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# Music, Digitalization, and Democracy

Johannes Brusila [ID]ᵃ, Martin Cloonan [ID]ᵇ and Kim Ramstedt [ID]ᶜ

ᵃDepartment of Musicology, Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland; ᵇTurku Institute for Advanced Studies, University of Turku, Turku, Finland; ᶜResearch Association Suoni, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

The purpose of this special issue of *Popular Music and Society* is to bring together a series of articles that deal with issues related to music, digitalization, and democracy. Since the 1980s, the impact of digitalization on the production, dissemination, and consumption of music has been immense. Scholars, artists, and policymakers have depicted this as a "digital turn," which can simultaneously be both a potential enhancement of, and a threat to, cultural life. Business futurists and technological optimists have described the increasing financial possibilities created by the new lower cost structures, and visionaries have predicted a greater cultural and creative freedom for larger population groups (e.g. Anderson; Fox; Frost; Lessig). On the other hand, others have questioned the scope of the structural changes in the music industries, emphasizing the reintermediating forces at play and criticizing unfounded hopes of increasing creative activities (e.g. Elberse; Galuszka; Jones). While many of these writings offer a thorough description of technological, industrial, and economic developments, less has been written about the cultural dimensions of the changes.

In this connection, it is interesting to ask whether digitalization really has had an impact on, for example, the diversity, equity, access, participation, inclusion, or fairness of music cultures. These kinds of issues are often lumped together in discourses on "democracy" which, despite criticism of their vagueness (e.g. Hesmondhalgh, 2019), seem to persist in popular music studies. From this perspective, it is interesting to ask how music and democracy and the discourses surrounding these phenomena have been influenced by the introduction of digital technology. This includes approaching digitalization and culture not as separate entities linked by a deterministic causal connection but as two sides of the same coin, functioning in mutual interdependency. It is also worth making a division between a narrow "digitization," or the technological methods of converting analogue material into digital bits, and a wider "digitalization," which refers to the way in which many domains of social life are restructured around digital communication and infrastructures (compare, e.g. Brennen and Kreiss). Here we also follow Williamson and Cloonan in adopting a pluralistic model of the music industries which goes beyond a concentration on the recording sector to incorporate live music, the copyright industries, etc.

**CONTACT** Johannes Brusila ✉ jbrusila@abo.fi ▤ Department of Musicology, Åbo Akademi University, Fabriksgatan 2, Turku FIN-20500, Finland

In this introduction, we will give a brief overview of some key approaches to studying the interplay between music, technological development, and democracy. Our aim is not to give a complete summary of the whole research field, but to consider some of the complex issues at play in the attempts to define and analyze the issue of democratization. Thus, we will start off by discussing the dystopian and utopian visions that have permeated much of the debates for a long time. We will then focus on how digitalization has been explained to increase accessibility to culture, often summarized in the concept "democratization of culture," after which we move on to digitalization's potential for so-called "cultural democratization," which refers to greater possibilities for personal creation and self-expression. Finally, we will present briefly the articles included in this special issue.

## Dystopian and Utopian Visions

From a historical perspective, digitalization is of course only a new stage in a long line of technological development. Indeed, many interpretations of the developments in recent decades largely follow the same lines of thought as previous explanations of the relationships between technology and music.

For the more dystopian visionaries (e.g. Postman), digitalization is the latest step in the decline of human culture. The roots of many of these pessimistic visions can be traced to the early critique of industrialization and mass media, which were often portrayed as leading to bland mass culture (for summary see Storey 19–29). As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, the social elite saw music that was produced and disseminated by new technology as a threat to both high culture and to the (newly constructed) "folk culture." Probably the most significant formulations of the pessimistic scenarios can be found in Frankfurt School's theories about the destructive role of the modern cultural industry in creating escapist and standardized products that lead to standardized reactions among the passive consumers (e.g. Horkheimer and Adorno).

