

Chapter 3.34

The MP3 Player as a Mobile Digital Music Collection Portal

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INTRODUCTION

MP3 players are often described as *music collections in our pockets* or the *pocket jukebox*. Indeed, it would seem that MP3 players have significantly transformed music collections, music collecting practices, and contemporary understandings of the music collection. The MP3 player may be used to store, retrieve, and reproduce digital music files, and, therefore, it can be described as a portal—if we define the term portal as an entrance, doorway, or gateway—into these simulated (Baudrillard, 1983) mobile music collections. It is an interface between the human body and archives of digitally compressed music. This can perhaps be understood as constituting a kind of *musical cyborg*, a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of human and machine (Haraway, 1991). The MP3 player, in this hybridised sense, is a gateway into the digital, virtual, or simulated (Baudrillard, 1983) material cultural realm of music, a mobilised cyber-collection. The question then is what becomes of the music collection and the music

collector when music shifts from the objectified disc and spool to the digital compression format and MP3 player portal? And, what are the social and cultural implications of the MP3 player portal's increasing pervasiveness and embeddedness in the flows of everyday life? The purpose of this article is to briefly introduce and discuss these questions alongside some of the technical details of the MP3 player. This article aims to use the material and technical details and definitions of the MP3 player to open up a range of possible questions that may be pursued in future research in this area. I will begin by defining the MP3 and the MP3 player.

BACKGROUND: MP3

The MP3 player, such as those manufactured by Sony, Creative, and Apple, can perhaps best be understood as a music retrieval interface that provides a portal for its appropriator to access an archive of digitally stored music files. These

may be selected and reproduced or illuminating the increasingly inert user, the device may select the tracks on behalf of the listener. An example of this is the *Shuffle* function on the Apple iPod (see next). This extension of the random play function of the compact disk (CD) player can perhaps be offered as an example of the increasing intelligence of the machine and the increasing inertia of the appropriator (Gane, 2005; Kittler, 1999).

According to Duncan and Fox (2005):

One of the oldest—and probably best known—compression/decompression formats (codecs) is MP3. It is popular with users for its near-CD quality and relative high speed of encoding and decoding. It is less popular with the music industry because it lacks controls to prevent copying. (Duncan et al., 2005, p. 9)

MP3, an abbreviation of *Motion Picture Experts Group One Audio Layer Three*, originated in 1991 as a system for broadcasting media files. MP3 is a file compression format that has the capacity to reduce music files to around one-twelfth of their original size (Mewton, 2001, p. 25), thus making the transfer across the Internet far more rapid and the space required to store the music much smaller. However, and contrary to the utopian rhetoric of the information or digital age, these are not perfect reproductions. The process of compression removes elements from music files so as to reduce them in size effectively; this leads to some of the subtleties of the music being removed. This then is a somewhat alternative vision to the perfect and infinite reproducibility that digitalisation has come to represent.

The MP3 format can be understood to have mobilised the music collection by compressing it, or miniaturizing it (Haraway, 1991), to fit into these pocket sized retrieval and reproduction devices.

THE MP3 PLAYER

The MP3 player, then, is a device that may be networked with the Internet (usually) through a connection with a computer, provided that the relevant software is installed upon it. A CD containing the required software usually comes with a newly purchased MP3 player. This connection made via the USB (Universal Serial Bus), USB2, or Firewire port or connector on the back of the computer enables music files stored on the computer's hard drive or accessed directly through the Internet to be downloaded onto the MP3 player where they are stored. The MP3 player then enables the appropriator to retrieve their music and reproduce the music file, often through headphones, although a variety of technologies are now available through which MP3 players may be docked (amplifying the music through speakers around open spaces).

MP3 players vary somewhat in size but, to give an idea of dimensions, are usually somewhere between the size of a box of matches and a pack of playing cards (more exact dimensions are included in the following discussion of the iPod). However, contrary to the image this suggests, the MP3 player is not a discrete, standardised, or self-contained device that takes on a single form or design. The current trend is for the combination of MP3 players with other technologies to create hybrid devices, the most significant of which is the combination of MP3 and mobile telephone technologies. This creates always-already networked MP3 players that may access networked archives of music files and therefore, exceed the storage capabilities of an isolated MP3 player and the collecting practices of its owner. Recently, highlighting their dynamic form, MP3 players have also been hybridised with camcorders, sunglasses, and even confectionary packaging to create novelty devices.

MP3 players are highly mobile portal technologies upon which anything between around 120

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