

**«First Week is Editorial, Second Week is  
Algorithmical»**

**Platform gatekeepers and platformisation of music  
curation**

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“In the  
streaming era,  
a new gatekeeper  
stands between  
record labels and  
listeners: the

The growing power of playlists: playlists mean curation. Curation means gatekeeping  
(human vs. automated gatekeeping)

Playlists rather than albums, tracks or artists are becoming the primary commodity on streaming platforms

Pitchfork

THE LATEST

REVIEWS

BEST NEW MUSIC

FEATURES

ARTISTS

VIDEO

EVENTS



How  
do  
people  
mainly  
listen  
to  
music  
now?

### OVERALL



### FREE STREAMING LISTENERS



### PAID STREAMING SUBSCRIBERS



[MIDiA Research survey of 1,500 U.S., UK, and French respondents](#)  
(participants could choose more than one answer)

We investigated the logics that underpin music curation, and particularly the work of music curators, working at digital music streaming platforms. Based on ethnographic research that combines participant observation and a set of interviews with key informants, we questioned the relationship between algorithmic and human curation and the specific workings of music curation as a form of platform gatekeeping. We argue that music streaming platforms, in combining proprietary algorithms and human curators, constitute the “new gatekeepers” in an industry previously dominated by human intermediaries such as radio programmers, journalists, and other experts. The paper suggests

Our research aims to further the exploration of this emergent field, being inspired from and adapting the work done in the past by Gans (1979) and other scholars within newspapers and television newsrooms, onto digital music platforms. In so doing, we maintain that, following Bucher (2016), we need to move beyond the ideal of algorithms as 'black boxes' to study the social and cultural constructs that lie behind algorithmic infrastructures.

# Methodology

Our research consists in a multi-site ethnography (Marcus 1995; Hannerz 2003) that entailed 17 semi-structured interviews with key informants working in the European music industry in London (UK), Gothenburg (SWE), New York (US), Berlin (GER) Rome and Milan (IT), between October 2017 and February 2018. The interviewees are data scientists (2), radio music programmers in public service media (2), marketing managers (2), software developer (1), music start up cofounders (2), director of streaming strategies (1), music curators for streaming platforms (2), company vice-president (1), music manager (3). Among them, some work for platforms like Apple Music, Spotify, Google Play Music, Shazam, while others work for record labels or digital music startups. All conversations were recorded with the consent of the interviewees and lasted between 45 and 80 minutes. Alongside interviews, we also performed a short participant observation inside the music department of two public service radio stations, BBC Radio 6 and Rai Radio2, in London and Rome, in November 2017.

This is complemented with a qualitative observation (Caliandro, Gandini 2017) of the Twitter profiles of music curators working for Apple, Spotify and Google Play Music, aimed at exploring the network of social relations in which they are embedded and how much they interact with the other actors of the

## Methodology: ACCESS TO THE FIELD – the field as a “black box”

The access to the research field represents an interesting finding of this work in and of itself. We began the project with the aim of performing participant observation inside the music streaming companies like Spotify, Deezer, Apple and Google, but we were denied both access to their headquarters as well as formal contact with interviewees.

Hence, our access to the field was only possible through personal contacts from the London and Milanese music industry who acted as bridges and put us in touch with people who worked or had worked for one of the platforms above mentioned. Through these contacts we managed to arrange the first interviews, from which we snowballed onwards. Our approach therefore reflects the ethnographic method that Gusterson called “polymorphous engagement”: this meant “interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites and sometimes in virtual form; and it mean[t] collecting data eclectically from a disparate array of sources in many different ways” (1997, 116, in Seaver 2017, 6).

# The rise of non human, automated gatekeepers (or 'infomediaries')

The proprietary algorithms developed by corporations such as Amazon, Google, Apple, Facebook, and Spotify constantly track users' reactions on their digital platforms in order to predict the rating or preference that a user would give to an item.

As Morris clearly explained, 'These automated (sometimes autonomous) tools combine massive databases of digital goods with behavioural tracking technologies to create connections between purchases, listens and views that were previously difficult to make, or severely limited in scope' (2015, p. 447).

'An emerging layer of companies – call them infomediaries – are increasingly responsible for shaping how audiences encounter and experience cultural content' (Morris 2015, p. 446).



