“This machine will not communicate”: The Decentralization of Authority in Radiohead’s Music and Digital Media

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Abstract

This study examines how the British band Radiohead have decentralized their authority over their lyrics, music, song titles, artwork, music videos, Web sites, and business practices to allow listeners to participate in the meaning-making process. In pursuit of this goal, the band has supported and developed digital spaces for fan interpretations, playlists, and remixes. As a result, Radiohead have empowered their fans to act as cultural intermediaries, curating and sharing personal interpretations, histories, and collections of the band’s work through digital media.

Keywords

Cultural intermediaries, curation, digital culture, digital fandom, music business, participatory culture, popular music, Radiohead

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Introduction

Throughout their career, the British band Radiohead have decentralized their authority over their creative works by supporting and developing digital spaces for fan interpretations, playlists, and remixes. From the very first Radiohead Web site, which presented disconnected lyrics as puzzles for the fans to interpret; to their "pay what you want" sales model, which asked fans to decide the cost of Radiohead’s new album rather than pay a pre-determined price; to the current Radiohead Public Library, which allows fans to assemble the band’s collective musical and artistic works as the fan sees fit rather than experiencing the works according to the artists’ wishes; Radiohead have allowed their fans to be cultural intermediaries, creating and curating personal collections of Radiohead music, artwork, and memorabilia in a way that is at odds with current gatekeeping practices in online music curation. In these ways, Radiohead have

empowered their fans to contribute to and even serve as the authorities of their creative works and history as few artists have done.

However, research into the ways in which Radiohead decentralize their authority over their works has been limited, despite this topic's significance to their enduring appeal, especially at a time when cultural intermediaries increasingly control the public's awareness, perception, and consumption of music. Instead, scholars such as Carys Wyn Jones (2005), Lisa Leblanc (2005), Curtis White (2005), Allan Moore (2005; Moore and Ibrahim, 2005), Davis Schneiderman (2005), Greg Hainge (2005), Mark Greif (2016), and Mark B. N. Hansen (2005) have focused on the band's authenticity, artwork, genre-bending music, and politics. Journalists such as Josh Tyrangiel (2007), Sasha Frere-Jones (2006), David Fricke (2000, 2001), Dai Griffiths (2004), David Hadju (2008), Scott Plagenhoef (2006), Alex Ross (2001), and Martin Rudolph Scherzinger (2005) have discussed the band's business practices, technical skill, and status within pop music. Finally, the authors of book-length works on Radiohead such as Tim Footman (2007), Jonathan Hale (1999), Martin Clarke (2010), Phil Rose (2019), and Mac Randall (2011) have foregrounded the band's recording history and cultural relevance.

Thus, this study will examine how Radiohead have decentralized their authority over their lyrics, music, song titles, artwork, music videos, Web sites, and business practices to allow listeners to participate in the meaning-making process. We will begin with an overview of cultural intermediary theory, curation theory, and music fandom in order to situate Radiohead's subversive practices into a broader context. We will then analyze Radiohead's music, lyrics, and digital media through the lenses of cultural intermediary theory as well as theories of digital curation, noting how they have consistently avoided acting as authorities over the interpretation of their music. Finally, we will connect these theories to both their music and digital "extras" to show a career-long trend toward emphasizing their fans' interpretive and curatorial authority over the band's own.

Cultural Intermediaries, Curation, and Music Fandom

The concept of cultural intermediaries is typically credited to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, an empirical study of how economic and cultural capital relate to "taste." Bourdieu defined cultural intermediaries as "tastemakers" whose work is integral to a consumption-based, or capitalist, society (1984; Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2014: 15). Cultural intermediaries can be argued as consequences of "the new middle class" and are so called because of their roles in "the mediation of production and consumption" and/or as "market actors involved in the qualification of goods, mediating between economy and culture" (Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2012: 551). Cultural intermediaries emerged from the *new petite bourgeoisie*, a social group whose occupations included "presentation and representation" (sales, marketing, advertising, and fashion); "medical and social assistance" (therapy, nutrition); and "cultural production and organization" (youth and recreation leaders, tutors, media producers, and presenters) (Bourdieu, 1984: 359). As a social

class situated beneath the *haute*, or *high bourgeoisie*, the *petite bourgeoisie* traditionally were controlled by, and therefore struggled against, the upper classes. Cultural intermediaries, as one branch of the *petite bourgeoisie*, decide what is legitimate and valued by a culture; their authority and expertise about what is good and what is not are what enable them to increase the marketability of the goods they are promoting (558). While their societal position doesn't allow them to directly affect consumerism, they instead enable consumers to manifest their own tastes and engage in a consumerist lifestyle (Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2014: 20). In music specifically, cultural intermediaries try to "create as many social, cultural and economic relationships with as many consumers as possible" for as long as possible (Fairchild, 2014: 126).

The accessibility of digital technologies has made the creation, distribution, and discovery of new music more widespread than ever before. From an economics point of view, the "platformization" or the "penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems" of cultural productions, such as digital music, renders the industry contingent, or dependent, on select digital platforms (namely, Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft), while digital music itself is "malleable, modular in design, and informed by datafied user feedback, open to constant revision and recirculation" (Nieborg and Poell, 2018: 4276). As digital platforms largely prioritize algorithmic curation and, therefore, "viral" content (4283), who makes decisions about what music is worth listening to and how has changed. While radio DJs, journalists, and record store staff were previously considered "tastemakers" who could help guide the discerning listener to the best new hit or the old classic that would perfectly fit their taste, professional curators and automated recommendation services at streaming platforms are now the "new gatekeepers" (Bonini and Gandini, 2019: 1). Hundreds of human music curators are employed at streaming platforms, including Spotify, Apple Music, and Google Play; these curators, constituting a "global elite," work in conjunction with automated algorithmic technologies to determine what music gets added or excluded to successful and widely consumed music playlists (4).

