Digital Patronage: Toward a New Model of Building a Radio Station

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This article analyzes how patronage crowdfunding is becoming a central part of the model for building a radio station. Implementing this model requires mobilizing listeners to engage in the direct, long-term financial support of a station. The analysis conducted in this article is based on a case study of Radio 357—an Internet radio station in Poland funded through digital patronage since 2020. The success of this station suggests that the development of crowdfunding has created a space for new types of participatory engagement by audiences. Not only are we experiencing a reduction in the distance between presenters and listeners alongside increased connectivity between members of the audience but we are also seeing the intervention of patrons in shaping the station in terms of how, what, and when it broadcasts.

Keywords: digital patronage, patronage crowdfunding, Internet radio, participatory audiences, Polish Radio

Despite technological innovations, such as Internet or satellite radio, most people in the Global North still equate radio primarily with commercial FM stations. The literature identifies several types of radio stations, and one classification proposes differentiating radio "on the basis of the way it is funded and the motives of those who produce it" (Chignell, 2009, p. 178). Following this line of reasoning, one can distinguish between commercial, state, underground (pirate), community, and public service stations (Hendy, 2013). Even without elaborating on their characteristics (see Chignell, 2009; Hendy, 2013 for such discussion), it can be argued that this list is not complete because of the emergence of radio stations funded through a form of crowdfunding called digital patronage (alternatively: patronage crowdfunding, see Netherton, 2021). Taking this into account, this article aims to analyze how digital patronage (Bonifacio, Hair, & Wohn, 2021) has become a central part of the model for building a radio station and its ongoing functioning. Implementation of such a model requires negotiating the "terms of participation" (Jenkins & Green, 2009, p. 222) and mobilizing listeners to engage in direct, long-term financial support of the station. The analysis conducted in this article is based on a case study of Radio 357, an Internet radio station in

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Poland that has been funded through digital patronage since 2020. By "building a radio station," we mean more than gathering funds to start a project through crowdfunding. Crowdfunding is understood as "the efforts by entrepreneurial individuals and groups—cultural, social, and for-profit—to fund their ventures by drawing on relatively small contributions from a relatively large number of individuals through the Internet, without standard financial intermediaries" (Mollick, 2014, p. 2). It has often been used to fund single media and cultural projects, such as reportage, albums, or short movies. Such use of crowdfunding is relatively well researched, including studies on film (Brzozowska & Galuszka, 2021; Leibovitz, Roig Telo, & Sánchez-Navarro, 2015; Scott, 2015), music (D'Amato & Casella, 2021; Galuszka & Brzozowska, 2016), journalism (Aitamurto, 2011; Hunter, 2015, 2016), and video games (Cha, 2017; Planells, 2017; Smith, 2015). While one-time crowdfunding has received significant attention from researchers, patronage crowdfunding, being the more recent innovation, remains an emerging field of study (early research includes Bonifacio et al., 2021; Regner, 2021; Swords, 2020).

Crowdfunding based on individual campaigns, which focus on funding one individual product or service, is not particularly useful for developing undertakings that require ongoing support. To maintain a radio station through classical one-time crowdfunding, individual campaigns would have to be organized regularly (e.g., every month), which—considering the uncertain results of following campaigns—would introduce unnecessary risks into running a station. Digital patronage is a relatively new form of crowdfunding that overcomes these problems. It is based on regular, typically monthly donations from patrons who continuously support creators (e.g., artists or journalists) or media enterprises, such as the radio station analyzed in this article. Therefore, the essence of digital patronage is not to mobilize a crowd of contributors for a one-time contribution but to engage them in a relationship that leads to recurring support (Bonifacio et al., 2021). This article positions the use of digital patronage by a radio station more broadly, not only as a method of obtaining funding but also as a business philosophy that is fundamentally different from that of commercial radio stations, which are funded through advertising income. The key difference lies in the relationship between the radio station (its management and employees) and its listeners.

With commercial FM radio stations, these relationships are often impersonal, distant, and based on one-way communication—from the radio station to a more or less anonymous "audience" (although, as argued by Bonini, 2014, the history of radio is marked by increasing participation, especially because of the advent of social media). A radio station funded through digital patronage, however, must invest more time and effort into maintaining and developing relationships with its patron listeners, as its survival depends directly on their ongoing financial support. This requires not only a substantial amount of relational labor (Baym, 2018) directed at developing these relationships but also a careful response to requests made by patrons who actively express their voice than in the case of commercial radio stations. At the same time, radio has never been a pay-per-listen medium (with a few exceptions, such as satellite radio in the United States), and, therefore, listeners need to redefine themselves as patrons. Not only must the need to pay be justified by the project managers, but also less technical-savvy listeners, who are not aware of how digital patronage works, must be taught how to become patrons.