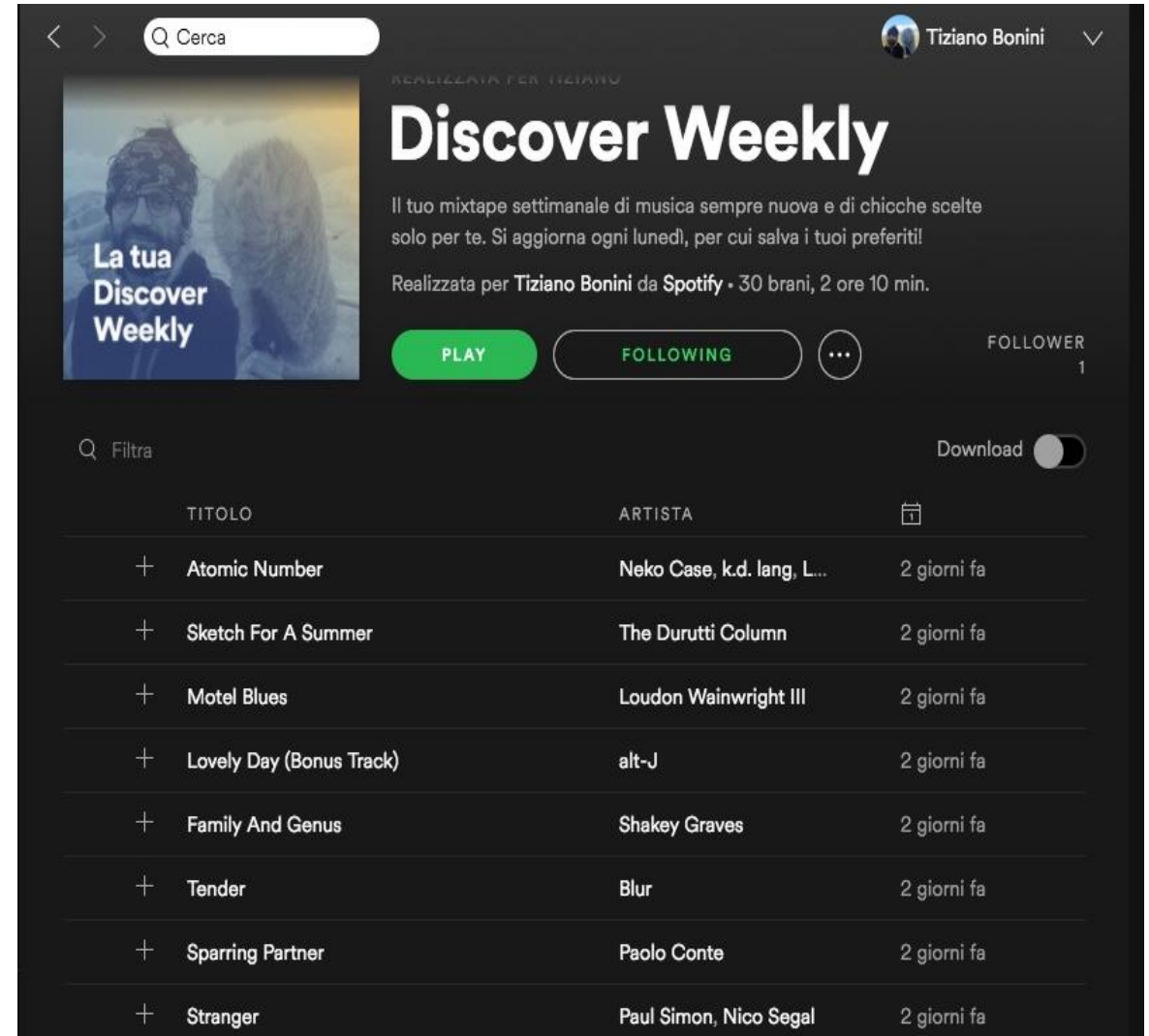


## Curation by code (Morris 2015)

Curation activity is no longer the reserve of human gatekeepers, but is also now performed by algorithms designed by other humans

The algorithms these services are based on therefore represent a new type of gatekeeper: after the human professional and amateur gatekeepers, we are witnessing the emergence of a new guard at the door, the algorithm:

Social media platforms, search and recommendation engines affect what a daily user sees and does not see. As knowledge, commerce, politics and communication move online, these information intermediaries are becoming emergent gatekeepers of our society, a role which once was limited to the journalists of the traditional media (Bozdog, 2013, p. 209).



Q Cerca

Tiziano Bonini

# Discover Weekly

Il tuo mixtape settimanale di musica sempre nuova e di chicche scelte solo per te. Si aggiorna ogni lunedì, per cui salva i tuoi preferiti!

Realizzata per Tiziano Bonini da Spotify • 30 brani, 2 ore 10 min.

