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Keywords
Music distribution, cultural intermediaries, old and new media, vinyl records, online streaming

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Abstract

Despite the rise of global online music services like iTunes and Spotify, local and physical music retailers are not extinct. Though many have faced redundancy, others are turning their local presence and technological platforms into assets in regaining customer favor. This article presents an interview-based study of the transformations of two Norwegian record stores in the 2000s, one of which invested in vinyl records, the other in online streaming with a local profile. These distributors are found to have changed the way in which they make records available, but also to have cultivated specific forms of musical communication, in perceptual, psychological and social terms. In doing so, they have developed crucial tools, such as the retailing of high-fidelity sound systems and the hosting of local concert events.
Introduction

Developments in music distribution are often seen as following a one-way street from physical to digital technology. Online and mobile media have demonstrably fueled a growing range of global services, from MySpace and YouTube to iTunes to Spotify, which many consider ‘the future’ for both artists and their fans. Local and physical retailers, conversely, have generally been seen as a thing of the past, a fate demonstrated by the closure of numerous independent record stores, as well as powerful chains like Tower Records and Free Record Shop. Some retailers have managed to thrive despite it all, including those that pinned their revival on vinyl records. Others have survived by cultivating alternative forms of local presence, calling for a reassessment of the trajectory of the ‘old’ distributors. This article looks more closely at how local and physical distributors are responding to new circumstances and even claiming new roles in the age of the global online service.

Traditionally, the intermediary power of music distributors has encompassed whose music is made available as well as how it is presented to consumers. The influence of distributors is changing, however, in a time when access to music online seems to be limitless. I will explore the transformation of intermediary agency by combining perspectives from cultural sociology with recent insights from musicology, media studies and psychology. I will then present a case study of the transformations of two record retailers in Norway, a market in which the impact of digital music distribution has been particularly strong (Mulligan, 2012). Studying why Big Dipper turned to vinyl records and how Platekompaniet started its own online service (called
WiMP) will allow me to investigate the role of local intermediaries in the contemporary music experience from different angles.

**Intermediary power and musical communication**

In 2002, Jones considered the impact of new media technology ‘for how music reaches people and for how people reach music’ as a timely opportunity ‘to bring distribution to the center of the study of media’ (2002:213). Since then, several studies have addressed impacts of digital technology (and particularly the Internet) on music distribution, but primarily from the economic perspective of record companies and rights holders (e.g., Wikstrøm, 2009) or from the perspective of the user (e.g., Bennett, 2012). When it comes to in-depth studies concerning the work of distributors and retailers, however, Jones’s observation remains true: ‘The intermediate step between the technological production and popular consumption continues to be ignored’ (2002:215). One of the reasons for this might be that processes of music creation and appreciation have been considered more valuable and worthy of study than those of distribution. Moreover, there persist powerful notions framing the Internet as a democratizing technology that happily relieves artists (and audiences) of the intrusion of commercial intermediaries altogether (Kruse, 2010). The fact of the matter, however, is that new (and old) distributors continue to evolve, and that artists and audiences continue to rely on them.

In general terms, a distributor can be understood as an intermediary between people, whom it can influence on (at least) two levels. First, it can affect what gets through from source to receiver. Second, it can contribute to the organisation of sources and receivers into groups, influencing, in turn, how people get involved in
cultural exchange. The first level of communication is a familiar topic in journalism studies, particularly in terms of ‘gate-keeping’. The second has been a concern of cultural studies—for example, in Grossberg’s study of ‘cultural formations’ and the determination of the ‘appropriate way of selecting cultural practices, of relating to them, and of inserting them into daily life’ (1992:72). These studies usually take a critical stance. In his analysis of art museums, for example, Bourdieu (1997) found that they cultivated a specific intellectual mode of experience—one characterised by contemplation, ‘disinterested interest’ and requisite references from art history, all of which contributed to restricting these experiences to privileged groups of people. Esteemed cultural tastes, he found, were linked to the characteristics of the privileged, rendering, for example, ‘masculine’ preferences more worthy than ‘feminine’ ones (Bourdieu, 1984). Cultural studies, however, has been criticized for prioritising macro analyses of group formations over investigations of the materials and exchanges with which individuals actually engage, meaning that the research can be insufficiently sensitive to variation and change (Born, 2011). One ambition for this study of distributors, then, is to combine these levels of analysis and incorporate investigations of the technologies and contents of the communication in question.

Musical communication has perceptual, psychological and social dimensions which overlap in different ways. The perceptual dimension refers to the sensory impressions of sound (and accompanying visual signals), determining the nuances of what is expressed and perceived (Clarke, 2005). The psychological dimension refers to the interpretation of the music and comprises the emotions, associations and memories triggered by the music. Lastly, the music experience is intrinsically social, building relationships between artists and audiences via music recordings, concerts or other media (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). While the artist often has a strong vision regarding how
it all should sound to the listener, fans may also have strong views regarding how the music should be shared and appreciated (Turino, 2008).

