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Crowd-patronage – Intermediaries, Geographies and Relationships in Patronage Networks

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Abstract

This article introduces a new mode of patronage of the arts: crowd-patronage. In so doing the article illustrates the plural roles of intermediaries in patronage networks which go beyond Bourdieuan cultural intermediaries to include regulatory and financial actors. A brief history of patronage is presented which outlines different modes and eras of patronage for the arts since the 12th century. Particular attention is paid to the geographies of patronage networks, the mobility of artists, the plurality of roles played by intermediaries and the relations between patrons and artists. These themes then structure the analysis of crowd-patronage through a case study of the patronage platform Patreon in the remainder of the paper. Crowd-patronage is distinctive because of the scale and geographical scope of patronage networks, its focus on funding practice rather than outputs, a shift in the power relationships between patron and artist, and processes of re-intermediation.

1. Introduction

Patronage has long been a key form of support for artists. From Welsh courts in the 12th century to contemporary transnational corporate players, artists have worked with patrons to produce art that has served political, economic and cultural functions. This paper presents crowd-patronage as a new form of patronage of the arts. Mediated through the web by platforms such as Patreon.com, crowd-patronage is qualitatively and quantitatively different to other types of patronage, and allows patrons to support artists around the world through monthly payments. Crowd-patronage refigures relationships between artist and patron, shifting the control over what and how work is produced from patrons to artists, and allows more people to engage in funding the arts. The primary focus of this article is Patreon, a San Francisco-based start-up established in 2013 and supported by venture capital investment. In 2016 Patreon was used by over 50 000 artists from over 90 countries and facilitated the transfer of \$100m of financial support from patrons to its artist base (Conte, 2017). Users include Grammy-winning musicians, renowned digital artists, bestselling authors, award-winning journalists and producers of some of the most popular webcomics and podcasts online.

In examining crowd-patronage this article explores the role of intermediaries in patronage networks. Mobilising approaches from economic sociology, the focus here shifts from cultural intermediaries to a wider set of actors defined primarily by their function rather than occupation, and includes those undertaking financial and regulatory roles. Adopting this approach illustrates the plural functions played by these wider groups of intermediaries, processes of re-intermediation and the consequences for artists. The paper begins by reviewing the literature on cultural intermediaries and builds the case for a broader understanding of their functions. A typology of five modes of patronage is introduced in section 3, before section 4 outlines the methods and data used to explain the case study of Patreon examined in section 5.

2. Intermediaries and Artistic Production

As is common in the field of cultural production, a patron or artist’s position within patronage networks is mutually constituted by relations with other actors. These include intermediaries who contribute to the regulation, curation, value, production and consumption of cultural products. The aim of this section is to examine the role of intermediaries within cultural production more broadly, and in so doing introduce the conceptual framework through which the geographies of patronage are understood in this article.

There has been a great deal of debate within disciplines concerned with culture about the role of cultural intermediaries in shaping aesthetic and symbolic value since Bourdieu’s (1984) seminal contribution. His categorisation of ‘new cultural intermediaries’ sparked work examining their role in adding value in the circulation and (re)production of cultural goods and services. As scholars have sought out cultural intermediaries in increasingly diverse contexts, the concept has become elastic, which at best questions its parameters (Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2014) and at worst sees it criticised for being “a dog’s dinner” (Hesmondhalgh, 2006: 227; see also McFall, 2002; Molloy and Larner, 2010).

Lizé (2016) offers a more precise categorisation outlining a typology of intermediaries which shifts the emphasis from occupation to function (see also Miller, 2014 and Zolberg, 1983). Table 1 builds on and expands Lizé’s template and adds financial and regulatory intermediaries which play important roles in patronage networks.

Intermediary Type	Function	Examples
Mediators	Actors “guiding the audience through its relationship with the artworks” (Lizé, 2016: 36) or independent third parties brokering relationships between other actors	Booksellers, museum workers, radio hosts, fans, brokers

Appraisers-prescribers	Professionals and amateurs who make quality judgements, and curating what is good and bad	Critics, experts, members of juries, reviewers
Curators	Those making implicit and explicit curatorial decisions	Directors of cultural institutions, museum directors, radio programmers, curators, recommendation algorithms
Distributors	“intermediaries of the art market” (Lizé, 2016: 37)	Film or music distributors, publishers, cinema owners, online media platforms
Intermediaries of production	“have a hand in the creation process and most of them bring cultural goods to market” (ibid)	Publishers, music producers, gallery owners, TV commissioners
Intermediaries of artistic work	“set between artists and employers” (ibid)	Working for artists: managers and agents Gatekeepers working for employers, investors or producers: talent buyers, scouts, casting agents
Financial intermediaries	“to effectuate more efficient transactions...to make it easier and cheaper for parties seeking financing to work with a specialized third party than to do it on their own” (Lin, 2015)	Banks, credit card companies, credit unions, venture capitalists, online payment providers
Regulatory intermediaries	Actors involved in the (formal and informal) regulation and accreditation of professional standards, terms of use and legal instruments	Professional bodies, community guidelines, laws, terms of service

Table 1: Intermediaries involved in patronage networks (adapted from Lizé, 2016)

This typology is used below to identify different types of intermediaries in the history of patronage. However, it is important to highlight that, like the work of others (Featherstone, 1991), Lizé’s conceptual framing of production as separate from consumption is problematic. McFall (2014) argues that the simultaneity of production and consumption undermines the notion of intermediation between them and suggests they are “always already, dynamically connected” (p.45). Drawing on work on economies of qualities (Callon et al., 2002; Musselin and Paradeise, 2005), McFall follows Muniesa et al.’s (2007: 2) call to focus on ‘agencements’ or market devices to understand: “the material and discursive assemblages that intervene in the construction of markets”. Doing so shifts the emphasis from intermediaries as creating (or

destroying) symbolic value to a wider group of actors influencing how cultural products are understood and used (McFall, 2014). This includes human and non-human actors such as algorithms, trading protocols, advertisements and pricing systems (Muniesa et al., 2007; Caliskan, 2007; McFall, 2014; Callon, 2005).