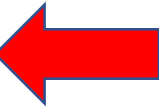
PLAY FOLLOWING

FOLLOWER 1

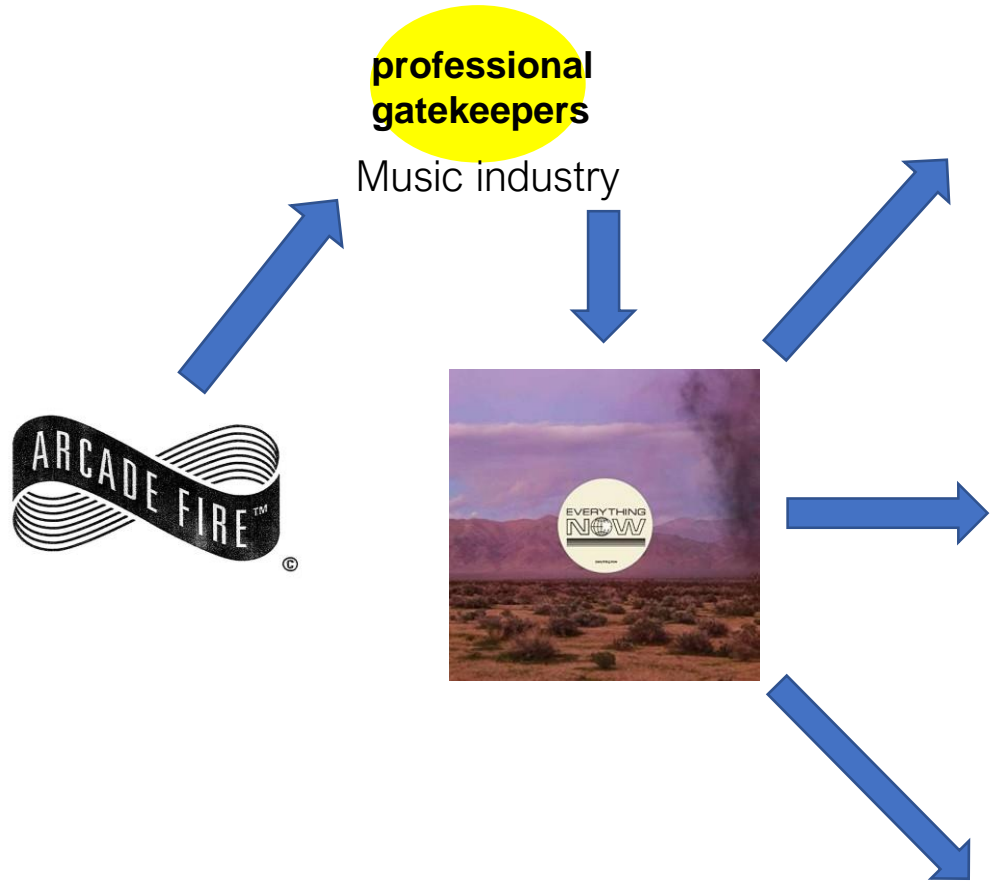
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TITOLO	ARTISTA	
+ Atomic Number	Neko Case, k.d. lang, L...	2 giorni fa
+ Sketch For A Summer	The Durutti Column	2 giorni fa
+ Motel Blues	Loudon Wainwright III	2 giorni fa
+ Lovely Day (Bonus Track)	alt-J	2 giorni fa
+ Family And Genus	Shakey Graves	2 giorni fa
+ Tender	Blur	2 giorni fa
+ Sparring Partner	Paolo Conte	2 giorni fa
+ Stranger	Paul Simon, Nico Segal	2 giorni fa

	<b>Professional/traditional gatekeepers</b>	<b>Amateur gatekeepers</b>	<b>PLATFORM gatekeepers</b>
<b>socio-economic background</b>	<p>belonging to social/cultural/economic elites</p> <p>Traditional cultural and creative industries (radio + tv)</p>	<p>non-elitist outsiders</p>	<p>New creative industries (digital media companies)</p> <p>New elites (software developers, interaction designers, venture capitalists)</p>
<b>nature of work</b>	<p>paid</p>	<p>un/semi-paid</p>	<p>Paid curators + Automation of cultural curatorial work</p>
<b>media</b>	<p>Media companies conglomerates</p> <p>Commercial media</p> <p>Public service media</p>	<p>Free radio and tv; fanzine; civic/community media</p> <p>Blogs</p> <p>Social network sites</p>	<p>Commercial digital platforms</p> <p>Platform Capitalism</p>
<b>bias</b>	<p>Cultural/social/economic biases</p>	<p>Cultural/social/economic biases</p>	<p>cultural/social/economic bias</p> <p>Data bias</p>
<b>expertise</b>	<p>Gatekeeping based on validated professional experience</p>	<p>Gatekeeping based on un-validated personal experience, legitimized by peers</p>	<p>Gatekeeping based on a mix of data-driven and editorial choices</p>



# The music trip to get into the ears of the listeners



**professional gatekeepers**

Music industry



- Radio programmers
- Television producers
- Music journalists
- Sponsored music festival directors
- Online music magazines
- Concerts organizers
- Music curators at digital music platforms
- Distributors, music promoters

**Professional gatekeepers**

- Offline Fandom
- Digital Fandom
- Music bloggers
- Community media producers
- Independent music festival organizers
- Independent concert organizers
- gatewatchers

