The Platformization of the Music Industry

A Case Study of Bandcamp

Student name | Tobias Nicolaus

Student number | 6508766

E-mail address | t.nicolaus@students.uu.nl

Supervision | dr. Ingrid Hoofd, assisted by dr. Mirko-Tobias Schäfer

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Abstract

Today's landscape of music consumption is increasingly dominated by streaming platforms such as Spotify or Apple Music. Their rise to popularity has not only impacted listening habits of individuals, but also the music industry as a whole. As discussed in popular as well as academic discourse, digital music platforms afford artists and listeners a variety of new opportunities, but can also be restrictive in certain aspects. This study focuses on the platform of Bandcamp which occupies a position on the fringes of the music industry. By outlining the political economy of the music industry and utilizing Actor-Network theory, Bandcamp's claims of being an alternative platform that values artists and listeners above profit will be critically evaluated. The results of the research show that the platform stays true to its promise in some ways while contradicting it in others. Additionally, insights about the application of Actor-Network theory to the study of digital platforms will be drawn from this study as well.

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Introduction

The rise of digital music platforms in recent years has been well documented in popular culture as well as academic literature. While the former often enthusiastically embraces them with a discourse of technological progress, increased convenience for listeners and empowerment for artists (Wolfson, 2018 & Bromley, 2016), the latter is routinely more critical by pointing out their propensity to collect and sell user data or their potential to reinforce existing power inequalities in the music industry (Eriksson et. al, 2019 & Marshall, 2015). Apart from a select few examples however, the vast majority of literature on digital music platforms deals with examples and case studies of the most popular ones such as Spotify, Apple Music or Pandora. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to this body of literature by analyzing the digital music platform Bandcamp which exists on the fringes of the music industry. It is a self-proclaimed 'fair' alternative to these previously mentioned mainstream platforms, promising to value artists and users above profit. With the help of actor-network theory, these claims will be critically evaluated by asking and answering the research question of how Bandcamp is reinforcing, or providing alternatives to, the existing power structures in the political economy of the music industry. In doing so, several sub questions will emerge: How does the platform's business model operate? How does it – or does not - handle artist promotion? How is the platform governed through terms of use? The discussion of these question will be framed through the lens of actor-network theory, meaning that a focus will be placed on how the relevant actors, who are constituting the network of the platform, are interacting with each other. To provide context and situate this research in the field of critical media industry studies, the political economy of the music industry will first be outlined. In a second step, the principles of actor-network theory will be described and their applicability to the case study at hand illustrated. Then, these insights will be used to analyze Bandcamp and to determine to which extent it is – or is not – a fair alternative to mainstream platforms.

Theoretical Framework

<u>The Political Economy of the Music Industry</u>

With the advent of the internet, the rise and fall of digital downloads and more recently the emergence of music streaming, the music industry has been in heavy flux for the past two decades. Reports such as the 2018 state of the industry report by the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry (IFPI) show the ongoing decline of physical and digital sales while streaming revenues continue to grow (IFPI, 2018, p. 11). Meanwhile, artists only received a 12% share of total music revenue in 2017 according to recent research (Citi GPS, 2018, p. 3). Even though this number is up from being at just 7% in 2000 – mainly due to an increase in the live performance business – artists still only see a fraction of total earnings in the digital music industry. With streaming revenue overtaking physical music sales and comprising the biggest part of annual revenue from recorded music in 2017 at 6.6 billion dollars (IFPI, 2018, p. 11), it is imperative to examine how major streaming platforms such as Spotify are operating in the music industry. As a first step however, one needs to gain an understanding of how the music industry functions as a whole. Therefore, the next section will briefly outline key aspects of the industry such as music publishing, promotion and distribution and their relations between each other, as well as their role in the political economy of the music industry.

Communications and Creative Industries scholar Patrik Wikström defines the music industry as follows: "The music industry consists of those companies concerned with developing musical content and personalities which can be communicated across multiple media" (Wikström, 2009, p. 49). This definition treats the music itself – arguably the primary good circulating through the industry – as just part of the overall musical content that generates value. Additionally, it emphasizes the fact that artists are just as marketable as the music they are creating, meaning that companies involved in the music industry spend considerable resources on communicating and promoting personalities as well. This definition carries two important implications with it: For one, there are multiple goods being developed and circulated through the music industry by the involved companies. Furthermore, by this definition the agency and power is attributed to those companies rather than artists creating the music. Musical content and artist personalities are being 'developed' and 'communicated' by the hand of companies and record labels, meaning that the actors responsible for the initial creation of the main musical content, occupy a rather passive role outside of that creative process. Wikström expands this definition of the music industry by separating it into three

interconnected compartments. The recording sector "involves the production of intellectual properties by recording artists' studio or live performances" which a record company then "markets and distributes […] to consumers around the world" (Wikström, 2009, p. 53). In order for artists to reach an audience, they must traverse four subsystems within the recording sector according to sociologist Paul Hirsch, who is referenced by Wikström in this chapter. In the first subsystem, the creative sector, the main actors are the Artist & Repertoire (A&R) agents. These A&R agents seek out artistically and commercially potent artists who can then be introduced to record companies which occupy the second subsystem. Here, it is decided which of the artists' recordings are deemed commercially viable, prompting an investment for them be released to the public. In order to reach the largest possible amount of the public, the third subsystem, occupied by promoters and distributors, is tasked with communicating the selected records across several channels. These channels are governed by the fourth and final subsystem which is labelled gatekeepers by Hirsch. Such gatekeepers include radio stations and other media outlets who are responsible for selecting certain recordings to be broadcasted to the public audience. Since Hirsch's model of the recording sector that is referenced by Wikström is from the 1970s, he questions its relevance in the current digital music industry. Wikström however concludes, that the model still outlines the inner-workings of the current music industry:

> Music still has to be exposed to the audience in order for listeners to be able to determine its value. Broadcast radio is to some extent losings its importance, but is replaced by other types of media. Advertisers or sponsors are probably even more important to the music industry today than they were forty years ago

