



Is Pitchfork Losing Its Edge?

An Analysis of Pitchfork Reviews Since Its 2015 Acquisition by Condé Nast

Andy Bashford, Jan 2018

Hello! My name is Andy Bashford. I'm a data scientist with an interest in music and music journalism.



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Pitchfork Gives Music 6.8


SEPTEMBER 10, 2007 | ISSUE 43-37

CHICAGO—Music, a mode of creative expression consisting of sound and silence expressed through time, was given a 6.8 out of 10 rating in an review published Monday on Pitchfork Media, a well-known music-criticism website.



According to the review, authored by Pitchfork editor in chief Ryan Schreiber, the popular medium that predates the written word shows promise but nonetheless

"leaves the listener wanting more."

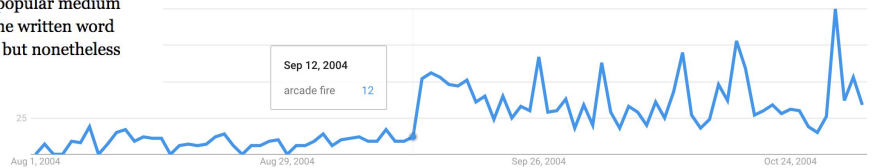


Arcade Fire
Funeral
Merge; 2004
By David Moore; September 12, 2004

9.7 BEST NEW MUSIC

ARTISTS:
Arcade Fire

FIND IT AT:
Insound Vinyl | eMusic | Amazon MP3 & CD



My capstone for Galvanize focuses on Pitchfork. Pitchfork is an online music publication with a reputation for being opinionated, snobby, but usually right.



[-] Bladeis 35 points 1 month ago

Longtime Pitchfork reader here! The lists this year felt different than usual, perhaps indicative of the music that came out, but also perhaps in part due to the sites recent Condé Nast acquisition. Does the new ownership have any influence on list curation?

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[-] PitchforkStaff [S] 3 points 1 month ago

No, none at all, people at Conde Nast outside of Pitchfork learned of the list when it went live, the same time as our readers. -Mark

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[-] specialandfun 34 points 1 month ago

you're still sell outs

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Pitchfork, the Reluctant Men's Magazine

Conde Nast says it bought the eclectic music-reviews site for its "Millennial males." What?

SPENCER KORNHABER | OCT 13, 2015 | MUSIC

In 2015, they were acquired by the large media company Conde Nast, leaving fans skeptical of the future of Pitchfork's reputation.



Question:

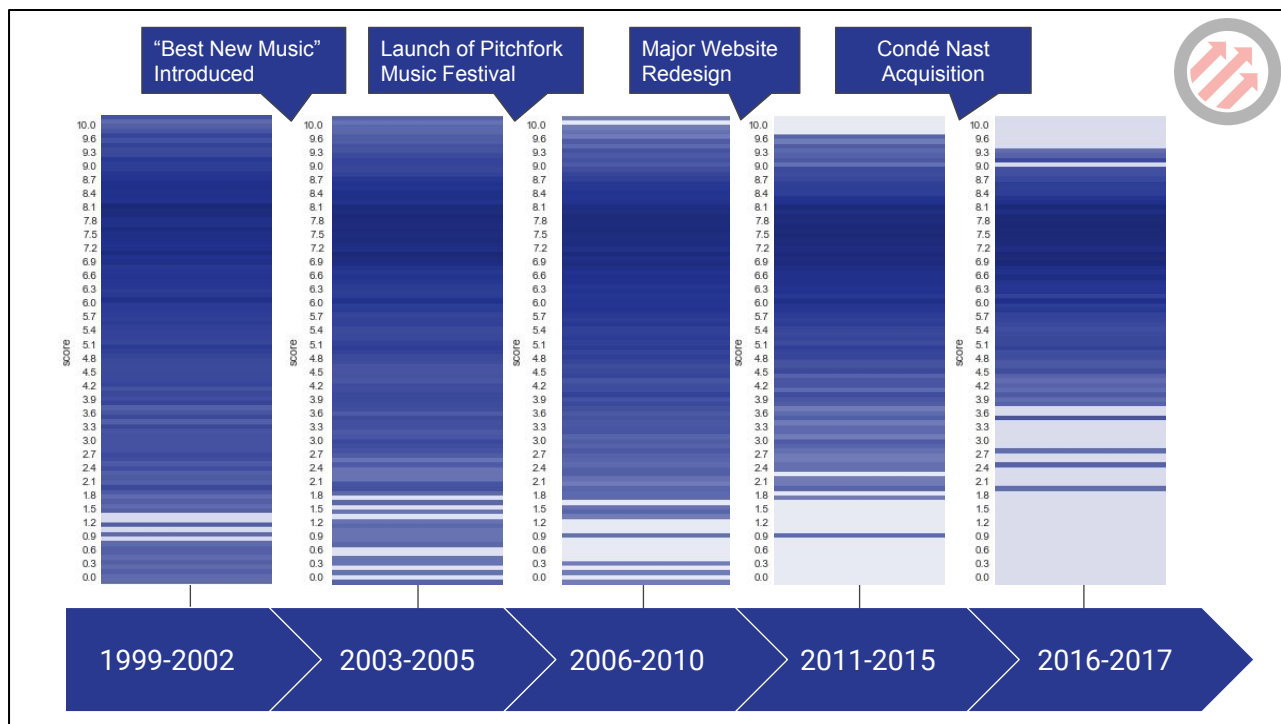
Has Pitchfork changed its **scoring methodology** and **review content** since its acquisition?