**Amateur gatekeepers (producers; micro-influencers)**

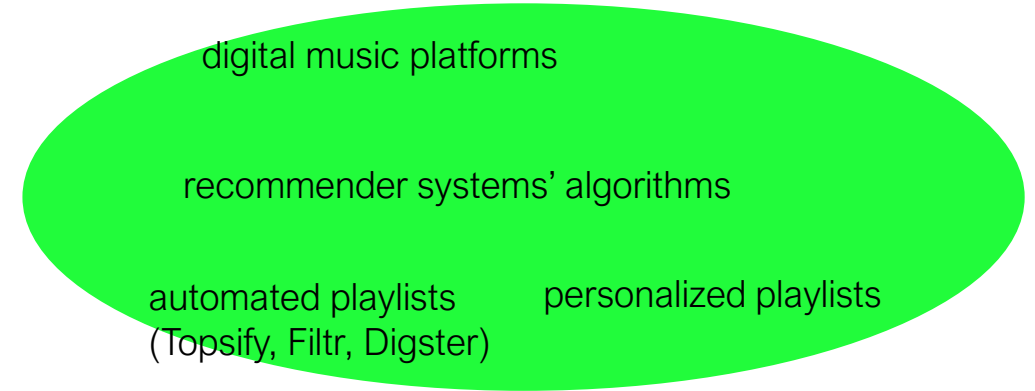
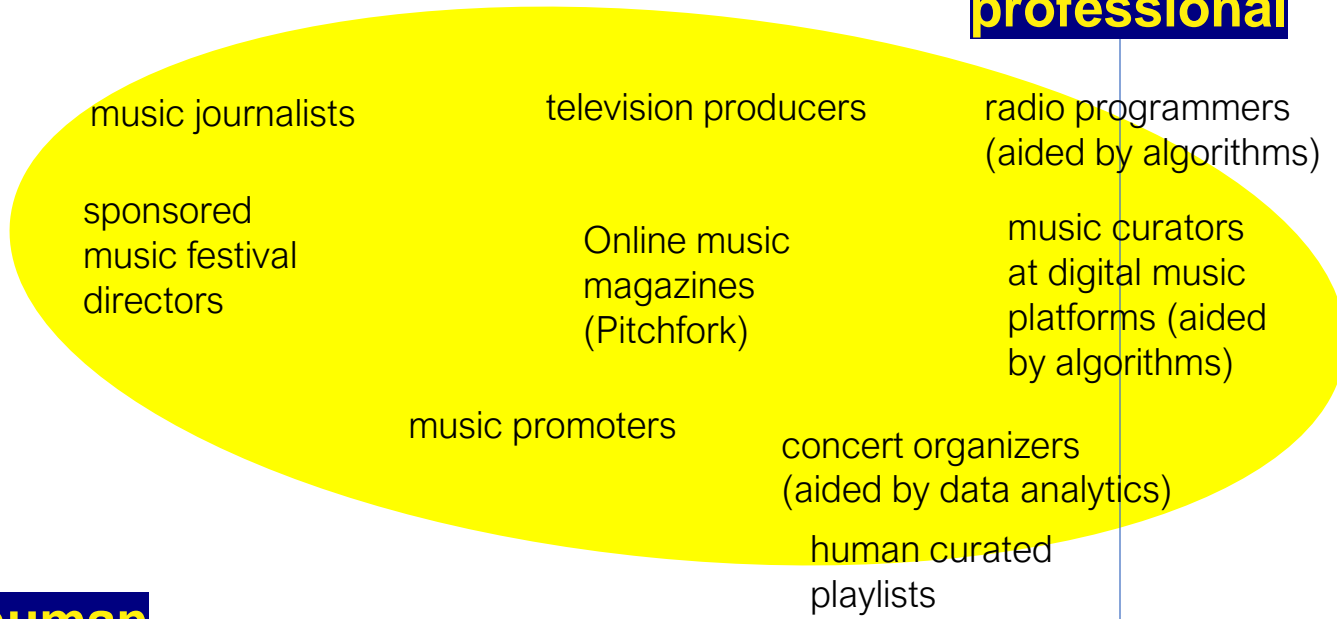
- Digital music platforms
- Recommender systems
- Algorithms
- Automated playlists

