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On *How Music Changed YouTube*: Guillaume Heuguet and Elsa Marshall, in conversation

Guillaume Heuguet
École Supérieure d'Art de Clermont Métropole
GRIPIC - Sorbonne Université
redhotcar@gmail.com

Elsa Marshall
Independent Scholar
Emars094@gmail.com

The effects of the Internet on the relationships between musicians and audiences, as well as on what music becomes popular and how, are frequently at the forefront of popular music journalism. While evaluating one viral sensation or trend may seem feasible, analysing the constant changes of Internet platforms overall is a daunting challenge. As both a history and recent study of such phenomena, Guillaume Heuguet's *How Music Changed YouTube* stands out as a must-read investigation of the relations between songwriting, music industries, technological businesses, and Internet platforms. It concisely explains how YouTube's development has been intertwined with the music business on matters including talent acquisition and development, star curation, audience attraction and retention, copyright, and dissemination. Heuguet investigates how these elements of popular music creation have changed (or not) in the process, questioning the accuracy of describing YouTube as solely a "hosting" site and connecting the directions of influences between platform, industry, creators, and audience. He thereby provides the tools and information by which scholars can more critically question constructions of value and popularity around and within today's popular music. In the following conversation with screen music scholar, Elsa Marshall, Heuguet provides insight into how and why he wrote *How Music Changed*

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YouTube and its continued relevance (edited transcript of interview conducted November 2024).

Elsa Marshall: *In popular music studies, we often focus on specific music texts or musicians with the topics of mediation and technology being secondary context. In your book, you put mediation front and centre. What inspired you to take this perspective?*

Guillaume Heuguet: There were both academic and personal reasons. I was convinced by Antoine Hennion's idea that music is a lesson in mediation, that to learn to appreciate music is to learn to negotiate with all kinds of mediation, such as a genre, scenes or technology (2003). I myself had learned to listen to music by reading music magazines. I don't think you can have music without mediation.

I was also very much in the milieu of people working on mediation. For example, my supervisor, Adeline Wrona, was working on the way the newspaper as a format influenced Émile Zola's writing. Yves Jeanneret, who was a figurehead in my lab, focused on deepening and extending the meaning of mediation and the layering of traces and texts that make up digital media (2020).

On a personal level, when I started my PhD, I worked with a lot of musicians and was very much embedded in the electronic music scene. My musician friends didn't become music entrepreneurs just because it was part of their personality or because they were convinced it was the best thing to do. I noticed how platforms, material and government shaped people's behaviour and how these kinds of devices affected culture as a whole.

Elsa: *So, you were seeing changes in how musicians were acting while you were being taught more traditional ideas of about, for example, newspapers, the effects of how they're formatted. Then, you've connected the two.*

Guillaume: Exactly. When I started, most of the discourse focused on the big changes that were coming with digital media, but it wasn't clear where or how exactly this was happening. David Hesmondhalgh recently wrote a great paper clarifying the methodological problems with big claims about change (2022). As I said in my dissertation, I struggled to understand exactly what scholars meant by 'change'. Is it a change in the way music is produced? The form of the music itself? Or the way listeners listen to it?

Elsa: *This complexity of change and influence comes across in the book, where you examine the influence of music on YouTube but also the opposite, YouTube on music, and all the complications of both. As per the book's title, you primarily look at how music changed YouTube. Why did you decide on this approach?*

Guillaume: I was interested in how I could study the impact of platforms on music, specifically YouTube. YouTube seemed very transparent, very simple and yet a bit overwhelming. I didn't have access to how it worked – so, in order to analyse YouTube, I had to go back to the beginning to better understand what it was and then decide what concept I could use to define it. Looking at the archives and

screenshots of its early days, I realised how far-fetched it was that YouTube could be a platform for music. So I started asking, "How did YouTube become this thing we now call a platform? And a platform for music?" I started looking for the places where music was mentioned in the discourse of the founders, or how it was presented as such on the site itself. I became aware that the shape of YouTube itself was regularly changing to accommodate more aspects of music culture. This came very much from the analysis of the archive, but I also had a specific framework from studies in the field of economic sociology, inspired by Madeleine Akrich or Michel Callon.