The contribution of this article is twofold. First, it adds to studies on radio and audiences by analyzing the emergence of the new *modus operandi* of radio stations, which is based on their being funded by direct contributions from listeners. Second, it contributes to the emerging field of studies on

digital patronage. Conclusions from our analysis can be of particular interest both to theoreticians studying new directions in the development of radio and to practitioners seeking new sources of financing for their media enterprises.

The article comprises six sections. The following section reviews theories of audience participation and their potential applications in the study of the relationships between radio stations and their audiences. The third section discusses the literature on media and culture crowdfunding and emerging studies on digital patronage. The fourth section presents the context and methodology. The results are presented, and the conclusions are discussed in the fifth and final sections, respectively.

Radio Listeners as a Participatory Audience

In the 1980s, audience studies became an influential academic discipline, bringing innovations that included studying ordinary people and how they actively used media to reinterpret content provided by the media industries. According to Livingstone and Das (2013), audience studies "asked how people converge and diverge in making sense of media texts, how people respond critically to dominant messages, and how audiences participate in civil society" (p. 105). The advent of the Internet and social media, which brought increasing mediatization to our lives, has urged us to rethink old concepts so that we can consider the changing sociotechnological circumstances (Napoli, 2011). Livingstone (2012) proposed using the term "participatory audiences" rather than "active audience" (p. 173), which was the central concept of audience studies in the 1980s. This change reflects the fact that "participation" better describes an audience's engagement with contemporary media (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Not only is a contemporary audience described as participatory but it is also increasingly autonomous. By audience autonomy, Napoli (2011) understands audiences' increasing levels of control over their consumption of media (e.g., how, when, and where listeners listen to podcasts) and the possibility of transgressing the role of consumers and becoming contributors, or, as others would argue, "prosumers" (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) or "produsers" (Bruns, 2008).

The concept of participation was employed by researchers in radio studies (Bonini & Monclús, 2015). Bonini (2014) argued that with the advent of social networking sites, "we are facing a paradigmatic change in the relation between radio and its audience" (Introduction, para. 1). He divided the history of radio into four stages, each encompassing a more active audience role. While in the early days of this medium (1920–1945), listeners were an anonymous mass of individuals without links and abilities to communicate with radio stations (except through letters), the next stages engaged the audiences in conversations with radios because of the telephone (second stage, 1945–1994), the World Wide Web (third stage, 1994–2004), and social networking sites (fourth stage, since 2004; Bonini, 2014). The fourth stage was not only characterized by a reduction of the distance between the employees of a radio station and its listeners but also by the increased connectivity with members of the audience. Naturally, these connectivity opportunities were not used by all members of audiences, as radio remained a "secondary medium" for some (or even a majority of) listeners (Berland, 2003). Bonini (2014) saw a station's listeners connected through social networking sites as a source of reputational capital for a radio program. He argued that:

Even if the fans' network does not generate a tangible economic value like the radio audience already does, it nevertheless generates a great reputational capital. The message of the SNS public of a radio programme is the network itself, because this network is able to produce value. The value embedded in the networked public is not already convertible into economic capital. (Bonini, 2014, "Change in the Value of Publics" section, para. 5)

Although it was not obvious how "the value embedded in the networked public" would be "convertible into economic capital" when Bonini (2014) wrote the paper, we can risk claiming that digital patronage is how such conversion can be made ("Change in the Value of Publics" section, para. 5). Clearly, different groups of listeners choose different forms of engagement with the medium. Some consume radio content passively, while others either communicate with the station through telephone or social media and contribute no money, or contribute money without communicating. Only the most active group of listeners support the station financially *and* express their opinions on the radio station's offerings through social media or other means available.

Building on the aforementioned literature on audiences, we propose to reconceptualize the *participatory audience* concept in such a way that it includes not only active engagement with the medium through consumption, reinterpretation, communication, and content coproduction but also financial engagement, which is the essence of crowdfunding and digital patronage. The following section continues this thread by discussing the relational aspects of digital patronage.

Digital Patronage Beyond a Financing Mechanism

Digital patronage, represented, for example, by the Patreon platform, involves contributors who make regular (usually monthly) payments to the project. As with single campaigns on Kickstarter, these payments may have different amounts that correspond to the levels set by the project initiator and give the contributors various benefits. For creative activities, patronage is usually aimed at providing artists or journalists with a regular income stream to help them focus on their creative work (Bonifacio et al., 2021). This crowdfunding model urges the project initiator to regularly give the contributors some benefits, which, from their point of view, justify prolonging the subscription for another month (Swords, 2020).

