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Paper Classic Texts

MySpace & Our Memory

Popular music & collective memory in the Long Tail.

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Introduction

What started as a one-time ‘millennium’ event in 1999 has become tradition; a Dutch national public radio station (Radio 2) yearly broadcasts during a five day period (from Boxing Day to New Year’s Eve) the Top 2000 of most popular songs of all times. This ‘list of all lists’, as it is being called by disc jockey and television presenter Matthijs van Nieuwkerk, is entirely compiled by public radio listeners who sent in their personal top-5 favourites of pop-songs. It is a media event, spread over four different media forms. Next to the radiobroadcast of the entire list of two thousand songs, there is a website where people can download and view the list, and upload personal comments (both aesthetic evaluations and memories attached to songs). Some of these comments are read by disc-jockeys during broadcast, all of them can be read on the web-site and automatically enter a contest in which a professional jury decides who will be this year’s writer of the best story. The third medium is television. During these five days, a daily one hour show called The Top 2000 A GoGo broadcasts on national television, giving the ‘ins and outs’ of some of the songs that made it to the list. It is broadcasted prime time and has had an average of approximately 750.000 viewers per show this year (2006).¹ Fourth, there is a live show called the Top 2000 in Concert (which is broadcasted on TV as well) with a lot of (Dutch) performing artists who made it to the list.

It is not entirely a coincidence that the Top2000 is broadcasted at the end of the year when (most of) the media review the past twelve months and try to give the audience a feeling of closure in order to freshly start the upcoming year. The Top 2000 fits right in. It is a celebration of days that are gone, a feast of remembrance, a festival of recognition. As a whole, the list of the two thousand most popular songs can be seen as an expression of our collective musical memory of the past. Collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present, as Maurice Halbwachs and many others since him have argued.² The media event not simply evokes but actively (re)shapes the collective memory.

Naturally, the list of the Top2000 consists of songs that were popular in the past. The acts of then are part of our collective memory in the present. Mieke Bal adds to this notion that memory is an activity inscribed in time; remembering links the past to the present *and* future, but as an activity taking place in the present, the past is continuously modified and revised, even as it continues to shape the future.³ So, the act of now is as well the activity of recalling experiences of the past in the present as well as the activity (in the present) of shaping the memory of the future’s past.

¹ Source: <http://www.kijkonderzoek.nl/> 2 January 2007. José van Dijck writes that in December 2004 and 2005, the national Top 2000 was selected by well over one million Dutch citizens, listened to by 6,5 million, viewed by 5 million, and the website had 9.2 million page-views in just five days, all on a population of 16 million people! (Dijck, 2006: p.21, note 1). This year (2006) the numbers were even bigger: the Top 2000 was selected by 1.9 million people, and the TV show of the final voting day was viewed by 1.8 million people.

² Halbwachs, 1992

³ Bal *et al.*, 1999, p. vii

José van Dijck convincingly argues in her forthcoming article ‘Record and Hold: Popular Music between Personal and Collective Memory’⁴, that recorded music is vital to the construction of personal *and* collective memory. She analyzes the interrelation between personal and collective memories of popular music based on two assumptions. The first being that memory is simultaneously *embodied, enabled, and embedded*. The second being that (re)collective experiences are constructed through *narratives*. She turns to an online set of narrative responses generated through the national radio-event of the Dutch Top 2000. After theorizing how song’s ‘stick’ to people’s minds and how they end up as national cultural heritage, Van Dijck concludes that we need public spaces to share narratives and to create a common musical heritage. But where Van Dijck talks about ‘ready made’ objects of memory in the shape of sound carriers, I would like to take into account the act of recording sound and music as a creative act of cultural production.

In this paper I will therefore analyse MySpace, an online social environment, as a place where the activity in the present of shaping the memory of the future’s past takes place, and I will argue that this has consequences for both the personal embodiment of musical memory as well as our collective musical memory of the future (Top2000). To do so I will make use of Van Dijck’s theory on how memory is concurrently an individually embodied, technologically enabled, and culturally embedded construction.

1 Music and the individual memory

This paragraph will take a closer look at some literature on how music sticks to the individual memory and how it gets embodied in the brain and mind of the individual in order to come to a better understanding of how new DIY (Do It Yourself) media changes that process of embodiment by adding a new feature.