Wikström, 2009, p. 57

The way in which the music industry operates in the digital age will be explored in an upcoming section, yet the previously discussed recording sector was just one out of three compartments of the industry as a whole. Publishing is the second part that is integral to the music business according to Wikström. This sector encompasses the licensing of recorded music for various purposes "such as traditional recordings, sheet music, live performances or background music in video productions" (Wikström, 2009, p. 57). Artists can then receive royalties by licensees in three different categories which include performance, synchronization and mechanical royalties. Performance royalties are distributed when a recording is performed by an orchestra or singer, as well as when it is played on the radio or in public places such as shopping malls. Synchronization royalties on the other hand, are tied to songs being used in movies, commercials or videogames, while mechanical royalties are based on actual sales of recorded

music (Wikström, 2009, p. 57). All the combined royalties are traditionally distributed in a 50/50 split between artist and publisher, yet the numbers can differ based on the roles that publishers have in the value chain; sometimes they are taking on the mantle of record producer or manager as well.

For the third and final sector of the music industry, Wikström denotes the area of live performance. He explains that "although the size of the recorded music industry is bigger than the live music industry, from the artists' point of view, live music generally is a more important source of income than recorded music" (Wikström, 2009, p. 58). This is especially relevant for smaller artists who are not signed to a record label, meaning that their main – and sometimes only – source of income originates from live performances in venues of differing sizes and capacities. As alluded to in the Citi GPS research report, revenue from live performances are split much more in favor of artists, who receive up to 85% of the income according to Wikström. Additionally, there are three more actors in the live music sector of the industry: The booking agent, the promoter and the venue operator. Booking agents represent the artist in talks with concert promoters and venue operators, ensuring that every party is satisfied with the distribution of payments and revenues. In most cases, they receive "a fixed fee or a percentage fee from the performer" whereas promoters "earn their revenue primarily from the sales of tickets" (Wikström, 2009, p. 59). The performing artists are reimbursed by promoters based on a formula that takes a fixed performance rate as well as ticket sales into account. Ticket prices are collectively decided by promoters, performers, managers and booking agents, while venue operators take on duties such as parking, security and ticket collecting at the door.

Conclusively, the music industry is a complex and multifaceted space with many different actors that represent a variety of interests and goals. In the past decade however, the industry has seemingly undergone significant transformations following the rise of streaming platforms such as Spotify and Apple Music. The next section will thus discuss how these platforms have impacted the music industry.

Digital Disruption – The Emergence of Music Streaming Platforms

As alluded to earlier, streaming platforms such as Spotify have become major players in the music industry nowadays. Since its inception in 2008, the platform has grown significantly and accommodates 96 million subscribers in addition to 207 million monthly active users as of December 31st 2018 (Spotify, 2019).The fact that the monthly active users are more than twice

as high as the number of subscribers is important to note. Consequently, a large number of people are using Spotify without paying any money whatsoever. In return, they are subjected to advertisements which the 'premium' users avoid by paying a monthly fee. There has been much discussion among musicians and scholars alike about who is benefitting – or suffering – from the existence of streaming platforms like Spotify. Matthew David for instance, argues that Spotify and other legal streaming services "are both taming free sharing and manifesting its triumph" (David, 2016, p. 557). His point is that such services are deterring music listeners from gaining access to music through illegal means such as peer-to-peer downloads, while at the same time offering the opportunity to stream music 'for free' by exchanging time (advertising) and privacy (data collection) instead of money.

After having broached the economic workings of the music industry in the previous section however, the more interesting and relevant issue to investigate is perhaps how streaming platforms are distributing not only music, but also the value generated by it. Spotify for example, pays between $0.006 and $0.0084 per stream (Sehgal, 2016). David further elaborates on who receives these payments by stating that "Spotify pays 70% of all the revenues it receives to 'rights holders', but rights holders are rarely ever the artists themselves and are in almost all cases the artists' record companies" (David, 2016, p. 58). Therein lies one of the reasons as to why digital music platforms and the often popular discourse of 'disintermediation' should be critically evaluated. The notion of disintermediation is often mentioned alongside of discussions about music platforms and can be surmised as "essentially [the] removal of routinized business practices involving middlepersons" (Jones, 2002, p. 222). Yet the distribution of revenue in favor of rights holders rather than artists, is one such 'routinized business practice' from the music industry that seemingly remains intact on streaming platforms such as Spotify. Furthermore, the structures of the recording and publishing sectors within the music industry as described by Wikström are still in place in the case of Spotify. Although there has been a slow move towards letting independent artists upload their music to Spotify in the last year (Spotify, 2018), for now it is only possible for signed artists and music aggregators to share music on the platform. Music aggregators "operate on the business-to-business market, where one group of contractors are record labels or individual artists, and the other group are digital music stores" (Galuszka, 2015, p. 262). Therefore, similar to the process of music distribution outside of streaming platforms, publishing companies and music aggregators are responsible for handling and uploading the music. Even if an Artist is among the selected few to test the upcoming feature of direct-to-platform uploads without having to go through a record label or aggregator, Spotify is still controlling certain aspects of the process. Mia Coleman who

produces music under the pseudonym of VIAA, was one of those test participants and had to remove some of her songs from her SoundCloud page before being able to upload them directly to Spotify (Setaro, 2018). Since artists like Coleman are independent, the revenue generated by her songs on Spotify goes to her directly instead of a publishing company. However, Spotify is still handling the money distribution according to their 'streamshare' formula meaning that they "calculate your [revenue] by tallying the total number of streams in a given month and determining what proportion of those streams were people listening to your music" (Spotify FAQ, 2019).

Conclusively, the emergence of digital music platforms such as Spotify has introduced new practices and business models to the legacy music industry. It is however important to stress that the existence of the former has not replaced the latter. While music streaming has become the most popular way of listening to music as of late, there are still major and independent record labels who are signing artists and distributing physical copies of records 'the old fashioned way'. This industry in flux therefore harbors a variety of actors who are connected in a heterogenous network of associations. In order to understand how such a network operates and how roles are distributed within it, the next section will outline actor-network theory (ANT) as a way of making sense of the web of associations that is the music industry.

