


Media Literacy through Popular Music, AI, and Youth Cultures: A Review of *We Want More: Music / Sociology!*

Popüler Müzik, Yapay Zekâ ve Gençlik Kültürleri Üzerinden Medya Okuryazarlığını Yeniden
Düşünmek: *We Want More: Music / Sociology!* Konferansı Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme

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Introduction: Why Review a Music Sociology Conference through Media Literacy?

The international conference *We Want More: Music / Sociology!*, organised by Rotterdam Popular Music Studies at Erasmus University Rotterdam on 8–10 April 2026, brought these questions into a rich interdisciplinary setting. Its programme included a Young Scholars Workshop, an opening event titled *The Future Sound of Rotterdam*, AI robots on stage, panels on nightlife and social justice, and sessions on audiences, platformization, inequalities, labour, education, memory, activism, and music ecosystems. Although the conference was not organised explicitly around media literacy, its themes closely intersect with current debates on digital culture and critical media engagement.

As Buchan, Bhawra, and Katapally (2024) note, digital literacy has become a crucial competence for young people as digital platforms increasingly shape communication, socialization, entertainment, and education (p. 3). Popular music is central to this platformed environment, especially for young people whose cultural identities, tastes, and forms of belonging are often mediated through digital music cultures. This review reads the conference as a space where music sociology, AI, youth cultures, and media literacy can be brought into dialogue.

The review follows the three-day structure of the conference and focuses on its broader conceptual contributions. It first considers the opening day through AI, speculative imagination, and nightlife as public culture. It then examines the second day through audiences, ecosystems, inequalities, and platformized music cultures. The third day is discussed through gatekeepers, nightlife, AI, and the politics of musical visibility. The final section brings these themes together to argue that popular music provides a valuable lens for rethinking media literacy in a platformed and increasingly automated cultural world.

Day 1: The Future Sound of Rotterdam: AI, Utopian Imagination, and Nightlife as Public Culture

The first day of *We Want More: Music / Sociology!* established the conference as a meeting point between scholarly exchange, technological experimentation, and public cultural life. The Young Scholars Workshop, *We Want More: Feedback!*, organised with IASPM Benelux at Codarts Rotterdam / WMDC, created a space for early career researchers to present developing work on alternative music, black metal, rap battles, youth orchestra participation, online festival communities, minority artists, regional music scenes, platformized recognition, clubbing, DIY collectives, and concert communities. This opening structure positioned the conference as an intergenerational forum in which music sociology appeared as a field shaped by established scholars, emerging researchers, artists, audiences, and cultural workers.



The evening event, *The Future Sound of Rotterdam*, shifted the conference from the workshop format to a more experimental public setting. The programme placed AI, performance, speculative thinking, and nightlife activism in direct conversation. The live session *AI Robots on Stage* asked what happens when artificial intelligence is no longer understood as software responding to a text prompt, but as a physical and performative actor that interacts through instruments, movement, and live sound. This framing moved AI away from the abstract language of automation and placed it within the embodied conditions of performance. It also raised questions about audience expectation, technical infrastructure, authorship, and the changing limits of live music.

Ana Alacovska's talk, "Utopian daydreaming: speculative experimentations with the future in creative work," deepened this concern. Her focus on utopian imagination, creative labour, and future-oriented cultural practice offered a productive way to think about AI without reducing it to efficiency, replacement, or technological spectacle. Discussions of AI creativity invite a reconsideration of creativity beyond narrow economic frameworks, drawing attention to the qualities of human creative labour and the ways some aspects of the creative process are now being simulated by artificial intelligence (Lee, 2022).

The final part of the evening, "From Dusk to Dawn: Social Justice in Night Spaces," expanded the discussion from AI and creative futures to nightlife, activism, and urban public culture. By bringing together cultural organisers, artists, and nightlife practitioners from Rotterdam, London, and Paris, the panel treated club culture as a political and social space. Nightlife was framed as a site where exclusion can be challenged, communities can be mobilised, and pleasure can be connected to political urgency. This was a significant opening gesture for the conference as a whole. It suggested that music sociology must attend to the spaces in which music is lived, danced, contested, funded, and organised. The first day therefore introduced three key concerns that continued across the conference: technological change, cultural labour, and the public life of music.

