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Slow and fast music media: comparing values of cassettes and playlists

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Introduction: slow and fast music media

In the light of the technical development of music media and the assumption that technically superior (faster) media takes the place of its predecessors, this paper aims to bring light to the values, in particular social bonding values, that users attach to media objects. Compact cassettes and digital playlists have both commonalities and differences. As such, the overlying question is how are music media's exchange and social bonding values affected by the fact that use values seem to follow a trajectory of speed-focused technical development? Can any dissimilarity or similarity in these values explain why the cassette tape persists of in an age of digital abundance?

The current social media surge has seen an eclectic range of services being developed. The options for communication, media and cultural scholars to create pioneering research on new digital services, and hopefully new phenomena, have perhaps never been wider. Thus, the question of whether established social theory stands the test when applied to the Internet (Baym) is compelling and although the answer to this question will vary, the need to consider the role of mediating technology in models of social and cultural interaction will grow. Consequently, while revisiting social theory in the light of new forms of mediated social interaction is important, this paper argues that it is equally important to revisit preceding media forms in the light of digital media. A common view is that new media takes the place of old media due to superior technical capacities. While this may sometimes be the case, there are uses of "old" media that persist in modern society, and not only for reasons of nostalgia. This leads us to ask: what media values persist, or do not persist, with a change from the old to the new? At this point it is, of course, important to appreciate that "new" is a relative term (Fornäs). The neologism "new media" has arguably been applicable to any media introduced at any time in history, since it was indeed new at that moment. As such, it becomes interesting to see what happens to the media forms that are obscured or made redundant by "the new."

To many, the cassette tape is now obsolete. Even though it was once a symbol of a late-modern technological culture (du Gay et al.), as a technology of music consumption and sharing, its position on the consumer market has now been made redundant by new, more popular and arguably faster, innovations. Yet it persists among certain enthusiasts as a medium of choice with distinct social practices connected to them (more on these later). The cassette also shows "semiotic persistence" as it has been recovered as a symbol of a kind of counterculture questioning or subverting capitalist market mechanisms. Due to these initial observations, this paper contends the idea of Jenkins' that the cassette is exclusively, or even foremost, a "delivery technology" (Jenkins) and not a medium. Indeed, and somewhat contradictory, the definition put forward by

Jenkins (as adopted from Gitelman), sees a medium as (1) a technology that enables communication and (2) associated with a set of "protocols" and social or cultural practices that surround that technology. To the author of this paper, the cassette certainly complies with this definition of a medium.

If the cassette, despite its persistence, can be seen as "the old" (and thus "the slow"), in contrast, the "new" (or "the fast") in music consumption is exemplified by streaming music services (e.g. Spotify, Last.fm and MySpace), which have been quite successfully marketed as "the legal, integrated, secure and ubiquitous alternative to disk space consuming, local and lawfully dubious MP3-files and P2P networks" (Pfanner; TorrentFreak; Greenwood). In these streaming services, the digital equivalent to mixtapes are arguably user-created playlists. A playlist is, essentially, a selected sequence of songs. However, unlike the cassette tape, the playlist is a meta-medium, not containing music in itself, but rather pointers to music, which is then delivered by the service in question. In an analogy to the tape, the playlist can be compared to a cassette cover containing song title, artist and position on tape (as often indicated by a three digit tape counter number). Moreover, a streaming service can be accessed via a variety of specific technologies (commonly computers or mobile phones). At first glance, both media constitute not only practical everyday technologies, but also media forms by which end-users can design experiences for themselves and others. The increasing focus on speed in contemporary society and its technologies, suggests that the cassette can be seen as "slow" (linear, analogue, time-consuming) and the playlist as "fast" (hyper-linked, digital, time-saving). As such, the persistence of the cassette in the digital age calls for an investigation of what values and qualities the cassette holds in comparison to digital playlists. This paper starts by providing a theoretical background regarding the values that can be attached to products, media or services. Next follows a short background regarding cassette tapes and digital music services, followed by a theoretical comparison and discussion.

A typology of values

The "crisis" of a new medium will be resolved when the perceptions of the medium, as well as its practical uses, are somehow adapted to existing categories of public understanding about what that medium does for whom and why (Gitelman and Pingree xii).

