

SoundCloud and Bandcamp as Alternative Music Platforms

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Abstract

We examine two “producer-oriented” audio distribution platforms, SoundCloud and Bandcamp, which have been important repositories for the hopes of musicians, commentators, and audiences that digital technologies and cultural platforms might promote democratization of the cultural industries, and we compare their achievements and limitations in this respect. We show that the emancipatory elements enshrined in SoundCloud’s bottom-up abundance are compromised by two elements that underpin the platform: the problematic “culture of connectivity” of the social media systems to which it must remain integrally linked and the systems of intellectual property that the firm has been increasingly compelled to enforce. By contrast, it seems that Bandcamp has been relatively stable in financial terms while being at odds with some key aspects of “platformization,” and we explore the possibility that some of the platform’s apparent success may derive from how its key features makes it attractive to indie musicians and fans drawn to an independent ethos. Nevertheless, we argue that even while in some respects Bandcamp acts more effectively as a cultural alternative than does SoundCloud, Bandcamp is also congruent economically and discursively with how platforms capitalize on the activity of self-managing, self-auditing, specialist, worker-users.

Keywords

music streaming, music platforms, alternative music, electronic dance music, cultural platforms, skeuomorphism, multisided markets, digitalisation of music

Context and Approach

In this article, we examine two music platforms that over the past decade have been important repositories for the hopes of musicians, commentators, and audiences that digital technologies might achieve democratization of the cultural industries: SoundCloud and Bandcamp.

The significance of these platforms can only be established by placing them in the context of the broader development of platforms in the world of recorded music. Recorded music was the first major cultural industry to be transformed by online platforms. The practices and working lives of many musicians, not just established names, have been fundamentally altered by the rise of music streaming and social media (Baym, 2018; Haynes & Marshall, 2018). The use of music streaming services by consumers has grown rapidly in recent years, and all serious analysts now see them as central to the economics of the recorded music industry over the coming years. A small group of specialist music streaming services has become dominant, notably Apple Music, Spotify, and in the vast Chinese market, those offered by Tencent. The attraction of such services is the instant availability for consumers of huge catalogs of professionally produced music, either for free, with adverts interrupting the

music, or for a monthly subscription fee, which as well as avoiding adverts, allows offline consumption of tracks saved to devices such as laptops and mobile phones. The services provide access to many thousands of playlists, based on artists, genres, and moods, some produced by algorithm and some by professional editors (they also allow for the creation and sharing of playlists by users). These platforms are the formalized inheritors of the well-funded but “extra-legal” (Nordstrom, 2007) peer-to-peer “pirate” services that sprung up in the first Internet boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s; most famously Napster, eventually closed down as a result of legal action by the “major” music business corporations (Sinnreich, 2014). Some such services or platforms persist but most digital consumption of music worldwide now takes place via the “mainstream” streaming services, in negotiated partnership with rights owners (mainly the majors).

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However, there is another set of streaming services or audio distribution platforms which serve a somewhat different purpose, allowing free and easy uploading and labeling of digital files containing music, and seeking to provide a means by which musicians can find audiences without necessarily working alongside major and independent recording and publishing companies. They might therefore be characterized as “producer-oriented” platforms, as opposed to the “consumer-oriented” mainstream platforms. We use the term “producer-oriented” to refer to the fact that, compared with streaming services such as Spotify, they are designed in such a way as to encourage producers of music to upload content though they are also accessed widely by people interested in music who are not musicians, and have no ambition to act as producers.¹

The first major example of a “legal” producer-oriented web-based service that served as a means to connect musicians and other music producers with music audiences was Myspace, though it was also widely used for social networking among non-musicians. Myspace, established in 2003, rapidly declined in popularity and use as a social network after 2008, displaced largely by Facebook. Although Facebook continues to be widely used by musicians to share music and information, SoundCloud, launched from Berlin in 2008, and Bandcamp, launched in California also in 2008, have been much more significant as channels for musicians to reach audiences in the new musical ecosystem. Arguably, these sites represent the main way in which the hopes of digital optimists regarding new relations of musical production and consumption are embedded in the rapidly emerging “platformized” cultural world.

We begin by analyzing SoundCloud’s efforts to create a “bottom up” platform devoted to sharing and connecting through music. We show how certain aspects of the service’s interface appeal to electronic dance music and hip-hop musicians and their audiences because, whether consciously or not, they reflect commonplace practices and values in those genres. We also show that the sense of a demotic and interactive abundance that underpins the service is doubly compromised: first, because of the problematic “culture of connectivity” and data-mining that underpin social media and other platforms with social-media features, and second, because it must manage conflicts of interest between its users and rightsholders. SoundCloud, we explain, has failed to find stable ways of monetizing the rich mix of musics that make the site so attractive to its users. Seeking to respond to this failure, it has been forced to accept terms and conditions from the established mainstream music industries that seriously damage its claims to be distinct from, and alternative to, the mainstream consumer-oriented streaming platforms, particularly regarding the enforcement of intellectual property.

Bandcamp provides a revealing comparison. While it is not completely clear how well or badly Bandcamp performs in economic terms (see below), there have been no reports of

financial difficulties. This seeming success may partly be explained by the facts that it operates with a small number of staff and does not need to make licensing agreements with key rightsholders to encourage use. Another possible factor, we suggest, is that its (partial) resistance to “platform” characteristics makes it attractive to musicians drawn to an “alternative” or independent ethos. Bandcamp, in other words, may be a successful alternative platform partly because, in significant respects, it is less like a platform than other key music services. Nevertheless, in some interesting ways, it is also congruent economically and discursively with how platforms capitalize on the activity of self-managing, self-auditing, specialist, worker-users.

