



'Vinyl never say die': The re-incarnation, adoption and diffusion of retro-technologies



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ABSTRACT

New technologies continue to shape the way music is produced, distributed and consumed. The new turn to digital streaming services like iTunes, Spotify and Pandora, in particular, means that very recent music format technologies such as cassettes and CD's have almost lost their value. Surprisingly, one 'obsolete' music format technology, Vinyl record, is making a rapid comeback. Vinyl sales around the world, in recent times, have increased year on year, and the number of music enthusiasts reaching for these long-playing records (LP's) continue unabated. Drawing on the sociology of translation as an interpretive lens, we examine the momentum behind the revival of vinyl record, as a preferred music format choice for a growing number of music enthusiasts. In doing this we unpack the inarticulate and latent network of relationships between human and non-human actors that constitutively give form to the contemplative knowledge (what has become) of the resurgence of vinyl as a format of choice. We conclude by discussing how insights from the vinyl reincarnation story could help open up new possibilities for rethinking the contextual re-emergence of near-obsolete technologies, the mobilization of different actors to aid their re-diffusion and potential exploitation of value from retro-technologies.

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1. Introduction

Orwell was an articulate proponent of dystopian visions of the future. In the light of the emergence of digital streaming services like iTunes, Spotify and Pandora, he would have probably predicted that young music enthusiasts in this age would be scrambling for more advanced and sophisticated technologies to stream their music. Surprisingly, recent global music sales figures show that the 'obsolete' vinyl record is making a comeback (Palerimo, 2015; McGuinness, 2014). Compared to CD and digital albums, the overall sale of vinyl is infinitesimal and accounts for only 2% of industry revenue. In this regard, vinyl sales remain a niche market as it does not capture a significant share of the global music sales. But with a predicted year on year growth of 100% (McGuinness, 2014), the revival of vinyl as a format of choice for both young and old music enthusiasts in an era of digital streaming is intriguing as it represents a confounding retro-technology— an old and often displaced technology that regains a new lease of life to become part of nearly invisible everyday-life. The survival and resurgence of vinyl challenges traditional views on technological evolution and beats the imagination of technophiles whose prognosis predicted the

total annihilation of vinyl LPs in the early 1990s (Osborne, 2013; Hainge, 2008; Plasketes, 1992).

In recent times, our understanding of the music enthusiasts' return to vinyl has therefore been extended as a result of some interesting lines of inquiry analysing the larger social, historical, and intellectual context within which vinyl has emerged as a preferred music format (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2013; Magaouda, 2011; Hayes, 2007; Straw, 1997). Among the plethora of factors cited as driving vinyl's renewed appeal and boom in vinyl sales include consumers demand for good-quality sound (Bartmanski and Woodward, 2013), its physicality, tactile and aesthetic appeal (Pantzer, 1997), and old-fashion consumerism (Hayes, 2007; Elborough, 2009). However, there is no evidence to suggest that vinyl is en-route to capture a significant share of the global music sales market anytime soon (Palerimo, 2015; McGuinness, 2014). Not all, we certainly cannot predict whether vinyl is poised to stay on the music enthusiasts' radar for the near future and beyond. Yet, tagging the conspicuous resurgence of vinyl as an insignificant phenomenon will mean its fecund progenerative potentialities on technology diffusion, and social change may escape the attention of decision makers who are expected to break out of dominant mindsets, and develop peripheral awareness of inarticulate and often invisible social currents. In this regard, we follow in the footsteps of other scholars such as (Magaouda, 2011; Pantzer, 1997; Nokelainen and Dedehayir, 2015), to argue that the resurgence and increasing adoption of near-obsolete technologies has some epistemological

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relevance to the management of technology in this digital age. This discursive positioning of retro-technologies is not simply of innovation. Rather, their uncanny reemergence has the potential to refashion discourse on novelty, technology diffusion and social change. Contributing to this line of inquiry, our objective in this paper is to extend our understanding of the resurgence and diffusion of vinyl technology and its potential implications for the management of retro-technologies across space and time. We do this analysing the 'reincarnation' of the vinyl as the music enthusiast's format of choice by attending to the social and technical aspect of the technology together. Emphasizing the role of boundary objects which act as intermediaries in network relationships, the sociology of translation offers an alternative interpretive lens to unpack and critically evaluate the configuration of human and non-human actors in the transformation of the contingent and contextual meaning of innovation. We aim to make two contributions to the literature on the diffusion of retro-technologies in the following ways: first, while prior research has examined retro-technologies using the S-curve as a point of departure, this paper draws on the sociology of translation as an interpretive lens to explore the convergences of various actors in a way that gives form to the resurgence of vinyl technology as a format of choice. Second, it unpacks the mechanism that sustains the re-diffusion of vinyl as an everyday retro-technology. Two main advantages of using ANT could be seen for the purpose of this paper. First, it opens up new possibilities for rethinking the surge in the reincarnation of old technologies by bring to fore the distributed interplay of humans and nonhuman actors in pursuing the establishment of irreversible and maintainable innovations. Second, it proposes one way of understanding technology, society, and relations among them by uncovering the mechanism translating the interest of heterogeneous actors and enrolling them into a socio-technical ensemble. We develop our contribution based on vinyl technology in the global music industry.

