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INTRODUCTION

Across the Platform Universe: Introduction

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Imagine popular music cultures in the mid-2020s without digital platforms: no song snippets as part of TikTok trends, no Spotify playlists, no music videos on YouTube, no concert streams on Twitch, and no reels and stories on Instagram. Since the mid-2000s, web-based communication and creativity have become increasingly dependent on a relatively small number of digital platforms, which can now be understood as the sociotechnical nucleus of today's internet (Dolata 2021). Platforms occupy a powerful position in modern media cultures, exerting a decisive influence on the exchange of information, processes of communication, and the organisation of work and markets, as well as creating digital spaces for social action (Dolata and Schrape 2023). Functional rules, defined by the tech companies behind the platforms, are expressed in the platforms' interfaces and algorithmic logics (van Dijck *et al.* 2018). These functional rules do not determine the behaviour of cultural workers active on platforms, but they can substantially influence it – notably in the field of popular music. Due to the platforms' pre-defined media formats, such as short-form videos, playlists, and similar content, it appears feasible to hypothesise that musicians endeavour to adapt their content – including songs, videos, visual media, and lyrics – to achieve optimal visibility within the digital spaces facilitated by these platforms.

The term 'platform' did not become widely accepted until the second half of the 2010s and should still be understood as an umbrella term. This is because a wide variety of platform types have emerged since then, with very different content focuses and business models, making it difficult to define the term in a uniform manner (Dolata and Schrape 2023, p. 2). Nevertheless, some overarching characteristics can be identified. These include the fact that platforms are digital, algorithmically driven infrastructures that operate on the basis of specific technological processes and business models, and that bring together different actors (such as companies, political actors, cultural workers, and private individuals) with different interests. Moreover, as van Dijck *et al.* (2018) argue, individual platforms are always integrated into a network of multiple and interdependent platforms:

> An online 'platform' is a programmable digital architecture designed to organize interactions between users – not just end users but also corporate entities and public bodies. It is geared toward the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, circulation, and monetization of user data. Single platforms cannot be seen apart from each other but evolve in the context of an online setting that is structured by its own logic.

> A 'platform ecosystem' is an assemblage of networked platforms, governed by a particular set of mechanisms [...] that shapes everyday practices. (p. 4)

It is beyond dispute that platforms, individually and as a part of the platform ecosystem, exert a profound influence on the 'everyday practices' (van Dijck *et al.* 2018, p. 4) of their users, as they facilitate and to some extent structure specific processes of social exchange and media consumption (Dolata and Schrape 2023, p. 8; Eisenegger 2021, p. 17). Platforms confront us with pre-defined user interfaces and incrementally adaptable default settings, as well as various communication features (such as commenting, messaging, and similar functions). They also comprise rules about the media genres that can be created, which are essential for cultural workers active in digital spaces. For example, platforms impose limitations on content length, such as the duration of videos on TikTok, which, at least in the early days of the platform, was restricted to 15 seconds. Users engaged in cultural work on digital platforms must learn to navigate the specific principles of these platforms if they aim to succeed in digital spaces (Burgess 2021, p. 23; Duffy *et al.* 2019, p. 2).

The concept of space in this context is quite a potent metaphor from an analytical point of view and corresponds to the ecosystem approach mentioned in the quote above. Media theories have been concerned with the effects of media on the forms of human coexistence from an early stage. An important contribution was made by constructivist models, namely in that they substantiated that the social effects of media are not limited to the neutral transmission of information and the facilitation of communication. Rather, it is the media technologies themselves that induce certain courses of action, shaping people's perceptions, values, symbolic orders, and so forth in the long term (Schmidt 1992). Media-ecological thinking shares the fundamental assumption with constructivist epistemology that everything that seems real to humans is a result of mental 'construction' efforts. However, with the nature analogy, which is implied by the concept of ecosystem, a distinct theoretical path is taken. From an ecological perspective, the media can be described 'as social environments, analogous to physical social environments', in other words, as environments 'where people act and live their lives, and through which reality is perceived' (Ruotsalainen and Heinonen 2015, pp. 2–3).

