



Communication in community-funded radio. The case of online station Radio 357

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the text is to analyze the model of communication with patrons of Radio 357 – an online radio station funded by listeners using digital patronage. **Methodology:** a qualitative analysis of the content found in the forum for patrons of the radio station was carried out. The empirical material consisted of 200 posts by the station, 21,081 comments by patrons, and videos lasting a total of 1,050 minutes. The analysis covered the period from October 2020 to January 2022. **Results and conclusions:** the analysis conducted indicates that Radio 357's communication model is strongly determined by the way the radio station is financed. The station communicates with all listeners in parallel (via its website and social media) and moderates separate forums for the most committed patrons. The communication is partly due to the individual model adopted by the radio station, and partly due to the framework and tools imposed by the technicalities of the crowdfunding platform on which the collection is conducted. **Research value:** the analysis provides insight into the characteristics and strengths and weaknesses of the described communication model. What is particularly important, given the last decades of rapid development of radio broadcasting, this model is significantly different from the previous way of communication of traditional radio stations.

KEYWORDS

radio audience, digital patronage, communication practices, internet radio, Radio 357



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Taking a historical perspective, it can be said that the importance and participation of media audiences have evolved. In the case of radio broadcasters, communication has always been mainly one-way. A small number of creators addressed a large audience, whose participation was primarily passive (Cassirer, 1959). Technological advances have made it possible to streamline broadcasters' communications for the benefit of the audience. The magnitude of the transformation is evidenced both by the emergence of a new digital model of Internet radio broadcasting and the activation of listeners by allowing them to express themselves (Sinton, 2018). Thus, communication has become increasingly hybrid, and the distance between the radio station and listeners has shortened. Methods of communication such as on-air phone calls, text messaging and online chat have contributed to this (Bonini, 2014, p. 75). At the same time, progress and new technical solutions have developed new avenues for media development and alternative ways of financing them. One manifestation of this phenomenon is the growing value of crowdfunding collections (Duszczyk, 2022), which are becoming an increasingly popular method of sponsoring journalistic projects.

The purpose of the text is to analyze Radio 357's communication with its patrons. The funding model adopted by the station is based on a variation of crowdfunding called digital patronage, which involves long-term solicitation of financial support pledged by patrons. In return, the radio station gives them certain benefits – not available to other listeners¹. This model determines a different form of contact between the station and listeners and patrons.

In many respects, the Radio 357 project presented in the text can be considered modern and unconventional. However, it should be emphasized that this is not the only radio venture financed through crowdfunding. The success of the competing Radio Nowy Świat (translated to English as “Radio New World”, hereafter “RNŚ”) and several podcasts financed in this way suggests that we are dealing with a new stage in the development of Internet radio. Thus, this text fits in with earlier studies of both radio broadcasting and crowdfunding, mainly undertaken in the communication studies, media studies and economic studies streams. For example, we can find analyses of internet radio (Doliwa, 2010; Kołodziejczyk & Stępka, 2006), crowdfunding (Kozioł-Nadolna, 2015; Pluszyńska & Szopa, 2018) and the use of this solution for the construction and operation of cultural, journalistic or radio projects (Baran, 2021; Doliwa, 2022; Kędzierska-Szczepaniak & Próchniak, 2018; Łysoń, 2021; Wilk & Śmigiel, 2021).

Crowdfunding in the creative industries

The practice of using organized cash collections to achieve a specific goal dates back to the 17th century. This method was of particular interest to cultural and scientific developers (Gómez-Diago, 2015, p. 172). Modern crowdfunding is a tool for financing small and medium-sized initiatives through the collection of small amounts from many people (customers), through online platforms designed for this purpose (Hossain & Oparaocha, 2017, p. 16; Ordanini, Miceli, Pizzetti, & Parasuraman, 2011, p. 443).

¹ In the case of community-funded Internet radio, “listeners” are referred to as recipients of the station who do not donate to it. “Patrons,” on the other hand, are defined as those who fund it with regular donations.