In “Record and Hold: Popular Music between Personal and Collective Memory”, José van Dijck, borrowing from Balch and Lewis (1996), writes that music has, like diaries or photographs, a mnemonic function in that it inscribes and invokes specific events, emotions, or general moods. Next to that music has, especially for young people, a formative function in that it helps construct a person’s identity. They build up a repertoire by investing time, money and emotion, and thus shaping a personal ‘jukebox’ with on the one hand songs stored in one’s memory and on the other a material collection of sound items.⁵ As Kittler once described, Van Dijck reminds us that it is the ability of this material collection of sound items, or simply put, recorded music, to be replayed endlessly in exactly the same performance that helps to create the auditory memory of people. Repetition of music through

⁴ Van Dijck, 2006.

⁵ Van Dijck, 2006: p.4

media inscribes experiences in the human psyche.⁶ It is this ability that creates one of the main conditions for a song to become popular, both with individuals and collectives.

To find an explanation for how music gains a permanent presence in our autobiographical memories, Van Dijck uses two highly complementary explanations. One, neurocognitive theory, dealing with the brain's and mind's involvement in constructing personal memory. That is, the more time we affectively invest in listening and constructing meaning for and around a musical item, we can assume that our memory of songs is more durable. In the long run, Van Dijck explains, songs make sense to us because ' [...] In addition to storing the sound of an object we hear, our memories also retain emotional reactions to it, as well as our mental and physical state at the time of apprehending'.⁷ These emotions get mapped in 'non-language' stories, internal narratives, inside our brain, which upon later recall, triggered by recorded songs bring ' [...] back waves of emotion, the specificity of a time, and event, a relationship, or evoking more general feelings'.⁸

The second explanation, stemming from a cultural-semiotic perspective, sees music as a system of signs, and with Peirce's notion of indexicality, Thomas Turino (1999) explains how music is not about feelings but rather involves signs of feeling and experience. Musical signs are sonic events that create rational *effects*, or conscious responses that involve reasoning (the interpretation or appreciation of music), and emotional *affect*, emotions, feelings and experiences attached to hearing a particular song.⁹ José van Dijck uses these two complementary theories by applying narrative analysis to stories relating how people feel affected by recorded music. She thereby gains valuable insight in the connection between personal and collective memory as she shows how people create images and stories around certain songs of the Top2000. 'Through these stories, we learn how people came to invest emotionally in a song, how the song came to mean anything to them in the first place, and how they retained that attached meaning – a meaning they like to share with a large anonymous audience. [...] some of these comments show how recall includes the experience of listening and the emotive state at the time of apprehending.'¹⁰

However, as Van Dijck writes in her article 'Mediated Memories', ' [...] engaging in commercial transactions, like buying ready-made cultural products such as CDs or videos, is different from deploying the very same equipment (tape and cassette recorders, CD players/recorders, VCRs, MP3 players and computers) to create one's own recordings'.¹¹ The next paragraph will show that new available technologies gave birth to a new kind of user, who now can easily create mnemonic sound files for themselves.

⁶ Van Dijck, 2006: p.5

⁷ Van Dijck, 2006: p. 6

⁸ Van Dijck, 2006: p.6

⁹ Turino (p.224) in Van Dijck: p. 6

¹⁰ Van Dijck, 2006: p.7

¹¹ Van Dijck, 2004: p.274

2 Prosumer

Unlike diaries and photographs one takes, thereby actively creating a material object with a mnemonic function, the music we listen to is often ready made. Other than actively putting on the record, radio, or your iPod, we often quite ‘passively’ engage with recorded music, i.e. most of us didn’t record music ourselves. New enabling technologies, however, give rise to a new kind of user. They are technologies of distribution, consumption, and production, which, without being too technological deterministic, slowly change our society from a strict hierarchical one to a society with a distributed network diagram.¹² These technologies with the PC and the Internet as main characters, enable the user, next to consuming content created by others, to create content (e.g. websites). Where once a big studio full of expensive equipment was needed to record a four track pop song, now it is possible to use a relatively cheap PC with some additional soft- and hardware to record and (re)mix a 256 track song in the basement or attic of your home. Furthermore, a computer in combination with an Internet connection facilitates participation in the public sphere by partaking in discussions on online forums or creating a personal blog to practice (civil) journalism.¹³ This technology enables a new type of consumer that Martin Lister terms ‘prosumer’ and the personal computer is in many ways the ultimate “[...] media ‘prosumer’ technology.”¹⁴ These new technologies that facilitate the rapidly blurring and changing of the boundary between producer and consumer is often described as, and related to *participatory culture*, a term introduced in 1992 by Henry Jenkins in his book *Textual Poachers*.¹⁵