There is still space for the "old" gatekeepers, however, as research points to the potential for face-to-face interactions between human curators and consumers to "generate more trust, richness and valuable forms of information or curation" than these recommendation technologies (Jansson and Hracs, 2018). Respected music curators, such as favorite DJs, can still be influential in virtual spaces (Jansson and Hracs, 2018). In addition, online music stores have sought to imitate their physical counterparts by "strategically manipul[at]ing what users see on their 'home screens' to enhance engagement, personalization and satisfaction" (Jansson and Hracs, 2018). These digital storefronts mimic the same market-driven motivations that have influenced radio, MTV, and record stores for decades, thus leading to a homogenization of curated music despite the proliferation of independent artists distributing their work online (Jansson and Hracs, 2018).

Davis writes that "A theory of digital curation is therefore a theory of attention within a saturated attention economy: how people allocate it and how they acquire and control it, for themselves" (2016: 770). Curation, as one expression of this use value, can be productive, involving choices about what to share and with whom, or consumptive, involving choices about what to consume

and from whom (Davis, 2016: 772-774). Similarly, the technology behind digital platforms plays a role in what and with whom content is shared. Network curation allows the sharer to determine who sees their content, while curatorial code refers to the information architecture, algorithms, and other technical underpinnings that allow for online curation (777). As an example, a music playlist curator, via productive curation, might choose to make their playlist publicly available. A follower, or consumptive curator, on the sharing platform might choose to hide all new posts by the playlist curator (network curation). The platform itself might promote the new playlist to, for example, 10% of the platform's users (curatorial code) (777). Therefore, curators, consumers, and platform designers make numerous choices that affect the likelihood of created and curated content ever being discovered. The agency of the consumer in discovering curated content is deeply reliant on the relationship between curator and platform, as "Collectively, personal productive and consumptive decisions create boundaries for agentic curation among users' networks" (777).

Furthermore, the curatorial choices made by music curators not only serve to communicate the curators' status within society, as theorized by Bourdieu, but also to construct specific identities for the curators themselves (Barna, 2017).

The motivations for individuals and companies to engage in music curation vary but fall into a few discrete categories:

1. Economic: music curation can be an income stream for music bloggers and professional curators at streaming platforms
2. Influential: record labels and music streaming platforms can strengthen their own brands and also dictate terms to music distributors and suppliers; non-commercial entities, like state-run radio, can also promote cultural importance
3. Psychic: individuals who experience satisfaction from curating and sharing music do so for purely non-monetary rewards, such as opportunities for engagement with other music lovers

(Jansson and Hracs, 2018).

While economic and influence-based curation practices are what primarily drive music sales, the "psychic" motivations for music curation are what can develop a community of music fans who will support an artist's output regardless of current market trends. Similarly, self-curation by musicians, such as through the selective re-release of archival recordings by musician-run labels, allows creators to intervene and contribute to the historical record and critical accounts of the creator's output, bypassing the work of outside curators and cultural intermediaries (Atton, 2014). The traditional interpretation of curation in a museum context "would once have emphasised the fixed contents within which collections and exhibitions were presented to the public, where meaning was preserved alongside the artefact" (414). When viewed through the lens of "new museology," however, the meaning of historical objects is open to reinterpretation considering present-day cultural resources and contexts (414). In the case of progressive rock band King Crimson, self-curated reissues of live and studio performances allow the artist to reinterpret the content and historical context of their own work beyond that of mainstream

popular music journalism (416). The collection of these recordings into a boxed set, along with reproductions of merchandise and memorabilia like ticket stubs and promotional posters, allow the purchaser to feel like they own a “special part of history” (418). Even the art of remixing and remastering the recordings in such a set creates opportunities for new experiences that can alter the listener’s perception of the value of a musical work or a particular performance. In the case of King Crimson, *The Complete Recordings* are remixed to highlight the contributions of percussionist Jaime Muir and enhance founding member Robert Fripp’s argument that the group was inherently collectively improvisational, in contrast with other so-called progressive rock bands, thus repositioning and reframing the group’s contributions to popular music (418-420).

Thus far, we have focused on the respective roles of professional cultural intermediaries and of the artist themselves in music curation. However, in the internet age, the role of the music fan in curation, and the relationship between fan and artist, cannot be ignored. Fans who create curated lists of music fill the role of the prosumer, or one who both produces and consumes, a term coined by Alvin Toffler in 1980’s *The Third Wave*. Though commonly used to refer to musicians adopting digital technologies to create and distribute their own music (Dumbreck and McPherson, 2016; Gilmore and Beech, 2015; Strachan, 2017), the unpaid music curator is also a participant in this aspect of the online media landscape thanks to virtual music curation channels and reaps the psychic benefits of such engagement. Jansson and Hracs argue that “this raises the potential for established curators to be bypassed, traditional industry hierarchies to be undermined, and markets to be democratized,” though they also acknowledge that these same technologies can be used by existing “well-entrenched players” and “global firms” (2018: 1606).

The rise of new internet technologies that enabled fans to participate more visibly in the curation of music playlists similarly and inextricably changed the relationship between fan and artist. Nancy Baym, noted internet researcher and expert on fan culture, writes,

“Just as industrialization and digital media changed the work of being a musician, they changed experiences and opportunities for audiences. While musicians dealt with the challenges of building and maintaining careers in the face of the new realities of their field, audiences developed new histories of participating with one another on their own terms. Now, even as musicians struggle to find their ways in an internet-mediated music world, audiences flourish. The internet has pushed their “hitherto marginal (and marginalized) tendencies into the very mainstream of media use.”

(2018: 79).

The fan, differentiated from other listeners due to their feeling of investment in the object of their attention, is yet another form of the “new gatekeeper,” with an undeniable impact on what information, interpretation, and version of an artists’ work gets shared. The fan not only purchases and uses music products but also engages in the social aspect of music production via the development of relationships with artists and with each other.

