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PRACTICE INSIGHTS

Micro-patronage for research communication: the Lingthusiasm podcast as a case study of a sustainable funding model

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Abstract

Micro-patronage provides a new model of funding for research communication. This article uses the Lingthusiasm podcast as a case study to describe how micro-patronage can work and some of the benefits and challenges involved. The authors draw on their own experience of micro-patronage to demonstrate how to create sustainable projects. They also discuss how it sits alongside university funding structures, while also providing a measure of independence from those structures.

Keywords

Digital science communication; Public engagement with science and technology; Science and media

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1 ▪ Introduction

In 2011, recommendation 7 of the Australian government's Expert Working Group for *Developing an Evidence Base for Science Engagement* recommended that the Australian government should: "Research and investigate the efficacy of innovative science engagement enterprises, including the role of popular media and social media" [Eckersley et al., 2011, p. 10]. Since then, a large amount of work has been done on the interaction between social media and research communication [e.g. Budge et al., 2016; Carrigan, 2019; Lesen, 2015; Lupton et al., 2017]. One area that has not been explored as much is the relationship between social media and funding for research communication.

Funding models affect what research communication can be undertaken. Government funders, for example, have a different conception of research communication to philanthropic funders [Christopherson, 2017; Palmer & Schibeci, 2014]. One model that is popular in the online media economy is that of micro-patronage, where a large number of patrons make regular, small payments to support the production schedule of a piece of media. Micro-patronage draws on an abundance model of economics [Suzor, 2013], with regular donations to support on-going activity [Swords, 2017]. This paper describes the emerging funding model of micro-patronage, and how it can fund research communication.

To explore this new model of funding, we look at the way micro-patronage supports the ongoing production of the Lingthusiasm podcast. This article uses a case study methodology, which is appropriate for investigation of a new or emerging phenomena [Yin, 2014]. The authors employ reflexivity [Dowling, 2008] to provide a rich and deep description of this case study, as one author, Lauren, is one of the two creators of the podcast and the other, Jonathan, has provided financial support for this project. Both authors are enthusiastic fans of educational entertainment, and support a variety of projects via the micro-patronage model. Both authors also have professional research interests in this area. Lauren is a Senior Lecturer in Linguistics at La Trobe University. She co-created and co-produces the Lingthusiasm podcast, alongside teaching and research work. She has research expertise in gesture, emoji, Tibeto-Burman languages, and research communication to general audiences. Jonathan is a Lecturer in the Researcher Development Academy at Deakin University, with a focus on funding for academics, and extensive experience working in research offices at universities in Australia [O'Donnell, 2023]. Jonathan has recently completed a Ph.D. on academics who have crowdfunded their research.

To better understand the landscape of micro-patronage for research communications projects, this article uses Lingthusiasm as a case study, with two key research questions, which revolve around benefit and difficulties of using this model of funding:

- What benefits does micro-patronage provide to research communicators?
- What are the barriers to implementing micro-patronage in the academic environment?

Before we address these in the case study, we provide an overview of the funding landscape for research communication (section 2). We then focus on the Lingthusiasm podcast as a case study in how research communicators can make use of micro-patronage models of funding (section 3). Finally, we draw together threads of observations regarding the ways micro-patronage allows the Lingthusiasm team to operate in a sustainable way (section 4), and the implications of this model for research communication more generally.

2 ▪ Background: funding research communication

Research communication exists in diverse forms and is funded through diverse processes. Large museums are often funded by the state; science journalism is generally funded by media organisations; some funding agencies explicitly require research communication as part of the budget; and universities increasingly fund significant public relations and media teams. These practices are cultural and often shaped by state-based legislation and funding mechanisms [Davies et al., 2021]. Like research communication itself, funding of research communication is messy [Metcalfe, 2022]. There is, however, general agreement across all these modes of communication that lack of funding is often an impediment to research communication [e.g. Claessens, 2008]. Within this wider landscape, research communication via social media is one of the most diverse (and contested) areas.

