

Convenience begets capitalism

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People see rock'n'roll as youth culture, and when youth culture becomes monopolized by big business, what are the youth to do? Do you have any idea? I think we should destroy the bogus capitalist process that is destroying youth culture.
(Thurston Moore in the documentary 1991: the year punk rock broke (Markey, 1992))

Having researched music file-sharing during its heydays in the late 1990s and throughout the 2000s (Skågeby, 2008), there is one thing that has, since the subsequent universal adoption of music streaming, fascinated me: how very quickly we come to the defense of our music streaming service of choice when it is, in any way, criticized. While admittedly anecdotal, it seems to me that any hint at “bogus capitalist processes” is immediately overlooked, and instead, arguments about the perceived ease of access to a ‘total supply’ of music are put forward; suggestions that algorithmic regimes (Jarke et al., 2024) or ‘software logistics’ (Eriksson, 2019) could be dictating the circulation of culture are not so much dismissed as accepted as ‘the way it is now’; and proposals that we have now even regressed from the supposedly ‘free and competitive’ markets of capitalism to digital feudalism (Arditi, 2023), where a few data siloed services are providing all our access to music, are perhaps met with a little more frustration, but ultimately also acceptance and internalized convenience. Algorithmic and capitalist regimes are now so tightly woven together and so ubiquitous that anything else (both future and past) just seems unnecessary, annoying, and overly laborious.

Having said that, there has been a certain surge in the adoption of older formats and ‘container technologies’ (e.g., vinyl records, cassette tapes, and possibly also a CD revival), which can be interpreted as fatigue with the non-materiality of music streaming (Mall, 2021, Rahm-Skågeby, 2021). However, as Palm (2019) argues, analog formats are often still circulated via digital platforms, meaning that the struggle to focus is arguably between corporate and independent culture (rather than old and new formats). So again, perhaps many of these analog practices are, sometimes, not so much a resistance against capitalism as such. After all, new vinyl records or cassettes are also, but not only just, another revenue stream for record companies.

So, what factors might be underpinning this proposed connection between capitalist algorithmic modes of cultural circulation and convenience?

Convenience as a driver

Arguably, humans have a deep-seated preference for convenience in a general sense (Trachtenberg, 2021). The ease of access to the vast music libraries offered by streaming services may thus create a strong positive reinforcement loop. That is, being instantly able to find any music you want is a powerful benefit that can quickly overshadow potential and more long-term or obscure downsides (Arditi, 2021). As algorithmic recommender systems analyze user behavior and preferences to suggest more similar content, convenience is further amplified by a (virtually) endless stream of content (seemingly) tailored to individual tastes. With Napster (and other peer-to-peer music-sharing

systems), music recommendations began to be more organically driven (with admins and users having conversations about music and servers hosting collections within or spanning neighboring genres). The music industry likely regarded this as a potential loss of control over music consumption patterns.

Contributing to the normalized convenience of streaming music is also how users, having invested time and money into building playlists or subscribing to a service, might be more likely to defend it even if they have reservations. Put simply, they might feel a psychological need to justify their investment by downplaying its negative aspects. Comparing this to Napster, finding and downloading music was much more a game of chance. This also meant that Napster (and other music-sharing services, such as Soulseek and Hotline) retained more room for serendipity and social bonding with, and through, music.

An additional factor, adding to the current ‘individual path dependence’ or ‘brand loyalty,’ is how streaming services and other platforms (e.g., TikTok) often highlight popular music based on user trends. This can create a fear of missing out on the latest music or cultural references, which means that people might be more willing to accept the subscription model and the digital feudalism of music streaming just to be able to ‘stay in the loop.’

While the legality of streaming services (as deliberately contrasted against ‘illegal’ P2P file-sharing, in particular, Napster) was a huge part of the initial marketing for music subscriptions, it now seems that internalization of convenience has since long taken its place. Both arguments (i.e., legality and convenience), however, still serve as fronts for black-boxed capitalist algorithmic regimes. This black-boxing is, of course, a calculated part of retaining the attraction of music streaming—both by keeping details hidden and thereby avoiding overwhelming users with complex options, but also by constituting a competitive advantage for the service as such. Black-boxing is also a way to obscure (critique of) algorithmic bias. That is, if the algorithm is not fully transparent, users and analysts will have to rely on ‘proxy methods’ to uncover potential predispositions (Lange et al., 2019).