One of them, one of the best and most well-founded studies on digital music I had read, was written by a scholar called Jean-Samuel Beuscart. He was studying the streaming music market in the 2000s, at a time when it was failing, with a focus on copyright debates (2006). I was inspired by these kinds of symmetrical stories of innovation, looking at the failures as well as the successes. My own way of doing this was to avoid too much teleology, to look at the archive as if YouTube was not destined to become a success in the field of music technology – it helped that the definitions of music streaming or platforms were still a bit fuzzy, especially in academic discourse. I also tried to avoid the determinism that sees technologies as the “main actor” and “culture” as the passive recipient of change.

In this respect, Jonathan Sterne (2003) and Jeremy Wade Morris (2015) have been very influential in my work. One aspect of Sterne's research is also about the dual histories of technology and sound, treated as two fields that constantly shape each other. Similarly, Sophie Maisonneuve has done great research on the early days of the phonograph, when Edison listed its various uses, including as a business tool to record instructions for secretaries, and music originally appeared somewhere in the list, but was just one idea among others (2009). I've always been fascinated by the idea that when you look at a technology in retrospect, it can seem like there was only one way to go, but earlier on you can see all sorts of possibilities.

Elsa: *Considering musicians in all this, at many points in the book, you reflect on how the identity of being a musical performer can take on expectations, often prescribed by YouTube, beyond the creation of a video itself. Could you explain a bit more about how YouTube has not only changed music, but how it's changed what it means to be a musician?*

Guillaume: In the beginning, this was mainly through the editorial design of the site, as well as partnerships, competitions and promotions such as the YouTube Music Awards. This is less obvious now, but it was important early on. Criteria for what kind of music was welcome were subtly promoted, for example, through the hand-picked selection of featured videos. There was an idea that a YouTube musician was not a regular musician. It was someone who made their own music videos or humorous sketches between songs. It wasn't one thing, but if you look at the winners of the YouTube contests, you could see that for YouTube, a good musician was usually not so much a practicing musician who was already active in their own scene. It was more someone who was doing something very DIY and entertaining, playing with multimedia tools that were available online. At the same time, you could still post a copyrighted music video that was registered with a music label, but it was unlikely to be shown on the home page.

This has gradually changed, and in 2013, among a series of decisions (such as a dedicated music section on the homepage, or playlists created by the company and dedicated to specific functions, such as Music For The Gym), you can see the YouTube for Artists tutorials. A new figure is presented: the musician as entrepreneur. There are many aspects to this. They have to be networkers, and they have to work with partners and brands to get visibility on YouTube. The new horizon is not to share home-made experiments with the world, but to monetise and make your productions advertising-friendly. I think this was when the word "content" started to appear. We're used to it now, but in 2014, for many people, using social media wasn't about monetisation or brands, it was about connecting with each other and trying new things.

Elsa: *Do I remember correctly that this was when people were beginning to monetise their videos and there was some audience backlash towards those who did?*

Guillaume: Definitely. You have to become an advertiser, a kind of service worker who takes care of the fans, a super manager, an accountant... It was strange for me to see musicians being told to become autonomous strategists, because for me, coming from a media and communication school (CELSA, a curriculum for future media managers within La Sorbonne), that was a full-time job! Basically, you had to become a one-person agency and, sometimes in tension with this idea, YouTube also said that anyone could be a creator. They were implying that if you took an existing song and changed the image on the video, you were a creator. It was a very minimal idea of what it meant to be a creator, very different from the idea that it meant being an all-round agency focused on optimising your views and improving your career. This is where Toynbee's concept of proto-markets was helpful, seeing what YouTube was doing as building a leadership position by trying to shape and internalise the whole continuum of music culture, and, within that, the climbing up the value chain, where the chain of activity starts with you picking up an instrument and at the end you have become a manager monitoring your views. All of this is also linked to the idea that YouTube is and should be your main output – which is very unrealistic and has often been at odds with the way the platform functions in most cases, like as a promotional channel – which I explored in the chapter on a viral song by Maggie Rogers, but also in the PhD version of the text, and in a more recent case study of Ariana Grande's activity on the platform.

