

Patronage

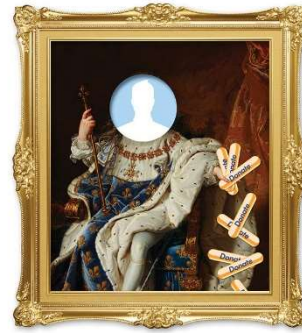
Patreon, Kickstarter and the new patrons of the arts

Once the gift of princes, patronage is now the spare change millennials pay podcasters

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Kathryn Rose faced a dilemma typical for a jobbing composer when she started out on her career. Hide her choral compositions away and show them only to those willing to pay for them? Or share her work with the world and earn a pittance? It was a choice between retaining control or giving access, explains Ms Rose, a Canadian who settled in London two decades ago: "But not both."



Matt Chase

Ms Rose chose to give access. All her work is available for free under a creative commons licence, which allows people to use it with attribution. Yet money comes in anyway. On the website PayPal, donors can decide whether to give Ms Rose a quaver (£4 per month, or \$5), a crotchet (£8), or a minim (£16). Kofi, an online tip jar, allows people to chip in more. Some 30 people support her on Patreon, a patronage website. "Exposure is not always worthwhile," says Ms Rose. "But exposure plus getting paid anyway? I won't complain."

Artists pleading for money is nothing new. Every fortnight in the back pages of *Private Eye* a middle-class begging bowl is passed around. For £3 per word, the British satirical magazine will print a plea for financial assistance, coupled with bank account details or an email address. "FLEDGLING OPERA SINGER £8k of conservatoire funding desperately sought," reads one. Another asks for £80,000 so she can attend drama school in New York. A Greek actress, cellist and singer asked for one year's rent so she has "time to practice". Staff at *Private Eye* cheerfully admit that they have no idea whether the section works.

But online, creative types are having far more success. Gone are the popes, dukes and Austrian princes who funded and protected the likes of Michelangelo, Shakespeare and Beethoven. In their place are websites that allow ordinary people to become patrons. Consumers have become contributors: giving a few pounds or dollars to artists, wonks, podcasters, politicians, writers and even university professors whose work they enjoy. Ms Rose is just one artist relying on this new system of patronage to fund her work. The result is that an old idea is having its time again.

I've got the brains, you've got the looks

On Patreon over 100,000 people are backed by nearly 3m punters. In 2018 the total pot of money behind them was \$300m. Jordan Peterson, a Canadian psychology professor who rails against political correctness and notions of white privilege, has 8,000 supporters. Together they pay an estimated \$1m annually to support his YouTube videos, which he then posts online free of charge. Writing in the 18th century, Edmund Burke described patronage as "the tribute that opulence owes to genius". Today it is the spare change millennials pay podcasters.

In its early incarnation, around the time of the Renaissance, patronage was a necessity for European artists, writers and musicians. Sustained creativity was not possible without it. A wealthy, powerful patron provided financial means and political cover. In return, oleaginous praise for benefactors seeped from the pages of any eventual work.

Machiavelli dedicated his “History of Florence” to his patron Pope Clement VII, declaring himself a “humble slave”. In 1593, William Shakespeare began his poem “Venus and Adonis” with a dedication to the Earl of Southampton. “If the first heir of my invention prove deformed,” wrote the playwright, “I shall be sorry it had so noble a godfather.” Galileo offered to name Jupiter’s moons after the Grand Duke of Tuscany in an act of cosmic sycophancy.

Praise was not the only price. A 15th-century missive from the Duke of Milan to the painter Vincenzo Foppa read: “Drop everything, jump on your horse and come here to us.” During a tangle with his bosses, Michelangelo moaned: “I cannot live under pressures from patrons, let alone paint.” Given his concerns that his on-off patron Pope Julius II wanted to kill him, a sense of pressure seems fair enough.

Some artists rebelled. After enjoying huge success early in his career, Rembrandt delighted in telling patrons to get lost if he did not appreciate their demands. Such declarations of independence could backfire. As Paul Crenshaw, an art historian, points out, when Rembrandt ran into financial trouble later in his career, he struggled to find a patron willing to bail him out.

The legacies of Shakespeare, early and late Rembrandt (if not the middle bits) and others might suggest that patronage was a rip-roaring success. But there is a survivor bias in such a reading. Everything now accepted as great benefited from patronage; but so did lots that is now forgotten. Plenty of dross was paid for, points out Werner Gundersheimer, a historian of the Renaissance, and untold amounts of talent may have gone unfunded.

