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Independent podcasters’ experiences of the paid subscription model
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The tension between podcasters and platforms: Independent podcasters’ experiences of the paid subscription model

Abstract: In 2019, Podimo, a major paid subscription podcast platform, was launched in Denmark. This sparked a recurring debate among independent podcasters in small language areas with a correspondingly small podcast market: How can podcasters working independently of public service institutions and commercial companies find viable funding models? Taking its departure from the research field of creative labour in the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011; Hesmondhalgh 2018) and research on the platformization of podcasts (Berry 2020; Heeremans 2018; Morris & Patterson 2015; Sullivan 2018; Sullivan 2019), this article explores the inherent tensions between creativity and commerce that independent podcasters experience specifically in relation to paid subscription platforms. This is done by conducting and analysing qualitative interviews with four Danish independent podcasters (The Bad Judges, The Tear Channel, Childless Birds, and Third Ear) who have decided to become exclusive content on Podimo, thereby intensifying the shift from being free labour to paid labour. Interviews are combined with transcriptions of podcast episodes in which podcasters seek to justify why they joined Podimo. The analysis reveals commerce, autonomy and discovery as the podcasters’ key motivations, while their overriding concern is the drop of listeners’ numbers.

Keywords: podcasting, podcasters, platform, paid subscription, creative labour, cultural industries

Introduction
American podcast journalist Nicholas Quah proclaimed that the year 2019 was the beginning of ‘the era of Big Podcasting’ (Quah 2019). His statement seems appropriated when considering the worldwide attempts to make a podcast version of Netflix. In February 2019, Spotify acquired the
podcast companies Gimlet Media and Anchor, in the effort to ‘become the world’s leading audio platform’ (Ek 2019). Finally, two months later, the ad-free US paid subscription platform Luminary was launched (Luminarypodcasts.com 2020). The Danish equivalent, Podimo, which offers exclusive access to programs and personalities in return for a monthly paid subscription, was launched in September. Being the first paid subscription podcast platform in Denmark, Podimo marked a milestone for the commercialization of the podcast medium in Denmark and intensely revived a recurring public debate: Are paid subscription platforms the financial lifeline to independent podcasters? Podcast researchers Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann (2019: 8) argue that ‘podcasts can thrive on niche global audiences. They are less rooted in material communities, regions and countries’. Obviously, there is no global audience for Danish podcasts. Monetizing podcasts is more difficult in small language areas with a correspondingly small podcast audience than in large language areas. Yet, Danish independent podcasters are no less concerned about monetization.

Digitalization and the success of social media sites such as YouTube and Facebook have enabled a diversity of new platforms and app-led ecosystems which, in turn, has increased the research interest in platformization (e.g., Christian 2018; Lacey 2014; Lotz 2017; Marshall 2015; Nieborg & Poell 2018). Scholarly inquirers of podcast platforms (or, interchangeably, apps) have emerged (e.g., Berry 2020a; Berry 2020b; Heeremans 2018; Morris & Patterson 2015; Sullivan 2018; Sullivan 2019), detecting how platformization impacts the podcast industry and its content. Spinelli and Dann have briefly discussed how independent podcasters experience the tension between creative independence and commerce, acknowledging that the desire to be creative and innovative is complicated by ‘the pragmatic realities of keeping their show running’ (ibid. 2019: 301). This article delves further into the tension between creativity and commerce by focusing on platformization from the perspectives of independent podcasters and their driving forces to join paid subscription platforms. Through qualitative interviews and analysis of podcast episodes, it explores independent podcasters’ motivations and experiences of becoming exclusive content on the Danish paid subscription platform Podimo.

Theoretical framework: Creative labour in the cultural industries

Research on creative labour in the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011; Hesmondhalgh 2013) presumes that a significant part of the cultural goods is produced by creative
workers who are continually struggling to earn a living from their contributions (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011: 14). Whether the creative workers succeed or not, they spend hundreds or thousands of unpaid hours on developing their product before it has obtained a quality that other people consider paying for. In emerging open markets (Christian 2018), such as the podcast industry, discourses of self-determination, hard work, creativity and passion normalize economic insecurity. Failures and barriers to entry are high, and the attractiveness of creative labour entail unstable employments and economical risks (Cwynar 2019: 317). Spinelli and Dann (2019: 224) note that independent podcasters must manage to thrive in ‘an environment in which each year thousands of shows are conceived, birthed and exist for a few hopeful episodes, before they are abandoned’. As a consequence of this competitive and crowded environment, commerce, autonomy and discovery are considered essential dimensions to creative workers (ibid.; Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011). These dimensions are useful as a framework for analysing how independent podcasters comprehend the commercialization and platformization of their medium. Furthermore, commerce, autonomy and discovery were recurrently emphasized by the informants in this study. In the following, they are unfolded specifically in regard to the podcast industry.

**Commerce**

The nature of the podcast medium and the perceived value of podcasts are changing. While independent podcasters have always strived towards monetizing their work (Markman 2012) and turning podcasting into a full-time job (Markman & Sawyer 2014: 30), recent podcast studies (Heeremans 2018; Murray 2019; Sullivan 2018) point towards an intensified urge to monetize podcasting. The new commercialized reality influences podcasters’ perception of the ‘eco-system’ of podcasting, as Sarah Murray (2019) observes; podcasters are motivated to formalize podcast collectives, uniting to create a ‘mutual support that sustains the collective even when some producers “get their wings”’ (ibid.: 308). Independent podcasters earn no revenue from distributing their content on many different platforms. For example, the source of most podcast traffic, Apple Podcast (Spinelli & Dann 2019: 223), has a payment system for all types of content, but not for podcasts given the open architecture of the RSS feed (Sullivan 2019: 4; Morris & Patterson 2015: 224). Setting up a paid subscription system for individual podcasts requires that each podcast has its own app or website from which it can be downloaded and paid for. This obviously makes it a hassle to podcast listeners who usually listen to a variety of different podcasts. So, how can independent
podcasters be funded? Two early US studies examined this question. A group of Indiana State University students (Crofts et al. 2005) conducted a study shortly after the concept of ‘podcasting’ was coined in 2004, while Vanessa Quirk (2015) studied funding models in the wake of a renewed interest in the podcast medium due to the true crime podcast *Serial*. These studies suggest sponsorships (or advertisements), crowdfunding, live events and paid subscriptions for podcast platforms as the most prevailing funding models.