While there is little research on the influence of distributors on these aspects of musical communication, it is well-established that record labels have contributed to organising artists and audiences into groups with shared musical standards (Negus, 1999). This has been made evident in music journalism (another important intermediary), in which labels typically are assessed in terms of the degree to which they subject the music to commerce and consumerism, while artists and audiences often are evaluated according to how much of this interference they are willing to accept (Lindberg et al., 2005). One of the few studies touching on distributors indicates that taking a stand in these regards can be a substantial asset: in her book on indie rock in the UK in the 1990s, Fonorow (2006:38) found that bands and fans favoured independent record retailers that were 'thought to be based on moral and aesthetic grounds, not solely on commercial success'.

A brief overview of the contemporary debate about the music industry confirms that distribution is a pivotal issue, but all of the aforementioned aspects of musical communication are presently being addressed. Regarding perception, the sound quality available from new online distribution services has repeatedly been criticised, with Neil Young, among others, famously protesting that ‘digital is degrading music’ (Rolling Stone, 2012). The unbundling of albums into individual online tracks and hit singles has also fueled uncertainty regarding the future prospects for artists’ larger-scale creative expression, thus threatening the depth of psychological display of their intentions (e.g., Byrne, 2013). One particularly heated argument has arisen around the fairness of economic reimbursement within the new distribution
models, and, relatedly, around the ways in which artists are made available for interaction with their audiences (e.g., Sisario, 2014).

The shared focal point of these debates is the ongoing transition from physical to digital technology. Research has found that the introduction of new music media affects the observed qualities of the old ones in different ways. Yochim and Biddinger (2008) discovered that devoted record collectors began to associate their vinyl with human qualities such as imperfection and even mortality when faced with the specter of apparently impervious digital music files and devices. Hayes (2006) even found a group of young music fans in Canada who had turned to secondhand vinyl specifically to protest the control mechanisms and streamlined markets of the digital music industry. Thus, the old medium gets a new role, in terms of its collectors’ sense of connection to a human source, as well as marking the group identity of the music lovers.

The agency of distributors in all of these ongoing negotiations and transformations remains to be explored, however. The initial issue is how distributors are coping with the transition from physical to digital online media. A related, though less obvious, challenge is how distributors deal with the aspect of their local presence. For many decades, music retail was largely based on local stores, where people could listen to the music and buy the record over the counter, although different forms of mail-order arrangements have also persisted. Long-distance transactions have proliferated in the 2000s, however, along with digital formats that are easily accessed from online vendors across the globe.

Physical media and fixed locality, then, might appear to be severely restricting but can also represent communicative resources in the distribution of music. One fundamental resource they provide is the possibility for the consumer to assess the
trustworthiness of the messenger. Quandt (2012) relates this particular affordance to our fundamental reliance on information from others, as we cannot possibly control or oversee everything that happens in our environment on our own. We instinctively evaluate any source of information, drawing upon any available intelligence about its intentions and capabilities. Face-to-face interaction offers the richest basis for such an assessment, therefore affording what Quandt calls ‘thick trust’, while the trust that is available via mediated forms of communication is inherently ‘thinner’. In the age of digital media, argues Quandt, the range of possible intermediaries has expanded greatly, presenting new challenges for any assessment of their trustworthiness. Based on his argument, we can see that the reliability of established media such as physical vehicles and local stores assumes greater importance in a digital context—both can be rich sources of information, including everything (and everyone) that the given store might contain.

Access to information is not guaranteed to generate trust, however; its interpretation might just as easily lead to distrust. A larger question, then, is how one acquires the reliability and relevance upon which trust ultimately depends. Here, perspectives from contemporary psychology are relevant, including that of mentalization, which Busch (2008:xv) defines like this: ‘The capacity to perceive and interpret behavior in terms of intentional mental states, to imagine what others are thinking and feeling’. This complex human ability, psychologists believe, not only enables cooperation but also offers the competitive advantage of anticipating actions. The perception of others’ ‘needs, desires, feelings, beliefs, goals, purposes, and reasons’ (Fonagy, 2008:4) must necessarily depend on external signs, while their interpretation demands that the interpreter has somehow relatable sets of internal referents. For people involved in acts of communication, mentalization goes both
ways: the one interpreting the other is also oneself being interpreted. Moreover, as one looks for clues to the other’s needs and desires, one is also displaying signs for the other to interpret. Fonagy explains how the ability to mentalize develops over time, through relationships with others and via accumulation of personal experiences. This training is essential to perceive and give off signals intuitively, particularly when handling the great amounts of information that are exchanged in live, face-to-face interactions.

