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Income models of online personal projects

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE: FROM PERSONAL BRANDS TO PERSONAL PROJECTS: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Internet from research to sales tool: Historical note

Personal brand on the Internet

Online personal projects

CHAPTER TWO: INCOME MODELS OF ONLINE MEDIA

Subscription

Advertising

Other models: Crowdfunding, donations

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Hypothesis and methodology

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

Case studies

Products

Supporting free content

Additional SM platforms

Income streams

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

BIBLIOGRAPHY

APPENDIX
ABSTRACT

The question of applicability of the existing online media income models to online personal projects (based on their authors’ personal brands) is discussed in the present study. Taking into consideration the extant research talking about inefficiency of the ‘traditional’ two-sided (i.e. involving readers and advertisers) model in digital media, we try to investigate factors which presumably led to appearance of novel models. In particular, we examine: types of products/content which are sold by the selected online personal projects, the free-to-access content they all offer to initially attract readers/viewers, the additional social media platforms which are used for brand building and maintaining purposes, and the variety of income sources those projects have. Fifteen currently working online personal projects have been researched. Our results indicate ‘traditional’ income models are indeed being exploited by the projects – however, they’re also being transformed in order to fulfill projects’ commercial goals. In fact, online personal projects turned out to be digital entities in-between media and e-shops which implies they, in addition, tend to generate income streams typical for e-businesses (such as, for example, physical offline products’ sales).

Keywords: online personal brand, income model, income stream, digital entrepreneurship
Introduction

The emergence and development of digital media have brought many novel forms of media organizations. Blogs, YouTube channels, Instagram accounts, and others enriched and (in some cases) replaced the ‘traditional’ forms such as newspapers, TV channels, and even whole publishing entities. This naturally advanced new forms of media entrepreneurship – i.e. digital entrepreneurship. New digital media ventures are being operated by tools other than those which the legacy media businesses have been used to for many decades now. For example, income models of online newspapers are naturally different from those in offline.

Same as the digital media itself, digital entrepreneurship is a young field of academic specialization. Whereas scholarly studies regarding media startups have grown since the mid-1990s, not many of them have focused on Internet-based entrepreneurship.

In this study, income models of the novel media form, an online personal project, are being researched. Personal projects are digital entities run on any of the available online platforms (namely, YouTube channels, websites, social networks…), and it’s a personal brand which underlies their existence in the first place (in contrast to projects run by corporate/ product brands). We agree with Raftari and Amiri (2014) arguing the extant literature does not sufficiently reflect the underlying building blocks which form the entrepreneurial personal branding business models. In fact, income models\(^1\) of personal brands, both online and offline, are rarely discussed in academic sources. Also, while personal branding and self-marketing are rather random topics in an online world, they don’t figure largely in the academic literature. Our research aims to fill in these gaps.

The emphasis of this study is put on research of applicability of the existing online media income models to online personal projects. The fact that both online projects and the ‘legacy’ online media are, in fact, media, gives us justification to draw such comparisons between them.

This paper initially started with a qualitative data collection process from different scientific journals, books, online articles, social networking sites and other Internet sources. Keeping in mind the broad topic discourse in online mainstream media, which is simply impossible to ignore, theories for this study take into consideration both academic and non-academic sources.

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\(^1\) Which are a part of their business models.
While the theoretical discussions are presented ahead of the analytical part, the analysis is what was eventually carried out first. The nature of this study is experimental, going rather reversely from practice to theory; practical part is the most volume part of this study.

Chapter One presents the theoretical background. The first section of Chapter One focuses mainly on historical background by revealing the journey of the Internet from being a research to becoming a sales tool. It is necessary to give this insight since commercial nature of the Internet is what enables online personal projects to actually exist and develop their income models. The second section of Chapter One is devoted to outlining of the available research on personal online branding, with the focus on the functions the brand serves to its carriers. Section three of Chapter One introduces online personal projects as a novel form of digital media.

Chapter Two gives a definition of an online income model, talks how it is different from a business model and income stream, and classifies and briefly describes online income models most frequently used nowadays by traditional online media, such as newspapers, magazines, etc.

Chapter Three introduces the aim and the hypothesis of the study along with the methodology used and the data collection approach.

Chapter Four presents a comprehensive analysis of the selected online personal projects given in a form of compared case studies. Each constituent of the projects has been inspected in detail to make a complete picture of their income models.

Finally, chapter Five offers a summary of the study, discusses its outcomes, limitations, and draws a few directions for future research.
Chapter 1

From personal brands to personal projects: theoretical background

1.1. Internet from a research to sales tool: Historical note

Using the internet for commercial purposes (either for selling or buying) is only one of its possible applications (such as transferring files, emails, and other forms of communications). However, it’s hard to argue nowadays the commercial purpose is being one of the most applied.

The history of e-commerce (same as the concept of new media itself) is integrally bound up with history of the Internet, since its emergence was what heralded the rise of new media.

Internet which initially started as a research tool has generally evolved into a commercial tool. First invented in 1969, it was confined to use by universities, government agencies, and researchers for many years (Bourgeois, 2014).

Its story can be traced back to the late 1950s. The US was in the depths of the Cold War with the USSR, and each nation closely watched the other to determine which would gain a military or intelligence advantage. In 1957, the Soviets launched Sputnik satellite, propelling the society into the space age. In response to Sputnik, the US Government created the Advanced Research Project Agency (ARPA) which became the center of computing research in the 1960s (Bourgeois, 2014) which was arguably driven by the desire of the American scientific community to perfect mechanisms of communicating with one another as by demands of the military (Flew, 2002). However, there was one problem: many of the computers could not talk to each other. In 1968, ARPA sent a request for proposals for a communication technology that would allow different computers located around the country to be integrated together into one network. Twelve companies responded to the request, and the company named Bolt, Beranek, and Newman (BBN) won the contract. They began work right away and were able to complete the job just one year later: in September 1969, the ARPANET, a long-distance computer network (Flew, 2002) was turned on years (Bourgeois, 2014). The emergence of electronic mail in 1972 was a major communication innovation arisen from this development.
Over the next few years, the ARPANET grew and gained popularity. During this time, other networks also came into existence. Different organizations were now connected to different networks. This led to a problem: the networks could not talk to each other. Each network used its own proprietary language, or protocol, to send information back and forth (Bourgeios, 2014). This problem was solved in 1972 by the invention of TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol), designed by Robert Kahn and Vinton Cerf to allow networks connect with networks and computers connect with computers. With the help of TCP/IP, networks running on different protocols, now had an intermediary protocol that would enable them to communicate.

This initiative of the Internet (which now simply meant ‘an interconnected network of networks’ (Bourgeios, 2014)) eventually spread in the end of 1980s from outside of its core consistency of the US Government and military, scientists, and defense contractors.

