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## From Artists to Creators, From Music to Audio

*A Critical Discourse Analysis of Spotify's 'Audio First' Strategy*

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This research project aims to identify the discursive features characterising Spotify's public communications relating to their 'Audio-First' strategy. Using Norman Fairclough's 'Three Dimensional' model of Critical Discourse Analysis five texts were analysed, identifying textual features and patterns, and drawing out relationships between these texts and their discursive and social functions and contexts. Three broad discursive themes were generated and discussed: the term 'Audio' and its relationship with broader tech discourses, the discursive construction of artists as content creators, and a contradictory framing of Spotify as both active and neutral. These findings suggest that by deploying terms such as 'Audio' and 'Creator' alongside discourses of neutral platforms, Spotify discursively justify their strategy, whilst obfuscating its problematic implications for music and artists.*

## INTRODUCTION

With 365 million users across 178 markets (Spotify Newsroom, 2021), and accounting for 20% of global recorded music revenue (Loud and Clear, 2021), Spotify has transformed and dominated the way music is consumed, distributed, and discovered. Rooted in a narrative of ‘saving’ the music industry from piracy by giving consumers “music at the right price”, it is easy to forget that the service was originally launched in 2006 as a “de-facto pirate service” with “little, if anything to do with music” (Eriksson *et al*, 2019: 43).

As with many Big Tech giants, the story of Spotify is a story of unplanned growth, constant pivoting, and hype-fuelled investment, relentlessly pursuing growth, scale, and dominance. By offering access to a database of music, initially for free, and then due to industry pressure, with an optional subscription, Spotify has continually amassed a huge userbase, attracting venture-capitalists who saw potential to dominate the music industry. But with valuation comes pressure to demonstrate potential for future revenues- a challenge for a business which has to pay a large proportion to the rights-holders who licence the music. Consequently, Spotify’s growth is marked by “constantly adjusting, if not entirely changing, its strategies and goals” (Eriksson *et al*, 2019: 31). From an ad-supported peer-to-peer network to a paid application, and from providing access to curation and algorithmically recommendation (via experiments with social media, app ecosystems, and video) Spotify was, and is, in a constant state of revision.

Though these changes may be forgotten and unnoticed, they have generated controversy and consequences. Recurring criticisms concerning payment often reach mainstream attention, as when Taylor Swift withdrew her catalogue in protest over financially and symbolically devaluing music (Linshi, 2014). In an op-ed, Swift commented “music is art, and art is important and rare. Important, rare things are valuable. And valuable things should be paid for.” (Swift, 2014) Whilst the debate over remuneration is certainly valid, its economic complexity, opacity, and the inherent unverifiability of alternative models’ effectiveness makes addressable criticism harder to parse, and goes beyond this project. However, the

relationship between Spotify and the symbolic value and importance of music is just as important.

Through changes to its platform, Spotify has changed the way users understand, consume, and value music. Since their 2015 'curatorial turn', Spotify have deliberately pushed their service as a provider of curated musical experiences, powered by opaque contextual algorithmic judgements. As the literature review will show, this has been linked to fundamental changes to music's place in culture and the lives of those who create and value it- evidencing "how vulnerable the codes and conventions surrounding the movement and use of certain commodities are when the format of that commodity changes" (Wade Morris, 2015: 133). Given Spotify's power to shape music, and their growing cultural and economic dominance in music, it is highly significant that in February 2019 they exacerbated this vulnerability by announcing perhaps their most profound change in strategy yet. 'Audio First' announces Spotify's move away from just music, towards podcasts, 'live', audiobooks, and even "formats that don't exist yet" (Mignano, 2021). As a central driver of the global music industry, it is vital these discursive, strategic, and technological changes are understood, especially relating to the musicians whose art built Spotify, and who now increasingly depend on it.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Discourse and technology

Discourses, "practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault qtd in Jager, 2011: 40), can be understood as the use of language to create meaning. By creating and limiting ways of understanding phenomena, discourse plays a fundamental role in the adoption and understanding of change and new technologies, disseminated through circulating "social, legal, personal, and economic discussions that shape how technology becomes incorporated into new ways of life" (Bazerman, 1998). Within these 'discussions', meaning-making is a contingent, unstable, and contested process, where what *can* be said is

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theoretically limited by social context, and the relative power of the speaker. Consequently, attention should be paid to the self-referential discourses circulated by powerful actors in technology, particularly during times of instability or change, when meaning is most contested. Such discourses can serve a pedagogical function, teaching potential users how to view and use a technology (Freishtat and Sandlin, 2010), or work to naturalise radically new processes and power relations through analogies such as ‘data-mining’ which places an unprecedented process within a natural, extractive metaphor (Couldry and Mejias, 2019: 4). Naturally, powerful institutional actors possess greater power to shape the discourses and meanings with which technologies are understood (Van Dijk, 1996), echoing a Habermasian view of public consciousness wherein powerful actors are disproportionately advantaged due to influence and access to the media (Wessler, 2018: 27). As Big Tech firms become increasingly embedded in private and public experience, their discursive power becomes increasingly influential, as ‘sociotechnical imaginaries’ who collectively institutionalise their ideological visions of progress. (Mager and Katzenbach, 2021).

Relatively little scholarship has specifically focused on the discourses of streaming music services (SMS), but general ‘Big Tech’ discourses are instructive. Economic change presupposes social change (Polanyi, 2002), thus the economic logics of platforms presuppose the adoption of favourable discourses. Characteristic discourses position technological innovation as the source of social progress, belying and justifying neoliberal discourses of deregulation and autonomy as serving this. These discourses invoke favourable narratives, an “implied picture of heroic outsiders challenging powerful incumbents” (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2017). Financially, discourses emphasising disruptive visions of ‘the future’ build “hype” driving investment by performatively promising future dominance (van Lente *et al*, 2013, Ramiller, 2006). Likewise discourses such as ‘dataism’(Brooks, 2013) function ideologically, positioning the morality, necessity, and objectivity of datafication and related technological processes. Such discourses contribute to increasingly widespread uncritical understandings of algorithmic technologies as infallible, inherently desirable (Broussard, 2018). Ultimately, such discourses can become ‘common-sense’, legitimising Big Tech’s actions, whilst framing regulation and criticism as impeding progress. Overall, these

demonstrate just some of the crucial legitimising, economic, and epistemological functions of technology discourses, and the importance of scrutinising them.

## Platforms: Economics and Imperatives

Contemporary western societies and economies are increasingly defined by the dominance of platforms. Simply defined as “a programmable architecture designed to shape interactions between users” (Van Dijck *et al*, 2018), platforms are constantly-evolving internet-based intermediaries which bring together two or more ‘sides’- user groups- and extract value from their interactions (Gawer, 2014). For example, Facebook brings together users and advertisers, and primarily extracts value by selling personalized adverts, targeted at users who are increasingly segmented and profiled by the vast data they provide through their social interactions on the platform. Crucially, these interactions are not neutral- platforms go beyond *facilitating* interactions, ultimately *shaping* them in ways that can impact our offline behaviour, values, lifestyles, knowledge- and ultimately, social order. (Van Dijck *et al*, 2018; Couldry and Mejias, 2019; Alaimo and Kallinikos, 2016).

Platform’s social influence is reflected in their economic dominance, with some critics arguing they constitute a distinct, new form of capitalism. Nick Srnicek codifies these logics, imperatives, and tendencies. Unlike previous forms of capitalism, the ‘extraction imperative’ determines action- the motive to find and extract new forms of data taking precedence over previous imperatives- responding to demand, and shareholder-centric profit maximisation (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). Secondly, as platforms scale, they generate ‘network effects’- natural barriers to entry. Users will naturally join the platform where their friends are, riders go where the taxis are, and consumers go where the content is. Consequently, platforms tend towards monopoly, whilst users are subject to ‘lock-in effects’ making leaving or switching platforms difficult. If network effects are strong enough, platforms can become ‘infrastructures’, establishing total control over the networks they mediate (Plantin *et al.*, 2018) Relatedly, platforms tend towards both ‘cross-subsidisation’ and ‘convergence’. The former holds that, in their drive to attract more users and data, platforms often use profits and investment generated by one ‘side’ to fund expansions into ostensibly unrelated, often

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lossmaking areas. For example: Facebook (social media) and Oculus (VR); Google (search) and Deepmind (AI); Apple (Hardware) and Apple TV. The 'convergence thesis' therefore posits that large platform firms become increasingly similar and economically dominant, as they continually colonise new economic and cultural areas- a virtuous circle of data extraction, conglomeration, and monopolisation. These tendencies underpin the unprecedented, continued rise of tech firm's valuations (Eavis & Lohr, 2020), and the speculation driving investment in companies promising to potentially exhibit them.

