

The Artist-as-Intermediary: Musician Labour in the Digitally Networked Era

ABSTRACT

The advent of digital distribution platforms has removed middlemen from the musical supply chain — better known within the industry as the process of “disintermediation.” Often celebrated, disintermediation is understood to have lowered the barrier to entry into the music industry, following the sudden rise in access to marketplace and distribution platforms. However, this increased access to the means of distribution comes with increased responsibilities; musicians not only write, record and produce their own music, in the digital era, they are charged with the added responsibility of promoting, circulating and distributing their music. To understand this disruption, this essay presents the conceptual framework of the *artist-as-intermediary*. Suturing the artist to the intermediary, the artist-as-intermediary articulates the ways in which the responsibilities formerly held by music label executives — promoters, managers, A&R representatives -- have not disappeared with disintermediation but have instead been downloaded onto the musician. To more fully illustrate this phenomenon, this essay proffers a brief case study of marketplace and distribution platform Bandcamp and indie musician Car Seat Headrest.

KEYWORDS: digital distribution; disintermediation; creative labour; music industry



Digitization has been heralded for lowering the barrier to entry into creative fields of production and distribution such as the music industry. The free circulation of music via digital distribution platforms and sharing networks prompted a reshuffling of the music industry, leading to an unmistakable shift in its overall appearance. Increasingly absent are the ever-maligned middlemen, intermediaries who once occupied various divisions of a record label such as artists and repertoire (A&R), production, marketing and promotion. However, despite the much-touted death of the middleman, celebrated for its empowerment of the creator, the distribution of power within the music industry remains unequal and new forms of unpaid, invisible labour have emerged.

Those in support of the digital turn venerate new modes of distribution and the expiry of the intermediary while others weave a more cautionary tale. While it is true that eliminating an intermediary can remove certain boundaries, once they have been erased, the responsibilities, risks and roles they previously performed are then downloaded onto the musician. In this process, the musician assumes what I'm calling the role of the "artist-as-intermediary." The artist-as-intermediary creates, records, and produces her/his own music; she/he aggregates, maintains, and grows a fanbase via ongoing and sustained interactions on social media sites, including Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr; and she/he circulates their music through streaming and marketplace platforms such as YouTube, Spotify and Bandcamp. In short, in the digital era, emerging musicians are their own producers, distributors and promoters, they are artists-as-intermediaries. Even though some may be quick to suggest that the downloading of risk onto musicians and the exploitation of their labour are by no means new phenomena, in what follows, I argue that digital technologies in fact intensify this process of exploitation, doubling a musician's output of creative labour. Before turning to a more thorough explanation of the artist-as-intermediary I first survey existing accounts of digital distribution and disintermediation. Certain gaps in these accounts will reveal the necessity of my conceptual contribution, the artist-as-intermediary.

Digital Distribution

In *Understanding the Music Industries* (2013) Chris Anderton, Andrew Dubber and Martin James argue that understanding digital distribution is the key to comprehending many of the changes that affect 21st century music industry ecologies (93). For that reason, digital distribution platforms provide a logical point of entry into a discussion of musician labour in the networked era as these platforms both reflect and are responsible for significant changes within the music industry today.

A proponent of this new mode is Philipp Peltz, a seasoned music producer and interdisciplinary researcher and lecturer in the field of the music industries at the University of Melbourne. Peltz (2013) outlines four models of digital distribution: the free model, the music as a service (MaaS) model, the download-to-ownership model (DtO), and the crowdfunding model. In the free model, musicians offer their music against no or involuntary payments (103). The music is delivered to consumers as a downloadable or streamable file through an artist's website or third party platform, such as Spotify, Soundcloud, and Bandcamp. While Peltz tacitly concedes that the free model potentially degrades or diminishes the value of the artists' work, he nevertheless supports the rhetoric that that exposure is just compensation for creative work. By contrast, Paul Rutter (2011) explains that the notion of "free" only benefits those musicians who have an established following and consumer base (172). Emerging musicians, he writes, "cannot risk devaluing their product

before it even has commercial value” as it will become nearly impossible to recoup losses (172).

The second model, MaaS, provides music to listeners without the transfer of ownership through the use of streaming platforms (Peltz 2013: 107). Most MaaS providers employ “freemium business models” wherein they provide music for listening at no direct cost to the consumer, accruing revenue through site-based advertising or subscriptions instead (107). Peltz (2013) briefly acknowledges some of its economic limitations but remains steadfast in his defence of this model, asserting that MaaS is a viable promotional tool that serves musicians (108). Conversely, Anderton, Dubber and James (2013) argue that these platforms facilitate a two-sided market that serves both listeners and advertisers, but not musicians (96–97). With MaaS, the service, not the recording is the commodity form (Sterne 2012: 220). When the service becomes the primary commodity form, musicians are left with little bargaining power to demand compensation for their labour contributions.