While some research indicates that independent podcasts in English and Spanish speaking countries are increasingly monetized through crowdfunding and sponsorships (see, for example, Bonini 2015; Edison 2015; Sande et al. 2015), other research indicates that the finances raised for podcasts through crowdfunding and sponsorships tend to be modest (Spinelli & Dann 2019: 44). Even internationally famous US podcasters have difficulties finding sponsors and convincing listeners to donate money (ibid.), and crowdfunding and sponsorships favour cheap and easy productions released in high frequency (ibid.: 303). As mentioned in the introduction and elsewhere (Berg 2020), it must be expected that sponsorships and crowdfunding are less viable funding models in Denmark than in larger language areas. US public radio has helped to promote independent podcasters, and as UK radio producer Alan Hall argues, ‘in much of Europe, broadcasting quality is high and still reasonably well funded’ (McHugh 2016: 23). This is not yet the case in Denmark. Just the opposite, labour-intensive radio montages (Poulsen 2006) have been eliminated from the budget of Danish public service radio, first, in 2008, at Danish Broadcasting Corporation and later, in 2019, as the talk radio station Radio24/7 was closed down. Furthermore, there are no media support or public service fund money allocated podcasting or audio journalism (Kulturministeriet 2020; DFI 2020). It can, of course, be argued that podcasters do not need funding in the first place, because it is relatively easy and in-expensive to record and publish audio online. Nevertheless, it can be difficult ‘keeping it running’ (Spinelli & Dann 2019: 215) without funding. It takes time, hardware and effort to produce a quality podcast. Consequently, independent podcasters – not least in Denmark – are drawn towards paid subscription models for podcast platforms. If independent podcasters wish to reach a broader audience and monetize, John L. Sullivan (2018: 46) argues, ‘there will be a gatekeeper’. This also implies that now is the time for critical interventions of the podcast industry.

**Autonomy**
Autonomy refers to the liberation from broadcast gatekeepers and commercial forces in a market economy (Sullivan 2018: 46). Autonomy in the production phase of podcasting is verified as a strong motivation to start podcasting (Markman 2012; McHugh 2016), which makes it a defining feature of independent podcasters unaffiliated with legacy media (Leadbeater & Miller 2004), whether these are public or commercial. This high degree of autonomy characterizes the first UGC age of podcasters who were committed amateurs striving towards professional standards (Markman 2012). But as podcasting, like all other new digital media, is heading ‘inexorably in the direction of commerce’ (Hesmondhalgh 2013: 331), the definition of independent (or autonomous) podcasting becomes blurred. Murray (2019: 306) notes that to decide on one or the other revenue model implies that the very idea of independence is negotiated, and as Spinelli and Dann (2019: 224) conclude, autonomy ‘as an end goal’ is not achievable. Autonomy entails human and artistic freedom, but it also implies a high degree of responsibility and financial risk. Thus, to focus singularly on autonomy and eschewing dependency, benefits a capitalistic culture. Neither is autonomy binary; it will always be situated on a multifaceted scale.

Arguably, paid subscription platforms such as Podimo represent a potential threat to the autonomy of podcasters. Podcasters on paid subscription platforms are not allowed to distribute their podcast through various platforms, and they might feel the pressure to change their content towards more mainstream content. Paid subscription platforms function as gatekeepers. Right now, because podcast platforms are in rapid flux with competing services and new technologies launching almost daily, the barriers to entry for new podcasters are low. But, as Sullivan (2019: 10) points out, ‘once this industry churn has settled and the pace of consolidation quickens, distribution options for podcasters may begin to dwindle, leaving them with less autonomy to transform their hobby into full-time work on their own terms.’ Christopher Cwynar (2019: 330) notes that the emerging podcast industry ‘tends to favour those who are in a position to leverage various forms of capital established in other fields rather than hopeful and tenacious amateurs’. Perhaps most importantly, paid subscription platforms increase the gap between the podcasters and the listeners (ibid.: 318).

Discovery

Along with offering a revenue stream, previous research points at discovery and reach as significant reasons for independent podcasters to join podcast platforms. Platforms are able to generate new
listeners through recommendations and unique constellations of content specifically designed for users. Thereby they provide a possible solution to the problem that niche podcasts risk to remain hidden on podcast platforms, also described as podcasts’ problem of discoverability (e.g., Berry 2018: 20). Jeremy Morris and Eleanor Patterson (2015) use the term ‘people catchers’ to describe the interactivity, sociability, and content curation offered by podcast platforms. Presenting content for users to discover or search through their interface is a primary function of media-related platform services (Nieborg & Poell 2018). Likewise, podcast platforms facilitate the discovery and reach of new podcasts. As Murray (2019: 305) shows, cross-promoting and building shared listening publics are driving motivations to members of independent podcast collectives and platforms. Secondly, podcast platforms affect the way people listen: They make people listen for a longer period of time (ibid.), and research from the branded content company Pacific Content shows that listening through apps creates a higher engagement with the podcast content, such as listening to entire episodes and binging series (Misener 2019). Paid subscription platforms might effectively help podcasters to be discovered and to increase their listeners engagements. But at the same time paid subscription platforms prevent distribution on other platforms. The risk of losing the direct relationship with listeners is high when podcasts move behind paywalls. As independent podcasters are funded through maintaining their audiences, they ‘cannot risk producing work that is focused just on sound, and not on gathering audience’, Spinelli and Dann (2019: 214) state.