With these features in mind, where does Spotify fit in? Spotify is a relatively unique case, as it does not own or control the most valuable side of its two-sided market- the licenced music they 'connect' with users, extracting value primarily via subscriptions. Consequently, Spotify occupies a relatively precarious economic position. Not exclusively owning content combined with less integral social features means they exhibit less powerful 'network effects', whilst also facilitating a relatively unique market for SMS', wherein providers exhibit 'platform parity'- similar prices, libraries, and features (Hracs & Webster, 2021). Furthermore, Spotify's competitors are predominantly Big Tech firms who can cross-subsidise their services with profits elsewhere- meaning "music is a means to an end" (Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2018). Conversely, Spotify's valuation and viability is wholly dependent on their capacity to monopolise and extract more value from their 'market'.

Furthermore, Spotify is relatively overvalued, based on investor faith that they will be able to dominate and monetise music beyond simply providing access. (Prey, 2020; Vonderau, 2017). Vonderau (2017) therefore argues finance is Spotify's 'leading market': the primary prism through which their actions can be understood. Their operations and communications must constantly signal future growth to investors, through adding alternative revenue streams beyond subscriptions, generating network effects and barriers to entry, differentiating themselves from competitors, and increasing their marginal profits, which are, at present relatively fixed, due to paying 70% of revenue to licence holders. Problematically, this growth must not appear to threaten the major labels, even as it necessitates undermining them (Powell, 2020; Prey, 2020). Three labels collectively account for 86% of streaming, therefore represent a key operational risk of withdrawing their libraries if threatened (SEC 2018).

Consequently, 'The Spotify Effect' denotes their characteristic ability to "make disappear an aggressive financial growth strategy... by creating an aura of Nordic cool & public benefit around it's use of music" (Vonderau, 2019: 6).

### Platforms: power and implications

Platforms have the power to influence behaviours, normative meanings, and interactions, with implications and effects that extend beyond the platforms themselves. By occupying an intermediary position between sides, platform power stems from their 'regulatory' capacity to reprogramme this intermediation- privileging certain 'sides' over others, shaping user interactions, and controlling information flows in ways serving strategic interests (Boudreau and Hagiu, 2009). Whilst no actor can exercise full control over streaming networks, users and content providers are most vulnerable to changes (Colbjørnsen, 2020). Platform power drives change in several ways. User interfaces shape perceptions and normative usages, 'nudging' certain behaviours, and ultimately forming habits (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008), whilst at scale, explicit rules over standards, and algorithmic decisions over the ordering of information, are necessary to manage the abundance of users and content (Gillespie, 2018). These control mechanisms can facilitate deliberate manipulation of users, through controlling who sees what, when, and why, (re)programming the 'rules of the game' and running non-consensual a/b experiments informing increasingly powerful behavioural manipulation (Zuboff, 2019). Crucially, however, even assuming moral intentions, platforms cannot abdicate these powers, or their consequences. At scale, moderation is essential, and there is no 'correct' way to do it, just as there are no 'correct' ethical systems- particularly not when operationalised through machine processes and applied globally. Consequently, all algorithms are value-laden. Netflix selections codify taste, Google codifies relevance, yet the algorithms determining these judgements are always value-laden and prone to bias and error (Boyd and Crawford, 2012; O'Neill, 2016; Broussard, 2018). Similarly, non-algorithmic decisions inherently exert power- user interfaces invariably make certain actions more prominent, whilst formal 'codes of conduct' are culturally relative. These problems are intractable, and bring legal, social, and moral implications. Thus, Platforms deliberately obfuscate and disavow these responsibilities-

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seen in discourses around platforms, which “connate neutrality” (Gillespie, 2018), algorithms, which connate objectivity, and a pervasive narrative of user sovereignty.

This tension between neutrality and control is reflected in the early hope, and still-prevalent narrative that SMS’ ‘disintermediate’ music. Stemming from early utopian internet ideals, optimists hoped the internet would democratise music, removing the institutional gatekeepers and limitations of physical media, giving users infinite freedom of choice, and enabling all artists to find niche audiences (Anderson, 2004). However, critics note an opposite trend-arguing SMS’ actually ‘reintermediate’ music consumption (Bonini & Gandini, 2019, Vonderau, 2014), leveraging their platform power to become a “new class of powerful gatekeepers” whose influence over taste and culture extends beyond the platform itself (Bonini and Gandini, 2019). This reintermediation has implications for both artists and listeners. One mechanism sees SMS’ pushing playlists as a mode of listening. Though they are now ubiquitous, curated playlists were not central to Spotify until 2013 (Eriksson *et al.*, 2019: 60). Driven by investor demand, and competition from services like Pandora, they aggressively pushed them through both communications and interface, driving their ‘curatorial turn’. Though playlists predate streaming, Spotify’s central change was their categorisation by context, not genre. This evidences Vonderau’s contention that finance leads Spotify’s decisions, as this facilitated competitive differentiation, greater ‘engagement’ numbers, and more valuable data (Eriksson *et al.*, 2019). Understanding and profiling users’ lifestyles and moods is valuable, and can be sold to advertisers with the promise of “owning a moment”. But crucially for the music industry, it places Spotify as profoundly powerful ‘tastemakers’-vocalised in Daniel Ek’s 2016 boast that “playlists put Spotify in control of the demand curve” (Ek qtd. in Prey, 2020). Though this accumulation of “curatorial power” (Prey, 2020) is evident, its manifestation is inconclusive- although studies have indicated Spotify are heavily biased towards their own playlists, and these playlists contain a higher proportion of major-label content than a sample of user-generated playlists (Prey *et al.*, 2020). Concerningly, reports showed that Spotify filled their playlists with ‘fake artists’- songs Spotify themselves bought outright from pseudonymous producers, thereby bypassing royalty payments to third-parties (Ingham, 2017; Goldschmitt, 2020). This practice was highly criticised by artists, users, and

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particularly the music industry whose position felt threatened, and has ceased. However, it exemplifies the potential for Spotify to use their platform control to favour their interests. Consequently, scrutinising these decisions is vital to uncover the “politics of selection” (Van Dijck, 2018) underpinning curation.

Spotify has likewise used this power to shape users’ interactions and perception of their platform, and subsequently the music it mediates. Personalised, automated, playlist driven listening has led to changes in user’s views of music, leading to suggestions they devalue it, promote ‘lean-back’ listening, and reorient music as a ‘functional’ commodity (Johansson, 2019; Goldenzwaig and Åker, 2018). Whilst such claims are limited by the difficulty of proving causation, playlists and curation clearly facilitate Spotify gaining further control over their platform, by increasingly intermediating the user/artist interaction. This raises empirical questions about how curatorial decisions are made, and ethical questions over how they *should* be made. Algorithms are neither neutral nor objective, thus automated musical recommendation requires somehow quantifying musical taste, a problem solved by threading between pure absolutism (music has objective quality) and pure relativism (music taste is entirely personal). Solving this by a data-driven process which defines quality contextually- the perfect song for this individual at this time- is novel, and its effects are not yet understood. However, critics warn of it’s potential to exploit subconscious psychological dynamics (Pedersen, 2020), or to constitute cultural imperialism through globally applying US-centric standards (Elkins, 2019). Classifying musical relevance and quality in this way exemplifies the power of classification to “structure the world on terms favourable to the classifier” (Cheney-Lippold, 2017: 7). Although Spotify do employ ‘expert’ human creators to facilitate a hybrid ‘algotorial’ curation mechanism, “human curators are responding to data to such an extent that they’re practically facilitating the machine process” (Bonini and Gandini, 2019). This opacity means that increasingly “it remains largely unclear who and what are in charge of the manner in which music reaches the music fan... dependent on the unregulated whims of the record labels and technology companies that constrain it” (Burkart, 2008: 250). Overall, whilst the literature is naturally inconclusive over the long-term implications of SMS’ changes to platforms, it is clear that Spotify is establishing further control over consumption behaviour

on its platform, and utilising its data-driven affordances to promote unprecedented modes of listening and curation.