In *Textual Poachers* Jenkins tries hard to uphold the rigid boundaries between producers of the ‘official’ industrial and commercial production and the unofficial production of texts and products by fan culture. Although he recognizes the grey area of semi-professional publishers of for instance fan magazines, he categorizes this group rather easily as fan commune, arguing that these semi-professionals have their origin in fan culture. The only difference between the fan culture and these semi-professionals, Jenkins argues, is that they uphold a better infrastructure for circulating the cultural products this culture generates.¹⁶ In this first text on participatory culture, Jenkins’ main focus is on the relationship between producers of television series and fans. This relationship is for the most part based on mutual suspicion and even public conflict.

Ten years after publishing *Textual Poachers* Jenkins reconsiders his thoughts on participatory culture in the article ‘Interactive Audiences? The Collective Intelligence of Media Fans’ by introducing what he terms “the new participatory culture”.¹⁷ In this article Jenkins distinguishes three

¹² Galloway, Foucault, Deleuze.

¹³ Een voorbeeld hiervan is de (in)fameuze website www.geenstijl.nl

¹⁴ Lister et al., 2003: p.34.

¹⁵ Jenkins, 1992.

¹⁶ Jenkins, 1992: p.280.

¹⁷ Jenkins, 2002.

trends that change the mutual relationships between media consumers themselves, media consumers and media texts, and the relationship between media consumers and producers:

- (1) new tools and technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content
- (2) a range of subcultures promote Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media production, a discourse that shapes how consumers have deployed those technologies
- (3) economic trends favoring the horizontally integrated media conglomerates encourage the flow of images, ideas, and narratives across multiple media channels and demand more active modes of spectatorship.¹⁸

These trends demonstrate that consumers do not operate totally independent from producers, but they also demonstrate consumers are not totally dependent on the cultural industries as well. Jenkins argues it is naïve to assume powerful conglomerates will jeopardize their own interests in the new media marketplace, where at the same time audiences obtain more power and autonomy when they enter the new knowledge culture. “The interactive audience is more than a marketing concept and less than a ‘semiotic democracy’.”

Drawing heavily on the writings of Pierre Levy, Jenkins recognizes that the most valuable aspect in participatory culture is that it generates *knowledge* by a constant process of negotiation between producer and consumer. Levy’s notion of *cosmopedia*, a predictive vision on ‘the new knowledge space’, might come into being when the full potential of the new media market is discovered and utilized by the consumer. Levy argues the deterritorialization of knowledge is facilitated by the opportunities of the Internet that make possible many-to-many communication. He distinguishes a productive division between organic social groups (families, tribes), organized social groups (nations, institutions, religions and businesses) and self-organizing groups (e.g. virtual communities on the web). Levy connects the emergence of this new knowledge space to the emergence of world communication (termed as ‘global village’ by McLuhan¹⁹), to the decrease of loyalty by individuals to organized groups, and to the decrease of governmental power to demand exclusive loyalty of their citizens. The new knowledge communities will be voluntary and temporary where individuals can make tactical and intentional choices for participation, defined by communal intellectual enterprises and emotional investments. Members of such communities can ‘move’ from one community to another when their interest changes.²⁰

The distinctions between authors and readers, producers and spectators, creators and interpretations will blend to form a reading-writing continuum [...].²¹

And this, ten years after Levy wrote the above line, is what happens in an online social environment as

¹⁸ Jenkins, 2002: p.213.

¹⁹ Kline et al., 2005: p. 34.

²⁰ Jenkins, 2002: p. 214.

²¹ Levy, 1997 in Jenkins, 2002.