Still, during the 1980s, it had maintained its non-commercial nature. The primary users were scientists and engineers working for the Government or universities. As a matter of fact, academics or researchers were the only ones capable of using the Internet, because of a sophisticated understanding of computer science and a high level of computer skills were necessary for Internet back then. In the same time, companies who wanted to expand their LAN-based email, began connecting their internal networks to the Internet to allow communication between their employees and employees at other companies (Bourgeios, 2014).

However, the question of how people could connect with people through electronic networks, had not received much attention until the development of World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989 which dramatically changed the communication capabilities of the Internet (Flew, 2002). Due to the WWW, users received a simple way to access any document stored on a network. This invention became the launching point of the growth of the Internet as a way for businesses to share information about themselves (Bourgeios, 2014).

The soon invented web browsers enabling easy usage of the www saw mass popularization of the Internet in the 1990s. As web browsers and Internet connections became the norm, companies rushed to grab domain names and create websites (Bourgeios, 2014). At the time, users were already able to display colorful pictures, music, and audio as well as data and text and also some multimedia.
The original ARPANET was shut down in 1990, and government funding for NSF\(^2\)net (which substituted APRA’s network at some moment) was discontinued in 1995, but the commercial Internet backbone services replaced them (Norton, 2008).

The history of the internet has been well documented, and it won’t be presented in more detail here. What’s important to us is the fact that something that had started as a mean to exchange research data, eventually evolved into a marketplace.

The first true e-commerce transaction occurred in the US in 1994. A 21-year old entrepreneur Dan Kohn from New Hampshire ran a website called NetMarket. On August 11, Kohn sold a CD of Sting’s Ten Summoner’s Tales album to a friend in Philadelphia, who used his credit card to spend $12.48, plus shipping costs (Sereda, 2018).

The next day, with the headline “The Internet Is Open”, an issue of New York Times chronicled the sale between two friends. The Times said, “The team of young cyberspace entrepreneurs celebrated what was apparently the first retail transaction on the Internet using a readily available version of powerful data encryption software designed to guarantee privacy” (Miva, 2011).

Not everyone, however, agreed on the NetMarket milestone. The Internet Shopping Network, an online seller of computer equipment, claimed they had beat NetMarket by about a month (Grothaus, 2015). Also, by some reports, the very first online transaction was marijuana sold by Stanford students to MIT students via the Arpanet account at the artificial intelligence lab back in 1972.

No wonder with the increased number of Internet users in the 1990s it became attractive to the business world. In 1995, Amazon.com, the world’s largest online bookstore was launched. Just a year later, it became a multimillion-dollar business. Two months after Amazon’s debut, e-Bay, the world’s first online auction site, was launched. In 1996, Dell began to sell personal computers directly to consumers on the Internet. In 1997, the commercial domain (.com) replaced the educational domain (.edu) as the largest in use. From 1995 to 1997, many companies built their web presence and began to conduct transactions online.

The Internet and then Web 2.0 by reduction of entry barriers, production cost, distance working, possibility to direct contact with consumers, etc. – revolutionized the way companies do their

\(^2\) National Science Foundation.
businesses and led to the creation of new firms. The Internet also offered the artists an indispensable tool to work as independent entrepreneurs (Khajeheian, 2017).

Discovery of the commercial side of the Internet led to its application in many industries, including the media. On the one hand, Internet had introduced a new medium for publishing the news (Siapera, 2017); on the other hand, it imposed the ‘liability’ on the media to become online businesses with everything it takes – introducing new advertising models, making online purchases possible, and others. Being now depleted from its traditional source of revenue (Siapera, 2017), journalism (in a form of new, digital, media) had to search for the fresh revenue streams.

As we learn from Picard, media products have their unique economic and business characteristics that differ them from other products and services (Picard, 2005) which implies we cannot look at them, even when sold online, as at any other item sold on Amazon. Still, they’re a part of (digital) economy attempting to grow their digital revenues via (digital) channels.

The fact that the Internet finally became commercial, enabled the existence of digital media ventures, such as online personal projects we deal with in this paper. Due to the commercialization, online transactions became possible, and the new media ventures could now sell their associated products online.
1.2. **Personal brand on the Internet**

The available research on personal online branding has multiple directions.

A rather philosophical direction is taken when the new media are looked at as *technologies of the self*[^3].

According to Siapera (Siapera, 2017), the internet may be associated with the novel means of constructing identities. We can, and in fact do, construct ourselves using blogs, social networking sites, MP3 players, mobile phones and so on. Technologies give us shape and form to do so; they enable us to fashion ourselves out of materials or affordances that they offer us. Blogging is seen by Siapera as one of the means to construct an identity. Moreover, it may contribute significantly to personal growth, understanding, exploration of ideas and events, as well as ‘self-transcendence’, going beyond one’s self and seeking to help others.

Today, under conditions of reflective modernization, Slevin writes twenty years ago (Slevin, 2000), individuals are faced with having to use communication technologies such as the internet in their attempts to refashion the project of the self. It’s being done by a narrative which Slevin calls ‘the narrative of self-identity’. When people build homepages, they’re not just constructing webpages. Personal pages can be seen as reflecting the construction of their makers’ identities presenting their creators in different ways – as ‘arty types’ or ‘science types’, etc. The links made to other webpages, for example, to homepages of friends or other places of interest of the web, are all part of the individual’s quest to use this communication technology to collage an identity.

Slevin continues: “While many people may, for example, complain about how they or their lives are portrayed and represented in the mass media, the internet offers them a platform to frame their own experiences and take control over their own symbolic projects. In order to do this successfully, much of the new knowledge and many of the new skills that have to be acquired relate to using internet technology itself. Learning how to build homepages and how to draw attention to them are of central importance”.

According to Caffey (2007) we construct ourselves via media, but also *our constructed selves create new types on media.*

[^3] Italic is ours, hereinafter the text.
Another direction of the research covers an **online personal brand as a tool**, and it can be created and utilized for various purposes.

We agree with Shepherd (2005) arguing that personal branding (and self-marketing) don’t figure very largely – if at all – in the academic marketing literature. Much of discussion is confined to what is in some ways a ‘grey’ literature, much of it written on the periphery of academic marketing.

The well-known Peters’ article of 1997 *The Brand Called You* (Peters, 1997) which pioneered discussions on personal branding, belongs to that periphery, however, is now perceived by many researchers as a textbook. We see no reasons to be an exception.

Big companies understand the importance of brands, Peters writes, but today, in the Age of the Individual, you have to be your own brand, a CEO of Me Inc. It’s time to take a lesson from big brands if we as individuals want to prosper in the new world of work, and the opportunities are within laptop’s length. Everyone has a chance to stand out and be a brand worthy of remark.

The Web makes the case for branding more directly than any packaged good or consumer product ever could, because anyone can have a website. The sites which are well-branded, get more visitors. The brand is a promise of the value they’ll receive.