## Music: a contingent cultural commodity

To justify these change's importance, it is necessary to acknowledge the long academic tradition exploring the value of music as a cultural practice, and part of human experience. For listeners, music has been implicated in both collective and private identity formation (Hesmondhalgh, 2013), as a source of cultural capital and class distinction (Bourdieu, 1984), or a tool of both political resistance and hegemonic cultural imperialism. Everyday listening can be a 'technology of the self' which we use to structure our identity, and work through emotions (DeNora, 1999). Whilst music has likewise been theorised as an evolutionarily significant tool of community building and psychosocial development (Levitin, 2008). Music's power can naturally be abused, yet the nature of this power, or even defining the 'the value of music' is a sociological and philosophical debate without a conclusive answer. However, for this dissertation it is sufficient to simply note that music *is* implicated in important sociocultural, developmental processes, and fundamentally, it is important because it is phenomenologically *experienced* as important and valuable, even if ineffably (Smith, 2019). Therefore, attention to changes the platforms that increasingly govern music as a commodity and practice is important.

Since the gramophone made the transport, reproduction, and commodification of sound possible (Jones, 2002) the technological affordances and economic imperatives have shaped music as both a commodity and social practice. The very concept of the 'album', and normative expectations of length, square artwork, and economic value became codified based on the physical affordances of the vinyl record. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new formats modified the music commodity- cassettes introduced private, portable listening, recording radio, and making 'mixtapes', whilst CDs introduced metadata and easy track skipping. The physical media era was thus characterised by a 'contingent' relationship with the consumer technology industry. But with the rise of personal computing and the Internet, the 'digital music commodity' has undergone profound changes, breaking from physical media. The digitisation

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of music caused the IT industries, not consumer electronics (Wade Morris, 2015; Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2018), to assume a dominant “transectorial” role over the music commodity, causing shifts which “reorient the role of music in everyday life” (Wade Morris, 2015), as discussed in the preceding section. The central change, however, is the commodity value of music itself. In the physical media era, music was valuable in itself- the primary economic imperative was to sell more ‘units’ of music, and indirectly to sell hardware needed for playback. But since digitization, music, as with many other cultural commodities, increasingly becomes a means-to-an-end for the tech companies that increasingly govern it. As such, it becomes ideologically, technologically, and strategically contingent on tech industry logics. This literature review will now conclude with an overview of the impact of these changes on listeners, artists, and music.

For artists, the reintermediation broached in the preceding section has contributed to increasing occupational and economic instability. Mainstream press coverage focuses predominantly on low payments by streaming services. However, these criticisms suffer from both a lack of evidence, and excessive focus on streaming rather than the wider, longstanding exploitations of the music industry (Hesmondhalgh, 2020). Several critics posit that through reintermediation, streaming has concretised and reasserted these hegemonies (Marshall, 2015), maintaining the longstanding ‘winner-takes-all’ market structure (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). Overall, there is a lack of academic consensus over whether, in pure economic terms, streaming is worse for artists, or if alternative remuneration models would increase equitability. Consequently, analysing the effects of streaming on artists cannot take a purely economic view, and should instead focus on the material changes to labour, experience, and success. As cultural industries become increasingly dependent on platforms, power relations, labour, and production become increasingly contingent. The music industry is notable for being relatively unchanged, with the oligopolistic dominance of the ‘big three’ major labels persisting. Despite this, the contemporary music industry is not siloed from changes in cultural labour- the increasing importance of ‘self-promotion’ and generating engagement is argued by Leslie Meier (2019) to now constitute music’s primary economic objective- exacerbating inequalities with major stars who can offset low streaming sales with

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promotional income. Reorienting production towards music(ians) as a promotional tool, not a saleable commodity can lead to increasing unpaid emotional labour, particularly disadvantaging those without these skills (Mühlbach and Arora, 2020; Kribs, 2017).

Likewise, opaque algorithms can demoralise artists and depersonalise distribution, as success becomes increasingly dependent on an impersonal algorithmic 'black box'. Algorithms can tacitly shape normative platform usage (Glotfelter, 2019; Bucher, 2017) - generating "folk theories" of algorithmic best practice, which can eventually become institutionalised knowledge (Caplan and Gillespie, 2020). This most clearly manifests in industries like news, where 'clickbait' articles are ubiquitous, and SEO manipulation becomes increasingly vital for success. Such changes are less obviously pronounced in music, however such processes are not linear, and changes in one cultural industry can foreshadow others. (Nieborg and Poell, 2018). Crucially, despite a present lack of conclusive evidence, the increasing dominance of platforms and algorithmic mediation itself constitutes a threat. As cultural industries become increasingly dependent on platforms, the reprogrammability and often self-regulating nature of algorithms creates an unstable situation wherein 'the rules of the game' can change overnight (O'Dair and Fry, 2019). As platforms grow in complexity, there is a pervasive threat that certain sides will be prioritised over others (Nieborg and Poell, 2018), or that previously siloed media formats will 'converge' and compete for time. (Jenkins, 2004; Johansson, 2019).

For users, the Platformization of music also has consequences. Again, popular media criticism often argues that streaming devalues users' perception of music, however, again, these suffer from a lack of evidence or consensus. One study found that whilst young participants still highly value artistic labour, others admit that streaming causes them to view music like a free utility, detaching them from the artist (Goldenzwaig and Åker, 2018). Meanwhile, recommendations fail to promote discovery (Kjus, 2016), and lead to users feeling 'trapped' in certain genres (Åker, 2018). These findings echo a similarly conflicted study concluding that whilst Spotify's algorithmic recommendations reduce consumption diversity, Spotify has an economic incentive to change this- implying this problem is inherent (Anderson *et al.*, 2020). This view of music as taken-for-granted reflects a shift from "ownership to access" (Johansson, 2019; Vonderau, 2014) seen across media industries. As with artists, the implicit threat is that

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this 'access' can always be revoked or modified (Zittrain, 2008). The push to ubiquitous listening exemplifies this modification, as communicative and technological changes transformed user's experience of music. Drott (2018) argues Spotify's design and communications deliberately condition users to experience 'lack' - that there is always a perfect song for a given context, and Spotify can provide it, "manufacturing scarcity" within abundance. An individual with relatively stable musical taste lacks the 'demand' Spotify needs to drive their interaction and control- and generating this demand required convincing listeners "their lives are decomposable into a series of need-states, for each of which there is an ideal song or playlist" (Hracs and Webster, 2021), convincing them music is a tool of self-improvement- you could, and implicitly should, be exercising harder, studying better, sleeping more soundly (Eriksson *et al.*, 2019). This echoes Kassabian's assertion when defining 'ubiquitous listening', that it represents a late-capitalist subjectification, divorcing listeners further from the 'sourceless' production of music defined by other activities (Kassabian, 2002).

More recently, Pedersen (2020) extends this notion, arguing platform-mediated 'ubiquitous' listening transforms our perceptions of relevance, quality, and cultural value- going beyond 'meeting' our needs, to shaping them, or paradoxically erasing individuality as the defining aspect of taste even as it claims to fulfil it (Elkins, 2019; Prey, 2017). Significantly for discourse analysis, Wade Morris and Powers argue Spotify construct a 'fantasy of abundance' through their marketing and interface that functionally promotes delegated, ubiquitous listening, whilst rhetorically centring user choice and individuality (2015). Overall, the literature reveals a clear pattern wherein Spotify is transforming not just our interactions with music on platforms, but our broader understanding and experience of music as a commodity, activity, and occupation. Opacity, fragmentation, and constant change make 'proving' such macro-social effects impossible, but it is clear that digitisation and Platformization subsume music's contingency into the logics and imperatives of the modern IT industry, with still-unfolding consequences.

## EMPIRICAL CASE STUDY

The academic literature has yet to specifically address Spotify's 'audio-first' strategy, announced in February 2019. This dissertation will address this gap by focusing on this period, drawing out implications, continuities, and breaks from the preceding academic understanding of streaming services and platforms.

Spotify's 'audio first' announcement was accompanied by the acquisition of two leading podcasting companies, Gimlet and Anchor, for a combined \$340m (Spangler, 2019). They have continued this aggressive acquisition strategy, paying \$100m for exclusive rights to 'The Joe Rogan Experience' alongside undisclosed deals for several others including Barack and Michelle Obama, Bruce Springsteen, and DC comics. Financial commentators reacted favourably, acknowledging the strategy's potential to raise Spotify's margins, previously constrained due to fixed licencing agreements with rights holders. Whilst this revenue is currently 'ring-fenced', the long-term expectation is that increasing Spotify-owned content could eventually justify taking a larger share, whilst also benefitting from the fact that Podcasts, unlike music, can deliver adverts to premium subscribers (Nicolaou, 2020; Powell, 2020). This faith is reflected in the share price, rising from \$114 in February 2019, to \$315 at the start of 2021. Effectively, they are becoming more 'multisided', and have an economic incentive to increase the amount of Spotify-owned content listened to- content that is not music. Further moves into "the future formats of audio" (Mignano, 2021) include interactive podcasts, 'written content', and 'finally' allowing creators to add video. They also acquired the "live audio experience" app Locker Room, rebranding it Spotify Greenroom.