A new variation on crowdfunding that is gaining popularity is digital patronage, distinguished by long-term, recurring funding of a project or the work of a specific creator (Regner, 2021, pp. 133-142). Regular payments resembling the subscription model provide a higher level of support and loyalty along the line between creator and patron (Wohn, Jough, Eskander, Siri, Shimobayashi, & Desai, 2019, p. 99). Digital patronage is particularly popular among independent creators using new media, including film producers, podcasters, and musicians (Bonifacio, Hair, & Wohn, 2021, p. 8). According to Knepper (2017) and Regner (2021, p. 2), payments from patrons are usually insufficient to make a living from them, although in many cases they are an attractive source of additional earnings. The patronage system encourages and rewards patrons with additional benefits tied to a certain amount of support.

The patronage model of support is also increasingly being used as a way to fund journalism (Zheng, Li, Wu, & Xu, 2014, p. 6). It provides an opportunity for projects previously impossible to carry out or carried out under another funding model. The important role of the patron may stem from his or her willingness to co-determine the creative process² (Lehner, 2013), which is one of the groundbreaking advantages of patronage.

The role and participation of the radio audience

The spread of the Internet has significantly influenced the development of broadcasting (Bottomley, 2020). The Internet provides a convenient framework for listeners to collaborate and interact with broadcasters, thanks in part to the social media platforms that media outlets and their audiences share. The combination of radio and social networks is the consequence of a long historical process through which the distance from the audience has been reduced (Bonini, 2014).

Despite the still relatively passive position of the listeners and their limited influence on program content, the communication expectations of audiences are growing. The beneficiaries of media convergence are both audiences demanding the “right to participate” (Baoill, 2008), as well as radio stations receiving feedback from listeners. Before the Internet era, it was the radio stations that influenced the preferences of their listeners (Scannell, 1996). Today’s radio audiences have the tools to interact with journalists, co-produce content and directly inform producers of their expectations. While most radio audiences can arguably be classified as passive, there are also groups of active listeners (sometimes they can be referred to as fans) with a keen interest in establishing interactions in various areas of a station’s activities.

Relational labor of creators with fans

An increasingly important part of the responsibilities of artists is interaction with the audience, as exemplified by the contact between musicians and audiences by Nancy K. Baym (2015). A particular type of activity directed at maintaining a bond with fans is called “relational labor”. It is any bond-building communication carried out by creators in the creative industries, for whom contact with the audience translates into economic value and gaining or sustaining financial support (Baym, 2015; Cunningham & Craig, 2019).

Relational labor is characteristic of developers funded in the patronage model. They are required to manage and communicate with the patron community (French & Bazarova, 2017;

² It should be emphasized that Radio 357 does not fall into the category of community radio stations, often presented as an alternative to private and public stations. Although the Radio 357 community makes requests regarding many aspects of the station’s operation, the radio station itself is managed by professional journalists and does not rely on the constant co-creation of broadcasts by listeners.

O’Sullivan & Carr, 2018). The intensity and degree of personalization of this communication is determined by the amount of support pledged by the patron. A study by Craig and Cunningham (2019) reveals a number of difficulties in relational labor, especially among individual creators using new media who cannot entrust these activities to others. The context of financial support obliges them to maintain interactions with fans and fulfill promises (such as sending them rewards in exchange for donations) based on the project’s goals and level of support.

Previous research on digital patronage has presented the duty of relational labor mainly from the perspective of individual creators. It can be assumed that this kind of work will become the duty of managers and employees of much larger-scale projects.

Background and research methodology

The results of the 2015 parliamentary elections, resulting in Law and Justice party coming to power, have significantly changed the way public media operate. Legislative and management changes have affected the media market, raising concerns from international institutions (e.g., EU Commission Recommendation 2016/1374 of July 27, 2016 on the and contributing to Poland’s sharp decline in the World Press Freedom Index from 29th to 66th position (Reporters Without Borders, 2022).

