

MP3 players

Listening practices and socio-technical appropriation

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Music and technology

To make history short, we can say that since the advent of sound recording, technology has evolved toward a size reduction and a tendency to individualize the listening practices. The development of listening through headphones allowed the listener to live a personal quality experience of music. Since the invention of the Walkman, the listener has the opportunity to listen to his music wherever he is. By moving his private listening into the public space, he personalizes his soundscape and transforms his relationship with the environment (Beer, 2007; Bull, 2005; Pecqueux, 2009a; Thibaud, 1994), to himself (Bull, 2005; DeNora, 2000) and others (Pecqueux, 2009a; Thibaud, 1992).

Thirty years later, mobile listening practice is spreading with the mp3 player (and, most of all, the iPod). It is one of the most (or even the most) frequent ways of listening to music today.

In my thesis, I want, first, to provide a better (and fuller) understanding of the use of the mp3 player through ethnography of its users.

Second, the analysis of the use of the mp3 player can, in my opinion, provide crucial concepts to understand what is today's musical reception. In other words, I consider that the experience of listening through an mp3 player changes the way we listen to music.

Third, and more prospectively, we can imagine that the way we listen to music thanks to a technology influences music production. As the 45-rpm defined the single, what changes in music production does the mp3 player provoke? I will not develop this last point here.

Exploration and observations

I am now in the exploratory phase of my research.

The goal of this phase is to explore various dimensions that play a role in the practice of listening with an mp3 player. Apart from a review of the literature and meetings with senior researchers, I carried out direct observation of mobile music listeners.

I am doing this for three reasons:

- as part of the exploration, to have a naive look at a variety of users and to define concepts of further investigation;

- to confront theory and field research;
- to assess what data can be collected through observation and consider other methods.

In the next few weeks, I will also be meeting users for the same reasons.

Observations were of three types:

- « On-the-fly »: observation of walking listeners from a static position. It allows observing a large amount of users of different types but can, in most cases, only provide a glimpse of the whole practice of listening.
- « Tracking »: by walking in the streets, I am selecting a mobile listener and follow him through his journey. It provides a fuller view of the practice but can sometimes lead to situation where the observation has to stop (for instance: the listener enters a private area).
- Longer observations of commuters in busses and trains or students in a library. By placing myself on an adequate position, it provides a detailed observation of the practice.

These observations - linked with the literature - have lead to an amount of concepts, dimensions that seem to influence the way people use their mobile music device in everyday life.

A collection of dimensions

I have tried to organize this collection of dimensions of the practice of listening (see fig. 1 below for a visualization of it).

First, and like any cultural practice, everything starts in social space, in which I put:

- fashion;
- other users listening to music (and we learn from their practice);
- cultural stereotypes about the mobile listener. The actual listener deals and plays with these (unconsciously or actively).

Second, the situation in which the practice takes place:

- The object I analyze is mobile. It seems then obvious to know the situation: is the listener travelling, walking, jogging, working and trying to concentrate? This can underline a functionality of the music as a way to manage the self (DeNora, 2000).
- The soundscape: as Michael Bull (2005) and others (Beer, 2007; Simun, 2009; Thibaud, 1992) mention, mobile listeners use their device to reconfigure a personal sound space.
- Space: how can space define zones, bubbles; how do listeners cross urban spaces; with which type of transport, etc.
- Time: the practice takes place in a limited time with a beginning and an end.
- The others: discussions with peers during the practice or the « obliged » communication (e.g.: say hello in a shop) (Pecqueux, 2009a).

Third, if the situation may seem like a « given » of the practice, something outside of him, the mobile listener can act upon various dimensions that influence his practice, the way he listens to his music.

