

This article was downloaded by: 10.3.98.93

On: 17 Jan 2019

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Edited by Michael Bull

## **The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies**

Bull Michael

### **Curating online sounds**

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315722191-26>

Durham Blake

**Published online on: 02 Nov 2018**

**How to cite :-** Durham Blake. 02 Nov 2018, *Curating online sounds from: The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies* Routledge

Accessed on: 17 Jan 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315722191-26>

**PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT**

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

## 22

## CURATING ONLINE SOUNDS

*Blake Durham*

This chapter addresses some of the key debates and issues raised in relation to curatorial functions of digital sound cultures, with particular attention to curation on licensed music streaming services. It addresses three overlapping but distinct orders of curation: first, curation as individualized practices of recombinatory and reflexive consumption; second, curation as collaborative, archival, and educational projects carried out by distributed regimes of value; third, curation as the primary output of algorithmic cultures online, wherein cultural technologies are engaged in the automation of classification and presentation. The examples provided in this chapter demonstrate that each of these curatorial practices is mutually mediating, with each order of curation—individualistic, collaborative, and algorithmic—intersecting, informing, and shaping the other (Born 2011). Much in the same way that it is impossible to speak about the online curation of sound without considering the technical infrastructure that engenders digital socialities, we must also address the mutating forms of curatorial labor that are appropriated and instrumentalized in the production of automated curation. A rigorous analysis of the sociotechnical systems of curation online must address the agencies at work within these assemblages, parsing whose tastes and values are being performed, and to whose benefit these curatorial acts serve.

Curation as it relates to the soundscapes of the internet is often hazily defined, but it generally refers to processes by which cultural objects are selected, classified, hierarchized, sorted, and displayed online. It seems indisputable that much of participation in social media networks is characterized by the interaction with or creation of ‘curated’ experiences: individuals are constantly engaged in curatorial functions, including searching, filtering, sorting, remixing, adding, saving, sharing, and so forth, which are each usefully understood as a form of selection and presentation. The impetus to curate personal collections of digital media is now ubiquitous across social media platforms, from the lifestyle-oriented ‘visual discovery’ site Pinterest, to the personal image collections of Instagram: music is perhaps most emblematic of this movement, with approaches to curation representing the chief point of product differentiation for competing digital music services.

The term ‘curate’ has been problematically adopted in digital marketing industries, particularly in reference to the user-generated content of Web 2.0, in which often-banal engagements with digital consumption are construed as active curatorial production. Notably, visual arts curator Hans Ulrich Obrist has argued against this appropriation of the metaphorical utility of curation, noting how it ignores the historical realities of museums, collections, and their caretakers. Chief

among Obrist's criticisms of online curation is that it ignores the professional status of curators: the preservation and organization of museum artifacts as a profession is significantly dissimilar to the creation of playlists or the sharing of hyperlinks. Here, Obrist attempts to distinguish between *expertise* and mere *interest*, relying on problematic notions of competencies and credentials that are prone to the reification of institutional hierarchies. Historically, curatorial labor was performed by figures both formally and informally recognized as cultural intermediaries: not only museum curators, but also radio DJs, record store clerks, librarians, journalists, critics, and so forth. However, the primary objection that can be raised against Obrist's attempt to reclaim the institutionalized status of curation is that it fails to recognize user-generated content as a form of free labor. As will be addressed further in regards to algorithmic curation, data collected from the individualistic modes of curation generate significant value for shareholders in digital cultural industries: as such, it is important to address new and evolving consumption and collection practices in terms of the work extracted from participants.