Communication between project initiators and patrons, which is needed to sustain and develop relationships, has been labeled "relational labor" (Baym, 2018). Bonifacio et al. (2021) apply this concept to argue that subscriptions on digital patronage platforms "do not appear to be purely economic: they are a multidimensional type of support that both transform and are transformed by the social relationship between creator and patron" (, p. 6). Relational labor is both "authentic and commercial: although creators must appeal to fans' demands for intimacy, their ultimate goal is to obtain financial support" (Bonifacio et al., 2021, p. 3). This corresponds well with earlier research that argued that digital fandom (Booth, 2010; Jenkins et al., 2013) and crowdfunding (Galuszka & Brzozowska, 2016) combine elements of both market and gift economies. Whether the market or gift economy prevails depends on the properties of a media text, cultural product, or service that is funded through crowdfunding and the audience's attitudes toward it.

This line of reasoning is present in Scott's (2015) argument that crowdfunding may be used to capitalize on a preexisting fan base, which she calls fan-ancing. This term refers to "the direct, monetary contribution by fans to support the production of a text that would otherwise remain unproduced within the media industries" (Scott, 2015, p. 170). Although with Radio 357, we do not have a single "text" but a whole medium, the mechanism behind the support seems to be similar. As will be explained in the following section, when the founders of Radio 357 decided that they would employ patronage crowdfunding to finance the running of the station, they knew they could count on a preexisting fan base, comprising former listeners of Polish Radio 3. They needed to find a way to convince the listeners to become patrons and engage in dialog with patron listeners, which would result in the creation of a radio station that satisfied its audience's needs and justified their long-term financial support. Although, as we will show in the following sections, the interests of the founders of Radio 357 and the station's listeners were to a large extent converging, there were some concessions that the founders had to make to satisfy patrons. These concessions, along with the large amount of relational labor invested in the project, could be treated as the price that needed to be paid to engage listeners in long-term financial support. While the ways contributors to crowdfunded projects attempt to influence the creative decisions made by cultural producers have been analyzed in earlier research (Planells, 2017; Smith, 2015), digital patronage creates a new context that requires a reevaluation of producer-patron dynamics. Looking at the dialog between both parties through the lens of radio studies and the concept of participatory audiences allows us to formulate three research questions, which will be answered in the remainder of this article:

RQ1:   *What methods of audience mobilization were used to capitalize on the preexisting fanbase?*

RQ2:   *Which of the patrons' requests were answered positively by the radio and how?*

RQ3:   *How were the patrons persuaded that some of their requests were impossible to implement?*

Context and Methodology

Radio 357 is a Web radio station founded in 2020 by a group of journalists who left Polish Radio 3 (also called Trójka, hereafter PR3) in protest of the political pressure exerted by the station's directors. For a few decades, PR3 had been a public radio station offering its listeners diversified, high-quality programming combining music, cultural content, news, and journalism (Gutowski, 2012). The station employed the most recognizable music journalists in Poland and had a loyal audience comprising mostly educated, middle-class listeners. PR3 had listenership ratios of approximately 8% (Kurdupski, 2021) throughout most of the 21st century (until 2016).

After the parliamentary elections in October 2015, which brought the right-wing populist Law and Justice party to power, the ruling party captured public media in Poland. Consequently, Poland moved in the media freedom ranking from 18th position (of 180, with a score of 87.29) in 2015 (Reporters without Borders [RSF], 2015) to 66th position (of 180, with a score of 65.64) in 2022 (RSF, 2022). In PR3, this was manifested by a gradual increase in progovernment news and the appearance of new journalists representing the right-wing, conservative-populist profile. The journalists who did not comply with the new

political line of the station were laid off. In early 2020, the changes also affected musical journalists who were ordered not to air songs critical of the ruling party ("Unieważniamy to Głosowanie," 2020).

As a result, several journalists left the station, either by giving in their notice as a protest against political influences or by being laid off. The crisis was so significant that for several days, PR3 had too few employees to broadcast regular programming and was forced to air only music (Kublik, 2020). Consequently, PR3 lost most of its listeners; between September and November 2021, it had a listenership ratio of 1.59%. This means that the station lost over 1 million listeners within 18 months (Gąbka, 2021). These listeners seem to have moved on to two radio stations founded by journalists who left PR3: Radio Nowy Świat (hereafter RNŚ) and Radio 357. Both are funded through digital patronage conducted via Patronite.pl, a Polish clone of Patreon. By the end of 2021, the combined audience of both stations had reached over 1.5 million listeners (Gąbka, 2021). It is important to note that both radio stations can be listened to by anybody, and as these numbers show, their general audience is larger than the number of patrons. Being an active patron gives certain privileges, such as the possibility of commenting on stations' posts on the Patronite platform, access to a closed Facebook group, and access to podcasts; however, it is not required to listen to the station.