This subcultural power is exemplified by the music fan communities who took advantage of the networking capabilities afforded by the internet well before music industry professionals did (80). Even as musicians grew to appreciate the potential uses of the internet as a marketing and promotion tool, it was rare for musicians to participate in online fan communities (103). Those who did attempt to join in in the 2000s discovered that, “Musicians, once the powerful, elusive rock stars who dropped from the sky every four years and let you listen to their album if you were lucky, land now in a realm where the audience is deep in relations with one another and their own participatory practices of meaning making” (103-104). Artists therefore must strike a careful balance between audience participation and control over their own artistic output (110). Baym identifies three primary control strategies employed by artists:

1. Territorializing, or controlling the location of fans’ participation in their work on their own Web sites
2. Invoking intellectual property rights to manage music, lyrics, images, and more through legal means
3. Datafying audiences to assess engagement and determine return on investment (Baym, 2018: 110-116).

But Baym also argues that music is inherently participatory. Commercial artists must wield at least some modicum of control over their output to be financially viable (110). There are two primary strategies for engaging fans within the existing structure of the music industry. The first is to accept fans’ autonomy as listeners, interpreters, circulators of live recordings and remixes, and creators of new works using the artist’s music (120-124). The second is to let fans help the band, whether through financial backing for touring and recording, through pay-what-you-want album releases (to be discussed in more detail in the next section), or through enlisting fans to help with promotions (124-126).

Inviting such a level of fan involvement into an artist’s business practices can be a double-edged sword, though. “Gift economics” can create obligations between artist and fan that do not exist in a market economy in which transactions are complete and free of constraints once finalized (130). In the “gift economy,” fans may feel that they are owed something, whether it be guest list spots, free music, or otherwise, in exchange for their contributions (130). In a 2018 interview with Cherie Hu, Baym further articulates how increased access can help fans and artists develop closer relationships, but fans may also find that their favorite artists may not meet their expectations in a purely social sense. What makes an artist “authentic,” long an essential criterion to many fans’ appreciation of a particular artist, is far more complicated when the fan has daily access to where a musician lives, what they eat, and how they vote. Where once fans could fill in the blanks and assume their favorite artists lived as they expected, the opportunity for artists to unwittingly dispel those fantasies has increased. Yet, when an artist fulfills these criteria well, it too can lead to increased and enhanced engagement with fans (Hu, 2018).

Thus, the rise of internet culture initiated the rise of the music fan as cultural intermediary, working in conjunction and in opposition to professional music curators as well as the artists themselves. This threefold attack on music curation has had an undeniably disruptive effect on

how listeners find new music and how the authority over a piece of music's meaning and interpretation is determined. In the following sections, we will provide a chronological history of Radiohead's output and analyze it through the lenses of cultural intermediary theory and theories of digital curation. For the purposes of this article, Radiohead products were defined as both traditional releases (albums, singles, and films, to name a few) and nontraditional digital projects, such as Web sites, online videos, and apps. Relevant data sources for analysis were selected using the Radiohead Public Library, a near-comprehensive database of Radiohead's traditional and nontraditional releases, as well as additional products identified through a robust literature review of interdisciplinary sources about the band.

Radiohead: Music, Digital Media, and Narrative Subversion

Radiohead have long been disrupters in the music industry, repeatedly defying industry trends while enjoying passionate support from their fans, surprising even their record label at times. Having gained popularity before the proliferation of digital music platforms, Radiohead were well established before the era of "winner takes all" in which a small number of superstars could dominate an oversaturated music market (Coelho and Mendes, 2019). At the same time, they have explored and, ultimately, benefitted from the ability to control the release of "extras," such as B-sides, unreleased tracks, live recordings, and more, using online platforms outside of the major record label release system. In light of Davis's theory of digital curation, the ways in which Radiohead have released digital information in their roles as productive curators both take advantage of and subvert the current internet landscape. By frequently bypassing the restrictions created by platformization and hosting their digital projects on their own web platforms, the band has undermined the network curation and curatorial code that would otherwise be out of their control. However, that is not to say these "curatorial boundaries," as Davis defines them, are completely mitigated; Radiohead can post whatever content they want on their Web sites but, as will be explored further in this section, they still need platforms (e.g., search engines) and cultural intermediaries (e.g., journalists, bloggers, radio DJs, and fans) to increase the chances of their productive curation being discovered (2016: 776).

Still, Radiohead's strategies for making these products available increase the agency of their fans, or consumptive curators, and disrupt how commercial music Web sites, streaming platforms, and other 20th–21st century online music venues typically work. The primary motivation of Radiohead's curation seems to be "psychic," as defined by Jansson and Hracs, rather than economic or influential—though it could be argued that any content put out by an artist has the effect of increasing the artist's influence and, therefore, economic viability (2018). In Baym's theory of artist control and participation, Radiohead exemplify the careful balance that must be exercised when territorializing fan participation while also accepting fan autonomy and inviting fans to help in the music-making machine.

What follows is a brief overview and analysis of Radiohead's music and digital products through the lens of digital curation theory and curator motivation. Through this analysis, we will show

how Radiohead's methods of content curation prioritize their consumers' authority as cultural intermediaries.

The Emergence of Radiohead's Fans as Cultural Intermediaries

For much of their career, Radiohead have occupied a curious place in the music industry. Initially positioned as a "Nirvana wannabe" (Kemp, 1997) due to the popularity of "Creep," the band leveraged their distaste for their first hit single into a career of subversive music-making and marketing. Though many reasons have been given as to why the band feel conflicted about the popularity of "Creep," the most persistent claims have been that the band did not intend for the song to be released, that the label released it anyway, and that fatigue from playing the song every night on their first tour embittered the band toward it.

