

Paywalls vs Creative Commons: Experiments with Patreon, Medium and LeanPub

Last year [I wrote about my dilemma](#): I have an ethical commitment to the commons, **and** I want to make a living from my writing. I want to publish all my creative work for free, **and** I am at my most creative when I have a reliable income. In that story I shared my long history of writing on the web, and my desire to free up time for more ambitious writing projects. Since then I have made a bunch of experiments with different ways of making money from my writing, including Patreon, the Medium Partner Program and LeanPub.

This week I was asked why one of my stories was locked behind a paywall, so I wanted to report on the progress of my income-generating experiments, and explore the ethical considerations of these different options.

<https://twitter.com/jdaviescoates/status/999226281987379200>

In the year since writing that post, I've written another 15,000 words of my mostly-finished first book, [published on LeanPub](#) as a work-in-progress-for-sale. I've published another 20,000 words in 21 articles, receiving 40,000 pageviews [on Medium](#). In addition to Medium, I usually publish [on my website](#) for convenient reproduction, and on [Scuttlebutt](#) to guarantee permanent storage in the commons (*Scuttlebutt is the peer-to-peer future of the Internet that I'm most excited about*). I use creative commons licensing to encourage syndication of my stories, so I'm delighted when I'm republished on blogs like [C4SS](#) or [P2P Foundation](#).

Experiment #1: Patreon

My ideal goal with Patreon is to eventually crowdsource a stable [living wage](#) from voluntary recurring donations. When someone makes a recurring pledge on [my Patreon](#) I take that to mean something like, *"I think your writing is important, here's a few dollars a month to encourage you to keep going"*. This community of support feels to me like an ever-present low-pressure sense of responsibility to keep publishing. So far, I really love this. Every single new patron is extremely encouraging for me.

The screenshot shows the Patreon profile for Richard D. Bartlett. The header includes the Patreon logo, a search bar, and navigation links for 'Create On Patreon', 'Explore Creators', 'Sign Up', and 'Log In'. The main banner features a green bridge structure over a city skyline with the text 'Richard D. Bartlett is creating writing'. Below the banner are tabs for 'Overview', 'Posts', and 'Community', and a red 'BECOME A PATRON' button. The 'Overview' section displays 39 patrons and a monthly total of \$196, with 'FOLLOW' and 'SHARE' buttons. A bio paragraph reads: 'I had my mind blown and my chest ripped open during the Occupy Movement in 2011. Since then I've been learning how people can work together without hierarchy.' Below the bio is a 'REWARDS' section with a tier named 'High Grade Vibrations' at \$1 or more per month, which includes 36 patrons and a reward of a high-resolution beam of light.

I feel like I am in relationship with these people in a much deeper way than say, a passing reader or commenter. I don't feel like I have to give my patrons anything more than gratitude, so I don't have to lock any of my stories behind a paywall. I have the option to give patrons early-access to new stories, or to give them free access to a book that I'm selling elsewhere.

Results so far

I signed up in May 2017. Most of my stories end with a link to [my Patreon page](#), but I haven't promoted it any more than that. Over the year, I've gained 44 patrons, and lost 5. Currently this earns me US\$196/month. Patreon takes 5% for their service, and about another 5% is lost to transaction fees (boo PayPal). Total income for the year, after fees and VAT, before paying income tax: \$1566.94. This is a lot less than a full salary, but also a lot more than spare change.

Ethical considerations

This represents the "gift economy" solution to the writers' dilemma: my writing is a gift to the world, and some of my readers gift me some money in gratitude. This gives me nice warm feelings and makes me feel like I've outsmarted capitalism.

To earn a full salary from Patreon, I would need many more supporters, requiring a marketing effort that starts to feel like begging. The gift economy is lovely in theory, especially because there's no coercion: contributions are voluntary, and there is no punishment for readers who choose to not contribute. But when I interrogate these dynamics at a deeper level, I'm less satisfied.

In my point of view, social capital is subject to the same accumulative and alienating dynamics as financial capital. It's even more dangerous in some senses, as the transactions are impossible to track, so it is much harder to redistribute accumulations of wealth.

Personally I redistribute 10% of my income to other Patreon creators who I think are doing more important and less fundable work than me: [street poet David Merritt](#) and anarchist authors [William Gillis](#) and [Emmi Bevensee](#). At least this is a

gesture to remind myself that the social capitalist is no more woke than the financial capitalist.

Frankly, as a producer, the clean transaction of buyer and seller just *feels better to me*. It feels good to produce something of value and have that value acknowledged by somebody purchasing it.

Experiment #2: Medium Partner Program

I happily signed up to pay \$5/month for [Medium membership](#) as soon as it became an option.

Medium

Read to your mind's desire

Become a Medium member for **\$5/month** and get unlimited access to the smartest writers and biggest ideas you won't find anywhere else.



As a reader, I want to support a sustainable and ethical citizen media ecosystem. You know the expression *who pays the piper calls the tune*? That explains in a nutshell why I prefer participating in a business model where the customers are readers, not advertisers. Reader-supported publishing incentivises high quality writing; advertising-supported media incentivises high quality data mining and manipulation.



In addition to being a paying Medium *reader*, I recently joined the [Medium Partner Program](#), which means I am now on both sides of the Medium marketplace. With this scheme, when I write stories I can choose to mark them as members-only, or leave them free for all. This creates a semi-permeable paywall: readers who are paying the Medium membership fee have unlimited access to members-only stories; free users can read up to 3 of these stories per month. In return, I get paid based on the level of reader engagement with each story.