Actor-Network Theory – Theoretical Groundwork and Implications

> Truth and falsehood. Large and small. Agency and structure. Human and non-human. Before and after. Knowledge and power. Context and content. Materiality and sociality. Activity and passivity. In one way or another all of these divides have been rubbished in work undertaken in the name of actor-network theory
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> Law, 1999, p. 3

Discussing actor-network theory can be a daunting task due to its intrinsic theoretical foundation that is quite radical in nature, as outlined by the John Law quote above. Its post-structuralist worldview questions pre-established notions such as the divide between *human* and *non-human* or *activity* and *passivity*. At the same time however, it is important to note that ANT does not claim to erase these divisions entirely, but it rather approaches them as being effects or outcomes as opposed to fixed and static states of being (Law, 1999, p. 3). No man –

and no thing – is an island. In other words, ANT "takes the semiotic insight, that of the relationality of entities, the notion that they are produced in relations, and applies this ruthlessly to all materials" (Law, 1999, p. 4). Consequently, one has to account for the relations between entities when studying them since, according to ANT, it is precisely these relations that constitute and produce the entity itself. Furthermore, as Law states, this notion is applied to *all* materials. Therefore, human and non-human actors are considered equally under the lens of actor-network theory. This aspect of ANT is also referred to as *generalized symmetry.* According to Bruno Latour, the term 'actor' in ANT refers to "something that acts or to which activity is granted by others" (Latour, 1996, p. 373). The second part of that definition is perhaps the most controversial aspect of ANT, because it implies that non-human objects are to be considered equally relevant to humans in a network, provided that they are granted activity by other actors. Examining modern communication via services such as WhatsApp under the theoretical lens of actor-network theory for instance, would require the researcher to take the position that hardware (the mobile phone and its constituent parts) and software (WhatsApp) are as integral to the network of communication as the two humans who are communicating. These actors however, are networks within themselves as well. WhatsApp itself for example, is a network consisting of technological elements such as the code that was written to program it, but also the human actors such as the people who wrote that code. In short, every actor in a larger network is a network her-, him- or itself. Thus, the term *actor-network* was coined by the proponents of the theory to more accurately describe the status of actants as actors and networks at the same time.

Conclusively, under the lens of ANT, networks are comprised of heterogeneous actors – human and non-human - whose relationships are dictating their status in the network. Generalized symmetry applies, meaning that all actors are considered equally, provided they either act themselves, or are granted activity elsewise.

Methodology

<u>Actor-Network Theory – The Question of Application</u>

> We are never faced with objects or social relations, we are faced with chains which are associations of human (H) and non-humans (NH). No one has ever seen a social relation by itself […] nor a technical relation

<div align="right">Latour, 1990, p. 110</div>

This quote by Bruno Latour connects to the theoretical aspects of ANT that were discussed in the previous section, namely that the associations between human and non-human actors are the focus in an actor-network study. Yet it is still unclear how to apply ANT to a specific case study or phenomenon. It is important to understand that ANT is somewhat similar to discourse analysis in this regard, in so far as that they both combine theory and method in one holistic toolkit. By carrying out a discourse analysis, one is subscribing to the theoretical tradition of social constructivism since it presupposes that discourse constructs and produces reality. ANT, as previously discussed, brings with it principles such as generalized symmetry and the viewpoint that associations between actors are essential to the network. Actor-network theory then is more akin to a certain way of looking at something and describing it. The object of description could be a network in the traditional sense such as subways or sewage systems, but it could also be something that does not initially fit the characteristics of a network such as a state of mind or a fictional character (Latour, 2005, p. 142). This explanation implies that it can be applied to virtually anything, so it is useful to ask what insights there are to gain by utilizing ANT.

Law and Callon outline their approach to ANT, stating that they "are concerned to map the way in which [actors] *define and distribute roles, and mobilize or invent others to play these roles*" (Law & Callon, 1988, p. 285). Consequently, actor-network theory lays bare the distribution of roles between actors in a network and how certain actors have the agency to empower other actors to take on different roles. Being able to detect how certain actors within a network assume and distribute roles is useful in a multitude of ways. Referring back to the case study of a military aircraft by Law & Callon, the results paint a holistic picture that considers both social and technological actors as well as their role in the cancellation of the TSR 2 aircraft project (Law & Callon, 1988). Actor-network theory provided the researchers

with the tools to trace the processes that ultimately led to the cancellation of the project, from engineers working on the technological parts of the aircraft to cabinet ministers who voted to cancel the project later on. By identifying the relevant actors and connections between them in any network, one can gain a deeper understanding of why certain networks 'succeed' as opposed to others. Measurements of success can differ depending on the nature of the network. As previously discussed, networks can come in any shape or form. Thus, success for a 'traditional' network such as the internet might be defined by a smooth and accessible transfer of data across multiple nodes, whereas for Law & Callon's network of the TSR 2 aircraft project success would be defined as ending up with a finished and functional airplane. The insights gained through a network analysis via ANT can therefore provide information about how and why networks succeed or fail, making it a valuable tool for consultants or policy advisors for instance.