To make the above arguments, we analyze the distinctive technological, political-economic, and business forms of these two platforms. Like other analysts of cultural platforms, we seek to draw upon insights from software studies, political economy of culture, and business studies (cf. Nieborg & Poell, 2018). However, our approach to the issue of the platformization of cultural production is distinctive. First, although we scrutinize the degree to which these platforms are influenced by understandings and practices associated with Big Tech, our focus on “alternative” sites such as SoundCloud and Bandcamp means extending the political-economic and socio-technical analysis of cultural platforms beyond those of the GAFAM oligopoly that dominates so much public and academic commentary on platforms and platformization.² Second, we analyze how audio distribution platforms such as SoundCloud are associated with the “alternative” and “independent” cultures that have been so important to popular music over many decades. “Alternative” is a term widely used to refer to forms of culture, and forms of cultural production, that stand outside, or in opposition to, some kind of “mainstream,” especially those associated with business corporations or the state (Downing, 2000), and that therefore in some way differ from, or challenge, conventional norms. In some cases, this involves nonprofit and cooperative forms of governance, in some it involves petty capitalism (Mutibwa, 2015). The notion of the musical “alternative” is strongly tied to “independent” or noncorporate and nonstate cultural institutions, especially record labels, distributors, and shops, and with a special focus on achieving greater degrees of collective autonomy and control for groupings of musicians, audiences, and others (see Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2015; Kruse, 2003). Focusing on alterity and independence therefore requires attention to aesthetic, textual, and cultural values and practices, as well as to political economy, business practices, and software affordances. To assist with this analytical task, we also draw upon interviews conducted with musicians from various genres.

Such a focus on alterity and independence also demands consideration of the musical genre formations that are essential to understanding the meanings of music in modern societies (Brackett, 2016; Lena, 2012). We show how and why “producer-oriented” audio distribution platforms become

associated with particular musical genres—Bandcamp with certain kinds of “indie” music, and SoundCloud with electronic dance music and certain subgenres of hip hop. This in turn allows us to place analysis of such platforms in the context of longer histories of efforts to create genre-based alternative business models for the production and circulation of culture in the name of democratization (Hesmondhalgh, 1998), thus deepening the historical field, and avoiding an emergent tendency in research and scholarship to see the onset of platforms as a totally new beginning for the cultural industries.

SoundCloud

The original aim of SoundCloud was to provide, in the words of its founders, “something that would enable artists to share and connect through music” (Ljung, 2017). It grew quickly in 2010 and 2011 to become the main way in which amateur and semi-professional musicians share music with potential audiences. SoundCloud is available and used across much of the world (Allington, Dueck, & Jordanous, 2015) and has a “highly shareable, highly social” (Mulligan, 2017) user interface, which easily links to mainstream social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. It incorporates many of the hallmark features of social media platforms, allowing for the following of other users, the reposting of tracks posted by other users (akin to Twitter retweets or Facebook sharing of posts), and the liking of tracks. As with social media, metrics are clearly and visibly displayed (e.g., number of followers, plays, likes, reposts), fostering user interaction, but often involving competitiveness and hierarchies of users. Registered users of SoundCloud can upload audio content up to a limit of 2 hours for free, more if they pay subscription fees, and unlimited for “premium” subscribers.

For professional musicians, SoundCloud provides a sense of “a direct connection with fans unlike standard streaming services” (Mulligan, 2017). For emerging musicians aspiring to greater success, it offers “a global platform for reaching fans with no intermediary” (Mulligan, 2017). Like YouTube, SoundCloud engages millions of users who have no ambition to achieve professional success as content creators. But also like YouTube, the appeal of SoundCloud has been stimulated by stories of the platform’s role in enabling ordinary users to achieve success and fame.³ Still, the platform’s ability to pave the way for success is often misunderstood, misrepresented, and mythologized. Perhaps the most widely cited case of a rise to musical fame via SoundCloud (e.g., Sisario, 2014) is the New Zealand artist Lorde, unknown when she posted her track “Royals” in October 2012, and an international superstar just a year later. Similar stories later surrounded the emergence of Billie Eilish as a global star (Duboff, 2019). As with stories about YouTube celebrity and Myspace stardom, the truth is often more complex. In fact, as Haynes and Marshall (2018, p. 1979) point out, Lorde had signed with Universal, the world’s largest record label,

3 years before “self-releasing” “Royals” (see also Bertoni, 2013). What is more, even on producer-oriented cultural platforms, only a small number of users post their own music—around just 3% to 4% of consumers post music and/or video to SoundCloud or YouTube according to one source (Mulligan, 2017). Nevertheless, as a result of its mix of amateur, professional, and semi-professional content, SoundCloud has an extraordinarily large and diverse catalog of music and other sound files, over 170 million tracks by 2017 (Lovejoy, 2017), far more than the roughly 40 million tracks available on Spotify (Nicolaou, 2018). In the words of one enthusiast, “it’s music interaction and discovery distilled to its purest form, home to just as many famous artists as ones that will be soon” (Horn, 2014).

SoundCloud includes music, speech, and sound across many different genres, but it is particularly well known for electronic dance music (EDM), and hip hop (Allington et al., 2015; Caramanica, 2017). Some key values associated with EDM, and to a certain extent hip hop, are incorporated into SoundCloud’s design and interface.⁴ In particular, SoundCloud enshrines a sense of vernacular abundance which appeals to musicians and fans drawn to those genres. Core audiences of EDM and hip hop (including amateur and semi-professional musicians) have historically placed great value on the genres’ ability to produce and sustain an ever-changing abundance of grassroots creativity. In the case of EDM, this has led to a relative emphasis on anonymity, manifested in the frequent use of multiple aliases by producers, and the downplaying of performers’ visual images (Hesmondhalgh, 1998). The abundance has partly been made possible by use of low-cost digital technologies, including “bedroom” production on laptops, often based on sampling, remixing, mashups, and so on (see Rauh, 2018).⁵ Compared with other genres, such as jazz, rock, and indie, there is comparatively less focus on stable canons of revered historical figures, and great value is placed on the dynamism and ephemerality of the music and associated forms of sociality (Straw, 1991).