MySpace. In paragraph four I will go more into the ins and outs of MySpace as a social environment, for now suffice it to say that the many-to-many communication machine is here fully at work. Next to being a consumer of content created by others, MySpace facilitates for the user to upload and share its self-created content. In MySpace it is not only possible to actively search for new music created by other acts, but also you can upload your own music and share it with the social network you're in. The act of memory is now not only the memorizing products created by others and the rational effect and emotional affect that comes along with this process, but it is also an act of inscribing and sharing your own mnemonic products. The embodiment of memory is now the prosumer participating in the knowledge space of the cosmopedia, which makes the whole more than the sum of its parts. The total knowledge is embodied in the individuals that participate and contribute to this knowledge space, which makes it even harder to distinguish the individual embodiment from the cultural and social embeddedness of memory and mnemonic products.

In the next paragraph I will elaborate more on the technologies that enable this many-to-many communication with a closer look at the digitization of music files in a container technology called the mp3.

3 Enabling technologies: the digitization of music as object

The ideas we now have seen is that, next to being individually embodied, and socially and culturally embedded, memory is 'enabled' through technology and material objects. Van Dijck observes that the materiality of the external object is typically taken for granted by scientists (the focus is mostly on content). But, 'in order to understand memory as a complex of physical-mental, material-technological, and socio-cultural forces, we need to understand its distributed 'matter' by looking into all three directions'.²² In this chapter the digitization of the musical object will be analyzed.

Since something finally stopped not writing itself²³, enabled through the 'discovery' of the phonograph, the technology to produce and reproduce sounds, to record, hold, mass-produce and -distribute music have changed the way we 'experience' music.²⁴ From this perspective, according to Simon Frith, the history of music can be divided into three stages, each organized around a different technology of musical storage and retrieval:

In the first (or "folk") stage, music is stored in the body (and in musical instruments) and can only be retrieved through performance. [...] In the second (or "art") stage, music is stored through notation. [...] In the final (or "pop" stage), music is stored on phonogram, disc, or tape and retrieved mechanically, digitally, electronically.²⁵

²² Van Dijck, 2007: p. 5

²³ Kittler, 1987

²⁴ Bull, 2000; Morton, 2000; Sterne, 2003.

²⁵ Frith, 1996: p. 226

Frith piles in this final stage all possible recording technologies. However, as seen in the previous paragraph, the differences in the enabling technologies gave rise to a new kind of user. Therefore I want to nuance this final stage into two categories. The first: the early analogue recording equipment put music into the age of mechanical reproduction, and created the grounds for what we now call the music industry, with its centrally produced and distributed commodities, its Top40's, 50's & 2000's, its Hits, Tips & "Klapperrrrrrrr van de week". Secondly, this final stage is liable to change due to the digitization of its commodities. Production and distribution have become 'optimal', or at least they seem to be so, for the musician, making it possible to skip centralized powers in their way to the top.

Mark Poster argues in *The Mode of Information* that the (analogue) 'black disc' was the commodity for which one paid, not the tune it contained, which could be sung by anyone. 'Information was inseparable from the "packages" in which it was delivered and the package had a price tag.'²⁶ Once sounds are digitally encoded, they may be reproduced perfectly and indefinitely. Enormous quantities of music may now be stored, transmitted, or copied almost instantaneously. Friedrich Kittler has noticed the same transformation when he argued there is a separation of object of storage and meaning to be stored: 'In computers everything becomes number: imageless, soundless, and wordless quantity. And if the optical fiber network reduces all formerly separate data flows to one standardized digital series of numbers, any medium can be translated into another'.²⁷

According to Poster, like Jenkins, the producer and consumer were separated by the process of production. Commodities were difficult to (re)produce. A complex combination of materials and skills were required to make music. With digitization music is easily (re)produced, notwithstanding the fact that it still requires enormous effort to play a musical instrument like a guitar, piano or drums, but with an ever growing and expanding database of (freely) available samples, and tools for (re)mixing, re-creating a song, or optimizing ones recorded voice, one might say that producing music has become more easy in the digital age. Or, again, to use Jenkins term: the digitization enables the consumer to become prosumer.