**Podcast platforms and Podimo**

Platformization has become ‘the touchstone for an emerging mini-industry with a vested interest in monetizing podcasting’, Jeremy Morris and Eleanor Patterson (2015: 224) argue, generating ‘more value than the content itself’ (ibid.). Investor backed platforms such as Podimo are inevitably and primarily motivated by money, which creates deep power asymmetries between platform, users and content producers (Nieborg & Poell 2018). As music industry researcher Lee Marshall (2015: 178) argues, streaming services reassert themselves through old industry structures in which major record labels exploit independent artists. Considering Spotify’s continuous acquisitions of podcast companies and world-famous podcasters (Podnews 2020; Ek 2019), it is expectable that Podimo signs up as many successful podcasts as possible. Thus, paid subscription platforms restrict podcasts’ availability.

Before describing the specific business model of Podimo, podcast platforms and how these differentiate from other media platforms should be outlined. Platforms can be divided into two
equally commercialized and capitalized types of platforms, which also represent two types of business models. As such, all podcasters publishing on platforms, whether open or paid subscription, are commercialized and contribute to the further commercialization of the podcast medium.

The open – or ‘freemium’ – platforms, for example Apple Podcasts, Facebook and YouTube, collect detailed user data to be sold to distributors and advertisers. Content on these platforms is embedded in the logics of connective media as described by José Van Dijck (2013). With this term, van Dijck advocates to replace the term ‘social media’ with the more critical term ‘connective media’ (ibid.). More than facilitating social connections, open network platforms facilitate connections between different kinds of content, users and commercial stakeholders through algorithms and datafication, Van Dijck argues. Thus, social media sites are not characterised by creating social connections, but by creating data. The more users engage with these platforms, the more data is generated to be sold to advertisers, and normalizing the commodification of connectivity and user data does not make freemium platforms less commercialized (Morris & Powers 2015).

The revenue model of the paid subscription platforms, for example Luminary and Podimo, is to create artificial scarcities of content to maximize the potential for revenue (Crofts et al. 2005). Paid subscription platforms present content which is not available outside of the platform. What is distinct about paid subscription podcast platforms in comparison to other paid subscription media platforms is podcasts’ origin as user generated content (UGC) (Markman 2012). Podcast started out as, and in many cases still remains, a DIY medium distributed via open RSS feeds which entails that podcasts are free to be distributed and to be listened to. Then, in 2014, Serial and the prevalence of smartphones made the podcast medium mainstream (Bonini 2015), which ‘began the process of sundering the professional and amateur elements apart’, as Spinelli and Dann (2019: 225) note. This made the eyes of major commercial investors and audio platforms turn towards the podcast medium to profit from a growing podcast audience and attract advertisers and talented podcasters. Thus, the open architecture of the podcast medium is essentially transformed when placed behind a paywall (Berry 2019; Berry 2020a; Sullivan 2019). Leading podcast academics such as Richard Berry continually argue that podcasts necessarily need to be freely available via RSS feeds – else, they are ‘paycasts’ (Berry 2019), or at least not podcasts in a technical sense (ibid. 2018: 29).
The specific business model of Podimo as a paid subscription podcast platform is to offer listeners approximately 100 exclusive ad-free podcasts in return of a monthly subscription price of US $6 (the monthly price for Luminary is US $5 (Lyons 2020)). Podcasters are offered 50% of the subscription money earned from subscribers listening to their podcast (Podimo.com 2020). Three of the podcast cases in this article are paid through this model: the film critic podcast *The Bad Judges*, the interview podcast *The Tear Channel* in which famous people talk about cultural artefacts that make them cry, and the infertility podcast *Childless Birds*\(^1\). This model shares similarities with Spotify’s model in which music artists are paid 70% of streaming royalties (Marshall 2015), but it deviates as Podimo listeners’ subscription money are distributed to specifically those podcasts they listen to instead of the overall most streamed artists. Based in Podimo’s own calculation example, described in detail on Podimo’s website (ibid.) to provide podcasters and users a sense of transparency, an exclusive podcast with 5000 listeners will gain approximately US $2,000 per month. Nevertheless, it is difficult to predict how many users a Podimo podcast will accumulate. Podimo is a new media platform in the act of establishing its audience, and in addition to that, podcast listeners are not used to paying for listening. As listeners’ subscription money is distributed among the podcasts that each subscriber listens to, the podcasts are in competition against each other. The more podcasts each subscriber listens to, the less money each podcaster receives. However, content director at Podimo, Nikolaj Koppel, maintains the position that this model ‘benefits the niche podcast’ (Obitsø 2019).

In addition to the official subscription money model, Podimo has paid significant sums to celebrities and ‘star’ podcasts, including the popular storytelling podcast *Third Ear*, to produce exclusive content for the platform. This strategy shares similarities with Luminary offering popular podcasters a certain amount of money to produce exclusive content for the platform (insideradio.com 2019). It follows a consumption-based logic (Marshall 2015: 184), or a pre-digital publishing logic (Miège 1989), based on producing a variety of content in which risks are outbalanced by financial hits. Thus, as long as some podcasts make a profit, it does not matter which podcasts. Podimo’s success depend upon the overall podcast consumption and not each individual podcaster.

Common to all exclusive Podimo podcasters is that they are entitled to receive promotion (Podimo.com 2020). This might cause some sort of gatekeeping towards podcasts which

\(^1\) Translated into English by the author. The original Danish names of these podcasts are *Dårligdommerne*, *Tårekanalen*, and *Barnlose Fugle*.
are not found worthwhile promoting. Podcasters are free to receive listeners’ donations and collaborate with sponsors (ibid.), though Podimo is free of advertisements. Since the line between advertisements and sponsorships is not clear (see, for example, Crofts et al. 2005), the welcoming of sponsors seems to reflect a dilemma: neither to reject listeners who do not comply with commercials nor to reject podcasters who are beforehand sponsored.