**PLATFORM gatekeepers**

**listeners**

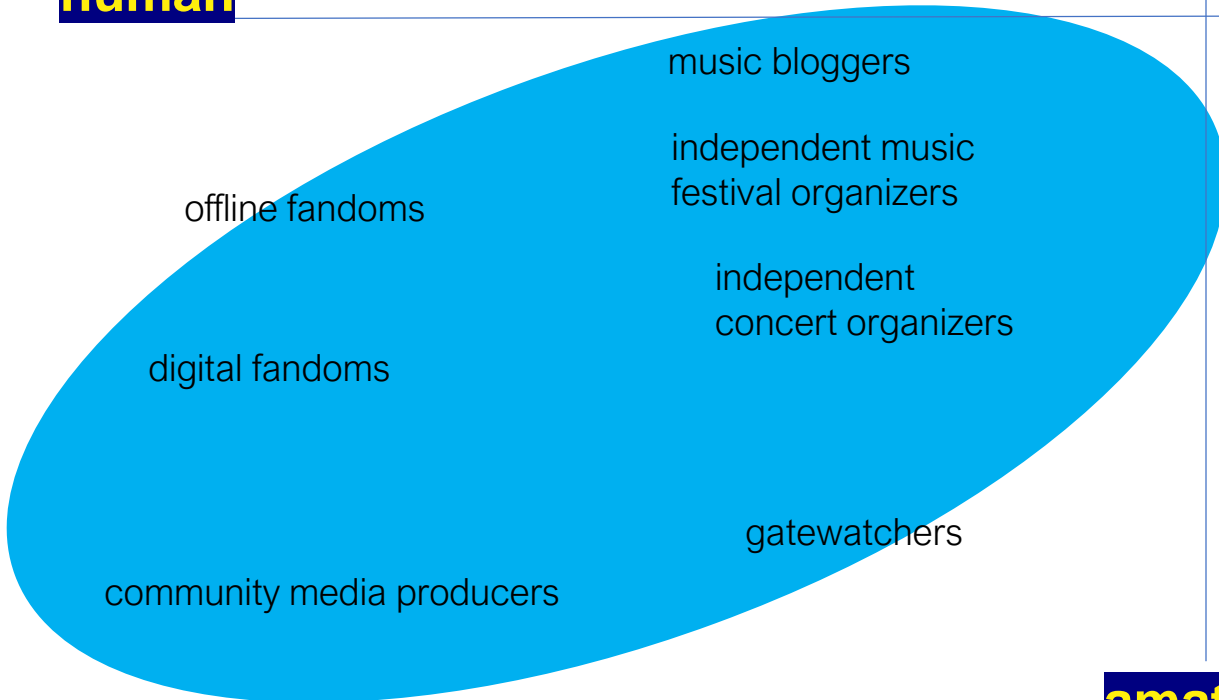
# The Music Industry Gatekeeping Matrix

**professional**



**human**

**automated**

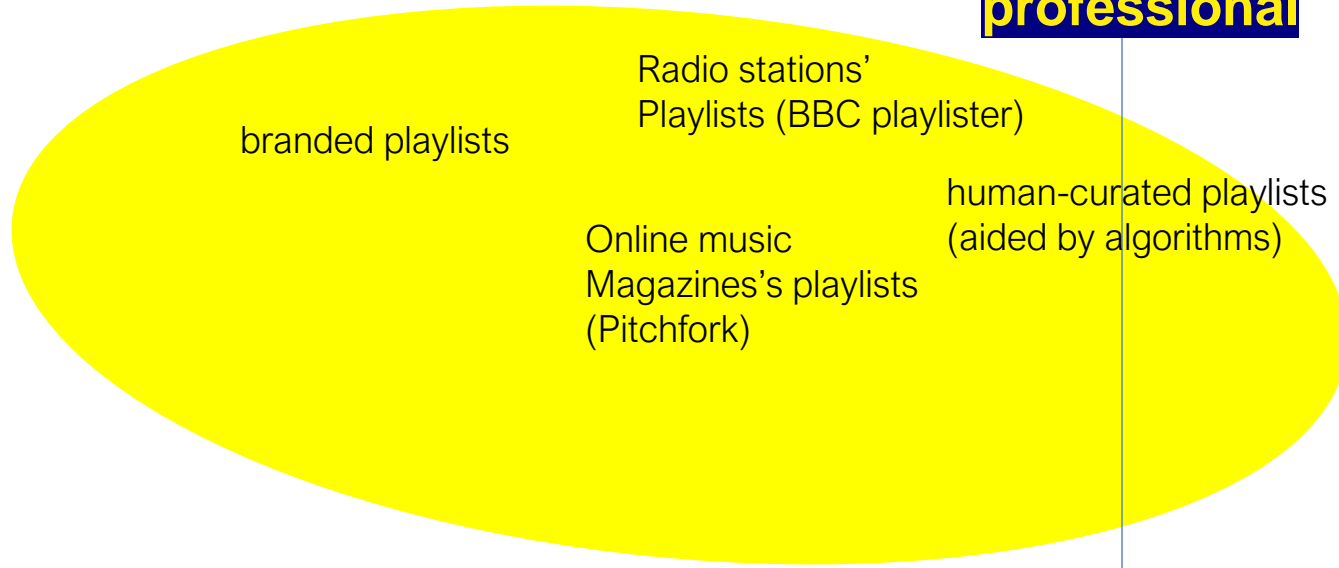


**amateur**

We call '**platform gatekeepers**'  
all those workers within music  
streaming platforms, who are  
able to decide, filter and  
select what to expose  
listeners to and which songs  
to direct their attention to.  
We focus in particular on the  
human music curator: this role