This strategy constitutes a profound change in strategy and identity for Spotify. As a platform, they are adding many more 'sides' to their market, which, as shown, comes with the ability to favour and marginalise some over others. Given the changes streaming has already made to music, it is important to examine how this strategy is communicated by Spotify, how it might change the discourses around their platform, and affect music, users, and artists.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Given the breadth of concepts related to SMS', I hope the literature review provides a satisfactorily comprehensive overview of the theoretical concepts and debates underlying Spotify's economic context, their power as a platform, and the current effects, and future implications, of Spotify's musical interventions. Given the recency of their still emerging 'audio-first' strategy, this change in strategy and messaging remains unaddressed by academic literature. This project may help fill these gaps, by conducting a critical discourse analysis that seeks to identify how their 'audio first' strategy is reflected in their communications, and how it relates to wider literature.

The literature review generated the following theoretical assumptions:

- 1) In order to justify investor valuation, Spotify has an economic imperative to develop their platform in ways which reduce their reliance on licenced music, facilitate network effects, and signal potential to become a monopoly.
- 2) Platform power offers the ability to affect the relationships and favour different sides of a platform. Spotify have demonstrably consolidated and used this power to assume greater control over how music is consumed.
- 3) Music has become increasingly contingent on the dynamics and norms of the tech industry. The Platformization of cultural industries has consequences for cultural commodities, labour, and consumption, therefore such changes warrant scrutiny.

This project will seek to understand the extent to which these imperatives and powers are being leveraged in pursuit of their 'audio first' strategy, and how these changes are reflected in the ways Spotify conceptualises themselves, their stakeholders, and their content. Therefore the following questions will be answered:

**RQ:** How does Spotify discursively engage with their 'audio-first' strategy in their public communications?

**SQ1:** How does this strategy relate to Spotify as a platform, their stakeholders, users, and music?

**SQ2:** What might the implications of this strategy be?

## METHODOLOGY

### Theoretical Overview

Critical Discourse analysis (CDA) denotes a set of approaches that view language as a form of social practice, both shaped by, and constitutive of, social reality (Fairclough, 2011). Consequently, discourse is inseparable from power and social context, which both constrains what can be said, and enables the reproduction, or destabilisation, of existing hegemonic structures and meanings. Thus, CDA takes its object as the text, and seeks to analyse it “from within” the culture in which it originates (Chouliaraki, 2008), extending beyond the text and considering its relation to ‘extralinguistic’ factors: the cultural, social, and ideological contexts in which it is produced and consumed (Meyer, 2011).

Importantly, there is no ‘correct’ way to do CDA, as the theoretical considerations necessary depend on the object of study (Gill, 1996)- consequently, it is a fundamentally interdisciplinary method, where the ‘lenses’ needed will vary according to the objectives of the research, and the relevant contextual factors mediating the texts production and consumption. CDA is part of an academic tradition centred on elucidating [un]changing power relations and systems of oppression- by relating discourses circulated to interests served/negated, these relationships are made explicit (Janks, 1997). Relatedly, CDA emphasises change as a “primary focus” (Fairclough, 1993: 137)- to what extent do discourses reproduce dominant systems of knowledge- and where meanings are destabilised, to what effect and why? Such change can be limited to a single ‘discursive event’, or as part of macro-historical change, transforming institutionalised discourses and social norms. Therefore ‘intertextuality’ or ‘interdiscursivity’ is important, as the ‘remixing’ or ‘colonisation’ of areas of social life by previously separate

orders of discourse can provide evidence of institutional transformation and the ideological presuppositions of the speaker (Fairclough, 1992; Wu, 2011).

### Theoretical Justification

As broached in the literature review, discourses surrounding new technologies can serve a pedagogical role, as discourses are advanced which promote understandings favourable to the organisation's goals. CDA is an appropriate method through which these discourses can be understood- by viewing language as performative and constructive, not descriptive (Gill, 1996), Spotify's intentions, self-presentation, and vision of the future of 'audio', and stakeholders' places within this, may be understood. Their 'audio-first' strategy represents both a profound discursive move at the textual level- redefining their mission and remit, yet it is simultaneously a material strategic change, characterised by an aggressive acquisition strategy, facilitating a reconfiguration of what their platform does. Here CDA's dual focus on the relationship between language and material change is valuable- for example, in drawing out the rhetorical and discursive features which justify these changes, how they negotiate stakeholders' continuity and change amidst it, and the relationship between these discourses and the material and potential problems with such change.

As shown, Spotify is precariously situated in the middle of a complex web of competing interests, industries, and stakeholders. CDA's acknowledgement of the impact of context and competing interests is pertinent, as its interdisciplinary approach and focus on interdiscursivity can help elucidate whose interests are served, whose are marginalised, and draw connections between these textual implications and the theoretical literature. This is conducive to Nieborg and Poell's analytical model for the 'Platformization of the cultural industries' (2018). This holds that a comprehensive analysis requires an interdisciplinary, multitheoretical approach: situating changes within platform business logics, transformations and hegemonic change within cultural institutions, and the effects of technological change at the lived level of production and consumption. Accommodating these interdisciplinary 'lenses' informed the structure of the literature review, and will guide the scope of analysis.

Additionally, CDA is pragmatically appropriate. With Spotify, “one can never access the same platform twice... any analysis of the platform itself will inevitably be an analysis of the present” (Prey *et al.*, 2020). The opacity of platforms, the fragmentation and personalisation of user experiences, and the ever-changing algorithms governing them make empirical analyses of the platform itself legally, technologically, and pragmatically unviable. Likewise, a purely economic analysis might be able to explain, rationally, *why* such changes are being made, but is less capable of accounting for the sociocultural effects of such changes. But by taking publicly available, self-published texts as the object of analysis, CDA can provide valuable insight into Spotify’s direction, their self-representation, and their vision of the future of ‘audio’. As discussed, Spotify’s history is marked by continual change and pivoting, whilst the [digital] music commodity is likewise subject to continual revision, spurred by technological and economic change. Given Spotify’s economic imperative to continually change in ways favourable to financial growth, it follows that such changes will be concurrently favourably constructed, developed, and justified in their discursive self-conceptions- as “if the discourse changes, the object not only changes its meaning, but becomes a different object” (Jager qtd. in Meyer, 2011).

## Analytical Framework

Fairclough’s ‘three-dimensional’ model of CDA was chosen for its focus on the relationship between discourse and social practice, and its transdisciplinary affordances- allowing parallels to be drawn between systematic textual analysis and material social, economic, and hegemonic change. By first deriving ‘dominant’ styles, genres, and discourses, Fairclough’s method allows analysts to draw out relationships between language, meaning, and material change. Operationally, the text is viewed through three mutually interdependent analytical lenses: ‘orders of discourse’.

### 1. Textual:

The ‘descriptive’ level. Here the analyst utilises a variety of linguistic analytical ‘tools’, to find patterns and relevant uses of linguistic features.

## 2. Discursive:

The 'interpretive' level. Here, analysts pay specific attention to the text as it is produced, consumed, and distributed. What influences or constrains certain discursive choices? Who is the presumed audience, and how might differing interpretive frames and sociocultural context affect interpretation? Do chosen discourses vary across contexts?

## 3. Societal:

The 'explanatory' level. This order of discourse asks, based on textual and discursive findings, what the discourse 'does'. Here the interdisciplinary focus of CDA is most pronounced, as analysts draw on relevant theory to uncover the effects of certain discourses: which social practices are enforced, to what extent are power structures, meanings, and practices destabilised, and why?