Methodology and empirical data

This article searches for independent podcasters’ considerations, experiences and reflections when joining a paid subscription platform. Therefore, the methodological approach is qualitative. The empirical data consists of semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted between 15 May 2019 and 2 April 2020 (see table 2) with informants hosting and producing one of the following podcasts: *The Bad Judges, The Tear Channel, Childless Birds*, and *Third Ear*. These four podcast cases are selected because they were the first freely available podcasts to publicly announce that they would become exclusive content on Podimo. *The Bad Judges, The Tear Channel* and *Childless Birds* are conversational podcasts, defined here as two (or more) hosts casually and spontaneously engaging in a sparsely edited conversation about a topic of interest (Markman & Sawyer 2014: 27; McHugh 2016: 12). *Third Ear* embeds the labour-intensive genre of non-fictional storytelling (McHugh 2016: 3), or ‘the ‘European’ feature’ (ibid.: 7) or montage (Poulsen 2006) and has, as mentioned above, signed an individual contract with Podimo. Thus, *Third Ear* is a deviant podcast case to study in comparison to the conversational podcasts. The interviews with the four cases focus specifically on the benefits and challenges of Podimo’s paid subscription model. To enable a deeper understanding of the informants’ experiences as free or paid labour within the podcast industry, they were asked to describe and evaluate all funding models that they had tested (see table 2, column 4) as well as models they considered relevant in the future. All informants agreed to answer follow-up questions via telephone or e-mail. Transcriptions of interviews are supplemented by transcriptions of two podcast episodes, one by *The Bad Judges* and one by *The Tear Channel*, in which the podcasters discuss their motivations behind shifting to Podimo and provide answers to what listeners might ask about. Finally, social media content from the podcast cases’ public Instagram accounts is included in the empirical data to investigate how informants frame their collaboration with Podimo and how listeners react towards this shift.

Table 1: Informants, empirical data and funding models.
These episodes are methodologically perceived as essential parts of the narratives that podcasters create about themselves and present to others. Essentially, dedicating respectively 18 and 23 minutes to explicitly justify the shift to Podimo to listeners per se suggests an inherent dilemma in moving behind paywalls as an independent podcaster. It is expected that informants aim to transparently communicate their process of monetizing, presenting it as a significant part of their subject matter (Murray 2019: 307). These episodes share characteristics with typical pre-roll discussions of the need for advertisements or other types of funding in US podcasts (ibid.). The combination of qualitative interviews, podcast content and social media content is perceived valid as both types of empirical data are analysed as the informants’ narratives about themselves (Mishler 1991). Whether communicating to listeners, journalists, or academic researchers, informants are expected to try to maintain a narrative that ascribes that they are making a necessary, fair decision when shifting to Podimo. Still, there is a difference between, on the one hand, informants acting in a creative manner when they communicate their motivations to their listeners in podcast episodes and on social media, and, on the other hand, informants acting as interviewees rather than creators when they explain these motivations to the author as researcher. The primary aim of communicating to listeners is to motivate them to pay money: “I just need enough money to buy a bike for my daughter,” as one podcaster explains to his listeners (Andersen 2019, podcast episode). The primary aim of participating in non-anonymous research interviews is to influence how the public perceive the podcasters and their decision to move their previously free product to a paid subscription platform.

Analysis

The following sections are concerned with the motivations and constraints that independent podcasters experience when becoming exclusive content on paid subscription platforms, divided into the three dimensions: commerce, autonomy and discovery. These are main reasons to join Podimo, but at the same time Podimo constrains these dimensions. As explained in the theoretical framework, commerce is essential to keep a podcast going. But commerce inevitably also influences the production (autonomy) and the distribution (discovery) of the podcast. As we will see, the overriding concern to *The Tear Channel*, *Childless Birds* and *Third Ear* when shifting from being free content to exclusive content is the drop of listeners’ numbers.
Commerce as driver and constraint

Previous research indicates that half of US independent podcasters spend money on podcast expenditures (Markman & Sawyer 2014: 27). This also applies to the informants of this study. With the exception of Childless Birds, they all stress that commerce is their initiate reason to become exclusive on Podimo. In fact, before the launching of Podimo was announced, The Bad Judges decided to stop podcasting because of lack of funding: “When we started the podcast, we decided to try to get funding within two years. Now, five years have passed, and we have not been able to make money. We simply can’t justify spending so much time away from friends and families without making a penny. If The Bad Judges ever revived, it would require big bucks. It costs money to make a podcast, to have server space and equipment. People don’t understand that their free entertainment costs money (...), but also that we want people to pay for it. If we ever revived, it would require big bucks.” (Hinchely 2019, interview) Thereby, The Bad Judges points towards the lack of commerce as a most likely widespread reason why podcasters become disenchanted with podcasting, which is still an elusive research subject (Markman & Sawyer 2014: 33).

Two months after stopping, The Bad Judges announced the return on Podimo on social media platforms and in a new podcast episode. ‘Freedom of choice’ is a key message to listeners, as podcaster Christoffer Andersen declares: ”Podimo is an offer that you can take or refuse. If you prefer The Bad Judges to forever be the 109 free episodes, then okay. But if you want to listen to new episodes, you need to subscribe to Podimo.” (Andersen 2019, podcast episode). Another key message to listeners is that the agreement with Podimo was made to justify to the podcasters’ families and friends that they spend so much time on podcasting: “I wanted to quit because my daughter hated when I was podcasting in the weekends. Now I can tell her, ‘hey, I get money for it and you want this new bike, right?’ I just need enough money to buy a bike for my daughter.” (Andersen 2019, podcast episode) Troels Møller supplements: “To me, being exclusively on Podimo means that I can podcast one day a week from 9 am to 5.30 pm. Then I get to spend more time with my family in my spare time.” (Møller 2019, podcast episode) This suggests that all three The Bad Judges podcasters feel obliged to move from being free labour to paid labour after five years of developing their podcasting skills. By drawing a sharp line between work and leisure, between free and paid labour, they intend to stop the blurring of work and nonwork time into one another, characteristic of the creative industries (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011). Still, no certain amount of money seems to define ‘paid labour’. Jacob Hinchely states that
“we now continue with a minimal wage instead of no wage at all” (Hinchely 2019, podcast episode). This indicates a need to appear humbler than declaring that “big bucks” are necessary to continue podcasting, as he did in the interview two months earlier.