The de-emphasizing of performer identity is apparent in SoundCloud’s design, in particular the visual prominence of music represented as a waveform (see Figure 1), but also in the way that amateur and semi-professional musicians are, at least in terms of presentation, given nominally equal billing with established and emerging professionals. As Figure 1 shows, musicians’ profiles coexist in the same digital space. The waveform draws from practices in digital music (re)production, and in SoundCloud reflects conventions adopted by EDM and hip-hop communities. In those genre worlds, DJs have long relied on visual references to cue and mix tracks, latterly as waveforms displayed on the screens of digital turntables and laptops. Using audio software (digital audio workstations [DAWs] and virtual studio technology [VSTs]), music producers create tracks by manipulating loops and other audio content displayed as waveforms in the screens of computers. Moreover, the waveform *symbolizes* an

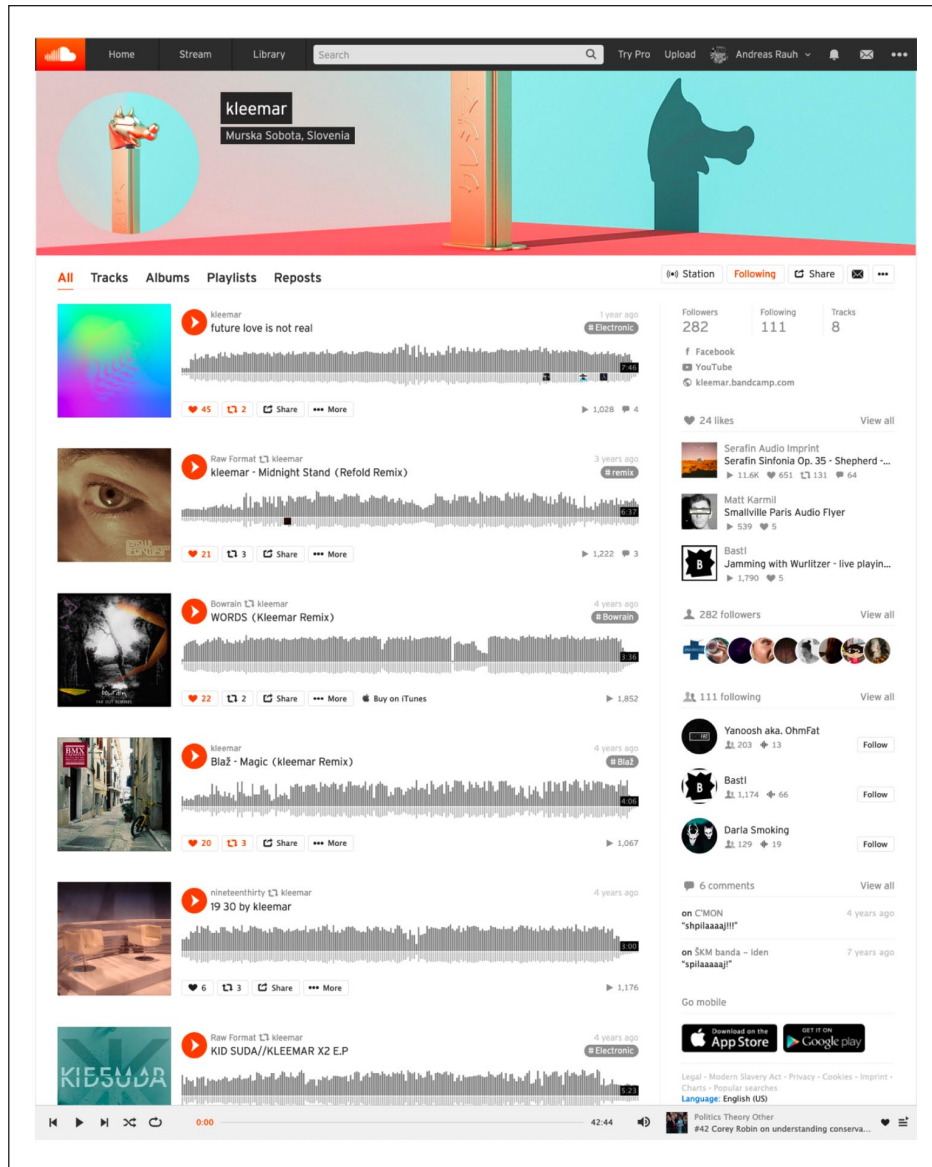


Figure 1. Detail from a profile page from SoundCloud, showing the lack of emphasis given to performer identity. (Screenshot of <https://soundcloud.com/kleemar>, accessed 24 April 2019, used with permission.)

engagement with computer-based music technologies, and such symbolism in itself is attractive to the technology-oriented users who are often drawn to EDM and hip-hop — musicians in these genres are “deeply invested in technology” (Farrugia & Swiss, 2005, p. 30) and dance music cultures were early adopters of online platforms for music distribution (Allington et al., 2015; Mjos, 2013). These musicians are largely enthusiastic, and at times utopian about new technologies, though critical dystopian views are also apparent.

Importantly, the waveform in SoundCloud is also a primary focus of social interaction because the platform allows registered users to post comments directly on it. These comments are timestamped, and are often used to convey information about sections in a track (or DJ mix) that have

important meanings in EDM culture, such as *the drop* (when the bass line and kick drum (re-)enter the mix following an anticipatory build) (see Figure 2) or the *hook* in hip hop. In this way, SoundCloud embodies into its design distinctive forms of genre-specific interactivity, by allowing users to post comments on particular moments in tracks uploaded by amateur and professional musicians. Listeners can also interact with each other through the comments posted along the waveform. For amateurs and beginners, this interaction is often a valuable source of feedback (whether encouraging or discouraging; Rauh, 2018), and for professional musicians and their fans, it can enable a greater sense of “mediated intimacy” (Baym, 2018) and community, in ways not dissimilar to threads of discussion on a musician’s Twitter feed.