While Quandt and Fonagy primarily address information exchange between individuals, the communication that they describe is also likely to contribute to the formation of group identities, with which Grossberg and Bourdieu are concerned. Indeed, the way a person relates to a certain artist can effectively demonstrate that person’s membership in a given community. For a distributor, then, offering specific forms of musical communication (perceptually, psychologically or socially) can also be a powerful mechanism for attracting a desired clientele. The intermediary’s capacity to express cultural preferences convincingly, however, is delimited by its contact with those it aims to serve. This is a pertinent issue at a time when much attention has been given to the fact that digital services can reach people worldwide and even accumulate ‘big data’ on their behaviors and inclinations. Looking more closely at how local distributors evolve in this context might therefore shed light not only on the capacities of the old media but also on the limitations of the new.

**Approaching distribution in Norway**

My account of the intermediary indicates that its capacity develop over time, and my analysis will therefore trace the evolution of two music distributors that have existed
since the 1990s. The first is Platekompaniet, which was established in 1992 and soon expanded into the largest record-store chain in Norway. The second is Big Dipper, which since its launch in 1999 has remained an independent record store, with only one subsidiary in a second city. Both distributors started in Oslo (Norway’s capitol) and were primarily based in CD sales. As those sales declined in the 2000s, however, Big Dipper turned to new vinyl records, while Platekompaniet invested in an online streaming service, called WiMP, through a partnership with the technology company Aspiro and the telecom Telenor.

This study focuses on how these intermediaries’ relationship with artists and audiences changed during this period. It was carried out over a period of two years (2013 and 2014) and involves interviews with personnel, participant observation and usage of the services provided. The analysis of the distributors’ agency also encompasses their marketing campaigns and statements in journalistic media coverage. Visits to the headquarters of the respective distributors supplied firsthand information, and key personnel were interviewed on several occasions. The headquarters of Big Dipper is its 200-square-meter shop on street level in downtown Oslo. WiMP is located just a few blocks away, on the second floor of an office building (not open to the general public) where the online service is operated. Visits to Big Dipper also afforded observations of customer interactions in the shop (see figure 1), while interviews at WiMP stuck to the development of the online service (see figure 2).

**Figure 1: Big Dipper’s vinyl record store**
Note: Big Dipper offers a collection of seven thousand new vinyl albums. Photo taken from the street by the author on 12 December 2014.

Figure 2: WiMP’s streaming service

Note: WiMP offers online and mobile access to 25 million tracks. The image is of the landing page of the service on 14 December 2014.

The Big Dipper interviews with the manager and several clerks focused on the orientation of the shop toward vinyl. At WiMP, a larger organisation with more administrative staff, interviews were primarily carried out with the team that organises
the presentation of music in the service. The head of this group had previously managed a Platekompaniet shop and had witnessed transformations in distribution at close range throughout the 2000s. In fact, this was true of most of the informants, many of whom had also worked in various other parts of the industry, including concert booking and music journalism, in addition to being dedicated fans and, in some cases, music performers themselves. Most of these people therefore appeared to be highly sensitized to the impact of new forms of distribution on various parts of the music industry. All of the interviews also delved into the chronology of these changes, progressing from the practice of selling music before the digital rupture to the transformations that have brought about the present situation (all quotes used in the following analysis have been translated to English by the author).

While declining CD sales and increasing online distribution represent international trends, technology-related transformations are furthest along in Norway, as well as in Scandinavia in general (Mulligan, 2012). In Norway, the overall decrease in CD sales from 2000 to 2014 was 92.5 percent (see table 1). This development struck international artists the hardest, while the sales of physical albums produced by Norwegian artists actually peaked in 2006 (see table 2). Though those sales subsequently also dropped, Norwegian artists represent the primary survivors on physical formats.

Table 1. Revenues from different music media.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CD</strong></td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td>116.1</td>
<td>120.3</td>
<td>117.9</td>
<td>109.5</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>8.9</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Streaming/downloads</strong></td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>41.9</td>
<td>58.5</td>
<td>64.5</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Vinyl</strong></td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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<td>1.9</td>
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Table 2. The sales share of Norwegian and international artists, respectively.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Norwegian</td>
<td>21,9</td>
<td>21,5</td>
<td>20,1</td>
<td>23,9</td>
<td>29,1</td>
<td>35,9</td>
<td>25,3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17,1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>63,7</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>96,5</td>
<td>89,9</td>
<td>76,8</td>
<td>44,6</td>
<td>38,4</td>
<td>20,8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>11,9</td>
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Note: Revenues from physical album sales in Norway from 1996 to 2013, in millions EUR. Norwegian artists on other formats are not included in these statistics, which IFPI stopped logging in 2014.