- Technical aspects: headphones or earbuds; what type of device does he use (mp3 player or smartphone, for instance); does he use accessories; what volume of listening; how is the machine organized; how does he navigate into it; how long does the battery last; what is the amount of music afforded by the machine, etc.
- Musical aspects: how does he listen to his music (by artist, shuffle mode, playlist), what type of music (his favourite music, discovery artists, commercial music that everybody listens to), what genre of music (rock, metal, electronic, etc.), etc.
- The body, the movements and the senses: the listener can move with his music; his perception through his senses is also reconfigured. For instance, Anthony Pecqueux (2009b) has observed the sense of looking when listening to music in a mobile situation but I don't agree with his conclusions. The question of the modification of the other senses (than the audition) when listening with an mp3 player seems of interest but I am temporarily leaving this behind.
- The other media being used: most of the time, the practice of listening to music in a mobile situation is accompanied by another media practice. Either on the same device (texting someone, checking emails on a smartphone), or with another media (reading a book or a newspaper, for instance) (Patriarche et al., 2009).

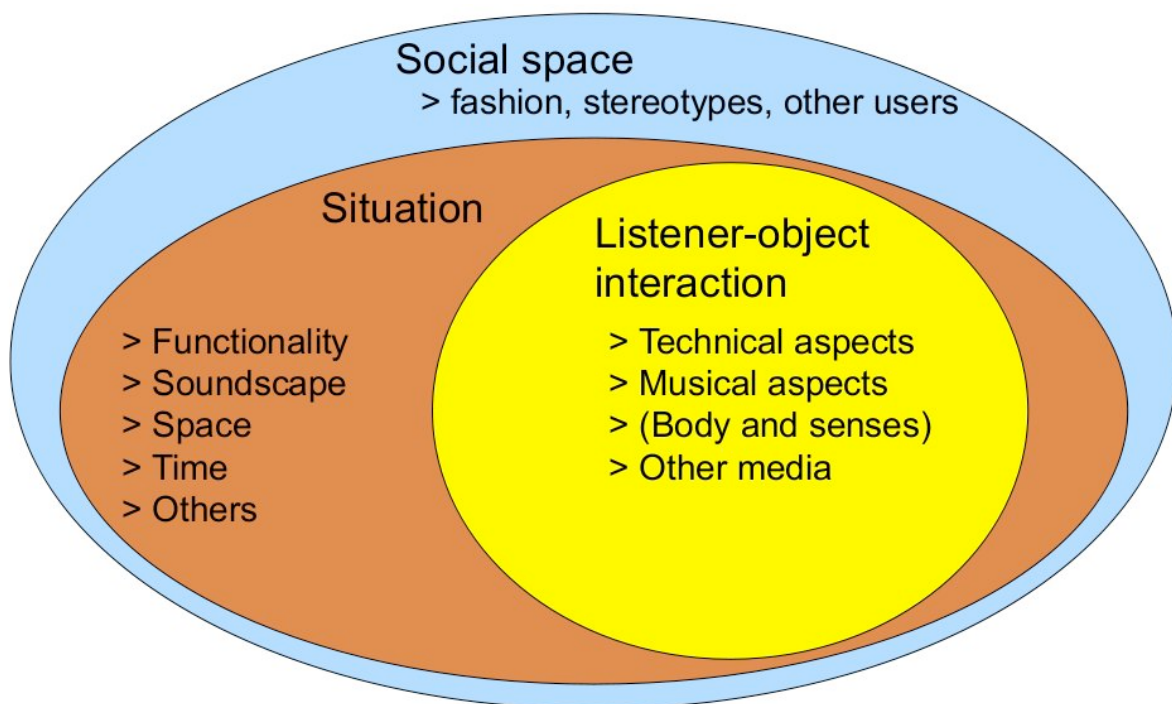


Fig. 1 : organization of the dimensions of the practice of listening with an mp3 player

As we can see, the practice of mobile music listening is a dialogue between the listener (interacting with his device) and the situation within which the practice takes place. It is an unpredictable event, an experience in constant negotiation with the situation and the device. Hennion (2002) and also Maisonneuve (2001) talk about a *performance* of listening. The listener puts himself in an attitude that is active and available to the modulations of the situation.