Figure 1: Posts from the film podcast The Bad Judges’ Instagram account (@darligdommerne) 24 April 2019, announcing that the podcast will stop because of lack of funding, and 16 August 2019, announcing that the podcast will return, but exclusively on Podimo.

The pursuit of moving from free to paid labour is also reflected in the The Tear Channel podcast episode published 29 August 2019. After having released 69 free episodes, podcaster Rikke Collin explains to listeners that future episodes will be exclusively on Podimo. Commerce enables and increases creative autonomy and self-realization, she argues: “Like all sorts of industries, we are interested in commercializing podcasts while maintaining our integrity and high quality. It’s about achieving something from the many, many hours spend on podcasting. And if things go well with Podimo, I might earn enough to improve the podcast and produce it more frequently. The Tear Channel will be published regularly, and I have prospects for making more specials and expand the universe. Until now, The Tear Channel has only been a loss-making concern for me, anything but spiritual, and my good karma and good won’t pay the rent.” (Collin 2019, podcast episode)

Similar to what Hinchely stressed in the interview, Collin explains that she wants listeners to pay for The Tear Channel: “Lots of people get nothing for doing what they do. But actually, I offer a product. At some point, this product has to be valued. It’s about creating value in what you do.” (Collin 2019, podcast episode) In the interview six months later she repeats this argument: “People tell us that we should podcast in our free time and we should not be paid, but some of us are not just sitting in our living room, talking about whatever. I intend to make conceptualized and high-quality podcasts.” (Collin 2020, interview) Changing listeners’ perception of the podcast medium as freely available is important, because this is the only way to make money as an independent podcaster in Denmark; it is like “finding a needle in a haystack”, Collin argues (Collin 2020, interview). She finds that Podimo represents an economic acknowledgement of her work and a fair ecosystem: “What I think is brilliant about Podimo is the ecosystem that it represents and the fact that podcasters get paid. Podcasts have always been free. The vast majority of podcasters are not paid a penny. And they work hard. When you use the Podimo app, the podcasts that you listen receive your subscription money. This is where Podimo differs from Spotify. Spotify’s distribution of money is based on downloads. (…) That’s not the case with
Podimo. If you have 400 very dedicated listeners who spend all their time listening to your podcast, you get a much larger share of the subscription money.” (Collin 2019, podcast episode).

*Third Ear* is a full-time production which makes the podcasters’ financial conditions fundamentally different to the other informants. Krister Moltzen and Tim Hinman have never been offered a sponsorship that they regarded as economically sustainable; crowdfunding has never been sufficient to cover their expenses for a longer period of time; and getting access to public funding is difficult: ”Public funding for podcasters does not exist in Denmark. We have to invent something else… a stage play, literature or a movie to get public funding.” (Moltzen 2020, interview). In early 2019, *Third Ear* was contacted by Podimo’s CEO and founder who intended to sign up the popular podcast. After some considerations, Moltzen and Hinman presented their non-negotiable conditions. In return for delivering four podcast series, they should be paid US $180,000 up front, which made them able to start producing right away: “We said yes because we made a good deal. After all, it’s not easy to get money to do what we do. So, if someone offers us money for producing, then we say yes. (…) But we discussed the decision quite a lot. The decision came down to whether we would like to spend the next year fundraising to make some programs, or just make programs.” (Moltzen 2020, interview) Moltzen further argues that new business models have to be developed in order to preserve the labour-intensive genre of montage (Poulsen 2006) in Denmark, which *Third Ear* represents. Therefore, *Third Ear* was motivated to support Podimo: “I find it very difficult to imagine a world with high-quality podcasts that no one pays for. I have the utmost respect for Podimo taking the chance to make a deal with us. I think it’s great that someone dares to take that chance, because it is necessary for our podcast genre to grow in Denmark instead of vanishing.” (Moltzen 2020, interview) At the same time, *Third Ear* exemplifies a tendency to pay-wall the best podcasts, while leaving the amateur niche podcasts in the big sea of open platforms (Sullivan 2019: 10).

Common to *The Tear Channel* and *Childless Birds* is that they contemplated Podimo as an experiment rather than as an indisputable success. When Collin announced that future episodes of *The Tear Channel* would be exclusively on Podimo, she explained to her listeners: “This is something I try out, because nobody knows if Podimo will be a success. If no one subscribes to Podimo, then no one downloads my podcast, and no money is paid to me. Then I might as well return to iTunes.” (Collin 2019, podcast episode) In a *The Tear Channel* Instagram post, Collin urges her listeners to try two months premium Podimo membership for free to see if they like it or not.
The Tear Channel, The Bad Judges and Third Ear alike oppose the idea that creativity, passion and hard work will always bring prosperity. They have experienced that this is not sufficient to ‘make it’ in the podcast industry, and they do not find personal fulfilment and creative autonomy reward enough. Podimo is described as an opportunity to, collectively, support a new funding model for independent podcaster and changing how listeners regard podcasts as free. Still, Third Ear and more and more celebrities and radio personalities (e.g., the host of the most downloaded podcast in Denmark (Sturlason 2020)) are signing individual, highly favourable contracts. Therefore, all Podimo podcast are not collectively supporting – nor collective supported by – the same funding model, but this is not mentioned by any of the informants. Neither is it mentioned that they are in a competition with each other to get a share of the subscription money, nor that their pay-outs are reduced by free trial periods.