Peters’ thought that a career ladder in its traditional sense (aka ‘becoming a manager’) is dead – was very new to 1997. In his opinion, linear careers are what we should go for instead. A linear career implies a portfolio of projects we work on which teaches us new skills, gains new expertise, grows our colleague set, and constantly reinvents ourselves as a brand. This way, we’re getting credit for being an exceptional expert in something which brings real value. A career is a horizontal project-oriented checkerboard rather than a vertical corporate ladder.

Peters suggests forgetting about our loyalty for a company as such for good, but rather change companies by taking your career as a path from one project to another. We now live in a project-based world, and this project-based world is ideal for growing your brand.

Already back then when the term ‘digital media’ hasn’t been introduced yet, Peters paid attention to the Internet as a self-branding tool, but, understandably, to a rather limited extend.

1. The current research on online personal branding developed Peters’ idea of its **importance for one’s career development.** Collins (2012) states that by creating and preserving a personal brand, individuals have the capability to use their unique qualities and skills to essentially market themselves to companies. *Branding is selling yourself*
in a cyberspace. With the current rise of social media, management of one’s personal brand has gotten easier. Many individuals choose to utilize various outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, personal blogs, and LinkedIn, to develop and maintain their own [employee’s] brand. In this case, Collins continues, the key is keeping the consistency of the brand across all mediums. Not only it’s good for an individual, but also for a company one works for, because followers associating the person with the company, will tend to think of it more positively.

Within this discussion, a great number of articles is devoted, for example, to the importance of creating a personal brand for academics. “Personal branding is not just for celebrities or those in a corporate sector, Mutim writes. – As a researcher, adopting the techniques and practices developed in business schools to create your own personal brand can be a powerful tool for marketing yourself. Many researchers are uncomfortable with the idea of promoting themselves or their work. The general opinion seems to be “let your work do the talking”. However, no one will know about your work unless you tell them about it. As an early career researcher, it is absolutely essential to promote yourself. After your PhD you may take time and effort to write a book, but how will it be doing a couple of years after publication? There are steps you can take to avoid it becoming one of those books left in some lonely corner of the library” (Mutim, 2011).

Incidentally, a personal brand is another word for a ‘well-packaged’ professional biography. Of course, it’s not limited to it.

Labrecque (2010) mentions social motives (site as a tool to reach friends and strangers feeling the need for social connectedness), self-realization and, also, non-social motives (one’s skill development) as frequent motivations for creating an online presence. Turning a personal talent or entrepreneurial concept into a small business is another reason behind developing one’s brand (Myers, 2017).

Baker provides probably the most comprehensive set of reasons (he mentions nine of them), amongst which we can find: establish yourself as an expert in your field, focus your energies on feeding your life’s purpose, become self-employed doing something you enjoy, increase your notoriety and improve your perceived value in the marketplace, develop your circle of influence within a particular business niche, and become a celebrity in your chosen field.

Besides the motives, according to Baker, there’s one aspect that is consistent for everyone who successfully brands himself or herself online: interweaving an individual’s name and
personality directly with the product, service, or idea being promoted (Baker, 2001 cited in Wei, H., Yi, X., 2011).

2. Within the same research direction, a number of works are devoted to promoting one’s personality via various social networks.

Wei’s work (Wei, 2011) (to mention some) studies Facebook profiles of top 10 music stars to see how they brand themselves online and whether their strategies are different. Eminem, Rihanna, Lady Gaga, Bob Marley, Lil Wayne, Shakira, and others appear amongst the mentioned top 10. While Eminem, for example, posts seldom on Facebook about his personal life but only about his music, another American rapper Lil Wayne is more likely to share private things, and his social daily life posts is what gives him more comments than to Eminem. The study also reveals that in order to promote themselves online more, musicians share via Facebook external links to other websites which may contain pieces of their work, such as YouTube, Twitter, and Myspace. In the end, the study identifies common strategies music starts follow to brand themselves online (such as, for example, ‘being trusted’, ‘keeping consistent images’, and ‘being professional in one’s field’).

This kind of study is different from our research in a way it explores online personal brands of identities which already have their offline image established and well-recognized. For them, an online brand is a supplement to what already works offline. In contrast, we’re going to investigate online brands which are being created purely online, and this is where their recognition flows from. Also, social pages of stars usually don’t have any income model incorporated in them, and this is another feature which makes them distinct from online personal projects we discover. (While, of course, there’re stores on Facebook where the fans can buy related products of a certain star).

3. Personal blogging on various online platforms is what is much closer to our research subject, since we’re interested in personal branding as a planned process in which people make efforts to market themselves. In these circumstances, a brand positioning implies active marketing communications efforts of one’s brand identity to a specific target market (Khedher, 2014).

Personal branding through fashion blogging is discussed by Safitri (2017) on an example of an Indonesian fashion blogger Diana Rikasari. Her blog hosted on Blogspot⁴, talks all things

⁴ http://dianarikasari.blogspot.com/
fashion. The article looks at online personal branding as a way to develop one’s identity (not the other way around when an identity is what develops a brand). With the help of her blog, Rikasari shapes herself as a modern Indonesian woman who loves entrepreneurship, marketing, and fashion. Also, her ‘motivational’ self-development posts show she’s a grateful person humbled for every success she achieves. Once an identity is shaped, a blogger brings it to the online marketplace where a specific market is targeted. Rikasari’s blog brings her featured in popular Indonesian and international media and she owns a shoe brand. It provided her a backdoor to the fashion industry which is normally almost impossible to entry.

As we can see, personal branding is looked at as a specific commercial tool which ‘opens doors’ rather than some abstract online thing.

“Personal branding is a quite new concept in communication, Safitri writes, however, when one understands on how to use this concept wisely, it will affect our personal and professional life.”

While in the early Internet days putting your personality out there was rather taken as an act of self-presentation and simply ‘sharing your thoughts’ with other people, now, when the web is that commercialized, we’re talking about personal branding in the context of self-marketing and person marketing.

In her work on how YouTubers create their personal brand, Tarnovskaya (2017) says personal branding might be seen as a re-invention of the traditional branding but on a completely different level of interaction and visibility. For example, she suggests we closely monitor and analyze what is being said about brands by famous personalities online as they’re capable to influence the consumers’ perceptions about brands and companies. Again, in terms of researching it, this suggestion pulls personal brand out of purely academic discourse.

By analyzing profiles of four popular YouTubers, Tarnovskaya finds certain common patterns in the ways they create their online brands. What is interesting to us is the outcome of the study.

The findings show that YouTubers are actively involved in personal branding and they undertake the stages similar to those deployed by conventional product or service brands: building the brand, enforcing the brand and maintaining the brand. However, for personal brands on social media, these stages are not distinctively separated in time, as suggested in the literature5, but instead, overarching. In other words, when a personal brand is born online, its enforcement and maintenance become critical immediately. There is an interesting similarity

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between the personally branded individuals on social media⁶ and “born global” firms that
develop a global brand from the beginning in contrast to the traditional firms that build theirs
gradually⁷.