The genealogy of online sonic curation can be readily connected to the Renaissance aristocratic collection displays known as 'cabinets of curiosities', considered to be significant precursors to modern museums (Impey and MacGregor 1985). Cabinets of curiosities, most often a room within a household containing numerous miscellaneous artifacts, were used to display objects carefully selected to demonstrate the collector's knowledge of in a variety of subjects. In a manner that prefigures anthropological work on the materialities of consumer culture (Miller 1987), cabinets of curiosities were assembled in service of Enlightenment identity formation: the skulls, relics, art objects, and other oddities, along with their meticulous arrangement, signaled a complex assemblage of social position, wealth, intellectual achievement, and aesthetic taste. The curation of sound online via playlists and other recombinatory formats functions in much the same way, reconfiguring personal consumption practices into virtual cabinets of the self: through the creation, maintenance and circulation of these lists, participants come to understand curation in terms of both personal collection practices as well as public performances of aural literacies.

### Individualized curation

Individualized curation is here understood as practices of collection and arrangement in which the primary motivation for curation is the affordance of particular modes of personal consumption. The unprecedented volume of content uploaded to digital repositories necessarily entails user participation in categorizing and sorting objects, in order to combat the problem of choice overload: digital curation and ownership is as much concerned with exclusion as it is acquisition, carving individualized tastes and experiences out from generalized libraries. Tom McCourt (2005) argues that it is the very 'immateriality' of digital music that animates this desire to curate, collect, and recontextualize, with curation serving to reify ownership. This can take the form of assembling a personal collection of music, constructing themed playlists to suit personal moods, building context-specific playlists that are designed for function in particular spaces or activities, or genre-oriented lists of artists, labels, and releases. Anja Nylund Hagen (2015), in her study of Spotify and WiMP users, demonstrates the rich heterogeneity of curatorial approaches to streaming libraries, along with differing understandings of the nature of musical collections within a subscription service.

The creation of playlists is the dominant organizational form for music on Spotify, both for private consumption and for public circulation: while individualized playlists are the primary means for users to manage their streamed library, these are (often unknowingly) publicly accessible, effectively instrumentalizing the labor of its users. Personal collections are reabsorbed into the streaming service's networks of cognitive capital, in the form of curatorial knowledge circulated

through public playlists. Therefore, curation is central to the crowdsourcing of individualization, amounting to free labor that Tiziana Terranova argues is found in ‘the expansion of the cultural industries [into] process[es] of economic experimentation with the creation of monetary value out of knowledge/culture/affect’ (Terranova 2000: 38). Inasmuch as the problem of choice overload is central to the rise of user curation in digital cultures, music’s unique affordances for identity formation and distinction are equally indicted in the structures of online participation. This is epitomized by YouTube and its long-running slogan, ‘Broadcast Yourself’, wherein the participatory self can equally take the form of contributing content to the site or curating a collection of videos that collectively represent personal creative identities. Playlist creation and the curation of musical materials also function as technologies of the self, where acts of musical consumption are intimately connected to the elaboration of identity and the regulation of mood. Tia DeNora’s work (1999, 2000) on everyday practices of consumption demonstrates the diverse affective qualities of sound—its engendering of excitement, tranquility, catharsis, and so forth—and how these characteristics are reflexively understood by individuals. Likewise, personal collections of music online are often used to publicly articulate and negotiate identity. The site Rate Your Music (RYM), originally designed as a collaborative online database for rating and ranking musical releases, also hosts a vibrant, animated online sociality, one in which prestige and symbolic capital are negotiated through the cataloguing of personal collections. By assigning each release personally possessed a rating between 1 and 5 stars, participants are not only engaging in critical evaluation, but are also broadcasting and curating their musical identity, with RYM profiles standing in as curated representation of individual collections: Rate Your Music’s sociality is equally bound up in its dual emphases on ‘rating’ and ‘your music’, wherein the performance of musical ownership and critical judgment are the primary medium for the expression of social relations.