I propose then to summarize these dimensions in a simpler model.

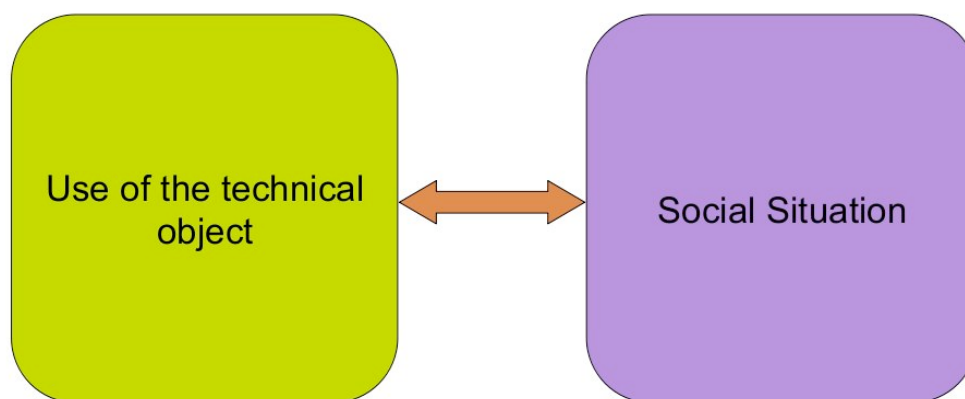


fig. 2 : simpler model for the dimensions of the practice of mobile listening

It seems clear that the use of a mobile object is framed by the situation in which the practice takes place. As you can observe, I erased the subject but, according to me, he is still present in both sides of this model through his use and his participation in the situation.

The framework of socio-technical appropriation

This shows then what is socio-technical appropriation. The practice that is analyzed is the result of a process of appropriation from the user. The use is negotiated with the technical constraints of the device, the constraints of the situation of use and is, more than probably unconsciously, influenced by socio-cultural dimensions. De Smedt defines it as « an ongoing transformation of use continuously brought about by interactions with other users and by interactivity with equipment and software. Appropriation is a concept that helps us get out of a naïve prediction, built exclusively on technical possibilities » (De Smedt, 2006, p.17). This approach (Bardini, 1996; Millerand, 1998; 1999; 2002; Proulx, 2001) affords to consider the object in everyday life and tries to elicit the meaning the users give to their practice. It puts the stress halfway between the object and the subject as it concentrates on the actual use of the object. It also takes into account the place of the object in a network of technologies (computer, software, online music stores).

I will use this framework to provide a better understanding of the use of mp3 players.

A methodology to elicit the practice

Even if I have been able to list these dimensions, direct observation can, in my opinion, only provide ideas and lead to suggestions about what the listener might think when he is in his practice. For the

ethnography of the appropriation of new technology, the method has to link the practice and the meaning the user gives to it. In this end, interviews of users are often preferred. In interaction with the interview, the researcher tries to imagine a method that can link the interview with an observation of the practice *in situ*. One method is to ask the user 'low-level' questions to get a fuller description of the practice: what are you doing, what is this, why do you do this, etc.

Because of the mobile aspect of the mp3 player, I am considering undertaking post-commented journeys. Thibaud (2001) configured a method called the "*parcours commentés*". Recently, Pecqueux (2009b) adapted it as the "*trajets post-commentés*". The idea is to follow a user (who is informed about the protocol) during his practice, to observe him from a distance (or even film or photograph him) and then to discuss his journey with the listener. This allows eliciting some details that are too often unconscious and hard to bring back to memory. By showing (or describing) his own practice to the user, the researcher can solicit him to give a meaning to his use. This also underlines the reflexivity of the user, just as Antoine Hennion (2009) has seen when interviewing music lovers about their passion for music.

To understand that practice of listening with an mp3 player *in situ*, this methodology can underline the link between what they say, what they do and what they say they do (or even what they think they do).

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