In our opinion, not only corporate brands are built bit by bit, but also personal brands offline
should go through certain stages before they are fully ‘out there’. In contrast, online personal
brands are built (a video is posted), enforced („Subscribe to my channel!“, „Don’t forget to
click the bell to receive notifications!“, „Follow me on Instagram!“), and maintained
(YouTubers reply to their subscribers’ comments and calls for different action) in literally one
user’s click.

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⁶ The author attributes YouTube to social media.
1.3. **Online personal projects**

Development of ICT has been providing new possibilities for entrepreneurs. This led, amongst others, to the appearance of new forms of media which cannot be defined with the help of ‘old’ media terminology.

There are multiple kinds of online media around, some have been academically researched and defined, while others remain in a grey area. An *online personal project* we discuss in this work, is one of them.

In 2009, a coursework (Anon, 2009) called ‘Personal Projects as a Case of Journalism’ was written by a student of Novosibirsk State University in Russia. There was the time (at least, in Russia) when Internet content wasn’t yet considered an independent organism, but there were frequent attempts to look at it from the positions of ‘traditional’ journalistic practices. The author of the mentioned work didn’t even doubt [online] personal projects can be something else rather than one of journalistic genres. As an example: the frequency of posted content is compared with the frequency of release of ‘normal’ media. Today, it looks as an academically naive perspective. However, the work is a unique one, because for the first time it defines the nascent phenomenon and tries to describe its key features. Also, the term ‘online personal projects’ itself which we use in our research, is coming from this coursework.

Online personal projects are though defined as “websites (or homepages) entirely created by efforts of one person where outcomes of his journalistic work appear regularly”. Then the author accentuates personal projects are treated in their work as ‘cases of online journalistic media’. Five projects from the ‘Russian’ Internet are analyzed in the coursework, all of them authored by professional journalists (!).

Even though the coursework itself gives an impression it was written overnight, the close attention to the subject itself is what’s important to us. The student continues: “Personal projects are often realized in a form of notes, in which the web author talks a problem or an event through the prism of their own point of view. The author’s attitude to a problem/ event is present. […] However, the specifics of personal projects is that they actually imply a wider [than journalism] genre reach. […] All journalistic genres are rarely combined [in one place], but personal projects can do it. […] There’s no any generally accepted definition of personal projects [at the moment]. [They represent] a ‘young’ genre of journalism and are not yet well researched. The reason is the academic toolkit which is being used to study internet journalism, is limited, since
it’s still necessary to prove websites can be attributed to journalistic media”. The author estimates online personal projects constitute (back then) no more than 2% of the media market.

What are those projects that the student analyzed in the empirical part of work? None of them exist now, so we will describe them in terms of the type of content they delivered:

- A website with videos where two journalists interview once a week a politician or political activist (the project was called “Unreal politics”). From our knowledge, videos were posted on YouTube also, however the student doesn’t mention this fact.
- A website with an archive of publications of a journalist she had in the last ten years in different media. This project the student calls a ‘non-standard’ one meaning it’s more of a portfolio.
- A website where a professional journalist publishes notes, separate from his major media work.
- A website of two female journalists who publish their articles about “what remains behind the scenes of conversations with public people”.
- A website of a journalist, theatre, and movie critic, and actress from Uzbekistan. The student doesn’t specify whether content on the website are previously published journalistic works or posts created specifically for the purpose of the project. We can guess it’s a mix of both.

Not by mistake we mentioned the latter project is from Uzbekistan (while the rest are from Russia). By analyzing projects coming from various geographies in one work, the author, probably unintentionally, ‘gropes’ one of the features which is important in our research, namely their independency of location. It will be described below in more details.

The last thing we want to mention in relation to this work, is that the author doesn’t raise any personal brand concerns. This can obviously be explained by the lack of topic (or the whole brand discourse) development at the time.

Another work (Smirnov, 2002) tracks the birth of online personal projects back to 1995 when what the author calls ‘web reviews’ first appeared in the ‘Russian Internet’. The first such review called ParavozovNews consisted of a bunch of notes by Alexander Gagin (who wasn’t a journalist at the time but became the one later). Here’s how Gagin himself defined his project: “Those are notes about everything and nothing. Things which attract my interest. That the best way to overcome hungover is not to drink. […] That Moscow is a rarely nasty place. […] That if you’re a fool, it’s for life. You got it, right? Sometimes, I write something useful – on nets,
computers, [...], and hackers”. In fact, in his notes Gagin commented a lot on the existing web content – what he liked and what he didn’t about the websites he had visited. Those were the notes of an explorer of the Internet as a new body in its early days.

The work mentions two other web reviewers of that time – same as Gagin (Paravozov), they wrote their notes under pseudonyms – actually, on behalf of fiction characters. Anonymity and wearing masks are the character features of the early online personal projects.

Already 1999 is called by the author the year of crisis of online personal projects. The event is linked to the appearance of an online newspaper Gazeta.ru, a daily media which gathered under its roof all those anonymous web reviewers we mentioned above – who abandoned their anonymity as soon as they became a part of the corporate internet media. In the beginning, Gazeta.ru was a set of those author’s columns. Later, it transformed into a regular news website.

In this sense, online personal projects pioneered the Internet forerunning corporate media (which is rather a radical thought).

“Many owners of online personal projects decided that that’s the death of them now. “The singles’ time has passed”, – this thought was in the air. The internet media started becoming commercial, and those authors began to be in demand. They though abandoned their projects to earn money working in the ‘serious’ media. [...] In 1999-2000, when the production of online information was fully set up and many new Internet media appeared, owners of online projects started feeling uncomfortable because they could not produce so much of information and were losing in that competition”.

We can see how naive the early days of online personal projects were – not only their authors thought by default Web is a continuation of ‘traditional’ print journalism, but also, they didn’t see any way to monetize their work being outside of some ‘news corporation’.

The work is finished with the claim that online personal projects are a part of what’s called ‘author journalism’ (or independent journalism) when a journalist is free to express his own opinion not being limited by external powers, such as, for example, an editor. Employing such a freedom, personal projects symbolize ‘an adequate realization of the Internet’ which “allows them to exist and even ‘prosper’8, however only intellectually and not economically”. Actually,

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8 Quotes supplied by the author himself.
the work itself we have just reviewed, is called: ‘Online Personal Projects as a Case of an Adequate Realization of the Properties of Internet’.

