After thoroughly researching datasets online, I’ve decided that I’d like to use a dataset I’ve found containing a web scrape of all Pitchfork reviews from 1999 to 2019. I was deciding between this dataset, a rotten tomatoes dataset, and a dataset containing reported crimes in Chicago. All three projects I was hoping to approach with a critical lens. For instance, having lived in Chicago for a considerable amount of time, I was hoping to go a step further than typical analyses. I had thought of supplementing the data with public funding data to investigate my hypothesis that increased crime in Chicago is a function of steadily decreasing public funding, crumbling infrastructure, and decaying social programs rather than, say, an increased need for predictive policing.

However, this is a weighty topic and a heavy undertaking to perform justly. Therefore, I’d like to tackle the more lighthearted subject of Pitchfork reviews. I’ve long been critical of Pitchfork. The language we use to describe music is seemingly much less developed that the language used to describe other art forms. Pitchfork attempts to resolve this by reaching to the far corners of their Thesauruses and deploying a multitude of words most readers probably haven’t seen since sitting for the SAT. A rich vocabulary isn’t a bad thing, but I am certainly critical of carelessly using complex words without any discernable improvement in the quality of ideas being conveyed. I believe there are many natural language processing opportunities in assessing the efficacy of the language used by Pitchfork. Which words do they use the most? Has their usage of words changed over the past 20 years? Can we index the frequency of usage against average word usage elsewhere?

The aspect of Pitchfork reviews that I find most interesting is the score out of 10 that is assigned to each album. This number is undoubtedly an attempt by Pitchfork to provide a guise of “quantitative” or “objective” rigor, and likely not very meaningful in this sense. However, I believe investigating this number in particular – despite being contrived – may in fact expose something deeper about the intentions of Pitchfork as an organization.

Before attempting to invoke the philosophical question of whether art can be evaluated objectively at all, let’s consider Pitchfork’s motives. Objectivity is certainly not the foremost concern for Pitchfork – itself just one of 26 subsidiary brands owned by mega-conglomerate media holding company Condé Nast. Pitchfork’s primary purpose is to make money. However, in this pursuit of profit, which trends come to the fore? What does the distribution of scores look like? Do critics favor a particular genre? Do Billboard hits fare better? Or does Pitchfork adopt a contrarian approach and promote seemingly less popular music? Has the substance of Pitchfork’s reviews changed over time? These are all questions I could address with this dataset.

Another interesting angle would be to understand Pitchfork’s biases. To do this, one would have to devise some sort of “objective” baseline against which to compare the content of Pitchfork reviews. Luckily, I’ve use Spotify’s API in the past and know Spotify has defined metrics such as danceability, valence, and energy to describe the mood of a song. I’d like to use this information to expose the characteristics of albums that Pitchfork tends to favor (and those of Pitchfork doesn’t).

Overall, I’m very excited about this project. I think it’ll be a great opportunity to use data science to tease and poke fun at a publication that’s known to hide behind pseudo-objective measures to peddle opinions.