## Reclaiming tastemaking for listeners in the Spotify era.

Last week, Spotify users were treated to the service’s annual “[Spotify Wrapped](https://newsroom.spotify.com/2020-12-01/6-new-features-to-unwrap-in-your-spotify-2020-wrapped/)” feature: a visual summary of an account’s listening habits throughout the year, including their most listened-to artists. New for 2020 are “in-app quizzes,” a chronological “Story of Your 2020,” and detailed podcast listening statistics. For premium users, “badges” will “crown listeners with various titles based on the ways they listened.”

For example, if a number of your playlists gained significant new followers, you’ll be a *Tastemaker.*If you listened to a song before it was cool (aka hit 50,000 streams), you’ll get the *Pioneer*badge. And based on the number of songs you added to playlists this year, you just might become a *Collector*.

Their use of the term *Tastemaker* is particularly interesting. “Tastemaking,” a function once relegated to magazines, has taken a concerning bent in the Algorithmic Age. Very much contemporary terms like “[filter bubble](https://megaphone.link/VMP4291212808)” and “[echo chamber](https://www.culturedmag.com/shouts-echo-chamber/)” – applied more and more often to social platforms like Facebook and Twitter, now – can also be associated with music streaming services like Spotify, who’s “playlistification” of content has had a number of alarming effects on American culture.

Graphical user interface, application

Description automatically generated

In 2018, *The Baffler*’s Liz Pelly explored Spotify playlists’ gender bias in “[Discover Weekly](https://thebaffler.com/latest/discover-weakly-pelly):”

On Today’s Top Hits, I found that over the course of one month, 64.5 percent of the tracks were by men as the lead artist, with 20 percent by women and 15.5 percent relying on collaborations between men and women artists. When all features were taken into consideration, I found that 85.5 percent of tracks included men artists, while only 45.5 percent included women. This was one of the highest percentages of women artists out of all the playlists I examined.

She also quotes a LinkedIn post by “Jerry Daykin, the Head of Media Partnerships at Diageo,” in which he observes, “The most popular tracks on Spotify get featured in more playlists and become even more popular as a result.” In January of the same year, the online music magazine *Pitchfork* published an op-ed by musician Damon Krukowski entitled “[How to Be a Responsible Music Fan in the Age of Streaming](https://pitchfork.com/features/oped/how-to-be-a-responsible-music-fan-in-the-age-of-streaming/),” which provided concrete statistics on this phenomenon (emphasis mine:)

According to the data trackers at [BuzzAngle Music](http://www.buzzanglemusic.com/" \t "_blank), more than **99 percent of audio streaming is of the top 10 percent most-streamed tracks**. Which means **less than 1 percent of streams account for *all other music***.

“While streaming media is pitched to us as tailored to our taste, or at least to our browsing history,” Krukowski goes on to note, “the business of it is in fact closer to one-size-fits-all.” Clearly, this is an issue, but technically **only insofar as Spotify advertises itself as a means to discover new music**, which [it does consistently](https://www.spotify.com/us/about-us/contact/).

The company has faced criticism in other areas, most recently by *The New Yorker*’s Alex Ross in a widely-read review of “[Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music](https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/decomposed),” a new book by University of Oslo professor Kyle Devine, entitled “[The Hidden Costs of Streaming Music](https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-hidden-costs-of-streaming-music).” Ross first cites a statement by Spotify CEO Daniel Elk, “The artists today that are making it realize that it’s about creating a continuous engagement with their fans,” arguing the true meaning of his words to be “to make a living as a musician, you need to claw desperately for attention at every waking hour.” His most original (as in, yet to be considered in the mainstream discourse) argument, though, involves the service’s environmental impact. He cites Devine’s depiction of a profound cultural delusion surrounding the consumption of music, suggesting that music is “seen as a special pursuit that somehow transcends the conditions of its production.”