The identification of this ‘crowd of intermediaries’ (McFall, 2014) means focusing, first, on products and, second, on actors mediating their value within markets. But rather than focus on the products within patronage networks I want to argue the focus should be on artists and patrons, the role played by intermediaries, and in turn the way these actors (re)produce geographies of patronage. In so doing the function of intermediaries widens to include those identified by Lizé (2016), sociotechnical devices such as algorithms, and other types of actors who function as financial and regulatory intermediaries. Here, consumers are understood as part of the process through which artists and their products gain meaning and value. This also allows us to appreciate better how intermediaries take on these positions simultaneously: as I illustrate below, patrons in particular take up multifaceted roles. Thus, intermediaries should be appreciated for their plural, multi-functional roles, not only in relation to aesthetic and symbolic value creation, but also involving financial intermediation, the regulation of professions and standards, and, in more recent examples, as distributors and publishers of cultural products.

Such plurality can be seen in the processes of dis- and re-intermediation. The number of intermediaries involved in activities across the economy has grown to the point where offering to remove them has become attractive, particularly in consumer markets where direct marketing and sales have increased. Disintermediation is usually accompanied by increased availability of information via the internet about what products are available or how to access them, allowing the consumer to reduce information and transactional costs by undertaking search roles themselves (Riemer and Lehrke, 2009).

In the creative industries disintermediation is a result of two factors. First, barriers to entry have fallen as high-quality equipment and software has become more available and easier to use (Miller, 2014). Second, market access is made easier as gatekeepers such as record companies and film studios can be bypassed with web-based, free-to-use platforms such as YouTube (Hirsch and Gruber, 2015). As the influence of traditional intermediaries of production has reduced, power has shifted to new forms of digital distribution and aggregators including Spotify and Apple (Galuszka, 2015). Such processes, however, involve the introduction of new intermediaries who provide new services (e.g. Hulu replacing cable TV providers), or aggregating products for end-user platforms (e.g. TuneCore) (ibid). The result is not disintermediation but re-intermediation as new intermediaries displace and replace existing intermediaries (French and Leyshon,

2004). This is perhaps inevitable for while the rhetoric of online economies is one of flattening, speeding up and efficiencies, the web is a tool for generating revenues:

“...the expectation that the network economy favors disintermediation is exactly wrong. It is quite the opposite. Network technologies do not eliminate intermediaries. They spawn them by definition, every node on a network is a node *between* other nodes.”

(Kelly, 1998: 100 original emphasis)

Through re-intermediation actors take on plural functions. Consumers become simultaneously consumers and appraisers as they are enrolled into review and recommendation systems. Distributors such as Amazon and Netflix become intermediaries of production as they seek greater control over their services. Similar plurality of functions can also be seen where tasks once undertaken by production intermediaries are removed as new companies seek lean business models and pass the tasks to artists. As Kribs (2016) argues, disintermediation isn't liberating for artists, rather they become 'artist-as-intermediary' (see also Zolberg, 1983). As well as producing work, they have to build brand image, manage it through social media, handle fan relations and do promotional activity, taking on the functions of mediators, intermediaries of production and intermediaries of [their own] artistic work. The next section provides more examples of the plural functions of actors in patronage networks as a typology of patronage is outlined.

3. Typology of Patronage

Patronage is perhaps the oldest type of formal support for the arts, and the breadth of work from across arts, humanities and social sciences reflects this. The intricacies of patronage relationships and range of contexts in which it is found mean this scholarship has necessarily had a narrow focus. It examines the work of individual artists or schools (Gardner, 2011), particular patrons (Ryan, 2007), periods of history (Kempers, 1993), modes of support (Cummings and Katz, 1989) and geographies (Blum, 1969). Such work provides detailed accounts and fascinating insights into the role of patronage in cultural production, but systematic overviews are rare. Raymond Williams' (1981) examination is perhaps the best, and it is the starting point for this section. He identifies four modes of patronage which are combined here with the work of other scholars to outline a typology of patronage, which helps place crowd-patronage in an historical context. This account is, in the interests of space, necessarily broad, and draws on exemplars to highlight the characteristics of each type which are outlined using four themes: geographic scale of patronage networks, the mobility of artists, the nature of patron-artist relations, and the role of intermediaries.