However, to take a clear anti-technological determinist position, the fact that it is technically possible for music as information separated from 'package' to be available to everyone at little to no cost in no way ensures that it will be. Under the veil of the protection of private property all efforts are made to ensure that it is not available. This has been a subject of debate in many areas and fields of work where the creation of ideas is the basis of ensuring an income, but it seems for the debate to focus heavily on a container technology called the mp3 and the ease of distribution via file-sharing programs. Although emphasizing the aesthetic dimensions of the mp3 and how this influences the way we culturally perceive music, Jonathan Sterne comprehensibly explains that the mp3 was created by

²⁶ Poster, 1990: p. 73

²⁷ Kittler 1987: 102

the music industry to have maximum compatibility across platforms, which would allow for easy exchange of files.²⁸ The mp3 makes audio files smaller through data compression based on the knowledge of how the human ear works. It systematically reduces the frequencies and sounds we as humans do not hear, making it possible for the audio file to be stored in a place that takes a tenth of the space that a 'normal' audio file would take. It was invented *by* the industry and *for* the industry in order to gain even higher winnings by bypassing or diminishing the costs for the production and distribution of musical 'objects'. That is: the 'legal' distribution of files.

Ironically, this ease of distribution is massively apprehended by users to illegally share and distribute copyrighted material via large p2p (peer to peer) networks. This cultural practice has brought the music industry to invent new ways to ensure and secure their income. To produce the scarcity that economics tell us is a fact of nature, the record-industry tries to restrict the flow of music by ideologically stressing the importance of copyright via commercials, practically enforcing this fact with lawsuits against individual users, and technically reducing the 'power' of the mp3 by imposing another technology: the DRM (Digital Rights Management, an algorithm which makes copying of an mp3 (almost) impossible). However, this digitization of musical objects enables prosumers to share and distribute songs in online environments like MySpace, which will be discussed in the next paragraph.

4 MySpace: popularity in a distributed network.

The ease of distribution of music via p2p networks has had an effect on record sales. The music industry has seen a decrease of demand and sales of their commodities, and has become less interested in putting time, effort, and above all money into a new and unknown act. Because record sales diminish, and p2p networks gain in popularity, it is not easy for new acts to sign a record deal. Moreover, it has become hard even for acts that did have a contract to prolong it to make yet another album.²⁹ The old decentralized channels through which acts used to operate in order to get access to the top are supplanted by a new communication and distribution channel that is enabled by digital technologies of the internet and mp3: MySpace. MySpace makes use of the logic of digitization of music and the distributed network and fills the need of the (individual) musician, displacing the old de-centralized pr-machine of the record industry for the act of personally and actively making friends.

Simon Frith has shown that through performing rites like shared listening and exchanging music, sonic experiences have been assigned meaning for collectives.³⁰ Van Dijck concurs with Frith as she shows by narrative analysis of respondents comments to the Top2000, that listening to recorded

²⁸ Sterne, 2006: p. 4-5

²⁹ An example is the Dutch band *Krezip*. <http://www.krezip.nl/> & <http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krezip>

³⁰ Frith, 1996.

music has always been a social activity: 'listening with peers or sharing musical evaluations with friends helps individuals to shape their taste while concurrently constructing group identity. It is therefore understandable that the sociability of listening to pop music becomes an inherent part of people's memories.'³¹ Moreover, Van Dijck explains that 'individual memories almost invariably arise in the context of social practices such as music exchange and communal listening, and of cultural forms like popular radio programs, hitlists, live concerts, and so on.'³² New online social environments like MySpace can now complement this list.

In the next paragraphs I will first explain what MySpace is, how it functions as a social and cultural practice and whom it works for, second touch upon a (relatively) new phenomenon, called the Long Tail which is facilitated by the ease of distribution via the Internet and other networks, and third analyze the Tail that's in MySpace.

4.1 MySpace.com

As mentioned earlier, MySpace is a social network site, founded in 2003 by two guys, called Tom Anderson and Chris Dewolfe along with a couple of programmers. Profiles that are connected by links to friends on the system, are at the core of the website. Profiles are personalized to express an individual's interests and tastes, thoughts of the day and values. Music, photos and video help users make their profile more appealing, and gives the user (most are teenagers) the environment to explore ones identity by gauging it with tastes and preferences of others. Nice feature is that when a user creates an account, s/he automatically becomes a 'friend' of Tom Anderson, who is then 'in your network'. The friend network allows people to link to their friends and people can traverse the network through these profiles. An individual's 'Top' list of friends is displayed on the front page of the profile; all of the rest appear on a separate page. MySpace allows 4, 8, 12, 16, 20, or 24 friends to be displayed in the 'Top Friends' area. Bands, movie stars, and other media creators have profiles within the system and fans can friend them as well. People can comment on each other's profiles or photos and these are typically displayed publicly. MySpace also features an internal search engine and an internal e-mail system.