Sterne brings attention to use value and exchange value in relation to digital media objects. While Sterne somewhat dismisses exchange value in his analysis of mp3 files – on the basis that these digital media objects are rarely paid for – it can be argued that exchange value is still relevant in "micro-economic" terms, in for example digital music stores and subscription services such as iTunes or Spotify. Also, the fact that digital media objects may not always be exchanged for money, but traded for other digital media objects in various types of peer-to-peer networks also signifies the viability of exchange value as an analytical concept. However, the sharing of media objects in social network services is not always as contractual or immediate as use or exchange values imply. In these contexts there are often other, more interpersonal or collective, reasons to share. Studies of sharing of goods in non-computerized social contexts (i.e. reciprocal or altruistic gift-giving) emphasize a different type of value that users attach to objects, namely social bonding value (Godbout and Caillé). Social bonding value, which is often referred to as the most important value in gift-giving research, is concerned with ties between people and how these are maintained via the exchange of goods and services. A question that has, so far, received fairly little academic attention is how these values change when the shared/gifted object is a digital one, and the context is a computer-mediated semi-public social network.

Value	**Characteristics**
Use value	The practical utility to a person. What can/will it actually be used for?

Exchange value	The value of a media object in terms of what it can be exchanged for, in monetary or trading equivalents
Social bonding value	The value in relation to social ties and their management. It asks questions of how users socially authenticate and personalize media objects in order to convey social bonding intentions

Table 1. Values of media objects

This paper refers to cassettes and digital playlists as music media *objects*. It does this to stress that they are, in practice, discrete objects that can be transferred or used as communicative tools between people. However, this is in no way saying that these objects dictate the surrounding practices or values. Rather, the examination of them as central objects is intended to explore the *relation* between specific media objects and the surrounding values and practices. While the cassette is material and the playlist is virtual (i.e. a digital representation) they are both forms of cultural containers. By including not only exchange and use values, but also the social bonding values that people ascribe to media objects, this paper proposes the analysis of these media objects as "technology-mediated cultural containers." Accordingly, a careful consideration of such cultural containers has strong potential to shed light on issues and practices of social meaning (Wallach).

Echoing the introduction, the question relating to media speed is how are music media's exchange and social bonding values affected by the fact that use values seem to follow a trajectory of speed-focused technical development? To unpack this question we will consider how different types of values have played out through (1) the history of cassette practices and (2) the history of digital music practices. After that we will consider a prominent case where cassette culture persists in the digital age, cassette labels (compare record label).

Cassette tape usage

There is no doubt that music is used for practical, exchange and social reasons (e.g. for self-management, social organization or ambience enhancement (Batt-Rawden and DeNora)). This paper, however, will concentrate on the cassette as a mediating technology rather than the variety of subjective (musical) experiences it can mediate. Having said that, it is also important to note that user perceptions of a mediating technology cannot be fully understood if taken out of practical context. The activities, and emerging practices, that are coordinated around the medium are essential keys to framing the values users ascribe to it.

The public status of the cassette tape today is, as has been pointed out, one of obsolescence. However, there was of course a time when the cassette tape was new and its surrounding practices were "in the making". The compact cassette was invented in 1963 by the Philips company (Wikipedia "Compact Cassette"). Due to its robust and simple design it soon became a vital catalyst for several social activities. In developing countries its design paved way for new ways to distribute both popular music and spoken word. In the 1980s its popularity grew with the introduction of various mobile personal music players. With the growing popularity of the compact disc (CD) in the 1990s the cassette lost its market share. As a sign of the times, Curry's (the biggest electronics retailer in the UK) announced in 2007 that it would discontinue sales of compact cassettes (Iggulden). Still, cassette use persists and provides end-users with the possibility to "socially charge" a trivial technological object, much like a digital file (Gaunt). The making of mixtapes, the creative use in portable studios and the cassette's unique sound are further cases in point. This paper will review three general, but still significant cases where cassettes constitute the central technology in co-shaping emergent practices, namely: mobile music consumption; tape trading; and mixtape creation.