A textbook on internet journalism of 2005 (Kalmykov, 2005) calls online personal projects, web reviews (in this work, these two terms are differentiated), and blogs the three journalistic genres which pioneered the Internet. The author gives an extended interpretation of the term: “In our cultural reality, the epithet “author’s”9 is used when it’s difficult to identify and classify something newly created; something which is different from its prototypes, but similar to them in the same time, but it’s hard to tell in which ways. This is probably how the concepts of an ‘author song’, different from both a romance and a pop song, and the ‘author television’, where an author conveys his vision and understanding of reality, were born”.

“Due to their non-commercial and non-conjuncture nature, personal projects10 found themselves being free from many limits which is, naturally, a good prerequisite for creativity. <…> Personal projects became a lab for new journalism, and their value is till now very poorly understood. Not only they represent the first experience of Internet journalism, <…> but they are also the prototype of media of the future. Personal projects revealed the strengths of the Internet as a media”.

The ‘Western’ academic and non-academic sources we’ve studied, operate rather with the terms ‘personal website’, ‘personal web page’, ‘personal blog’, and ‘online business’, and almost never (with some exceptions) with the term ‘online personal project’. In addition, the term ‘online personal brand’ is often used as a synonym of all mentioned terms.

English-language Wikipedia mentions11 that the Web 1.0-generation of personal webpages tended to be created by hackers, computer programmers, and computer hobbyists, while the later Web 2.0 pages were created by a wider variety of users, including individuals whose main interests lay in hobbies and or topics outside of computers (e.g., indie music fans, political activists, and social entrepreneurs). It’s clear that personal websites existed (and still they do) for various purposes, from simply expressing one’s opinion on a topic to self-promotion for fame and/or business; we won’t go deeper into this.

This diversity of goals is probably one of the reasons personal projects of any kind in general (be commercial or not) don’t get greater attention of academics. There’re multiple publications

9 “Author’s” is equal “personal” in our work – as something done by one person.
10 Or ‘author projects’ – this is how the term is used in the original language – in all reviewed literature.
11 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Personal_web_page
on corporate online ventures (to mention some: “Let’s start an online news site”: opportunities, recourses, strategy, and formational myopia in startups” (Naldi, L., Picard, R. (2012)) and “Innovation of new revenue streams in digital media. Journalism as customer relationship” (Barland, J., 2013), but just a few are on personal ones as such (in comparison to online personal brands in general on which multiple studies do exist).

(It seems the two concepts, one, of online personal brand and another one, of monetizing it, do not find their ‘intersection point’ in the literature – and if yes, they belong to the project management rather than media management field).

Döring’s work (Döring, 2002) examining ‘personal home pages on web’ of 2002, is one of a few. They are defined as sites published and maintained by individuals or informal, small groups who may or may not be affiliated with a larger institution. The Web design can be undertaken by the individual herself or be delegated to professional Web designers. The author mentions that personal home pages are often trivial or even tasteless, amateurish and superfluous products of narcissism and exhibitionism adding that “Sartre had it only partly right. Hell is not other people, it’s other people’s home pages”, since they emphasize the emancipatory and self-reflexive potential of autonomous portrayals of individuals in the public space of the Web. No wonder it’s happening, since back in 2002 many personal home pages (websites) indeed seemed unprofessional, which is no longer the case.

As examples of personal home pages, the author mentions, for example, the following. A page of a student from California Jenny Rigley who called herself JennyCam and whose work started with publishing poems and ended as a video online diary to allow others to see her daily activities. It’s interesting to us that back to those early internet days (the page was started in 1996) Jenny already had what we call an income model incorporated in her project. Paid membership entitled one to pictures at a rate of one per minute, while the free transmission supplies a new shot every 15 minutes.

Another example is a home page maintained by a professor of tele-learning with the collections of her numerous lectures, publications, research projects and courses. The 57-year-old also gives information concerning her hobbies, her philosophy of life and her family complete with grandchildren through the use of text and pictures.

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12 The webpage [www.jennycam.com](http://www.jennycam.com) is no longer active.
Personal web pages are even defined as a web ‘genre’. They can also play a role in professional life, where the exchange of work and project-related information becomes the norm.

Döring mentions that personal web pages, apart from the few exceptions, not discussed in the literature, even though the topic is seated at the intersection of lively theoretical discourse on virtualization of the self and practical endeavors to establish one's own presence on the Web. As we can see, at the time a personal web page was looked at no more as a Web-based self-presentation created for the purposes of self-expression, and their monetization wasn’t still a topic of discussion.

Nowadays, personal web pages are already business entities (even though they might have initially started as self-expression bodies).

In this regard, the concepts of media entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial journalism, and content startups are important to us when defining online personal projects, since academically they exist at intersection of those three fields.

As mentioned, online personal projects are subjects of media entrepreneurship.

According to Hoag and Seo (2005), entrepreneurship is a major component of the media industry and a promising area for scholarly study. The major body of research on the topic did not really emerge until the 2000s. It seems that the new millennium brought the interest in the subject (Hang, M., Weezel, A., 201-).

As Khajeheian writes (2017), media entrepreneurship has been an ambiguous, unclear and controversial concept and despite of growing academic efforts in the last decade, it is still a poorly defined subject; there is no consensus even among the experts of the field.

The author’s own definition from 2013 is: “[Media entrepreneurship is] Individuals or small firms which use their own or other’s resources to create value by extracting opportunities via offering a service or product that is consist of any type of innovation in any of product/service characteristics, process, distribution channel or place, or different innovative usage, to the media market, or any other market that media is its main channel of interaction”.

In the world of “Media Entrepreneurship”, Media is an adjective for the noun of “Entrepreneurship”, implying that Entrepreneurship is the core of this process.

According to Khajeheian, media entrepreneurship may include the new venture creation, or entrepreneurial management of an existing firm, or may occur solely as an individual effort.
Media entrepreneurship can be an innovation or innovative use of already existing business model elements.

However, media entrepreneurship is not merely for profit, but sometimes happens to obtain a benefit such as social responsibility, attention attraction, a favorite behavior or attitude, etc. – from one of the sources that is willing to pay for (direct consumers, advertisers, data demanders, and others).

Media entrepreneurship in an internet-based context implies the content production, platform provision, business model invention, and data analysis (user data), while in traditional media, media entrepreneurship mostly implies on content creation. The commodity that a media entrepreneur sells could be a product, service, data, users (followers or members) or even the media entity itself (such as a channel, brand, etc.).

Media entrepreneurship is slowly but surely moving toward achieving its legitimacy as an academic field. More and more articles drawing that this field is different from already established fields of entrepreneurship and media, appear.

**Entrepreneurial journalism** looks at content creation in business terms – where a media becomes a content-based business that can make money. Whether it’s pitching a story or writing a press release, new media practitioners must propel their companies forward in marketing and selling products, services and problem-solving solutions (Whitney, 2013). Also, content has evolved so now it needs different distribution channels.