Research communication via social media can be funded in several different ways (summarised in Table 1). Often it is self-funded, as an additional, unrewarded activity undertaken in the gaps between other research tasks or outside the hours of paid employment. Most researchers active on social media are doing it as a labour of love. They get as much (or more) from their activity as they give. It can be funded by the organisation, if the activity is recognised and rewarded as part of a salaried research position. Many, but not all, universities encourage their researchers to act as public intellectuals in their areas of expertise. It can be funded through the models pioneered by social media influencers — merchandise sales and promotional deals and a fraction of platform advertising income. This is the provenance of research superstars on social media, such as Andrew Huberman, a neuroscientist with a public profile in personal health who sells clothing and other merchandise on his "Huberman Labs" website.[1] It can be funded by subscription or donations from fans. This model is known as micro-patronage, recognising the cumulative small denomination support from audience members.

Table 1. Four models for funding research communication via social media.

Characteristics	*Funding model*
Labour of love	Self funded
Public intellectual	Funded through salary
Research influencer	Merch sales, promos and platform income
Fan-funded	Micro-patronage

The micro-patronage funding model can be seen as a form of subscription, particularly when patrons receive a bonus, such as extra episodes or access to communication channels with the researchers. Some patrons undoubtable subscribe to secure these benefits. However, many patrons are motivated by generosity and enjoyment. They will provide micro-patronage funds whether there are additional benefits or not. This can be seen as a form of participatory support for research communication.

The literature often describes micro-patronage by comparison with other forms of crowdfunding, or with historical forms of patronage. Jon Swords describes three differences to other sorts of crowdfunding:

1. "… crowd-patronage allows smaller and repeated payments…
2. … money is transferred to artists regardless of levels being reached…

1. https://www.hubermanlab.com/ accessed 5th August 2024.

3. … 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).” [Swords, 2017, p. 69]

He believes that micro-patronage is distinct from other forms of patronage due to “… 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” [Swords, 2017, p. 63]. The scale of micro-patronage, with many patrons providing small, regular payments, changes the balance of the researcher-funder relationship seen in most research funding arrangements. As with other forms of crowdfunding, more funders means that each funder has less control over the creator, and the scale of the network of patron funders means that patrons have difficulty acting in concert together [Chaney, 2019].

Historically, the idea of micro-patronage has been described by different writers at different times. In 1999 John Kelsey and Bruce Schneier outlined the Street Performer Protocol, a rationale for writers “to continue producing their freely-available creations so long as they keep getting enough money in donations to make it worth their while to do so” [Kelsey & Schneier, 1999, para. 3]. By 2006, Greg Stolze was using these ideas to fund his writing. He provides a fascinating comparison between gathering donations by himself (‘alternative publishing’) and doing this through the (now defunct) crowdfunding website, Fundable.org [Stolze, 2006]. In a series of blogposts in 2008, Kevin Kelly used the thought experiment of 1,000 true fans to describe how musicians can gain an understanding of their earning potential. He describes a method for calculating how many enthusiastic fans an artist would need, and how much merchandise those fans would need to buy, to provide a reasonable wage [Kelly, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c]. In 2014, Amanda Palmer brought this conversation full circle. In her book, *The Art of Asking*, she describes how her experiences as a street performer led to her record-breaking Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign to fund her music [Palmer, 2014]. At the time of writing she is being funded by over 8,000 patrons on Patreon [Palmer, n.d.].

Despite the development of these ideas, the actual emergence of micro-patronage was facilitated by platform economics, through micro-patronage platforms such as Patreon; GitHub Sponsors; Medium; and Ko-fi:

- Founded in 2013, Patreon[2] is a “… place for creators to build community with their biggest fans, share exclusive work and turn their passions into lasting creative businesses” [Patreon, n.d., para. 2].
- Ko-fi[3] “… can be a simple tip-jar, a place to build a membership community or a super-easy way to sell products and commissions” [Ko-fi, n.d., para. 4].
- Since 2017 Medium[4] and Substack[5] provided payments to bloggers based on their readership.
- Launched in 2019, GitHub Sponsors[6] allows patrons to support software developers on GitHub.