Mobile music consumption – an emphasis of use value

The cassette enabled the first personal mobile music experience. Through personal stereos, such as the Stereobelt and the Walkman, cassettes could provide a soundtrack to the everyday lives of people (du Gay et al.; Hosokawa). One interesting social consequence of the Walkman in terms of user experiences is a type of social separation and self-centeredness, that has been referred to as "electronic narcissism" (Chen). By this token, the technology was mainly driven, and marketed, through personal, and not social, motives. In the words of Bull, the Walkman gave users the opportunity to "attempt to exist within their own private soundworld" (Bull 181). As such, the aspect of mobility refers primarily to a *use value* of the cassette as a medium. However, there is also another quality of mobility, or rather portability, which allowed for user-recorded music to be sent or carried to, and played at, other locations, which leads us to the practice of tape trading.

Tape trading – an emphasis of exchange value

Tape trading is a way to distribute cassettes, usually via the regular postal system. The cassettes often contain unreleased ("demo") material or live shows, hard to come by. Officially released material can be included, but is usually not encouraged. Tape trading allowed for users, and artists, to share material across distributed networks. The method was organized around an exchange system where users were required to contribute in an amount equal to the amount of tapes they received, clearly emphasizing the *exchange value* of the cassette in this particular practice (Marshall). Tape trading could also involve related material such as concert posters, flyers or t-shirts. An interesting parallel practice was for traders to make use of vacant tape space by recording, often local and relatively obscure, music on to it. This particular practice allowed for an expansion of musical connections between remote geographic areas (Manuel).

The mixtape – an emphasis of social bonding value

As mentioned in the introduction, the compact cassette tape is a simple, but versatile, technology. Apart from the activities already described, the creation of the "mixtape" is a particularly interesting practice making use of tapes.

> A mixtape is a compilation of songs recorded in a specific order, traditionally onto a compact audio cassette. […] Many enthusiasts also devote substantial attention to the packaging of a mixtape intended as a gift, sometimes going so far as to create cover art and customized liner notes. (Wikipedia "Mixtape")

The creation of the mixtape is thus a holistic practice, or even art form, where the mixtape becomes larger than the collection of individual songs (Fox). Much like digital gifts, the mixtape is also affected by the tension between the public and the private: a mixtape might be intended for a single individual, a select group of knowledgeable friends or even as a marketing or political mass medium directed towards the general public (Geller; Ball). From the quote above, it also becomes clear how much the context and the added metadata, can mean in terms of communicated social intention. While the tape itself is a cheap technology, a carefully compiled mixtape shows that you have taken time, made a substantial (cognitive, emotional or social) effort and, eventually, communicated significant social intention. Clearly, this highlights the social bonding value of the mixtape and how the metadata (song choice, song sequence, themes, cover art) is included in the conveyance of this value.

Digital music media

In general, there are certain qualities that come with media objects being digital. These characteristics are:

- Replicability – digital objects are easy to reproduce and make literally perfect copies. The

digital nature also adds a tension between the persistence and ephemerality of media objects in online networks
- Searchability – digital objects can be easily stored, catalogued and searched
- Remixability – digital objects can be changed, combined and repackaged

The combination of these characteristics creates a digital ecosystem where there is an abundance of digital media objects. Based on this abundance, Tanaka argues that many digital personal music systems lack social interactivity to support navigation and meaning-making. Other scholars, however, mean that digital music enables users to remix (combinations of) media objects to create new and unique experiences:

> [Digital music] offers the opportunity to share music at the level of the ideas, freely exchanged and competitive with other music, as opposed to other commodities. It brings to the fore the value of music in terms of what it means to ourselves, our family, and our friends. (Condry)

In the case of music this freedom can mean to de-contextualize songs from albums, create new playlists, remix it or include it as a part of other media objects (Kelly). To provide the necessary context to digital playlists, this paper will provide a brief description of the MP3-file and the application that popularized the sharing of it, Napster.

The MP3 and Napster

Commonly, the MP3 is regarded as a file-format for digital audio that significantly reduces the size of a music file. As, such, its technical characteristics paved way for new distribution paths for music (Jones). In a rigorous cultural analysis of the MP3, Sterne concludes that the MP3 is designed for "massive exchange, casual listening and massive accumulation" (838). These three practices mainly highlight the MP3's technological or personal *use* values: it is endlessly replicable, it is easily searched and accessed, and it is small in size and easy to store. While the MP3 is an artifact in its own right, it was arguably through file-sharing services, such as Napster, that its potential became realized.