My question: Has Pitchfork changed its scoring methodology and review content since its acquisition?



- Score Distribution over time
- Filter based on number of previous reviews

First, I scraped Pitchfork's archives to gather over 19,000 reviews since 1999 and performed some numeric analysis.

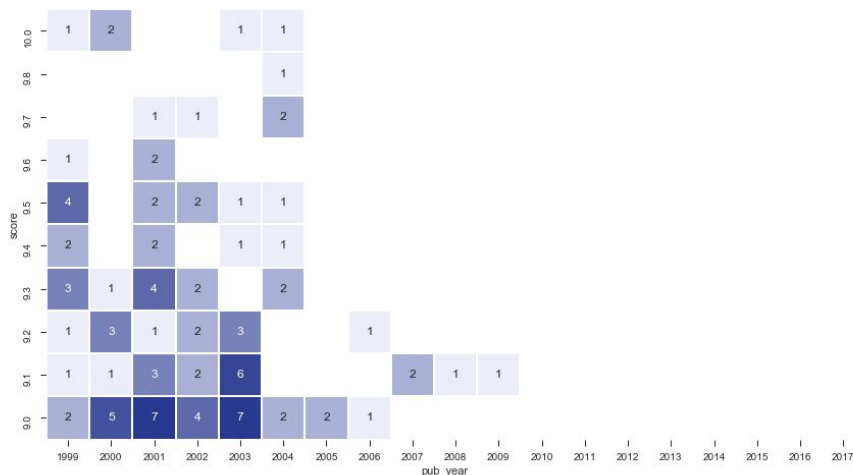


I broke down Pitchfork reviews into five major buckets. One before BNM, one before the launch of Pitchfork Music Festival (the first time Pitchfork had an incentive to promote specific artists), one before a major website redesign in 2011, one before the Conde Nast acquisition, up to present day. It's pretty plain to see how the spread of scores given to albums has tightened with each major event.



Does Pitchfork Still Gamble on New Artists?

Count of Albums Scoring +9.0 for New Artists*



* Artists with 0 previous reviews on Pitchfork at time of publication

Next, I wanted to evaluate if Pitchfork is still willing to gamble on new artists. In 2004, they gave Arcade Fire a 9.7 for their first release, putting them on the map. But, since then, they have only given an album a 9.0 or above 8 times when the artist is being reviewed for the first time... zero times since 2010.



- Score Distribution over time
- Filter based on number of previous reviews
- Part of Speech Tagging
- Sentiment Analysis

After finding that the distribution of scores has changed, I used Natural Language Processing to evaluate the content of the reviews.

POS Tagging

```
abstract = """Sufjan Stevens has always written
personally, weaving his life story
into larger narratives, but here his
autobiography is front and center.
Carrie & Lowell is a return to the
stripped-back folk of Seven Swans but
with a decade's worth of refinement
and exploration packed into it."""

import spacy
nlp = spacy.load('en')
```

```
make_POS_df(abs_desc, nlp)
```

	word	POS	tag
0	has	VERB	VBZ
1	always	ADV	RB
2	personally	ADV	RB
3	weaving	VERB	VBG
4	larger	ADJ	JJR
5	here	ADV	RB
6	is	VERB	VBZ
7	front	ADJ	JJ

spaCy

Sentiment Analysis

```
abstract = """Sufjan Stevens has always written
personally, weaving his life story
into larger narratives, but here his
autobiography is front and center.
Carrie & Lowell is a return to the
stripped-back folk of Seven Swans but
with a decade's worth of refinement
and exploration packed into it."""
```

```
from textblob import TextBlob
TextBlob(abstract).sentiment
```

```
Sentiment(polarity=0.049999999999999996, subjectivity=0.25)
```

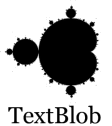
```
parse_sentiment(abstract)
```

```
personally,
Subjectivity: 0.3
```

```
larger
Subjectivity: 0.5
```

```
center.
Subjectivity: 0.1
```

```
worth
Subjectivity: 0.1
```

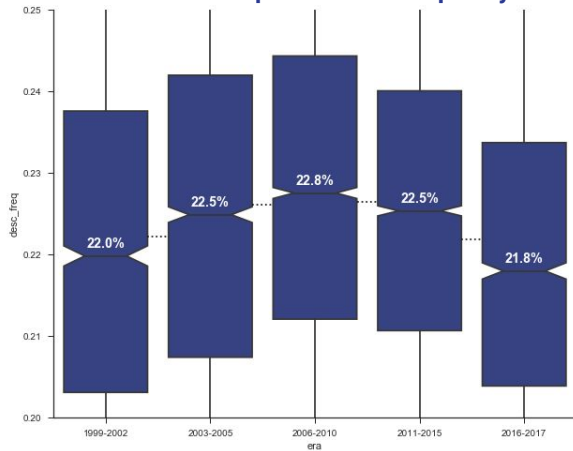


TextBlob

I used the tool SpaCy to tag all 14 million words from reviews with their part of speech, counting up the words that are most likely to be descriptive (adjectives, adverbs and certain tenses of verbs). I then used TextBlob to get a subjectivity score for each review, measuring how opinionated or objective the author was.