### **Collaborative curation**

Many forms of online curation are not so intimately connected to individual pursuits of symbolic capital, instead systemically designing curatorial functions into practices to highlight and categorize content, what we might usefully term ‘deindividualized’ curation. The work of individuals here is aggregated into browsable collections, offering a distributed yet collaborative environment for curation to take place. Social media content aggregators such as Reddit depend on the cumulative efforts of its userbase to make high-quality content more visible over less relevant content through a ‘voting’ system, though the technical specificities of the sorting systems of user-generated sites evidence the complex sociotechnical arrangements at stake: the solicitation and aggregation of evaluative judgments is often contentious and prone to undemocratic consensus-building, emically referred to as internet ‘hive minds’.

Not all such sound cultures online are assembled solely around music: indeed, YouTube plays host to innumerable channels dedicated to audio-centric video, such as field recordings, foley, ‘binaural beats’, and the burgeoning subculture of auditory sensualists organized around so-called Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) audio. Likewise, the collaborative sonic archive freesound.org hosts over 300,000 audio files and millions of registered users, with each contribution holding Creative Commons licenses permitting creative adaptation and circulation of the sounds. Freesound is perhaps the premiere example of folk taxonomies of sound online, with curatorial participation taking the form of creative deployments of metadata tags: common strategies for classifying and curating sound include functionalist (for example, ‘sleep’), formalist (for example, ‘110bpm’), contextual (for example, ‘civil defense’), and technical (for example, ‘moog-minitaur’) criteria.

An invitation-only, highly governed music file-sharing site, here pseudonymised as Jekyll, offers an apposite case study for examining the conflicts and tensions performed by curatorial regimes online. The tagging system on Jekyll is deployed in a manner that evokes the hybridity of genre: by not restricting user categorization of music to single genres, the classification practices of curators are a mode of creative judgment, based on the combination of salient tags. For instance, a release by the New Zealand musical comedy duo Flights of the Concorde was collaboratively tagged ‘alternative, comedy, electronic, folk, hip-hop, new.zealand, 2000s’. Here, the genre tagging system notes secondary generic characteristics that speak to particular musical elements rather than conventional genre limitations, which would place the group solely within ‘comedy’. Similarly, artists frequently cited as performing across genres, such as Radiohead (a particularly popular group on Jekyll), have as many as 11 tags on a single release. Conversely, many releases are accepted with only single genre indicators: ‘hip-hop’ is particularly often encountered as a standalone tag, indicating genre-specific divergences in approaches to classification and contribution.

Jekyll’s administrative decision to redefine the ‘hardcore’ tag, and the collaborative editing project that followed, offers insight into the governmental dynamics of collaborative curation. Jekyll moderators announced that the official tag ‘hardcore’ was no longer permitted and all new releases were to conform to ‘hardcore.dance’ or ‘hardcore.punk’, despite neither subgenre being commonly referred to with either modifier. All qualified Jekyll members were asked to assist in reviewing and correcting the existing torrents, choosing whether the appropriate tag for the upload was ‘hardcore.dance’, ‘hardcore.punk’, or removing the hardcore designation completely, as users had adopted the ‘hardcore’ tag to indicate aurally ‘intense’ releases, which staff decided should be discontinued. Several types of criteria were provided to assist in distinguishing between hardcore punk and dance, beginning with accompanying tags: for instance, releases with ‘hardcore’ and ‘gabba’ tags were likely to be marked ‘hardcore.dance’, while ‘hardcore’ and ‘alternative’ almost always fit within ‘hardcore.punk’. Approximately 20,000 and 30,000 torrents were affected, and at least 3,000 releases required further individual examination: participants were asked to investigate either by researching the release itself—for instance, looking up the record label and the genres with which it was associated, as well as the artist’s classification on music databases Discogs or Allmusic—or determining its generic relations by aesthetic judgment. This could involve critical listening, looking for instrumentation and vocal stylings unique to the convention of the respective genres, or even considering the album art, as generic conventions applied to the graphic design, typography, and art direction of most hardcore releases.