The second problem was in part because the interests of artist and patron were not identical. The artist strives to create what is great, the patron to be associated with it—something more easily done when the greatness is already apparent. In 1755 Samuel Johnson, on being offered patronage for the dictionary he had already created, replied “Is not a Patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help?” His dictionary defines a “patron” as “a wretch who supports with indolence and is paid with flattery.”

Let’s make lots of money

Dr Johnson would perhaps then have been satisfied when aristocratic whim was squeezed out by something more powerful: the market. From the late 18th century the burgeoning middle class pushed patrons to the fringes of artistic life by buying reading material, prints and more in their thousands and later their millions. High culture was no longer the preserve of the rich, but a permanent fixture of bourgeois life.

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Where profit was not possible, the patron persisted, points out Jonathan Nelson, a professor at Syracuse University in Florence. Putting on an opera still requires deep pockets, just as it did in 18th-century Europe. But mass-market books, photographs and phonographs had, by the mid-20th century, largely commodified culture. The change broke the direct connection between artist and audience, creating a new generation of middlemen (and they were mostly men) and of publishers, record label executives and film producers. Quantity became quality, and art lost some of its “aura”, as Walter Benjamin, a philosopher, argued in his essay “The work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction”, published in 1935.

At the end of the 20th century, though, what had been commodified started to dematerialise. Culture that had come in a physical form, whether on vinyl (or cd) or printed on paper, started to be

delivered digitally, something to which consumers were unused and for which they initially proved unwilling to pay. Music revenues fell from \$24bn in 1999 to \$15bn in 2010 and have stayed at roughly that level since. Newspapers suffered a similarly steep decline. For some forms of culture, the market that superseded the models of patronage of early modern Europe is no longer enough. Now the new patrons are filling some of the gap.

Patronage is no longer one-to-many, as it was for the Medicis in Renaissance Florence. It can now be many-to-one. In an essay published a decade ago, Kevin Kelly, a former executive editor of *Wired*, a technology magazine, argued that a creator could make a living with the support of just 1,000 “true fans”. If each fan was willing to spend about \$100 per year on someone’s work—the cost of driving out of town for a gig and staying the night, or just a few evenings in the cinema—and if an artist could capture that money, he could attain a form of creative freedom. In an era where popular YouTubers can attract hundreds of thousands of people, converting just a fraction of them to paying customers is enough to make a living, based on Mr Kelly’s formula.

Although the internet hurt conventional forms of media, it opened up possibilities for projects that did not easily fit mainstream outlets. Since 2014 a group of German filmmakers has made videos chronicling the first world war, in real time week by week. The Great War Team rakes in \$14,500 per month from roughly 3,500 patrons. Other, even more niche, tastes abound. People producing strange (often pornographic) art are among the most successful on Patreon. The broader consequence is that superstardom—or indeed, genius—is not necessary to make a living. Laurie Penny, a British writer whose 650 patrons pay her just over \$3,500 per month, defines it as “nanocelebrity”: she may be recognised on the bus, but she still gets the bus.

The appeal for the beneficiaries is obvious. What entices the patrons less so. Some forms of culture now resemble public goods, which a market typically struggles to provide, points out Kimberley Scharf, a professor of economics at the University of Birmingham. An album funded by a few willing donors can be made available to download for free. If everyone can lay hands on the end product, why be the mug who pays the up-front costs?

Some such public-good problems are solved by the state, which provides what the market will not. That is a sensible position when it comes to national defence. Not so much when it comes to podcast production.

Free-riding was less of a problem for the patrons of old. As one Italian put it in 1473, his artistic outlays were to “serve the glory of God, the honour of the city, and the commemoration of myself”. Such men wanted to signal status, and they wanted to do penance (something which, if done conspicuously, served the former purpose too). No palazzo in Venice was complete without a portrait of the Virgin in each room.

Some modern consumers feel driven by a secular version of the same motivation. Stian Westlake, one of the authors of “Capitalism Without Capital”, which looks at the consequences of the world’s increasingly intangible economy, argues that people are decent intuitive economists; they know when something is unsustainable. And they know which public goods governments will and won’t provide. “My take is that we’re massively overpaid in tech, and I need to balance the books if the state won’t,” says one developer who supports eight people, mostly left-wing activists, on Patreon.

Given such enlightenment on a large-enough scale, patronage can fill the gap left by market failure and government reluctance. Possibly the clearest example of this is the *Guardian*, a British

newspaper which refused to put up a paywall. In 2016, about 150m browsers visited its free website each month; subscribers numbered fewer than 200,000. Instead, since the summer of 2016, a little notice has appeared on the bottom of many stories: “Since you’re here,” it begins, “we have a small favour to ask”. It is a begging letter, asking *Guardian* readers for a few pounds per month. “It was a bit of a punt,” says one person involved. A successful one: today 340,000 people donate monthly. Another 375,000 gave one-off donations in 2017. If people are willing to pay and let others benefit, free-riding is no longer a problem. Instead, funding culture becomes borderline charity.