Elsa: *It's really important that you've detailed these incremental changes, some of which we now take for granted. How did you undertake this research on the Internet's history and present? What methodological adjustments did you make in the process?*

Guillaume: I started with two points of reference. The first was Michel Foucault and genealogy, his take on critique as "how did we become what we are?" in *Qu'est-ce que la critique* (2015)? Second was my background in semiotics, which involved printing lots of documents, comparing them, and building intermediate categories to classify and map layers of meaning. So I tried to mix these two approaches. I

looked at YouTube homepages in the web archives of the *Institut national de l'audiovisuel* (INA) in France and the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. There was an idea that was important to me: what a platform is and what people say it is - for example, Tim O'Reilly's account in his Web 2.0 manifesto - can be two very different things. This friction is interesting. For a while I put aside the public and academic commentary and just looked at the sites themselves, a kind of micro-historical work. I also have a taste for the vernacular culture of the web. I always liked to export PDFs of home-made websites that I liked and build up my own collection. So I wanted to do something similar with old school YouTube. I looked at the page every day for a few years of the site's history, noting which music videos were featured on the homepage.

I had to change my method when personalisation changed the interface so that everyone saw a different YouTube homepage. It became much more complex, so the second step was to map all the new tools and devices that were becoming part of YouTube. I realised that a lot of what was changing wasn't visible on the platform itself, so I started researching tech magazines and Internet media, and did a very systematic study of what was being published about YouTube at the time. Throughout, the research questions changed with the archive, as I had to approach these new documents with a different level of reflexivity. The third step was to try to understand the algorithms and rules that make Content ID and Watch Time/True View work as industry frameworks. At the time, there wasn't much research on Internet history or methodological approaches to web archives, but I knew there would be the issue of websites or archives disappearing. It was important for me to document sites and content that were not part of the platform's current strategy. I realised that sometimes YouTube says "we have this new big change" when it is not a big change. The opposite is also true sometimes, important socio-political decisions are being made discreetly.

Elsa: *You often take a critical lens to YouTube's own reflections. For example, you question the notion of virality through the analysis of the 2016 masterclass video of Maggie Rogers's "Alaska." How do you distinguish between YouTube's own narrative, which, in this case, emphasised it was the reason for the song's success, and what actually occurred.*

Guillaume: I was inspired by Catherine Saouter's analyses of semiotic chains (2018), looking at all the edits, comments and changes that happened to the same music video over time. At the time, a lot of research on virality was based on content analysis of large amounts of data. I felt that we weren't learning as much by using huge databases and automatic labelling processes as we were by examining cases on a small scale and picking apart each layer of transformation and interpretation.

On the question of how to dissociate the research from the discourse of the platform and how to deal with the non-public corporate information, I decided to just look at what was available with enough care and systematicity. If you put one thing after another, a story emerges that is more complex than what the platform says about itself. This is often because the promotional rhetoric is about simplifying things, making decisions legally or morally compliant, lobbying the government or reassuring investors, rather than detailing the conflicting goals that a company has to deal with in its strategy. It's just a different register of discourse. I don't have to

compete on veracity and suggest that the company is lying. For example, on virality, if you want an easy story, you can tell stories about how YouTube is a "hit machine" that produces overnight successes. But I can also argue that trying to reduce the creation of popularity to one source, simplifying the multi-layered mechanics of the platform itself to "just YouTube", is doomed from the start – especially when you're talking about something as mystifying as music and culture.