2. https://www.patreon.com/ accessed 5th August 2024.
3. https://ko-fi.com/ accessed 5th August 2024.
4. https://medium.com/ accessed 5th August 2024.
5. https://substack.com/home accessed 5th August 2024.
6. https://github.com/sponsors/ accessed 5th August 2024.

Nic Suzor focuses on the generosity of patrons when he describes micro-patronage as an abundance model of content creation. He notes that micro-patronage upends the standard economic conception of the free-rider problem. In classical economics, free riders would wait for others to pay first, so that they can gain the goods for free.

> "Users — or, more accurately, fans — fundamentally want to support artists. Fans develop incredibly strong links to their favorite artists that cannot be explained by the simplistic model of the rational consumer. It is possible that a more sustainable ecosystem could directly involve fans in the funding model and, in return, could provide all users with the benefits that expressive abundance promises." [Suzor, 2013, pp. 334–335]

Suzor recognises that while people who pay for content are often 'rational consumers', they are also sometimes fans.

3 ▪ Crowd-funding research communication: Lingthusiasm case study

In this section we introduce the Lingthusiasm podcast (section 3.1), and Lauren reflects on the motivations behind choices the team made in selecting a crowd-funding model for research communication work (section 3.2). We then discuss these choices in relation to the research questions, looking at the benefits (section 3.3) and barriers (section 3.4) to the use of micro-patronage crowd-funding.

3.1 ▪ *Overview of Lingthusiasm*

Lingthusiasm is a podcast that is enthusiastic about linguistics. Structured as a convivial conversation between professionals without any of the terminological barriers to join in as a listener (think of the joy of the conference corridor chat, but everyone gets to come along for the ride). Podcasts have been noted in the research communication literature for their role in democratising access to 'hidden knowledge' of expertise [Quintana & Heathers, 2021]. We operate with a deliberate proposition to be people's go-to for an accessible introduction to linguistics that professional linguists would also listen to. This engagement is, in terms of Sánchez-Mora's [2016] taxonomy of public communication of science, a playful and informal learning by a mass audience. Sánchez-Mora indicates that this quadrant of her taxonomy is the province of showmanship, of playful and spectacular communication.

Lingthusiasm is hosted by co-creators Gretchen McCulloch (Canada, freelance linguistics communicator) and Lauren Gawne (Australia, La Trobe University academic). The show started production in mid-2016 and launched in December 2016 with three episodes. Originally, we produced monthly episodes of 35–40 minutes. In March 2017 we asked our audience to support us through micro-patronage via Patreon, providing one bonus episode for patrons. The show hit the goal for short monthly bonuses (10–12 minutes) for patrons above a certain level of financial commitment in April 2017, with the goal of full-length bonuses reached in December 2017 (see section 3.2). Lingthusiasm is episodic; it is possible to start at any episode, but there is also a larger overarching perspective that rewards

sustained listening. There are now over 100 main episodes, and 95 bonus episodes. Episodes are hosted on SoundCloud and distributed via RSS to all podcast platforms. We also create video versions with a static title card that are hosted on YouTube. We chose to create a podcast because it is a medium that allows for broad distribution outside of traditional media networks [Picardi & Regina, 2008], while fostering a sense of intimacy with the listener that can engender positive sentiment towards the topic [Swiatek, 2018; Schlütz & Hedder, 2022]. A podcast with a conversational tone allows us to convey complex information in an accessible way (as Barrios-O'Neill [2018] noted in an analysis of the 'Stuff to Blow Your Mind' podcast).