As CD sales truly began to decline in the mid-2000s, revenues began trickling in from digital sales, first from download services (primarily iTunes), then from streaming services (primarily Spotify). The streaming model (based on paid subscriptions and/or advertising exposure) has proved by far the most popular, amounting to 75 percent of the total sales revenues in 2014. International artists now dominate this growing market, whereas Norwegian acts only claimed 12.2 percent of it in 2013 (though this represented a small increase over 9.5 percent in 2010, according to IFPI).

Interestingly, alongside the growth in downloading and streaming, vinyl records re-emerged to represent a niche that amounted to 2.5 percent of music sales in 2014. These are figures for new vinyl records; secondhand vinyl retail is also assumed to have increased, though statistics are not available to demonstrate this.

In sum, distribution has shifted from ‘one format fits all’ to an increasing diversification among available technologies and the music they carry. The audience has also subdivided itself, most obviously in the faster appropriation of digital options by younger audience segments. These developments all reflect the ways in which audiences are reorienting themselves toward acquiring music; artists are reassessing
how to reach those audiences; and middlemen are trying to keep up in terms of connecting the two. The case studies to follow will unpack these developments from the perspective of the intermediary—case studies, after all, are uniquely suited to exploring the relationship between a phenomenon and its environment (Yin, 2003).

Of course, these cases differ extensively between themselves and are also not representative of all Norwegian distributors. Big Dipper’s vinyl sales serve what remains a niche demand, whereas WiMP is a challenger in a large streaming market dominated by the global player Spotify. By 2013, about 70 percent of all Norwegian Internet users had access to a streaming service: 50 percent via Spotify and 21 percent via WiMP, according to the market research supplier TNS Gallup (2014). Although the analysis to follow will focus on WiMP’s operations in Norway, it should be noted that WiMP also has international ambitions: the service is presently available in Sweden, Denmark, Germany and Poland and was recently launched in the UK, the US and Canada under the name ‘Tidal’.

While my cases are changing fast and have individual trajectories of development as well, they are still representative of long-term and wide-ranging developments which I will analyse according to the following structure: part 1 establishes how physical music was sold for many years; part 2 assesses the process though which Big Dipper turned to vinyl; and part 3 studies how Platekompaniet turned to online streaming via WiMP.

**Selling music in the CD age**

In the 1980s, CDs became the most common format for music sales, and they remained so at Platekompaniet and Big Dipper for several years. Big Dipper also sold
vinyl in this era, but few new records were being released on vinyl, and the staff did not find a strong preference for a specific format among most of their customers, ‘except when they still only owned a turntable’, according to the shop manager. The store depended more on differentiating itself from the commercial chains via the music it sold, often prioritising artists and genres favored by the staff itself. While content, not format, determined sales at that time, vinyl clearly identified Big Dipper as an independent alternative distributor. Platekompaniet, on the other hand, was more sensitive to broader musical trends and preferences, targeting a larger commercial market with low prices.

In their daily work, then, Big Dipper staff saw themselves as engaged with presenting quality music and personal picks, which their clientele grew to expect and seek out in the shop. In practice, such recommendations also occurred at Platekompaniet, as the chain only hired staff with extensive interest in and knowledge about upcoming releases, concerts, reviews and the like. New staff therefore had to learn to balance personal judgment with customer needs. A former Platekompaniet store manager goodnaturedly recounted an inexperienced colleague’s response to a new customer who had asked, ‘Is the Corrs’ new album good?’: ‘No, it’s not good at all’, the staff person answered, after which the customer promptly fled, embarrassed. In time, staff members learned to adapt to customers’ interests and views. Once they got to know individual customers, as well, they could steer the conversation to their own personal preferences and experiences. Shop visitors often sought validation, as one clerk recalled: ‘A person excited about an upcoming concert in town and coming in to buy the band’s latest record would be disappointed if there was no expression in the face behind the counter.’ The record store representative could, in other words,
confirm that a given artist was good and that the concert was a significant musical event.

Platekompaniet was not only well-informed about local releases, concert venues and music magazines but also tried to pick up trends among their customers. Many of the regulars were musicians themselves, whom the shops could help promote via occasional in-store performances, for example. Shops would also sell the recordings of unsigned local artists on commission, and Big Dipper even established its own record label in order to release the work of artists they considered to be worthy of the support.

For several years, these were the key means of running Platekompaniet and Big Dipper through which they established themselves as favored intermediaries for music. Making the right music available was the primary motivation, and the technologies involved were not seen as particularly relevant. Soon, however, that would change.