On the other hand, the more optimistic utopians (e.g. Negroponte) see technological progress as offering new ways of increasing social and cultural wellbeing. In these more enthusiastic explanation models, the relationship between the cultural industry and consumers is not built on a technologically framed one-way relationship where the cultural industry controls the mass production and, therefore, also the consumption of culture. Instead, technology is optimistically explained to increase the agency of the individuals to express themselves and reform older ideals and norms, and to use the media disseminated culture for resistive and subversive purposes (e.g. Fiske).

In parallel with these influential perspectives, cultural disputes, and policy debates have, in recent decades, been affected by a tension between two paradigms that are often summarized in the concepts of "democratization of culture" and "cultural democratization" (Evrard). Democratization of culture refers to an effort to offer everyone in society equal access to culture. This idea is built on the ideals of popular education and general enlightenment, which expect the rulers of society to ensure that the best art is available to everyone, regardless of demographic factors. In contrast to this approach, which initially assumes that there is a high culture defined as worthy of dissemination, can be found the idea of cultural democratization, which is based on everyone's free will. The goal of cultural democratization is for all citizens to be able to choose which culture they wish to

embrace and also through which culture they want to express themselves. In other words, cultural democratization shifts the focus from how citizens passively consume culture defined as valuable by others, to the importance of having the opportunity to actively choose and produce cultural artifacts of one's own. In several countries in the Western world, the emphasis in cultural policy has gone from democratization of culture to cultural democratization, but without the previous views having been completely replaced by the newer ones (see, e.g. the approach of the Arts Council England). Simultaneously this shift has been accompanied in many places by a move away from the subsidizing of the "high" arts toward using the arts to drive the economy forward via the "creative industries" (Cloonan). It goes without saying that these thought patterns are also found in debates about the impact of digitalization on cultural life and therefore we will move on to discussing how digitalization has affected the possibilities for disseminating music in the democratization of culture tradition, after which we will focus on the so-called cultural democratization idea of increasing opportunities to expressing oneself.

## Democratization of Culture

Digital technology has undoubtedly offered new and previously unimagined opportunities to disseminate music. Thus, it also has a massive potential for the so-called democratization of culture by increasing the accessibility of music throughout society and in remote locations. Before the development of sound recording and reproduction, only people who had the knowledge to play and create or who were physically located in the same room as the performers, could have access to what we today cherish as canonized musical heritage. Although analogue technology offered a great leap forward, current inexpensive and accessible digital possibilities feel almost limitless. Not unexpectedly, both national high culture institutions and subcultures use Internet 's ability to distribute their material to wider audiences. This includes both offering the music to those already interested and those with no previous knowledge of the music (e.g. Chávez-Aguayo, 2016 211).

At the same time, critics have emphasized that the central issue is not whether it has become easier to spread music or if it has become easily accessible, but what forms of music are spread through the new media. For example, Brunel takes as his starting point audience research that shows how an emerging "digital culture" has led to the decline of traditionally esteemed forms of culture, such as literature and classical music, and thereby to a situation, which from the perspective of the democratization of culture thesis "is unacceptable to everyone concerned about the equality of opportunity and those unwilling to accept seeing culture reserved for an elite, with masses limited to entertainment concocted by the cultural industries" (2). Not only has the new situation led to a decline in high-art's position in public life, but also to a situation where for example classical music is forced to repurpose itself in order to meet the demands of its new media context (see, e.g. Cook 13). The activities of the new media are based on the ideals of the free market economy and the idea that the people should be offered the culture they want. However, according to critics (e.g. Hesmondhalgh, 2019), this is just a rhetorical chimera that hides the fact that the needs of the people have been created by the media and the supply is not necessarily in line with the needs or well-being of the people.