**Autonomy as a driver and constraint**

Podimo provides autonomy in two regards. Firstly, podcasters are not obliged to change content or formats; they can “continue as before”, as The Bad Judges assures its listeners (Hinchely 2019, podcast episode). Third Ear argues that they have greater editorial freedom collaborating with Podimo than before when they were funded by the state: “The first time we received state funding, we had to fulfil specific substantive requirements from the fund, so we actually had much less editorial freedom than we have today.” (Moltzen 2020, interview) Additional to the promise of editorial freedom, The Bad Judges podcasters emphasize that they wish to “stay free of commercials” (ibid.). Likewise, Sophie Lindegaard, one of the two podcasters of Childless Birds, prefers to produce the podcast without a sponsor: “It’s a little hefty to advertise. It becomes very commercial and undermines our credibility. But, preferably, the sponsor should be the municipality or some other kind of public support. I really don’t want to be sponsored by a fertility clinic or a pharmaceutical company. Our listeners are so vulnerable.” (Lindegaard 2019, interview) Childless Birds is anxious about violating listeners’ trust, which is enhanced as Childless Birds deals with a highly fragile subject. Sponsored content would be a violation to the podcast, Third Ear likewise argues: “Native advertising is never going to happen. Tim (Hinman) or me, pre-roll to the show,
proclaiming how happy we are for our new mattresses, never ever.” (Moltzen 2020, interview)

Thus, the paid subscription model is appreciated as it does not intervene with the podcast content and compromise podcasters’ perceived credibility. This is a concern common to many podcasters. Spinelli and Dann’s (2019: 212) suggest that ‘there is an implied contract between the independent podcaster and their listener, an understanding that they are saying what they are saying, because they chose to.’ Trust, credibility and closeness with listeners are essential to independent podcasters, and sponsors risk to affect these valued commodities.

Despite the autonomy emphasized by informants, they are still subjected to several conditions which restrict their autonomy. First, once podcasters have passed gatekeeping mechanisms – Podimo initially decides who they want to collaborate with, and who they find worthwhile promoting, as mentioned above – it must be expected that Podimo continually practices some degree of restriction of what can be said, and how. All podcast cases in this study had been running for some time before they shifted to Podimo. In other words, Podimo knew the podcasts’ content and formats beforehand. But it cannot be left out of consideration that Podimo will eliminate content or language which is found controversial or too explicit.

Second, **Third Ear** exemplifies podcasters who are obliged to deliver a specified quantity of content. Moltzen and Hinman are contractually obliged to deliver four podcast series – even if they do not discover four interesting stories to unfold during a year. Third, Podimo owns the rights to all podcast episodes subsequent to publishing them exclusively, which means that podcasters are not allowed to publish freely via their own RSS feed. Nor are podcasters allowed to reutilize podcast content for other cultural productions like books, films or live events. Forth, it can be argued that Podimo podcasts are framed and promoted as a ‘Podimo product’ rather than as individual, independent podcasts, given the visual presentation illustrated in figure 1 and 3: the mint green background and the Podimo logo emphasized in the top and in the bottom of the picture.

These four restrictions make Podimo podcasters different to the independent podcasters of the first UGC age of podcasting (Markman 2012).

**Discovery as a driver and constraint**

Two of the podcast cases – *The Tear Channel* and *Childless Birds* – address the problem of discoverability and the challenge of expanding their podcast audiences. Previous to the launching of Podimo, Collin (*The Tear Channel*) requested a platform that was “easier and better” than Apple
Podcast to promote her podcast: “I don’t reach a broad audience when it’s only me producing The Tear Channel. Even when celebrity guests visit the podcast, they share this event once in a [Instagram] story, and that’s it.” (Collin 2019, interview) The initial motivation for Childless Birds to join Podimo was to be discovered by more listeners, which Lindegaard found difficult: “I was really busy at work and I didn’t think we got enough publicity. But we could definitely do more ourselves… Hand out flyers at fertility clinics or keep contacting magazines or newspapers.” (Lindegaard 2019, interview) Contacting magazines did not pay off. Instead, the podcast was dependent on word of mouth, which “takes time, and it is something that my temper has to accept” (ibid.). Childless Birds decided to give Podimo a try “in the hope of reaching more listeners as they could help us with marketing (…) and create more knowledge about our podcast. Getting the message out there.” (ibid.) One month after signing with Podimo, Childless Birds has been included in a newsletter and promoted on social media. However, Lindegaard does not believe this is sufficient, and she intends to stop the Podimo experiment: “Podimo has not yet fulfilled our expectations (…) We did not move to Podimo to create a barrier for listening, so I honestly don’t know if we will stay on Podimo. We don’t have access to listener data from Podimo yet, so we’re a bit in the blind. (…) We joined Podimo with the mindset of ‘nothing to lose’. But now I worry that the word-of-mouth recommendations stop because the episodes are not free anymore. Some of our Instagram followers wrote comments like ‘boo’. (…) I didn’t expect it would be such a big deal to pay DKK 39 a month, but to many listeners it is, actually.” (ibid.)

When comparing the social media accounts of the four podcasts, Childless Birds listeners write the most disapproving comments, including ‘boo’, crying emojis and sceptical questions like: ‘now one has to pay to listen?’, ‘does this mean that the podcast is not in the normal podcast app anymore?’ and ‘so now it is only for the few and not for the many?’. Mirroring the arguments presented by The Bad Judges and The Tear Channel in their podcast episodes, the Childless Birds podcasters reply that Podimo offers a free trial period, plus Podimo will enable the podcast to reach a broader audience and have their production expenses covered. But, as Lindegaard explains in the interview, the comments fuel the concern about listeners’ consent to pay to listen and to change app to listen: “People are used to listen through this purple app [Apple Podcasts]. Now they have to change habits. Some listeners think that we made it more difficult to access our podcast. But our intention behind shifting to Podimo was to help more people by creating more knowledge about the podcast, since a lot of people don’t know of its existence.” (Lindegaard 2019, interview). In a follow-up correspondence in March 2020, Lindegaard exclaims
that “it has been hell to be on Podimo. That is why we are leaving Podimo now. Our listeners’ numbers are plummeting. The weekly update from Buzzsprout shows that each week we are crashing. My experience is that people are simply not paying for Podimo.” (Lindegaard 2020, personal correspondence) It is characteristic that podcast listeners react strongly if podcasts move behind paywalls – this also happened when The Joe Rogan Experience launched exclusive partnership with Spotify (Podnews 2020).