In her comprehensive literature review on the available academic research in the field, Achtenhagen (2017) mentions that one of the reasons for this increased interest lies in the economic factors. The crisis of many legacy media companies – aggravated by their lower level of entrepreneurial orientation – have led to diminished traditional career opportunities. As a result, graduates of journalism programs are pushed into entrepreneurial or/ and freelance careers. These new careers are here and there catered for by new higher education curricula of entrepreneurial journalism and media entrepreneurship offered within or in addition to existing media programs.

A qualitative study has been recently conducted in Spain (Aceituno-Aceituno, 2018) using in-depth interviews of local journalism and communication entrepreneurs who have undergone university training in business creation and management. One of the outcomes of the research
showed that the common limitation entrepreneurs face is the difficulty to create a feasible business model for their media venture.

Besides school programs, the increased recent attention to media entrepreneurship is supported, for example, by four special academic issues on the topic in 2017: *International Journal of Media Management* (Title: Media entrepreneurship), *Global Media Journal* – Canadian Edition (two issues in a row, both titled: Entrepreneurship and innovation in media markets) and *Baltic Journal of Management* (Media entrepreneurship in emerging markets) (Khajehheian, 2017).

The reluctancy of future (or present) journalists to embrace entrepreneurship is being mentioned in many studies on the topic as a matter of fact. The motives that explain this low predisposition are both ethical issues and the primacy of the ‘classic’ journalist model, understood as an employee, distanced from ownership structures.

In his blog post on the future of entrepreneurial journalism, Bhargava (2011) argues that *start up* environment pioneers new forms of media. According to him, startups will unlock new forms of content creation and new business models that the entire industry will eventually look towards.

From an economic point of view, online personal projects are single creation products (Picard, 2005) meaning they are creative and idea-driven and based on *unique individual media content*. The conditions of their creation are *project oriented*, and the core competence of their authors is content creation. Because of the nature of such products and their consumption, the market for them is fickle and they are economically highly risky. In contrast, the core competence of firms producing continuous creation products, is not content creation per se, but the selection, processing, and packaging of content (process oriented).

While a single creation product reminds a beautiful ‘polished’ *portfolio*, in which each element is carefully thought-out (for example, a book or musical recording, or a TV program), a continuous creation product is rather a package sold to an audience continuously (to mention some: newspapers and television series) to create habitual patterns and therefore offer subscriptions. In fact, a personal online project remains a portfolio which can be easily presented to a future employer.

Let us summarize what have been just said (here and also in the previous sections) and give an accurate definition of online personal projects by specifying their key features.
Online personal projects are **based on online personal brands but are not equal/limited to/by them**. Personal projects **imply a prospective model of income**, while personal brands do not. Personal projects are more than personal brands, since they are business entities.

They are based on an **individual media content**.

There’s a **product and a distribution channel/s** connected to them.

They are **independent of their owner’s location**.

Even though personal projects have an income model (or prospective income model) incorporated in them, **they are not always for profit**. In other words, the model is not always ‘activated’.

The last key feature consists in online personal projects **not necessarily generating any profit**, despite a prospective income model can be implied. For example, prospectively any website can make money once they activate an online subscription (described in more details in the next section), accept donations from visitors, join the ‘pay per click world’, post sponsored articles, etc. But even if all those options are activated, still they may bring no money. This is said to point out that our research, despite it is about income models, is not focused merely on projects generating money.

Our concept finds its academic justification. Media entrepreneurship (same as media themselves) differs from other types of entrepreneurship (products), since it is not necessarily commercial. For example, an entrepreneur selling shoes, cannot grow their business if shoes are not sold; while a YouTuber having no views, can still post videos because it provides them with profit other than money. As Hoag and Seo write (Hoag, A., Seo, S., 2005) media entrepreneurship counts both for-profit and non-commercial forms of media enterprise.

The presupposition in entrepreneurship literature is that it occurs only in the commercial, for-profit realm. It is presumed that achieving personal wealth is the driver for the entrepreneur. In the case of media, that would be limiting; so much media and communication technology are the products of non-profits, non-commercial communities and even small government agencies. Many [media] entrepreneurs strive for utility maximization rather than profit maximization, fulfilling a social goal rather than increasing personal wealth.
Because of the nature of their work, media workers are creative personalities who seek independence and a sense of ownership of their work (Albarran, 2006). In this sense, online personal projects, in our opinion, can be perceived as exactly the types of media of the “new generation” (in a broader sense), meaning they are able to provide creative people with enough psychological space and independency from the management to come up with new ideas and test them.

In a blog post from 2019 on personal websites, its author Chris Shiflett (2019) writes: “The best time to make a personal website is 20 years ago. The second best time to make a personal website is now”.

In chapter three, we’ll provide examples of online personal projects which meet our specifications.
Chapter 2

Income models of online media

We’ve already mentioned that online personal projects are subjects of media entrepreneurship – same as the established mainstream online media also are (in a sense they’re entities which can be monetized). Online media employ various methods of monetization, and it’s a topic of the next chapter which ones of them online personal projects pick to use. In the current chapter, we’ll give an overview of the basic income models now successfully functioning in the ‘legacy’ online media world.

First, let’s be clear on the definitions. It’s important we distinguish between the three of them: ‘income/revenue model’, ‘income stream’, and ‘business model’. Those concepts are interwinding and often synonymously misused.

Out of the three, income (or revenue) stream is the most basic term. Income streams are the channels through which media generate income, both earned revenue and subsidies (Crow, 2009). A business can have one or multiple income streams. For example, regular payments coming from subscribers and the money flows from advertisers are the two possible income streams for an online media. An income stream represents (Genadinik, 2014) a single source of revenue for a business.

In contrast, income (or revenue) model is a more volume concept – it’s a strategy (Genadinik, 2014) of how many revenue streams a business will have, a high-level look at the business revenue structure. An income/revenue model though aggregates various revenue streams.

Raftari and Amiri mention (Raftari, M., Amiri, B., 2014) revenue model amongst the nine key elements of a business model ontology (including an offered product, target customer group, distribution channels, and others). According to them, the revenue model describes the way the company makes money through a variety of revenue flows; a revenue model can be assembled of different revenue streams – that can all have, in turn, different pricing mechanisms.

A business model represents the most high-level look which takes all aspects of a business into account, including a revenue model and the revenue streams, and examines how well the different parts will play together. A business model (The Asian Entrepreneur, 2019) takes into
account things like: whom the product is served for, how it’s distributed and promoted, what
the key partnerships are. In other words, a business model constitutes a more holistic approach
(Slywotzky, 1996).

There’s still no consensus about what a business model is what it comprises (Rimscha, 2016),
however what’s important for our research is to show we’re not going into analyzing business
models in their full complexity. Identifying a variety of revenue streams of online personal
projects is what interests us the most; we’ll look at them as a matter of the happened fact, and
the strategic process of their creation (i.e. business modelling) is beyond our research.