In fact, the massive upsurge in options that have become available due to digitalization does not necessarily lead to cultural pluralism but, paradoxically, to its opposite. According to Schwartz, 2008, a choice overload in culture will make people opt for the same old thing as a way to avoid facing unlimited options, rely on filtering mechanisms rather than on themselves, and become more passive in their participation in cultural life. Thus, there are maybe even growing demands for controlling, or influencing the process of selection and flow in order to democratize music culture in a vibrant and creative way. How this would work in practice, however, is a more difficult nut to crack as the basic structure of the Internet tends to counteract older social institutions' attempts to control or direct the audiences' online activities. Instead, new media institutions, such as streaming services, have become important gatekeepers with their algorithmic mechanisms that filter available options for the listener.

The democratizing potential of the Internet may perhaps lie more in its ability to circumvent cemented national institutions and policy decisions thereby enriching the diversity of media offerings. The transnational nature of digitalization benefits not only the large media companies but also smaller cultural formations. For many minorities, the loss of analogue record sales has not had any major relevance, as there has never been any economically viable record market for them, and digitalization has offered new ways to reach out to both members of the group and those outside it (Brusila, "Maximum"). Among indigenous peoples, the Internet has, for example, created cosmopolitanism, music revivals, activism, new ways of becoming recognized and ways to assert authorship over representation of alterity – thus offering a more accurate picture of themselves to the outside world (Hilder 7). The networks offered by digital media have allowed new forms of decentralized subcultural and transnational communities to emerge (Brusila, "'Impact'" 10).

However, it is also necessary to remember that the reconfiguration of the national level can also mean lesser national, institutional, and legally cemented support, which in some cases have been indispensable to ensuring the viability of these activities (Bissonett and Arcand). It is also an indisputable fact that not everyone has equal access to all music; the fruits of the so-called digital revolution have simply not been evenly distributed among all sections of the world's population. This "digital divide" should not be framed in simplified categories such as a North-South axis, because "Just as there is no single Internet around the world, the Internet does not represent the whole world of digitality" (Tan 254–55). Technical inventions tend to lead to structural changes in industry, which opens up new opportunities for actors and audiences who have the economic, technical and social potential to take advantage of the changes, but many are left out or see their future collapse (see, e.g. Stobart). It is equally worth remembering that the digital opportunities are not only used in democratizing purposes, but also by forces which want to apply the new technology to spread anti-democratic messages that were previously blocked by the established radio stations, record companies, distributors, and stores. In fact, the development has not led to a straightforward realization of either optimistic or pessimistic visions, but rather to new complex structures where both large transnational technology companies and people who are active in social media renegotiate democratic ideals and practices, as was shown, for example, during the presidential elections in the US in 2021 when Facebook and Twitter both offered a free platform for deviant comments and later imposed censorship on some of the comments. It should also

be noted that the rise of the digital recording industry has been accompanied by the growth of the live music sector which, prior to Covid, was the economically dominant sector of the wider music industries. The impact of digitalization has also been felt in this arena, in particular in the rise of the "secondary market" for concert tickets, facilitated by online platforms and raising its own questions about access to culture (Behr and Cloonan).

According to a persistent optimistic idea the new, lower cost, structures created by digitalization should lead to increased financial opportunities for even the smallest niche markets, subcultures, and genres (Anderson; Fox; Frost). However, research has shown that rather than a radical restructuring, reintermediation characterizes the changes in the music industries, and still only few products form the vast majority of income and most of the products still do not produce any income (Elberse; Galuszka; Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Jones). This is reinforced by, for example, the streaming services' compensation agreements, which are to the advantage of the few stars and large companies (e.g. Muikku; Nordgård), and although the issue has caused political debate in many countries, so far no changes in jurisdiction have been made on national or international level. (See, e.g. the inquiry held within the UK's Parliament, "Economics of Music Streaming.")