Both hosts had existing experience in research communication; Gretchen had been a columnist at the Toast, was editor of Slate's (now defunct) Lexicon Valley blog, and writes the blog All Things Linguistic. Lauren has authored the Superlinguo blog since April 2011, had written a regular column for The Big Issue Australia, and had public radio experience. Our careers have grown alongside the show; Gretchen's 2019 book Because Internet was a New York Times best seller, and Lauren has moved from being a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at SOAS, University of London to holding a tenured teaching and research role at La Trobe University, Australia. The team since launch has included our Senior Producer Claire Gawne, who does audio editing, social media and administration. We were joined in 2018 by Sarah Dopierela as our transcriptionist, and our team includes others who have taken on production support work. We have actively decided to not join a larger media network, and instead retain full independence.

Lingthusiasm's host actively situate themselves with the 'linguistics communication' (lingcomm) space [Gawne & McCulloch, 2023], which is a discipline-specific conversation that ties into the larger discussion within scicomm that acknowledges the specific skills and expertise that research communicators bring to sharing research with broader audiences.

3.2 ▪ *Choosing a micro-patronage model*

When we were developing the show, we knew we needed to embed it in a model that was sustainable for us as research communicators. It needed to work both within the academic system Lauren operates in, and the media landscape that Gretchen works in. As we both already had full-time jobs, we needed to make sure that the show could grow, but not in a way that took too much time away from the other things we do, all of which enrich the show. This meant that we knew from the beginning that the show would need a team to do production work. We took on more of this work in the early days of the show, but it became quickly apparent that we did not have the time or skills to always do this work well.

We launched the Patreon three months after the main show. This initial gap was because we wanted to confirm there was definitely a sustained audience for this concept. The first few months indicated there was, and listener numbers were growing. We used listener stats, but also proxy indicators of active engagement, such as the number of listeners willing to leave a review on Apple Podcasts (then, iTunes). Although we started the Patreon after establishing there was an audience, it was still very early in the life of the show. This meant the show was not initially able to fully fund itself through this model. Only about a year after launch, when we had around 300 patrons, did the show start to become financially sustainable. According to Spinelli and Dann [2019] this is a fairly typical 'sweat collateral' investment in starting up a podcast project, but not one we were able to maintain indefinitely. We started with shorter

monthly bonus episodes, before moving to full length monthly bonus episodes, which is the cadence we have maintained since late 2017. These bonus episodes sit in a separate RSS feed for patrons, for which they also receive email notifications when new bonus episodes are published. Patrons can also listen to bonus episodes directly on the Patreon app, and we link to main episodes there too for patrons who want to have the Patreon app or emails as their primary way of staying up to date with the show.

We spent a lot of time considering different micro-patronage models, platforms and price points for Lingthusiasm. At the time, Patreon had some key advantages as a platform. The first is that it was an early mover in this space, with other podcasts and creators in our area already established on Patreon. The second was that it was the most established of this generation of micro-patronage platforms, and had both a good existing community of podcasters and good tools for podcasters (especially the custom RSS feed for paid supporters to access bonus content). While we modelled out a variety of price points for the project, in the end we replicated a relatively standard model; our 'Lingthusiast' tier of support provides people with access to monthly bonus episodes ($5USD/month at launch). We have tiers of support higher than this, which we have experimented with; we had a 'Ling-posium' tier ($500USD/month), a premium 'we'll give a talk' tier that no one took us up on, which we eventually disbanded in case they might. We added the 'Ling-phabet' tier ($15/month) where people do a novelty quiz and then are 'given' a character of the IPA on our supporter wall.[7] People can support us at less than the Lingthusiast tier, as a form of 'tipping', which some people do out of appreciation for our advertising-free model. As the back catalogue of bonus content has grown, the value of the initial sign-up has increased. It is possible to become a patron, access the whole catalogue and leave in the same month, and a small number of people do this, but many stay.