The present study focuses on Radio 357. The station's profile on the Patronite platform (https://patronite.pl/radio357) is the primary means of communication between the station and its patrons, as well as the discussion forum for the community of patrons.[2] Whenever a question was intensely commented on or repeated by many patrons, the station responded to it with a post, a prerecorded video, or a live stream. The empirical material comprised 200 posts by the station, with 21,081 comments made by the patrons and 41 videos made by the station, altogether lasting 1,050 minutes. The posts and videos were published between October 5, 2020, and January 22, 2022, which covered the period from the start of the project (October 5, 2020) to the start of regular broadcasting (January 5, 2021), one year of regular broadcasting (January 5, 2021, to January 5, 2022), and two additional weeks (January 5, 2022, to January 22, 2022) that cover several comments made during the celebration of Radio 357's first year of broadcasting. Initially, the posts were read to develop open codes using an inductive coding approach. The analysis led to the creation of a set of 50 codes, which were classified into 16 categories (axial coding). During the final reading of the empirical material, connections between these categories were sought (selective coding). The analysis was conducted using Atlas.ti software.

Analysis of messages by the station and the audience—both parties engaged in the funding process—allowed us to observe how the "terms of participation" (Jenkins & Green, 2009, p. 222) were negotiated. Based on this analysis, we selected communication threads that were essential to understanding the phenomenon of a radio station funded through digital patronage, and this allowed us to address the research questions.

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[2] A closed Facebook group for patrons is another place where communication between the station and its patrons occurs. We chose to analyze content available on Patronite as not all the patrons use Facebook, and therefore we consider Patronite to be a more representative source of the data.

Results

RQ1: Audience Mobilization

The announcement of the start of the collection of funds was made on October 5, 2020, via the newly opened social media profiles of Radio 357, as well as the personal profiles of the station's journalists. All posts redirected viewers to the project's profile on the Patronite platform where detailed information was provided, including goals, subscription tiers, and promises regarding the future shape of the station. The start of the collection was impressive: in just two days, more than 6,000 patrons donated over 150,0000 PLN (roughly 35,000 USD). One year after the start of the project, it was supported by 33,662 patrons, contributing 682,070 PLN monthly (roughly 157,285 USD). At the time of writing (December 13, 2022), these numbers reached 45,385 and 809,715 PLN, respectively. These numbers mean that the project initiators were exceptionally successful: they reached preestablished targets quicker than planned, and Radio 357 gathered more funds each month than RNŚ. RQ1 sought to understand what made it possible to mobilize audience support so efficiently.

Reference to PR3

The key element of presenting the project to the public was a direct reference to PR3. It was aimed at causing nostalgia and showing symbolic continuity between the old—PR3 as it used to be before politicians changed it—and the new—Radio 357. This can be illustrated by the following citation from the station's website: "You know what radio we want to make since we made it for years. And now it will finally sound as it should (…) you'll get what you remember, what you miss, and what can't be heard anymore today"[3] (Radio 357, 2022, paras. 2 & 5).

The name of the new station itself directly referred to an address of PR3, which was located at Myśliwiecka St. 3/5/7 in Warsaw. Reference to PR3 was also manifested with an emphasis on the personnel of Radio 357, which was directly based on those journalists who left PR3 in the aftermath of the crises that hit the station in 2020. This is illustrated by the first post by Radio 357 on social media, which contained 24 such names.

For the sake of comparison, it is worth noting that another station founded by former PR3 employees—Radio Nowy Świat—did not emphasize its roots so strongly. Contrary to Radio 357, the station's name—translated to English as "Radio New World"—emphasized newness. This was also the case with the station's communication: One of the first statements made on air during the first broadcast was "this is not the old PR3, this is not the new PR3, this is Radio New World" ("Radio Nowy Świat," 2020, para. 2).