## Sampling

Given "no evidence can be found concerning data collection requirements in the contributions of Fairclough" (Meyer, 2011), I shortlisted texts that were relevant, of sufficient length, and contextually, and formally varied. Additionally, the sample is limited to the utterances of CEO Daniel Ek, aside from, naturally, parts of the podcast and interview. As the CEO and founder, I felt his discourses would carry the greatest significance, whilst limiting focus to one individual will generate less variance, and subsequently more meaningful findings. The 6 texts chosen were: A quarterly investor call; a keynote speech at Spotify's 'Stream On' event; a blog post announcing 'audio-first', an interview with CNBC's Jim Cramer, and an episode of Spotify's 'For the Record' podcast, in which staff and guests discuss topical industry and Spotify news. These transcripts were obtained from the Spotify and NBC websites, whilst the podcast was hand transcribed.

The sample is limited by the fact that the texts are primarily oriented towards an investor or analyst audience. In itself, the fact that no texts discussing their strategy in sufficient detail exist for general audiences is telling, indicating a deliberate distance between Spotify's operations and their users understandings. However, this study is focused on Spotify's self-

representation and justification this is acceptable, particularly as the colloquial tone and ostensibly public-facing nature of their keynote and podcast imply that general audiences *are* considered, increasing the samples utility by signifying that these texts represent their overarching communications strategy for 'audio first', beyond just investor relations. Like press releases, these still contain public discourses they hope to disseminate, even if the primary texts are unlikely to be sought out by individuals without professional or academic interests. Furthermore, given the global ubiquity and significance of Spotify, they will be aware their communications will be journalistically scrutinised, and controversial statements and announcements can provoke mainstream international criticism (cf. Frere-Jones, 2013; Daly, 2020; Yoo:2020). Overall, the sample sufficiently represents the discourses used to justify and naturalise Spotify's strategy to multiple stakeholders.

### Limitations and alternative methodologies

CDA has notable limitations. The first is the unavoidable problem of subjectivity. Logically, any theory which presupposes language and meaning to be constituted through the intermediation of context, speaker, and interpreter, renders "'strict objectivity' impossible" (Meyer, 2011: 16). To mitigate this, analysts must reflexively acknowledge their own situatedness, recognise individual biases and attempting to read texts as other subjectivities might. Additionally, given the breadth of the topic, the global nature of the platform, and the multitude of different stakeholders any analysis will likely be insufficient to account for the multitude of potential interests and interpretations a text might affect and contain- particularly when analysing online texts for which the 'presumed context' is impossible to neatly delineate (Jones *et al.*, 2015). Similarly, given the theoretical breadth and complexity of Spotify's economic, technological, cultural, and ethical dimensions, analysis will again be limited by the unfeasibility of accounting for all possible theoretical 'angles'. However, providing the analyst acknowledges these limitations, productive, albeit non-comprehensive conclusions can be drawn. Here, limitations stem from the opacity of Spotify's motivations and technological design, whilst popular debate about payment and 'fairness' will similarly be bracketed. Thus, the relationship between discourses and reality can only be inferred due to limited empirical

data and published academic work specific to audio-first, a problem also limiting the capacity to generate actionable 'solutions' to problems identified.

Alternative or complementary methodologies should be noted. As mentioned, a more user-centric analysis could focus on the advertising and marketing specifically aimed at general users, examining the ways this reflects 'audio-first'. Similarly, interviewing or surveying users on how they use Spotify, why, and whether this have changed could be fruitful. Alternatively, a more technological analysis of the platform itself could be a source of valuable findings, potentially to test the hypothesis that Spotify's design or recommendations are changing to favour non-music content.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

### Audio, Innovation, and Industry Dynamics

The term 'Audio'

As the unifying, titular principle behind their strategy, this analysis will begin by examining the term 'audio' itself, both in isolation and as positioned by Spotify. 'Audio' is notably ambiguous, encompassing literally the entirety of sound, particularly sound which is recorded or transmitted (Merriam Webster). Thus, the notion 'audio-first' is inherently confusing, given the expansive range of distinct genres, formats, and categories it encompasses. This breadth is further indicated by its positioning alongside 'video', itself described only in terms of 'hours of consumption per day' (Appendix C,D). As 'video' is an equally expansive category, encompassing TV, film, YouTube, News, and even user-generated social media, this essentialisation to consumption hours is significant, erasing variations in production or form-cost, labour, professionalism, qualitative merit.

Spotify's discussion of audio-as-strategy is notably inconsistent- Audio is a new direction, a constant guiding principle, and an emergent phenomenon separate from Spotify. To illustrate, Appendix C sees Daniel Ek declare "what I didn't know when we launched to consumers in

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2008 was that audio- not just music – would be the future of Spotify”, whereas in A “audio is our history- and it’s our future” and “we still believe in audio first”. This move from audio as new strategy towards audio as unchanging principle is notably chronological- indicating a rewriting of corporate narrative, burying a significant ‘pivot’ beneath a myth of long-term vision. This is characteristic of tech narratives common across tech discourses (LeLoarne and Maaloui, 2015), and indeed Spotify’s own history. Importantly, this ambivalent framing of ‘Audio’ as intentional and incidental is continued by its positioning as a new frontier pioneered by Spotify, yet simultaneously an emergent trend Spotify responds to. Audio is a deliberate expansion of Spotify’s mission (Appendix B,E), and an emerging phenomenon separate from Spotify: “we’re in the midst of an explosion of audio creation” (Appendix A), whilst the metaphor that “Audio’s just in a growth spurt right now, it’s really fun to see” (B) suggests Spotify are merely watching this ‘natural’ “growth”. These coexisting, opposing narratives are shown by: “what we’ve seen- and helped drive- in an audio renaissance” (Appendix A). This exemplifies a tension seen throughout the texts, as Spotify’s actions signal deliberate vision to investors, whilst maintaining a sense of natural, inevitable, and logical change to users, artists, and the music industry. This tension will be returned to throughout this analysis.

Overall, ‘audio-first’ represents a discursive expansion of Spotify’s remit, accompanying and rationalising their strategic moves. This is encapsulated in Appendix D, when the interviewer comments “I didn’t think that a music company would do it, but I do think that an audio company would do it. And that’s what this is about, isn’t it?”. By redefining their mission as ‘audio-first’, Spotify create a powerful rhetorical framework, within which their actions seem logical, natural in the context of the loosely-defined “audio market”, “audio business”, and “audio ecosystem” (Appendix A,B,C,D,E)- notably distinct from their separately lexicalised ‘music’ equivalents. Crucially, these textual moves serve their economic interests and signify to shareholders their potential to expand as a platform. Redefining themselves from a “music streaming service” (SEC 2018) to “the world’s number one audio platform” (Appendix B,C,D) implicitly diminishes music’s centrality. Given their unstable relationship with the music industry, the term audio has a discursive significance insofar as it allows them to discuss

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strategies which implicitly threaten music's long-term prevalence, and revenues, on Spotify. Music becomes one amongst many forms of 'audio'- except, as shown, Spotify has economic incentive to promote non-music content, which they can monetize. Similarly, this redefinition erases the fact that Spotify owes its userbase and success to the access to music it provides- success it is now leveraging to enact changes which potentially threaten music's centrality on their platform, and subsequently its position in culture- embodied in the simple textual substitution of music for audio.

### Tech Interdiscursivity: Innovation, Growth, and Speed

Throughout the sample, Spotify's communications interdiscursively draw upon the language and logics of the wider technology industry. This often manifests in relation to their corporate narrative, wherein they position themselves as saviours of the music industry from piracy (Appendix A,C). This narrative notably rewrites their origins as effectively a pirate service themselves, but more importantly, it is used to naturalise their actions as a binary choice between streaming and piracy. For example:

We knew our platform had to be revolutionary if we were going to stand a chance of getting people to abandon piracy and pay for music again. Spotify would have to be faster, more responsive, and more personalized. And it would have to be a more exciting and engaging way of listening to music. (Appendix A)

Here, Spotify's saviour narrative positions their 'revolutionary' choices as imperatives in the Spotify/Piracy binary. These features- speed, personalization, and interactivity are characteristic ideals of tech companies. Crucially, interactivity and personalization were only added several years after launch, again retroactively justifying changes as necessary. The notion that music *would have* to become more exciting and engaging significantly implies that piracy stemmed from the pre-Spotify musical experience's inadequacy- a problem Spotify 'solved'. This arguably constitutes what Morozov (2014) terms 'technological solutionism'- the casting of complex social issues as quantifiable problems with objective solutions- solutions private technology companies have the tools to solve.