3.1 Early Patronage

For Williams the first proper mode of patronage is ‘early patronage’. He illustrates its emergence with court poets, or ‘poets of the princes’, in 12th century Wales. Instead of finding a role within a tribe (as bards had previously done), poets were attached to households, travelling between them and performing their work in return for “hospitality and support” (Williams, 1981: 39) and up to forty pence for major pieces (Parry, 1952). Networks were local to regional in scale with poets relatively mobile, although some became attached to individual courts. The poets formed orders headed by the ‘Chief of Song’ (or *Pencerdd*) who sang at ceremonial occasions, but also played an intermediary role as an early kind of what Lizé terms ‘intermediary of artistic work’, operating between poets and employers to assign poets to nobles. They were also regulatory intermediaries responsible for reproducing and regulating the quality of poets by overseeing the examination of apprentices (Parry, 1952; Koch and Minard, 2012). Not a great deal is known about patron-artist relations within this era, but these early patrons are recognised as using their political and economic power for cultural (re)production. For Williams (1981) this era of patronage represented the “social self-definition of the patronizing household...to assume what was at once a responsibility and an honour” (p.39). Such households elevated the poets by facilitating their artistic production through important occasions (Koch and Minard, 2012). Together with *Pencerdd*, then, households acted as curatorial intermediaries to shape what was acceptable, of quality and worthy of reproduction.

3.2 Retainer and Commission Patronage

Perhaps the best-known form of patronage Williams (1981) calls ‘retainer and commission’ patronage. This involved a variety of different arrangements, but most commonly painters, sculptors, architects, writers and musicians produced art for patrons on a commission basis. A key distinction between this type of patronage and ‘early patronage’ was that art was no longer produced as part of societal ceremonies, but as decoration, status symbol and within more complex political milieux. The zenith of retainer and commission patronage can be found in Renaissance Italy. During this era artists often started their careers in their home town, then with success became more mobile, following the money and commissions to larger cities. Some artists gained reputations beyond their city of residence, producing work for patrons in a number of cities across Italy. It should be noted that artist communities and patronage networks also existed during this period in London, Ghent, Paris and Prague, amongst others (Blum, 1969; Foss, 1972; Pavitt, 2000). Evidence can be found that artists from these cities with the reputation and capital to do so (most notably artists from Flanders), moved to Italy seeking commissions (Hay and Law, 1989). The Renaissance is the archetypal example of retainer and commission patronage, so it is this era on which the rest of the sub-section focuses.

Five sets of patrons can be identified from the literature on this period for whom patronage and art was of material, symbolic and political value: Christian religious orders (including prominent individuals within the Church), city authorities, merchant families, princely courts and guilds (Burke, 2014; Kempers, 1993). The following sections explore their roles alongside new intermediaries which emerged to regulate, curate and reproduce art markets for increasingly professional artists.

3.2.1 Religious Orders

Artists were instructed to paint frescos and panels by religious patrons designed to set examples and teach the virtues of Christianity (Burke, 2014). This was a form of political power designed “to secure for the Church of Rome what amounted to a monopoly on communication in word and image” and therefore its position within society (Kempers, 1993: 21). Clergymen used their position within patronage networks to do this, acting simultaneously as patrons funding artists and powerful curatorial intermediaries controlling who, where and what kinds of religious buildings were commissioned from architects, and who, how and what was depicted in the decorations commissioned from painters. Religious orders also acted as mediators, encouraging wealthy families to pay artists to decorate local churches which were being built at a rapid rate (Gardner, 2011). Some orders, however, were criticised by senior clergymen for putting the pursuit of external patronage ahead of the religious education of the public (ibid). To avoid this senior clergy would control the commission of decoration for churches and chapels of lesser orders (Kempers, 1993). This hierarchy of intermediation within the Roman Church can also be seen in the scale of commissions for more important churches and by more powerful people. The Papal Court is the best example, and represents the most consistent source of patronage during this era. Popes sought to maintain the Church’s position within society, and in so doing their position as rulers of central Italy, through patronage of the best artists in the biggest churches (Burke, 2014). We can see here not only the plural roles the Church played in Renaissance patronage networks, but the heterogeneous power relations within these networks: e.g. between the Church as patrons and the artists they commissioned; clergymen as mediators of taste between artists and wealthy families; and within the Church itself.

3.2.2 City Authorities

While members of religious orders used religious patronage to maintain their position within society, members of city authorities used government patronage (Goldthwaite, 2009). City authorities often funded cathedral and church building, and in turn furnished them with art. This gained them favour with the

Church and demonstrated their importance within society. Larner (1971) adds that in addition to these political motives, “governments were consciously acting on behalf of the deepest religious instincts of their citizens...Throughout the whole [fourteenth] century the demand for aid to be given in religion came from below”. The 14th century also saw the growth of secular patronage of architects, as city authorities commissioned government buildings, and artists who were employed to embellish them. Again, paintings and statues were designed to glorify the individuals or institutions who commissioned them, and/or the principles of those funding the art. For Larner the increase in secular patronage illustrates the tension between the Church and city authorities in shaping both artistic styles and projecting “ideals of civil morality” within a changing society (1971: 79). City authorities, then, can be understood as significant patrons and as mediators seeking to educate publics and curators of what they deemed to reflect civil morality.