Promise of a Democratic and Apolitical Medium

Radio 357 has positioned itself as a medium that is democratic, transparent, and free from external pressure (both political and from advertisers). Patrons were promised,

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[3] All citations translated from Polish by the first author.

the first radio in Poland entirely socially financed (…) instead of one investor, there will be thousands of them, and they will have an influence on the directions of its development (…) this will be radio without adverts (…) fully independent, which represents only the interests of its listeners. (Radio 357, 2020, 0:08–1:06)

During its first months, the station was in quite a vulnerable position. Despite a quickly growing patron base, the station's financing was far from stable, especially since investment needs were high. At first, the station had no equipment, no premises, and no dedicated app for mobile listeners. Before the start of regular broadcasting (on January 5, 2021), the mobilization of the patron base was based mostly on promises and meticulous reporting of the progress made by project initiators, for example:

App—here we are ahead of the schedule. We have finished making the database, CMS is almost ready, the development of features is practically finished, and we are finalizing UI/UX, graphic design, and cosmetic changes. In a few days, we're running stress and efficiency tests. (Radio 357, 2021b, para. 3)

In a similar fashion, the station attempted to explain the strategic decisions made by its management, such as the decision to give up advertising money.

This mode of communication was crucial for building trust among patrons. The analysis of patrons' discussions on the Patronite platform showed that they were satisfied with the level of transparency and quality of communications (albeit not immediately and not uncritically; see the section on "*Improvement of Communication*"). This is illustrated by the following statement made by one of the commentators: "Thanks for the report! I feel a little bit like an investor, informed about the progress and giving you the nod of approval. Great work, keep it up!" (fuw3[4])

Facilitation and Explanation of Technicalities

A lot of the effort made by the project initiators, especially in the early phases of the fund collection campaign, was toward explaining the technical aspects of the functioning of the project. This was crucial for generational reasons: PR3 was popular among listeners who were not "digital natives." The first challenge was explaining how digital patronage worked, as it was not a popular phenomenon in Poland before 2020. Although the fact that RNŚ, which started its project a few months earlier, did a lot to popularize this form of crowdfunding, the founders of Radio 357 had to put significant effort into explaining how the process worked. One patron commented:

For a few of my friends, the technical side of Patronite is an insurmountable barrier. All those registrations, PayPals, it's all Greek to them. People in their 60s, they listened to PR3 "since always" and now they miss it, and they are ready to pay these 10 or 20 zlotys. But they don't know how to do that. (fxg5)

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[4] Patrons' comments were anonymized; names were replaced with codes. See also "Context and Methodology" section.

Second, project initiators had to instruct former PR3 listeners on how to listen to an Internet station. For numerous listeners, the change was dramatic—they were used to listening to FM radio, and some of them had never before streamed a radio program online. One patron expressed this in the following way:

> I feel sorry that I cannot listen to you, as I have done so far. Well, my years do not allow me to 'keep my finger on the pulse' because some new technologies are too difficult for me to implement. Help us, your senior listeners, to use radio 3/5/7 actively. (fia1)

The station responded with special instructions that explained the steps necessary to become a patron and to listen to the station. The communication concentrated on showing the advantages of Internet radio, which, despite not being as accessible as an FM station, overcame many of its deficiencies. Emphasis was placed on constant access to podcasts, lack of commercial blocks, and flexibility. Using Napoli's (2011) concept of "audience autonomy," it can be claimed that Radio 357 offered listeners greater autonomy, yet for the project to succeed, it needed to make sure they understood what was being offered and how to make use of it.

RQ2: Positive Responses to Requests Expressed by Patrons

The start of the project was greeted with enthusiasm, manifested through both the sheer number of comments published on the station's Patronite profile and the optimistic and grateful tone of these comments:

> After the first sounds, I felt shivers down my spine. The great longing for THIS radio comes back and hits with force. It's great to listen to familiar things once again… it's a bit like coming home after months in exile. (fjs6)

Apart from enthusiasm and gratitude, patrons expressed hundreds of requests and suggestions, which—based on the analysis of empirical material—could be classified into the three threads discussed below.

Improvement of Communication

As mentioned earlier, patrons were generally satisfied with the station founders' level of transparency and quality of communication. Nevertheless, the scale of communication needs on the patrons' side, caused by the sheer increase in the number of patrons asking questions, resulted in the station's inability to address all the comments in a timely manner. As the start of Radio 357's broadcasting was so much awaited by former listeners of PR3, their need to contact the station via various communication channels was overwhelming. The lack of answers to every question caused frustration, especially among patrons who were unable to imagine the scale of the challenge the project managers faced. An example of such frustration can be found in this comment:

…do you ever answer the questions? Last year I tried a few dozen times without luck, but now I have a problem and there is still silence on your side. Why is there a contact form if no one answers back? (fon1)

The station addressed such comments apologetically:

these comments… we really read them, they don't go unnoticed… but we aren't able to communicate with you as much as we would like. However, we certainly wouldn't like you to feel that you are left behind or that communication is unimportant. We don't want that. (Radio 357, 2021f, 17:40–18:06)

Consequently, seeking a strategic solution to the problem, the station strengthened its communication team by hiring new employees and recruiting them among the patrons.