Furthermore, Actor-network theory can shed light on how power is distributed and exerted within a network. Latour problematizes this notion by drawing attention to its paradoxical nature:

> When an actor simply *has* power nothing happens and s/he is powerless; when, on the other hand, an actor *exerts* power it is others who perform the action. It appears that power is not something one can possess – indeed it must be treated as a consequence rather than a cause of action

Latour, 1984, p. 264

This power paradox is an important notion to understand when working with ANT in any context. Claims about actors in a network 'having' or 'possessing' power are essentially meaningless as Latour points out, since ANT's main concern is with the connections between actors rather than with the actors themselves. Therefore, Latour's conception of actual, meaningful power within a network is defined by actors performing actions in service of other actors. He condenses this concept further by stating that the crucial difference between power 'in potentia' and power 'in actu' is the actions of others (Latour, 1984, p. 265). Conclusively, even if an actor exerts power by having others perform actions for them, they don't actually 'possess' power since others are carrying out those actions: "Either you have [power] in practice and *you* do not have it – others have – or you simply have it in theory and you do not have it" (Latour, 1984, p. 265). In a more concrete context, this means that ANT can provide insight into how certain actors are empowered or disempowered in a given network. Applied to the

case study of Bandcamp then, the theory is a useful tool for researching whether or not the platform operates in accordance to its mission to "create the best possible service for artists and labels to share and earn money from their music, and for fans to discover and enjoy it" (Bandcamp, 2019). Referring back to the work of Wikström, David and Galuszka, the main actor to follow in this context will be the artist who chooses to offer their music online via Bandcamp. By tracing the relationships – or lack thereof – between artists and other actors such as distributors, aggregators and the platform itself, this research aims to investigate the power structures embedded in the platform of Bandcamp. Since Bandcamp prides itself on being a 'fair' alternative to mainstream music platforms such as Spotify (Bandcamp, 2019) and the notion of power and power relations in a network is significant to ANT, the research will be performed with the artist's interest in mind. This means that Bandcamp's claims of empowering artists will be tested by comparing the network of actors involved in music distribution through Bandcamp to the traditional method as outlined by Wikström and mainstream platforms such as Spotify.

In conclusion, when first engaging with actor-network theory it can be hard to see its practical use and label it as only useful for theorizing. Yet having conceptualized the notion of power in a network, it becomes clear that analyzing tangible objects as well as intangible processes from the perspective of ANT can shed light on the role of actors and the resulting distribution of power. This allows one for instance, to make substantiated comments on whether or not a given network is beneficial for a specific actor within it. One example of applying ANT in such a manner, can be found in the work of Nick Couldry. As he points out in his paper on how to apply actor-network theory in a media studies context, platforms such as Facebook "involve huge numbers of actors interacting in multiple and multidirectional patterns that are not chaotic but often quite ordered" (Couldry, 2016, p. 4). ANT's focus on just these interactions between actors and the resulting power relations makes it a fitting tool with which to analyze such platforms. In the context of this research then, ANT can provide insight into how Bandcamp is operating as a fringe platform outside of the main music industry. More concretely, the methodological approach will be similar to other studies which have utilized actor-network theory to analyze intersections of the social and the technical in a given network. Hajer Kéfi and Jessie Pallud for instance, applied the theory to examine the role of technologies in cultural mediations in museums (Kéfi & Pallud, 2011). Their way of identifying how ICT's take on a more active or passive role depending on how they are implemented in different types of cultural mediation (content-driven or visitor-oriented), provides a helpful template for this research. In the context of Bandcamp, notions of activity and passivity will be relevant when

evaluating the position of artists in the network of music distribution and promotion through the platform. Similarly, Sameer Hinduja employed an actor-network perspective in his study of online music piracy by identifying a variety of social and technological actors who are all integral to the existence of music piracy (Hinduja, 2012). The process of describing actors – be they social or technological, human or non-human – and outlining the relations between them that constitute the network will be relevant to this research as well.

Therein perhaps lies another paradox of actor-network theory. As discussed in the previous chapters, merely 'applying' ANT to any singular topic can be rather difficult. At the same time however, it can be used as a lens through which to examine practically anything, since the principle of generalized symmetry effectively renders any human and non-human entity or object an actor-network that is entangled in other networks that consist of more actor-networks et cetera. In order to prevent getting lost in endless descriptions of actors and networks though, it is important to keep in mind that "it's the work, and the movement, and the flow, and the changes that should be stressed" (Latour, 2005, p. 143). It is these aspects that will be analyzed in the following section, after briefly outlining Bandcamp as a digital music platform.

Analysis

Bandcamp – A David amidst Goliaths?

Platforms […] do not *cause* a revolution; instead, they are gradually infiltrating in, and converging with, the (offline, legacy) institutions and practices through which democratic societies are organized

van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 2

After having discussed the foundations of actor-network theory in the previous section, it is important to understand why this particular theoretical framework lends itself to the analysis of digital music platforms – and Bandcamp in particular. As Couldry outlined in his research on ANT in media studies, platforms such as Facebook but also Spotify or Bandcamp are constituted by a variety of actors interacting in an ordered manner. Furthermore, he points out that "the power relations that are being worked out *through* interactions on such platforms are particularly important, if difficult, to understand (Couldry, 2016, p. 4). Actor-network theory can help in deciphering those power relations by studying the connections between actors and how these are influencing the power distribution in the network. In order to apply this method to the case of Bandcamp however, the platform first needs to be described in more detail.

Bandcamp is an online music platform that was founded in 2008 and has since then enjoyed a positive reputation of being an independent alternative to mainstream platforms such as Spotify and Apple music. The main aspect differentiating it from its larger competitors is that Bandcamp offers more than just music streaming. When visiting the front page (https://bandcamp.com/), it becomes immediately apparent that the platform places high importance on its news articles and interviews that cover predominantly smaller and unknown artists and bands. These are often placed in a local context to highlight specific niche music scenes that would otherwise likely continue exist outside of the public eye without coverage from larger music publications (Garcia, 2018 & Franceschetti, 2019). Another feature that grabs the attention of users on the frontpage interface is the live feed showing current sales of music and merchandise under the header 'selling right now'. It provides a direct link to the product that has been sold, as well as the price and the country of residence of the buyer. Features like these distinguish Bandcamp from its competitors as they incentivize users to discover and listen to music outside of their usual group of preferred artists. Furthermore, the platform affords