In a chapter on the digital and streaming era, Devine drives home the point that there is no such thing as a nonmaterial way of listening to music: “The so-called cloud is a definitely material and mainly hardwired network of fiber-optic cables, servers, routers, and the like.” This concealment of industrial reality, behind a phantasmagoria of virtuality, is a sleight of hand typical of Big Tech, with its genius for persuading consumers never to wonder how transactions have become so shimmeringly effortless.

Also noteworthy are questions of Spotify’s viability as a business, which Ross includes by citing [a July article in *Barrons*](https://www.barrons.com/articles/spotifys-losses-widen-as-subscribers-keep-growing-51596034688) quoting Spotify Technology’s second-quarter earnings report: “The streaming music company lost $418 million, or $2.24 per share, versus analysts’ expectations for a 41-cent loss.” Spearheading this year’s news conversation surrounding the company, though, were its widespread acquisitions in the Podcasting industry, including [Anchor](https://www.theverge.com/2019/2/6/18213462/spotify-podcasts-gimlet-anchor-acquisition), [Megaphone](https://www.theverge.com/2020/11/10/21557458/spotify-megaphone-podcast-streaming-ad-insertion), [Gimlet Media](https://www.vox.com/2019/2/7/18214941/alex-blumberg-matt-lieber-gimlet-spotify-deal-acquisition-peter-kafka-media-podcast-audio-interview), and – [most controversially](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/25/opinion/joe-rogan-spotify-podcast.html) – the exclusive rights to the most listened-to property in the medium, [*The Joe Rogan Experience*](https://www.theverge.com/21265005/spotify-joe-rogan-experience-podcast-deal-apple-gimlet-media-ringer). Though details of their implications are beyond the scope of this essay, it is reasonable to assume its concerns – if not its proposed solutions – should apply to the future of podcasting as well.

## Responsible Curation

For solutions to address Spotify’s overwhelming skew toward rewarding popular music with even more popularity, we can first look within its own history to just a few years earlier, when human curation was more equally matched in its fight against algorithmic curation. In 2015, the company claimed that “[Half of Spotify users stream from other users’ playlists at least monthly](https://pitchfork.com/features/article/9686-up-next-how-playlists-are-curating-the-future-of-music/).” *Pitchfork*’s Marc Hogan profiled a number of “power users” within the upper percentile in terms of followers and personal playlist popularity. Notably, all of his examples are male.

Generally, human curation should hypothetically combat its algorithmic counterpart in terms of favoring already commercially successful content, if not its gender disparity. The industry’s other biggest player, Apple Music, has invested heavily and successfully in the former. (Disclosure: I have been an Apple Music subscriber since its launch.) *Fast Company* addressed this contrast in a 2018 long read entitled “[Spotify’s $30 billion playlist for global domination](https://www.fastcompany.com/90205519/spotifys-playlist-for-global-domination):”

Cook’s words embody Apple’s longstanding critique of Spotify, which is that its algorithms are eroding music’s spiritual role in our lives. Cook doesn’t mention Spotify by name but says, “We worry about the humanity being drained out of music, about it becoming a bits-and-bytes kind of world instead of the art and craft.”

Then again, the same article also quotes Tim Cook – the CEO of the most valuable company in the history of the world – as insisting “We’re not in it for the money.” In turn, Daniel Elk is quoted saying “Music is everything we do all day, all night, and that clarity is the difference between the average and the really, really good,” though what exactly he is quantifying as “really, really good” is not entirely clear. In context, the words of both leaders seem untrustworthy – vague, at best.

[](https://www.youtube.com/embed/At_K4FVY198?feature=oembed)

In tremendous and relevant contrast to the voices of these CEOs is that of Ethan Diamond, CEO and co-founder of Bandcamp, a music streaming service unlike any other. In [an interview with Music Tech Fest director Andrew Dubber this May](https://mtflabs.net/podcast076/), Diamond exemplifies an entirely different mentality in running a for-profit service for musicians.