However, it seems likely that talking about the song to the media played an additional and important role in the band's quick evolution into unwilling gatekeepers of their music's meaning. In particular, Thom Yorke, the lead singer of Radiohead, was repeatedly asked by the press what the song was about. His discomfort with the question led to starkly divergent answers from interview to interview, with some answers falling into self-contradiction, such as his statement to *The Boston Globe* that he was trying to "assert a sexual persona and on the other hand trying desperately to negate it" (Sullivan, 2012). In turn, many journalists asked Yorke if the song was merely a "joke" (Jennings, 1993).

Yorke's on- and off-stage frustration grew. On MTV's *Beach House*, an exhausted run-through of "Creep" was followed by a performance of the song "Anyone Can Play Guitar," during which Yorke stopped singing near the end and let out three full-throated screams to the apparent concern of guitarist Ed O'Brien (shreddycap, 2013a; shreddycap, 2013b). Off stage, Yorke was coping by writing the lead single for their next album: an anthem to disavowing any gatekeeping role over his music's meaning. "My Iron Lung" was an anti-"Creep," subverting the musical conventions of their previous hit while declaring "This, this is our new song / Just like the last one / A total waste of time." These lines seem to discourage listeners from reading any deeper meaning into the lyrics, yet Yorke also included ambiguous imagery related to "my uncle Bill" and "my Belisha beacon" in the chorus, inviting interpretation. Further, the song's central conceit seemed to obliquely reference his mixed feelings toward fame—that "Creep" was like an iron lung, its success simultaneously supplying the band with the means to live and entombing them.

This type of forbidding yet mysterious surface existed in many of the second album's song lyrics and promotional materials as well. The music video for "Just," for example, involves a businessman lying down on the sidewalk for unknown reasons. Through muted dialogue that is subtitled, pedestrians ask him to explain himself. They get no answers. Then, at the song's climax, a bystander screams for the man to explain himself, and he offers an answer—but one that is given almost entirely off screen without subtitles. All the viewer knows is that the answer, whatever it may have been, causes everyone in the gathered crowd to lie down on the sidewalk with him, motionless through the rest of the video while Yorke sings "You do it to yourself!" (Radiohead, 2015). What occurs at the end of the video is, of course, intentionally withheld and

up to the viewer. Thus, this choice demonstrates the band's increasing desire to let fans imbue their work with meaning.

With these developments in mind, it can be argued that Radiohead exposed three major themes in their work on their third, and most heralded, album, *OK Computer*: an interest in progressive musical structures and instrumentation; in subversions of mainstream culture and politics; and, most importantly for this article, in anti-consumerist practices, later epitomized by the "pay-what-you-want" model employed for their 2007 album *In Rainbows* (Clément, 2019). In a track-by-track analysis of *OK Computer*, Tembo writes about "denouement," stating, "The broader implication here is that human beings in global late capitalist society not only have their experience of modern life mediated but also accelerated by its various technological constituents" (2019). We argue that *OK Computer* was thoroughly designed and packaged to decentralize their authority over the music's order, words, and meaning, subverting the power of these technological constituents. Specific to the band's increasing musical experimentation, *OK Computer* introduced technology as a conceptual framework into Radiohead's new music, from the text-to-speech vocal recording in the song "Fitter Happier," to the topical android in "Paranoid Android," to the use of electronic instruments on songs throughout the album. Of note, not only are the vocals for "Fitter Happier" delivered entirely by the "Fred" voice on Yorke's Mac computer, the track is also represented on the back jacket of the CD's packaging to the right of the listed songs, in a smaller and lowercase font, but numbered consistently with the other songs, as if the band had included the song without being sure of its status.

The ambiguity around the official or unofficial status of the songs continues within the liner notes, where several lyrics are inconsistent with the audible lyrics on the record, many lines are struck out or contain non-alphanumeric characters, and the layout of the words breaks away from a top-to-bottom, left-to-right presentation, confusing their progression and performative function. Moreover, on several occasions, the band motivated fans to interpret and self-curate the songs themselves. One notable example of these statements is Yorke's interview with *Humo* magazine, in which he stated that he would not explain his lyrics to the interviewer because "sometimes your ideas get entangled with other ideas and then you have to apologize for the original idea because it doesn't make sense anymore" (Sutherland, 1997). Another example is Ed O'Brien's interview with *Rolling Stone* in which he stated, "I think *OK Computer* was a song too long. With our music, forty-five minutes is enough" (Fricke, 2001). In response to O'Brien's comment, which did not identify the song he wished to eliminate, online fans began posting their own track lists for the album, including alternate versions of the songs bootlegged from live shows and unreleased songs, two of which the fans unofficially titled "Big Ideas (Don't Get Any)" and "Big Boots," respectively. Within the *OK Computer* tour documentary, *Meeting People Is Easy*, Yorke is informed of these unofficial titles by MTV interviewer Matt Pinfield and expresses both his shock and appreciation that fans have already named the songs (Gee, 1998).

By no accident, a robust community of fan Web sites also emerged in 1997, including Green Plastic Radiohead, Follow Me Around, and At Ease Web, where fans regularly assembled snippets of band interviews covering every song the band had released or played live (Gordon, 2016). In essence, these Web sites became scrapbooks of quotes where fans could weave

together and share song interpretations that ignored the band's contradictory statements or centered the contradictions within their interpretations. Thus, in calling his music a "total waste of time" in "My Iron Lung," Yorke produced a fandom dead set on proving him wrong.