# The Spotify Gatekeeping Matrix

**professional**

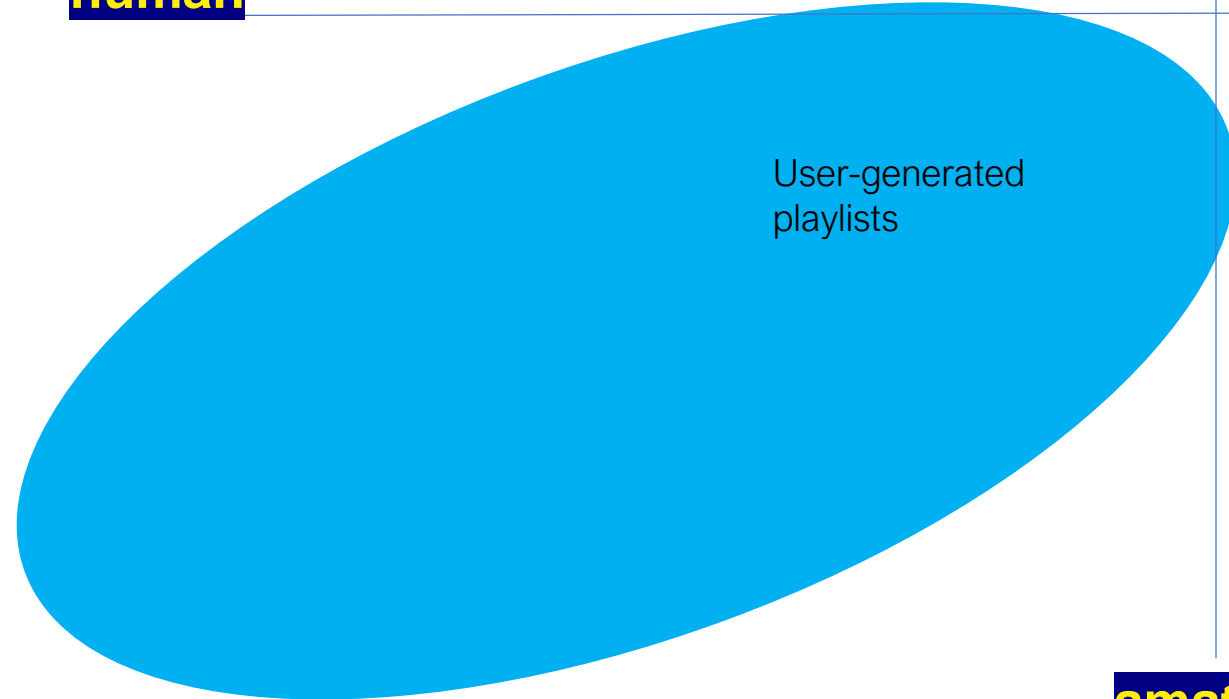


**human**

**automated**

User-generated playlists

**amateur**



# PLATFORM GATEKEEPERS

Professional playlist curators

Around 300 human curators  
in the world.

Our thesis: they represent  
the emergent «class», or the new «elite»  
of music gatekeepers

»Curatorial Turn« (Erikson et al 2019)  
happened in 2014-2015

Apple Music playlist:



## The Playing Field

	Spotify	Apple Music	Google Play Music
Year founded	2006	2015 (2014 announced)	2011 (streaming began in 2013)
Year human curation began	2014	2015	2014
Number of playlists	4,500+	14,000+	Tens of thousands
Typical playlist length	3-3.5 hours	1-3 hours	3.5-4 hours
Number of full-time curators	50	More than 12 plus additional freelancers	20 plus additional freelancers
Signature playlist styles	Genre themes, activity/mood	Essentials by artist, genre themes, activity/mood	Activity/mood



Source: BuzzFeed 2016

## Human curation based on a mix of algorithmic and editorial logic:

the algorithmic and editorial logic merge together and are actually mutually dependent. As one curator told us, her choices were:

**“10% personal taste-driven, 40% editorially driven, 50% data driven”.**

“I do not have a background in music, I'm not even a great expert or passionate about music. I'm an Art historian and when we create playlists we base our choices on data and other algorithms”