A significant reorganization has taken place at Polish Radio Three (hereafter PR3), among others. The method of preparing news services, previously developed in-house by journalists, was centralized. Clear personnel and program-related changes were also made, which, in the opinion of listeners and experts, brought the station closer in line with the powers that be (Wilczak, 2020). PR3 saw a drastic decline in listenership, with a record low of 1.59 percent in the fall of 2021 (Gąbka, 2021). “Reform” of the public media and the dismantling of PR3 lasted for several years, and included successive waves of resignations and layoffs of employees, as meticulously described in academic (Chwastyk-Kowalczyk, 2022) and journalistic publications (Wawrzuszkiewicz, 2020). The result of political interference in PR3’s operations was the creation by some of its former journalists of two independent internet radio station projects – RNŚ and Radio 357. Both stations were created and are funded under the digital patronage model.

Radio 357 is an online music and journalism station. Fundraising to finance the project began on October 5, 2020 through the Patronite platform. The radio station began permanent broadcasting on January 5, 2021. It can be received for free, and the idea and structure of its financing is based on voluntary regular payments from listeners who are its patrons. As much as 76 percent of the station’s 2021 budget came from patrons’ donations, with the remainder coming from cooperation with marketing partners (Radio 357, 2022). Radio 357 is supported by more than 50,000 patrons, which translates into monthly funding of approximately PLN 920,000 (Patronite, 2023 – as of May 8, 2023).

It should be noted that Radio 357 was not the first of the “after-PR3” community-funded initiatives. Earlier, in early 2020, Dariusz Rosiak’s *Report on the State of the World*, Dariusz Bugalski’s *K3* and RNŚ were established. There are many similarities between Radio 357 and RNŚ. Noteworthy, however, is the clear advantage of the former in terms of the number of patrons and the amount of support they have pledged. On January 1, 2023 Radio 357 became the world’s largest media project funded by the online community (Wirtualne Media, 2023).

Radio 357 may be enjoyed without paying a fee, but financial contributions provide patrons with privileges commensurate with their level of support. Some involve making communication between the station and patrons more attractive. Even the lowest support (PLN 10 per month) gives patrons access to a closed group, whose members include Radio 357 journalists. Higher amounts provide a more individualized form of contact.

The main means of communication with patrons is the Patronite platform. Since payments are made through it, all active patrons have access to it (unlike the Facebook group). Therefore, this analysis focuses on Radio 357's communications conducted through the Patronite platform. The material includes 200 posts published by the station, 21,081 comments from patrons and 41 videos lasting a total of 1,050 minutes³. The material analyzed is from the first 15 months of the project's operation (from October 5, 2020 to January 21, 2022).

The analysis is qualitative in nature. All of the collected material was coded and anonymized using Atlas.ti software⁴. The analysis of forum content for patrons led to the creation of 50 specific codes⁵ assigned to 16 thematic categories⁶.

Taking into account the unique economic context of the relationship between the station and patrons, the case of Radio 357 prompts consideration of the model of communication in radio created and financed by the audience. Accordingly, three research questions were formulated and attempted to be answered later in the article:

1. What distinguishes the communication model that Radio 357 offers patrons?
2. Which elements of communication do patrons rate positively?
3. What communication difficulties do patrons mention?

Characteristics of Radio 357's communication model

Although Radio 357 has publicly available profiles on popular social networks, this analysis focuses on a distinctive slice of communication carried out by the station – its closed forum. Unlike publicly available channels, the radio station allows closer contact there and provides content exclusively for patrons. This is due to their important role and contribution to the financing of the project; radio representatives refer to patrons as “co-creators” and “co-builders” (Radio 357, 2021b).

The main channels of communication with patrons are a forum on the Patronite platform and a closed Facebook group. Patrons are the first to be informed of the station's most important decisions or privileges – as was the case, for example, when patrons purchased the radio's mugs: “We operate thanks to you, so we are repaying you as best we can. This time, patrons can order first. The whole 2 days only for you. Only after that the rest of the world.” (Radio 357, 2021c).

Radio 357 provides patrons with special forum posts, videos, live broadcasts and photo reports. Patrons are exceptionally active, sending journalists letters, cards, gifts and visiting them

³ In the event that it was not possible to organize a broadcast on Patronite, the station provided a link to the broadcast venue on the platform.