We chose the micro-patronage model in large part because other models weren't viable. The grants model and university funded model were not feasible because we are based in different countries and Gretchen is not at a university. Grants are also time-bound, creating boom/bust cycles that don't sustain longer projects. We also decided early on that advertising and sponsorship would not be a sustainable or attractive option for us either. Advertising requires bulk audiences, as it is measured in units of thousands (cost per mille, CMP) and does not suit highly-targeted content creators [Sullivan, 2018]. These revenue sources also add an additional layer of management and logistics. Since 2021 we have met YouTube's threshold for monetisation but since YouTube is not our primary platform, this nets us about enough money to cover our annual domain hosting fees. While we used self-funding to bootstrap the project, it was not sustainable for the level of professionalism we wanted to bring to this project, and for it to fit alongside our existing work, some of which, like blogging and media engagements are relevant to both our day jobs and function as top-of-funnel promotion for the podcast and other projects. Since October 2017, we make a small, sustained income from selling merchandise related to the show, through RedBubble and Zazzle, both print-on-demand platforms. We add new merch once or twice a year, usually custom art created by our resident artist Lucy Maddox.[8] Even though merch doesn't usually reference the show directly, it fits in with the larger theme of linguistics enthusiasm and is a demonstration of how a sustainable project ideally includes diversified revenue streams.

7. https://lingthusiasm.com/supporters accessed 5th August 2024.
8. https://www.lucymaddox.com/ accessed 5th August 2024.

3.3 ▪ *The benefits of the micro-patronage model for Lingthusiasm*

The main advantage of the micro-patronage model is that the monthly cycle of stable income has helped us scale sustainably, in lockstep with developing an audience. We could move up to two full-length episodes as our audience grew and our team improved our production workflow.

Lingthusiasm falls right into the middle of Patreon's own data that the audience conversion is around 2–5%. The money mostly is expended paying the production team members for their time (an undervalued ambition in both media and academia), and also smooths out the irregularities of being freelance for Gretchen and small costs of research for Lauren. It became apparent in the first couple of years of the project that we needed someone with expertise in creating high quality transcripts as none of the existing team had the capacity or appetite for this work; accessibility is often missing from projects with all but the biggest budget, but for us they are an important part of the core business of our research communication work. Being able to bring Sarah Dopierela into the workflow has allowed us to publish transcripts much faster. We also have made infrastructure investments over time as we deliberately started with the lowest cost, economical project. For example, we started recording using equipment we already had, purchasing Gretchen a Zoom H4n audio recorder in 2017, and new microphones for both of us in 2020. We did not have a custom website until Liz McCulloch, who was working with us as a producer, developed one for us in 2021. Before that, we had been using a templated Tumblr page for the first four years of the show. Additional money allows us to undertake additional projects. This includes projects to enhance the field of public engagement with linguistics such as developing the LingComm Grants in 2020 (and subsequently 2022 and 2024),[9] and the International Conference on Linguistics Communication in 2021 (now run by the community every two years). We have also worked together on scholarly research that advances understanding of lingcomm [Gawne & McCulloch, 2023], or on shared topics of linguistic expertise, such as our work on the parallels between emoji and co-speech gesture [Gawne & McCulloch, 2019], which subsequently fed back into an episode of Lingthusiasm.[10]

We have made the most of new affordances of the Patreon platform over the years. These are an illustration of Lessig's [2000] observation that code is law, and the constraints of the platform are tangible influences on our actions. In 2019 Patreon started a system of providing print-on-demand rewards for listeners who subscribed at a particular level for three months, for a small fee. Now patrons at the 'ling-phabet' ($15/month) level receive a custom sticker and patrons at the 'phi-ling-thropist' tier ($50USD/month) receive a mug. This increases the desirability of each level of support without adding to our team's workload. Similarly in early 2020, Patreon added easy integration with the online chat platform Discord, allowing us to run a custom Discord channel only accessible for paying members. We set this up with the intention of running a three month trial and reviewing. We saw quick and sustained uptake by a core group of Lingthusiasm fans, many of whom were already on the platform in other capacities. Discord provides another form of value to Lingthusiasm patrons, providing them with a dedicated online space to share their enthusiasm for linguistics with other fans. While Lingthusiasm listeners have a parasocial relationship with us as hosts, they have a real community with each other. There are many points of friction on the platform that

9. https://lingcomm.org/grants/ accessed 5th August 2024.
10. https://lingthusiasm.com/post/186386270916/lingthusiasm-episode-34-emoji-are-gesture-because accessed 5th August 2024.

we would love to see improved; more useful and granular usage statistics (there are still no listen statistics on the podcast feed, for example). Gift memberships, which we had long requested, finally came online at the end of 2024. We discuss some of the limitations of using third-party platforms in the next section.