3.2.3 Merchant Families and Courts

As the economies of Italian cities grew, so did the wealth of merchant families who came to dominate artistic patronage in the 14th and 15th Centuries (Goldthwaite, 2009). Rising wealth brought new appetites for art and saw a shift in the power relations between the Church and rich families, with the latter becoming more assertive about the style of art commissioned in churches and for their houses and palaces (Kempers, 1993). We can identify here then, not only a shift in who is patronising artists, but the sites of artistic production spreading to include private houses. This was also seen in the growth of courts headed by wealthy individuals in the 15th century (Kempers, 1993). Inspired by knights and aristocrats, a ‘bourgeois courtliness’ emerged whose “dominant ambition was to win or retain...a place in the nobility, to ‘live nobly’, assuming the pose, habits and prejudices of ‘gentleman’” (Jones, 2004: 327). They sought to achieve this, in part, through patronage of the arts. Works commissioned by this group of patrons reflected their position in society and desire to emulate those above them in the social hierarchy. Competition amongst courts increased the demand for artists, and thus their professionalisation and recognition within society accelerated (Kempers, 1993). Some artists moved beyond commissions and were appointed as court artists, retained to produce work on an exclusive basis. Those artists most in demand by courts had greater freedom over style and content of a work, rather than submitting to the will of a patron, and themselves became intermediaries by acting as appraiser-prescribers of quality (Shils, 1972).

3.2.4 Guilds

Guilds were key actors and intermediaries throughout the Renaissance and some of the period’s most famous art was the result of guild patronage. Guilds were ‘professional corporations’ whose purpose was to:

“represent and regulate...the economic interests and responsibilities of matriculated members...to promote solidarity...to adjust trade disputes of all kinds, to supervise standards and control trade practices, and competition, prices, terms of apprenticeships, and work, to levy dues to indemnify merchants, assist members in litigation and the acquisition of materials, merchandise and money...” (Jones, 2004: 229).

We can identify similarities between guilds and the *Pencerdd* (section 3.1), both functioning as intermediaries responsible for reproducing and regulating the quality of art and practice with members having “obligation[s] to conform to prescribed codes of civilized behaviour...[and] regulations governing images, delivery dates, the dimensions of a work and the materials used” (Kempers, 1993: 167-8). Artisan guilds also operated intermediaries of artistic work for their members seeking commissions, helped build networks between patrons and artists, and were regulatory intermediaries in the case of disputes (Zolberg, 1983). There are also instances of guilds taking on roles as intermediaries of production as some city and religious authorities tasked guilds with supervising church-building and decoration, including sourcing art (Larner, 1971).

3.3 Subscription Lists

Williams (1981) highlights the subscription list as a third mode of patronage. By the 18th century the market for art had developed to the point where production for sale was commonplace, but patronage was required “to provide early support, or early encouragement, to artists beginning to make their way in the market, or unable to sustain some particular project within it” (ibid: 42). Monetary support came from individuals and groups to support art in the form of subscription lists. In England, the scale of this form of patronage ranged from local networks centred on growing cities with publishing houses, to national networks centred on London (Suarez, 2003). The scale was largely dependent on the significance of the author, book and potential market. Authors gravitated to cities to access patronage networks, but the portability of books (in contrast to frescos) afforded authors some degree of freedom in where they settled. Authors generally had the freedom to produce what they wanted, but publication relied on demand for the work existing or being able to foster demand through subscription lists.

This nascent form of crowd-patronage was common in the literary arts where authors, their agents and/or publishers would nurture networks of patrons to subscribe to their output and provide a guaranteed revenue stream (Miller, 1959). Agents acted as classic intermediaries of artistic work, while publishers operated as intermediaries of production, distributors and on occasion financial intermediaries between subscribers and

authors. Influential individuals amongst lists acted as intermediaries for artistic work (either for authors or for their own ends), and those involved with multiple publishers, authors or subscription lists essentially became intermediaries of production themselves (Griffin, 1996; Zolberg, 1983).

3.4 Government Patronage

Government patronage has a long history: at the city scale, Italian city authorities during the Renaissance supported the arts, and after the French Revolution Napoleon strengthened national organisations for the arts (Cummings and Katz, 1987). But it was after WW2 that governments began to engage more fully in patronage, using a range of distribution mechanisms, selection criteria and policy interventions (Harris, 1970). Hillman-Chartrand and McCaughey (1989) identify four roles governments play in the support of the arts – facilitator, patron, architect and engineer – each with varying degrees of curatorial input, but as Alexander and Bowler (2014) point out, most countries exhibit a hybrid of modes, especially when examining sub-national governance of the arts.

The geographical scale of government patronage is usually limited to work undertaken within a country's borders, by a domestic artist, work produced in a particular language, or work for domestic beneficiaries (Arts Council, 2016). State funders may also use secondary eligibility criteria, such as the requirement to have a bank account in a particular country, submit to a national accreditation scheme or sign up to a government administrative system. As outlined above, artists have historically followed the money, and countries with relatively generous arts funding attract artists with the mobility to achieve eligibility criteria. As well as operating as important patrons, government bodies undertake a range of intermediation depending on the mode of patronage adopted by a government body in explicit and implicit ways. They can be, to varying degrees, curatorial intermediaries through their selection criteria and motivations for funding art. Through funding of cultural venues, governments play an implicit role as intermediaries of production and mediators of quality. Acting on behalf of the public, they can also be understood as intermediaries of artistic work.