In the late 1990s, Napster emerged as first publicly widespread file-sharing application (Shirky). Napster was a software program that connected computers and allowed users to share their music libraries over the network. From a user perspective this created an easily accessible library of downloadable music. It was largely built on a combination of human sharing intentions and the previously detailed characteristics of the MP3 file (Menn). While Napster did include certain functionality supporting interpersonal communication, it was according to Brown and colleagues rarely used to create a social context around music listening and sharing. Still, Napster users often regarded themselves as opposing a disagreeable business model of music distribution, creating a "culture of consumer emancipation" (Giesler and Pohlmann). As Napster's reputation grew, record companies sued it for violating the current copyright laws, resulting in an even further boosted popularity of the service. At this point Napster was also the source material for an extensive public debate regarding online sharing of digital media objects. The topic was almost always framed as a legal issue (i.e. "kids who steal music and how they can be stopped"). In 2001 Napster was forced to shut down. This opened up to a new breed of peer-to-peer networks that were, unlike Napster, not reliant on a central server (e.g. Kazaa, eDonkey, BitTorrent). While these services also gained massive popularity, copyright holders continued to request "legal alternatives" that would not support "massive exchange". One of the more recent efforts trying to meet this request are so called streaming services.

Streaming services and the playlist

Music streaming services work on a different logic than MP3 files being up- and downloaded over a peer-to-peer network. In a streaming service, the accessed music files are located on

centralized servers. Via the web or a dedicated application, users can search the files and access the music they find appropriate. Put simply, when selected, the music file is played on the user's computer while being concurrently downloaded. However, the files are, unlike MP3s, not intended to be permanently stored on users' hard drives. Because music files are only temporarily stored, the sharing of music takes place via so-called playlists. This is a kind of meta-sharing, where music files themselves are not shared, but rather meta-information about a sequence of selected songs, which can then be accessed via the service in question.

A significant amount of technologically oriented work has been done on automatic playlist generation, where algorithms for creating personalized playlists based on prior listening behaviour, are developed or optimized (Alghoniemy and Tewfik; Ragno, Burges and Herley; Andric and Haus). However, very little research has been conducted on the *social* use of playlists or the perceived values of them. An extensive survey found only two papers that examine the social uses of playlists (Cunningham, Bainbridge and Falconer; Liu and Andersson Reimer). One of these studies examined the underlying principles for organizing playlists and found that the major part of playlists was produced with a social intention, for example to support a social activity, to express romantic feelings, to tell a story or to convey a mood (Cunningham, Bainbridge and Falconer). The second study confirms many of the results of the first, but also adds some important observations. According to this study, many users require an existing social bond or shared experience to be able to interpret to the conveyed bonding value of a playlist. These results clearly connect to the social uses of mixtapes and highlight the remediation of the cassette in the digital playlist.

In summary, there is no clear consensus regarding the social values or social potential of digital music media. While some see the digital as irrevocably removing important social qualities relating to context and tangibility, others view digitalism as a liberation to remix, re-contextualize and rediscover the social values of music.

A case of cassettes in current music culture: cassette labels

The revitalization of the cassette label scene is indicative of the persistence of the cassette. The (now) famous cassette labels of the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Tellus Audio Cassette Magazine, MusicWorks Journal and Reach Out International Records) have been followed by a considerable number of currently operational labels (e.g. Gift Tapes, Midori Records and Poor Little Music) (Moss). To get a clearer picture of current cassette culture we interviewed 8 persons operating cassette labels in Sweden about their cassette-related practices and motivations. It would seem that cassette culture today remediates many of the values of both earlier cassette practices as well as digital networks. The use of the Internet was prominent with all respondents – virtually all exchange and trade of cassettes was coordinated through the Internet. One interesting thing was that sales and trade of cassettes was an important starting point for trust-building and social networking (thus moving from exchange value to social bonding value). Many times, trust was presumed to exist in the culture. For example, several respondents explained how they assumed that people would pay for a sent cassette or reciprocate with another cassette. This reciprocity of trust was essential in building a social network.