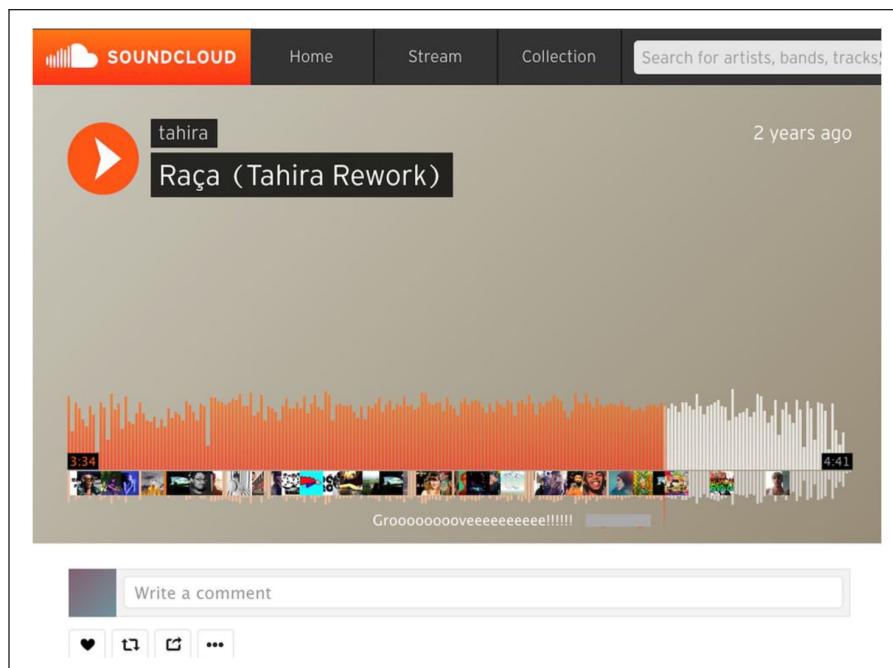


Figure 2. Detail from a profile page from SoundCloud, showing the waveform and timestamped comments. (Screenshot of <https://soundcloud.com/tahira/raca-tahira-rework>, accessed 10th December 2018).

In these various ways, SoundCloud involves a much greater sense of vernacular interactivity and reciprocity than the mainstream consumer-oriented platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music, and there are strong echoes of the hectic and tumultuous diversity of the peer-to-peer sites that have long been popular among EDM, hip hop, and other audiences, but that have become increasingly marginal as digital music has become integrated in consumer-oriented platforms.

However, SoundCloud's demotic, interactive, and apparently democratic abundance is compromised. Even as it seeks to convey an aura of peer-to-peer multiplicity, underpinning the platform's interactivity is social media's problematic "culture of connectivity," involving "a continuous pressure—both from peers and from technologies—to expand through competition and gain power through strategic alliances" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 21). That culture of connectivity also includes monitoring users' behavior and gathering data about music consumption, potentially available to third parties via Application Programming Interfaces (APIs); and, like other platforms based on "user-generated content," their business model depends on what can be characterized as the "free" or unpaid labor of users.⁶ SoundCloud's rhetoric of sharing and connecting through music remains embedded in the political economy and culture of digital networks under capitalism, and various contradictions result from it.

This is clear when considering SoundCloud's history, and the platform's struggles to build a business model based on UGC and social media interaction. As is typical for a tech

company seeking to establish itself as the main provider of a certain kind of service, SoundCloud has sustained considerable losses in the hope of achieving very large profits later, once it has established itself as the dominant platform within its particular market by matching high numbers of providers (and their content) with high numbers of users (and data about consumption practices; see below for more discussion of this multisided aspect of platforms). But the platform has proven unable to monetize the vast amounts of freely given content, which is largely obscure and/or unauthorized, thus leaving it at a disadvantage in a market dominated by consumer-oriented platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music. SoundCloud's capacity to earn revenue from the sales of targeted advertising is also limited because the platform does not have demographic (meta)data information associated with individual user behavior (Allington et al., 2015).

The problems facing SoundCloud demonstrate the continuing difficulties that capitalist businesses face in generating revenue from music-related online activity, even as they transform the ways in which music is distributed and consumed (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2018). By 2014, SoundCloud had "raised more than \$100 million in venture financing from blue-chip investors" (Sisario, 2014) claiming 175 million regular users and valued itself at as much as US\$700 million, as firms such as Twitter and Spotify showed interest in purchasing the company. In spite of its rather dubious claims to attract such high numbers of users, however, SoundCloud's revenues were "miniscule" up to 2014, and were derived almost entirely from "the fees it charges some of its most active

providers” for storage space and data analysis (Sisario, 2014). For this reason, in 2014, SoundCloud began to sign deals with major music publishers, distributors, and artists so that they could attract advertising, and in 2016 began to offer a consumer-oriented subscription service along the lines of those run by Spotify, Apple, and Tidal, entitling subscribers to advert-free music as well as offline access. It also sought and obtained further investment from its backers, but by 2017 SoundCloud was in serious trouble, making considerable losses, and attracting only 100,000 new consumer subscriptions. It laid off hundreds of workers in 2017, closing its San Francisco and London offices and, under a new Chief Executive, abandoned its efforts to compete with the major subscription platforms, and refocused towards catering to content producers, on the basis of selling “tools” (mainly data on user behavior and extra storage) to musicians for between US\$70 and US\$100 per year (Nicolaou, 2018). SoundCloud then seemed to recover, raising yet more investment in anticipation of a bid from a bigger rival such as Spotify (Nicolaou, 2018). Yet there is still skepticism from music industry commentators about its efforts to “reposition itself as a creator-first community” (Deahl & Patel, 2018). SoundCloud’s future remains uncertain (Sanchez, 2018).