For example, Spotify describes itself as "a democratizing tool" that offers a larger access to the artists' production than hit radio (Sirén), but the majority of the artists available on the service are hardly ever, or never listened to. The opportunities, but also threats, that the company's activities include are paradoxically summarized in the slogan "Sounds and stories that once remained local . . . are now GLOBAL" (Spotify), which the company used when launching its new strategy in 2021. The local musicians now not only have the advantage, but also the disadvantage of competing with the biggest international stars and industries. For example, after Spotify's launch in Finland, streaming has increasingly concentrated on fewer and fewer big hits and the three largest international major record companies have increased their market share to a historically high 90% (Jokelainen), at the same time as the overall market share of the domestic repertoire has dropped from 61% in 2009 to 34% in 2020 (Suomen).

It is hard to refute the large impact that digitalization has had on the accessibility of music and, following the logic outlined above, consequently on the democratization of culture. Perhaps the major problem is that the existing institutional solutions on issues related to democratization, such as national legislation and international agreement, inevitably lag behind. With reference to freedom of expression, streaming services and social media can create their own transnational algorithm-based distribution systems, and this profit-driven so-called "black box" is, despite its claims of democratization, beyond both transparency and control (compare, e.g. Eriksson etal.; Hesmondhalgh, 2019; Prey). At the same time, national public service broadcasting companies, which, for example, in Europe have been expected to guarantee diversity and counterbalance commercial actors, are forced to adjust themselves to the new media landscape and spread their products on transnational internet platforms such as YouTube and Facebook in order to reach and attract their audiences (Brusila and Ramstedt). The question of

democratic governance and control of what music becomes available and how is, in other words, not resolved, but rather the subject of a constant renegotiation as a result of technological change.

## Cultural Democratization

Digital technology has not only affected the accessibility of culture, but it has also changed the conditions for the production of culture. Although digital equipment and software often has been expensive and required special skills when it has been launched, it has usually become accessible for a fraction of the money soon after that. In the 1980s broad expertise, significant investments, and skilled people were required to create a multitrack recording with a greater range of sounds, not to mention what was needed to press records and distribute them in any larger scale. In this sense, digitalization has offered new opportunities for individuals and different population groups to create themselves, choose their modes of expression and increase their cultural autonomy. In other words, digitalization has had an impact on so-called cultural democratization.

One key issue in the development is the new relationship between what, based on the ideas of the Frankfurt School, used to be explained as an active cultural industry and a passive collective of consumers. According to some theorists, convergences between older and new media have made it possible for the audience to engage in collectively creating "user-generated content," "participatory culture," or "convergence culture" (e.g. Jenkins). The renegotiations of the distinctions between producers and consumers have been summarized in concepts such as "presumption" (Ritzer and Jurgenson) and "pro-dusage" (Bruns), emphasizing the restructuring of creative practices that previously were based on one-way communication. The technological and cultural changes also have consequences for institutions outside the core industry. For example, music learning is undergoing major changes that are often described by using the discourse of democracy as people study things on their own with the support of online materials online (e.g. Partti and Westerlund). As a result of the general development, the relationship between amateurs and professionals changes as "new amateurs" (Prior) pluralize and diversify the body of creators.

The new do-it-yourself practices, including sonic remixing and video mashups, are often explained as challenging existing structures of power. According to Lawrence Lessig, for example, the cultural industry's products are increasingly adopted and transformed into new forms of "remix culture" by individuals of various backgrounds, leading to practices and end-results that are manifestations of the democratizing potential of digital technology. In the most optimistic visions, technology has finally realized the idea of "semiotic democracy" in a refined way, where consumers not only give new meanings to the products of the cultural industry (as in Fiske's original idea) but also rework the products to the extent that elements of the products come to represent new, oppositional, meanings and values. Following this positive line of thinking, digitalization should offer the potential to increase social inclusion, promote diversity and gender equality, force the audience to review many of the stereotypical concepts and presumptions of social groups, as well as give marginalized population groups a voice.