Day 2: Audiences, Ecosystems, Inequalities, and Platformized Music Cultures

The second day of the conference offered the most comprehensive map of the intellectual scope of *We Want More: Music / Sociology!*. Across four parallel session blocks, popular music was approached through audiences, reception, ecosystems, inequalities, health and wellbeing, memory, platformization, labour, and education. This structure showed that music sociology is increasingly concerned with the social conditions in which music circulates, gains value, becomes visible, and shapes everyday life.

The morning sessions foregrounded participation, technology, and materiality. Papers on gamified concerts, hybrid media landscapes, YouTube reaction communities, and vinyl nostalgia suggested that music audiences are no longer adequately understood as passive listeners. They appear as participants, collectors, commentators, affective publics, and data-generating users. This was especially visible in the discussions of Fortnite concerts and YouTube music reaction communities, where audience participation becomes part of the cultural and economic value of music. These examples also point to a key media literacy concern: listeners now encounter music within environments designed by platforms, metrics, monetisation strategies, and participatory interfaces.

The sessions on music ecosystems expanded this perspective by shifting attention from individual artists or genres to infrastructures, policies, spaces, and networks. Presentations on urban music studies, local sector mapping, public value, and music as part of civic life demonstrated that music cultures depend on complex relationships between venues, institutions, technologies, communities, and policy frameworks. This ecological approach is useful for understanding how underground, independent, and local music practices become connected to broader cultural infrastructures.

Inequality was another central concern of the day. Sessions on gender, race, colonialism, racialization, migration, diaspora, and inclusion practices made clear that music cultures are shaped by uneven access to visibility, resources, recognition, and safety. The programme positioned inequality as part of the everyday organisation of music industries, scenes, institutions, and audiences. This was particularly important for a media literacy perspective, since critical engagement with media culture requires attention to who becomes visible, who remains peripheral, and how cultural value is distributed.

The afternoon sessions on platformization and AI brought these concerns into direct contact with digital infrastructures. Papers on Spotify, platform capitalism, musical labour, local scenes, authenticity, and musicians' engagements with AI addressed how music is increasingly shaped by data-driven systems. Bonini and Gandini (2019) conceptualise platformized music curation as a data-driven form of gatekeeping in which human editorial judgement and algorithmic systems jointly produce new regimes of visibility. This insight was strongly echoed in the day's discussions. Platformization does not simply change how music is distributed; it reorganises the conditions of attention, recognition, labour, and cultural legitimacy.

The final sessions of the day extended these questions into songwriting, wellbeing, inclusion, and education. The music education session was especially relevant for the wider argument of this review. Discussions of pluriversal pedagogy, institutional barriers, and neoliberal higher music education suggested that music learning cannot be separated from industry structures, cultural inequalities, and digital transformation. Taken together, the second day presented popular music as a field where audiences, platforms, institutions, and social inequalities intersect. It therefore strengthened the central claim of this review: music sociology provides a valuable route for rethinking media literacy as a critical engagement with platformed cultural life.

Day 3: Gatekeepers, Nightlife, AI, and the Politics of Musical Visibility

The third day of *We Want More: Music / Sociology!* sharpened many of the questions that had been opened during the previous sessions. The programme moved through politics and activism, gatekeepers, intermediaries, support personnel, nightlife, health and wellbeing, artificial intelligence, and new scholarly perspectives. If the second day mapped the breadth of music sociology, the final day placed particular emphasis on the forces that organise musical visibility: who gains access, who mediates cultural circulation, which platforms and institutions shape recognition, and how artists respond to changing technological conditions.

The morning sessions on politics and activism addressed music as a site of affective and political struggle. Discussions of polarization, identity, and new forms of scholarly engagement showed that music is deeply involved in contemporary conflicts over belonging, memory, representation, and public voice. These sessions framed music as a form of social mediation. Songs, scenes, performances, and audiences help produce emotional attachments, collective positions, and symbolic boundaries.