⁴ Working in Atlas.ti streamlined data coding by making it easier to review and organize the data. Coding decisions were made individually by the researcher. Tools available in the latest version of Atlas.ti that use artificial intelligence for automatic coding were not used.

⁵ Codes: Gratitude (reactions); Video; Broadcast sharing; Reception/quality; Other issues; Facebook group; FM/Internet radio; Application; Technology – opinions; Sister cities; Joint patronage; Disadvantages/advantages; Rivalry; Differences; Politics; Ads – reactions; Opponents/supporters of ads; Patrons – evaluation; Project – evaluation; Engaging patrons; Covid; Other events; Communications; Publicity; Patrons' reactions to R357 communications; Project development; Frame development; News services; Radio structure; Transparency/clarification; Comments/praise; Practices; Politics; Political events; Approach to politics; Media protest; PR3 thread – politics; Money – funding; Box; Democracy; Who we want; Dissatisfaction; Patrons vs. listeners; Money thresholds; Proposals/expectations; Mutual support (patrons); Charts; Access to information; Relationship to Facebook.

⁶ Topic categories: Bots; Facebook and Patronite; Community culture; Music; Music events; Patronage; Patrons; Money; Politics; Design; Advertisements; Patrons; RNŚ; Gratitude; Technology; Relationship to radio.

in person at the radio station's headquarters. A characteristic feature of digital patronage is that patrons co-determine the shape of the project they fund, which is also the case with Radio 357:

“We are coming up with development directions together with you. [...] We promise not to stop listening and responding to you [...] We will talk with you and decide together on the direction we want to develop. This is not supposed to be a community-funded radio. This is supposed to be a community radio – ours, together.” (Radio 357, 2023).

Patrons are involved in the process of co-determining the station's vision and development and key program areas. Radio managers asked them for their opinions and preferences, on the basis of which decisions were then made. One example is inviting patrons to discuss the shape of journalism at the radio station (Radio 357, 2021d). In addition, the forum allows them to articulate expectations that were not necessarily within the initial assumptions of the project originators. Some of the most commonly articulated requests the station had to fulfill more quickly than anticipated. An example is the earlier “test” start of radio broadcasting:

“We asked our patrons for their opinion and they decided: “launch earlier, even in a slightly truncated form”. So we created an additional intermediate goal – Radio 0.9 [...] certainly less lavishly than our target form will broadcast for a shorter time (10? 12 hours a day?), but... WILL. You want us to broadcast as soon as possible. We are listening and hereby implementing your request.” (Radio 357, 2021e).

Radio 357 took advantage of the non-financial benefits of close communication with patrons. The station, during the testing phase of the mobile app, reported to patrons for help in evaluating its performance and the need for possible modifications. A high level of transparency was also a goal of the radio station, and one of the expectations of patrons. The managers made an effort to explain comprehensively the motives behind the most important decisions (e.g. not to cooperate with RNS), explain issues related to the company's legal structure and the business model adopted. This included the financial situation and reporting of expenses. In a statement, the station conveyed: “Our patrons are our investors, and we care that you know what the financial situation is like. We will regularly, report on our finances – a bit like listed companies do to their shareholders.” (Radio 357, 2021a).

In the first months of the project, Radio 357 struggled to implement the adopted communication model – mainly by not having enough people dedicated to responding to patrons' posts. The station's passivity was met with criticism. The editors explained that they were unable to answer such a large number of questions, while assuring that the entries were regularly analyzed. In the following months, the number of communications staff was increased (to eight). To improve contact and better understand the community of patrons, some of them were hired in the communications department.

Positive elements of communication

The method of communication adopted by Radio 357 generally received positive reactions and satisfaction from patrons: “Great live, we like your transparency very much. Keep it up!”⁷. Patrons felt sufficiently informed about the station's activities, and the journalists' arguments were met with understanding. Some patrons were positively surprised that the station takes their opinions into account, reads comments, and responds to some of them: “I'm impressed. Someone from Radio 357 is reading this. I really like your response and the fact that you are listening to our voices.”