The vinyl experience of Big Dipper

For Big Dipper, CD sales dropped fairly early on, because the independent record shop could not compete on pricing with the chains: ‘Our CDs were getting a negative focus that was all about the price, even though people liked hanging around in our shop’, recounted the shopkeeper. Big Dipper’s vinyl records, however, were not affected by these price wars, or by growing doubt regarding the fate of CDs in the era of online music-distribution. This relative stability became an incentive for Big Dipper to invest in vinyl: a turn that also would revitalise its relationship with artists. There had always been certain artists who fought hard for the release of their albums on
vinyl, and now this group began to grow. Popular international artists also arose to hail the format publicly, which was welcomed by Big Dipper’s shopkeeper: ‘When Neil Young says, “If you want to hear what my music really sounds like, you must listen to it on vinyl”, I think it greatly influences music lovers, as well as other artists’. Labels began releasing new records on vinyl, with heady qualifications such as ‘High-definition premium virgin vinyl pressing for super fidelity’, and re-pressing classic albums, such as *The Velvet Underground & Nico*, with stickers saying ‘Finally, the original mono version’. While the impact of these sorts of efforts can be hard to pinpoint, it is clear that the investment of record stores, artists and labels in vinyl increased along with customer interest. The Big Dipper shopkeeper keenly recalled how people in the early 2000s ‘started standing in longer lines for [vinyl] items they knew were limited editions’.

In 2006, Big Dipper decided to drop CDs entirely and reinvent itself as an exclusively new-vinyl record store. For the first couple of years, sales were slow, but 2008 brought with it a turning point, the shopkeeper remarked. That year saw massive coverage of the ‘rebirth of vinyl’ in the Norwegian media, some of which was triggered by the first international ‘Record Store Day’, featuring exclusive vinyl releases from numerous artists. Big Dipper was itself the subject of numerous articles, in which the staff explained the benefits of vinyl: ‘Today’s formats, like Mp3s, create a distance between the listener and the music. I like to flip through stacks of records, look at the cover and learn things about the artists and the related aspects of popular culture’ (Aronsen, 2008). In articles like this, as well, the record store clerk would be depicted in front of his vinyl shelves, album in hand. Big Dipper seized this opportunity to broadcast its views regarding the immersive experience of vinyl records, as opposed to the detachment of the digital alternatives. Notably, the
derogatory description of the ‘distance’ that Mp3s introduced between artists and listener also indirectly undermined the music experience of the group of people who settled for that medium. In the article quoted above, as well, the staff members went on to reassure readers that vinyl was catering to a wide range of musical tastes: ‘Guitar rock used to be the framework, perhaps, but now we have a broad interest in music, ranging from Mette Marit’s psalms compilation to Madonna’s latest album’. If the article reader were to actually enter the shop, the record shelves would confirm a generous representation of new Norwegian albums, as well as many well-established names in international popular genres, from Miles Davis to Arcade Fire. In its attempt to survive via vinyl sales, then, Big Dipper started to shift from promoting certain artists to offering specific ways of experiencing them.

In the revamped store, access to a special world of music was heralded by a long row of turntables for sale in the window facing the street. Each was presented according to its unique sonic qualities and capacities via posters that described the technology in tactile terms and even linked the vinyl grooves directly to the listener’s body. One read: ‘Pleasing to the eye as well as the ear, this special edition digs out magic from the grooves and sends it into the room with a sound so distinct and dynamic that the hair on your back will stand up’. Another: ‘It has a good tone-arm with low resonance and optional vertical adjustment that increases precision and the range of pick-up choices. A player for those who want to play vinyl seriously’. The technology was likewise characterised as adaptable to increasingly advanced musical explorations over time. The implicit message, of course, was that those who commanded the best (which tended to be the most expensive) turntable also had the best music experience. According to staff, Big Dipper particularly attracted men in their forties ‘with money to spend on the high-end alternative’, and this group has
proven to be particularly important to the growing business of Big Dipper. There was also a fair share of younger customers, often in their twenties, whom staff members found to be very interested in high-fidelity music and music history. For them, the pedigree of vinyl technology was a bridge to a (romanticized) past, when vinyl was a primary recording medium for artists and everything was different (better), a point made repeatedly on vinyl album reprints to this day.