Innovating Music Production, Marketing, and Distribution Models through New Media

Radiohead were also one of the first popular music artists to create their own Web site. Unlike many artist Web sites, which serve primarily to promote new music releases, tours, merchandise, and achievements (Cliff, 2020), Radiohead's Web sites contain disjointed and unintelligible text, artwork, lyrical fragments, and short videos. According to Yorke, "We came up with this idea to create something we called a ziggurat...Each person would have a room, and you could leave your own shit there, your opinions on stuff, bits of music, what you're up to. And then you move into different rooms, message each other. Like a weird, twisted version of Facebook" (Cliff, 2020). Importantly, Radiohead acknowledged that their fans' Web sites were better places to go for band-related information. One page on an early site read, "We are extremely grateful to all those who have created 'unofficial' Radiohead sites; these do a top job and we thank you for your work. Below is a selection of sites. This isn't a list of recommendations, and it's probably disgustingly out of date. Oh, just use a search engine or something. Anyway, go forth and find that discography."¹ Here, the band encourage users who desire an organized experience to leave. By implication, they recognize that their own site is, in contrast, a puzzle: a "choose your own adventure" in which the user really is not sure what the adventure—or the point—is.

A later version of the Web site is only minimally more conventional in structure, with menu buttons for Help, News, W.A.S.T.E., More Info, Theme Park, and No Data. W.A.S.T.E. is the name of Radiohead's official online merchandise store, band blog, and fan network, perhaps named for the private, secure, government-hidden communication system in Thomas Pynchon's 1965 novel *The Crying of Lot 49* (Shabi, 2013). This may be interpreted as Radiohead grimly acknowledging their place as peddlers in a marketplace, except that the merchandise on W.A.S.T.E. further expands on the fragmentation, cryptography, and labyrinthine structure of the main site. By purchasing products from W.A.S.T.E., fans become vessels for these mysterious images, phrases, and objects, inviting questions and speculation from others that can increase the community of participants in Radiohead's meaning-making. Theme Park is yet another rabbit hole of textual miscellany, while No Data leads to a "lifestyle" survey with questions like "All participation is a myth (agree or disagree)," "I have been manipulated and perpetually distorted," and "When I get home from the supermarket I don't know what to do with all the plastic".²

For the 20th anniversary of *OK Computer*, the band resurrected the site as it looked in 1997 to promote *OK Computer OKNOTOK 1997 2017*, a re-release of *OK Computer* containing every

¹ <http://archive.radiohead.com/Site1/exit.html>

² http://archive.radiohead.com/Site4/NODATA/data_enter2.html

demo Yorke had recorded for the album. The landing page read, “This is the Radiohead Web site. [from about 1997] I don’t care about a Web site that goes all over the place in a meaningless series of loops and is filled up with discarded ephemera from the broken hard drives of Donwood & Tchack. Where can I buy OKNOTOKCOMPUTER?”³ Through this style of distribution, Radiohead took on the identity of a frustrated fan, then provided a link as if to appease that fan. However, the re-release’s vastness, lack of appropriate track names, and inclusion of lengthy diegetic and atmospheric noise did not offer the directness a frustrated fan might seek.

Likewise, with each successive album, the band further decentralized their authority over the meaning-making process. For example, on their next album, *Kid A*, Yorke explored his penchant for removing his voice’s primacy over the music, both figuratively and literally. To this end, distortions, effects, samples, mixing, and vocal substitutions were used to present Yorke’s voice as an instrument rather than a guide to the song’s content. More so, in some songs, his voice was wholly absent.

To be expected, considering one of the band’s biggest calling cards is Yorke’s operatic falsetto, EMI described the promotion of *Kid A* as a “business challenge” (Cohen, 2000). In addition to creating a musically demanding album, Radiohead also severely limited the number of interviews they gave and sent digitally altered, alien photos of themselves to magazines. No singles were released either. Instead, the band provided a first-of-its-kind embeddable stream of the record (Hyden, 2015). Included in the streaming player, called iBlip, were “extras” like live recordings and 10-to-20-second “anti” music videos called “Blips” (Hyden, 2015). The embeddable streams were a calculated economic decision by Robin Sloan Bechtel, Capitol Records’ head of new media, to prove that pre-release buzz could be generated via the internet and improve album sales (Hyden, 2015). The “Blips” also served as “protagonists in a self-referential aesthetic that pastiches the band’s commodification and the operation of capital at large” (Tate, 2002). The Blips were even identified on the band’s Web site as “brief films used as promotional material.” Thirteen of the sixteen Blip videos for the band’s next release, *Amnesiac*, were silent; the anti-video had truly become the anti-music-video, a notable turn of events, even for a band like Radiohead (Tate, 2002). While these new releases could be interpreted as “advertising simply for advertising’s sake” since they promoted a musical album without teasing any of the music, it was later revealed by one of the artists that these videos were simply outtakes from actual music videos that were later released (Tate, 2002). As with Radiohead’s other marketing efforts, the Blips existed to invite fan interpretation. The musical content was limited, but the cryptic nature of the visuals, snippets of music, and words served to excite the fan base in a way that most bands could not get away with. Throughout these innovations in digital music marketing, Radiohead managed their online presence by prioritizing the release of “extras” on their own platforms and avoided making any authoritative commentary on their new work.

Even more radical for the time, Yorke offered support for online piracy through music-sharing services like Napster, which he said “encourage[d] enthusiasm for music in a way that the music

³ <http://archive.radiohead.com/Site13/>

industry ha[d] long forgotten to do" (Farley, 2000). Every opportunity was taken to limit the band's on-the-record comments about the album and to prioritize subversions of the traditional music promotion and distribution process. A watercooler effect was the result. Numerous magazines referred to *Kid A* as the year's most talked about album in their year-end lists. Digital distribution had played a major role in that phenomenon, and a culture of fan access, gatekeeping, and digital curation emerged.