⁷ All statements by Radio 357 patrons have been anonymized and quoted in the original version.

The communication model adopted made patrons feel not like only listeners, but also “investors” and “the other side of the venture” – which was achieved through detailed reporting on key management decisions. The following post from the forum serves as an example of a satisfied patron: “Thanks for the report! I feel a bit like an investor, informed about the progress of the work and nodding my head approvingly. Great job, keep it up!”

The station’s engagement of patrons has translated into their greater confidence in the project and its prospects for development. This was also important for the initiators of the collection, whose goal is to constantly increase the number of patrons and the amount of support. Statements from patrons testify that the exchange of information not only reduced their doubts, but may also have contributed to increasing their existing donations. The following entries from two patrons illustrate this: “Keep the transparency going. It’s much needed. Very much so. Patrons will be more willing to fund the radio if they have a clear message of what it costs”; “Thank you for making us more familiar with how internet radio works and the costs associated with broadcasting. I have to get my head around it now. I will think about paying the higher monthly fee. Best regards.”

Patrons appreciated the accessible explanation of the project’s basic premises and the benefits of status. This was a major challenge for the station’s initiators, since a large part of their audience is former listeners of PR3, accustomed to using traditional radio and unfamiliar with the advantages of Internet radio. Despite the few voices that for the 60-year-old generation the patronage model is an “insurmountable barrier,” the vast majority of patrons praised the accessibility of the messages and the language in which they are delivered, such as: “It’s nice to get emails like this, in simple and real language it smells, that’s how I like it.”

Another of the advantages highlighted was the multi-platform and interactive method of contact. Key messages were presented simultaneously in posts and video recordings – playable at the patron’s convenience. Key live broadcasts of several minutes were also published in writing and shared in posts. “Such communication is ideal. It’s Live on FB, you can watch it again later, then a shortcut on Patronite and everyone feels informed and thus more loyal.”

Patrons praised how Tomasz Michniewicz, a journalist and co-founder of the radio station, communicates while liaising with the audience. His work was repeatedly rated as exemplary: “The way you communicated with us, patiently explained, conveyed the motives for the decision – full professionalism! Thank you!” Six months after the start of the station’s broadcasting, some changes occurred, a decision was made to strengthen the communications department and move from a one-person to a team model.

Problems flagged by patrons

Although the model of communication adopted by Radio 357 was generally viewed positively, at times patrons mentioned some frustrating difficulties.

Patrons repeatedly expected individual contact with the editors and expressed disappointment at their lack of response. Their vision differed from the station’s strategy, which most often addressed messages to the entire community. One patron who expected direct interaction felt disappointed when he was not personally thanked for increasing his monthly support from PLN 50 to PLN 357. The station did not respond to his comment, and words of support and appreciation were conveyed to him by community members.

Criticism from some patrons concerned the way in which questions were selected and answered by editors in a “There’s a question? There’s an answer!” Patrons asked questions, which were then voted on in a poll. Those that received the highest number of votes were answered by the editors in the form of a video. According to patrons, the proposal was “form over substance,”

as the vast majority of questions could be addressed collectively in one or two sentences, and most were not answered. Their annoyance was exacerbated by the limitations of the Patronite platform, which did not have sufficiently developed tools to conduct surveys efficiently.

Patrons, especially in the early stages of the station's establishment, stressed the need for more advance notice of upcoming broadcasts. Commenters recounted how longing editors were unable to listen to an eagerly awaited broadcast because they were not notified of it. In one patron's case, the first morning broadcast, through lack of proper information, caused "as much satisfaction as frustration."

There was a lot of excitement about the different way Radio 357 ran two closed groups for communicating with patrons. Members of the Facebook group were able to access information and materials that were not published on Patronite (or that ended up there with a long delay). Many patrons declared a dislike of social media or an aversion to Facebook. For some of them, Facebook was an intermediary on which the station depends. They demanded respect for the fact that "not everyone uses it, and many don't want to be there."