Elsa: *On that note, the term "viral" is ingrained in how we speak now. I think it is important to take a step back and question if and how the term may influence our assumptions.*

Guillaume: Yes. We should question not only the term, but also the tradition of thought that supports its effectiveness, which often functions as a kind of cultural unconscious, rather than as a theory that we could discuss head-on. But as we get to theory, are Gabriel Tarde and the idea of contagion, or Richard Dawkins' memetics, really the best way to understand the circulation of culture today? All of this goes back to debates between cybernetics and social semiotics that go back several decades.

Elsa: *In regard to writing style, you balance technical and narrative writing really well throughout the book, particularly in the first chapter on the coding of early music players and files. What tips do you have for integrating technological specificity into writing while making it engaging for a broad readership?*

Guillaume: It took me some time to realise that the reason I was writing badly was because I didn't really know what I was talking about. You have to document your research first, really look at things thoroughly, as multifaceted texts and situations. Joelle Le Marec calls this a "composite" approach to research objects. I think you need to have some sense of the point of view of the people involved and their own stakes if you want to be able to put it into perspective and not just bury it under sexy theoretical and critical frameworks. It can be painful, but I have found it useful to read, for example, technical documentation on recommender systems, as well as product developer blogs for the more mundane aspects. I wonder if it is possible to do a good critical analysis of technology without doing some kind of ethnography, even if it is a web-based or digital ethnography.

Also, the more historical data I had, the easier it was for me to move back and forth between specific analyses and a more narrative logic. The two kinds of knowledge, analytical and also contextual, may not always be present in the final writing, but they give you the confidence to be assertive.

Also, I found a French publisher who was interested in doing very small books, and I was given a choice of format: a kind of full-length dissertation or this pocket-sized monograph – I chose the second. It felt like a nice challenge. It helped that I didn't look at my dissertation for a year, and then I approached it not so much as research but as an editing task, asking: "What parts are just not interesting anymore? I wanted to get to the core ideas, the things I didn't know before this research and wouldn't know otherwise, things that felt like they would make a difference. I felt I didn't need to prove every point, and I got rid of most of the paragraphs that were

just academic positioning. For me, they can be felt as blended into the ideas that I put forward. I can always expand on them in an epistemological discussion elsewhere if necessary.

The narrative style, I think that's really something that I can only do when I write twice. For me, every first draft is very analytical in terms of how I structure and map out my ideas. Then I ask myself, "What should be the focus/thesis? And how do I tell a story about what I have learned?" Also, I always imagine this other scholar talking about the same topics from a different angle. I want to be able to respond with clear contrasts to another perspective that feels unsatisfactory. Sometimes it works by telling a story, because it is about adding ambivalence against reductionism, or conversely, by a one-sentence, affirmative, stronger hypothesis when I feel things have been too muddled.

Elsa: *The book is recent, but, with anything to do with the Internet, things change very quickly. With a few years since the publication of '*How Music Changed YouTube*' in its original French (*YouTube et let métamorphoses de la musique*, 2021), what changes have you seen? Has YouTube's identity or* médiagenie *changed in the meantime?*

Guillaume: I see two big trends in platforms. First, there is a lot of public talk about how platforms are becoming "shit". More academically, I see this with YouTube and the abundance of automated or semi-automated videos. How do you distinguish between content, music and spam? Is the difference very clear? Is it important? At the very beginning of YouTube, when you heard sound and music, even if it wasn't recognisable as a song as such and the exact intentions weren't always clear, you understood that what you were seeing was more or less the expression of an individual playing with the tools available. Now it's more a sea of "content" that can be either very professional, very streamlined; very cheap but commercial at the same time; streamlined but amateur-looking or sounding; or just amateur and uncommercial. And contexts and intentions become blurred again, but in new ways. YouTube's médiagenie now moves between all these registers at once. Yet YouTube continues to occupy a very specific place in this economy. Some other platforms are trying to occupy a "premium catalogue" position. For YouTube's music catalogue, part of the appeal is still the cover versions, infinite playlists and so on that are not filtered through the major music distributors.

