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Crowd-patronage—Intermediaries, geographies and relationships in patronage networks

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A B S T R A C T

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 Bourdieuian 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 $100 m 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.

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Table 1
Intermediaries involved in patronage networks (adapted from Lize, 2016).

Intermediary Type	Function	Examples
Mediators	Actors "guiding the audience through its relationship with the artworks" (Lize, 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" (Lize, 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" (Lize, 2016)	Publishers, music producers, gallery owners, TV commissioners
Intermediaries of artistic work	"set between artists and employers" (Lize, 2016)	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

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 & Matthews, 2014) and at worst sees it criticised for being "a dog's dinner" (Hesmondhalgh, 2006: 227; see also McFall, 2002; Molloy & Larner, 2010).

Lize (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.

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, Méadel, & Rabeharisoa, 2002; Musselin & 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 (Caliskan, 2007; Callon, 2005; McFall, 2014; Muniesa, Millo, & Callon, 2007).

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 Lize (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