An example of a situation in which Patronite forumers felt aggrieved was the highly anticipated *Max 357* broadcast, which was announced exclusively on Facebook. Disgruntled patrons wrote about feeling alienated from the community. Frustration was reinforced by the indifference of the station not responding to their complaints. Many said they felt they were "second-class" patrons, and pointed to the existence of a division between "first and second class patrons." Some threatened to abandon funding for the project: "The circle of people ignoring FB or not wanting to use it is growing [...] editors, wake up, because we will leave, and with us our/your money! Respect your patrons!"

Some patrons declared that they would not start using Facebook, and their decision would not be swayed even by their considerable attachment to Radio 357. Many faced a serious dilemma, as their dislike of Facebook was often the only argument depriving them of access to the content published there. The community of patrons pointed to the need to find a single, optimal platform for communication. The greatest support was for the idea of creating a forum on the radio's website, but the editors never considered such a step (Radio 357, 2021f).

Over time, patrons noticed an improvement in the station's communications, moving toward more universal, multi-platform and uniform information to patrons. They praised the greater number of broadcast announcements on the Patronite forum and the increase in activity toward "non-Facebook" patrons. Some patrons who were previously dissatisfied felt that, despite the lack of a Facebook account, they "no longer lose as much as they used to."

In some situations, the problem for patrons was the language the station used to describe the salient points of its activities. Editors often used phrases such as "we are considering," "please wait," "we will think about," and "we have in mind," which generally meant little. Radio executives repeatedly explained their reasons for adopting this mode of communication, stressing that on some issues they "have to be diplomatic" (Radio 357, 2020), including when addressing sensitive topics (such as competition on the media market). This was in keeping with the station's tenets of conducting cautious communications, making no empty promises, and announcing next steps in development only when everything is already certain. The radio station's management acknowledged that in some areas the scale and unfamiliarity with the realities of operating a crowdfunded project exceeded the team's predictions and capabilities. An example is the initial plans to apply for a permit to broadcast on FM frequencies, but the station withdrew from this – arguing financial barriers.

Conclusions

The circumstances of the founding of Radio 357 and the way it operates indicate the uniqueness of this project. This analysis shows that the station's funding model, based on pledged long-term contributions from patrons, determines its communication strategy with its audience. This is the result of the relationship between the creators and audiences of this radio station and the phenomenon of increasing participation from radio listeners in recent decades. The creators of Radio 357, unlike traditional FM stations, must communicate with listeners and patrons through separate discussion forums. Given the scale of the project, the radio station's relational labor differs significantly from those of individual online creators. On the one hand, the station can assign specialized staff members to contact fans, while on the other hand, it is not able to be fully communicative and interact with every expectant patron from a community of tens of thousands. Radio 357 is confronted, though not directly, with the dilemma of giving a hierarchy to its audience. While it is reasonable to ensure that large-dollar contributing patrons have closer contact with the editors, the expectations of those making the lowest donations cannot be ignored, especially given that they are the largest in number. Moreover, since the goal of the project's managers is to continually increase the number of patrons, concern for relations with non-paying listeners should be equally important. Patrons' contact with the station thus takes on a dimension that is both friendly and businesslike. The goal of Radio 357's relational labor remains to monetize the bond between the station, its journalists and its audience.

Radio 357 claims to make decisions based on consultations with patrons, for which it needs a platform and tools to enable effective debate between parties. The station also needs to maintain a high level of transparency. The described model of communication is a new experience for both the staff of the radio station and its audience. Both have a vision of the preferred form of communication, and the first months of Radio 357 were an attempt to mutually negotiate its optimal shape. Although a large proportion of patrons expect personal contact with journalists, the station uses a hybrid model of interaction – with mass communication playing a dominant role. While successful offline fundraising would be unlikely for Radio 357, in the course of its past operations, technology could sometimes be a barrier. Former listeners of PR3 may have been potentially excluded in the sense of not belonging to the generation of digital natives.

This analysis provides a preliminary characterization of the communication model of a new and successful media project, Radio 357. The case described also provides information about the communication preferences of the audience. The work should serve as an introduction to subsequent research on other journalistic initiatives funded under the digital patronage model, and may also help determine how audience relations affect the success of such projects.

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