3.5 Corporate Patronage

State-supported arts funding remains an important, if sometimes controversial, source of patronage for artists, but it has been eroded by and to some extent replaced by corporate patronage. Williams (1981) highlighted the role of corporations as patrons in the 1970s but not as a distinct mode. At the time he couldn't have foreseen the growth of corporate patronage sparked by the Thatcher and Reagan

administrations in the UK and USA during the 1980s (Wu, 2002), and the subsequent trend which spread across Europe (Oliver, 1999; Trupiano, 2005; Milan, 2013) and beyond (Lachmann et al., 2014; Zolberg, 1983; Cummings and Katz, 1989). Corporate patronage during this time, and since, involved a range of engagements with artists and the art world including corporations sponsoring exhibitions and concerts, funding galleries, commissioning artists to produce work for their offices or as part of product lines, buying and exhibiting art, and higher management taking positions on boards of cultural institutions (Wu, 2002; Ryan, 2007). While the economic clout of large corporations affords them a global reach to engage artists, the latter's mobility and control over their work is constrained by the influence wanted by a corporation. With this form of patronage, then, the geographical scale at which corporation and artist can work is increased, as is the possible venue for exhibition. But audience engagement is potentially limited to the market segments, or social groups the patron is interested in.

Wu (2002) argues that the 1980s “more than any other [decade] witnessed the utilisation of the power of corporate money for active participation in the cultural arena” (see also Zolberg, 1983). By any quantitative measure it is certainly the case modern corporate patronage is unprecedented, but if we widen the definition of a corporation from capitalist economic agents to the older meaning of “a number of persons united, or regarded as united, in one body” (OED, 2017: online) we can see similarities with the patronage of guilds and religious orders. Both corporations and guilds and religious orders engaged in patronage for the symbolic and political value it earned their organisation and senior officials (Wu, 2002). Again, winning political favour and improving one's social status have clear parallels with the motivations of guilds and religious orders during the Italian Renaissance (Cheshire et al., 2011). By the early 2000s, Rectanus (2002) described corporate sponsorship of cultural production as “ubiquitous”, and the trend for business involvement in the arts has increased. In the UK, for example, local museums and galleries have had public funding reduced or entirely removed under austerity budgets, with some told they need to be more entrepreneurial including the requirement for private sector representation on their boards (Arts Council, 2016). Even in France and Italy, where public subsidy of cultural institutions has long been maintained, private sector involvement of the arts has increased (Oliver, 1999; Trupiano, 2005).

These shifts prompt a transformation in the type of intermediation undertaken by corporations and individuals acting on their behalf. Corporate officers tasked with commissioning artwork become intermediaries of artistic work. Sponsoring an exhibition involves implicit mediation as audiences are guided to make connections between a brand and artworks (Wu, 2016), while funding a wing or an entire gallery identifies corporations as intermediaries of production, and where corporate officers have greater involvement in the operation of cultural venues they gain a curatorial function (sometimes in the form of

ensorship (Schiller, 1991). We can also identify the emergence of new intermediaries of artistic work established to work specifically between corporations and cultural producers (Oliver, 1999; Rosenbaum, 1978; Zolberg, 1983). For corporations (and individual patrons) wanting distance between themselves and artists, financial intermediaries have also emerged who manage philanthropic funds through stock market investments and seek cultural producers to support. Corporate involvement in artistic patronage, therefore, has resulted in art becoming enrolled in the intermediation of products not considered as traditionally cultural. In McFall's (2014) terms, this makes the crowd of intermediaries even larger.

4. Methods and Data

With the context set, section 5 introduces crowd-patronage as a new form of patronage based on the results of a two-year research project funded by the British Academy and Leverhulme small grants scheme. It sought to analyse the geographies and networks of crowd-patronage mediated by the web, the role of key actors in these networks, and the potential impact on existing arts funding. A mixed-methods approach was used, organised into three phases. The first phase involved web-scraping pages from Patreon.com over the summer of 2015 to build a social network of patrons and artist connections which included data about their location, pledges, genre, total patrons and overall income. A sample of 21 826 users was gathered, of which 5802 (26.6%) were artists and 16 024 (73.4%) were patrons. Precise numbers of users at the time of scraping were unavailable, but Patreon confirmed this sample was representative of their artist and patron base.¹ This data was cleaned and coded, graphed using Gephi (a social network analysis program) and the analysis was undertaken in Excel and Gephi. This dataset was supplemented with data from graphtreon.com, which aggregates statistics about Patreon users.

The second phase of the project generated data from an online questionnaire with artists using Patreon. Participants were approached via Twitter and email, and a total of 115 responses were received. The questionnaire focused on how and why artists used Patreon, relationships with patrons using Patreon and fans using other platforms, and the kinds of feedback artists received on their work. Data were cleaned and coded using SPSS, and statistical analysis was undertaken using Excel and SPSS.

In the third phase of the project 30 semi-structured interviews were conducted with patrons, artists, Patreon employees, 'traditional' arts funders and patrons, arts organisations, and curators. These were completed either via Skype or face-to-face, and lasted between 30 minutes and three hours. The interviews were

¹ Patreon asked for the precise percentage of their userbase the sample was taken from to not be revealed for commercial confidentiality reasons.

transcribed, coded and organised using NVivo. Each phase was complemented by an analysis of various documents including webpages and artist profiles, the Patreon website, podcasts, social media, related newspaper and blog posts, and videos. Where necessary these were transcribed and included in the NVivo project. The following section draws on insights from all three phases of the research.

5. Crowd-patronage

The ‘crowd’ has become a popular term to prefix a range of activities facilitated by internet-based tools including crowdsourcing data, crowdsolving problems, crowdsearching for lost items, crowdvoting for gathering opinions and crowdfunding to raise investment. This section introduces crowd-patronage, a new form of patronage which shares similarities with some kinds of crowdfunding, but is distinct in a number of important ways. I begin this section by highlighting these differences, before examining its emergence through a case study of Patreon.