Next to a general friends profile with the ability to add at least one favorite song to a profile, there is a special profile for musicians and bands, which allows an uploading of up to four mp3 songs. Of course the work must be owned by the uploader or the original copyright owner must have given permission to upload the music. MySpace has been very popular for bands to promote their work. For the music industry it has also proved its use because the search for new bands and material can now be

³¹ Van Dijck, 2006: p. 15

³² idem.

done without having to scout for them the traditional way in the 'field'. The amount of friends (= fans) a band has, is now a decisive factor for the industry to sign a band.

So basically what MySpace does is giving (new) bands the opportunity to find an audience, and with 80 percent of the total of visits to online social networking websites³³, it gives this opportunity rather well. It is possible for every band to get at least a small audience out of the 100 million worldwide accounts that are created on MySpace, as long as you have one or some songs available for the public to download. With this comes an enormous amount of (new) music available for everyone, at every computer, everywhere in the world. This has never before in the history of pop music been the case. To get to know new music, you had to go through the 'analogue' channels of your hometown network, listen to public or commercial radio, or visit concerts of bands you'd never heard of, but now there is this seemingly endless amount of music to listen to. The question that almost evidently comes with this and that Chris Anderson poses in his book *The Long Tail*, is: 'What happens when the bottlenecks that stand between supply and demand in our culture go away and everything becomes available to everyone?'³⁴

4.2 The Long Tail

According to Anderson, "The Long Tail" is a powerful new force in our economy: the rise of the niche. As the cost of reaching consumers drops dramatically, our markets are shifting from a one-size-fits-all model of mass appeal to one of unlimited variety for unique tastes. The Long tail is an example of an entirely new economic model for business. After a century of obsessing over the few products at the head of the demand curve, the new economics of distribution allow us to turn our focus to the many more products in the tail, which collectively can create a new market as big as the one we already know.³⁵

The Long Tail is really about the economics of large quantity. The digitization of musical products and the distributed network of the Internet enable new efficiencies in distribution, manufacturing, and marketing. Where the cost of manufacturing, storing and distribution are insignificant, relatively unpopular products can be offered; however when these costs are high only the most popular products can be offered. When the costs are low the Long Tail works and minority tastes are provided to individuals who are therefore offered greater choice. If the 20th century was about hits, the 21st will be equally about niches.

The Long Tail also has implications for the producers of content, especially those whose products could not find a place in pre-Internet information distribution channels controlled by record

³³ Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myspace>

³⁴ Anderson, 2006.

³⁵ Anderson, 2006.

companies. From the producers' perspective, the Long Tail has made possible a flowering of creativity. The Long Tail may threaten the established record industry. Before the Long Tail works, only the most popular products are generally offered. When the cost fall, a wide range of products become available.³⁶

Clay Shirky, writing about power law distribution in blogs, theorizes on how popularity exists in the Long Tail. His main argument is that 'Diversity plus freedom of choice creates inequality, and the greater the diversity, the more extreme the inequality'³⁷. He explains this by arguing that the very act of choosing spread widely enough and freely enough creates a power law distribution. These power law distributions especially tend to arise in social systems where many people express their preferences among many options. The counter-intuitive finding Shirky addresses is that as the number of options rise, the curve becomes more extreme. This is based on the premise that people's choices affect one another.

To illustrate how this freedom of choice creates such unequal distributions, consider hypothetical thousand MySpace visitors that pick their 10 favourite acts on MySpace. In the first model there are no shared tastes, no preferred genres, or no effects from recommendations from friends. The distribution of taste would basically be flat; most acts will have the same number of people listing it as a favourite. A few will be more popular than others, but this will be statistical noise. But if people's choices affect one another and the choice of favourite act is influenced only a little by recommendations by friends and the popularity of certain acts, the system changes dramatically. A small number of acts become increasingly likely to be chosen in the future because they were chosen in the past. Shirky argues this positive feedback should be thought of as a preference premium. Later users come into an environment shaped by earlier users; a later user will not be selecting acts at random, 'but will rather be affected, even if unconsciously, by the preference premiums built up in the system previously'.³⁸

A final note on this model is that it is absolutely silent on why one act might be preferred over another. Perhaps some music is simply better than average (a preference for quality), perhaps people want the recommendations of others (a preference for marketing), perhaps there is value in listening to the same music as your friends (a preference for "solidarity goods", things best enjoyed by a group)³⁹. It could be all three, or something totally different, and it could vary for different listeners.