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Elsewhere, ‘innovation’ and ‘speed’ are regularly deployed throughout their communications as unquestioned ideals and concepts guiding their actions. Innovation in particular is a dominant discourse throughout the technology industry- signifying an ideological position that ‘innovation’ is inherently good, and necessary for social progress (Levina & Hasinoff, 2016), whilst economically signalling future growth opportunities to investors. This interdiscursivity is evidenced by references to experimentation, iteration, and speed (Appendix E), alongside citing acontextual big numbers and data as shorthand for progress (A,B,C,D,E). For the music industry, this signifies the sublimation of a relatively static industry into the logics of technology. As the single biggest contributor to music industry revenues, Spotify has a key role in determining the shape of music as a commodity, industry, and sociocultural practice. By co-opting the logics of big tech implicit pressure is placed on the music industry for *not* innovating. Closely related to the prior point is the recurring allusions to growth and expansion as again, unquestioned positives. Expanding into new markets (Appendix A,B,D,E), appealing to more users (A,B,C,D,E), and adding creators to the platform (A,B,C,D,E) are celebrated throughout, frequently positioned together as mutually beneficial processes- a ‘flywheel’ in which quantitative increases in any metric equates to qualitative benefits for all stakeholders (Appendix E). Again, quantifiable ‘growth’ is a prima-facie good, interdiscursively reflecting financial and technological discourses. This oversimplifies the subtleties of these changes, emphasising a deliberately ‘macro’ perspective, that understands benefits in terms of entire industries, markets, and stakeholder groups, bypassing discussion of changes for individuals.

Ideological discourses of technology are likewise present throughout Spotify’s stated objectives and self-categorisation. Immediately, the term ‘platform’ itself (Appendix A,B,C,D,E) “connotes neutrality” (Gillespie, 2019), whilst allusions to “growing and enabling the marketplace” (D) “reducing friction” (B) and promoting “fair competition on an even playing field” (C) reflect the techno-libertarian ideals underpinning the ‘California ideology’ uniting many ‘Big Tech’ firms, and reveals the US-centric governance ideologies beneath their consciously Nordic identity (Vonderau, 2019). These discourses suggest a lack of ‘regulation’ in both economic (marketplace) and technological (platform) senses. However, as the literature

review showed, such neutrality is both technologically impossible and economically unviable. As such, Spotify's discourses must negotiate this tension between neutrality and control- a theme returned to later in the analysis.

## Artists, Creators, and Engagement

### The term 'Creator'

Just as 'audio' is an overarching category supporting multitude of potential meanings, creator is likewise polysemic. But unlike 'audio', which is relatively novel in its nominal usage by Spotify, 'creator'- particularly 'content creator'- is already a prevalent category in discourse. Youtubers, Instagram influencers, bloggers, and TikTokers are all various content creators. The term content creator is ubiquitous, and thus comes bound with these pre-existing notions and associations. It represents an overarching category describing a multitude of highly different types of work (Mileros *et al.*, 2019), encompassing both 'legacy industries' which move online- models, artists etc., and new content formats made possible by technological platforms affordances- for example Twitch Streamers and Patreon artists. It additionally encompasses a vast spectrum of success- from hobbyists making no income, to influencers constituting mainstream celebrities in their own right. This spectrum is united not by economic or labour norms, but solely by the generation of 'content' disseminated through platforms that determine payment, labour terms, and merit (Kopf, 2020). The category is subsequently entwined with adjacent discourses such as the 'gig economy', as 'content creators' are typically self-employed, and must amass a significant audience themselves to eventually earn a living income. Consequently, Spotify's usage of the term 'creator' more so than 'artist' is noteworthy. This arguably continues the interdiscursive usage of the lexicon of technology, and it's associated meanings, to conceptualise music and their platform. Furthermore, it continues the essentializing logic of 'audio', as texts frequently use lists to describe their 'creators' and the audio they produce: "all our amazing music, creators, sports, and culture" (Appendix B), "educators and entrepreneurs, and storytellers and authors, well-known personalities and artists" (A). This listing technique essentializes artists as one amongst many forms of creator-

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qualitatively indistinct from others listed through their interchangeable positions and the equal space they are afforded.

However, the definition of 'creator' is complicated by a recurring destabilisation of the terms internal cohesion. Within the same text, artists are positioned as both a distinct category *alongside* creators, whilst elsewhere referred to as a *type* of creator. For example, in Appendix B, Ek says: "the numbers of creators that are benefiting, and artists that are benefitting from that [the growth of the music industry], is increasing as well". However, 30 seconds later he adds: "So overall, the music industry is growing, more creators are benefitting from that growth". By excluding artists the text creates a lack of cohesion for the term 'creators', whilst supporting the interpretation that the streaming-led growth of the music industry brings benefits to non-music creators. This is congruent with Spotify's strategy of cross-subsidisation, wherein the revenues and userbase generated predominantly by their licenced music library is leveraged to invest heavily in 'non-music content' which allows them to diversify their platform. Likewise, Appendix C notes "no other audio company has the two-sided marketplace that we have built at Spotify- a marketplace that benefits artists and creators along with consumers". Here artists and creators are again distinct categories, yet the next reference to 'creators' again omits artists: "Fair competition on an even playing field is what yields the most creative output and innovation and will result in the best experience of listeners and creators". Again, this supports an interpretation of deliberate marginalisation- in economic terms, Spotify is favouring the '[non-music] creator' and 'listener' sides of their market, at the expense of the distinct group of artists. This interpretation is credible within Spotify's economic context, as it makes strategic sense to prioritise and grow the sides of the 'market' that they can control and monetize. This discourse signals this to investors, and semantically destabilises artists as a distinct category in the minds of users.

### Engagement, Success, and Artistic Merit

Beyond the term 'creator', other textual features reveal a pattern of implicitly marginalising and disadvantaging artists. This is seen in Spotify's treatment of the natural corollary of creators- the audio 'content' they produce, and the attributes and standards by which it is

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valued. As alluded to, technological ideals are often uncritically intermingled with audio, and the term 'engagement' is particularly relevant. The word 'engagement' normatively signifies attention, whilst the adjective 'engaging' connotes a positive interpersonal attribute- the quality of 'engaging' others. However, beyond these qualitative associations, engagement signifies a wholly quantitative, pervasive technocratic logic: engagement=time. The unspoken conflation of emotional engagement and quantitative engagement is encapsulated in the statement "users love having podcasts as part of their Spotify experience. Our podcast users spend almost twice as much time on the platform" (Appendix C). So, when Spotify repeatedly refer to increasing user engagement as driving a virtuous circle of growth (Appendix A,B,C,D), this logic is made apparent- economic value is analogous to the quantified attention one can capture. This notion is explicitly connected to artists labour and economic conditions:

A more connected, more engaged community of listeners creates more demand...  
and more opportunity for artists and podcasters to make a living from their work.  
And the more people who are creating, the more there is for our users to discover  
(Appendix A)

This draws out several attributes of Spotify's vision of the audio creator. Firstly, podcasters and artists are again grammatically and semantically made equals, qualitatively indistinct 'audio creators' who logically operate under the same economic conditions. Secondly, it unifies the notion of engagement as value and implicitly places responsibility for this onto creators- success is aligned with one's capacity to build their own 'connected, engaged community', framed again as a virtuous circle of scale and quantitative growth. Though this appears logical within the discourse, subjecting artists and podcasters to these same criteria of success creates an inherent inequality. If value=capacity to generate ongoing engagement, then a podcaster who can release a three-hour podcast weekly is structurally advantaged over musicians, for whom music cannot be regularly produced. And within music itself, it creates a bias towards certain genres and artists who are more suited to repeated listening, can better mobilise fans to repeatedly stream them, or are more suited to background listening. And furthermore, discourses and language referring to artistry, genius, and subjective, ineffable

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value are conspicuous in their absence, furthering the overall implication that value is quantifiable regardless of format. And when language implying qualitative judgements is used, it remains concerningly entwined with the logics of engagement and self-promotion.

As more and more people become audio creators, Spotify will enable the best of them- the ones who are highly driven, highly talented, and resonate with a group of fans- to grow their audience and build their careers on our platform (Appendix A).