While a certain playback technology was thus exploited to promote the perceptual experience of vinyl, a specific format was used to emphasise the psychological aspects of vinyl as well: the long-play album. Albums, as mentioned, were what the clerks always held in their hands in the news articles, and they represented the format most often associated with understanding the artist and his or her ‘original’ (true, authentic) intentions. The fact that vinyl fixed the totality of the work, including the order of an album’s songs and all of its associated visual and textual information, was promoted as a source of the most profound insight into an artist’s vision. Interestingly, singles were not revived in the same manner, although they were also an important format when vinyl ruled the market. The turn to LPs was likely inversely related to the abundant availability of singles on contemporary online music services. In fact, many of the shop’s customers said that they went home to listen to individual songs online before deciding to buy the album. Vinyl technology was used to invoke not only a notion of intimate access to an artist’s work but also memories of times when music might have had a different role in some customers’ lives. Repeatedly, staff found that people who collected vinyl records in their early years came into the shop after being inspired by the sight of the turntables in the window. They found that it was relatively common for these visitors to enthusiastically reassess the value or personal relevance of that old record collection in
the attic and leave the shop with a new turntable in tow. In sum, the shopkeeper was interested in offering a dedicated kind of music experience, which he recounted as follows: ‘When you think about vinyl, you now think about treasured music moments. Sitting down by the stereo, the wife has gone to bed, you have a glass of whiskey. Quality time for the quality minded’.

Big Dipper also cultivated specific social experiences with music. For one thing, more effort went into ‘recognising individual customers and remembering what they like in order to be able to give them personal tips’. Staff also invested more effort into continuously refining the shop’s collection of albums (currently numbering some seven thousand), and into being well-versed about their quality. As a result, artists began to push more to have their albums featured in the shop, and customers began to be more particular and more demanding of assistance. The vision of the shop as a welcoming place to spend time was realized anew in 2012 when Big Dipper moved to a 200-square-meter location that facilitated a generous spacing of elegantly designed album shelves, deviating markedly from the traditional stereotype of the independent record store as a ramshackle site full of cardboard boxes and eccentrics or adolescents. Being in the shop was in itself reinvented as a musical experience, as staff curated the playing of albums on a top-notch turntable and sound system, then happily discussed what they were hearing. By ruling out individual listening stations, the shop privileged a shared music experience as well. Moreover, as part of this relocation, a large stage was installed on site to facilitate the growing number of in-store performances. At first, staff had to ask artists to come and play, but soon artists themselves were reaching out, to such an extent that many requests had to be turned down. At times, concerts occurred almost daily, and the average remains one or two a week, many by Oslo-based artists, underscoring Big Dipper’s dedication to the local music scene and
its fans. Customers were thus allowed to ‘hear the artist play a few songs from the album, and then have him sign and hand it to you in person’, explained the shopkeeper. These events also provide an opportunity for customers to support favourite acts directly, and for the shop to justify the fairly high prices of the vinyl albums, which continue to cost about thirty euros, on average, although some are much more.

In all, the turn to vinyl technology by this local record store afforded new means of redefining the communication between artist and audience, as well as demarcating what characterised the groups involved. Most strikingly, the growing range of intimate in-store concerts represented a persuasive demonstration of the shop’s provision of direct access to the artists themselves. Among those who came to buy the album on these occasions (and others), however, men were clearly overrepresented, and this was also the case for the record store clerks, the artists and the label personnel who supported those artists. Male dominance in the music industry is well-chronicled (e.g., Whiteley, 1997), and is apparently sustained in the distribution of vinyl records as well. A male frame of reference is of course reflected in the shop’s evocations of these experiences, including advertising taglines such as ‘the hair on your back will stand up’ or ‘the wife has gone to bed’. By these means and others, then, vinyl’s promises of tactile sensations, interpretive proximity and direct social interaction appeared to address some groups more than others.

The streaming experience of WiMP

Platekompaniet felt the pinch of collapsing CD sales relatively late, as the chain was able to absorb the market left over from the numerous failed small CD retailers.
Eventually trouble caught up to them as well, however, particularly following the arrival of iTunes and Spotify in Norway (in 2005 and 2008, respectively), driving Platekompaniet toward the sale of DVDs, computer games and other entertainment products. In 2010, having already partnered with two companies with online technology expertise, Platekompaniet decided to invest in its own music streaming service, called WiMP.

By this time, Platekompaniet had begun to note the growing national dissatisfaction with international online distributors. Norwegian artists, in particular, saw their revenues dwindling and also found themselves left to their own devices in terms of promotion, and local consumers were not being adequately assisted in their search for Norwegian music. WiMP explicitly presented itself as a remedy for these shortcomings and received considerable media coverage that framed it as a national challenger to the global giants. In one such article, one of WiMP’s founders described the service as follows: ‘Our basic philosophy is that artists, labels and rights holders must be paid’. He then went on to assure readers that ‘WiMP will be developed specifically for Norwegian users . . . by people attuned to what’s happening here’ (Bjørkeng, 2010). As opposed to Spotify, WiMP would offer no form of payment-free access, thereby funneling more revenue from its subscribers to the artists.