However, as with the democratization of culture thesis, the idea of the cultural democratization via digital technology, has also been met with criticism. A digital recoding of material from the international entertainment industry can assign these cultural elements new meanings, but they can also re-disseminate existing meanings and reaffirm their importance (Joo), or simply function as blank postmodern pastiche (Jameson), rather than functioning as tools of empowerment. In many instances, the key idea of the cultural remixes can be a humorous effect, which is simply based on the pleasure of recognizing the reference to original material, making the cover more a pastiche (Jameson) than a critical parody. It is probably safest to say that digitalization can both be embraced and dismissed for the ways in which it simultaneously can both support and suppress self-determination, notions of subjectivity, empowerment, and cultural diversity (e.g. Hilder 11–12).

As Hesmondhalgh succinctly has argued, merely praising the positive opportunities offered by digitalization easily leads to a denial of the larger economic and political frameworks. The cultural logics of community and openness can be in tension with the corporate logics of the new media, as is the case with YouTube (e.g. Burgess and Green 151). These divergences are often made concrete in disputes about how to deal with the copyright and contractual issues that arise when individuals push the legal boundaries. Despite visions of renegotiations of the intellectual property systems, no fundamental changes have occurred. The idea of a creator's moral or economic right, or a market based on intellectual property have not disappeared. The ones that suffer the most damage in financial terms if copyright is stretched to the breaking point are the big companies, but in reality the independent producers and individual musicians can be hit hardest in relative terms as they lose their already small income. Major music publishers, record companies and collecting agencies have, on the other hand, developed new forms of exploiting the market by, for example, successfully campaigning for the extension of the time-limits under which sound recordings receive legal protection.

It is also obvious that not everyone has equal opportunities to embrace the new technologies for creating their own modes of expression. The do-it-yourself culture requires money and knowledge, at the same time as it also incorporates its own distinctions in terms of cultural capital, which means that it is not necessarily open to everyone (Kanai 128). The fast development of technology places demands on musicians, who are increasingly consuming technology in order to be able to create within the changing framework. In this situation, it has, for example, not necessarily become easier for amateurs with career ambitions or alternative artists to become professionals. Solutions such as crowd-funding do not necessarily support the pursuit of independence, but connect the artists to the existing production system, thereby partly filling gaps in the dominant system but not really constituting an alternative to it (Galuszka and Brzozowska). From a pessimistic perspective, the rhetoric surrounding the do-it-yourself solutions can be seen to articulate increasingly prominent neoliberal discourse, which emphasizes the need for individuals to take responsibility of their own life, rather than to seek or expect support from state or corporate institutions (Ellis 3).

Overall, the new production technologies and the Internet seem to have increased access to new ways of expression and a potential for cultural democratization. However, this does not mean that the new digital business environment automatically leads to changes in existing power structures. The Internet reproduces and reconfigures prevailing social structures and practices, and "availability in itself is not a sufficient condition to encourage diverse populations to engage in digital music production" (Prior 89). In other words, the potential for cultural democratization exists, but to the extent to which such expectations are fulfilled is a much more complex question.

## The Articles

In general, digitalization has undoubtedly had a large impact on popular music. However, it is important to avoid simplifying the internal causal relationships between technological development and music, especially bearing in mind the risks of technological determinism. It is not meaningful to approach technology as an outside force, which unilaterally encroaches on music and transforms it into something different from before. Technology and music have always existed and developed in mutual interdependency, and one is always an integral part of the other. New digital technology has also not totally vanquished or subsumed its predecessors, or the practices related to them. In fact, these processes are complex and influenced by several regulations, norms and practices, which lead to many, often contradictory results.