artists the choice to pick their preferred distribution method in addition to streaming. This means that music can not only be sold through the platform digitally, but also in physical formats such as CDs, Vinyl and Cassettes. In those cases Bandcamp acts as a storefront, yet unlike companies such as Amazon, it does not have its own centralized warehouses with products. It rather gathers all available formats – digital or physical - on one website and leaves distribution of physical goods up to artists and record labels themselves (Bandcamp Help Center, 2019). In addition, Bandcamp offers the opportunity for artists to let users pay as much as they want for any given product. Some albums might be offered for a minimum price of $10 with the option to pay more, while others are available entirely for free and users can pay any amount they deem fair should they desire to do so. Bandcamp then takes 15% of profits from each transaction, dropping down to 10% when all-time sales of an artist exceed $5000 (Bandcamp, 2010). This business model differs drastically from Spotify's which collects money from subscriptions and advertisements as previously discussed. It is one of the major features by which Bandcamp identifies itself as a 'pro-artist' alternative in the realm of digital music platforms, since 85% of profits are payed to artists directly. There are however also two additional possibilities for artists to upgrade their Bandcamp profile. A 'Bandcamp Pro' subscription for $10 per month enables features such as setting up an exclusive email list for private streaming access of certain tracks and albums, additional data and statistics such as buyer location and Google analytics or the ability to upload music in batches to make it more convenient. Furthermore, artists can set up their own, customized subscription service within Bandcamp similar to crowdsourcing platforms like *Patreon* or *GoFundMe*. They get to choose a monthly or annual fee which listeners can opt-in to pay, in order to gain access to subscriber-only benefits which the artists can set up. Examples of these include exclusive access to certain tracks, direct chats with artists, early access to live show tickets and merchandise, or possibly even guest spots on a song or album. It is important to note however, that even the free 'standard' version of Bandcamp does not feature advertisements unlike Spotify.

All in all, Bandcamp is providing an alternative for both artists and music listeners that exists largely on the fringes of the music industry due to its different approach to the business model. It offers a variety of services that extend beyond the popular trend of music streaming, most of which are free to use with additional options of opt-in subscription fees. Referring back to the quote of van Dijck et al., Bandcamp could thus be interpreted as one such platform that has 'infiltrated' – or at least attempted to infiltrate - the legacy institution of the music industry. In the following section, the political economy of the legacy music industry and Bandcamp will

first be described with an actor-network vocabulary, in order to discuss and evaluate the differences and the resulting consequences for artists in a second step of analysis.

The Legacy Music Industry under the Lens of Actor-Network Theory

Since the research question revolves around the position of artists in the network that is the digital music platform Bandcamp, they will be the primary actor to follow in the actor-network analysis. This means that relationships between actors will be evaluated from the perspective of artists with their interests in mind. As previously discussed, ANT studies have the potential to suffer from extensive descriptions of actors without reaching any meaningful conclusions, which is why the focus on artists and the representation of their interest in the network is chosen for this research.

If one was to conceptualize the legacy music industry as an actor-network, it is helpful to refer back to the research that has been done on the industry by scholars such as Wikström and Hirsch. As previously discussed, they conceptualize a network of different actors that maintain relationships to the artist whose music – and to an extent also personality – is being circulated through the network. Key relationships of artists to other actors in the network would include producers, A&R's, record companies, promoters, gatekeepers such as Radio stations and media outlets, as well as the audience and fans. As Hinduja points out in his study on music piracy through the lens of ANT, any given network "must maintain the relationships that support its persistence while assimilating or rejecting those that might prove detrimental" (Hinduja, 2012, p. 233). In this case, this means that the relationships between these aforementioned actors not only constitute but also sustain the network. As the work of scholars such as Wikström and Hirsch demonstrates, each actor in the network of the legacy music industry has a defined role and thus contributes to sustaining the network. Since the research question is framed within the context of the political economy of the music industry, one important actor to follow is money. As previously established, following an actor by examining their relationships to other actors is integral to ANT, and while artists are still the main focus of this study, following the money is equally important in understanding how the given network operates. In order to so, one can examine a type of record contract that is increasingly common in the legacy industry, namely the '360-degree deal'. A typical 360-degree deal "has one company to administer all rights on behalf of the artist – from recording and publishing through to touring and merchandise revenues" (Rutter & Sharkey, 2016, p. 95). These deals are often proposed by large record labels in order to secure additional revenue streams by including

publishing rights in the contract, meaning that the label becomes the sole rights-holder to an artist's catalogue of music. In this type of contract, money is invested by the record label upfront in several ways: Usually artists are paid a lump sum of money in advance in order to be able to focus entirely on recording new music. In addition to that, recording costs such as studio time and assistance by audio engineers will be paid for as well (Rutter & Sharkey, 2016). While those types of investments are also common for regular record deals, 360-degree deals are different due to the fact that they also enable record labels to collect profits from income sources outside of just recorded music; merchandise and touring being two major ones. Following the money in the network of the legacy industry then, reveals that it is invested upfront by record labels in hopes of being recouped with a profit later on through music sales – and in the case of 360 deals – also through touring, merchandise and licensing to media outlets such as TV, film or radio. Therefore, it flows through a variety of different actors before a small part of it ultimately ends up in the hands of artists.

Consequently, in this network of the legacy industry artists are one singular node with connections to many different nodes. How do these insights about following the money and the connections of various actors to artists then contribute towards evaluating the position of artists in this network? For one, and rather paradoxically, they could lead one to the conclusion that artists occupy a position of elevated power in the network of the legacy industry. Indeed, referring back to Latour and his conceptualization of power within a network reveals that, in the legacy music industry, artists effectively have other actors do the work for them. They are not concerned with promoting and distributing their music since there are specialized actors for these kinds of tasks. Therefore, they can focus on creating music while other people do the 'busy work'. At the same time however, it also means that artists lose control over certain important processes such as music distribution and promotion. Depending on their record deal, they might not have a say in how their music is marketed towards the public and on which format(s) it will be released. From this perspective, it appears as though the relationships between artists and other actors result in artists occupying a position of lower power in the network. Thus it is important to note that the legacy industry contains a plethora of actors whose interwoven relationships contribute to a highly interconnected and complex network. With this in mind, one can refer back to John Law's notion of the relationality of entities to draw further conclusions about the position of artists in the network. According to this notion, actors in a network are constituted by the relationships between them. Following this logic then, artists are not only dependent on actors such as promoters and distributors, but are also effectively 'constituted' by them. When translating this concept from the abstract into the practical, it again