³⁶ Anderson, 2006. And: http://www.thelongtail.com/the_long_tail/2005/11/the_effect_of_p.html

³⁷ Shirky: http://www.shirky.com/writings/powerlaw_weblog.html

³⁸ http://www.shirky.com/writings/powerlaw_weblog.html

³⁹ idem.

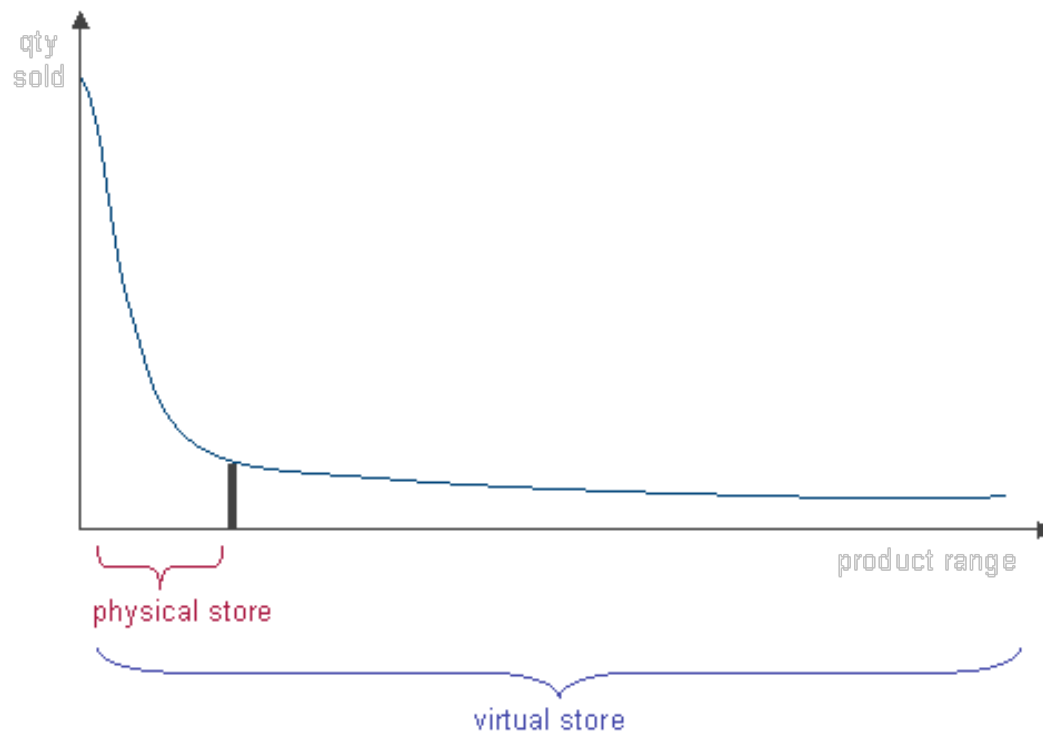


Image 1. Rise of the ‘niche’: The Long Tail

4.3 The Tail in MySpace

When we look at the above image (1) which is a graph of how the Long Tail functions, we can see that in the ‘old’ system of the record industry which had to deal with relatively high costs of creating sound carriers and distributing them via ‘physical stores’ to an audience, it is only profitable to sell those acts that are in high demand and ensure that at least the break even point is being matched. It is in that old system not cost effective to produce a large amount of albums of a very diverse and large amount of acts. But when the cost of manufacturing a song or an album is diminished to little or nothing through the cheap DIY tools that are available now, and the cost of distribution via ‘virtual stores’ is practically nil, it is possible and profitable to offer everything that is being made. This is what the social environment of MySpace facilitates. For an act to reach an audience it is no longer necessary to depend on a record deal. Every band can reach a potential worldwide audience, and become more or less popular because there is always a niche that can be filled.