As a result of these developments, while SoundCloud maintains a reputation as a place where musicians—perhaps especially hip-hop musicians (Caramanica, 2017)—can go from obscurity to success and fame, thereby presenting itself as a “bottom up” challenge to the music industry, it has not been able to bypass the systems of intellectual property that underpin the music industries, and this has come to constrain its appeal to independent musicians. This is evident in SoundCloud’s changing policies on “takedown” notices. For years, the company did little to police copyright infringements, claiming that as a platform it was protected by the US Digital Millennium Copyright Act of 1998, notably the “safe harbour” principle which determines that online intermediaries (whether “platforms” or Internet service providers) cannot be held responsible for user-generated content that infringes copyright.⁷ However, as SoundCloud struck deals with major recorded-music companies (Universal, Warner, and Sony), it was compelled to take a far stricter stance with regard to unauthorized use of copyrighted material. It increased the number of takedown notices it issued and increased deletion of profiles of recurring offenders. To make matters worse, its content ID algorithm often seems to be inaccurate, leading to unjustified takedowns. While users can appeal, the process is opaque, increasing levels of anxiety and uncertainty among musicians (Rauh, 2018). This scenario places some users at great risk of having their profiles deleted, as is evident in the case of DJs who upload mixes and sets featuring unauthorized third-party content. Many DJs have migrated to other producer-oriented platforms (Rauh, 2018), such as Mixcloud, partly because the latter service is not so enthusiastic in enforcing takedown notices (O’Hear, 2018).

SoundCloud, then, faces a major problem: its most valuable asset is uploaded content made by those the company refers to as *core creators*, yet it must reinforce stricter copyright enforcement policies, because of its lack of power vis-a-vis the major record companies. In this respect, it is in a much more vulnerable position than YouTube, which, backed by its mighty Alphabet parent company, can approach infringement issues from a more powerful position. Having said all this, in SoundCloud’s favor is the need of the recorded-music companies for a variety of online outlets for licensed music, so that outside China and India the mainstream consumer-oriented streaming services do not form into an oligopoly, or even a duopoly run by, say, Apple and Spotify, as is highly feasible. Moreover, the music industries as a whole rely on a constant influx of new talent and cultural products, and SoundCloud offers a relatively inexpensive environment where musicians can experiment musically (which in EDM and hip hop rely on sampling and remixing) and build up followers and fans. Yet, current copyright enforcement policies on SoundCloud work against the common view among many EDM and hip-hop musicians of “fair use”; that is, as long as the authorship of sampled material is acknowledged and no negative impacts are incurred to the original artist (loss of revenue or reputation damage), there is a valid case for using copyrighted material without authorization. A different view prevails in the mainstream music industries, one with which SoundCloud is now forced to comply.

SoundCloud, then, is a remarkable cultural phenomenon, but its struggles suggest limits to hopes that a producer-oriented platform of this kind might be the basis of any significant democratization of musical production and consumption. Bandcamp provides an interesting comparison, precisely because its relative success seems to be based on ways in which it foregoes features of “platforms,” at least in some understandings of that term.

Bandcamp

Bandcamp is a music sales website founded in 2008 by Ethan Diamond and Shawn Grunberger, developers with a successful track record in Silicon Valley (their webmail service Oddpost was bought by Yahoo! in 2004 for a reported US\$30million). While it launched in the same period as Facebook and Twitter, and comparable music-oriented platforms such as SoundCloud and Spotify, it has not grown at the rate of these former peers, and nor has it changed so substantially. It has also not taken the leap into market flotation enacted by these other larger platforms (SoundCloud being an exception at present, though not for the want of trying). Bandcamp received venture capital funding in 2010, from Brad Garlinghouse and True Ventures, but such financing does not seem to have substantially impinged on a stable business model that has been “profitable since 2012” (Bandcamp, n.d.-a). Although it has of late made some

concessions to the rise of streaming (purchased releases can now be streamed through the Bandcamp mobile app), it is distinct from other major music platforms in that it primarily offers artists a digital storefront for sales of digital files, physical releases, and merchandise.

It is this distinctiveness we examine here, in the context of platformization. Bandcamp does define itself, in corporate filings to the State of California, as a “music platform” (Bandcamp, 2013), but in its more public-facing discourse, as well as through its interface and its business model, it operates in ways that seem deliberately counter to the approach of dominant music streaming services. This makes it an intriguing case of a potentially “alternative” music platform.

Economically speaking, Bandcamp is at odds with a key aspect of “platformization,” namely, that it “brings about a shift from single- and two-sided markets to complex multi-sided markets” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 428). Whether Bandcamp is one-sided or two-sided is a difficult question—economists generally agree that “sidedness” is a matter of “degrees” rather than an either/or distinction (see Filistrucchi, 2010, pp. 4–5)—but what is more pertinent is that its status as a “transaction platform” (as opposed to a “non-transaction platform”) means that, across however many sides, Bandcamp is operating within one *single market system*: that of digital and physical music commodities.⁸ It does not meaningfully engage in the “stacking” of markets so commonly associated with platforms. (The fact that Bandcamp offers musicians and consumers distinct “products” is not relevant here.⁹)

Going by the quite specific technical definitions offered in some strands of “platform studies” (Bogost & Montfort, 2009), Bandcamp would fail to constitute a platform on the basis that it is neither programmable nor modular. Most notably, its API offerings are minimal, allowing users to access their own sales data and merchandise orders, but offering no real opportunities to work “with” the data (e.g., by connecting audience metrics to other datasets). Gillespie (2017) argues that it is “too late” to base the definition of “platform” on these technological criteria (i.e., the public understanding of the term has moved on), but it is notable that in its use of this basic, “level 1” API (Andreessen, 2007), Bandcamp strongly resembles older iterations of content distribution sites. And going by Gillespie’s rather more socio-cultural definition, Bandcamp still lacks some degree of “platform-ness”; its recommendations system seems to be entirely editorial rather than algorithmic, and the site lacks the “culture of connectivity” that van Dijck (2013) notes is a hallmark of social media. It also has no advertising of any sort, and while this does not directly relate to its status as a platform—there are plenty of online platforms that operate without ads (see Scholz, 2016)—it does put Bandcamp in sharp contrast to the dominant online music (and media) streaming services, and also to the contemporary Internet as a whole.