Peltz’s third model is the download-to-ownership model (DtO). Of the four models, this one most closely resembles the structure of the traditional recording industry wherein consumers buy individual songs or albums and permanently download them to their computers and various devices (Peltz 2013: 110). Artists and labels alike can either utilize their own website or use third party distributors such as Apple’s iTunes to sell music online. Major players in the recording industry — commonly represented by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and the International Federation for the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) — tend to favour the DtO model as it provides a closed circuit of distribution that limits (or at least discourages) piracy. However, according to the 2015 report from the IFPI, downloads have decreased eight per cent in the last year while streaming has increased 39 per cent (9). If the propensity to download music is diminishing, and notions of ownership appear less significant to listeners, then it is reasonable to predict that independent and emerging artists may see less revenue for music distributed digitally.

Peltz concludes by outlining crowdfunding as the fourth model of digital distribution. In this model, artists use third party sites such as Patreon and Kickstarter to request donations from fans and listeners. These donations are used to fund tours, the creation of an album, the production of merchandise and music videos, and general financial support for artists who otherwise see little return on their creative investments. Through the crowdfunding model, artists provide incentives at various levels of funding, be it unique merchandise, exclusive passes to events, early releases of music, and so on. The crowdfunding model demands more than just their music, in effect doubling musicians’ creative labour.

While it would be inaccurate to suggest that these new models of distribution are simply a vampiric form of capital extraction disguised as digital egalitarianism, it is nevertheless important to maintain a critical distance from celebrants. For starters,

smaller producers and creators continue to have less power and control over distribution and they remain economically insecure (Davis 2013: 105). The disparities from the traditional, off-line model of distribution have not been entirely upended as not everyone has equal access to the same tools for production and distribution and, for many musicians, the capacity to attract a monetizable audience remains elusive (Taylor 2014: 108). Indeed, while the means to distribute have been made easier through digitization, Timothy Taylor (2013) poses an important, niggling question: “distribute it to whom?” (167).

Disintermediation

For many (Jenkins 2006; Florida 2012), the advent of digital distribution technologies signalled a dramatic and positive turn toward free circulation of creative content and successful circumvention of a formerly impenetrable system. New communication technologies have eliminated intermediaries from the distribution process thereby causing disintermediation (Jones 2002; Arditi 2014b). In certain cases, this has granted musicians better access and connections to fans. Instead of relying on a middleman to facilitate artist-fan connections, through digitization musicians are endowed with the power to communicate directly with their consumers and followers. With digital distribution, access to audiences is more open and connections are closer, but what does DIY distribution mean for a musician as a labourer? How does the increasing disintermediation caused by a growing reliance upon digital distribution change the nature of musician labour in the networked era? What are some potential implications of these changes for artists as they increasingly perform the duties of not only the musician but promoter, producer and distributor as well?

In *Promotional Cultures* (2013), Aeron Davis employs the term “promotional intermediary” as an amendment of Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) “cultural intermediary.” Promotional intermediaries occupy various roles within the music industry but their primary concern is to “identify a saleable product”, “a potential audience”, “a communications medium”, and “a message” (2). Davis argues that they unburden musicians of their need to think about commercial imperatives, granting them the freedom to focus on the creative (101). In addition to making downstream connections to fans and listeners, intermediaries also establish connections upstream, helping musicians to reach those in elite positions, “who control the allocation of resources or distribution of information” (Maguire & Matthews 2014: 10). While the distinction between musician and promoter was clearer just a few years ago, the popularity of digital distribution platforms and the subsequent rise in disintermediation have made it increasingly difficult to separate creator from promoter, artist from distributor.

For Billy Geoghegan and Kevin Meehan (2014), disintermediation flags a much larger issue: despite the apparent flaws of the old system, the numerous functions labels used to perform have been stripped down to just distribution and royalties

by the likes of iTunes and Amazon (62). With “the abdication of vital functions such as artist development, advances for recording, sponsorship of tours, marketing, and accounting,” they continue, “the risk and responsibility for fulfilling these necessary duties now falls heavily on artists” (Geoghegan & Meehan 2014: 62). “The idea that distribution has been radically democratized is a ruse,” according to Geoghegan and Meehan, and while some creative producers can make their content instantly available to consumers and fans, there remains a need for promotion and advertising, “which is still the domain of the major labels and bigger indies” (Geoghegan & Meehan 2014: 66). Similarly, David Arditi (2014b) argues that despite changes in its outward appearance, the traditional recording industry and the major labels that it is comprised of have maintained their position as gatekeepers. Indeed, disintermediation has “created the potential for musicians to distribute music directly, but internal limitations to their interactions on the internet maintain power imbalances in the larger music industry” (Arditi 2014b). As Astra Taylor (2014) states, “networks reflect and exacerbate imbalances of power as much as they improve them” (24). In essence, the structural position of the intermediary remains unchanged in the wake of digitization, even if digital distribution has reorganized the actors involved; the outward perception of change belies the ongoing, underlying industrialization.