The micro-patronage arrangement has provided a direct relationship with some of the most engaged and enthusiastic members of the Lingthusiasm audience. This allows us a direct channel for both support and feedback. We used to have a 'Ling-quisition' tier of support ($10USD/month), where people could ask us questions and suggest episode ideas. We have also had bonus episodes where patrons could submit questions or ask for linguistics advice. We also often solicit feedback from patrons on ideas for merch, and launch features for patrons first, who can provide valuable feedback before content is launched to a wider audience. Rather than develop a show that allows audiences to build a parasocial relationship with the hosts and with linguistics to subsequently read them advertising (a common dynamic noted by Schlütz and Hedder [2022]), we build the parasocial relationship to request that they then directly support our work.

We have been fortunate that the show has mostly grown or plateaued over the last eight years, but we also appreciate that the micro-patronage model provides the opportunity to ramp-down on production if the audience decides to no longer support the show. Our forecast planning always considers diminishing support as a possibility. In Kelty et al.'s [2015] taxonomy of participation, this places Lingthusiasm in the dimension of 'Voice-organized public to formal social enterprise'. The formal social enterprise (in this case the podcast) gives the organized public (donors) the ability to voice their approval or disapproval of the project. This represents a very direct and high level of control over the future of the podcast in the hands of our listeners.

3.4 ▪ *The challenges of the micro-patronage model for Lingthusiasm*

The regular and constantly renewed relationship with listeners has helped us stay committed to a monthly release schedule for main and bonus episodes. Keeping our early established boundaries around this as our upper limit of content creation has helped this to be sustainable for us, but it has not always been easy. We have planned around book deadlines (Gretchen), international moves and having children (Lauren), as well as a pandemic and the general chaos of having full-time jobs (both).

While bonus episodes are deeply entrenched in the rhythm of our production, they very literally double our workflow for content that may only be heard by three percent of our audience. This has constrained what we do with these episodes, as we deliberately keep content that might be integrated into pedagogical materials in the main feed and accessible to all. Some of our bonuses are more anecdotal or chatty, to minimise the time we spend researching and preparing these episodes. This constraint leads to us trying out different approaches. Some of these approaches have been unsuccessful; for our third bonus we experimented with a text-chat format rather than recording. This turned out to be no great reduction in effort, and also not appealing to patrons (and many years later we still get people asking where bonus three is in the feed). Sometimes, experimenting with format leads to positive innovations. We now have a somewhat annual episode type where we dive into a

single paper, such as our episode on contrastive focus reduplication, which takes as its focus Ghomeshi et al. [2004], a paper affectionately known by linguists as the 'salad-salad' paper.[11]

While the show has mostly grown in both listenership and patrons, the micro-patronage model can leave creators at the mercy of economic winds beyond their control. While Lingthusiasm saw good growth in 2020 and 2021 alongside other online creators as people were spending more time at home, in 2022 and 2023 growth was very flat, and continues to be so as many people have less disposable income. We have attempted to mitigate this with additional promotional work and some special offers to encourage new patrons, and while this lead to an increase in patron numbers it was also a lot of additional work. A major challenge for the micro-patronage model is that creators are precariously placed in terms of their relationship with any given platform. We acknowledge it is mostly good luck that Patreon has managed to endure. The percentage of micro-patronage earnings Patreon takes has increased since we joined; it was originally 5% and is now 8–12% of earnings. This is competitive in comparison with other platforms; Gumroad moved from 2–9% to 10% fees in 2023, the same as Substack, and Apple Subscriptions charges 15–30%. Most of those fees do not include credit-card processing fees, which are usually an additional ~3%. The benefit of these platforms managing payments and security for members are obvious advantages, allowing even small projects to scale without the need for a larger production company, but creators are at the mercy of platforms, their choices and popularity in the marketplace.

