be the case.

'It's all on there, isn't it?', asked the man. 'I told her, this is easy once you work it out.'

'Hmm', I said again.

Well, I could have said, it depends which 'there' you mean. On the phone right now you probably *don't* have any music, unless Apple are still imposing that U2 album on everyone (Booth 2015). However, if you mean the internet, *well* … lots of it is on there, but some of it isn't. Most well-known pop music is on YouTube, which has adverts but is in some sense free, and you don't need to sign up, although you can't download anything, and it's awkward to organise the music in any way; plus, lots of it is technically hosted illegally, and there's plenty of famous music that isn't on there for rights reasons.

Spotify, I might have continued, is a popular way of streaming music from the internet – it's a stand-alone app that you download from the App Store – but again it has adverts, and you'll need to create an account, and some music isn't on there because it's exclusively on Apple Music, or Tidal, or even Google Play. Those are separate apps which need to be separately downloaded and signed up for. However, all of these require continuous internet access to use, which you might not have at the hospital, and the alternative is to use your mobile data plan, which could quickly become expensive, especially if you aren't sure where to check how much you've used, and in any case you might not have any signal. You can save and download playlists – I can explain what they are – on Spotify, but only if you're a subscriber, which means paying every month in perpetuity in order to retain access, and they're bordering on becoming a monopoly, so expect prices to rise.

You can still use iTunes to buy permanent ownership of MP3s through the iTunes store, but of course that isn't free. You can also still upload your CDs onto your home computer and then via USB to your phone, although a lot of newer computers (and all tablets) won't have a built-in CD drive. You can still just about use BitTorrent and peer-to-peer networks to download music illegally, although the cultural industries have for the most part successfully lobbied governments to enforce ISP crackdowns on those sites, and some high-profile court cases might well have scared you off that particular route. There are also archives online of music whose copyright protection has either expired or been voluntarily given up, although of course you're very much at the mercy of what has been uploaded, and it's unlikely they'll have any ABBA.

There are also radio apps, like the BBC Radio Player, although again they use data, and there are podcasts, too, which are increasingly popular, although they tend to avoid music for fear of infringing copyright. Your phone *might* have an FM Radio signal, which doesn't require internet access, although at that point you may as well just bring a radio in.

So, is music free online? Well, it sort of is, sometimes, if you know where to look, and have a few options at your disposal for each specific instance, and don't mind it being pretty inconvenient, and aren't too fussed about the specificities of copyright law, and don't include the indirect (but substantial) costs of having a phone and internet access. There isn't one single place to find all music online, though, and if there was, you would almost certainly have to pay through the nose for access to it. Did you have any other questions?

I forget now precisely what scant advice I gave to the couple, in a fog of embarrassed mumbling – I think I walked them through downloading Spotify and making an account, with a warning about data charges – but I suspect it wouldn't have been

enough to ensure that this woman was able to access the music that might have provided solace and companionship in a difficult time.

In recalling this brief interaction, my intention is not to make any generalisations about age and technological aptitude – the digital 'participation gap' falls across multiple social axes (Jenkins 2008). Rather, the old truism about wisdom coming 'from the mouths of babes' is, I think, one that can be adapted and applied to our contemporary situation with enlightening consequences. The assumptions of the technologically naïve are often common-sensical and broad, and reveal the extent to which our more nuanced perspectives are shaped by everyday engagement and trial-and-error with platforms and apps, this being the process by which vague understandings become specific ones. I focus here on three key points which emerge from this vantage-point of (relative) digital inexperience, and which might contribute towards future research on contemporary experiences of consuming popular music.

Firstly, and most plainly, the perpetuation of the artificial scarcity of popular music is *absurd* from this perspective, and we should remember to point to its absurdity at every given opportunity. File-sharing, of course, was and is a means of pointing to this absurdity (although not without its own flaws), and seemed set to stretch artificial scarcity to breaking point, until powerful vested interests intervened to re-frame the practice (Gurman 2009; Prior 2015). Yet we are reaching a point now where the 'walled garden' of Spotify is beginning to feel as natural and inevitable as previous, physical commodifications of music, and their power over playlist curation is increasingly shaping industry behaviour and popular music itself. Just as the unfettered peer-to-peer exchange of music was shown *not* to be a technologically determined characteristic of the digital file, but a socio-cultural moment enabled by an affordance of shareability, we need to retain a confident sense of multiple, malleable futures. Recent calls to nationalise social media and provide free, state-operated wireless internet in the UK (Corbyn 2016) ought to re-inforce this assertion that the current arrangement of resources is neither 'common-sense' nor inevitable. In contrast, Spotify's ongoing inability to turn a profit is helpful in pointing towards the economic unsustainability of existing models; simultaneously, their continued capacity to attract investment demonstrates the problematic extent to which data is the driving force of their business (Srnicek 2017).