Nesta (2013) dates the beginnings of modern crowdfunding to rock group Marillion’s successful campaign to fund a tour in 1997. Since then crowdfinancing had grown to an estimated \$34 billion in 2015 (Forbes, 2015). As the industry has grown, the range of projects funded has increased and the models of funding diversified. Langley (2016) outlines five key types: ‘peer-to-peer’, ‘equity’ and ‘fixed-income’ funding, which are closer to venture capital and traditional financial products, and ‘donation’ and ‘reward’ crowdfunding, which are closer to patronage-style relationships. As the crowdfunding industry has grown in both scale and scope, so too has academic interest. Research has focused on four broad areas: what makes campaigns successful (Hobbs et al., 2016; Yuan et al., 2016); the role of fans in funding and production processes (Booth, 2015); the potential of crowdfunding as an alternative form of finance (Lasrado and Lugmayr, 2013); and crowdfunding as part of wider financial ecologies (Langley, 2016; Langley and Leyshon, 2017). The aim of this paper is not to re-cover established ground about crowdfunding, but to introduce crowd-patronage as a distinct mode of patronage. Below the distinction with other forms of crowdfunding become clear, but here it is worth stating the main differences. First, crowd-patronage allows smaller and repeated payments to artists rather than larger one-off pledges. Second, crowd-patronage is not all-or-nothing funding. Pledge levels are used, but money is transferred to artists regardless of levels being reached. Finally, crowd-patronage is not reward-centric: patrons are not making an investment in an individual or organisation with an expected return, nor are they paying for a reward (in most cases). The focus is on helping artists to continue and develop their practice.

5.1 The Emergence of Crowd-patronage Platforms

At the start of this research project two crowd-patronage platforms existed: Patreon and Subbable. Both were established in 2013 – the former by Jack Conte and Sam Yam, the latter by John and Hank Green – to facilitate the transfer of financial support from patrons to artists.² In 2015 Patreon acquired Subbable after the latter’s payment provider (Amazon Payments) changed the payment product Subbable used, which meant “creators on Subbable were about to see a 30 to 40% decrease in their monthly income” (Jack Conte, quoted in Patreon, 2015). Faced with this problem the Green brothers accepted an offer from Patreon to acquire Subbable. Immediately we can see a financial intermediary shaping the nature of crowd-patronage, as within two years of its birth, Subbable ceased to exist and without Patreon’s intervention artists would have seen their income drastically reduced.

Both platforms were established to solve the problems of declining incomes attributed to online piracy, reduced ad-revenue as a result of increased use of ad-blockers, and falling revenue per advert view on distribution platforms such as YouTube (Perlberg, 2016; XOXO Festival, 2013). They sought to solve this problem by facilitating direct payments from fans to artists and to create closer relationships between them. The mechanism for doing this is not the established ‘all-or-nothing’ model (Langley, 2016) used by other crowdfunding platforms, but a subscription-based system where fans become patrons by pledging \$x per month (or per piece of media an artist releases). In return Patreon takes 5% of the pledge from patrons. This is akin to the subscription lists outlined above, but under this contemporary model patrons don’t necessarily receive a product or reward, as an artist may not produce anything that month. This model allows artists to focus on their practice, rather than one-off projects in an all-or-nothing model. Participants adopted both models, with the latter useful for funding exhibitions, albums or other expensive outputs, the former covering day-to-day costs. To understand more let us turn our attention to the characteristics of crowd-patronage by again examining the geographic scale of patronage networks, the mobility of artists, the relations between patrons and artists and the role of intermediaries.

5.2 Scale of Patreon’s Patronage Network

One of the major differences between crowd-patronage and the forms outlined in section 3 are the number of patrons artists gain and their geographic spread: Patreon’s patronage network is large and global. At the time of writing there were 50 412 active artists receiving 1.4m pledges each month and in 2016 Patreon facilitated \$100m of payments between patrons and artists (Conte, 2017). The top 10 creators receive 3% of

² Artists, or creators as Patreon terms them, include people working in the following fields: video and film, music, writing, comics, drawing and painting, animation, podcasts, games, photography, comedy, science, education, crafts and DIY, and dance and theatre.

this total, and the top five artists were earning more than \$30 000 a month (Graphtheon, 2017). This represents significant amounts of revenue for artists, and by the end of 2017 the total transferred from patrons to artists is predicted to eclipse the \$147m budget of the US National Endowment for the Arts (McIntyre, 2017; NEA, 2017).

As outlined in section 4, a sample of 21 826 Patreon users was gathered to interrogate these networks. The number of artists supported by patrons within the sample ranges from 1 to 91, and the mean number supported was 3.4. Artists have between 1 and 7973 patrons, and 50 artists in the sample have 1000 or more patrons. The mean number of backers was 90 but the mode was 2, highlighting a long tail (1567 artists had fewer than 10 patrons). Of the sample 4170 artists (71.87%) and 4263 patrons (26.7%) provided information relating to their location, ranging from zip/postcodes to their continent of residence. This data was coded to country or continent with 96 locations identified. The sample includes locations from every continent including Antarctica (0 artists, 2 patrons) but the geographical distribution is uneven.³ The USA has the highest number of both artists (2643 or 45.55%) and patrons (2430 or 15.16%) in the sample. Participants suggested this was the result of the maturity and size of US-based artists using the internet to distribute work; an established culture of philanthropy in the US; Patreon being an American company; and the Patreon website being only available in English.