In economic, technological, and socio-cultural terms, then, Bandcamp perhaps offers something akin to a “quasi-platform”; a static, Web 2.0-esque distribution service whose functionality has been rapidly outflanked by its former cohorts. And yet, as it enters its second decade, Bandcamp must be considered a relative success among a field littered with might-have-beens—if not quite a tech “unicorn,” then at least a very sturdy workhorse (at the time of writing, Bandcamp mediates music sales totalling around US\$7 million per month, 10%–15% of which goes directly to the site). Why has Bandcamp not gone the way of, say, Myspace, a music-focused site whose decline has been attributed to the lack of an expansive API (Helmond, 2015, p. 7)—essentially, a failure to “platformize”?

The answer is partly that Bandcamp offers capacities that hold specific value to the indie music practitioners who form its core user-base, and that these capacities relate directly to its “quasi-platform” status. A significant consequence of the lack of connectivity mentioned above is that artist pages are discrete entities—lacking, for instance, the autoplay function of SoundCloud that takes listeners from one artist to the next when a track is over. Releases on Bandcamp seem more fully “situated” than on streaming services, allowing for the creation of the “excess of symbolic meaning” that Barry Shank (1994) has argued is a key characteristic of local music scenes, such as the one he studied in Austin, Texas, in the 1980s (p. 122). One interviewed practitioner suggested that “it feels like when you go on a Bandcamp page, you can concentrate on what it is more. If it’s a release, an album or EP or whatever, it feels more conceptually there, in the closest way possible I think to a physical release.” One band observed that SoundCloud was for “viral streaming of individual tracks,” whereas “with Bandcamp it’s more like you make your own little space on the Internet”; another argued that “if Bandcamp is the full thing, the twelve-inch [album], then SoundCloud is the seven-inch [single].”¹⁰ There are links to rock discourses of value here—the album as the nourishing meal, the single as calorific snack (Keightley, 2001, 2004)—but also to indie-specific values of materiality (physical productivity as the valorized “doing” in “do it yourself”), and insularity (the “do-it-yourself” [DIY] scene as something to be shielded and protected; see earlier citations, and Jones, 2018). It makes sense, then, that practitioners value how Bandcamp allows users their “own little space,” rather than chasing the ephemeral (and quite uncontrollable) popularity of virality.

This emphasis on space also intersects with a specific notion of time. Because Bandcamp pages are relatively standalone, there is less fear that releases here will be cast adrift amid an unceasing flow of content. This offers an alternative to the hurried chronology of the “News Feed”—what Kaun and Stiernstedt (2014) call “Facebook time”—and this sense of relative permanence also extends to the overall site design. Bandcamp has a relatively stable and limited set of features, unlike Facebook’s reactive approach in which rugs

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Figure 3. Detail from an Artist page on Bandcamp, showing a crowd of “fans,” and any qualitative feedback left by them, beneath the album art. (Screenshot of <http://cowtown.bandcamp.com>, accessed 17th December 2018.)

are frequently pulled from beneath users’ feet as various components of the platform are redesigned, repurposed, or removed entirely (Bratton, 2015, p. 194). Here, there are notable connections with indie and punk practitioners’ historical emphasis on “documentation” as a key aspect of their work (Azerrad, 2001, p. 132); the phrase “making a record” neatly carries this connotation of cultural output as archival work (or “record-keeping”). Bandcamp is a place where recordings feel like they will stick around, contributing to a historical lineage of self-made cultural artifacts—very different from the ephemerality and newness enshrined in SoundCloud, a focus on innovation congruent with some core values of EDM and hip hop.

Nieborg and Poell (2018) argue that platformization has brought about the “contingent” cultural commodity, defined as “malleable, modular in design, and informed by datafied user feedback, open to constant revision and recirculation” (p. 2). Popular music is certainly not immune to these processes—prominent examples include the iterative “albums” of Kanye West and Frank Ocean (Greene, 2016), or the rise of highly data-driven Spotify playlists both algorithmic and editorial (see Bonini & Gandini, this issue). But there are numerous reasons why the kind of “contingency” observed in the news and video game industries might be less readily adopted in music, including popular music’s particularly

strong emphasis on “authentic” expression (Frith, 1987/2007, p. 136). That larger issue of authenticity is beyond the scope of this article, but at the genre-specific level at least, it is clear that a malleable cultural commodity is ideologically incongruent with indie’s emphasis on materiality, permanence, and insularity, and that Bandcamp provides these qualities to a substantially greater extent.

Bandcamp’s limited utilization of data may be to some extent a matter of resources (i.e., their small staff may make certain kinds of data work infeasible), but it is at least partly a deliberate choice to offer a non-platformized aesthetic; Bandcamp advisor Andrew Dubber (2013) has used the phrase “behavioural skeuomorphism” to characterize the platform’s conscious efforts to make the platform’s interface look and feel like an old-fashioned, record-shop experience for consumers. Bandcamp’s skeuomorphism also extends to a specific approach to metrics. While a few now-conventional metrics of a kind associated with social media platforms are available to Bandcamp page owners (plays, sales, and “buzz,” with additional location details available to paying “Pro” subscribers), there is no public metric that is directly equivalent to “likes” or “followers.” Perhaps the most important measurement on the site—the number of people who have purchased a release—is not given publicly in numerical form, but is instead represented pictorially, in

the form of a collection of avatars of “fans” who have supported the artist (see Figure 3).