becomes apparent that artists lack agency in many aspects in the legacy industry network. As Wikström outlined in his definition of the music industry, it "consists of those companies concerned with developing musical content and personalities which can be communicated across multiple media" (Wikström, 2009, p. 49). This definition already implies a certain kind of passivity on behalf of artists. They are merely "developed" and "communicated" across multiple media. These actions happen through the hands of aforementioned actors like promoters and distributors, meaning that the relationships between them and artists can be interpreted as key processes in maintaining the network. At this point, it is necessary to refer back to John Law's notion about how actor-network theory conceptualizes divides between activity and passivity. He states that ANT "approaches them as being effects or outcomes rather than fixed and static states of being" (Law, 1999, p. 3). Applied to the case at hand, this means that artists are not merely in a passive state in the network of the legacy industry, but that the passivity is rather an outcome of their relationship to other actors. Naturally, they are not exclusively passive in so far as that they are still recording music and playing shows, yet the nature of their relationships to promoters and distributors contributes towards a lesser degree of agency.

Without these relationships in place however, artists have little chance in succeeding in the legacy music industry. Gatekeepers such as radio stations and media outlets are a necessity to spread the music to the public in the legacy industry, which is why independent artists are unlikely to have the needed connections to be able to have their music featured by them. Conclusively, one might – as previously outlined – consider the argument that artists occupy a position of elevated power in the network of the legacy industry due to the fact that other actors are carrying actions like promotion and distribution out for them. Yet it is precisely this passivity and the resulting lack of control on behalf of artists, that renders the opposite argument more convincing.

Bandcamp under the Lens of Actor-Network Theory

When examining the position of artists in the actor-network of Bandcamp, it becomes immediately clear that the number of relationships between artist and other actors is greatly reduced compared to the legacy industry. While at first glance this could lead one to believe that this simplifies the process of network analysis, the opposite is true. In the legacy industry network the distribution of roles between actors is rather clear and distinct, whereas in the case of Bandcamp this is not the case. When examining the network of the music platform under the

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lens of ANT however, it is important to avoid conceptualizing it as 'smaller' than its counterpart in the legacy music industry. Latour points out that "a network is never *bigger* than another one, it is simply *longer* or *more intensely connected*" (Latour, 1996, p. 371). Conversely, the network of Bandcamp is perhaps *shorter* and *less intensely connected*; suppositions which will be examined in the following section.

As previously outlined, the platform prominently features news articles and interviews with artists on the frontpage. These pieces of writing embed and link to the discussed artist's Bandcamp page which increases traffic and draws attention of a potentially new audience. In the legacy industry, such pieces might have appeared in popular music magazines, advertising artists through that channel of communication. The relevant tension to explore in these cases however, is how an artist gets featured and who is responsible for that decision. In the case of the legacy industry, music publicists would pitch artists they are working for to appropriate outlets and writers (Sciaretto, 2015). It still remains just a pitch however, meaning that the decision of whether or not to feature a written piece about that artists is up to the outlet and writers themselves. Similarly, Bandcamp employs an editorial team which oversees the production of news content for the platform. The members of that team have previously worked for outlets that were founded prior to the emergence of digital music platforms such as *Rolling Stone, SPIN, MTV* or *Pitchfork* (Bandcamp Daily, 2016). Reading the statement of the platform regarding their news output reveals that "the pieces we'll be running are designed with our unique audience of fans and artists in mind. We'll publish profiles of artists we feel are making compelling, groundbreaking work." (Bandcamp Daily, 2016). This statement implies that the editors and writers of the platform pick and choose which artists to feature in pieces of writing. Furthermore, an email address of the editorial team is included for artists to effectively pitch themselves to be featured. Consequently, the major difference between the legacy industry and the platform of Bandcamp in this instance lies in the fact that Bandcamp encourages artists to pitch themselves whereas these tasks were carried out by publicists in the legacy industry. In both cases however, gatekeeping occurs through the hands of an editorial team and writers. Therefore, the relevant actors when it comes to music promotion in the legacy industry are artists, promoters, publicists, media outlets, editors and writers for those outlets, as well as the audience. In the case of Bandcamp, relevant actors in the network are artists, the platform's editorial team and writers, the platform interface presenting the written pieces, as well as the audience.

A further aspect of the platform that contributes to the less connected nature of its network, is its business model. Referring back to the first section of this chapter, Bandcamp operates more akin to a storefront or marketplace, meaning that the majority of the work that goes into having one's music distributed on the platform has to be carried out by artists themselves. Staying with the marketplace metaphor, artists have to set up their own shops on the platform and are responsible for the maintenance of those shops. Bandcamp then, is responsible for upkeep of the entire marketplace as a whole, meaning that they carry the cost of hosting the online servers and make sure that traffic on the site can proceed without problems. While this could be interpreted as the macro-perspective on the platforms' business model, the micro-perspective of everyday transactions on Bandcamp is equally important to the network. Other than its competitors such as Spotify, Bandcamp is affording artists and audience a certain degree of flexibility regarding payments. In an actor-network vocabulary, the relationship between artists and their audience is more direct and stronger in the network of Bandcamp than it is in the legacy industry or other digital music platforms. An example of how this relationship is inscribed in the platform can be found in the option to let buyers pay more for a piece of music or merchandise than the set minimum price (Figure 1). This minimum price on the other hand, is being determined by artists themselves and can therefore be entirely non-existent as well. Therefore, the nature of the relationship between artist, user and platform results in increased agency for artists and users. Following the money in the network of Bandcamp then, further reinforces the notion of it being a less intensely connected network. Money is invested by Bandcamp to be able to host their services online, enabling transactions to take place on the platform. In these transactions the money travels through the network from the audience, either through PayPal or directly via Credit Card, into an artist's PayPal account. The platform thus only mediates the transaction by providing the interface and then takes its 10-15% share. Arguably Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and input devices such as keyboards or smartphones are also constituent parts of the network since they are necessary for allowing the platform to be operational and users to access it, yet other than that, PayPal is the only additional actor involved in monetary transactions on the platform.
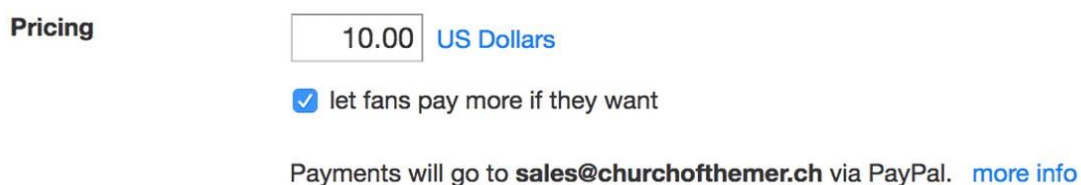