While there are many advantages to having a direct relationship between creators and consumers through the micro-patronage model, there are also some challenges involved in this model. One advantage of Lingthusiasm not being the sole project for any of our team is that we do not feel too beholden to the whims of our audience, but we are very wary of the way in which we make changes to the show, and the way we communicate these. Funding independent of audiences (e.g. grants) also allows for greater independence in production decision-making. We retired the option for patrons to submit topic ideas, because we found that as domain experts and experienced communicators, we had a strong sense of what would work as a topic, and this didn't always line up with audience suggestions. Some creators find ways to work more dynamically with their audiences, but this hasn't worked as a model for us, and instead our audiences trust us to curate their linguistic listening experience.

While the micro-patronage model has changed the way independent research communicators and media makers operate, and their relationship with audiences, it still does not sit well in relation to university infrastructure. Many research communicators work in universities, either as academics or in dedicated research communication positions. These institutions are not well set up to support their staff to make the most of micro-patronage models. Universities typically cannot process small regular payments from platforms like Patreon, RedBubble or Substack. Instead, research communicators typically manage this money themselves. There are ways that these funds could have direct benefit for research communicators within institutions; they can pay for support, or the kind of professional memberships and conferences that are intrinsically tied to doing this work. There are also less-direct benefits for the careers of research communicators; institutions are very keen to see researchers generate alternative streams of income to diversify away from government,

11. Bonus 49 The episode-episode (reduplication) https://www.patreon.com/posts/bonus-49-episode-48173596 accessed 5th August 2024.

institutional and large philanthropic funding. Accounting for this income through institution channels would make the success of micro-patronage more visible on annual performance reviews. Research administrators are generally aware that for many researchers, four-figure income can make a meaningful difference to their research and research communication work, but institutional structures are not set up to help staff make the most of these opportunities.

3.5 ▪ *Being a patron, supporting what you love*

As well as Lauren's experience of being a creator who uses micro-patronage as a funding model, both Jonathan and Lauren are passionate funders of research communicators and other independent media makers who use micro-patronage models. Lauren is currently supporting ten different projects on Patreon, the majority of which are podcasts. Lauren supports research communicators in linguistics and in other disciplines, as well as media makers in other fields. Jonathan is currently supporting eleven projects on Patreon, two on Ko-fi and one on GitHub Supporters. Of these, eight are academics across a wide range of disciplines.

For most of what we support, we appreciate getting access to patron content, whether that's bonus podcast episodes, or ad-free versions of podcasts. More importantly, we feel a sense of pride and enjoying in being able to support creators who make content we are passionate about. We inhabit the abundance mindset and value our capacity to support creators whose work we value. Many of these creators produce content that does not fit into the model required by larger networks, such as Doug Metzger's *Literature and History*[12] podcast with 2+ hour episodes on an irregular production schedule. Other content is niche enough to only work by connecting directly with audiences, such as Martha Tsutsui-Billins's *Fieldnotes*[13] podcast, an interview show with a focus on the practice of doing language documentation fieldwork.

4 ▪ Discussion

We have discussed some of the key reasons for using the micro-patronage model to fund Lingthusiasm. We have also discussed some of the benefits and challenges of using this model of funding. A key theme throughout decision-making has been a focus on ensuring that Lauren and Gretchen can produce a show we are proud of in a way that is sustainable. In drawing together the threads of the case study, we focus on this theme of sustainability.

