Piotr Chmielewski

The Creation and Functioning of Listener-Funded Radio: An Analysis of the Audience Community of Radio 357

The aim of this dissertation is to explain the phenomenon of the creation and development of Radio 357 – an online radio station supported by voluntary listener contributions in the digital patronage model. The station emerged in the context of the crisis of the Polish Radio Three/Third Programme of the Polish Radio (PR3) in 2015–2020, during a period of dynamic changes in the media sphere and growing interest in alternative forms of media funding. To achieve this aim, three research questions were formulated: (1) how are the processes of building and managing a listener-funded radio station organized, and how does its logic of operation differ from that of public and commercial broadcasters; (2) how was the patron community of Radio 357 formed and how does it function, including the role of listening rituals, radio biographies, and community-building practices; (3) how are relations and power structures shaped between patrons, and the station's founders and editorial team within a donation-based funding model.

The methodological part (chapter 1) presents the research problem, aims, and questions, and explains the choice of a qualitative, exploratory approach. Complementary techniques were used: content analysis, netnography of online forums, in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, and observation. The collected material was systematically coded with Atlas.ti software.

The theoretical part (chapters 2–5) discusses the main issues and contexts of the research. Chapter 2 presents sociological perspectives on communities, including the transformation of associative forms and the debate on differences between offline and online communities. Chapter 3 describes radio as a medium that is not very complicated technologically but socially and culturally embedded. It examines the radio ecosystem, the historical perspective (with attention to convergence and formatting), and the specificity of internet radio. Chapter 4 shows the evolution of listening practices and broader changes in media use. Chapter 5 focuses on crowdfunding: the origins of the idea, its applications in culture, media, and journalism, and the digital patronage model, which underlies the functioning of Radio 357.

The empirical part (chapters 6–11) begins with a reconstruction of the PR3 crisis and the emergence of bottom-up, listener-funded initiatives – Radio Nowy Świat and Radio 357.

Chapter 7 analyzes the early formation of the Radio 357 community. Key themes included the radio biographies of patrons, differences between the two stations rooted in PR3, and the motivations for choosing Radio 357 as the main subject of support and emotional identification. Chapter 8 examines the station's everyday functioning, its communication with patrons, the role of internet forums, and listeners' adaptation to internet broadcasting. Chapter 9 deepens the analysis of the community, proposing a typology of patrons which consists of: (1) donors who provide financial support but remain unengaged, (2) satisfied enthusiasts, and (3) critical-demanding patrons, characterized by high expectations and strongly voiced opinions, whose experiences with Radio 357 often ended in disappointment. Chapter 10 emphasizes the role of listening rituals and community practices in shaping a sense of belonging. Chapter 11 analyzes power relations in the project: the real influence of patrons, mechanisms of co-decision, and the asymmetry of competence between the community and the editorial and management team.

The study confirmed that the digital patronage model – based on voluntary, regular contributions – proved to be an effective way to provide stable funding and sustain a professional radio station. This was not obvious before the project began. The scale of the initiative (around 50,000 patrons) and the pace of Radio 357's development make it exceptional, with few comparable examples worldwide. Its success grew from the former community of PR3 listeners, whose practices, traditions, and rituals were transferred to the new station. The promised "co-decision" of patrons in practice took the form of consultation, while formal control and responsibility remained with the founders and editorial team. Collective pressure from the community proved effective in moments of crisis but did not eliminate the existing power asymmetry. The sustainability of the station depends on ongoing "relational work": building trust, maintaining transparency, and regular communication with patrons. Radio 357 has reached a natural limits in recruitment of new patrons, and therefore – while maintaining its basic principles, such as the absence of traditional advertising blocks – it also relies on selective cooperation with business partners and diversifying its programming offer to reach audiences beyond the former PR3 listeners. Competition from the "revived" PR3 after 2023 did not threaten the Radio 357 community or its financial stability.

This dissertation contributes to knowledge on contemporary forms of community in the conditions of digital and interactive media. It shows that online communities can meet the criteria of "real" communities, especially when their practices also extend into offline life. It documents the transfer of listening rituals between stations and the role of radio practices in building imagined communities united around a specific broadcaster. On a practical level, the findings provide guidance for creators of crowdfunded projects, highlighting the importance of

long-term relational work and transparent communication, the need to manage expectations and clearly define the scope of community participation, and the value of combining crowdfunding with complementary commercial partnerships. At the same time, the uniqueness of this case and the specific Polish context point to the need for further comparative studies – both national and international – as well as long-term analyses of the Radio 357 community and the inclusion of non-patron listeners in future research.

Key words: radio audiences, internet radio, digital patronage, Radio 357, community practices, virtual communities, sociology of media.