The paper is organized as follows. First, we provide a brief review of the literature on the emergence and re-diffusion of retro-technologies. Next, we present an overview of the re-emergence of vinyl technology as a preferred medium choice in music consumption. Following this, we draw on the sociology of translation as a meta-theoretical lens to unpack the circulation and adoption of retro-technologies in everyday life. In the penultimate section, we delineate how inarticulate and latent network of relationships between human and non-human actors gives form to the contemplative knowledge (what has become) on the resurgence of vinyl sales to explicate the intransitive mechanism sustaining the resurgence of vinyl sales in the music industry. We conclude the paper with a discussion of our thesis and its implications for theory and practice.

2. The emergence and diffusion of retro-technologies

Promoting the S-curve as an organizing device to theorize the diffusion of innovation, the widely accepted dogma is that old technologies, processes or products will be replaced by newer ones as industry moves along the evolution wave; and there is no going back during this process (Klepper, 1997). From this perspective, Roger (1962) identified knowledge, persuasion, decision to adopt, implementation and confirmation as the five fundamental stages through which innovations and technologies in general get adopted and diffused. Building on the work of Roger, Motohashi et al. (2012) outlined the flow of the whole diffusion process: first an innovation has to be a major technological breakthrough; then the innovation has to be communicated to consumers through marketing channels; after that the innovation has to be commercialized and put into market; over time, the innovation gets accepted and diffused. While these studies have extended our understanding of the diffusion of technologies, they appear to be far removed from reality, where disrupted or 'old technologies' gain a new lease of life, get culturally revived, and re-diffused locally and in appropriate contexts (Brown, 1999; Castellano et al., 2013). Consider, for example, the Swiss mechanical watch. This product and its technology, almost pushed to extinction

in the 1970s by cheaper and more advanced quartz have enjoyed tremendous success in recent times. The European automobile industry has also seen a spike in the sale of the new Volkswagen Beetle and the Fiat 500 despite the deteriorating trading conditions for the whole industry (Raffaelli, 2014). Placing emphasis on the past, present and the future, a new stream of literature that examines retro-technologies has emphasized heritage (Aaker, 2004; Balmer, 2011), revival of collective memories (Widemann et al., 2011), strong nostalgic appeal (Sierra and McQuitty, 2007), as the quintessential psycho-social factors reinforcing and enhancing the enduring appeal, adoption and diffusion of retro-technologies. Elsewhere, Brown et al. (2003) observed that what is driving the re-emergence of old technologies is partly due to the contemporary turn to recreating the past for the present. This they argue involves the creative combination of past elements from prior periods with contemporary standards of performance, functioning or taste, and the proactive renewal of dormant elements which have strong appeal in today's society's collective memory. In practice retro technologies tend to gain life and grow in niches or carved out protective spaces where the perceived value, material and social logics of using the supposedly outdated technology trump new technologies (Castellano et al., 2013). Their diffusion requires an innovation of meaning of the technology, and the building of networks made up of actors bounded together by their socio-technical interest in the technology (Arrese, 2015).

Recent theory in consumption studies has re-directed attention to new ways of understanding the reincarnation of retro-technologies. One of the most insightful studies emanating from this stream of literature is the work of Magaudda (2011) which analysed the consequences of dematerialization of the practices of cultural goods consumption. Drawing on the theory of practice, the study shows how the appropriation the vinyl technology re-configures listeners' situated practices which in turn changes the subjective meaning of the value of materiality of the technology in everyday life. Magaudda's study shows that music digitalization does not mean less materiality in the actual practice of listeners, that material stuff still occupies a relevant position in the digital age. Paradoxically, as the process in which the reconfiguration of the relationship between materiality and culture leads to a renewed role played by material objects in people's life and activities, material stuff would play an even more essential role in consumer practices and life. On the surge in the appropriation of vinyl as a format of choice, Magaudda drawing on the contemporary turn to practices adopts what he called the "circuit of practice" as an organizing device to analyse the processes of change in consumption of vinyl in everyday life. The "circuit" is made up of the three elements of object, representation and doing, aiming at delineating the transformative process of reintegration of vinyl record in contemporary music consumption. The circuit starts from the spread of digital music and online music servers, which changes music-listening habits and devalues the authenticity of music-listening experience; the devaluation prompts the listeners towards the adoption of a more material form of music – vinyl record; this forms a process of reconfiguration of meanings, values and feelings around the use of the obsolete vinyl; finally the re-incarnation of vinyl as a socio-material musical practice is the basis for the development of new activities and behaviours, which involve the buying, listening, conservation and appreciation of vinyl.

While the marketing and innovation literatures offer some insightful pointers and subsidiary awareness of the reincarnation of old technologies (Nokelainen and Dedehayir, 2015; Brocklehurst, 2012; Brown, 2002, 1999), theoretical frameworks that show how the interaction among actors and artefacts, and the changes happening to all of them as a result of these interactions is sparse. In turn, we also lack conceptual innovations that analyse how different translation processes through which technologies, artefacts' and human actors interact to give form to the re-incarnation of old technologies. Our paper seeks to fill this gap by unpacking the differentiated inarticulate mechanisms and latent network of interdependent relationships that sustains the reincarnation of 'obsolete' technologies in everyday life. In the next section, we

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