This is unique within the sample for the notion that Spotify themselves make qualitative judgements directly determining success, yet echoes a controversial 2020 interview in which Daniel Ek stated:

Some artists that used to do well in the past may not do well in this future landscape, where you can't record music once every three to four years and think that's going to be enough... The artists today that are making it realise that it's about creating a continuous engagement with their fans. It is about putting the work in, about the storytelling around the album, and about keeping a continuous dialogue with your fans. (Dredge, 2020)

Whilst not selected for the sample due to length, this statement is worth including as an indication of Ek, and subsequently Spotify's vision of artistic merit. Notably, the inclusion of 'putting the work in' lends significant credence to the notion that generating one's own engagement is an increasingly non-negotiable prerequisite of success. Given the vehement backlash to these comments, particularly the insinuation that unsuccessful artists aren't working hard enough, Spotify and Ek have naturally refrained from making such explicit declarations. However, it remains a valuable and rare example of Ek explicitly engaging with these notions, providing vital context to this discourse analysis- their implication that engagement and promotion is optional, and the potential meaning of associating "drive" with "talent" (Appendix A), or justifying investment through "cost of engagement numbers" (D).

### Changing nature of Artistic Labour

The aforementioned points relate to a broader theme- the changing nature of artistic labour. By essentialising artists as 'creators' Spotify discursively imply they are subject to the same conditions of success and merit, even as these conditions may structurally disadvantage musicians. These conditions are framed as offering new tools, possibilities, and opportunities. But whilst this language implies choice, freedom, and generosity, it obfuscates the reality of such changes, which correspond to increased power and control accumulation for the platform holder. Allowances often relate to possibilities for: greater interactivity with fans (Appendix A,B,D,E), possibilities for innovation/new experiences, (Appendix A,B,E) alongside the aforementioned emphasis on engagement. Whilst the tone of these 'opportunities' is positive, they represent fundamental changes to musicians labour and the music commodity itself. Saying "We want to be the absolute best partner to creators by giving them opportunities to create, grow, engage, and monetize their art and fanbase" (Appendix E) or "We will offer better discovery, data, and monetization to creators" (Appendix C) is to tacitly introduce new forms of labour, and new influences upon the production process and wider 'marketplace' they govern.

Though framed as optional, simply introducing new 'options' to engage fans, monetize content, and access data transforms the nature of artistic labour and the Spotify music commodity. Given Ek's comments, Spotify's economic imperatives, and their incentives as a platform such changes are likely not neutral. And even assuming such changes are genuinely optional, a question remains over whether such options should be implemented- for example, allowing artists to access user data itself represents an unprecedented change, and potential influence on music production and the creative process. None of these are natural or necessary components of an audio platform, a streaming service, or the music commodity. From a purely discursive perspective, it is notable that by framing these as tools and opportunities, in line with Spotify's mission of enabling 'innovation' and 'empowering' creators, changes are naturalised, and positioned as liberating, positive acts- obfuscating their potentially negative externalities. Music production might become increasingly dependent on exploiting algorithmic and psychological tendencies conducive to repeated streaming. Artists and

producers who lack access, skills, willingness, or time to interpret such data might be disadvantaged. Similarly, the repeated stressing of connection and engagement reflects a trend throughout the cultural industries of platforms increasingly generating new forms of unpaid labour for ‘creators’, as they are increasingly pressured to generate their own promotion, build their own followings, and act as their own promoter. This involves a problematic increase in both emotional and unpaid labour and may again disadvantage those unwilling or unable to adapt.

### Control, Neutrality, and Responsibility

#### Spotify as Neutral Facilitator

Throughout the sample there is a clear pattern of textual features connoting Spotify’s own neutrality, subsequently offloading responsibility onto other actors. This was seen in the preceding discussion of framing labour changes as providing ‘opportunities’ and ‘tools’, tacitly subsuming musicians and creators into unquestioned technological drives of engagement, connection, and innovation. Throughout, Spotify positions its relationship to users and creators as a facilitator. They “give”, “provide”, and “enable” their creators to grow and find *their* audience, build *their* careers, using Spotify’s platform and tools. Continuing from the prior section, ‘giving opportunities’ is a recurring theme (Appendix, A,B,C,E), that emphasises Spotify’s separation from the success or failure of an artist. The notion of ‘giving opportunities’ itself connotes both a lack of obligation, and an act of generosity. Similarly, the verbs ascribed to creators bestow material and relational processes (Bartley:2018) and responsibilities upon them. Spotify gives the ‘opportunity’ for creators to *engage* (Appendix E) and *grow* their audience, *build* their career, *connect* with fans (A,D) *monetize* (C,E) their content and “reach out and touch the world through audio” (Appendix A), affordances textually entwined with their recurring veneration of ‘engagement’. By repeatedly emphasising the breadth of ‘opportunities’ provided, they rhetorically defer responsibility and labour- the term ‘opportunity’ implying that ‘taking’ them leads to positive outcome. Likewise, users are also ascribed agency:

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Our platform is wired for connection. It's connecting listeners with the audio they love, and connecting creators with the fans who'll find meaning in their art, and won't just follow their career, but will sustain it. (Appendix A)

This section has several interesting attributes. Immediately, Spotify are grammatically distanced from the actions of 'our platform'. Saying 'it's' doing the connecting, not 'us', generates further semantic distance between Spotify as a company and their effects, belying their control over the platform. Also interesting is the qualification that fans won't just "follow" but will "sustain" the careers of creators. The definite article "will" places responsibility onto fans to financially support artists, and likewise for artists to better monetize them- again tying into discourses around the gig economy and self-promotion.

Ascribing agency to the platform ties into another theme present in both Spotify's discourses, and the wider tech industry- that algorithms and platforms are personified, infallible, and reflective of reality. The metaphor of 'wired for' constitutes a skeuomorphic invocation of a physical, unchanging system- obscuring the complexity, opacity, and reprogrammability of these systems. Likewise, using emotional, personified language alongside discussion of algorithmic recommendations is characteristic- "we're looking at more than 16000 signals every single day as we look at your taste profile and try and rank you the things you like the most" (Appendix B). This unquestioning intermingling of technological process and personal preference itself obfuscates a problem- music taste is a personal choice which individuals often struggle to describe or rationalise, much less quantify based on 16000 reference points. The uncritical, naturalising discourses of algorithms as capable of understanding, and therefore neutrally facilitating human wants characterises many tech discourses, hiding the fact that such systems are inherently value-laden, biased, and can shape individual and cultural norms inasmuch as they ostensibly reflect them. Such algorithms can invert the user-centric logic of recommendation- we like things *because* we are recommended them, whilst over time the act of recommendation itself comes to be expected. This normalised deferral of personal choice in 'audio' potentially undermines the personal, psychological dimensions of music. This example raises the moral and social concerns of such systems when applied to socioculturally important

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commodities and information flows yet is a primary source of power and economic value for these firms. As such, it is advantageous that these changes are hidden and naturalised.

But beyond this, discourses of neutral algorithms negotiate a paradox inherent in algorithmic curation and Spotify's business model. The paradox is that 'creators' are paid according to the number of streams they accumulate, implying and necessitating a fair, democratic market. However, as Spotify increasingly shapes what music is consumed, through playlists, auto-playing recommendations, and suggestions, they increasingly determine artist's success. Even assuming moral intentions, this is inescapable, as every decision over their platforms design and processes will entail manipulating user behaviour- and, particularly for automatic 'radio' streaming, content can be selected, and artists paid, without user input. By framing their systems as rooted in serving user demand- connecting artists with fans who "love" and "find meaning" in their work, this paradox is backgrounded through a narrative of user sovereignty. This narrative similarly downplays the role Spotify plays in shaping tastes and norms of consumption- norms which promote this 'lean-back' or 'functional' listening. This gives additional significance to the usage of emotive language such as 'engagement', 'love', and 'experiences'- Spotify positions themselves as facilitating these powerful experiences whilst simultaneously generating an increasingly detached relationship between listeners and music.

For artists, this is especially problematic, as even as algorithmic systems invariably shape success, this is disavowed through the narrative of the platform neutrally catering to fan's tastes. Implicitly, if you are unsuccessful, it is because fans don't 'love' you enough, or because you failed to use the tools and opportunities provided by Spotify. The opacity of this, coupled with speed of change exemplifies the precariousness of platform-dependent cultural work- where invisible changes to an algorithm can transform career prospects, and reasons for success or failure can often only be guessed at. Given the history of both the music industry and Spotify manipulating audience tastes in pursuit of private financial gain, the fear that such a system could be misused is justified. Indeed, an investor call was headlined with the "promising" finding that Spotify was increasingly successfully conducting "thousands of a/b tests" one of which "increased [podcast] listening amongst the test group by 33%" (Spotify 2020). Meanwhile, users are implicitly given the responsibility to "sustain" the careers of the

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artists they “love” (appendix A, B) even whilst Spotify technologically and discursively naturalises a mode of listening that is functional, conflated with non-music ‘content’, and increasingly governed by Spotify’s ‘algotorial’ systems. Consequently, it is crucial that algorithmic recommendation and curation is discursively aligned with personal taste, objectivity, and user sovereignty, hiding their inherent biases and potential for manipulation. These notions are concretised through our increasingly ubiquitous involvement in the wider platform ecosystem.