This example of collaborative editing projects exemplifies why metadata is of interest: much in the way playlists and other curated assemblages bear witness to the dynamics of listener labor online, the paratextual data supporting and informing listening experiences is also the product of collaborative curatorial labor (Straw 2009). Jeremy Morris (2012) explores how ID3 tags and the Compact Disc Database (CDDDB)—two keystones of sonic metadata—both originated as hobbyist programming projects, which were collaboratively worked upon and then eventually absorbed into the corporate infrastructures of the cultural industries. Technologies of curation are prone to these appropriations, as the arrangements which make content more useful for collectors—making sounds more easily sorted, located, and understood—also benefit the cultural intermediaries who attempt to extract profit from the usage of these works. Nonetheless, collaborative curatorial projects continue to proliferate: the open source music encyclopedia Musicbrainz hosts one of the most comprehensive databases of music metadata and paratexts, all gathered from the participatory contributions of over 250,000 volunteer editors.

These case studies of the participatory processes of circulation offers insight into a key component of online curation: the manner in which networks of musical circulation are constructed

by the extraction of labor from participants, while simultaneously, these systems enact processes towards ‘configuring the user’, shaping not only personal consumptive and curatorial practices, but also notions of taste, quality, and aesthetic judgment (Woolgar 1990). The policing of official and unofficial tags in Jekyll can be understood as a technology of governance over both musical objects and individual subjects, requiring the aesthetic judgments of users to conform to predefined standards of musical identity and classification. The ‘hardcore’ tag splitting project perhaps best encapsulates the dynamics of collaborative online curation. Circulation’s dependency on the collective musical knowledge of its participants—the necessity of assembling a rationally ordered musical index in order to function properly— is here evidenced within the elicitation of member participation in determining *which* ‘hardcore’ each of the thousands of releases belonged to, while also rejecting the expressive potential of ‘hardcore’ as a descriptive modifier of other musics. This propensity towards the formalization of informal practices of exchange online is instructive in recognizing how curation is equally instrumentalized by both licensed and extralegal systems of circulation.

### Algorithmic curation

Lastly, automated technical systems for classifying, recommending, and programming sound objects, here broadly characterized as algorithmic curation, must be assessed in comparison with individualized and collaborative approaches. Automated music recommendation systems, emerging from decades of research in the field of Music Information Retrieval, seek to identify musical similitude through the accumulation and analysis of salient information, such as user activity data, acoustic characteristics, metadata tags, and critical reviews. The most widespread technique for automated curation, collaborative filtering, is a schema based on a relational model of aesthetic taste: if a statistically significant number of consumers who ‘like’ Object A also like Object B, these items will be understood as related, and future consumers of the former will be recommended the latter. While earlier iterations of recommendation systems were easily critiqued as reductive and often counterproductive—collaborative filtering techniques are prone to highlight the most common and well-known similar artists and works, which is antithetical to the objective of discovery—algorithmic curation has expanded in scale and scope. Recommendation systems are now involved in the production of automated ‘curated’ experiences: from online radio to context-aware playlist generation, digital circulation is widely marked by the influence of algorithmic decision-making.

Humanistic anxieties of the deterministic potentials of algorithmic cultures are commonplace: Tarleton Gillespie (2014) describes a tension between ‘editorial’ and ‘algorithmic’ logics, with hierarchies of expert knowledge and institutional backing on the editorial side, and putatively rational systems of automation based on the analysis of datasets on the other. Proponents of both editorial and algorithmic logics suggest that their respective approach to digital curation proffers the best response to the challenges engendered by the vastness of online content archives present, the so-called ‘choice overload’ problem (Burkart 2013). Apple Music and Tidal have both publicly aligned their approach to curation with editorial logics, with Apple Music’s homepage offering a preferential endorsement of (personalized) musical expertise: ‘With so much great music to hear, it’s nice to have someone in the know helping you find exactly the right tracks. Our experts handpick songs, artists and albums based on what you listen to and like.’ Spotify has been widely described as an algorithmically oriented service, with features such as the automated personalized playlist generator Discover Weekly attracting particular attention, it also bears clear evidence of editorial interventions at work. This can be most clearly witnessed in the company’s featured playlists, curated by an editorial team and categorized by mood, moment, or genre.