Again, this approach is consistent with the ethical and aesthetic sensibilities of the indie musicians who populate the platform. These practitioners report finding conventional metrics at best “vaguely interesting” or “irrelevant,” and at worst a source of anxiety and unwelcome comparison with other, bigger acts. The irrelevance of metrics here relates to the specific structure of small indie scenes (highly focused on the local), and also a not-for-profit ethos, which combine here to mean that the numbers are simply not that valuable (Jones, 2018). There is a strong desire to “translate” metrics back (*a la* Bolin & Andersson Schwarz, 2015), to see their audience not as the instrumentalized connective “edges” of a social network, but as individuals with which to form communicative bonds. On Facebook Pages this means “clicking through” past their total number of likes to find meaningful relations to the local, material practice that still constitutes the primary “site” of their scene: “that’s quite nice to be like, hey, I remember I saw that person last night, they’ve now come and found us [. . .] I like getting new Likes because you can relate it to those moments.” Bandcamp’s pictorial representation of fans—the opposite of the “faceless” numbers on mainstream platforms—makes it easier to locate meaning, creating a crowd scene out of individually discernible users, and thereby emphasizing the direct, intimate connection that indie musicians tend to valorize (Nguyen, 2012). This is not to say that feelings of competitiveness and status-seeking are eradicated—it isn’t hard to approximately “add up” the number of avatars on display—but there is a clear affinity between Bandcamp and indie music here.

Bandcamp has, like SoundCloud, made some effort to bring the recorded music industry on-board, but this has been aimed primarily at larger indie labels, and therefore does not interfere with core platform dynamics in the same way as SoundCloud’s contentious implementation of “content ID.” The Bandcamp “Labels” tool, for example, which allows for an overview of multiple artist accounts, is utilized by large indies such as Merge and Sub Pop but is also organizationally beneficial for smaller scale “bedroom” labels. The platform’s most recent “expansions,” if they can be labeled as such, have included opening a bricks-and-mortar record store in Oakland, California, and collaborating with a record manufacturer to offer a “vinyl pressing service” to artists. These developments may hint toward aspirations of vertical integration, but the “old-school” focus on vinyl and record shops also emphasizes their positioning as music intermediaries rather than technologists, and this operates in tandem with their discursive emphasis on what we might call a “music ecology”—of which they declare the “streaming giants” to be the enemy (Bandcamp, 2018). Bandcamp argues that, “[s]ince we only make money when artists make a lot more money, our interests remain aligned with those of the community we serve” (Bandcamp, n.d.-a).

Such an approach perhaps points to the limited scope of current perspectives on platforms from economics. The starting assumption of the two-sided market theory is that platforms connect actors from different markets who have no interest in each others’ welfare (Rochet & Tirole, 2006, p. 646). Newspapers connect audiences and advertisers but, to use Filistrucchi’s (2010) neat example, “it would surprise the news agent if you also asked, in addition to the price of the newspaper, the price of an advertising slot in the newspaper” (p. 4). In this framing, the cross-side network effects generated by platforms are a kind of accidental fallout of individuals acting out of self-interest. Bandcamp’s business model is less about generating sufficient critical mass to generate such “accidental” effects, and more about making the case for a moral economy in which consumers *deliberately* treat musicians’ livelihoods as their own concern.

There are some significant ways, then, in which Bandcamp might justifiably be understood as an “alternative” to the platformization of culture—although, as we will now show, the relationship is somewhat more complex. And the platform’s discourse emphasizes this alterity by, for example, positioning their relative reticence to utilize data as an ideological stance, rather than a matter of insufficient resources, as in this introductory section on a Bandcamp “Help” page concerning download pricing:

Please take what we’re about to tell you with a grain of salt. Part of what makes Bandcamp *Bandcamp* is that you, not some corporate behemoth, set your own pricing. And that’s really as it should be, since the most effective price just isn’t the same for every artist, and you know your fans better than anyone. That said, we have the advantage of a metric crap-ton of data, and that data tells us a few things: [. . .]. (Bandcamp, n.d.-b)

The informal and self-aware tone taken here by Bandcamp (e.g., the semi-ironic description of the platform as a “corporate behemoth”) seemingly anticipates some degree of skepticism from their “alternative”-minded artists, and seeks to negotiate between practitioners’ localized, qualitative understanding (“you know your fans”) and the kinds of analysis in which platforms specialize (built on “a metric crap-ton of data”). Arguably, this “in-between” position reflects an ideological compromise of the platform that does not seek to be a platform. But, at the same time, this kind of hands-off liberalism is a fundamental platform logic, which reflects that fact that platforms have nothing invested in any single sellers’ success or failure. In these ambivalent negotiations with and presentations of data, then, Bandcamp remains compatible with a kind of anti-managerial autonomy valued by indie practitioners.

While this compatibility is partially a consequence of Bandcamp’s specific status as an alternative, advert-free quasi-platform, it also demonstrates a quite striking congruity between indie music ethics and platform logics. The aforementioned emphasis on autonomy is one crucial

overlap—platforms, unlike labels, won't change your image, or force you back into the studio to record a more commercial track—but there is further affinity in platforms' and indie practitioners' shared interest in bypassing traditional cultural gatekeepers, and in encouraging participation from amateurs (the “anyone can do it” ethos of punk, which on platforms is sometimes considered in terms of the “prosumer”). Where once indie and DIY had a fairly stable and unambiguous antagonist, then, in the shape of major record labels (and their stranglehold on access to TV, radio, and the music press), the newly dominant platforms are regarded far more ambivalently.