As said in the beginning of this chapter, these new ways of costless distribution has had an effect on record sales. The ‘big acts’ like Metallica, Madonna, and many others have seen a decrease in the sales of their records. On the other hand, the group of four adolescents somewhere in the basement of your apartment building now has the opportunity to spread their music around the globe,

making the offer of the Long Tail even bigger, and bigger. The diversity of big 'hits' will possibly become less in this system, because of the dispersion of our taste over the enormous amount of music that is now available to anyone. Anderson reminds us, however, that hits will always be there.⁴⁰ This is basically due to the fact that we never step, as 'a blanc' into what MySpace has to offer: the social groups that surround us influence us, and make it possible for a small number of acts to become increasingly more popular, because they were chosen in the past. This can be seen at best with file sharing over p2p networks, but is equally true for the way MySpace offers music: for a file to become a popular download, it already has to be known because demand drives supply.

Conclusion

After this rather technical and economical analysis of the new ways in which supply and demand facilitate the emergence of a future that is selling less of more, I would like to conclude that this has an effect on our personally embodied and collectively embedded musical memory.

Memory is an activity that takes place in the present, as we have seen. It is an activity inscribed in time that links the past to the present and the future. Recalling experiences of the past in the present actively reshapes the memory of the future's past. When we listen to songs from our adolescent years, they invoke memories that are then being reshaped in the light of the present. But to become memories, songs have to somehow stick to our minds, they have to get embodied inside the individual where s/he then can attach emotional affects to the song.

With the emergence of new technologies, the so-called Do It Yourself media, a new kind of user emerged: the prosumer. Where once the individually embodied memories of songs came through externally enabled technologies as records, tapes and compact discs, all ready made by others, now a new feature is added to the embodiment of musical memory. Like diaries and taking photographs, the prosumer can inscribe musical memories via the relatively cheap new medium of the personal computer. Combined with the internet that changed the ways of communication, being from 1 to many, like radio, now the many-to-many distributed ways of communicating can create a reading-writing continuum, or as Levy puts it a cosmopedia in which the prosumer participates in the knowledge space. This makes it very hard to distinguish the individual embodiment from the cultural and social embeddedness of memory and mnemonic products.

The changing enabling technologies, enabled through the digitization of content, separated the content from the 'package' it was presented on. No longer does the music industry have to press expensive albums, which have to be sold in expensive brick and mortar stores to an audience. They can easily digitally distribute their commodities as mp3, a container technology that the industry

⁴⁰ http://www.longtail.com/the_long_tail/2006/07/hits_arent_dead.html

invented, to any computer around the world. Ironically, this technology makes it easy for the audience to share and distribute any files they like, whether legally or illegally.

An online social network environment like MySpace makes use of this new technology and its ease of distribution. Because of that, acts are able to skip the centralised powers of the industry, and share their homemade music with the world at little to no cost at all. The Long Tail, as Anderson describes, has now become possible, and a new market arises that is equally as big as the 'old'. But with this enormous amount of ready available music in the environment that MySpace offers, our taste gets (theoretically) dispersed. However, the way we individually pick and choose the acts we listen to are, according to e.g. Shirky's power law of distribution, affected by previous choices by others. Here, personal and collective are again not so easy to divide.

The contemporary cultural practices of prosumers, enabled by the new DIY media and the new ways of many-to-many communication via (digital) networks, inform the memory of the future. In the case of the Top2000, this memory is expressed in the personal top 5 lists, which forms the collective memory of the Top2000 list. But where once these top 5 lists were compiled out of a 'short tail' of supply of music, now the Long Tail that MySpace offers is bound to change these personal lists. When these lists change, the total list of the Top2000, the list of all lists, is bound to change as a whole. Where possibly the dispersion of musical taste and preferences no longer are shared by the collective, resulting in a change of the meaning of the word collective in 'collective memory'.

Now, this is a presumption. Only time will tell if the Top2000 of the future is representing the 'less of more'. What is clear, however is that, once again, the division between personal and collective is very hard to distinguish, because our memory is simultaneously personally embodied, and collectively embedded, all enabled through the new technologies and social networking environments like MySpace. It's an amalgamate.

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