### Spotify as Active Controller

Given the importance of discursively maintaining neutrality, it is noteworthy that this tone is not consistent. Throughout the sample, Spotify adopt a more active, possessive tone regarding their platform and stakeholders. Despite their discourses of neutrality, they somewhat paradoxically present themselves elsewhere as the ultimate owners, controllers, and source of value when it comes to the platform as a whole. When discussing the platform in a more abstract, macro sense, they often use possessive language to describe “our” users (Appendix A,B,C,D)- a possessiveness used just once for “creators” (B). This signifies a view of users in economic terms- as an asset- whilst also framing Spotify as the primary attraction, not the musicians and creators who likely brought them to the platform. The concept of users as an economic asset is vocalised in “Our podcast users spend almost twice the time on the platform” (Appendix C), and echoed in the announcement that “our” more ‘connected’, ‘dual-platform users’ “are more than twice as engaged as the average user” (D)- again, time spent is conflated with a desirable outcome in itself. The unequal semantic relationship of users and creators to Spotify implicitly suggests that Spotify’s users are their priority, not their creators, and further, that Spotify’s primary source of value is their users, not the artists whose catalogues who brought them there.

This possessive relationship, and implicit thread of user sovereignty defines the statements in which Spotify takes an active voice- ‘we’ [Spotify] “reach beyond music to engage users in entirely new ways” (Appendix C), “continue to aggressively pursue opportunities to expand our content and our offerings and enhance our user experience” (E), whilst “for consumers...

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the best experience wins. And now we're adding the best content to that." (D). These exemplify Spotify regularly taking an uncharacteristically active, authoritative tone regarding their podcast acquisitions and broadening of 'Audio' justified by user demand. This complicates the idea of music creation, particularly in Spotify's declaration that "We are ramping up quickly, evolving our content and adjusting our product as we learn about what makes the most sense on a hyper-local level" (Appendix E). The notion of evolution implies intervention in pre-existing content- not merely facilitating, but actively shaping undefined 'content', based on an undefined criterion of 'sense' in 'hyper-local' contexts. Here it is not the creators who share their content on Spotify's platform, but Spotify themselves who ambiguously iterate on content they own- signifying both competition with independent creators, or editorial authority over them. This assertion of their unilateral capacity to transform content based on contextual logic reveals the reality underpinning the espoused neutrality, their ability to shape the 'rules of the game', even potentially intervening in the creative process and 'marketplace'. The contradictory co-existence of neutrality and control discourses is encapsulated in Ek's announcement of their move into live audio "that allows these creators, these musicians to interact with their fans". But from this neutrality, Ek states:

But first and foremost, we're focused on creating amazing, engaging experiences, and when we succeed with that we will turn to monetizing it to the benefit of creators and consumers alike. (Appendix B)

This exemplifies Spotify's contradictory positioning as the primary 'creator' of experiences in the macro sense, omitting the musician-creators who are 'given' these 'opportunities', create the value, and ultimately take responsibility for their performance. This demonstrates the multiple, competing justificatory discourses, wherein Spotify's changes are simultaneously positioned as increasing options for creators, meeting user demand, whilst more forcefully aligned with their private imperative, signalling to investors their pursuit of 'engaging experiences' they can control and monetize. Particularly revealing is the statement: "We will begin competing for time more broadly against all forms of entertainment and informational services, and not just music streaming services" (Appendix C). This explicitly reveals the

relationship between Spotify's objectives, and the needs and rights of their users and creators. With 'time' again positioned as an unquestioned metric to-be-raised, Spotify signals their active leveraging of their controlling position at the centre of the platform to pursue this, regardless of the wants and rights of users, nor those of the musicians who built the platform's success, and now depend on it.

Elsewhere, they appear to contradict their own characteristic claims to being an open, demand-led marketplace by taking an active tone that suggests qualitative judgements. "we {Spotify} are adding the best content to that [Spotify experience] as well. And that's now Spotify" (Appendix D) exemplifies this, echoed by their intention to "give users around the world access to the best podcast content, and improve the quality of our listening experience" (Appendix C). By describing their original content as 'the best' they imply qualitative superiority, which through its presence elevates the 'experience' and user's implied perception of it. This notion of Spotify in abstract as the source of value is tellingly referenced with respect to justifying price increases: "the value users see in Spotify" (Appendix E), "the tremendous amount of increased value" (Appendix B). This is crucial, as it signifies how, by constructing Spotify the platform as the source of value, not the music that access is provided to can be justified to raise prices. By implying Spotify's investments and unique affordances are the source of this increased value, then the affordances and attributes of 'non-music content' implicitly define this 'value'. As "the worlds largest audio platform" continues to technologically, strategically, and discursively orient itself towards value defined in 'non-music' terms, a question remains over what this means for the music that built it.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the analysis revealed several characteristic textual and semantic themes, which serve to create an understanding of Spotify's identity, actions, and processes favourable to its strategic objectives.

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Spotify's creation of a relatively stable discourse of 'audio-first', stemming from a consistent narrative, obfuscates the contradictions, inequalities and paradoxes underpinning their strategy. In this way we see how audio-first functions as a 'future imaginary'- a stable, institutionalized 'vision' in the minds of the public that belies the multiple, contested, and contradictory visions underpinning them (Mager and Katzenbach, 2021). Insofar as discourses work to create knowledge, pedagogically shape understandings, and 'limit' what can be said, these findings are important. Redefining the platform discursively, economically, and technologically as an 'audio platform', not a 'music streaming service' conditions users to view the platform's evolution as natural, and discursively pre-empts criticism- a music streaming service could be criticised for heavily investing in podcasts, whereas for an 'audio platform' this is natural. Likewise, the voices of musicians and music fans are marginalised by the implied move away from access to a catalogue of music as the value proposition, towards the 'audio experiences' Spotify provides, of which music is one (implicitly outmoded) part. The sublimation of music into audio and artists into creators destabilises the institutionalised discourses of artists as a distinct category, and implicitly subjects a previously distinct occupation into the essentializing logics of platforms. Meanwhile, the quantification of value and taste raises concerns over music's status as a commodity with unique, ineffable sociocultural value.

As a contribution to the literature, these findings are noteworthy. Given much of the SMS corpus predates 'Audio First', existing criticisms and analyses of Spotify's interventions in music as commodity, practice, and labour are limited by the presupposed premise that Spotify is a music streaming service. But by expanding their 'Audio' remit in increasingly divergent ways, Spotify's capacity to shape music in service of their economic ends potentially extends to shaping and destabilising music's very status as a distinct cultural object. By sublimating music into the logics of technology and platforms and placing music in implicit competition with other 'audio formats', there is both potential and incentive to devalue and destabilise music itself. As Spotify is now the largest streaming service and revenue contributor in the world, such changes have global implications beyond one platform.

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More broadly, this analysis serves as a case study for the role discourse plays in supporting and permitting the aggressive economic growth and diversification that characterises the expansions of platforms into social and cultural domains. Platforms rest on contradictions, paradoxes, and responsibilities- they connote neutrality, yet exercise power with every decision. They promote a neoliberal, techno-utopian ideal of frictionless interaction between producers and consumers, yet invariably shape the nature of this interaction, and likewise the conditions of success. And though the very act of digitisation and Platformization is associated with a logical progression of pre-digital social practices and commodities, these commodities and practices are invariably transformed in the process. In Spotify's discourses we see how these tensions textually manifest in ways which emphasise their control to financial stakeholders, whilst rhetorically complicating this control and deferring responsibility to others.

This project emphasises the need for further research. 'Audio First' is still unfolding, and its effects are unclear. There is scope for researchers further elucidate these processes and their consequences, in order to provide the empirical basis from which clear criticisms and solutions can be articulated. Given the technical, sociocultural, ethical, and legal dimensions of these changes, there is a need for intra and interdisciplinary work. A particular area of focus regards the potential conflicts of interest that emerge as Spotify become an increasingly complex multisided market. I hope this analysis provides a suitable overview of the material implications and imperatives behind Spotify's strategy, and the ways their communications help legitimise, justify, and redefine them.

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## APPENDIX

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