This is where the 'across' attribute enters the picture, which is emphasised in this special issue. Not only does it imply that musical practice on the internet spans a variety of platforms, but it also highlights that musicians generally use multiple platforms to pursue their goals. Both cultural workers and users move through a network of functionally linked platforms which, in line with the eco-rationale, could be described as environments or, if the internet is taken as a frame of reference, as parts of them. It is the traces that cultural workers and users leave behind as they cross these environments that are analytically significant. These traces can be interpreted literally as data tracks and figuratively as a series of micro-decisions that are conditioned by the habitual crossing of the environments, but which are at the same time productive in nature, namely in the sense that they are algorithmically evaluated and thus co-shape the environments themselves. Following this perspective, it becomes clear that cultural workers in particular need to constantly reflect on what their current engagement with an environment demands of them and what consequences this has for their presence in other environments.

Hence, from an analytical point of view, the question arises as to which extent cultural workers tailor their products to specific platforms in order to comply with the respective logics of popularisation, that is, to generate views, likes, shares, and so forth. In this context, there is often talk of 'optimising' aesthetic objects such as songs, images, videos, or texts for specific platforms (Morris *et al.* 2021; Raffa and Pronzato 2021). In the sense used by Morris *et al.* (2021), the term 'optimisation' does not necessarily imply an increase in artistic quality – however defined – but refers to the assumption that on platforms, cultural workers must differentiate themselves from the vast quantity of content and creators in order to garner

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attention. As the authors assume, aesthetic objects must be made 'more searchable, discoverable, usable, and valuable in both economic and cultural senses' (Morris *et al.* 2021, pp. 162–63). In this respect, it would make sense to consider songs, for example, as datafied objects to a certain extent. Everyone involved in the production and distribution of aesthetic objects (in the music sector, e.g., musicians, label employees, and producers) would have to become data scientists, so to speak, in order to succeed in the digital competition for visibility in the long term (Morris *et al.* 2021, p. 163). However, with regard to the premises of the ecological approach, one could critically object to the extent to which it makes sense for creative actions that adapt to the constantly changing conditions of not just one, but several environments, to be interpreted in terms of an optimisation endeavour. It could be argued that the 'platform universe' represents a certain section of social reality where fashions emerge, are evaluated, replaced by others and integrated into existing styles, and the criteria for desirable behaviour are negotiated, albeit at a high rate compared with the age of mass media. According to this understanding, it seems equally sensible to interpret the creative decisions that bring the aesthetic objects into a template-like form against the backdrop of a – fairly fast-paced – discourse or interdiscourse on aesthetic *standards.*

Platform-related phenomena such as the assumed practices of optimisation necessitate a broad contextualisation, especially in a historical sense. For example, the tailoring of musical recordings for certain media formats is anything but a new phenomenon. The term 'platform effect', coined by Jeremy Wade Morris (2020) and referring to the potential influence of platforms on the production of music, is a reference to the term 'phonograph effect' tracing back to Mark Katz' (2010) research on the influence of recording and playback technologies on recorded music in the early twentieth century. Moreover, trying to optimise music for specific media formats and contexts of listening is far from new. Over the second half of the twentieth century, this applied, for example, to the so-called 'light music' genres such as easy listening, muzak, and smooth jazz, which were linked to specialised radio formats (Hesmondhalgh 2022, pp. 9–11). The parallels with the so-called 'chill playlists', such as Spotify's *lofi beats*, are obvious. The challenge for platform research is therefore to find out how exactly platforms affect music-related creative practices and how they differ from similar practices in the past and in other media contexts.