However, this tension between the editorial and algorithmic should not be construed as immutable: all algorithmic recommendation systems involve editorial interventions, and quantitative audience response data has shaped the editorial decisions of terrestrial radio programming for decades. Furthermore, imagining these approaches as discrete entities problematically ignores the immanently sociotechnical nature of algorithmic production. Nick Seaver argues against accepting this technological formalism, saying, ‘we can see the variety of people, epistemologies, and methods that constitute “data science.” We can see the countless choices involved in cobbling big data together, moments of ambivalence and constraint [...]’ (Seaver 2015: 43). The finding that technical objects are generated by humans, refracting sociocultural norms, ideologies and practices, is not unique: studies of technical cultures have long demonstrated the contingency and socially constituted arrangements of these systems. In the case of music curation online, the divide between editorial and algorithmic approaches is similarly muddled by a consideration of the specificities of what these techniques entail: at Spotify, the Browse editorial team relies on complex data sets and analytics of aggregate listening sessions to assist in choosing new musical works, using algorithmic functions to inform rather than generate playlists—Spotify Creative Director Richard Frankel summarized the editorial team’s reliance on analytics at CES2016 as ‘Data Drives Direction’. Likewise, the extent to which these algorithmic systems can be said to function without human intervention is too often overstated, requiring frequent technical maintenance, attention, and realignment. For Pandora’s Music Genome Project, one of the pioneering algorithmic music recommendation systems, musicologists analyze each work atomistically, with music scored with respect to 450 possible ‘genes’ (that is, formal and sonic characteristics): Pandora’s recommendation system is perhaps the most ‘editorialized’ mode of algorithmic curation online. Persons and algorithms thus mutually mediate the other, reciprocally engaged in the work of curation.

A final consideration in the analysis of algorithmic curation is the issue of non-reciprocal data flows: that is, the manner in which data from users’ everyday listening practices is systematically and involuntarily extracted and instrumentalized. These dual processes of surveillance and appropriation are akin to what Mark Andrejevic (2002) has called ‘the work of being watched’. In digital market research, value is captured from watching consumer behavior, reshaping individuals listening practices and affective musical experiences into a form of (unconscious) free labor. In the case of licensed streaming services, these databases of user behavior are used to shape the output of automated curation features. For example, Spotify’s most widely used algorithmic curation function, Discover Weekly, generates appropriate playlist sequences for individualized playlists by recombining sequencing data from the billions of user-generated playlists on the service: songs that often appear sequentially on user curated playlists will regularly be paired together on algorithmically curated Discover Weekly playlists. Likewise, the Fresh Finds series, which purports to identify ‘up and coming’ new music, crawls music blogs to identify emerging artists, locates the users on Spotify who are listening to these artists, and then marks these users as trendsetter. The newly released music these trendsetters discover is compiled by Spotify staff into playlists and released each week. These examples reflect broader realities about algorithmic curation and recommendation, namely that the exchange relations of digital repositories of sound and its participants extend beyond the financial exchange of subscription fees and advertising revenue.

## Conclusion

It is now apparent that the supposed emancipatory potential of ‘convergence culture’ have not yet come to pass for the sound cultures of the internet: one must be careful to not overlook cultural intermediaries and the continued importance of editorial functions in circulation