As such, it is only natural that many users might not fully grasp the algorithmic processes steering (and manipulating) their music consumption. The black-box nature of algorithms can make it difficult to understand how they influence music selection and limit exposure to diverse artists (Eriksson et al., 2019). An interesting question is whether an acceptance of such conditions will become more or less common as new users are ‘fostered’ into algorithmic culture. If we are increasingly accustomed to algorithms shaping our online experiences, from social media feeds to product recommendations, this constant exposure can make algorithmic curation seem normal, even desirable. The affordances offered by Napster, like manual searching, converting between formats, social bonding, and a greater degree of self-curation, might feel increasingly outdated or inefficient. Not to mention other alternatives such as visiting record shops or borrowing records from friends.

When Napster appeared (popularizing file-sharing as the most important cultural practice the Internet has brought), it was with a certain sense of resistance (which was soon co-opted as the convenience of having ‘X thousand songs in your pocket’). The practical exercise of this resistance also required certain technical skills, which also come across as increasingly obscured today. In this context, it is interesting to note that a recent survey has shown that ‘illegal streaming’ (in this case, mainly of TV shows, movies, and sports) has again risen in the Nordic countries (Advanced Television, 2024). An analyst at the survey company Mediavision provided the following explanation: “Piracy is still a problem in the Nordics. Financial pressure on households combined with generally increased prices for legal alternatives are factors that have likely contributed to growth”.

A possible difference now, at least compared to sharing on Napster, is the much more organized profit-oriented (i.e., capitalist) schemes underpinning this trend. So, arguments around illegality and piracy are still the main media narratives, but now the lack of morality of both individual users and criminal networks, as well as unreasonable pricing, are put forward as responsible for ‘reducing the profit for legal companies’ (which is of course normalized as bad in modern capitalism). This can also be gleaned from how the ‘boot out piracy’ campaign in the UK emphasizes the risks of using illegal streaming services to watch paid-for content (Zulhusni, 2023). The risks that are put forward are relegated to the individual user—fraudulent transactions on *your* credit card, malware on *your* computer, access to *your* bank

accounts, or the theft of *your* personal information (i.e., it may become *inconvenient* for you). All these risks have only been amplified by the implementation of digital feudalism powered by capitalist actors, who now avoid accountability by delegating the responsibility for the risks accompanying this ubiquitous infrastructure to the individual.¹

Convenience and its entanglements

Importantly, there are more reasons for not subscribing to the normalization of streaming services as the only and best option around, simply due to their convenience. This is mainly because convenience is entangled with capitalism and, thereby, comes with a price. Devine (2019) discusses the environmental impacts of the music industry, including music streaming, which he argues makes use of data centers that consume a significant amount of energy, often generated by fossil fuels, which contributes to greenhouse gas emissions.

A constant and convenient access to music has also changed music listening practices in interesting ways. Fuentes et al. (2019) describe how ‘soundtracking’—a mode of ‘listening’ that involves choosing and playing music mainly to accompany other everyday practices—becomes more common. Unlike the authors, who argue that this increase has ‘important implications for how and what music should be produced and marketed’ (including making music for moods and practices), we could see how this contributes to more or less constant and passive streaming of music everywhere (even when we sleep). Such changes in listening practices, combined with planned obsolescence, can have a significant environmental impact due to resource depletion, electronic waste, and environmental pollution (Beuscart et al., 2023; Taffel, 2023).

Convenience, public benefit, and ‘coolness’ are also rhetorical figures that have been used to obscure the fact that corporate interests are tightly interwoven with how music streaming works (Hodgson, 2021; Vonderau, 2019). As such, music streaming services have enormous gatekeeping power when it comes to how music is consumed and circulated in society. Eriksson (2019) and Eriksson et al. (2019) have effectively demonstrated that algorithmic recommendations lead to a homogenization of music tastes, where users are exposed to similar content and thereby become less likely to discover genres outside their algorithmically delineated ‘comfort zone’ (unless they actively break out of the algorithmic regime). How these recommendation systems work is, again, black-boxed, but it is certainly sullied by commercial influences and interests.