Sustainability is not a specific dollar value. We didn't hit a particular financial milestone and suddenly feel sustainable. This is because as the show has grown, and plateaued, at various points, our expectations for production have changed, and other circumstances in our lives have shifted. While we were able to bootstrap the show ourselves in the early days, there is no way we could continue to make that sustained investment. We should also not expect that research communicators should pay for upkeep of domain hosting or purchases of equipment, even though many do.

As Lingthusiasm endures, and we move into mid-career and more obligations beyond the show, we find that it is more important to focus on ways to buy back our time, having made

12. https://literatureandhistory.com/ accessed 5th August 2024.
13. https://fieldnotespod.com/ accessed 5th August 2024.

key investments in infrastructure. An approach that focuses on sustainability as a key goal has also meant that we do not pursue a growth-at-all-costs mentality. We deliberately chose a minimal-viable monthly production schedule and have only increased this with the addition of bonus episodes. This has been a major advantage, because as we have become quicker at some elements of production, we also now have higher expectations for ourselves regarding research, and have time to undertake maintenance admin, like new merch projects and website maintenance (an unglamorous element of a project that has accrued almost a decade of content). Rather than unrealistically promise 'more' to patrons we simply promise, and deliver on, 'the same' high quality content every month. This helps retain existing supporters.

Choosing a revenue model that does not involve ads has also helped us stay sustainable. It has meant we can choose to stay independent of a network, as these are typically beneficial for helping podcasts manage advertising logistics [Spinelli & Dann, 2019]. Not chasing advertising means we don't have to focus on CPM and other metrics that all have a bottom line requiring higher listener numbers. Similarly, staying away from the institutional/grants model means that we do not have to report to an institution, or regularly apply for funding.

Part of being sustainable is not pursuing growth as the only metric of success. Since the earliest days of Lingthusiasm, we were very clear that the show would never be the single focus for any of our team. This does not mean that it is not a key part of our work; for Gretchen and Lauren it works in synergy with our other projects, writing, teaching and engagement work, without consuming all of our time. For the whole team it fits alongside other work, study or life factors. We want to be clear that even though Lingthusiasm is not the full-time focus for any team member, it is not a 'side-hustle', but a component of core business for each of us, within the model of our own work. Both freelance media work and institutional tenured roles operate on a 'portfolio' model, with a mix of projects and work types. The concept of side hustles as additional work is inherently positioning work as unsustainable. The team constantly checks in with each other — through formal annual mechanisms and informal chats — about how things are going, and we alter things as necessary. For example, in 2023 we brought on a new editor (Jon Kruk) so that Claire could dedicate more time to social media and administration work.

5 ▪ Conclusion

This paper has provided a case study on the role of micro-patronage in research communication, looking at the Lingthusiasm podcast. We are aware that as with all long-term projects within this area, this case study represents a degree of survivorship bias. Both Gretchen and Lauren have transitioned from early- to mid-career in two competitive industries (media and academia respectively). We also acknowledge that the persistence of Patreon as a viable micro-patronage platform is a relief, and we are glad we did our research before settling on it, but also a factor totally outside of our control. While this paper frames our choice to eschew grants and advertising as choices, in many ways these models simply were not a good fit and did not provide a likelihood of sustainable income for us to continue to produce the show we wanted to create.

While the *Developing an Evidence Base for Science Engagement* report outlined the importance of improving the ways that we do science engagement, little has been done to examine the viability of different economic models for this work. One of the things that is

most important for ensuring this work is done well is ensuring it is done sustainably. This means sustainable for the project, but also for the research communicators, audiences and larger economic ecosystems in which these projects exist. This case study outlines the choices and constraints made in the creation of Lingthusiasm, a podcast that provides an entertaining but factually-robust form of linguistic research communication. In presenting this case study we hope to have highlighted that there are advantages to micro-patronage for research communicators, particularly in the regularity of support in contrast to other models. There are challenges to this model as well, especially in finding equilibrium in a crowded media space. Micro-patronage and other forms of consumer support have become established models for funding research communication in a sustainable way.

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