Furthermore, discussing music-related practices on platforms cannot be restricted to the sonic level. On streaming platforms like Spotify, the focus is, of course, on music *listening*, while platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are characterised by multimodal content. The focus on the (audio)visual provokes the reproduction of cultural stereotypes regarding social categories such as gender and *race*, for example, in relation to normative ideas of beauty and femininity (Bishop 2018; Sweeney-Romero 2022), and algorithmically moderated spaces are often heavily influenced by racial stereotypes, as predominantly *white* content tends to be more visible (Benjamin 2019; Boffone 2022; Noble 2018). Content creators can perform specific 'beauty actions' (Degele 2006) according to certain platform logics that increase the chances of visibility for specific groups of people in digital spaces. Such multimodal practices must also be seen as part of cultural workers' platform-specific strategies of optimisation, and they can have a decisive impact on the representation of music cultures on and across platforms (Burkhart 2025).

When examining such practices, it is important to recognise that cultural workers – and platform users in general – do not necessarily utilise platforms in the same manner as platform companies may have initially envisioned during the development process (Hesmondhalgh 2022, p. 15; Jansson 2023, p. 3209). Rather, the concrete platform-related practices result from the specific *socio-technical* interactions between human and non-human actors – that is, between the users and content creators on the one hand, and the platform's media formats, communicative features, and algorithms on the other.

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A central idea behind the call for articles for this special issue was to address such platform-specific socio-technical relations in the field of popular music. We were especially interested in cultural workers' strategies of dealing with the options for action provided by platforms – that is, the platforms' specific 'affordances' (Bucher and Helmond 2018; Hopkins 2020; Ilten 2015). The following questions resulted from this: How do certain platform rules influence the tailoring of aesthetic objects in the field of popular music? What does it mean, for example, to produce music *for* Spotify playlists or TikTok trends? How do the musicians' interpretations of platforms' affordances contribute to the development of platform-specific conventions regarding cultural workers' representation and staging practices – the so-called 'platform vernaculars' (Gibbs *et al.* 2015)? And how do field actors, for example, musicians, producers, and label managers, acquire knowledge about the functioning and creative realms of possibility of each platform?

It is important to bear in mind that the platforms' algorithms are powerful non-human actors, potentially influencing human actions in digital spaces, and co-constituting the formation of 'algorithmic cultures' (Roberge and Seyfert 2018; Striphas 2015). Algorithms, in this understanding, do not produce social realities; they form these realities in conjunction with human actors (Gillespie 2014, p. 177; Cotter 2019, p. 898). On algorithmically moderated platforms, there is a continuous competition for visibility among content creators; this phenomenon was recently described as a 'popularity contest' (Bucher 2018, p. 105) and as a 'visibility game' (Cotter 2019, p. 896). Taina Bucher (2018) has coined the term 'algorithmic imaginaries' to describe how human actors try to make sense of algorithmic logics, especially regarding the algorithmically driven negotiation of visibility in digital spaces. Thus, our questions are: What ideas about the functioning of algorithmic systems exist among cultural workers in the field of popular music? How do cultural workers imagine the (also algorithmically generated) audience? And how do they define the performer-audience relationship? As algorithmically moderated spaces are often influenced by cultural hegemonies in relation to social categories such as gender and *race*, we further ask: How are stereotypical beauty norms negotiated on – and perhaps perpetuated by – platforms? To what extent are performance styles shaped by categories such as *race*, gender, and intersectionality, and in what ways do music performers address questions of identity and belonging?

The articles in this issue refer in one way or another to these questions and supplement them. Qian Zhang examines how short-form video platforms have changed the strategic orientations of musicians as well as record labels and music streaming services and influenced the overall ecosystem of platforms. Drawing on interviews with musicians and employees in the Chinese music industry as well as theoretical concepts such as affordance and platform adaptor, the paper explores how the possibilities of an emerging media ecosystem in China have affected industrial production, distribution, and advertising strategies. Using the example of the so-called hot songs, methods are identified with the help of which songs are popularised today. It is shown that emotional coding has become increasingly important for the commercial valorisation of popular music in the platform economy.