Music scholar Steve Jones (2002) argues that the introduction of networked technologies has very real consequences for how listeners access music, and how that music makes its way to listeners (214). “Network[ed] technologies,” he writes, “are of increasing importance in regulating the tension between alienation and progress” (214). The lowering of the barrier to entry to distribution expedites a flooding of the virtual market, making a plethora of music available at one time, resulting in fierce competition (Taylor 2013: 167). So, while emerging musicians continue to enter the fold, the power imbalances characteristic of the traditional recording industry remains firmly intact (Klein et al 2016: 6).

Furthermore, while networked technologies may permit “new expressive forms,” and the costs of production and distribution have become cheaper, it is important to remember that the process of making things remains, in many critical ways, unaltered (Taylor 2014: 43). Consequently, while access to distributive and networked technologies is more open than it was in the past, it is still difficult for many emerging musicians to adequately compete with the traditional recording industries in terms of their capacity to promote and circulate content. For example, the IFPI (2015) recently reported that over the last five years record companies have invested more than US\$20 billion in A&R and marketing alone (22). As the Vice President of digital strategy and business development for Warner Music, John Rees says: “the challenge is to reach the mass market and that requires significant investment in marketing and promotion” (IFPI 2015: 17). Therefore, while digitization may have lowered barriers to entry, facilitating easier access to the means of distribution,

those with the greatest economic means (i.e., major labels) ultimately out-promote those without.

The Artist-As-Intermediary: Bandcamp & Car Seat Headrest

Bandcamp

On March 5, 2015, a number of online sources including Forbes, Billboard, and FACTmag, announced that Bandcamp — an online distribution and marketplace platform — had reached a significant milestone: through their site, listeners have paid over \$100 million to artists since its 2007 launch. According to bandcamp.com, to date the company has overseen the payout of over \$133 million to musicians, selling an average of 16,000 albums per day (Payne 2015). Catering primarily to independent artists, Bandcamp makes music available to listeners for free through streaming, but downloads cost listeners an artist-determined fee. Likewise, musicians get free access to Bandcamp and there is no charge to upload music for streaming, but should an artist sell their music to a listener, however, she/he must pay 15 per cent to the site. When a musician reaches \$5000 in sales, Bandcamp lowers their commission fee to 10 per cent. The lowering of the commission percentage fees demonstrates that Bandcamp implicitly incentivizes the active cultivation of fans by musicians, and in doing so encourages musicians to create quality, saleable products — the more they sell, the more revenues Bandcamp ultimately yields.

Bandcamp is emblematic of the paradigmatic turn within the music industry triggered by digitization. No longer reliant on traditional means of production, distribution and circulation, Bandcamp exemplifies the ways artists and fans have greater access to new music. While Bandcamp is undeniably an alternative digital music distribution platform, it in many ways resembles a traditional label. They create a space (i.e., online platform) — rather than a product (i.e., album, CD) — for musicians to sell to audiences and cultivate fans. The “label” in Bandcamp’s case receives a small fraction of the final sale of the music and the artists see the largest portion. This is different than traditional models, where musicians are likely to receive less than 10 per cent of an album’s sales. In this sense, Bandcamp presents itself as a promising, progressive distribution outlet for emerging musicians. However, we should temper our celebration.

While Bandcamp does take a relatively small portion of the revenue by comparison to traditional labels, it is missing the key element in the successful circulation of music: promotion. Marketing, promotions and public relations expertise are invaluable resources that were traditionally provided by labels, a service noticeably absent from Bandcamp. Much in the way that Apple sees auxiliary revenue from music sales through iTunes — music they had no hand in creating — Bandcamp accrues revenue from artists for whom they toil none. The onus is thus on the musician when it comes to managing her/his marketing and promotional initiatives. The

creative labour enacted throughout the cultural industries is daunting enough, but to face the additional burden of constant self-promotion and self-management, a tension described by Nancy Baym (2015) as “the relational labour of connection”, the artist-as-intermediary’s labour is transmogrified in the era of digital capitalism. To illustrate some of these tensions, I now turn to a very brief case study of Bandcamp star Car Seat Headrest.

