

Actions and Reactions in Technocene Times

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Eleven years ago, in 2011, Miguel A. García, director and editor of this journal, proposed to me the creation of a scientific publication covering a diffusion and discussion space on the theoretical, methodological and epistemological problems of the research carried out in the areas related to the study of music and sound. The invitation also included Daniela A. González, a colleague and friend of ours. Many other participants joined this initial shortlist: the advisory committee, assistant editors, interviewers and interviewees, collaborators, peer reviewers, and, of course, over a hundred authors. The support received from two institutions which endorsed, and provided the space for, hosting the digital contents: the CAICYT-CONICET¹ –with its *Portal de Publicaciones Científicas y Técnicas* – and the *Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad de Buenos Aires* –through the *Instituto de Ciencias Antropológicas* and the *Portal de Revistas Científicas* belonging to such school, was important, too. This collaborative effort has allowed an interrupted work which lets volume 10, number 1, of *El oído pensante* be published today.

One of the premises we firmly kept was that the publication should be on-line and of unrestricted and free access. The purpose was to offer bigger accessibility to the ideas expressed here and to promote a debate with an approach open to any perspective and academic current interested in music and sound issues. In a sense, the idea was to increase the existing access –which in our academic environment was very limited–, bring to light the most recent research in an area, that of reflection on music and sound manifestations, which has grown in the XXI century as it has never happened since its origins, and, on the basis of that, encourage dialogue. The technology of that time already allowed it, and we put faith in it: on-line publication. During the last decade, the renowned academic journals which were published on paper were forced to adapt themselves to

¹ The acronyms refer to the *Centro Argentino de Información Científica y Tecnológica y el Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas*.

the digital modes which academia, the market and users imposed; that is why, at present, there is no one left publishing only in printed form. The condition on that mode of spreading scientific knowledge, apparently more inclusive and with a bigger scope, was also accompanied by changes which sometimes limit or hamper edition, publication, and diffusion work, and which have been the object of critical analyses. Both academia and the market have obliged scientific journals to adapt themselves to rules to keep quality and recognition standards. I am referring to the use of publishing platforms, the uploading of metadata to speed up later digital searches, a blind peer review regime, the assignment of a permanent link to identify electronic contents, the inclusion of indices, catalogues, directories, etc.

In these eleven years, music practices –music production, storage, distribution and consumption- on which *El oído pensante* proposes to reflect, have also undergone paradigmatic changes. Perhaps the most significant transformation has been the establishment, in a dominant way, of music consumption through platforms, such as iTunes, YouTube, Spotify, etc. Besides, it cannot be ignored that the pandemic which broke out in March 2020 has also altered and modified our production, distribution and consumption of music. Virtuality has suddenly increased and went on to occupy such an important place as *in situ* practices, both in the everyday routines and, specifically, in everything referring to the music world.

The principal role of technology in the scenario described so far is evident. As Flavia Costa (2021) proposes, it is possible to denominate the epoch we are living in as Technocene, as a declination of Anthropocene. The neologism “stresses the question of technological deployment (Technocene), of the infrastructures built, and of the forms of energy triggered” (Costa, 2021, p. 10). Among other characteristics, it is an epoch in which information abounds because of the massiveness of data, and technology developments preponderate “to collect, analyse, and utilise data about human beings” (Costa, 2021, p. 32). In this context, there are habits which are intensely modified. For example, as Santiago Bilinkis points out: “Collaborative reading, collective underlining, the indelibility of our notes, the possibility of quickly searching through contents, and the fact that a book can never be sold out and can be available in just a second, incorporate new aspects which notably potentiate the reading experience” (2014).

These changes in which technology is, no doubt, the protagonist have given rise to a diversity of positions which includes both apocalyptic and integrated ones –employing the famous distinction by Umberto Eco. I would like here to take some of the least benevolent and most critical arguments.

Among the apocalyptic ones, the opinion of Yuval Noah Harari is taxative: “Macrodata algorithms may create digital dictatorships in which all the power is concentrated in the hands of a minute elite at the same time as most of the people suffer not any more from exploitation, but from something very much worse: irrelevance” (2018). That is why, the Israeli author’s intention is to highlight threats and dangers. In this case, I will mention two. In the first place, Harari states that macrodata algorithms may both do away with humans’ freedom and create more unequal societies than the ones existing now. In the second place, he warns us against globalization which, even if it has benefited big segments of humanity, [...] there are indications of growing inequality both between and inside societies” (Harari, 2018). That is to say, bigger access to information and growing world communication do not necessarily imply more freedom and equality, but the opposite.

These same critical positions about the big data epoch are found among those who have reacted against the transformations which have taken place in the above mentioned music practices. A revealing piece of work is that by Israel Márquez and Elisenda Ardévol in which they question how YouTube has suffered a process of “capitalist colonization or appropriation” (2018, p. 34). It is interesting to observe the different strategies which the platform has employed to limit and control what any user can publish freely and, in this way, notice how the authors dismantle the supposed democratic ideal of YouTube.

Another example which raises the issue of freedom and equality advocated with regard to the platforms which offer music occurred a few weeks ago in an environment not of academic reflection but which can surely be taken into account in future research. It is the conflict between the renowned popular musician Neil Young and the platform Spotify. Young announced that he was immediately withdrawing his music from Spotify given the fact that comedian Joe Rogan had been able to upload his podcasts about Covid-19, spreading an anti-vaccine discourse. This drastic reaction was accompanied by composer Joni Mitchell and other musicians such as David Crosby, Stephen Stills and Graham Nash. Even though the company has not issued any official communiqué, there is an abundance of journalistic opinions focussing on the issues of freedom of expression, censorship, the profits of other platforms when capturing musicians who have withdrawn their discographies, etc. As it can be confirmed, the retaliation has not yet caused devastating losses to Spotify but, evidently, it is an attention call for those who take part in that market.²

² Cf. https://cincodias.elpais.com/cincodias/2022/02/11/lifestyle/1644599664_740393.html

This brief review of the current times in which we are dependent –sometimes by choice, others by imposition– on certain technologies, and of the actions and reactions which have manifested themselves, in particular, in their employment in everyday situations, in their use in the discographic market, in the reflection on how they operate in music practices and in the consequences which they have in the diffusion of our academic work, is meant to awaken interest in the risks of the technological uses we are immersed in and mostly naturalize.

None of the authors mentioned can foresee the way in which technologies, artificial intelligence and other advances will modify life conditions, and virtuality, which has become gigantic in the last two years, cooperates in increasing the uncertainty about the future, in the short, medium and long terms. The world we live in is in constant transformation and, as has been said, in many cases, at an exponential growth rate (Bilinkis, 2014). Music practices and the reflection around them are not exempt from those changes. It is then necessary that *El oído pensante* can continue to be a space for raising awareness, for reflection and debate which allows us to be alert while freedom and equality continue to be restricted.

Bibliography

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