The same opaque principle applies to Spotify’s artist compensation model, which prioritizes generating revenue for the platform over fair reimbursement for artists. While sharing on Napster may also be subjected to some of these objections to varying degrees, it becomes obvious that Napster was literally co-opted and turned into a profit-optimized resource-depleting business model (simply because that is what capitalism does). This includes the exploitation of free labor and data from users. This labor and data are sometimes presented back to users (e.g., in the shape of Spotify Wrapped or Apple Music Replay), who are then “mobilized to flood [...] communication channels with marketing for the service, which maximizes brand awareness, creates a fear of missing out, and may drive traffic to the platform for further data extraction” (Owen, 2023). This reification of people’s relations to music masquerades as a summary of *your* emotional uniqueness, but it is also a yearly reminder that music listening is now quite literally a measured, surveilled, manipulated, and systematically commercialized media practice.

Convenience begets capitalism... for now.

The transition from Napster to streaming services has, of course, changed music listening, further prioritizing convenience and access over ownership and cultural value. The exploitation of technologies

¹ As a case in point, the Swedish Banker’s Association recently *opposed* an EU proposition stating that banks should take larger responsibility for reimbursing their customers in case of online fraud. They suggested that such a responsibility would weaken the “security awareness” of their customers, thereby supporting criminal networks, and also that it would even increase the frequency of “friendly frauds”.

and consumers has driven this shift, and the resulting economic disparities, cultural homogenization, and ethical and environmental concerns highlight the critical need for a more social, equitable, and sustainable music distribution model. Streaming services devalue music by making it seem like an infinite, on-demand product with little intrinsic value. Addressing these issues requires a re-evaluation of how music is valued, consumed, and monetized in the digital age, ensuring that music media practices do not come at the cost of artistic integrity, economic fairness, or ecological impact.

So, at this point, we may need to refine the argument. We could say that convenience *currently* begets capitalism and, consequently, that any way forward must *still* address capitalism rather than convenience (i.e., we *still* need to ‘destroy the bogus capitalist process’). Right now, the alternatives to music streaming are framed by a retained focus on piracy as something that takes away profit from ‘rightfully deserving’ companies and constitutes very risky practices for the individual consumer. These representations of the ‘problems’ silences any viable alternatives. Napster arguably initiated a focus on convenient and fast access to music listening, but these values have now been put into overdrive and (again) corrupted by capitalism. Subscription-based models and the convenience of AI-manipulated playlists have been increasingly normalized (Fleischer, 2021). As such, a prompt to ‘imagine something different’ may ring overfamiliar and insipid. Especially when convenience capitalism has made any anti-capitalist efforts seem like something bad. Still, any inconvenient efforts are better than ignoring music streaming’s environmental impacts or allowing arguments about piracy to be repeated as something that steals ‘lawful profit’ from companies but is still the most risky for the individual consumer.

Convenience, as it is sold to us now, is a Faustian bargain. I really do not wish to contribute to (more) timeworn whining about the state of things, but when convenience is normalized as a defense for algorithmic capitalism, I feel demoralized. Why aren’t apps that connect music enthusiasts in our local neighborhoods more popular? Such services could allow users to share music in all its forms (at)s, recommend local bands, and organize listening parties at cafes or parks. Why hasn’t decentralized music streaming, using transparent royalty tracking, direct micropayments, or even NFTs, taken off in a sustainable fashion? Why aren’t there more inclusive curated listening evenings in cafés, bars, or record stores arranged more systematically? Why is AI (or other tech) not used in sustainable ways that can augment music exploration and recommend music based on factors beyond streaming data, like lyrics, instrumentation, genre developments, samples, geographical trends, or historical context? Why are we not supporting and making better use of public libraries as the amazing tax-funded institutions they are!? These are places that could host sub-collections curated by enthusiasts, the disinterested, or anyone in between, allowing users to explore new artists and genres connected to social information without necessarily accumulating physical media.

It seems to me that so many creative incremental pushes for change that we design and imagine are crushed beforehand. The only common answer to these questions is that digital feudalism is convenient, accepted, and in the way of new solutions, and it seems we are back where we started. We could imagine anything, but we failed. In the overall context of crises in the world, music consumption is a puny problem, and I do realize this text may come across as naive, and most probably, the questions above are preposterous, but the point I seek to convey is that digital feudalism must be dismantled, history is full of surprises, resistance is often inconvenient, and hope is an important form of defiance.

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