This ambivalence means that tensions between platforms and indie (and its sense of itself as valuably alternative) are likely to be subtle, often arising in the form of potentially pernicious elisions between the two sets of ideologies at play. For instance, to return to the Bandcamp “Help” page quoted above, what is being sought is not a rejection of datafication in general, but the “most effective price.” Similarly, the reason they give for encouraging “pay what you want” is not premised on this being a more egalitarian approach but on the data-supported assertion that people will, on average, end up paying more. The specific ethical frameworks of indie here are not adhered to for their own sake, but because they work as a specific form of granularity to be instrumentalized for the maximum return. In this context, Bandcamp's assertion that “you know best” is perhaps the very essence of what is unique to platform economics: the autonomous activity of a legion of self-managing, self-auditing, specialist, workers, mediated by a host platform that capitalizes upon the effect this individualized labor has in perpetuating and accelerating an internal, multisided market.

As this section has outlined, one key concern of indie musicians in the platform age is that their distinctive sense of alterity might be rendered *indistinct* amidst a torrent of content from newly platform-enabled creators. Bandcamp mitigates this concern particularly well, by anachronistically ensuring that musical content and its context constitute its “raw material” (Srnicek, 2017, pp. 54–58), and not data. Nonetheless even this indie-minded quasi-platform puts forward, economically and discursively, an amended conception of the musical alternative, as slippery concepts such as autonomy, participation, and self-sufficiency—having arguably always existed on a normative knife-edge—are put to work in new, complex ways. Yet here too there is continuity, for the industry surrounding indie has always been involved in negotiations and compromises with the major-led industry “mainstream” that acts rhetorically and discursively as an ideological pole to be resisted.

Conclusion

Mainstream consumer-oriented streaming services such as Spotify and Apple Music are undoubtedly the principal

means by which the challenge to the recorded music industry once afforded by digital technologies has been contained. The status of music as property, threatened by the early “pirate” sites' enabling of radical sharing, has now been restored and in recent years the revenues of the global recorded music industry have substantially recovered—though not to the levels achieved at the turn of the century. Revenues now increasingly derive from advertising and subscriptions, rather than the sales of ownable individual items such as “singles” or “albums” that once sustained the late twentieth-century industry. Within this new system, producer-oriented sites such as Bandcamp and SoundCloud represent the residues of the hopes for a democratization of cultural production and consumption that were so widely heard in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In many respects, these producer-oriented platforms have become the principal site for “alternative” music, in the way that independent, alternative record companies and record shops once were (Kruse, 2003). Against excessively pessimistic accounts, we have indicated how some aspects of the sites represent positive values and emancipatory aspirations. However, we have also shown how, like older forms of alternative cultural production and distribution, these services are compromised and problematic, in ways that demonstrate contradictions in the political economy and culture of digital media. We showed, for example, the ways in which SoundCloud offers accessible self-publishing and music abundance, but struggles to be sustainable. Meanwhile, Bandcamp seeks to act as an “alternative” platform but finds relative stability partly via (often unacknowledged) congruences between platform ideologies on the one hand and values of its indie and DIY admirers on the other.

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Notes

1. It is easy for amateur and semi-professional musicians to use YouTube to upload their music. YouTube, because of its extraordinary multiplicity, does not fit easily into our categories of “consumer-oriented” and “producer-oriented” music streaming services.

2. The widely used acronym GAFAM refers to five large tech corporations with massive global reach: Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft. Three of these firms (Google, Apple, and Amazon) own and operate popular consumer-oriented (as opposed to producer-oriented—see above) music platforms. Other popular and well-funded services such as Spotify and Deezer are not run by these major tech corporations, and so are “independent” in this (limited) respect, but they are likely to be vulnerable to takeover by the bigger companies.
3. Some commentators and users see much stronger parallels between SoundCloud and the video-sharing site Vimeo, than between SoundCloud and YouTube, on the basis that Vimeo does not carry adverts, allows for better audiovisual quality, and arguably contributes to a stronger sense of community among creators and users. When SoundCloud reorganized in 2017 in the wake of new investment, its new CEO and other senior executives came from Vimeo. The aim appeared to be to focus on monetizing the attachment of creators to the site, as Vimeo successfully had. See Kim (2017).
4. Some commentators have used the term “SoundCloud rap” to describe hip hop disseminated on SoundCloud and characterized by “lo-fi” and “distorted DIY production” (Scheinberg, 2017). At the time of writing, such tracks are by far the most popular form of music on SoundCloud. In this article, we focus more on electronic dance music (EDM), partly for reasons of space, and partly because some of the research on which this article is based was focused on that genre (Rauh, 2018).
5. EDM and hip hop of course have star systems based on celebrity musicians and DJs, but this feature of the cultural industries is in constant tension with the high value placed on anonymity (Hesmondhalgh, 1998).
6. There is no space to discuss the concept of “free” or unpaid labor here. See Hesmondhalgh (2015), for discussion of problems concerning the concept, including its relations to ideas of exploitation.
7. A similar principle was incorporated into European law in the form of Article 14 of the E-Commerce Directive of 2000.
8. The key distinction here concerns the “neutrality” of the price structure; that is, the irrelevance of whether it is the buyer or seller who pays the platform. This is sometimes referred to as “pass through,” since one side of the market is able to *pass through* its interaction costs to the other side (Filistrucchi, Geradin, van Damme, & Affeldt, 2014, p. 299). Rochet and Tirole draw on the example that “for a given level of VAT, it does not matter who, of the merchant and the consumer, is charged for it” (p. 648). Bandcamp’s per-transaction fee is this kind of “neutral” exchange, and is quite distinct from a platform having to set a price structure that works for, say, advertisers, rightsholders, and consumers who do not directly transact with one another.
9. To use Filistrucchi et al.’s (2014) example, a rental agency dealing with landlords and tenants operates in a single market, despite the fact that the products offered to each side are different: “a landlord trying to rent a flat would not usually be interested in visiting flats that are up for rental” (p. 303).
10. The interview material utilized here is drawn from ethnographic research focused on the do-it-yourself (DIY) indie-punk scene in Leeds, conducted during 2015–2018 (see Jones, 2018).

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