1 April 2020 – five months after shifting to Podimo – Childless Birds announces to its Instagram followers that “we have great news for you. (…) You can now listen to ALL Childless Birds episodes on iTunes. For free. Unfortunately, we experienced that the podcast received fewer listeners, so we faced the consequence.” (Instagram caption from post, 1 April 2020) Followers comment with clapping hands emojis, ‘great’, ‘now we can listen again’ and similar statements. The Childless Birds case shows that Podimo’s model lacks transparency, though Podimo might intend to make it as transparent as possible. The promise of earning money through paid subscription podcast platforms is not always fulfilled, which is similar to the case of music streaming services (Marshall 2015). Furthermore, it can be suggested that podcast listeners find paid subscription platforms anti-social, as the ‘social aspects of podcast apps’ (Morris & Petterson 2015: 228) – the ability to freely share content across social networks – are absent.

Figure 3: Posts from Childless Birds’ Instagram account (@barnlosefuglepodcast), first, 30 October 2019, announcing that they will now be exclusive content on Podimo, and, second, 1 April 2020, announcing that they will return to Apple Podcast.

Six months after The Tear Channel shifted to Podimo, listeners’ numbers have dropped to less than 25% of numbers before Podimo. Losing listeners, Collin explains, is “the most difficult thing, because I had pretty nice numbers before” (Collin 2020, interview). Nevertheless, Collin intends to continue the experiment with Podimo for least a year. Her strategy is not to focus on the dropping listener numbers, but to focus at supporting the new ecosystem that Podimo represents. This change of focus is fostered by a close dialogue with Podimo, she explains: "Talking to Podimo reminds you of the several months with free trials, which you don’t get any money from. You have to wait one year before you can estimate your listeners’ numbers. (…) It takes time to change people’s mind sets. Neither did it happen overnight to get people on Spotify.” (Collin 2020, interview)

From the moment Podimo contacted Third Ear, losing listeners was the podcasters’ most present concern about signing with the platform. In fact, Moltzen was positive that listener
numbers would drop dramatically: “Podimo publicly announced they have 100,000 subscribers. Even if every single subscriber listened to our program, it’s much less than the 600,000 who listened to ‘The woman with the heavy suitcase’ [podcast series from 2016]. Moving your podcast behind a paywall creates an insane drop of listeners. So, we have been painfully conscious about not moving everything we produce behind a paywall from one day to another. We can’t risk disappearing for years from people’s awareness. We have to be a mass medium, to reach people. Our survival depends on it.” (Moltzen 2020, interview) Podimo accepted Third Ear’s non-negotiable conditions because of the podcast’s wide-ranging popularity and massive reach, which is, paradoxically, now restricted. The Third Ear case exemplifies a delicate tight-rope walking between immediate funding and future funding. By becoming exclusive content, Third Ear receives a lot of money, but it also challenges future funding possibilities. To prevent the scenario of solely becoming a ‘paycast’ (Berry 2019) and thereby losing touch with their broad audience, Moltzen and Hinman included the following contractual conditions: The right to release the first two podcast series freely for two weeks, and the right to own and reuse their content after one year on Podimo.

When contacted late March 2020, The Bad Judges was not interested in revealing their listeners’ numbers or whether they had any other concerns about Podimo.

**Conclusion and discussion**

Making money as an independent podcaster through sponsorships, listener donations and live events is difficult in small language areas. Therefore, when the major paid subscription platform Podimo launched in Denmark in September 2019, expectations of prosperity spread inside and outside the Danish podcast environment. Podimo is an instructive starting point from which to investigate how independent podcasters in Denmark experience the commercialization of the podcast industry in regard to paid subscription platforms, and how independent podcasters experience the tension between the risks and the freedom of working independently. Furthermore, the medium’s UGC origins makes podcasting an interesting lens through which the tension between autonomy and commerce in creative industries can be explored.

The empirical data informing this investigation consists of three dimensions. First and foremost, qualitative interviews with three cases of conversational podcasts (*The Bad Judges*, *The Tear Channel* and *Childless Birds*) and one storytelling podcast (*Third Ear*) were carried out. These podcast cases were sampled as they were the first to publicly announce that they would stop
distributing freely available podcast episodes and, instead, distribute episodes exclusively on Podimo – thereby contributing to the global emergence of paid subscription platforms in the podcast industry. The three conversational podcasts gain half of the subscription money from Podimo, while *Third Ear* was paid US $180,000 upfront in return for delivering four podcast series. Interviews were combined with transcriptions of podcast episodes in which podcaster explain to listeners why they decided to join Podimo. Thirdly, social media content informed the analysis of how podcasters as well as listeners framed the shift to Podimo. The theoretical framework for analysing the qualitative data is the research field of creative labour (e.g., Christian 2018; Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011; Hesmondhalgh 2013). These studies point to commerce, autonomy and discovery as key factors which creative workers in new open markets strive for.

Consistent with previous podcast research (Morris and Patterson 2015; Berry 2018), commerce, autonomy and discovery were recurrently emphasized as drivers to join paid subscription platforms by the informants in this study. All informants aspired to make money from podcasting, and they were motivated to join Podimo, as paid subscription platforms, contrary to open platforms, imply a promise of monetization. Informants were also motivated to change the economic system of independent podcasting, so that listeners become accustomed to pay for podcasts. The informants pointed out autonomy as a key driver to join Podimo, as they were not forced to change content or format, plus they were able to avoid sponsorships. Furthermore, *The Tear Channel* and *Childless Birds* addressed being discovered and expanding their podcast audiences as initial motivation to join Podimo. Thus, contrary to the early days of podcasting (Bottomley 2020), today’s independent podcasters are highly concerned about listener numbers.