Perry Chen, who co-founded Kickstarter, which lets people crowdfund everything from backpacks to art exhibitions, argues that simply supporting the arts and funding projects makes people feel good. Early access to, or a discount on, an eventual product is nice. But the big payoff is enabling work to be produced in the first place. Patronage helps cultural consumption become more of an experience and the experience remains personal even after the artwork is shared with the rest of the world. If mass production, as Benjamin argued, removes the “aura” that surrounds culture, then patronage brings some of it back.



Some patrons get handwritten notes of thanks, or a visit to the studio where a show is filmed. They can suggest what topics a YouTuber talks about that week, or fire questions during a live question-and-answer session. The two people who give Ms Penny \$250 per month receive a promise of special treatment. “I will definitely write you a letter of effusive thanks,” Ms Penny says on her Patreon page. “And we can go for dinner if we’re in the same city and I’m positive that you don’t want to murder me and eat my skin.”

People fed up with politics, on the left and the right, throw money at those who appear to offer an alternative. For some punters being a patron is a form of commodified dissent, argues Riley (who goes by one name only), one of the hosts of *Trashfuture*, a leftist podcast. It now has 232 patrons, sending just over \$1,000 its way each month. Matt Bruenig funded the People’s Policy Project, a left-wing think-tank, through Patreon in 2017. Mr Bruenig already had a large audience before Patreon, with 130,000 followers on Twitter, garnered largely from arguing about the left-wing American politician Bernie Sanders. But now his ideas—expressed through radical papers, such as one on a wealth fund—have a larger audience. And his army of patrons suggests that there is an appetite, at least among younger types, for more radical left-wing proposals in America: with 1,700 patrons Mr Bruenig raises around \$9,200 each month.

Figures on the other end of the political spectrum also benefit. Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, a far-right campaigner from Britain who goes by the name Tommy Robinson, allows people to donate through his website, so he can “cover stories about terrorist billboards, about migrant rapes, elections and women standing against [Social Justice Warrior] policies in Europe”. His pitch is similar to any other plea for patronage. “I couldn’t keep doing what I do without you,” he wrote, next to a PayPal button with suggested donations of £5, £25 and £50 on either a one-off or monthly basis. (PayPal dropped Mr Yaxley-Lennon after *The Economist* approached it for comment, pointing out that the far-right activist violated its terms and conditions.)

With new patronage platforms, old problems remain. Racking up followers is difficult, points out David O'Brien at the University of Edinburgh. Amassing a few thousand fans of freely available work is hard enough, never mind persuading some of them to pay. The middle men who emerged throughout the 19th and 20th centuries were not inherently parasitic. Publishers and record labels could nurture talent, relying on cross-subsidies from mainstream artists to develop more literary or avant-garde ones. Now budding creative types face two routes: try their luck with the algorithms that divvy up the enormous audiences of YouTube or Facebook, or seek out success in a depleted traditional sector.

Discovering talent is not Patreon's concern, says Jack Conte, who co-founded the website in 2013. Those who have not already achieved modest online fame still rely on a market that no longer properly functions. In the past, a record label would invest in a musician or group, says Will Page, the director of economics at Spotify, a music streaming company. "Today, one of the first questions the label will ask the artist is: 'what audience are you bringing me?'"

Do you want to be rich?

As a result the new form of patronage tends to reward those who are already established. "If you don't have a big audience, you probably won't do well," admits Mr Conte. But if you have an enormous one, success is likely. One example is the blog "Humans of New York". It has been on Patreon since August 2018. What started as a website chronicling lives of random New Yorkers has since swelled to a whimsical juggernaut with 19m followers on Facebook. The blog's large audience did not convert into ready cash, says Brandon Stanton, its creator. Instead, he made money from traditional sources: he gave speeches and sold books featuring his photos and interviews. Now thanks to 23,000 patrons, he no longer has to drum up funds. Mr Stanton keeps shtum about how much he receives, but the minimum monthly donation is \$1.50, implying an annual six-figure income from donations.

The new model of patronage offers benefits to a few—and often those on its extreme edges. It does not create large new avenues for artists to be discovered by unwitting fans. Instead, the likes of Patreon often act as a pawnshop for internet celebrities. The result is that patronage, in its older conventional sense, may still be most needed when it is least likely. Three centuries on, it is the vision of Dr Johnson rather than Burke that rings true.

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