Programming

The essence of a radio station is the content of its programming schedule, which was also the major theme of the patrons' requests. Since the project attracted several thousand patrons, the diversity of expressed ideas about how the programming of the radio station should be was significant. However, if only repeated requests were considered, then there would be no fundamental differences between the founders of the project and the patrons. By fundamental differences, we mean, for example, the type of music or political profile of the station. The reason for this is simple: The audience comprising mostly former listeners of PR3 wanted continuity and trusted that former PR3 employees would provide just that. There were, however, several details that were subject to numerous patrons' requests and were, to a large extent, considered by the management of the station.

In its early days, Radio 357 broadcast for 10 to 14 hours a day, and one of the main postulates of the patrons was to extend the broadcast time to 24 hours. At first, the station's management was skeptical because broadcasting during off-peak hours was almost as costly as broadcasting during the daytime, and the number of listeners was much smaller. Because of the number of requests, however, they agreed to broadcast 24 hours a day, 7 days a week: regular programming would take 10 to 14 hours, and the rest of the time—the off-peak hours—would be filled with musical content only.

Another related example of patrons' influence over Radio 357's decisions was agreeing to extend regular programming until midnight instead of ending it at about 10 p.m. (which meant that "music only mode" started two hours later). It is particularly interesting to note that this was introduced as a concession to compensate patrons for the station's inability to deliver one of the rewards associated with gathering a predefined sum of money. After gathering donations equaling 615,000 PLN a month, the station's journalists were supposed to start broadcasting outside of the studio, for example, reporting major events. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, this turned out to be impossible, and the funds were used to answer patrons' requests regarding the extension of regular broadcast time until midnight:

> We didn't do it [reporting outside of the studio] but we managed to do a few other things, for example, extend the program until midnight. So it's still an investment in the radio. We're talking about programs from 22.00 to midnight, which you enjoyed very much. (Radio 357, 2021e, 6:08–6:35)

Another good example of how the station tried to use patrons' collective intelligence is the question asked in one of the posts:

> Here we'd like to invite you to the discussion about the form of journalism in Radio 357. You have different sensitivities and views. We want to create a formula that will connect and strengthen the radio community. To achieve this, we need to get to know your opinion and perspective better. What is important and interesting to you? What journalism do you consider valuable? What principles should it follow? What should this programming segment look like so that you would like to listen to it and recommend it to others? As more programs start, there will also be a place here to share your opinions about them. Your entries will be followed by the team responsible for this programming segment. We will analyze them, react, and ask questions. (Radio 357, 2021d, para. 1)

These questions prompted a discussion (331 comments), which included various proposals for social, cultural, and economic issues that could be discussed on air. The comments showed trust in the station's employees, for example, "I think that you—journalists—know better than us how journalism in our radio should look like. Since you asked, I'm most interested in cultural and social issues." (fbb0)

Several examples of similar small modifications to the program offerings were inspired by the patrons' requests. These included news blocks (patrons asked that they do not interrupt music programs), starting regular programming earlier (6.00 instead of 6.30), and adding certain programs to the schedule (e.g., a music program dedicated to progressive rock).

Online Store

One of the clearest examples of the patrons' influence on the project was their request to have an online store offering radio merchandise opened. The project initiators never prioritized opening such a store, and it was not associated with any financial goals set by them. The store was opened explicitly because patrons demanded it: "Secondly, we're opening a store with merchandise where you'll be able to buy mugs, t-shirts, or posters with our logo. You ask us about that constantly" (Radio 357, 2021c, para. 6). For patrons, such a store seemed to be important as they saw products like mugs or t-shirts as a way to manifest their fandom. On the other hand, for a radio station, this required a significant amount of work and generated several risks regarding setting prices (how high could they be without accusations of "being greedy"?), taking care of deliveries abroad (which was complicated, especially to post-Brexit United Kingdom), and accusations of producing nonecological waste. Paradoxically, the great success of the store generated additional problems for the station: Huge demand overloaded the servers, and the patrons complained that they could not buy the merchandise. Additionally, a particularly vulnerable point was regarding the money used to start the store, as expressed by one patron in the following comment: "store selling merchandise

should not be financed from patrons' donations; it should self-finance" (fdd8). Nevertheless, despite all the potential risks and controversies, the demand for merchandise turned out to be so significant that the project managers had to keep the online store open permanently.