However, Podimo’s paid subscription model has not appeared to be a good deal for small (meaning podcasters with few listeners) independent podcasters, as the platform has not yet generated a noticeable number of new listeners. Six months after joining the platform, *The Tear Channel* and *Childless Birds* declared that loss of listeners outweighed the number of new listeners discovering the podcast through Podimo. Perhaps paradoxically, the overriding concern to informants when joining Podimo was losing listeners. When communicating with listeners, informants therefore emphasized that Podimo represents a necessary change of the podcasting ecosystem. Informants also focused on free trial periods Podimo, in spite of the fact that free trials would reduce their pay-outs.

Informants expressed a profound need to justify their choice to shift to a paid subscription platform. This need might derive from the fact that podcasts behind paywalls are
fundamentally different from the medium’s first age in which podcasting was considered a ’con amore’ project and freely distributed and consumed. As any tech-savvy person with access to sound equipment can produce a podcast, podcasting has always been a world of free labour. Today, podcasting is increasingly commercialized and monetized. This creates new opportunities and new narratives for independent podcasters. Informants in this study maintain a narrative of commerce as a necessity, which does not compromise creativity, authenticity and credibility. They represent a new generation of commercially woke podcaster who consider podcasting as work, separated from the spheres of leisure time. In 2015, Tiziano Bonini observed that podcasting was evolving in two directions: ‘amateur, non-profit use and commercial, for profit-use’ (ibid.: 23). These two directions now seem to align. Niche podcasters aim to profit as well, and paid subscription platforms support this aspiration. Motivations change when money comes in.

Still, regardless of whether independent podcasters distribute their content on free or paid subscription platforms, monetization is difficult. Therefore, paid subscription platforms need to manage a close, highly transparent dialogue with their podcasters about what to expect regarding promotion, listener numbers and pay-outs. While Podimo’s own calculation examples from their website (Podimo.com 2020) shows that an exclusive Podimo podcaster can make a full-time salary in Denmark, the podcast cases in this study show that it is nearly impossible to determine what the pay-out for a Podimo podcaster will be – initially or long-term. Therefore, there is a high risk that podcasters become impatient and lose sight of possible future gains from paid subscription platforms. Podcasters need to feel appreciated.

Though this study solely concerns podcasting in Denmark, perspectives and results can be drawn to other countries and other digital creative industries, in which creative workers strive for commerce, autonomy and discovery, such as the music industry. The question still remains if paid subscription platforms are the best funding model for creative workers – and if so, which content should the creative workers produce, and how should they be paid? In the specific case of Podimo, at least half of the subscription money is absorbed by the platform, and podcasts’ mobility, flexibility and availability in whatever app the listener prefers is crucial.

So, is crowdfunding in fact a more viable funding model? Future research calls for deeper investigations of the business dimensions, the overall levels of pay-outs that creative workers receive, users’ perceptions of paid subscription platforms and which types of content users are willing to pay for.
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**Biographical note**

I began working on my PhD project about independent podcasting at University of Southern Denmark in April 2019. The aim of the project is to map out the characteristics in terms of form, content, production, and distribution of independent podcasts in Denmark in the era of social media and the commercialisation of the podcast medium. I combine quantitative content analysis, textual analysis and qualitative interviews to understand how the podcast medium is developing in a Danish context from the podcasters’ perspectives. My interest in radio and podcast goes back to my masters’ degree in Media Studies at University of Copenhagen, during which I worked as an intern and as a producer at the Danish public service stations. My master’s thesis investigated the development of form in public service talk radio, and after graduating I specialized in producing radio documentaries and features.

**Geolocation information**

City: Copenhagen

Latitude: 55.6667

Longitude: 12.5833
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<th>Name of independent podcast</th>
<th>Name of informant(s)</th>
<th>Title and release date of podcast episode</th>
<th>Date, duration and place of interview or personal correspondence</th>
<th>Funding previous to Podimo</th>
<th>Funding at Podimo</th>
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| *The Bad Judges*            | Jacob Ege Hinchely, Troels Møller, Christoffer Andersen | ‘DD CONTINUES EXCLUSIVELY ON PODIMO’
| *The Tear Channel*          | Rikke Collin         | ‘I am trying out something new – are you joining?’
| *Childless Birds*           | Sophie Lindegaard    | Interview conducted 18 November 2019. Duration of interview: 1:04 h, via Skype. | None | None | 50% of subscription revenue |

2 Original Danish title: ‘DD GENOPSTÅR EKSKLUSIVT PÅ PODIMO’.
3 Original Danish title: ‘Jeg prøver noget nyt – vil du være med?’. 
<table>
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<td><strong>Third Ear</strong></td>
<td><strong>Krister Moltzen</strong></td>
<td>Interview conducted 15 January 2020. Duration of interview: 50 min., in person.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1


Figure 2

Hej!
Nu kan du lytte til Tårebakalen eksklusivt på Podimo.
Podimo er en ny Podcast-app hvor du, udover alle de podcaster du allerede kender også kan finde en masse nye spændende og helt eksklusive podcaats.
Sammen med Podimo, har jeg fået lov at læve et rigtigt godt tilbud til dig.
Du kan få 2 måneders gratis Premium medlemskab helt uden betaling og du behøver at gøre, er at oprette dig via denne side.
Du skal ikke give kreditkortoplysninger, men kan idet nyde 2 måneders gratis premium medlemskab og heretter, kan du selv vælge om du ønsker at blive Premium medlem.

Figure 3

NU KAN DU LYTTE TIL

Barnløse Fugle

Laura

Birgit Bæk

Sophie

Alexandrine

Lindegaard

barnlosefuglepodcast - Følger

næsten regne ud...

6 d. over

kriminal89

4 d. over

fertilt, hooked på, så skal man boksen for et lytte med 0 ?

4 d. over

petitesåde, så er det nok kun for de 15 og ikke de mange.

Søren godt om fra podax.dk og 43 andre

barnlosefuglepodcast - Følger

nu kan du lytte til barnløse fugle eksklusivt på podimo

Laura

Birgit Bæk

Sophie

Alexandrine

Lindegaard

Figure 3