Secondly, this 'naïve' perspective shows that, in the process of becoming digital music consumers, it is the rhetoric that gets to us before the reality, and the rhetoric is deeply incongruous with the digital mediascape as we encounter it. It is the job of marketing rhetoric to sell smartphones and data plans, and it is unfortunately the job of the rest of us, as I have done with parents and grandparents, to gently deflate this rhetoric. The rhetoric draws on early cyber-libertarian pronouncements, of course (e.g. Barlow 1994), but in terms of why it is that popular music (rather than films, or games or books) is most often (mis-)understood as freely available online, we have to consider its specific relationship to peer-to-peer file-sharing, 'piracy', BitTorrents and the history of attempts to make music free. Why did the couple in the café assume that the music would all be 'on there'? I think the 'Napster moment' has to be a part of the answer to this, which draws attention to how, astonishingly, the phone companies and new media companies and the old music industry have capitalised on the short-lived success of file-sharing, by transforming its promise into their own manipulative marketing. Let's say this as well: that the inadequate user is part of the means by which the rhetoric functions and survives. Why doesn't your technology 'just work'? Because *you don't know how to work it*, stupid. This is a

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superior explanation, from the perspective of the IT and music industries, to any acknowledgement that the current online music economy is deeply flawed, and scarcely ever offers the ease-of-access that was promised, and that remains eminently deliverable.

Thirdly, and relatedly, the materiality of our experiences of music continues to matter, a lot. Specifically, our experiences of listening to music are mediated by frequent technological failure (on our own part, or that of the equipment) and deeply *un-technological* workarounds, of which we all have examples. I'm thinking of my mum, whose new iPhone only has the inherited handful of songs that I put on her previous phone years ago using a convoluted combination of CDs, cables and SD cards, unchanged since then because she can't recall her Apple ID and, indirectly, because I don't go home as often as I should. Or my dad, who still calls the internet 'eBay' after his first online obsession, listening to covers of his favourite songs on YouTube, because the rights-holders don't allow the originals to be uploaded there, and he wouldn't know where else to begin looking for them. And me, with my budget smartphone's dodgy headphone socket, which only plays through one stereo channel unless I press it down the whole time, spending train journeys holding the connection firm with an increasingly sore thumb, and therefore tending towards choosing silence.

The word that comes to mind to describe these materialities, unfortunately, is 'crap' – in that colloquial British sense that denotes knock-off trainers or an unreliable old car, and carries the general sense that the product isn't quite as promised. The extent to which our economic situation still determines our material experience of music in the digital realm *ought* to be shocking to us, in an age in which post-capitalism apparently beckons (Srnicek and Williams 2015), but instead is mundane. The continued maintenance of artificial scarcity is planned of course, but in other ways this landscape is an accidental hodge-podge of business models, inter-platform incompatabilities and shoddy products. We need to continually question why these 'crap' experiences of listening to music remain commonplace in an age of potential abundance.

Capitalism, even as the last disruptive wave of technological innovation settles in anticipation of the next, continues to be chaotic and improvised in ways that negatively impact our lives, and continues also to impose a sense of inevitability upon this specific landing of the (loaded) dice. To paraphrase David Byrne of Talking Heads, we might ask ourselves, how did we get here? And as with Byrne's 'beautiful house', in seeking an equitable and practicable experience of consuming music online we must first acknowledge that 'this is not', before we can ask 'where is my'? We need not only to acknowledge that the digital music economy is deleterious to the working lives of music practitioners (Lowery 2013), but also to recognise that its most common justification – a superior consumer experience – might be countered by a politicised understanding of everyday music consumption as muddled and difficult (much as Fisher 2009 does in showing how the apparently 'everyday' frustrations of call-centres are endemic to bureaucratic capitalism). We can see that the contemporary digital cultural economy serves to restrict and constrain experiences of listening to music, denying access to the range of private and public benefits that music can, at its best, deliver for all of us (Hesmondhalgh 2013). To consider the perspective of digital inexperience is to highlight the gap between marketing rhetoric and the realities of consuming music in the present day, and to 'make strange' what can often seem acceptably banal. From there, to again quote Talking

Heads *again* talking about a house, we can look fruitfully for something 'out of the ordinary'.

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