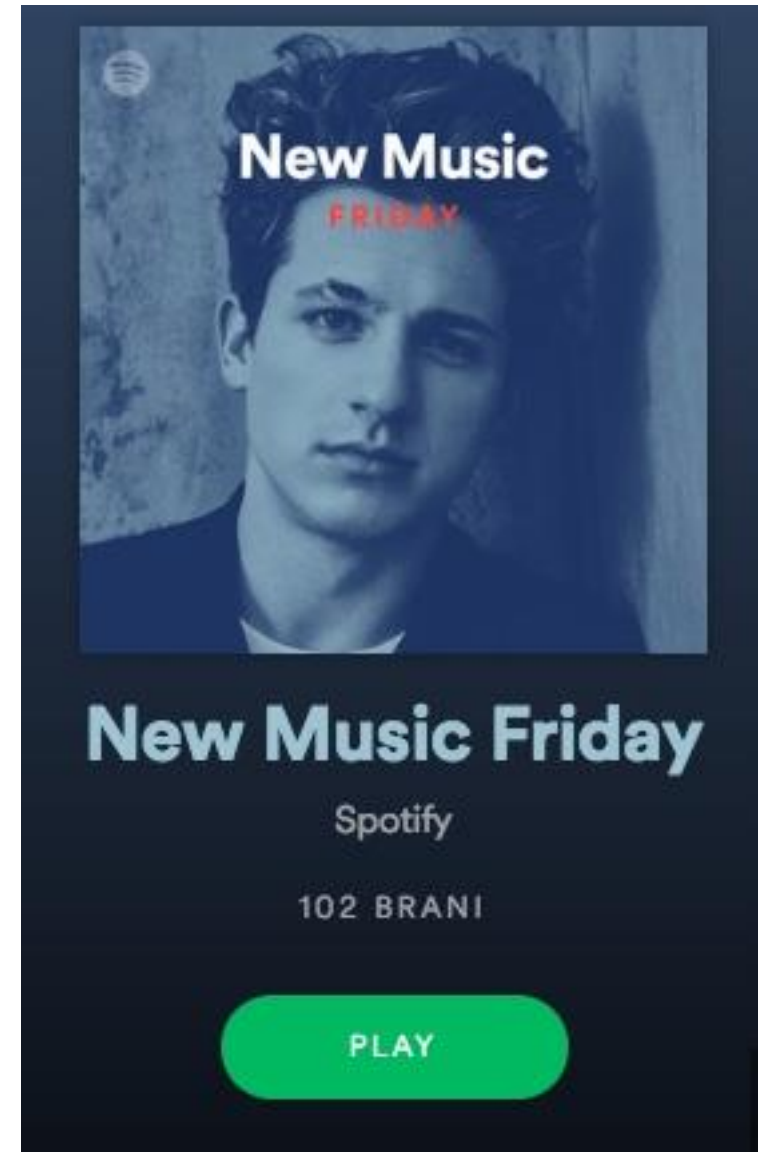
“There is a big misconception that it's just a one-person show, running the whole things. That's totally not the case. We take decisions as groups regarding the bigger playlists,” he said. “The decision on where we put a song, in what playlists, is based on historical data, but also in all honesty on the gut feeling of the editors.»



## Human curation based on a mix of algorithmic and editorial logic:

→ "week 1 is editorial, week 2 is algorithmic"

(interview with a digital music promoter, London, 13th November 2017)



## Human curation based on a mix of algorithmic and editorial logic:

Curation on music streaming platforms in other words is the intermingling process that results from combining human activity 'augmented' by algorithms, and non-human activity designed, monitored and edited by humans. Machines (algorithms) do not replace nor are they separated from the work of human curators. Spotify has continued to hire music curators while investing in “technology for music intelligence” (Eriksson et al., 2019, p. 65). Machines both automate the creation of playlists, making their production more efficient, and improve - like an 'exoskeleton' - the skills of human curators, making them faster in their choices and speeding up production times. Pelly (2017), after a conversation with a playlist creator for Spotify recounted that “these human curators are responding to data to such an extent that they’re practically just facilitating the machine process”. On the other side, humans intervene on automatic playlists to make their output less predictable and constantly improve their code.

## **Human curation based on a mix of algorithmic and editorial logic:**

Instead of contrasting editorial and algorithmic logics, we should thus frame these logics as stacked and entangled, both shaping the outputs of platforms. These two logics are always present together, but with different weights. Each platform articulates these logics by giving them a different relevance. In some Spotify playlists the algorithmic logic weighs more, while in other playlists editorial logic is more relevant.

# Human curation based on a mix of algorithmic and editorial logic: The rise of algo-torial logic

Drawing from the expression used by Austin Daboh, above (in Ramirez, 2017), we define this combined logic as an “algo-torial” one

«Spotify's playlist c(source: NPR article, April 4, 2018 staff of editorial tastemakers, in combination with a suite of proprietary machine-learning algorithms, an approach to song selection that Spotify execs describe with the gruesome neologism «algotorial» »

## An «algo-torial» form of Hegemony?

“The data is compiled in a Google spreadsheet, with each song in the playlist ranked by “Song Score,” a multipoint metric that, like Spotify’s PUMA, accounts for things like average play length, skips, and number of thumbs-up or thumbs-down. Editors typically access this data via a Google-designed content management system called

## An «algo-torial» form of Hegemony?

«If you enjoy your Discover Weekly and you listen more and more to it then yes, the more you listen to it the more you are listening to things that  
(interview with a Spotify software developer, October 29, 2017)  
are predetermined by a

m **New regimes of visibility** for music artists (what is positioned first in a playlist is going to be listened more)

- **PLATFORM GATEKEEPERS EXERT AN AGENDA SETTING POWER**: they are becoming hegemonic in setting the global agenda of music listening.



## The (so far limited) rise of counter-hegemonic struggle?



First symptoms of counter hegemonic practices, aimed at gaming the algorithms, are emerging:

some music promoters have organized prize competitions in which they ask listeners to listen more times to a song in order to detect which word is spoken 5 times within the lyrics of that song. To answer the contest listeners have to listen to the song several times and this generates traffic that the algorithm can understand as an increase in interest for that song.

Or, other examples: fans are organizing campaigns to mobilize traffic toward a specific song recently released by their favourite artist, in order to allow him to climb the position in the playlists. Other case histories: the bulgarian hackers.