Figure 1: Bandcamp's option to let buyers pay more than the regular price

Another important constituent part of Bandcamp that affects artists is the platform Terms of Use (ToU). These terms can be interpreted as fulfilling a similar function to contractual obligations artists have in the legacy industry when signed to a record label, as they are governing the platform and in turn, also the artists to a certain degree. Examining the ToU in detail reveals several relevant insights about the nature of the relationship and resulting power distribution between platform, artist and audience in the network of Bandcamp. For one, Bandcamp – in the ToU referred to as 'Company' – has "no obligation to monitor the Site, Service, Content, or User Submissions", yet it "reserves the right to (i) remove, edit or modify any Content in its sole discretion, including without limitation any User Submission, from the Site or Service at any time, without notice to you and for any reason […] or for no reason at all (ii) to remove or block any User Submissions from the Service" (Bandcamp Terms of Use, 2017). This means that the platform is not responsible for identifying potentially copyright infringing content, making it a task to be carried out by artists themselves if they are affected by it. Additionally, Bandcamp does have the power to remove and edit existing content without notice and without having to specify a particular reason for it. The ToU further contextualize the relationship between artists and platform through the aspect of intellectual property rights. It is explicitly stated that the "Company will not have any ownership rights in any elements of an Artist's Music, however, Company needs the following license to perform the Service" (Bandcamp Terms of Use, 2017). The license that is required by Bandcamp is then described in detail and includes the right to reproduce, distribute, publicly perform and display, as well as create derivative works of, an artist's music. All of these actions are summarized in the ToU under the umbrella term of to 'exploit' an artist's work. Furthermore, by uploading music to Bandcamp one agrees that the platform can exploit any associated copyrightable works or metadata such as song lyrics, album cover artworks, photographs, graphics, logos and slogans. The platform also reserves the right to use such trademarks for marketing, promotion and advertising purposes (Bandcamp Terms of Use, 2017). In summary, there are several relationships between actors in the network of Bandcamp that are not obvious from the outset. It is precisely these relationships however, that are crucial to how artists are ultimately experiencing the platform as opposed to its mainstream competitors. The next section will therefore discuss the findings and critically evaluate them in order to answer the primary research question.

Discussion

Network analysis does not prevent judgement any more than it prevents differentiation. Efficiency, truth, profitability, and interest are simply properties of networks, not of statements.

Latour, 1990, p. 130

After having outlined the web of associations and relationships between actors in both the legacy music industry and in the network of Bandcamp, it is necessary to relate the produced insights back to the research question. To what extent does Bandcamp operate in the favor of artists, thus staying true to its promise of being a fair alternative to the legacy industry and other digital music platforms?

The answer to this question is not as clear-cut as it might seem from the outset. On the one hand, the network of Bandcamp is structured in a way that undeniably affords artists greater freedom as an outcome. This is particularly evident in the business model of the platform which lets artists set the desired price for a piece of music or merchandise; a practice which is entirely foreign to the legacy industry and other platforms such as Spotify. Furthermore, the way in which Bandcamp conducts business transactions through the platform is more direct and thus requires less intermediaries than other business models. With the exception of PayPal, the money flows directly from fans to artists, benefiting both parties by removing the element of corporatism that is present in the legacy industry in the form of actors such as distributors or promoters, and in other digital platforms in the form of aggregators or shareholders. This in turn contributes towards a closer connection between artists and their fanbase. On the other hand, a possible counterargument to this position on the business model could be that Bandcamp is taking 10-15% of profits from each transaction while only having to invest minimal funds into upkeep of the website and app, as opposed to having to invest larger sums up front to sign artists and provide recording opportunities for them as is the custom in the legacy industry. There are several aspects to keep in mind when evaluating such a viewpoint however: First, the number of 15% per transaction that Bandcamp takes – even dropping to 10% after $5000 of total sales of an artist – is comparatively rather low. Taking home 85% of profits is usually only possible for artists by playing live shows as alluded to by Wikström (Wikström, 2009, p. 59). Spotify and other digital music distributors such as iTunes for instance, pay approximately 65-70% of revenue to rights holders (Marshall, 2015, p. 9) while

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a typical record deal in the legacy industry leaves artists with just 10% of revenue from recorded music (Wikström, 2009, p. 59). Consequently, it is fair to conclude that, in terms of business model, Bandcamp stays true to its promise of being a fair alternative representing the interest of artists above all else.