RQ3: Answering Requests That Are Impossible to Implement

Considering the number of patrons and the complexity of the project, its managers quickly learned that patrons made requests that were difficult, if not impossible, to grant. Interestingly, these requests were not simply declined. Instead, project managers explained (why something could not be done) and taught (how radio business or patronage crowdfunding works), effectively leading to "talking patrons out of" unfeasible ideas. Therefore, RQ3 concentrated on analyzing the most representative cases of the station's reactions to such difficult requests.

Why Not Together With RNŚ?

One such topic was the question of why Radio 357 and RNŚ did not join their forces to build one post-PR3 radio station funded through digital patronage. Patrons believed that one post-PR3 station would be stronger, as patrons' funds would not split (some patrons supported both stations, but many could only afford to sponsor one): "Looking only at Patronite, there are many people from PR3 here. If they all consolidated, they would surely make a radio station that would be legendary. Clearly, we're willingly becoming subject to a divide and conquer strategy" (ftt7).

Radio 357 addressed these comments with due care, explaining and justifying their positions in both written posts and video material. This suggests that they were aware of how seriously patrons considered this matter. The main arguments made by project managers boil down to three points. First, joining forces would mean laying off some employees at both stations. Neither the stations' premises nor programming schedules could accommodate both radio teams in their entirety. Second, Radio 357 had a different functioning philosophy from RNŚ. Despite utilizing nostalgia for PR3, the project was positioned as more than just a radio: "On Radio 357, traditional listeners will find an equivalent of a typical FM station, but those of you who are more multimedia-oriented will get a true powerhouse, allowing users to individually cherry-pick and manage content" (Radio 357, 2021a, para. 3).

Third, the project managers argued that the dynamic development of crowdfunding made it possible for both projects to prosper. This line of reasoning was strengthened by the argument that both stations supposedly complemented rather than substituted each other. It is clearly subjective and should be evaluated individually by every patron. From a purely economic point of view, both radio stations compete not only for patrons' donations, but also for listeners' attention, as it is impossible to listen to both stations at the same time. Some patrons noticed it and argued that they were happy to sponsor two post-PR3 stations, as they could cherry-pick programs from both stations and have more choices.

It should also be noted that the patrons also requested inviting to Radio 357 the journalists who stayed in PR3 after the 2020 crisis or who had left it for other (not RNŚ) media. Project managers clearly

communicated that they had no plans to invite these journalists and that their decision to choose their own career paths should be respected.

Development of the Platform and App, Technical Features

This thread combines numerous proposals made by patrons, mostly addressing various mobile app features, online platforms, and technical issues regarding the quality of the stream or the possibility of listening to the station on various devices. The main efforts of the project managers concentrated on explaining why implementing certain features proposed by the patrons was taking more time and costing more money than one may have expected. For example, discussing the voting system (for the radio's song chart), the station communicated that "the very assumptions for the voting system are 22 pages of text in Word... The cost of the voting system is 6-digit amounts" (Radio 357, 2021f). Such messages had the goal of confronting patrons with economic reality while also adhering to the concept of full transparency. The problem with developing technical aspects was that the results were noticeable only to a group of listeners (e.g., those who gained the possibility of listening to the radio more easily while driving), while changes in the programming schedule were immediately noticeable to everyone who was listening. Therefore,

> we decided to redirect the funds that you transferred to us through Patronite primarily to the programming, so that our offer would be extremely rich and that you would enjoy it, and at the same time we are working on this technological part, which we will probably have to finance from other sources. (Radio 357, 2021f)

By "other sources," the station means funds received from sponsors. While at Radio 357, there are no commercial blocks, the station occasionally invites a company to sponsor a program. In one report, the station revealed that between January and May 2022, it received 944,000 PLN (roughly 214,000 USD, which is 17% of its budget) from such deals, the rest coming from patrons' donations (76% of the budget) and sales of merchandise (7% of the budget; "Radio 357 z dobrym," 2022). We could not verify whether these proportions were similar in other periods and whether the station used the money from sponsors to finance any particular expenditure (therefore, the aforementioned technological development of the station funded from "other sources" should be treated as a discussion of plans).

Discussion

The purpose of this study is to analyze how digital patronage has become a central part of the model for building a radio station and its ongoing functioning. The success of Radio 357 shows that such an alternative model is possible in certain circumstances. This, however, prompts a question: Is it possible to replicate such a model elsewhere?