In their article, Carsten Wernicke and Michael Ahlers analyse collaborative practices in the field of contemporary songwriting. Their data are based on interviews with songwriters, A&R managers, label and publishing executives, and session producers, amongst others, as well as participant observations at songwriting camps. With a particular focus on Spotify and TikTok, Wernicke and Ahlers demonstrate that certain ideas about the formatting and standardisation of popular music for different platforms can have a crucial influence on the practices of professional songwriters. At the same time, the authors are able to expose certain myths about the influence of platforms on creative work in the field of popular music songwriting, suggesting that these cannot be validated empirically. That is, the authors

address key issues that need to be discussed in relation to potential platform effects in popular music studies.

Massimiliano Raffa and Riccardo Pronzato examine the various stages that a song goes through on platforms and for this purpose propose the metaphor of the social life of an optimised song. Based on interviews with producers, songwriters, music industry professionals, and listeners who make intensive use of streaming platforms, and approaches from science and technology studies and media studies, they shed light on the network of relationships between human and non-human actors in which a song is created, distributed, and listened to – its life cycle, so to speak. In this way, it can be shown how power asymmetries, recursive dynamics, and the erosion of artistic autonomy contribute to the transformation of songs into data-based products.

David Hesmondhalgh and D. Bondy Valdovinos Kaye deal with the fundamental question of the opinions and attitudes that musicians develop towards platforms and, in this context, examine the influence that affiliation to a genre has on these very opinions and attitudes. On the basis of focus groups conducted with musicians in England, it can be shown that some positions are ambivalent or even positive and thus deviate from the generally negative assessment in academia and journalism. The authors provide a differentiated view of platform evaluation by splitting the results of their empirical study into three categories: attitudes towards music streaming platforms and record labels; attitudes towards social media and short-form video platforms; and attitudes towards the abundance of data available to musicians from different platforms. Finally, they address the question of the extent to which the occasionally positive assessments may be an expression of a misguided view of platform effects.

Gabrielle Kielich investigates the representation of women electric guitarists on the Instagram platform. The electric guitar has long been heavily gendered and understood as *the* symbol of stereotypical masculinity in popular music discourses. As Kielich shows through a study of sixteen guitarists' accounts, Instagram can also be a space for deconstructing such stereotypes to a certain extent. While the guitarists' contents and strategies of staging are diverse, traditional gendered norms regarding beauty and femininity are not completely absent in the musicians' self-representation on Instagram. As Kielich's research shows, platforms unfold certain ambivalences when it comes to negotiating social categories such as gender. While they provide space for constructive challenges to cultural stereotypes, they can also perpetuate them.

The authors of this special issue provide substantial insights into musicians' practices in the platform context. Much of what is discussed in journalistic and academic discourse about the influence of platforms on music-related practices must inevitably remain speculative. This is due to the fact that it is often challenging, if not impossible, for external observers to gain access to insights into music-related production processes or even the internal workings of platform companies. As Carsten Wernicke and Michael Ahlers put it in their article: we are often dealing with myths that sometimes do not stand up to closer scrutiny. However, the question of what a song might need to be like in order to be successful in the algorithmic systems of TikTok or Spotify certainly influences the practices of many creative artists in the field of popular music. That is, cultural workers' ideas about what platforms and their algorithms *could* do can develop powerful agency in their own right (Beer 2017, p. 11; Bishop 2019).

It is important to point out that music-related practices do not change fundamentally in the platform context. Rather, they are transformed there, and the algorithms mentioned are a key factor in this regard. Thus, an *actual* novel development in the interaction between music-making and digital mediation pertains to the way power relations between human actors and machine curation are negotiated. This special issue explores the various strands and (temporary) outcomes of the transformation process sparked by the platform economy from a variety of angles. The authors' contributions offer a nuanced perspective on the

transformative capacity of digital platforms while avoiding an exaggerated sense of media determinism. When considered in conjunction with a robust empirical and historical foundation, this is essential for achieving a comprehensive understanding of popular music cultures within the digital domain.

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