Online Music Distribution and the Unpredictability of Software Logistics

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Akademisk avhandling

som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Rektor vid Umeå universitet för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen framläggs till offentligt förvar i hörsal G, Humanisthuset, fredagen den 22 november kl. 13.00. Avhandlingen kommer att försvaras på svenska.

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Abstract
This compilation dissertation examines the role of software in online music distribution and critically scrutinizes the increased influence of digital technologies in everyday life. In particular, it explores how software coordinates and arranges things, people, and information surrounding music and thereby exerts a logistical power that makes music calculable and governable online. The dissertation consists of four case-studies that problematize the role of software and algorithms in regulating how digital music moves. Article I highlights the role of algorithms in organizing, evaluating, and creating knowledge about artistry, article II uncovers the material, political, and technical networks that facilitate streamed music, article III scrutinizes editorial playlists and their role in packaging and containing digital sound, and article IV traces how software is designed to identify and regulate how music moves and is monetized in the online domain. These case studies draw attention to issues concerning visibility, access, ownership, control, but also—as this dissertation especially aims to highlight—the elements of surprise, unpredictability, and unsettlement that are inherent to complex software technologies.

The research contributes to three subfields in media and communication studies: music-oriented media studies, materialist media studies, and software studies. It contributes to music-oriented media research by accounting for the role of digital technologies in organizing musical practices and thereby illustrates how algorithms and software must be taken seriously as agents that shape cultural practices surrounding music. Relatedly, the research contributes to materialist- and software-oriented media research by continuing the tradition of paying close attention to the technical constitution of media technologies and reflecting on the power and politics of software logistics and its unpredictabilities. Methodologically, the research builds on—and advocates—a mixed-methods approach that combines the use of digital methods, media archeological tactics, and a technology-oriented ethnographic approach. In combining these methods, the dissertation illustrates the benefit of experimental and qualitative methods in the study of digital technologies and highlights the need to approach software as both an object of study and a strategic research tool.

Theoretically, the dissertation mainly draws upon materialist and German media theory (e.g., Kittler 1990; 1999; Ernst 2012; 2016), theorizations of logistical operations (e.g., Neilson 2012; Cowen 2014; Durham Peters 2013; Case 2013; Young 2014; 2015), and theories regarding technological accidents, ruptures and unpredictabilities (e.g., Frabetti 2010; Virilio 2007; Parikka and Sampson 2009; Fuller and Goffey 2012). In doing so, the dissertation highlights how the hidden and seemingly ‘grey’ and mundane task of regulating the movement of online music online is, in fact, a deeply cultural and subject to ongoing power struggles. Ultimately, the dissertation illustrates the continued relevance of media research that critically engages with software, adopts digital and experimental methods in the study of digital technologies, acknowledges the logistical power of software, and accounts for the unpredictable events that software technologies sometimes trigger.

Keywords
Music distribution, logistics, software studies, unpredictability, digital methods.