Yet, other relevant aspects in the network of Bandcamp provide ample material to form an argument that the platform's mission statement is not achieved. The Terms of Use for instance function similar to legacy industry record contracts on many levels. While it is important to emphasize that Bandcamp does not explicitly own any publishing or royalty rights to an artist's catalogue, operating the platform necessitates an agreement on behalf of artists to sign over rights that allow the music to be hosted and distributed. In addition to that, the ToU agreement also grants the platform the rights to use an artist's likeness, slogans or lyrics for marketing purposes. As alluded to earlier, these rights are a necessity to operate the platform, meaning that they are not exclusive to Bandcamp but rather appear in the Terms of Use of any digital music platform. This is the case because any given platform has to ensure that they are allowed to host an artist's music online first and foremost, but also that users are able to play this music "on any and all devices owned and controlled by the user for non-commercial purposes" (Bandcamp Terms of Use, 2017) and in public without potentially facing a lawsuit from artists. Without acquiring these rights from artists, music platforms would be unable to function due to their online existence which makes their content openly accessible to the public. Consequently, there is an argument to be made that digital music platforms, Bandcamp included, feature inherently exploitative ToU due to their public nature. Again, it is important to emphasize the difference between these agreements and contracts in the legacy industry, namely that Bandcamp does not receive additional royalties from music sales on their platform apart from the 10-15% of each transaction. Another relevant aspect of these Terms of Use however, is that due to the less interconnected nature of the network of Bandcamp artists are personally responsible for understanding and adhering to these terms. In the legacy industry network, actors such as managers and lawyers deal with the task of navigating such legalities. While artists who use Bandcamp as their primary way of music distribution could also hire such external actors, that would defeat the purpose of and go against the mission statement of the platform.

A further similarity between Bandcamp and the network of the legacy music industry can be found in the way that promotion does – or does not – work on the platform. By employing an actor-network lens, it becomes clear that there are still certain gatekeeping mechanisms

embedded in the platform. More specifically, the existence of a team of writers and editors who decide which artists to promote through the official Bandcamp website and various other social media channels, is akin to music journalism in the legacy industry which involves media outlets such as radio shows or print magazines. On Bandcamp though, artists are encouraged to 'pitch themselves' to this team of writers and editors; a task which is carried out by actors such as publicists in the legacy industry. Therefore, artists face extra responsibilities and have to occupy additional roles in the network of Bandcamp. Without managers or lawyers to handle the legalities of distributing music online, or publicists to reach out to writers and editors, artists who are thinking about choosing Bandcamp as their way of distributing music online have to be aware of a potentially greater workload. Kait Kribs describes this phenomenon with her conceptual framework of *artist-as-intermediary* (Kribs, 2016). She uses the example of indie rock act Car Seat Headrest who self-released several albums through Bandcamp before being signed to the music label Matador Records. According to Kribs, Will Toledo of Car Seat Headrest points out that self-releasing material through Bandcamp was a rewarding process, yet the tasks of managing his Bandcamp site with the ongoing downloads prevented him from touring and releasing more music (Kribs, 2016, p. 7). Naturally, these tasks are not mandatory for artists who merely want to share their music on Bandcamp without aiming for a professional career, yet they are important issues to point out when drawing a comparison to the legacy industry and evaluating Bandcamp's mission statement critically.

Consequently, the case of Bandcamp is a multifaceted and complex one. In a vacuum, the platform allows independent musicians to share their music with a global audience and to receive a large majority of the generated value. It also requires them to take on a multitude of roles in addition to being an artist, making it significantly different from the legacy music industry in some ways, while also still relying on structures from the very same legacy industry in other ways. The same ambiguity remains true when evaluating Bandcamp in a broader economic context. As Nick Srnicek outlines in his book on platform capitalism, digital platforms are facilitating an economy in which work is increasingly precarious and based on infrequent gigs rather than long term contract work (Srnicek, 2017). While his book focuses on major platforms such as Uber or YouTube, this description also fits Bandcamp. The platform does away with the 360-degree record deals that are dominating the legacy music industry, and instead affords artists the opportunity to earn money on an individual project basis whenever they make new music or merchandise available on Bandcamp. Yet, it gets more complex when trying to fit Bandcamp in one of the categories of platforms that Srnicek describes. The platform is perhaps most closely associated to what he terms 'lean platforms'. Examples of these include

Uber and Airbnb, which generate revenue by outsourcing work to independent contractors without explicitly owning involved assets such as cars or apartments (Srnicek, 2017). The fact that Bandcamp offers additional opportunities such as its subscription model 'Bandcamp pro' however, nudges it slightly towards the category of 'product platforms' to which Spotify also belongs. It is thus most accurately described as being somewhere in between; it offers a product while also outsourcing the work to independent musicians at the same time.

Conclusion and Reflection

Bandcamp then, occupies a unique space in the landscape of digital music platforms. It's business model stays true to the promise of being a fair alternative to mainstream platforms, whereas other aspects such as artist promotion and governance through Terms of Use are reminiscent of the inner workings of the legacy music industry. For all the freedoms that artists enjoy when choosing Bandcamp as their way to distribute music, they must also occupy additional roles that were previously taken up by individual actors, if they aim to enjoy similar success to artists who are involved in the network of the legacy industry. The crucial difference however, is that Bandcamp significantly lowers the barriers of entry and affords anyone with internet access the opportunity to share their music online. Therefore, musicians who are thinking about using Bandcamp should first ask themselves the question of what they are expecting to get out of it. If the answer is 'an opportunity to share my music online with the added possibility of perhaps earning some money from it', then it is fair to say that Bandcamp holds true to its promise of being a fair alternative to other music platforms. If the answer however is 'a way to achieve fame and success similar to artists that have been brought up in the tightly connected network of the legacy industry', then they need to be aware that this – while not impossible – is highly unlikely and demanding of additional work due to the platforms' less interconnected network.

This study was an attempt to enrich the analysis of digital music platforms with the added perspective of actor-network theory. In doing so, it has contributed several insights that are valuable to future research in the same field. Through applying ANT to the analysis of digital platforms, relevant actors and relationships between them are highlighted, most of which are not immediately obvious from the onset. In this case for instance, the writing and editorial staff of Bandcamp were revealed to take up a similar position to magazines and other media outlets in the legacy industry. It is by describing these actors and the nature of their relationships, that one can infer how power is structured within any given platform. Actor-network theory could therefore be used to great effect in future research of digital music platforms – or platforms in general. Even though it mostly concerns itself with networks 'in the making' as opposed to ones that are already in place and operating (Couldry, 2008, p. 101), this research has demonstrated that ANT can also contribute to understanding how power is structured in already established networks.

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