In terms of use value, there was a norm to make full use of the recording space of the cassette (to "dub all sides"). Also, the cassette provided respondents with a more concentrated listening experience – the temporal limits of the cassette enabled a more focused effort. Further, the sequential nature of the cassette countered the "skip and shuffle" behaviours many respondents attributed to digital music. A final use value of the cassette was that it was a cheap(er) material container to use for distribution of cultural content.

A common theme was a resistance towards "unlimited access" and "ubiquitous abundance" of music. In the eyes of the respondents ubiquity rendered music "meaningless". The defiance was

partly a deliberate act against the perceived conventions of music listening, but also as a way to "be part of a scene". By superposing a social context on the abundance of available music a functional limit to both music listening and distribution created meaning for the respondents. The cassette was described as having a larger capability of conveying intention and effort, something that respondents interpreted as a sign of human investment. Music online was "just there", without any significant social context.

A value which had not been considered in the previously presented typology, but which became very evident in the collected data, was the (material) aesthetic value of the cassette. Several respondents gave accounts that emphasized the aesthetic qualities of the cassette. The size, look and feel of the cassette in their hands was something very important.

The speed of music media and the speed of media values

In the mid-1980s, many home computers used tape recorders, with ordinary cassette tapes, as storage devices. The general idea of this was as simple as it was smart: to make use of an available, well-known and cheap technology with a fairly large storage capacity. Interestingly, the use of the cassette also provided one of the main technical incentives for an early attempt to support end-user sharing. In Sweden, and probably also many other countries, end-users and hobbyist programmers could send programs they had written on their home computers to a dedicated radio show (via cassettes and diskettes in the ordinary mail). The radio show would then select and broadcast some of these submitted computer programs, for other end-users to record on their home receivers, and later use in the tape recorders connected to their computers. This effort can be said to constitute an early attempt at public file-sharing. Unfortunately, the broadcasts relied on too many analogue technologies to be completely successful (e.g. recording levels, uninterrupted and clean broadcast and reception conditions, recording head angle alignments etc). Nevertheless, these broadcasts, in many ways, highlight the technical differences compared to how end-user content sharing is happening today (see table 2).

Then:	**Now**:
centralized broadcast	more decentralized (each user is a potential broad or narrowcaster)
content selected by editorial boards	distributed editorial control (there is still what can be argued to be quality assurance in certain online venues, although it is often collectively emergent)
mix of digital and analogue technologies	pure digital storage and communication

Table 2. Differences between sharing practices then and now

Of course, the above distinction between then and now is somewhat polarized. Indeed, the very thesis of this paper is that analogue technologies *reside* in the "digital age." As such, media are "always in reciprocity with other existing and circulating technologies and tendencies" (Acland 177). This paper has focused on cassettes and playlists as cultural artifacts. Both cassettes and playlists are used to encode lived experiences (van Dijck). The rituals and practices surrounding this encoding are not entirely collective, yet not entirely individual – they are in constant re-negotiation between self and culture. As such, this paper owes legacy to a larger stream of cultural materialism, perhaps most relevantly expressed by Innis. While this paper has no Innesian ambition to connect the analyzed cultural artifacts to, for example, the organization of empires (Innis), Innis raises important issues regarding the past and the present. A constant focus on the "new," without acknowledging that the new is a relative term (Skågeby "Conceptions of New Media: Towards Analytical Dimensions"), completely misses the dynamic relation between *residual* and *emergent* practices. The analysis of cassettes and playlists shows how residual and emergent media technologies (and practices) can support and co-influence each other. Thus, a cultural analysis of the present arguably must envelope the past. Importantly, as Straw points out, the digital devours all that precedes it (Straw). The Internet is an accumulative medium, which

constantly looks backwards for even more obsolete content to incorporate. This growing depository of historic media objects contributes to making other media obsolete. In this context of increasing speed and digital perfection, residing analogue media (e.g. the cassette) provides a way to slow cycles of both production and consumption down and emphasize aesthetics and social bonding value. In other words, residual (slower) media helps to highlight "the care and attention needed in both the preparation and execution of a work" (O'Hagan). Perhaps the step back to slow media is a counter-cultural act where the rare and scarce, rather than the ubiquitous and abundant, is a goal. The residing use of the cassette also points to a challenge of the previously mentioned accumulative process. By being analogue, local, sequential and many times used for exclusive content, the cassette *re-displaces* accumulative media.