The first factor that was fundamental in the case discussed in this article was the existence of a strong connection, showing elements of fandom between listeners and PR3. The shock caused by the crisis in PR3 allowed a group of radio presenters who left PR3 not only to "take" the audience with them to Radio 357 but also to convince its listeners to engage in "fan-ancing" (Scott, 2015) of the new station. This exemplifies—perhaps a trivial observation—that the true value of a radio station lies in the emotional

connection between the station's presenters and its audience. While it may be obvious to claim that radio does not exist without listeners, there seems to be a qualitative difference between passive listeners of some commercial stations who just need some background noise (Crisell, 1994) and the participative audience of Radio 357. Getting funding through digital patronage may be extremely difficult if a station has a mostly passive audience. Such listeners, whenever they do not like the content broadcast in the station they listen to, most likely switch to a different station than seek ways to "save" it.

The promise made by journalists who left PR3 of "you'll get what you remember, what you miss, and what can't be heard anymore today" (Radio 357, 2022, para. 5) was enough to start the crowdfunding process. However, to ensure that the financial support was not just temporary, this promise had to be kept, which led us to the second factor that was essential in the case analyzed here—continuous negotiation of the "terms of participation" (Jenkins & Green, 2009, p. 222). The project managers had to respond to the patron's requests whenever it was reasonable and put extra effort into explaining their decisions when a positive response was not possible. To make the patrons feel—to paraphrase their words—"a little bit like investors" (fuw3), the station needed to appear transparent to them. This meant not only being able to communicate clearly and timely but also explaining complex issues of media and Internet economics to the patrons. It seems that the project managers attempted to manage patrons' expectations, reducing them in advance in some areas and heightening them in others. Therefore, it can be said that to replicate this model with other radio stations (or, more broadly, the media), one would need a dedicated group of users-fans whose willingness to become patrons would have to be constantly strengthened through engagement in dialog and the possibility of influencing the final shape of the financed undertaking.

The case analyzed in this article suggests that the development of crowdfunding platforms has created space for new types of audiences' participatory engagement. We are experiencing a reduced distance between presenters and listeners alongside increased connectivity between members of the audience and patrons' intervention in the final shape of the station—how, what, and when it broadcasts. Even if this intervention is subject to the mediation of project managers and at times a cleverly executed veto (as in the case of deciding not to join forces with RNŚ), it is still more participatory than just being a listener who occasionally phones the station or comments on its Facebook profile. Simultaneously, we need to remember that, while patrons, compared with radio listeners in the prepatronage era, seem to have gained more power, they should not be associated with all listeners. Patrons are self-selected—anybody can become one if he or she donates money to the project—which exemplifies capitalist rather than strictly democratic mechanisms of governance. Moreover, not all patrons actively participate in the forum or Facebook discussions (or even follow them)—some only donate money and listen to the broadcast. The reasons behind and consequences of differences between active patrons, passive patrons, and listeners who are not patrons should be investigated in future research.

Conclusion

The analysis conducted in this article suggests that Radio 357's *modus operandi* differs from that of commercial FM radio stations. For most FM radio stations, their format is indirectly dictated by the advertising market, which provides the necessary funds to run the station. The role of the audience is important since its size and demographic profile can be measured and commodified.

For Radio 357, part of the audience—those who became patrons—engaged in financing the station, proposing modifications, and exerting friendly pressure aimed at making the station closer to their *collective* expectations. We emphasize the word "collective" because the station's management considers proposals that are observable on patron's forums (i.e., they are expressed by many patrons), while divergent proposals made by single patrons are likely to be missed or ignored.

It must, however, be emphasized that Radio 357 is also different from community radio stations. They are often shown as an example of an alternative to private and public stations because of their concentration on the needs of a very specific community (e.g., local or minority group), the active participation of volunteers in running the station, and its nonprofit profile (Gordon, 2006). Unlike community radio stations, Radio 357 does not assume the regular cocreation of programs with listeners or serve the needs of one particular community. The station is professionally managed by journalists who are responsible for its content. Although patrons make requests regarding almost any aspect of the functioning of the station and some of these requests are considered, the programs are clearly authored by professional presenters and not members of the audience.

One final difference between crowdfunded and traditional FM radio (either commercial or public) is the much easier access of the former to data about listeners' preferences. While information on terrestrial radio listenership is vital for finding advertisers, it must be bought from external partners. Internet radio stations have much easier and more direct access to such data. Radio 357 goes one step further by combining data collected through the observation of automatically collected listenership figures with data on patrons' donations. While our research did not investigate how Radio 357 makes use of such data (except for confirming that it *does* use them), we can risk claiming that it offers opportunities for offering programming that better fits listeners' preferences.

Although we found the model proposed by Radio 357 unique, it is almost certain that digital patronage is being—or will be—used by some other radio stations elsewhere. Therefore, future research should concentrate on analyses of similar undertakings that function in different cultural, legal, and social circumstances.

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