Through the releases of *Kid A* and its two follow-up albums, *Amnesiac* and *Hail to the Thief*, Radiohead took advantage of the freedom that the internet afforded to solidify their decentralized relationship with their fans. Updates were provided through their now numerous Web sites via vaguely captioned pictures and cryptic online journal entries. Songs in contention for upcoming albums were listed on a chalkboard, imaged, and uploaded for fans to comment on (Kreps, 2016). Tours were conducted to workshop song arrangements and to gauge the fan response. Then, a contest was held for fans to create music videos for the new album, as well as for old and unreleased songs. After the winners were announced, the fan videos were packaged together, along with live and in-studio performances by the band, in a DVD called *The Most Gigantic Lying Mouth of All Time* (2004). Ironically, *The New York Times* review of the DVD noted that the fans' videos accurately reflected "the vertigo and anomie" of the band's work and concluded "Now Radiohead can never claim to be misunderstood" (Pareles, 2005). We would argue that the project's goal was not to provide evidence that fans understood Radiohead's authorial intentions, but instead to center the fans' interpretations of the work. The band would go on to hold fan video contests for many of their subsequent albums as well.

While it cannot be said that Radiohead fans now controlled the band, from this moment on, they were openly courted for their opinions, were allowed to influence the direction of the recordings, and were provided with opportunities to respond to the music in environments stripped of outside meaning-making. In this spirit, a big-top tent was even used for live shows on one leg of the *Kid A* tour to ensure the audience was not distracted by corporate logos while experiencing the new music. The band extended their meta-commentary on who is and is not a Radiohead authority prior to the release of *Amnesiac* in 2000 by enlisting fan site creators Jonathan Percy (Green Plastic) and Beryl Tomay (Follow Me Around) to contribute content for GooglyMinotaur, an AOL Instant Messenger bot that returned Radiohead information, tour dates, MP3 downloads, and more for Capitol Records (Gordon, 2016). In this instance, the cultural intermediaries, accustomed to promoting the work of their favorite band for other fans, officially became part of the promotional machine.

As they had done in the past, the band also avoided giving the traditional trappings of officiality to their lyrics and song names. Thus, the liner notes for *Amnesiac* begin and end with a representation of a hardbound book's covers, but almost no intelligible words are contained in the booklet. Similarly, *Hail to the Thief*'s packaging overflows with clearly legible but disassociated words, many of which do not appear in the songs. In this way, the two albums withhold and overshare lyrics to disrupt a listener's search for guided interpretation. The same practices were undertaken to muddle the identity of the songs. For example, the track list for *Hail to the Thief* includes parenthetical, superscript alternate titles for every song, allowing

listeners to identify the first track as “2 + 2 = 5,” “The Lukewarm,” “(The Lukewarm),” “2 + 2 = 5 (The Lukewarm),” or “2 + 2 = 5 (The Lukewarm).”

Of note, though the band has eschewed providing commentary on their own music, they have embraced curation in one way: through “office charts,” or lists of songs recommended by the band published to Dead Air Space, a blog on the Radiohead Web site managed by the band.⁴ Dead Air Space, which was a part of the Radiohead Web site from 2005 to 2016, contained the closest thing to traditional promotional content on the Radiohead Web sites. It also served as an alternative to social media,⁵ as it allowed the band members, their producer Nigel Godrich, and their chief artistic collaborator Stanley Donwood to post informal thoughts, recommendations, information about non-band projects, fundraisers, and more ephemeral communications, plus tour dates and links to album streams. The “office charts” are one of the more enduring aspects of Dead Air Space and have since been reconstructed on Spotify, Apple Music, and Deezer (seemingly by fans rather than by the band themselves). This productive curation is primarily “psychic,” but it is also “influential,” as it identifies the band’s interests for their fans.

Perhaps no single act decentralized Radiohead’s authority more than the decision to allow consumers to pay what they wanted for the band’s next album, 2007’s *In Rainbows*. For each of their previous releases, Radiohead had been beholden to EMI for the distribution, marketing, and consequently the price point of the music. As a result, Radiohead’s subversions were limited. By 2007, however, they had left EMI and gained the ability to crowdsource the music’s monetary value. That they did so was reported to have sent “shock waves throughout the music industry” and benefitted the band, who, according to music publishing company Warner Chappell, “made more money before *In Rainbows* was physically released than they made in total on the previous album *Hail To the Thief*” (Kreps, 2008). Warner Chappell also revealed that these trends were true despite more fans downloading the album for free than paying for it (Kreps, 2008).

Several concurrent factors lent additional significance to this decision. Digital access to the music created opportunities for fans to decontextualize and reinterpret it. To this point, importantly, 2007 was not only the year *In Rainbows* was released, but also the year YouTube emerged as a dominant cultural force, taking up as much bandwidth in 2007 as the entire internet did in 2000, when *Kid A* was released (Carter, 2008). In addition, simultaneous and varied releases, including an \$80 deluxe set containing alternate artwork, track lists, and songs, bucked the traditional model of promotion and distribution, which required a slow-moving media machine to raise awareness of a single product. Radiohead, in contrast, created a moment of hysteria, driven by fans seeking out all the new mysterious texts and racing to upload their covers, remixes, and interpretations on YouTube. The band also directly courted fan reinterpretations of the music by offering “stems,” or tracks of individual instruments, of the song “Nude.” This act, too, increased the album’s profitability. Though the song received minimal airplay, the iTunes downloads led to its inclusion on the *Billboard* “Hot 100 Singles” chart, their

⁴ <http://archive.radiohead.com/Site12/deadairspace/index.html>

⁵ The band later started a Twitter account named “Dead Air Space” (https://twitter.com/dead_airspace) after the discontinuation of the Dead Air Space blog in 2016.

highest debuting single ever (Morris, 2015: 161). With these moves, Radiohead anticipated a new world of music distribution where fans had access to the music for reinterpretation by default—but could pay a premium price to get the band’s version, which itself was not treated as the primary release. Like the splatter of the paint on *In Rainbows*’ covers, the effects of the album(s) on the creator-consumer relationship were widespread.