Instead of trying to assess whether the relationships between digital and musical progress have led to one outcome, either democratic or undemocratic, it is probably more meaningful to state that the interaction between the two has been manifold and context bound. As we have shown above, fears have been expressed about the negative impact of both increasing individual freedom and increasing institutional power over individuals. In other words, it is not a change in the balance between cultural freedom and control as such that worries critics, but the wrong kind of freedom or control that might be the outcome of the development. This also means that an analysis of music, digitalization and democracy must be contextualized. By focusing on case studies and analyzing them inductively within their particular frameworks, it is possible to widen the perspectives and offer new insights in the field. Thus, this special issue of *Popular Music and Society* illuminates this topic through five articles that each focus on different perspectives on the subject.

Kai Arne Hansen and Steven Gamble's "Saturation Season: Inclusivity, Queerness, and Aesthetics in the New Media Practices of Brockhampton" is an analysis of the American hip-hop group's self-released trilogy, which exemplifies how digital technology has not only offered new opportunities for audiences to access music and musicians to access audiences, but also for both parties to interact during the production, dissemination, and consumption of music. Simultaneously, the article discusses how online practices deepen both inclusive and exclusory discourses around music.

Digitalization's impact on democratic processes at the intersections between culture and politics is studied by Adam Behr in his article "Music, Digitalization, and Democratic Elections: The Changing Soundtrack of Electoral Politics in the UK." Behr analyzes how structural changes in the media contexts and available technology have influenced the

position of music in UK General Elections, revealing how complex the issues related to regulation can be when parties, individual politicians, musicians and the audience negotiate their position in the changing media environment.

The problem of balancing between individual freedom and institutionalized social control in the dissemination of music is concretized in Sam de Boise's "Digitalization and the Musical Mediation of Anti-Democratic Ideologies in Alt-Right Forums," which shows how digitalization not only offers possibilities for democratic interaction, but also for groupings that have as their ultimate aim to oppose common ideas of democracy. According to de Boise, algorithmic architecture can reinforce extremer tendencies and social media can offer platforms that evade regulation easier than in the pre-digital media.

Simplistic notions of equal cultural democratization are criticized in Emilia Barna's "Between Cultural Policies, Industry Structures and the Household: A Feminist Perspective on Digitalization and Musical Careers in Hungary." Barna argues from a feminist standpoint that despite new technological opportunities, home-based musical creation is still framed by national policy decisions, rigorous industrial structures and traditional gender relations within the household.

Lastly, Paul Harkins and Nick Prior critically discuss the use of the term democratization in popular music studies in their article "(Dis)locating Democratization: Music Technologies in Practice." Based on an analysis of the availability, affordability and use of, for example, the E-mu SP-12, the Roland TB-303 and game consoles, Harkins and Prior question the extent to which new digital equipment really has been inexpensive game-changers when they were launched, and to what extent the whole concept democratic suits descriptions of processes of this kind.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributors

*Johannes Brusila* is professor of musicology at Åbo Akademi University, Turku, Finland. He has worked in the areas of popular music studies, ethnomusicology and the cultural study of music. One of his main research interests is the study of music and minorities. He has published several articles and co-edited a book on the Swedish-speaking minority of Finland, and been director of the research project The impact of digitalization on minority music: Finland-Swedish music culture as case study.

*Martin Cloonan* is the Director of the Turku Institute for Advanced Studies (TIAS) at the University of Turku, Finland. His research interests focus on the political economy of the music industries and issues of freedom of expression. Martin is coauthor of a three part history of the UK's live music industry, published by Routledge. He is a Director of Live Music Exchange (livemusicexchange.org) and sometimes sings in public.

*Kim Ramstedt* is a postdoctoral researcher affiliated with the University of Helsinki. Ramstedt's research has mostly focused on the mediation and movement of music. After his PhD research about DJs as cultural brokers, Ramstedt has studied the digital mediation of music and culture in the context of the Swedish speaking population in Finland. Currently Ramstedt is studying constructions of race in musical encounters in the research project "Advancing social justice through activist music research."

## ORCID

Johannes Brusila  http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4129-8635
Martin Cloonan  http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2592-0968
Kim Ramstedt  http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8408-9361

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