The sessions on labour and careers developed this point through a focus on gatekeepers, intermediaries, and support personnel. These topics are central to understanding the contemporary music industry, where artistic production depends on a wide range of visible and invisible workers. Managers, curators, bookers, stage personnel, platform editors, data analysts, and other intermediaries help shape how music reaches audiences. Technological change has reshaped musicians' working lives by expanding their responsibilities beyond performance and composition toward production, distribution, promotion, and audience engagement (Everts, Hitters, & Berkers, 2022, p. 97). The final day made this transformation especially visible by showing that musical labour now extends across artistic, managerial, technical, emotional, and platform-oriented tasks.

Nightlife also reappeared as a key theme. After the opening night's panel on social justice in night spaces, the dedicated session on music and nightlife allowed the conference to return to questions

of urban culture, embodied participation, safety, pleasure, and inclusion. This continuity was valuable. It suggested that nightlife should not be treated as a secondary or informal extension of music culture. Night spaces are cultural infrastructures where social relations are formed, contested, and regulated. They are also spaces where questions of access, vulnerability, community, and cultural belonging become concrete.

The afternoon session on *Music, Platformization, and AI 2: Artificial Intelligence* brought the politics of visibility into direct contact with automation and technological power. AI was discussed as part of a broader sociotechnical environment that affects creativity, authorship, labour, and agency. Owen (2025) argues that the emergence of artificial intelligence in music shifts power toward AI technologies, developers, and owners, requiring music workers to develop new strategies for maintaining agency within increasingly sociotechnical music careers. This argument resonates strongly with the conference programme. AI does not enter music culture as a neutral tool. It changes the distribution of decision-making, the meaning of creative control, and the strategies through which musicians seek recognition.

The final day therefore connected gatekeeping, nightlife, AI, and labour through a shared concern with visibility. Musical visibility is shaped by platforms, institutions, curators, infrastructures, data systems, urban spaces, and forms of cultural mediation. By ending with sessions on AI, mobility, and new scholarly perspectives, the conference pointed toward a future in which music sociology must continue to examine how cultural participation is organised under platformed and automated conditions.

Concluding Reflections: Toward a Media Literacy of Music, Platforms, and Cultural Participation

We Want More: Music / Sociology! demonstrated that popular music studies can contribute directly to current debates on media literacy. Across the three days, music appeared as sound, performance, cultural memory, labour, identity, technology, education, activism, and urban experience. This breadth is important because contemporary media literacy cannot be separated from the cultural environments in which people listen, share, comment, create, and participate. Music is one of these environments.

The conference also showed that platforms and AI are now central to the social life of music. Streaming services, recommendation systems, digital archives, online communities, and AI-assisted creative tools shape how music is made visible, how audiences encounter it, how musicians organise their work, and how cultural value is recognised. A media literacy perspective must therefore include the ability to question the infrastructures behind cultural participation.

The strongest contribution of the conference was its refusal to isolate music from wider social issues. Sessions on inequality, migration, gender, race, health, education, nightlife, labour, and activism showed that music is embedded in unequal but also creative forms of social life. These discussions made clear that media literacy is connected to access, representation, care, visibility, and public participation. It is also connected to pleasure, affect, memory, and belonging.

For a journal concerned with media literacy, the conference offers a useful reminder: digital culture is not experienced only through news, screens, or information flows. It is also experienced through songs, playlists, concerts, clubs, archives, memes, fan practices, and AI-mediated creative experiments. Popular music provides a concrete and accessible way to understand how young people and wider publics navigate platformed media environments.

In this sense, *We Want More: Music / Sociology!* can be read as a call to expand the vocabulary of media literacy. It invites scholars and educators to consider music as a critical site where digital participation, algorithmic visibility, creative labour, and cultural identity intersect. A media literacy of music, platforms, and cultural participation would therefore examine how people listen, how platforms orga-

nise attention, how technologies reshape creativity, and how cultural communities continue to imagine more inclusive futures.

References

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