In terms of international flows, the US is the only country where the majority of financial transactions are domestic. Within the sample, 77.2% of the flows originating in the the US go to US-based artists, while Spain has a 50-50 split between domestic and international flows. Every other country has a net outflow of support, and excluding countries with fewer than 10 patrons, every other country's top destination for flows is the US. The geographical scope and magnitude of these flows mark out crowd-patronage as both quantitatively and qualitatively different from other modes of patronage, with the probable exception of corporate patronage.

5.3 Mobility of Artists

The mobility of artists highlighted in section 3 varied from era to era. The general trend is artists moving to hubs of patronage where finance is available. The nature of much of the art being produced historically – architecture and decorations for specific buildings – together with relatively poor transport infrastructure, meant it was often produced in-situ, or at least very near to its intended home. It was only later that art became more portable and artists could work at a distance, but even then, the eligibility criteria for

³ See supplementary table for full list.

government patronage constrained this. Technology has enabled the distanciation of patronage networks over space, but when large sums of money are involved intermediaries still require face-to-face interaction with artists and agents. Patrons can also demand proximity to, if not an artist, then the artworks, given this is also the means of consumption (Thornton, 2009).

In contrast, the globalisation of patrons highlighted in the previous section does not require Patreon artists to globalise their practice. The process of following the patrons – or more accurately the money – seen in previous eras is no longer necessary: Patreon handles that, acting as an intermediary of artistic work, financial intermediary and distributor. Moreover, with dozens, hundreds and even thousands of patrons around the world, doing so is impossible. Patreon’s role as an intermediary connecting artists and patrons via an online platform helps reshape the geographies of patronage by reducing the significance of creative hubs which dominate geographies of the creative industries (Boix et al., 2015). However, as the previous section illustrates, the distribution of patrons and artists, and the flows of finance remain geographically uneven. The web-mediated nature of patron-artist relationships and the digital form of much of the art also facilitate this changing geography. Artists using Patreon frequently work from home, using digital platforms to distribute and exhibit their work. For many a computer and internet connection are all that is required to upload work and engage with Patreon. Performance-based artists such as musicians, theatre companies and comedians are more mobile, exhibiting their work on tours, but respondents reported this is usually to an audience who are not (or at least not yet) Patreon-based patrons.

5.4 Patron-Artist Relationships

The low levels of artist mobility raises questions about the nature of relationships between artists and patrons. Throughout history these relationships have taken many forms, but generally involve patrons exerting some form of control over the art being produced, either through explicit direction or from eligibility criteria (Williams, 1981). Within crowd-patronage networks, relationships are also varied, but control is not a primary concern of patrons. The source of this different form of patronage relationship can be found in Patreon’s mission “...to help every creator in the world achieve sustainable income” (Patreon, 2017). This philosophy is evident throughout Patreon’s activities including in advice for artists on the website, through social media, in media interviews with staff and the top artists Patreon uses to promote the company. In turn, this is reproduced by other artists in their own promotion of Patreon to fans to the extent that it is an accepted norm amongst the community, and neophytes are quickly enrolled into this way of thinking. In this way Patreon and artists act as regulatory intermediaries reproducing certain behaviors amongst the community.

Further, in contrast to other forms of crowdfunding, the pitch to patrons is not that they want to do a new activity or produce a new product (in contrast with other forms of crowdfunding), but that they want to continue what they are doing, do more of it and do it better. This is reflected in the nature of the pledge levels artists develop for patrons, which take two main forms: artist-centric goals and patron-centric rewards. Artist-centric goals include targets such as:

“\$200/week – This point would allow me to be more able to afford better equipment to produce my work.”
(Wilson, 2016)

Patron-centric rewards include thankyou's, a credit on a website or exclusive content. Artists are discouraged by Patreon from making too much extra work for themselves by producing special work for patrons, and this is another difference compared to rewards-based crowdfunding. Patreon also recommend artists don't use the website as a paywall, producing work only for patrons. As a Patreon employee explained it during an interview:

“what the heart of it is everything is always for free...I think that changes the way that rewards can be viewed, because it's not like I pledge this to get this. It's I pledge this because I love you, and also I get this.”
(Participant P3 – interview response)

This attitude is also reflected in the demands patrons make of artists. Based on a questionnaire with artists there is a statistically significant difference between the types of feedback artists receive from patrons and non-paying fans ($n=115$, $p<0.05$). In terms of demands for particular kinds of content, 9.1% of respondents stated they received such demands from patrons, compared to 14.3% from non-paying fans. Patrons accepted this relationship, signing up to support an artist because they wanted them to continue to produce their work. As one put it:

“The art is theirs. Not mine. If they ask for ideas and I happen to have one, I would share, but I'm supporting their creativity.”
(Patron 5 – interview response)

Patrons act as intermediaries of artistic work (working for the artist) by promoting artists' work through their own social networks, but few seek a relationship with artists beyond the occasional interaction on

patreon.com. This relationship means that having a crowd of patrons doesn't produce re-intermediary effects that increase the amount of work an artist has to undertake, in contrast to the effects created by intermediaries of production, distribution and curation discussed in the following section. The more direct relationship between artist and patron that Patreon sought to create, then, is specifically a more direct financial relationship, rather than a personal one.