Car Seat Headrest

A lo-fi indie pop band and the creative project of 23-year-old frontman Will Toledo, Car Seat Headrest (CSH) is the quintessential artist-as-intermediary. Hailing from Leesburg, Virginia, but currently residing in Seattle, Washington, Toledo is the sole auteur for all of CSH’s material, though he occasionally recruits others for recordings and live performances. Starting in 2010, Toledo began recording his music onto his MacBook using GarageBand software and a USB interface plug for his guitar (Aguilar 2015). The New Yorker’s Hua Hsu (2015) describes Toledo’s music as “the kinds of perfect, instantly familiar pop songs that echo in the back of your dreams.” The bulk of these recordings, especially the vocals, took place in Toledo’s parents’ minivan to an audience of “car seat headrests”—hence, the name. Immediately after recording, Toledo would upload his music to the Bandcamp website and has since made 11 albums available for listening and purchasing. Via Bandcamp, Toledo has sold over 25,000 copies of his works, amassing a small but loyal following of devotees (Hayden 2015). He is an active social media participant, engaging with his fans regularly through Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr and Bandcamp, often posting several times in a day.

In 2015, Matador label founder Chris Lombardi emailed Toledo after being turned on to his music by an intern (Aguilar 2015; Rettig 2015). Lombardi then came out to watch one of CSH’s shows in Seattle which, according to Toledo, had “a shoddy turnout” and was a poor performance (Rettig 2015). Nevertheless, Matador signed CSH right away, and released a compilation (or “taster”) album called *Teens of Style* in October 2015. Shortly after its October 30, 2015 release, *Teens of Style* secured a number 19 spot on the Billboard “Top Heat Seekers” chart (for new and emerging artists), remaining there throughout the week of November 21, 2015.

While much of this paints a promising picture of digital technology’s capacity to lower barriers to entry, there are three things to consider. First, despite his impressive output, according to Aguilar (2015), very few people had heard of CSH until he was signed to Matador. Toledo had never toured, instead spending the bulk of his time managing thousands of downloads through Bandcamp (Aguilar 2015), suggesting that getting signed to a label is still the most lucrative way to achieve musical celebrity. Second, notwithstanding his support for Bandcamp, Toledo concedes that “self-releasing material is rewarding but the payoff is super slow.” He goes on to say that he would have liked to continue in this model but that he “needed money” (Rettig 2015) implying that the DIY model of digital distribution is not a

viable model for sustainable creative production. To produce 11 full-length albums in a five-year span only to see 25,000 units sold (including singles) indicates that Toldeo labours exponentially more, but sees significantly less payout, than a musician signed to a label. Signed musicians are more likely to concentrate upon one album per year and receive an advance to do so. By contrast, Toledo downloads all risk when releasing an album and assumes all responsibility for it, overseeing its production, distribution, promotion and circulation without any financial safety net.

Finally, during the production of his massive Bandcamp catalogue, Toledo completed a Bachelors degree at The College of William & Mary. Throughout this time his most significant gesture toward self-promotion was a Tumblr page that he actively managed (Hsu 2015). Even today, the page “features his latest press, responses to his fan’s questions, photographs of his friends and himself, and brief entries about recently discovered bands” (Hsu 2015). In addition to completing school work and overseeing all aspects of his musical releases, Toledo labours to maintain social relations online as his followers are the basis of his fan group and are the ones most likely to buy his music. Sustaining an economically viable fanbase therefore requires an abundance of ongoing and intensified interactions, adding affective labour to his existing responsibilities as a creative labourer. Indeed, as creator, producer, promoter and distributor of his own music, Toledo is an illustrative model of the artist-as-intermediary.

Conclusion

David Ardit (2014a) writes that “the materiality of the music commodity and the labor tethered to the production, distribution and sale of physical objects is transformed in the process of digitization” (517). Disintermediation shows us that the elimination of the middleman through digital distribution does not in fact liberate the musician from industry shackles but rather forces artists to occupy the role of intermediary should they aspire to be commercially successful. While it is true that the artist-as-intermediary has more open access to distribution platforms, she/he do not have access to funds or promotional resources. The artist-as-intermediary does all her/his own creative and promotional work, establishing a monetizable fanbase in the hopes that label executives (or, rather, their interns) scanning the web for the hottest trend will sign her/him to a recording contract. Consequently, the ease of access to distribution and increasing disintermediation create a false impression of openness within the music industry when the gatekeeping functions of the traditional industry obstinately persist.

The concept of the artist-as-intermediary is in this respect intended to be a generative one, and should help us to understand the elision between producer and promoter, maker and marketer, facilitated by networked technologies. While there are liberatory elements introduced to the cultural industries through digitization, the term artist-as-intermediary puts into perspective some of the less empowering

aspects. The immaterial labour already expended by musicians is doubling — if not tripling! — as artists-as-intermediaries become responsible for not only writing their own music, but producing, distributing, promoting and circulating it as well. This exponential growth in the immaterial labour put forth by musicians speaks to much broader conditions experienced by creatives across the cultural industries. Indeed, looking to future research, the artist-as-intermediary can easily be applied to a number of potential case studies, covering the ways digitization has facilitated a doubling of unwaged creative labour, including the work of visual artists, graphic and web designers, writers, filmmakers, poets, game developers and more.

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