Results so far

I've only just joined the program and published 2 stories. The payout algorithm considers page views, readers and fans. I was surprised at the low level of engagement [with my first locked post](#). In the first month it got 140 views, 59% reader completion, 11 fans. I would have expected maybe 5 times that amount if I had published a similar story without the paywall. So I was disappointed with the small audience, but then I was pleasantly surprised by the high payout: \$4.27 for the first month. Considering I regularly write stories that get 10-50 times more engagement than this one, that's a promising sign that the paywall could deliver a reasonable

chunk of revenue if I use it for my really high quality stories that have a big audience and a long shelf-life. Estimating audience size is an inexact science so I intend to publish a few more locked stories to get more data.

Ethical considerations

The main obstacle to me embracing the Medium Partner Program is the audience perception. Simply: people don't like paywalls. In particular, a significant portion of the people I write for have values that are explicitly against anything that looks like an enclosure of the commons. My people are advocates of free culture/ creative commons/ platform coops/ social enterprise/ and decentralisation. Some of them have a knee-jerk reaction against Medium because it doesn't tick those boxes.

I'm happy to debate on this topic, but for what its worth, so long as Medium respects my right to license my own content, I feel pretty stable on my moral high horse. I could choose to release some of my work to a paying audience first, if that proves to be a viable funding model, but all my writing will maintain its commons license. I expressly *don't* put limits on reproductions or derivatives of my articles, because I want to encourage distribution and engagement.

As a writer, I feel like I'm renting audience-discovery services from Medium. When I publish on Medium, most of the audience-discovery is done by algorithms, augmented by human curators. When I publish on C4SS or P2P Foundation, the audience-discovery is done entirely by humans, painstakingly cultivating a community of readers and writers. There are pros and cons to each method, but either way there's valuable work being done *which I think is worth paying for*.

Experiment #3: LeanPub

I've spent most of the summer in Aotearoa New Zealand writing a short practical book about decentralised organising. I write using [Markdown](#), which is a text formatting syntax designed for portability. As I completed the first draft, I started researching the technicalities of publishing: *how will I convert these text files on my computer into an ebook in various formats?*

My research lead me to [LeanPub](#), which at first was interesting to me purely as a technical solution. You can write in Markdown on your computer, use Git or Dropbox to sync the files to LeanPub, and with one click generate html, pdf, epub and mobi formats.

The "lean" in "LeanPub" comes from "lean manufacturing" or "lean startup", i.e. an approach to product development combining rapid iterations and ample user feedback. So LeanPub has created a marketplace for selling in-progress ebooks. I came for the publishing toolchain, stayed for the marketplace.

50 READERS 70 PAGES

Patterns for Decentralised Organising

Richard D. Bartlett

Practical guidance for teams, organisations and networks to manage without hierarchy.

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Table Of Contents

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by Richard D. Bartlett

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Results so far

I [published the first version of the book](#) when it was about 75% complete. LeanPub allows variable pricing, so I set the minimum price at \$4.99, with a suggested price of \$14.99. I gave free access to all my Patreon supporters, and sent out one Tweet to announce the publication.

<https://twitter.com/RichDecibels/status/987197779662393344>

I was quite stunned with the positive response from such a small amount of publicity: 21 purchases in the first month, totalling \$302.36 in total revenue, 80% of which comes to me.

The best part is the audience interaction. Readers are invited to join [this Loomio discussion group](#) to give feedback. I've already had detailed, page-by-page feedback from two readers, which is immensely valuable. They've pointed out weak or awkward parts, and provided a tonne of encouragement that this work

is worth doing. I've got a really clear list of homework to do next time I get into writing mode.

While my articles are published with no rights reserved, for now at least the book is licensed [CC-BY-NC-SA](#). That means anyone can reproduce or modify the work, if they meet 3 conditions:

- BY = they must credit me as the author
- NC = non-commercial (they're not doing it for profit)
- SA = share-alike (derivative works must use the same license)

I've chosen this as an interim measure, to keep my options open while I figure out the best balance between free and paid sharing.

Ethical considerations

Because this is a straightforward commercial transaction, it's pretty easy to analyse the ethics of this approach. On the plus side, buyers can freely choose to pay at least \$4.99 if they want to read my work. On the down side, this excludes people who don't have money.

I don't want to exclude people who are broke, but I also don't want to make it overly easy for freeloaders either. I'm not sure exactly how I'll ride this balance yet. I could tell people to contact me if they want a free copy, or just drop the minimum price to \$0 after some period of time. I'm not totally certain of my choice to use CC-BY-NC-SA, so perhaps I'll switch to [CC0](#) (no rights reserved) too.

Next steps

So, the trickle of income from Patreon feels nice, but I don't want to self-promote more than I already am. Medium's paywall is a promising income stream, but I risk losing the audience I care most about. So far it feels like publishing on LeanPub hits the sweet spot between revenue and ethics. So I'm considering that my next experiment could be to package up my existing blog posts into a kind of "best of" ebook that people can buy if they want to support my writing.

Reading back through this post, I'm not feeling certain about any of the ethical choices. I'm publishing this in the hope that some of you clever loving people challenge my thinking and enhance my ethics. I'd also love to hear from other authors who feel like they've solved the dilemma between the paywall and the commons.



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