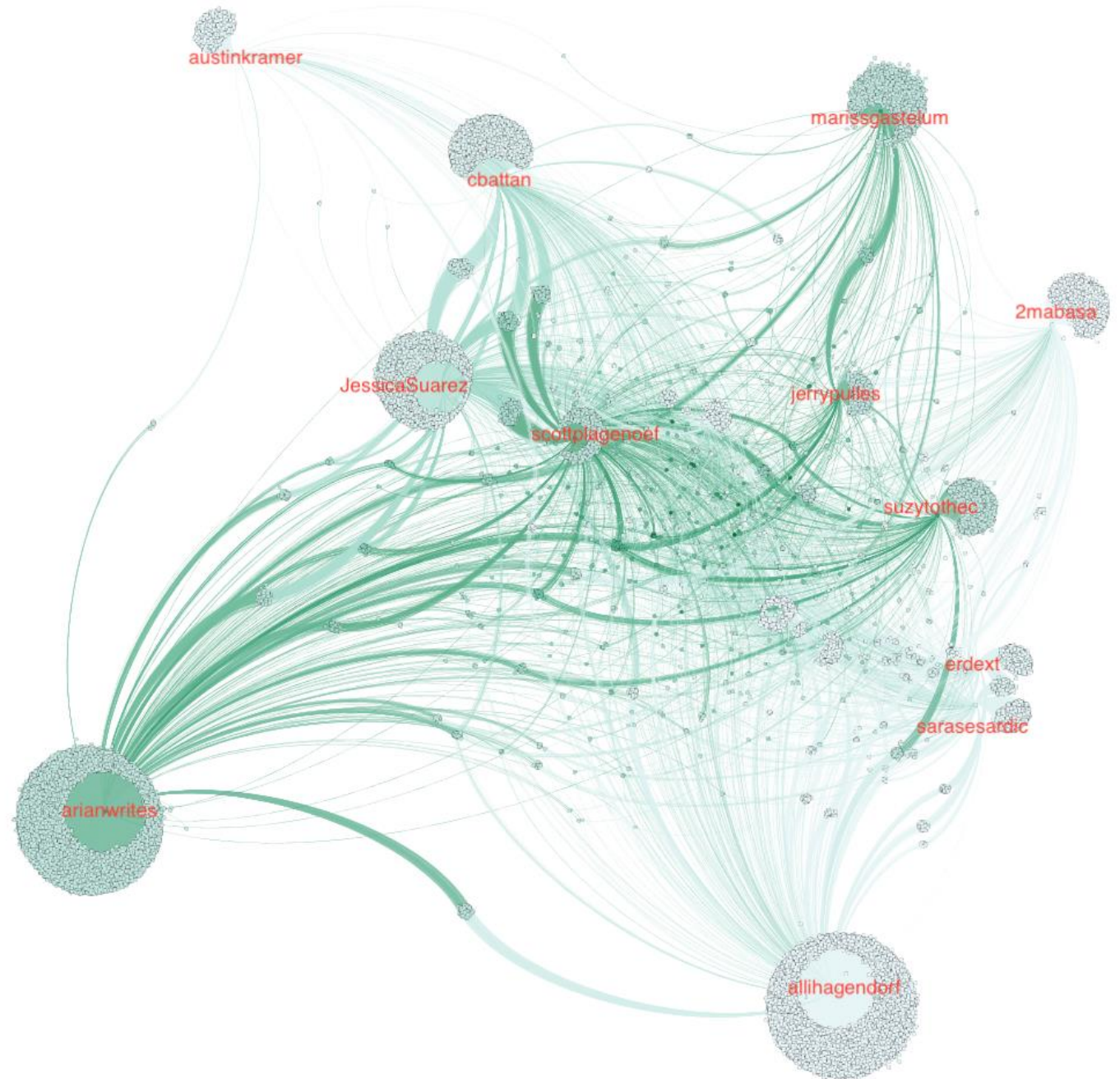
# Qualitative observation on Twitter:

## The new gatekeepers' network

asymmetrical surveillance: «He is seen, but he does not see; he is an object of information, never a subject in communication»  
(Foucault 1975)

We want to «reverse» the  
panopticon  
Data activism (Milan & Treré  
2017)

crowdsourced database of  
music curator's list





## Conclusions

The nexus between human work and machines is a central issue for further research in the platformization of culture. We think this is better understood if framed not as a dualistic opposition (machines vs. humans) but as a complex relationship, in which machines automate some human skills while, at the same time, act as an increasingly influential aid for human decisions and extend productive capacities. This combination of human labour power and machinery is typical of industrial capitalism, even before the rise of online platforms, as stated by Eriksson et al. (2019, p. 65). What is new here is the relevance that automation processes fueled by data and organized by algorithms have acquired within the new platformed cultural industries. The decisions of platform

## Conclusions

While the power of traditional gatekeepers was mainly of an editorial nature, albeit data had some relevance in orienting their choices, the power of platform gatekeepers is an editorial power 'augmented' and enhanced by algorithms and big data. Platform gatekeepers have more data, more tools to manage and make sense of these data and thus more power than their predecessors.

This makes the platform capitalistic model (Srnicek 2017) potentially more efficient than industrial capitalism in transforming audience attention into data and data into