The key innovation of WiMP, however, was its establishment of an editorial group to determine all of the music to be highlighted by the service. While WiMP also offered search engines and statistical estimations of ‘related artists’, which had proliferated elsewhere, the editorial provision was explicitly upheld as a local and ‘human’ alternative. Numerous artists were invited to WiMP’s headquarters to discuss its presentation of upcoming releases, negotiating visibility within the service in exchange for exclusivity of distribution of their music. Platekompaniet’s cultivated
editorial approach convinced many Norwegian artists who were otherwise skeptical about online distribution to release their music on WiMP. The year after its launch, WiMP proudly announced that twenty-eight of the one hundred songs that were streamed the most in their service in 2011 were by Norwegian artists, while the equivalent of Spotify (in Norway) could point to only eight out of its top one hundred as national in origin. There were, in other words, audience groups that appreciated the local touch, a fact that also was reflected in the service’s growth from 100,000 subscribers in 2010 to 300,000 a year later.

WiMP did not stop with its local profile, however, but also sought to present a unique sound experience. A high-fidelity version of the streaming service was launched in 2013, offering music in the lossless FLAC format for a higher price. A series of respected Norwegian artists were recruited for this promotional campaign, featuring headings such as ‘Listen to Sondre Lerche the way that Sondre Lerche wants Sondre Lerche to sound’. The implicit message was, of course, that those who settled for other online services did not (could not?) appreciate the artist’s true expression. The high-fidelity option’s visual identity included the depiction of a relaxed (male) WiMP HiFi user with a collection of vinyl in the background, thereby evoking the growing audiophile status of that medium as well.

Furthermore, WiMP also prioritised the artistic format of albums, as opposed to the single tracks and hits that proliferated among its online competitors. In order to communicate that message, WiMP became the main sponsor of the Nordic Music Prize (established in 2010), which aimed to ‘refocus on the full length album as an art form’. In presenting new albums, WiMP also utilised technological means to offer another kind of exclusive access—this time to the artists’ creative intentions. Artists were asked to record commentary tracks about their songs or present WiMP playlists.
of the music that inspired their own work. They were also encouraged to submit additional visual and textual material to accompany their work, and WiMP began to conduct artist interviews, all in the interests of a ‘direct and seamless experience of the music’, according to the chief editor.

While WiMP’s editorial group (which primarily consisted of former record store clerks, all of whom were male) found itself in closer contact with artists, it was (literally and figuratively) much further from the hundreds of thousands of anonymous subscribers. One of the editors described the transition from store to online service as follows: ‘When a twelve-year-old entered the record store, you would immediately get an idea of what to recommend and what not to’. He went on to acknowledge that ‘it is not that direct any more, and if the customer goes, “That’s not exactly what I had in mind”, there is not that much we can do [online]’. When face-to-face interaction disappeared, much of the basis for mentalizing about the audience’s interests went away with it, marginalising the staff’s ability to share the benefits of their own experience in turn. Moreover, communicating with thousands of users at the same time made the staff reluctant to share personal preferences and even led them to reflect on how their appearance as ‘indie rock dudes with flannel shirts’ might turn away potential subscribers. The editorial group therefore decided to remain largely anonymous in their work at WiMP, instead inviting a host of well-known artists, music journalists and cultural personalities to publicize playlists of their personal favorites, thereby giving users a choice of people with whom to identify musically.

The editors also began to explore new ways of connecting with subscribers and their musical experiences, particularly at live concert events. They prioritised festivals covering a range of genres through playlists that included the artists who were performing, aiming to ‘connect the strong experiences you have had, or are looking
forward to, by using WiMP’, according to the chief editor. Soon, the service started to organize its own live music events and even added a stage to its new headquarters in 2013. At these events, a few lucky WiMP users were invited to attend, along with various music industry professionals; all others could experience the concerts via online streaming and the resultant recordings.

Along with these efforts to build alternative bridges to consumers, the organisation also sought to make sense of the new user data that it was accumulating via the online platform. An opportunity to do so arose after WiMP HiFi was launched, when it became clear that its growing consumer base was older and more male-dominated than that of the premium service. This was considered a rather promising niche in terms of disposable income, compared to, for example, teenagers, who were already avid (and sometimes pirate) users of music online. These new demographic insights were exploited when WiMP HiFi launched in the UK, the United States, and Canada under the name ‘Tidal’. The promotional campaign for the service presented ‘5 things a man should have’, including, above all else, ‘An ear for quality. Never compromise on sound’. In other words, the appreciation of good sound was not only elevated as a virtue but also overtly celebrated as a hallmark of a ‘real man’, so as to have a maximum impact on the anticipated target audience.

**Discussion: Reclaiming the music**

This analysis has chronicled one chapter in the transformation of two music distributors in the 2000s, both of which were engaged in a survival process that has by no means concluded. Though one turned from CDs to a newer technology, while the other turned from CDs to an older one, these intermediaries share many similarities as
well. Most strikingly, both retailers changed from being primarily music sources to
purchasers of relatively specific music experiences, in perceptual, psychological and
social terms.