Creating a New Era of Access and Decentralized Authority

Since the release of *In Rainbows*, Radiohead have continued to support a decentralized relationship that positions their fans as cultural intermediaries of their work. Both 2011’s *The King of Limbs* and 2016’s *A Moon Shaped Pool* were accompanied by further examples of cryptic online messages, limited interviews, missing or alternate lyric booklets, and purposefully mysterious videos. In an even more experimental venture, the band collaborated with longtime producer Nigel Godrich, artist Stanley Donwood, and digital art collective Universal Everything to create 2014’s Polyfauna App. The virtual reality app included audio from the song “Bloom” off *The King of Limbs* and art by Donwood in a constantly changing abstract world set to the lunar calendar, “a boundless world of lines and shapes that blend the primitive graphics of early computer experiments with the poetic potential of the iPad generation” (Nowness, 2014). According to a Forbes article about the app, snapshots from users were submitted directly to the Web site as they navigated the digital terrain, turning the user into both a contributor and an archivist for the unique visuals generated each time the app was used (Hanlon, 2014). The use of segments and outtakes from the album also differentiated Polyfauna from other band apps. Since each use of the app was supposed to result in an entirely individual experience, the user became a creator, albeit a passive one, of a new representation of Radiohead’s work.

In line with the collaborative spirit of these endeavors, the band made two recent decisions that have continued to prioritize their fans’ authority over their works’ meaning, curation, and distribution. First, Radiohead made all their music available for free on YouTube and Spotify, giving fans global control over the entirety of the band’s catalog and encouraging infinite reassembly and sharing.

Second, in 2020, Radiohead released the culmination of their subversive digital projects: the Radiohead Public Library.⁶ In a statement about the project, the band said,

“The internet as a whole has never been a reliable resource for detailed or even accurate information re: Radiohead. Many sites that attempted to provide some measure of service have long since gone dark as well. The overall effect has been ‘Radiohead’ search results that yield random and/or abbreviated shards: songs and album titles unaccompanied by detailed artwork or any additional context, low-quality videos preceded by advertisements and shuffled via algorithms, and so on ...

That ends with the unveiling of the Radiohead Public Library. From today, visitors at Radiohead.com will be able to create their own library card and membership number,

⁶ <https://radiohead.com/library>

and access a highly curated and organized archive of the band's catalogue and corresponding visuals and various artifacts associated with each album: Detailed artwork, official videos, and ad-free HD live and TV performances, B-Sides and compilation tracks, previously out-of-print merchandise to be custom made on demand, band members' 'office chart' playlists from around the time of *In Rainbows*, *The King of Limbs* and *A Moon Shaped Pool* recording sessions, and more" (Herbert, 2020).

This "library" is a veritable treasure trove of Radiohead "extras," including videos, music, artwork, Web sites, and merchandise, as well as links to buy or stream the albums. From an information science perspective, the use of the word "library" is liberal here, as the various items included in the site have limited metadata or descriptions of the data included. Instead, each item has a title, and the URL for each item includes an album name code (for example, #amsp for *A Moon Shaped Pool*-related items). Searching the "library" requires knowing the name of the item; searching for a type of item, like "t-shirt" or "video," only works if the item's title includes that description. In this way, the site encourages browsing, a core organizational concept in the band's previous digital projects as well.

This emphasis on browsing begins on the Web site's homepage, which includes links to everything on the Radiohead Public Library, roughly organized by album (horizontal) and material type, with vertical columns for album releases and related content, official music videos, marketing (merchandise, Web sites, newsletters, PSAs, etc.), and live performance videos. Colored boxes at the top of the page represent each era of the band's output, one for each album. Each member of the band also created their own library card and took a turn at being "librarian for a day," which in actuality meant that each member curated a collection of their favorite items from the library (Bulut, 2020). Thom Yorke, Ed O'Brien, Colin Greenwood, and Phil Selway's collections feature videos with brief annotations. Jonny Greenwood's selection includes his picks for the "best video we've done" ("There There"), "the best marketing" (a glitchy, vaporwave-style video of Chieftan Mews unboxing *OK Computer OKNOTOK 1997 2017*), and "Web site design the way mom and pop used to do it" (a screenshot of the first available Radiohead site) (Radiohead, 2020).

Discussion

Radiohead's digital projects do not exist to inform the consumer about the band and their work, except to introduce the notion that the band is not principally concerned with informing the consumer or selling albums, merchandise, or tickets. Instead, these digital projects provide deeper access into the aesthetic worlds of each Radiohead album. Some of the disjointed text on the Web sites is recognizable as lyrics; others have an unknown origin or function, despite sustained investigations by fans. The seemingly unending choices on the Web sites, in which a user can get lost in the simple HTML and occasional animated gif, have an air of mystery but also of exclusivity, as if the band is sharing secret material with their fans. Interestingly, too, the old Web sites frequently pointed to fan sites, as previously mentioned, with one version's so-called News page reading, "Well, obviously if you really wanted news about Radiohead you'd be at some other site that is actually updated more than once a decade. The simple truth is that I

don't have any news. But I have found out about some people who do" (Gordon, 2016).⁷ Thus, Radiohead not only discounted themselves as experts on their work, but also relied on their listeners and followers to determine which of their activities were newsworthy, in essence allowing their fans to help construct the narrative of their career. This is one of the ultimate decentralizing techniques in the band's toolbox, implying that their focus is in creating experiences, leaving fans to assert what these experiences mean. To this point, when Radiohead temporarily took down the official Radiohead Web site and all social media prior to the release of *A Moon Shaped Pool* in 2016, the unofficial sites and message boards remained for the fans, perhaps the true Radiohead authorities, to continue analyzing and dissecting the band's work (Gordon, 2016).

Through over a dozen iterations, the official Radiohead Web site in particular has represented an entryway into the aesthetics and communication style of the band rather than to a more formal introduction to their work. It is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to actually use the Radiohead Web site to listen to the band's music, and getting to the W.A.S.T.E. Web site to purchase music and merchandise requires multiple paths. The Web sites themselves are akin to the "extras" that musicians release in order to appeal to the super fan and are an act of anti-curation. Rather than situate the band's music in a new context that encourages new interpretations, the Web sites eschew the music itself and instead build on the visual, political, and cultural interests of the band.