The other trend is that streaming companies and platforms are changing or positioning themselves against each other. So you had Vine, then Instagram stories, then TikTok, and now even YouTube Shorts; and each platform has its live feature. There's less specificity now about what each platform is or isn't. It used to be that people had a very specific idea of what YouTube was for. Now it is more of a "bundle of affordances", to borrow Jonathan Sterne's phrase. Each platform is now several platforms at once, tailored to each user. This means that as scholars we need to focus (again) on the structural level of platform strategies and political economy, which is less subject to month-to-month fluctuations, but maybe with more precision. What factors will enable this platform to secure music copyright for the long term? Will this platform include podcasts and non-copyrighted content next year because music is too expensive? If a platform has to target so-called "creators", what is their socio-economic typology and what is the wider social, commercial

and institutional environment that influences their relationship with this company? I felt for a while that it was important to show that the platform economy is an industry of tactics (Jeanneret's phrase), but I feel that I need to temper this aspect with a stronger account of the economic structure (dynamics in finance, asset management, etc.) that can also determine what design, layout and production are foreseeable down the line. We don't want to fall into the trap of just focusing on certain trends in music or certain platform choices and just chasing the tail. We need to think about the big pillars on a longer scale, looking at the interactions between the tech and music industries, the state and all the stakeholders involved, if only to train our imaginations for "big stakes" alternatives.

Elsa: *All the changes we have discussed have had an influence on the relationship between audiences and performers. In 2024, it has become more of a talking point. Singers, such as Chappell Roan, are being more critical of the pressures for musicians to partake in online parasocial relationships, the kind YouTube was pushing early on, while still partaking in these practices. Do you think this is part of a wider shift? What changes do you perceive may come as the idea of broadcasting yourself has become a norm as opposed to a fringe movement?*

Guillaume: I have a chapter that focuses on the critique of parasocial promotion. It is interesting to see that this discussion has been taken up by more and more artists recently, but I don't know if this critique will ever become the norm. Sometimes I have felt a bit frustrated because the specificity of academic disciplines and training tends to make you focus on music as either culture or commerce, but not both at the same time. One risk of being interested in the discourse of successful artists critiquing a platform might be that we fall back on an idealised notion of their creative autonomy, and we continue to feed a cycle where we constantly move from the positivity of culture and creativity to the negativity of the market without really thinking about their interplay, – for example, the cultural dimensions of markets and the market orientation within music as culture, which is what is at stake if we want a non-moralistic critique to offer some results.

I think we need more ethnographic research on the cultural economies of music at different scales, in different scenes and different musical genres, such as Timothy Taylor's recent study of the moral economy of the rock music scene in Echo Park, Los Angeles (2024). I am inspired by Mark Fisher's evocations of how, for a period of time, musicians in the UK, while still earning money from their music, did not focus too much on productivity or success because of access to solidarity, housing, welfare, and so on (2018). If we focus only on the business model of musicians and how it is effected by platforms, we forget that a "music economy" does not exist in isolation. It's part of a web of interdependencies.

In writing the book, it was important to me to show, through the musical and technical analyses, that we should not abstract cultural meaning from socio-economic critique, nor from the dissection of the various technological paths available. I think YouTube's strategy would not have worked if it did not tolerate and build on a diversity of relationships to music and music cultures, but also to different devices and technological cultures, some of which are very deeply rooted in society, others of which exist on a more speculative level, or through tiny

experiments from the past. It is true that the overall dynamic of YouTube has been to re-commodify every aspect of music culture. But to think that this was a strategy from the start, that it was the consequence of using the right technology (video player, recommendation system, etc.), or that it had the best venture capital firm behind it, is to miss something. It would not work without the way in which, on one level, people are constantly (re)making a whole range of relationships with music and making them feel alive, bringing back memories and calling for the very desires and forms of collectivity that, on other levels, the platform tends to marginalise or make contingent.

Elsa: *Thank you very much for the insight. I've learned a lot from your book and I hope others do too.*

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