(Jenkins 2006). Here, it is instructive to consider Aditi Deo's (Deo 2015) study of the informal digital music economies of Indian 'download vendors', who acquire large quantities of music from online 'cyberlocker' sites (and fellow vendors), and transfer bulk collections onto memory cards for customers who do not otherwise have internet access. She writes, 'These collections, on the one hand, normalized unexpected musical juxtapositions [...] [and] often excluded certain canonical elements of popular Indian music' (Deo 2015: 11). Their curatorial interventions 'also introduced reorganization of music in creative genres based on customer requests: sad songs, songs of betrayal, "beechwale" or the "middle" songs—that is, Hindi film songs from the decade of 1990s, etc.' Concerns about the overreach of algorithmic curation or the pervasive individualization of the internet are held in sharp contrast to the richly social selections of download vendor circulation, as well as the previous example of Jekyll, wherein the hierarchical dynamics of this unique social formation mediate the curatorial output of its collaborative projects. Further evidence for the continued importance of editorial intermediaries can be found in the widespread movement by cultural institutions associated with the curation of sound to adapt their collection for the internet: museum archives of field recordings are increasingly digitized and presented in novel ways to engage new audiences and bring to light the social and political situations of these artifacts. Ethnomusicologist and curator Noel Lobley writes, 'future sound curation is likely to be most effective when music heritage is embedded in locally meaningful events, collaboratively designed to immerse people in recorded heritage' (Lobley 2015: 247). Likewise, scholarship on digital cultures of curation should foreground the immanent socialities of curation, illuminating the webs of social relations enacted through the collection, arrangement, and recommendation of sound objects.

### Related topics

- 13. Material Sounds: The Mechanical and Digital Sonic Archive (Erik Granly Jensen).
- 20. The Sociology of Sound (Martyn Hudson).
- 32. Collecting Sounds (Richard Elliott).
- 39. Sound on the Web (Thor Magnusson).
- 46. Cultural Specificities of Sound in a Digital Age (Gerard Goggin).

### References and Further Reading

- Andrejevic, Mark. "The Work of Being Watched: Interactive Media and the Exploitation of Self-Disclosure." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19.2 (2002): 230–248.
- Born, Georgina. "Music and the Materialization of Identities." *Journal of Material Culture* 16.4 (2011): 376–388.
- Burkart, P. "Music in the Cloud and the Digital Sublime." *Popular Music and Society* 37.4 (2013): 393–407.
- DeNora, Tia. "Music as a Technology of the Self." *Poetics* 27.1 (1999): 31–56.
- DeNora, Tia. *Music in Everyday Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Deo, Aditi. "Digital Modes of Music Circulation in India: From Vernacular Music Archiving to Extralegal Music Vending." Presented at Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune, May 2015: [http://musdig.music.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/AD\\_India\\_Website\\_Report-300615.pdf](http://musdig.music.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/AD_India_Website_Report-300615.pdf)
- Gillespie, Tarleton. "The Relevance of Algorithms," in Gillespie, Tarleton, Pablo J. Boczkowski and Kirsten A. Foot (eds.), *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*. MIT Press, 2014: 167–194.
- Hagen, Anja Nylund. "The Playlist Experience: Personal Playlists in Music Streaming Services." *Popular Music and Society* ahead-of-print (2015): 1–21.
- Impey, O. R., and MacGregor, A. *The Origins of Museums: The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Europe*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.
- Jenkins, H. *Convergence Cultures: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.



- Lobley, Noel. "Curating Sound for Future Communities." *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan (2015): 234–247.
- McCourt, Tom. "Collecting Music in the Digital Realm." *Popular Music and Society* 28.2 (2005): 249–252.
- Miller, Daniel. *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1987.
- Morris, Jeremy W. "Making Music Behave: Metadata and the Digital Music Commodity." *New Media & Society* 14.5 (2012): 850–866.
- Seaver, Nick. "Bastard Algebra." In *Data, Now Bigger & Better!*, eds. Bill Maurer and Tom Boellstorff. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2015.
- Straw, W. "Cultural Memory and Listening Preservation." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technology* 15.3 (2009): 259–262.
- Terranova, Tiziana. "Free Labor: Producing culture for the digital economy." *Social Text* 18.2 (2000): 33–58.
- Woolgar, Steve. "Configuring the User: The Case of Usability Trials." *The Sociological Review* 38.1 (1990): 58–99.