Radiohead, like many so-called "rock bands," walk a fine line as music creators and marketers, with their authenticity and commodification always entangled (Morrow, 2009: 164). While "authentic rock" is rebellious, spontaneous, and creative, "co-opted rock" is commercially successful and transparent in its commodification (Tate, 2002). For their part, Radiohead go to extraordinary lengths to straddle this line between authenticity and commercial success, doing so especially by drawing attention to their own commodification and by creating oblique and playful digital works, navigational tools, and labels.

This approach contrasts with how most artists construct authenticity: by demonstrating the band's relatability. In fact, this humanizing-not-dehumanizing principle informs the so-called "Rule of Thirds" for social media, which states that musicians should spend one-third of their time on social media promoting their product, one-third of their time sharing their outside interests with fans, and one-third of their time offering perspectives and advice on the music industry. For example, the British pop star Adele's Twitter feed focuses on her performances, her single and album releases, charities close to her heart, and other musicians she admires (Adele, 2021). In contrast, Thom Yorke's Tweets are often cryptic statements offered without context or explanation, such as "thrown under a big red bus" (Yorke, 2021a), "it'll all blow over soon" (Yorke, 2021b), and "THE BLACK OUTLINE OF A GUILLOTINE AGAINST THE HEAVY WHITE OF MORNING" (Yorke, 2020). Presumably, some of these statements are ideas for lyrics written in response to recent events in British politics, but that also may not be the case, which is the essence of Yorke's social media strategy—to generate authenticity through

⁷ <http://archive.radiohead.com/Site4/newsnews.html>

inscrutability. Here, too, Radiohead avoid the potential pitfall of disappointing fans by offering too much access to the band's personal lives.

Along similar lines, Radiohead have avoided traditional creator-consumer relationships via meme culture, though that culture celebrates the fragmentation and de-contextualization of pop culture artifacts and is often used by bands to bring themselves into a joke for the sake of increasing their relatability. There are, for example, many artists, including Weezer, Chris De Burgh, Matt Heafy, and Eric Benet, who have covered Toto's "Africa" in guilty celebration of the song's questionable and hastily recorded lyrics and music. A band that demonstrates its awareness of what others see about the song can, therefore, position themselves as one with their fans. Radiohead, in contrast, build walls for their fans to climb over, rarely indulging in a familiar or recycled form of fan interaction.

Through all these efforts, a central irony has emerged: Radiohead's persistent fear of technology, as exhibited in their lyrics, promotional materials, and interviews, despite how integral technology has been to the band's career. The effects of Radiohead's innovations with technology have been manifold. Through their obtuse web presences to their validation of fan sites and message boards, Radiohead's careful cultivation of an online fan community has helped create a "shared history" of the band (Gordon, 2016). More so, the ongoing inclusion of fans in the decision-making and interpretation of the band's output has innovated the creator-consumer relationship and changed traditional music production, marketing, and distribution models.

That Yorke is fearful not only of technology but also of losing the band's fan base is another source of irony. Prior to *A Moon Shaped Pool*'s release in 2016, Yorke admitted that he had been unsure if Radiohead's fan base still cared about his music; thus, he was delighted to see via online activity, as well as album and ticket sales, that people were still interested (Phillips, 2016). The band had been renewing that interest for their entire career, so it is difficult to understand why it would stop now. Radiohead's nonconformity, inaccessibility, and labyrinthine media has attracted fans, not pushed them away, because Radiohead's withdrawals have always been accompanied by a call for self-empowerment. For example, with the evolution of their sales strategy to a "pay what you want" model for the digital release of *In Rainbows* in 2007, the band helped to redefine their own relationship to commodification. Though this strategy may not be replicable in other subsequent releases by popular artists, at least in Radiohead's case any "cannibalization" of digital sales that the model may have produced seems to have been mitigated by the overwhelming publicity the strategy received, resulting in little impact on CD sales and increased digital sales (Bourreau, Doğan, and Hong, 2015). Further, releasing music at a discounted price or for free online in addition to physical media has now become commonplace, especially for independent artists. By innovating this approach more than a decade ago, Radiohead introduced a new channel of music discovery to their fans (Morrow, 2009: 167).

Even further, in inviting the fan as cultural intermediary to interpret, curate, share, and participate in their oeuvre, Radiohead promote their listeners to a position at odds with much of the rest of the music industry. Instead of aggressively attempting to control the bands' image,

Radiohead give ownership of their history and significance to their followers. As a result, they have succeeded in maintaining their fan base in a way that few other musicians in the 20th and 21st century have. It may have been unintentional and, perhaps, related more to the bands' personal social anxieties than anything else. But Radiohead's distribution of meaning-making to their audience has had the paradoxical effect of creating extremely strong and dedicated supporters and a lucrative career in which the band have increased their own autonomy thanks to successful digital marketing. That very idea is contained in the lyrics of "The Numbers," one of the songs on *A Moon Shaped Pool*, when Yorke sings, "We call upon the people. The people have this power. The numbers don't decide." Here, perhaps more clearly and directly than at any other point in Radiohead's career, Yorke meant what he said.

Conclusion

Through the lenses of cultural intermediary, digital curation, and fandom theories, this study examined the variety of ways in which the British band Radiohead have decentralized their authority over the meaning, organization, and distribution of their creative works. Chief among their tools has been digital media, which has allowed the band to innovate music production, marketing, and distribution models, empowering their fans to act as cultural intermediaries. By subverting traditional gatekeeping practices in online music curation, in particular, the band has also amplified their fans' "psychic" motivation for curating and sharing their music and, in so doing, anticipated a new creator-consumer relationship for the 21st century. Despite the significance of these contributions, prior studies have delved only minimally into these topics, if at all. Thus, this research offers a new lens for understanding the band's legacy, influence, and enduring appeal.

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