The cassette is a unique medium as it invites users to combine personal, social and altruistic intentions. In many ways the roots of the sharing surge and "free culture" movements of today can be traced back to the social activities surrounding compact cassettes. Even though the debate over digital sharing has elevated to political, juridical, social and ethical levels, the values appreciated by sharing users are arguably very similar (see for example (Cenite et al.)). Of course, the cassette did not fade into obsolescence over night. The process, where the "fast" took its place was slow but sure. Today, the cassette is a marginalized medium, used by a minor group of enthusiasts (at least in the U.S. and most of Europe). However, the range of accessible content in online media collections will continue to grow and end-users will need to make sense of it. By analyzing how prior technologies have fulfilled use, exchange and bonding values we have gained an insight into how digital collections can be managed, accessed and shared in socially meaningful ways. Values becomes a way to compare what Williams call residual and emergent media in order to prefigure new media forms (Williams). From the concurrent analysis of cassettes and playlists it seems clear that the playlist in streaming services removes much of the remixability of music objects. As such, it appears to be a step backwards, towards centralization and simple sequencing of music.

In an effort to prefigure how slow and fast music media can co-exist, we may consider how playlists could be beneficially connected to other social media objects (e.g. photos, events, groups) in order to enhance the support for social bonding values. Further, it also suggests that the social bonding value of a playlist is significantly larger when used in an already established social context. There it becomes an added layer of social communication.

As prosumers (i.e. concurrent producers and consumers), we are increasingly active in online sharing environments (e.g. blogs, social networks, media sharing). The mediated presentation of our everyday lives becomes a matter of direction. Direction in the sense that we direct our sharing towards designated, or undesignated, others, but also in the sense that we direct the overall perception and experience of ourselves we wish to convey in the same way a movie director directs a movie. Designing experiences for others becomes a part of personalizing the experience for ourselves as well as for others. Experience design is by the same token a question of making specific objects relevant out of an overwhelming and senseless mass of objects. Thus, by making certain media objects socially significant (i.e. conveying social bonding value) end-users can help each other find and enjoy new media experiences. This design activity is carried out both on an individual media object level, but also on an overall level where media objects are clustered and shaped into social pools of experiences. Consequently, end-users are designing experiences for others and by highlighting the social functions of these experiences; previously redundant objects can gain a significant value, both on a personal and structural level. In many ways, this process is about slowing music consumption down.

Social metadata refers to the notion of media objects being attached with data that carries social relevance (Skågeby "Exploring Qualitative Sharing Practices of Social Metadata: Expanding the Attention Economy"). For the material mixtape such metadata could be explicit (e.g. a self-designed cover or sheets of background info) or implicit (e.g. track order or an embedded

connection to a personal event or activity). The packaging of the mixtape enacts a social function that structures the conveyed experience. In the online social networks of today many users create and add both personal information and media objects. While there are certainly efforts to connect these two types of information (e.g. through tags or comments), this paper suggests that such connections could be made much more powerful. In digitally mediated milieus social metadata can be for example activities, status updates, contacts, events or even other (multi)media objects (photos, texts, videos). Social metadata supports such processes as emotional attachment, identity construction and social bonding values. By connecting such social metadata to typical music-related activities, there is opportunity for enhancing (1) social navigation of music, (2) the interaction history of a specific media object and (3) personal information management. These three notions are tightly interwoven and sometimes overlapping. For example, typical activities surrounding the mixtape are to screen, listen to and select the appropriate tracks, compile them in appropriate order, convey what you like/your excellent taste, and eventually to provide a soundtrack to a specific event, person, personal status or activity. Screening and listening activities can be conveyed via status updates; selection, compilation and taste through personal playlists; and finally to connect such lists to relevant people, activities, photo albums or events. Over time, recording such interaction history paves way for new usage patterns relating both to social navigation and personal information management.

Conclusions

This paper has suggested that the speed, or slowness, of media can be fruitfully analyzed via the values that are attached to shared media objects. The comparison made between cassette tapes and digital playlists imply that use values follow a trajectory of increased speed as part of technical development. However, social bonding values seem to work on a different time scale and contain resources and contexts that require a slow media approach. Additionally, the paper adds to the classic value typology by highlighting the (material) aesthetic value of the cassette.

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