The core of the traditional media revenue model is producing journalistic content that attracts
readers who purchase newspapers (either by subscription or physically buying them), becoming
targets for advertisement sold to companies and published in those newspapers (Barland, 2013).

Insufficiency of this two-sided (i.e. involving readers and advertisers) model in digital media
environment has been thoroughly discussed in academic sources till now – probably, to an
extent the topic itself has become rather outdated. The timely question is how this traditional
model is being transformed and re-oriented digitally to meet the needs of the new media
(including online personal projects).

In 2012, Siapera writes: “<…> new media companies, despite the huge hype that surrounds
them, have, for the most part, failed to come up with a successful business model, relying
instead on older models, such as generating income through advertising and subscriptions. To
an extent, this failure to come up with a model for ‘monetization’ may be due to elusive nature
of user-generated contents, which represent a substantial part of new media contents” (Siapera,
2017).

We agree with Siapera in a way that, yes, regardless there’re so many methods of online
monetization being nowadays discussed in the mainstream business media, most of them
eventually turn out to be variations of the two mentioned models. That’s why we’ll below divide
the most common living online media income models into two big groups, either belonging to
subscription or advertising.

It’s understandable that income models of, for example, a news site or a YouTube channel differ
from each other. In addition, some online entities can employ one, while other – multiple –
revenue sources. However, recent research shows (Tsourvakas, 2018) that for e-media
businesses, applying a multiple revenue source strategy doesn’t constitute a necessary factor of their success.

2.1. Subscription

To convert a reader into a payer, online media are in ongoing search for subscription revenue. There’re multiple forms of subscriptions:

- Paywall

A paywall acts as a barrier between an internet user and a media’s online content (Anon., 2015). To access the content, users must purchase a digital subscription.

Paywalls are nothing new (Moné, 2018) and have emerged soon after the advent of Internet and the creation of the first American newspapers websites. Being thrown online, publishers tried to implement that worked from print to digital. In 1997, The Wall Street Journal pioneered online media paywalls by implementing a subscription fee of $50/year to have full access to their website.

There’re three basic types of paywalls: the hard paywall, the freemium model, and the metered model.

In the hard paywall model, all the content is reserved for subscribers, meaning there’s no free access: if a reader wants to read/ watch anything, they must pay first.

The freemium model consists of giving free access to a part of the site and keeping articles with higher added value for subscribers only (generally representing 10% to 20% of the visible articles). On some websites, this model gives access (The Asian Entrepreneur, 2019) to all basic content for free, but users can choose to subscribe to premium content for a fee that provides improved access (such as, for example, an add-free experience) or additional services.

The metered model implies a certain number of articles (usually ten) which can be consumed for free, ad anything above this amount requires taking an online subscription offer to continue. This model, for example, is now used by Medium.

The paywall model is employed, for example, by the British The Times online which allows readers to access only a part of an article for free, and any further reading needs paid subscription (the illustration below).
British strike on Iran can’t be ruled out, MPs warned

The defence secretary refused yesterday to rule out a British military strike on Iran as he said that helicopters and warships had been placed on standby in the Middle East.

Ben Wallace told the Commons that the UK had evacuated non-essential personnel from Baghdad amid growing tensions after a US drone strike killed the senior Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani.

He called for de-escalation but told MPs that he was “not going to rule out anything” when questioned on the prospect of offensive British military action. “The UK will do what it has to do to defend its persons, its citizens and wherever it needs to do that. That is our duty,” he said. “We cannot say what is in the

Medium is another media which works on a paywall model. There’s a certain number of articles visitors can read per month for free, and anything above is under subscription:

Medium

Become a Medium member for $5/month or $50/year and get unlimited access to the smartest writers and biggest ideas you won’t find anywhere else.
• **Membership**

Membership is another, less frequent, kind of a paywall model. Under membership, the content can either be free or paid, but users who purchase it, receive perks and bonus materials, exclusive access to supplemental materials, and so forth. Musician fan clubs and sporting teams are classic examples of non-digital content entities that excel at offering memberships.

Depending on the industry a media operates in, further variations of a subscription model can appear. For example, in the academic world, accessing a publication in a journal can be allowed via paying an article processing fee (micro-payments). This is based on the premise that authors and their host institutions are direct beneficiaries of the publication. Such a model is closer than the ‘purely’ subscription one, to the concept of an e-shop where one can purchase whatever item they wish, and there’s no need to pay any monthly fee.

There’s an ongoing discussion on the failure of the subscription model in the media. In case of television, for example, the peacefully drifting world of subscription (or pay-) TV was troubled in the end of 1990s with the rapid expansion of the Internet and digital technologies.

Pay TV channels used to rather automatic money flow from the existing number of subscribers, unexpectedly found themselves in an economically uncertain environment facing competition for viewers from the side of FTA (free-to-air) channels or even free riders (the Internet). It was releaved (Tsourvakas, 2005), for example, at the time that most viewers are willing to become subscribers only for movies and sports. Subscription management though became a new key area to focus on for television companies. In the last twenty years, many new forms of subscription have been established, such as: pay-per-view, free-to-view, and others, and the novel income models have emerged. A deeper investigation on the topic is outside of our research; what’s important to us is that the discussion is present across all media types.

In the world of online newspapers/magazines, for some publications, subscriptions work well. For example, *The New Yorker* (the illustration below) is known for the fact that its revenue from readers exceeds that of advertisers. In 2018, readers contributed 65% of the magazine revenue.

In the same time, news organizations are being challenged. Rasmus Kleis, director of the Reuters Institute, comments on the situation (Faulconbridge, 2019): “Much of the population is perfectly happy with the news they can access for free and even amongst those who are willing to pay, the majority are only willing to sign up for one subscription.”
NewsBrands Ireland, a representative body for all national media, contributes to the discussion in their online blog (Anon, 201-): “Whether you believe in their efficacy or not, paywalls are proliferating across the digital media landscape, with a variety of models now in operation. <…> Paywalls go global. <…> In Europe, paywalls are popping up at newspapers of varied focus and size. <…> Skeptics have long maintained that paywalls can’t work for general news websites as readers will merely bounce off to another site where they can access news for free. <…> The widespread adoption of paid subscription models across the web is evidence that the news media landscape is evolving. <…> Where content remains free to access you should take advantage of this while you can. Indications would suggest that it’s unlikely to remain free in the longer term.”

We can see from the illustrations above that it’s sometimes hard to distinguish between paywalls and subscriptions, since media often use a mixture of both models.
2.2. Advertising

When this model is applied, a company (individual) makes money by charging an advertiser. There’re multiple variations of this model, where some of them have already stood out as self-standing models. The income sources and models of partnerships between the content owner and the ad owner are truly countless in case of the advertising-based income model. This diversity, however, makes it nearly impossible to create any clear classification.

- **Display/ banner advertising/ digital advertising**

Display advertising means showing an ad (text, video, or audio) on a website. Search results ads (usually done by attracting a third-part service like Google AdSense) are also a type of display ads.