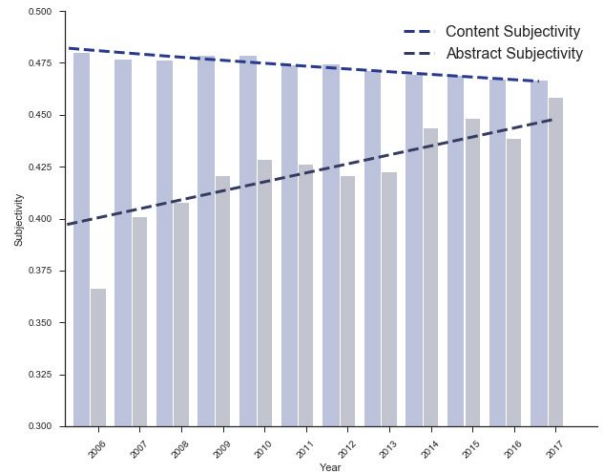
Part of Speech Tagging

Content Descriptive Words Frequency



* Notches indicate 95% confidence intervals for the median

Sentiment Analysis



I found that since 2003, Pitchfork reviews are getting less descriptive. The boxplots have notches indicating a 95% confidence interval of the median, showing that these changes are statistically significant. I also found that, while the content of the reviews has become more objective, the one-to-two sentence abstract at the top of the review has become more subjective. The subjectivity of the content and the abstract are converging together, giving the reader a more consistent account of Pitchfork's opinion.

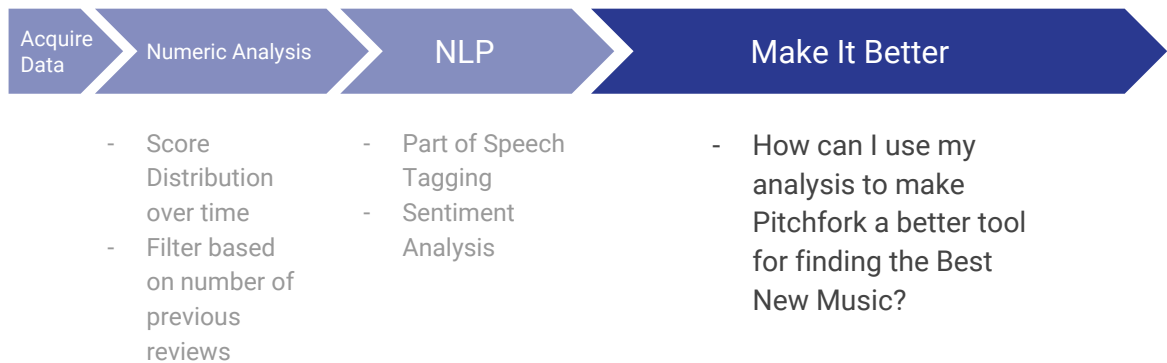


Question:

Has Pitchfork changed its **scoring methodology** and **review content** since its acquisition? **Yes!**

- **The spread of the score distribution has tightened**
- **Pitchfork doesn't gamble big on new artists**
- **Pitchfork's language has become less descriptive and more objective**
- **Pitchfork has become more consistent in the Abstract**

So, has Pitchfork changed its scoring methodology and review content since its acquisition? Yes! The spread of the score distribution has tightened, Pitchfork doesn't gamble big on new artists, Pitchfork's language has become less descriptive and more objective, and Pitchfork has become more consistent in the Abstract



I didn't stop there. My next step was to use the data I collected to make Pitchfork a better tool for finding new music, since at the end of the day that's what most people are after when they are visiting the site.



Pitchfork Review Recommender System



Need More Data!



spaCy



matplotlib

Pitchfork Data

- 19,620 Reviews
- 14,314,748 Words
- Average Score: 7.0
- 1,042 Best New Music
- 367 Best New Reissue

Matched 11,600
Reviews on
Spotify

Spotify Data

- Danceability
- Valence
- Energy
- Acousticness
- Release Year



I took the review data I had collected and merged it with data from Spotify, where they have done audio analysis on 3-second samples of tracks to get some key metrics. I was able to match 11,600 albums from Pitchfork with data from Spotify.



Live Demo!

A portrait of a man with a beard and glasses, wearing a dark shirt, set against a blue background with geometric patterns. The image is partially obscured by a solid blue rectangle on the left side.

Github: <https://github.com/andrewjbashford>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/andybashford/>