5.5 The Role of Intermediaries

As outlined above, intermediaries come in many forms, and have proliferated in the art world through time. One of Patreon's founding principles was disintermediation and creating a more direct relationship between artists and fans. For artists using the site, this includes record labels, art dealers, advertisers, distribution platforms and publishers. Disintermediation is an attractive proposition because, as one participant put it, "I hated watching my cheese get cut in half eight times before they got back to me" (Participant P8 – interview response). But, as discussed in section 2, the role played by intermediaries is so embedded into production networks rather than processes of disintermediation, we instead see re-intermediation. Patreon, for instance, are themselves a multifaceted intermediary, managing the pledge system and taking a 5% cut of transfers between patrons and artists, distributing and regulating content, curating work, and acting as an intermediary of artistic work for artists. They don't process the payments themselves; instead another financial intermediary – Stripe, a payment processor – handles the monthly transfer of money between patrons and artists, provide security in the process and also charge a processing fee.

As re-intermediation increases the number of intermediaries of production, distribution and curation, the plurality of their functions grows. Additional work is created as individuals become 'artist-as-intermediary' (Kribs, 2016). For example, although there is less reliance on these platforms as sources of revenue, content still needs to be formatted and uploaded for online consumption. Based on the questionnaire responses, 47% of respondents use four or more distribution intermediaries to host their work, and 46% communicate with fans and patrons using four or more different communication platforms. This creates a lot of work once undertaken by intermediaries of production and artistic work (for employers) and is in contrast to the relatively low amount of work created from patron demands (or lack thereof).

As in other modes of patronage, intermediaries play curatorial roles, and two important processes emerge. First, distribution platforms provide traditional curatorial functions by promoting content a user may like. Patreon's 'featured' section on their homepage is based on decisions made by a dedicated team of staff, while algorithms develop recommendations in a user's 'suggested' section. YouTube's 'trending' list uses

viewing metrics to highlight popular videos in different territories as they emerge, while their ‘recommended’ section combines a user’s viewing history, subscriptions and general viewer metrics to make suggestions (Allocca, 2015; Marissa, 2016). Algorithms become both appraisers of content based on the quantification of website use, and curators making suggestions for what a user will like. This kind of algorithmic curation is not as neutral as it may appear, however. The code is written by humans based on various assumptions about what people may like (Amoore and Piotukh, 2015), trends in algorithmic models come and go, and emphasis is put on different metrics often decided by commercial interests such as advertisers. Thus, although the curatorial function of intermediaries has changed compared to other modes of patronage, algorithms are written to seek similar political and economic goals for their authors. In addition, artists can also adopt functions as mediators and curators by recommending other artists to their patrons.

Second, the terms of use and community guidelines of intermediaries of production produce regulatory functions about the kind of content which can and cannot be hosted on particular sites. Patreon and YouTube do not allow pornography, but the former’s guidelines reflect their commitment to artists:

“some of the world’s most beautiful and historically significant art often depicts nudity and sexual expression. Because of that, we allow nudity and suggestive imagery, as long as it is marked NSFW⁴”

(Patreon, 2016).

NSFW material, however, isn’t included as part of the ‘featured’ page, and the algorithm generating the ‘suggested’ section filters it out. These guidelines are enforced in various ways, and open to interpretation. YouTube has the expertise to use algorithms to detect potentially pornographic material, but like smaller sites, also relies on users and staff to monitor content (Chen, 2014). These regulatory functions have parallels with the roles played by the Pencerdd in 12th century Wales and guilds in Renaissance Italy. They determine what is and what isn’t suitable to be distributed, but in contrast these platforms aren’t designed or run by the artists who use them. They are commercial organisations who are in turn regulated by legal systems, and it is to these systems and shareholders they are primarily accountable. Artists are therefore constrained by wider systems that may not explicitly seek to impact cultural production, nonetheless influence it through the plural intermediary functions of actors like YouTube.

6. Conclusions

⁴ Not safe for work.

This article has introduced crowd-patronage as a new and distinct mode of patronage. In so doing this paper has outlined the global scale of crowd-patronage networks, a different set of relationships between patrons and artists, and how processes of re-intermediation have transferred work from intermediaries to artists. It has also illustrated crowd-patronage as distinct from the ‘all-or-nothing’ models of crowdfunding, providing artists a regular income and allowing them to focus on their practice, rather than one-off projects. By examining artists and patrons, and the role played by intermediaries in crowd-patronage networks, the focus here has widened from cultural intermediaries to include financial and regulatory actors which play an important role in the (re)production of geographies of patronage. A functional perspective has also highlighted the plural roles these intermediaries play in patronage both in crowd-patronage and established modes of support. Such an appreciation provides a more nuanced way to understand the ways in which aesthetic and symbolic value are entwined with financial and regulatory processes. I want to finish this article by outlining two areas which the findings here highlight are in need of further examination.

First, the role of sociotechnical devices such as algorithms has been highlighted, and underlines the need for so-called ‘non-human’ actors to be examined further in the field of cultural production. Understanding the ways in which they are written, the assumptions made in the mathematics, the data they use to classify and recommend, and the ways they are mobilised are crucial to understand cultural production as more work is produced, curated and distributed online. Second, the geographies of crowd-patronage highlighted here – global networks and low artist mobility – call for a re-evaluation of the importance of creative industry hubs in the economy for individual artists. If a computer and internet connection are sufficient for artists not only to distribute work, but to find support for it, what does this mean for national and international hubs of creative work? Are artists using crowd-patronage to fund their practice, creating new geographies which undermine the role of cities in creative production? What response can we expect from multinational intermediaries?

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