



BOOK REVIEW

Digital Music Distribution: The Sociology of Online Music Streams

Hendrik Storstein Spilker, Routledge, 2017

Reviewed by Raphaël Nowak, Griffith University

It took me a very long time to read and review Hendrik Storstein Spilker's 2017 book *Digital Music Distribution: The Sociology of Online Music Streams*. I would like to blame the range of work demands that are known to every scholar. Truth is, this also has to do with the book itself. *Digital Music Distribution* covers many configurations of digital music distribution and consumption. Spilker provides with this book what is close to an encyclopaedic knowledge. As a result, it is a book that I have picked, read 20 pages of, put down, and come back to much later. Sometimes I went back, or even *had* to go back, to some of the chapters I had already read. Some chapters took me a long time to read and process. That is so because the book is incredibly comprehensive in its historical, economical, social, and cultural treatment of the digital age of music distribution and consumption. This leads me to a first observation about the book. On the one hand, Spilker does an amazing job at retrieving a broad range of sources and accounts from different disciplines and at compiling them to discuss every possible aspect related to digital music distribution. On the other hand, the book can be hard to follow at times because of the amount of sources, stories, and details about each aspect of the distribution and consumption of music in the digital age, which can disrupt the narrative of the whole book, even if the final chapter is a very good attempt at bringing it all back together.

The book is inherently tied to Spilker's academic career which started back in 1997. The author thus goes back to the 1990s as a way to account for how the contemporary digital music distribution not only finds itself in an unprecedented state, but also that this very state results from many years of uncertainty, characterized by actors' decisions or indecisions, attempts at inventing and imposing new models and standards, and so on. Or, in the words of Spilker, the project is set out to analyse the 'disruptive and unpredictable character of the forces that have been and are at work in the shaping of digital music landscape' (p. 170). He does so by offering a book that '... is the only monograph that analyses digital music distribution both from the consumption and production side in a combined effort' (p. 3). To the author, it is critical to explore the structures and social actors, as well as issues of power, because they ultimately all partake in 'some of the great – and some of the smaller – changes that have occurred in the music world in the last 20 years' (p. 170). Spilker works with the assumption that anybody could have had a role to play in the shaping of contemporary music distribution. That is why the book provides a meticulous investigation of '[the] crucial interplay between technological, economic, legal and cultural forces' (p. 6; see also pp. 7-9). In that

regard, Spilker collects insightful knowledge about for instance the intricacies of the 'hacker punk' culture (chapter 4) or with his thorough analysis of the press coverage of the *Piracy Kills Music* campaign (chapter 8), which contribute in explaining how we got where we are now. In his own words, 'A basic premise for my research has been that there is nothing self-evident about digital music – nothing inevitable, nothing obvious, nothing irresistible, nothing relentless' (p. 5).

The book is composed of 10 carefully-crafted chapters, which at first seem a bit disconnected. Each chapter is in fact a piece of the jigsaw puzzle of the theoretical 'folding' landscape that Spilker aims to capture. Many of Spilker's claims are both theoretically rich and empirically informed through historical analysis, textual analysis, statistics/surveys, and interview material. The book rightly rejects all the absolutist theories about the supposed revolutionary nature of transformations that occurred since the early 2000s, and it is instead anchored within a sociological approach. Drawing on science and technology studies (STS) and more specifically actor-network theory (ANT), Spilker develops the concept of 'folding', which aims to provide an explicative framework that traces techno-cultural, social processes of the digital age of music distribution and consumption. He writes:

The concept of folding, applied to interactions between humans and technology, is meant to highlight the non-linear, non-determinist character of technology appropriation. It helps us envision the outcome as entangled and twisted arrangements of social and material elements – where one otherwise could be tempted to predict obvious and determined courses of development. (p. 72)

This approach recalls that of Anja Hagen who argues that, in the contemporary age of streaming platforms, 'the uses and experiences flow into another' (2016: 239-40). However, Spilker goes further by incorporating fields (architecture and material arrangements, laws, markets, social norms, and literacy, see pp. 7-8) that are often explored separately. The structure of the book also clearly indicates that both distribution and consumption, in the variety of forms they have taken over the last 20 years or so, are accounted for in the overall analysis.

I found chapter 4, about 'the rave scene, the goth subculture and the punk movement' (pp. 8-9), to be theoretically less convincing than the rest of the book, probably because the terms 'scene', 'subculture', 'movement' tend to be used interchangeably and the



literature on the topic is missing (see for example Bennett, 2011). As it is a sociological perspective, some could regret that music is *not quite there*, in a sense that Spilker does not engage with the cultural and textual features of (popular) music and how they impact upon, or are impacted upon by, the technological transformations brought about by the digital age, which is a phrase that we often hear/read in critiques of any sociological work on music. Maybe Spilker could have engaged a bit more with the work of DeNora (2000), Bull (2007), and Hesmondhalgh (2013) to discuss where music fits in all of this. Others might be more critical of the focus on STS and ANT, which tends to place individuals at the core of the analysis, particularly through Spilker's focus on 'networks' throughout the book, and which, for some (see Hesmondhalgh, 2002), would be equivalent to ignoring the 'structural' and 'systemic' processes

at play in issues of distribution and consumption. However, to come back to my earlier point – the book is very comprehensive as is. Its conceptual framework, which rejects extreme positions on technological transformations, is very welcome, especially considering that this topic has somehow been populated by many *prophecies* about the 'revolution' that would have happened since the advent of Napster. The book will be of interest to all who want to gather a thick understanding of what happened in the last 20 years in digital music distribution. Although the narrative is hard to follow at times, I have no doubt that Spilker's concept of 'folding' will be of great use for scholars in the fields of cultural/digital sociology in providing a complex, nuanced, and uncertain depiction and conceptualization of the music distribution and consumption landscape in the digital age.

References:

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