The vinyl record store, with the support of artists and labels, deliberately
cultivated vinyl, and particularly the LP format, as an exclusive link to the sound and
creative intentions of the artist. The streaming service also attempted to construct a
privileged connection between artist and listener, not least by championing high-
fidelity in online music. Deeply held ideals of fidelity, authenticity and morality,
traditionally associated with only certain types of music (Lindberg et al., 2005), have
thus been mobilised to larger ends. While both distributors tried to rearticulate those
ideals in technological terms, they took very different approaches, as is clear in their
construction of prime sites of listening to artists. The record store cultivated the image
of the living room as a sanctuary for the sophisticated music experience, where vinyl
records might be handled mindfully before ‘sitting down with a glass of whiskey’ (a
message that has been reinforced by incorporating turntable sales into store offerings).
The streaming service, on the other hand, promoted the notion of always having
‘direct and seamless’ access, even when the user is on his or her way to experience the
favoured artist in concert.

Physical and digital technology has also afforded specific means for signalling
what groups of artists and audiences the distributor serve. This is striking in the
gendered descriptions of turntables and vinyl experiences, as well as in the masculine
presentation of the streaming service’s HiFi users. The distributors here exploited
traditional conceptions of particularly transcendent and ‘masculine’ art experiences—
those characterised by focus, reflection and knowledge. While Bourdieu (1997) found
these values to be expressed in the ‘disinterested interest’ of the ideal visitor at the art
museum, the music distributors in this study are manifestly purveyors of popular culture, which ‘provides sites of relaxation, privacy, pleasure [and] passion’, in the words of Grossberg (1992:79). Moreover, these distributors are players on a competitive commercial market, the returns of which depend on the effectiveness of specific ‘modes of engagement’ in inserting popular culture ‘into daily life’ (ibid.:72). As their income now relies on the use of specific technologies, it is not surprising that their articulation of a privileged taste culture strongly emphasises the pleasures of their respective technologies, at home and at concerts.

The gendering of vinyl has relied not only on the technology itself but also on the space of the record store, where male perspectives are expressed verbally as well as enacted through the visual predominance of men standing behind, and in front of, the counter. The streaming service, conversely, found that its staff, as well as its streamers, became invisible and anonymous. The customer here turned into user data, which proved relevant to identifying and stimulating certain user segments, such as older male high-fidelity enthusiasts. While the streaming service could strategise its offers based on statistics regarding the entire user base, the record store was able to tailor its offers in face-to-face encounters, where clerks could mobilise personal music experiences in accordance with an individual customer’s identity and interests. In other words, record stores present distinctive conditions for the ‘perspective taking’ of mentalization (Fonagy, 2008:8). For example, while accommodating individuals in search of specific artists, the clerks of this study also appeared perfectly capable of inspiring and validating the desires that these individuals shared with others, whether twenty-year-olds seeking the ‘original sounds’ of music history or forty-year-olds wanting the ‘high-end’ option. In stimulating these vinyl-related tastes, as well as the desire for an alternative to the streamlined digital music industry described by Hayes
(2006), record store staff had the benefit of accumulated mentalization about anyone entering the shop. Physical locality thus provides distributors with specific resources with which to establish ‘thick’ social relationships and build tangible customer groups (Quandt, 2012). This physical limitation also shortens the store’s reach, however, which primarily comprises urban music milieus (new vinyl record stores have only found markets in the big cities in Norway thus far). The online platform, on the other hand, facilitated the accommodation of larger and less uniform groups, and the streaming service addressed a national community in its drive to support Norwegian music.

As a study of the intermediate step between ‘production and popular consumption’ (Jones, 2002:215), this article demonstrates the value of a critical analysis of the use of technology for artist-fan connections as well as group formations. It thereby also draws attention to the changing conditions for membership in certain musical communities. For example, these distributors introduced new expectations for the appreciation of artists’ sounds and album-length works, even as they primarily served the artists who produced such works and who were considered suitable for intimate in-house performances. Moreover, rather than sustaining local music distribution as such, the record store primarily accommodated what might be called ‘urban music connoisseurs’ (while the streaming service invoked a national community of music lovers). Their choice of technological platform has to some extent led these record distributors in different directions, but their competition with global online services has also fuelled shared developments in their offers and their rhetoric. Most importantly, both are currently exploring and establishing new artist-fan connections, a continued appreciation of which is key to their survival. A strong expression of these innovative investments is the building of in-house concert stages,
which both distributors did. By regularly offering in-person encounters with artists, notions of the ‘right’ and truly valuable musical experience are cultivated in ways that are hard to match for global services that only are present online.

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