

The political economy of radio crowdfunding

This research proposal has been inspired by the success of Radio Nowy Świat – a station that was started by journalists who left public radio Program Trzeci in early 2020. Thanks to the support from over 30 thousand contributors these journalists managed to crowdfund money which made it possible to start an internet radio station that broadcasts ad-free programs. This crowdfunding campaign is impressive in terms of its scale and speed, it raises however also several interesting questions, which address current debates ongoing in the media and cultural studies.

The advent of the Internet, and in particular social media, created new opportunities for financing audio media long before this outstanding campaign. Crowdfunding has been successfully used to fund media and cultural projects, including film, music, journalism, and video games. Among journalism projects, there were initiatives aimed at financing radio content: individual programs and podcasts. However, successful crowdfunding of whole radio stations, particularly built from scratch, is a less common phenomenon. This makes two crowdfunding campaigns recently initiated in Poland: Radio Nowy Świat and Radio 357 particularly promising objects for analysis.

During most of the 20th-century radio stations were financed either through some form of public financing or money from advertisers. Both these options had their drawbacks. Public funding makes radio stations vulnerable to political pressure and sometimes leaves them underfunded, as radio subscription fees are not always easy to collect. Funding through advertising, on the other hand, results in a reduction of the diversity of radio programs and excludes minority tastes. Crowdfunding can mitigate both problems.

Taking this into account, the goal of this research project is to understand the mechanisms and consequences of the advent of non-conventional methods of financing radio and the analysis of their meaning for the functioning of the media market. Why and how people donate to crowdfunded radio stations? How are these stations managed? Does being financed directly by listeners mean that programming of such stations is significantly different from that of traditional radio stations? How long can a radio station function without money from advertisers? This project aims at answering these and other related questions thanks to gathering empirical data through in-depth interviews with employees of crowdfunded radio stations and people who support them with their money, surveys, analysis of documents, and virtual ethnography.

The project should help answer the questions about the future of radio. This medium is 100 years old, and it seems that due to technological progress it faces significant challenges and opportunities. In particular, radio is in an uneasy relationship with the Internet. On the one hand, the Internet is a potentially great platform for the development of internet radio, which is however gaining popularity rather slowly. On the other hand, the Internet with all the social media available is directly competing with radio for listeners' attention and advertising market. This project will not solve or even address all the problems faced by radio stations today. After completing it, however, we will know whether crowdfunding can reinvigorate this medium, and help satisfy the hopes of supporters of internet radio.