- **Native advertising**

When ad integrated into the content, it becomes a native ad. A native ad blends with the website content and, ideally, doesn’t look like a traditional ad. The created content delivers value such as information or entertainment, but this is done to propagate a message which is in line with the advertiser’s brand/ company.

- **Sponsored content**

Sponsored content can be done in a form of native advertising, but not necessarily, since the content can be sponsored not being thematically close to the topics a media covers.

- **Product sales (affiliated or own)**

Advertisers can use an affiliate marketing network to advertise specific products on websites with related content.

This is how *Elle Magazine* features items from advertisers:
When we click on the ad ‘55 Kitchen Gadgets’, we’re redirected to another website, Bestproducts.com, from which we can purchase a gadget on Amazon:

**THESE 50+ COOL AND QUIRKY KITCHEN GADGETS WILL REVOLUTIONIZE MEALTIME**

We would just like to apologize to your wallet in advance.

**Smart Tongs 2-in-1 Spatula Tongs**
amazom.com
$19.99

This tong-spatula hybrid is exactly what your kitchen needs. Pancakes for everyone!

More: We All Scream for These Ice Cream Products
Selling products online (ecommerce) is becoming an important part of online media’s digital strategy (Anon, 2016). The incorporated links direct readers to online stores or marketplaces where they can buy the advertised products. A magazine or newspaper gets their commission fee for each purchase/ click. In 2004, *Politikens* launched the e-commerce program, plus.politiken.dk, where it offers specially selected goods and services. *Berlingske Media* also provides several e-commerce websites, with special offers, for example: sweetdeal.dk, lidtmere.dk and downtown. dk, which have no relation to the core business activity field of the newspaper (Trourvakas, 2018).

To become a successful source of revenue, online advertising presumably requires ad targeting, i.e. taking into consideration the readers’ interests and behavior when posting an ad.

2.3. **Other models: Crowdfunding, donations**

As mentioned above, the traditional media income models are in transformation, and there’s a constant, feverish search for new revenue sources. Recent research (Trourvakas, 2018) identifies **crowdfunding** as a new one potential source of income for journalists – it implies a distributed funding model in which stories are funded by small donations or payments from a large crowd of people. Crowdfunding in journalism has become increasingly common in recent years, where most often it’s used by freelance journalists pitching their story ideas on crowdfunding platforms, such as Kickstarter, Indiegogo, Beacon, *The Guardian*-backed Contributoria, and others. Moreover, crowdfunding has been used to fund entirely new journalistic platforms and publications, like *Krautreporter* in Germany and *de Correspondent* in Netherlands – in both cases, crowdfunding guarantees independent journalism without advertising. By pooling their money through crowdfunding, funders often enable a realization of a process or a product that might not have come true otherwise. For example, before its launch, *de Correspondent* raised more than 1mln euro in a crowdfunding campaign in just eight days.

There’re multiple categorizations of crowdfunding – what interests us is distinguishing the funding activity between *ex ante* and *ex post facto*. In *ex ante* crowdfunding, the funds are raised to support a future action, event or process to achieve a certain outcome. In *ex post facto* crowdfunding, instead, the funds are raised for a completed product. *Ex ante* crowdfunding is the more common crowdfunding model. *Ex post facto* crowdfunding is more of a digital tip jar (Kappel, 2008-2009) in that money is raised for a product that would be often available for free
anyway. Some online media depend on the goodwill of their readers to increase revenue. A digital tip jar gives readers the chance to contribute to what they consider a worthy cause.

Crowdfunding can happen anywhere online, including on one’s blog or website, but the practice often takes place on dedicated online platforms due to the large audiences the platforms are able to gather and the technical affordances they provide. In journalism, the idea of crowdfunding is closely connected to the idea of independency – of both political power and advertisers (Newman, 201-). In the same time, crowdfunding is a business model which role as a commercial mechanism in the journalism business model ecosystem is underexamined (Aitamurto, 2014).

The concept of crowdfunding is close to the concept of donations. While crowdfunding often means collecting money to complete a certain task (for example, an independent journalistic investigation on the topic), recipients of donations are usually ‘free’ from such obligations. (with the exceptions of large donations to media organizations when donors have an agenda media should follow to get a donation (Aamir, 2018).

A recent study investigating the applicability and success of different income models to small-sized digital news media organizations, for example, revealed that minor individual donations from the users and supporters is most preferred means of revenue generation for them. The reason is small digital media organizations have a small group of followers who admire them and are willing to show support them in a form of donations. The study, however, recommends developing other revenue streams also since donations can never guarantee a sustainable flow of income.

The same study revealed advertising was a less used method to generate funds in case of small digital media. The reason is it’s hard to get private advertisements and revenue generated from services such as Google Adsense is negligible due to the high volume of traffic required which small digital organizations do not have. It has also been mentioned small digital media are not willing to use ads because it can affect outlook of the websites in a negative way. Experts in the study suggested small digital media organizations look for local advertisements which can work better for them being targeted exactly to their readers (Aamir, 2018).

In the next chapter, we’ll investigate whether the abovementioned media income models are employed by online personal projects and in what combinations.
Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1. Hypothesis and methodology

The study assumes an online personal project is a self-standing media venture which forms its own income models, different from the models used by the traditional online media.

It raises two research questions:

- Do online personal projects employ the same income models which the ‘legacy’ online media do? If not, what are the distinctive features of those models they employ?
- Is personal brand playing a role in forming of income models of the researched projects? If yes, what is its involvement?

For the purposes of current research, the already existing income models of online media are taken as those ‘conventional’.

A case study methodology (cross-case comparison) was used to answer our research questions.

The sample selected for the research, comprised of fifteen currently working online projects, all built on an online personal brand. Starting from an early definition of online personal projects being something which started as personal websites or web pages, we picked only projects having their own website (but also using social media platforms for brand building purposes). All projects were launched after 2010.

It’s important to mention we picked only cases where brands of projects’ authors were built purely online\(^{13}\) - i.e. their audiences learnt about them this way.

Taking for absolute Castells’ statement that new media erode territorial boundaries and minimize the importance of geographical divisions (Castells, 1996), we did not limit ourselves by picking online personal projects coming from any selected country/territory. (In a broader sense, according to Castell, we no longer understand ourselves as rooted in particular territories,\(^{13}\)

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\(^{13}\) For example, an American signer Amanda Palmer runs her personal project [www.amandapalmer.net](http://www.amandapalmer.net). It is indeed a project falling into the category of those built on a personal brand. However, it doesn’t fall into our category since prior to launching her project, Palmer was already well-known in an offline world, i.e. her online personal brand was just a ‘continuation’ of the offline one.
as we take meaning from participation in different networks, which are not bound to geography, but which create their own space).

It’s not our goal to find out the real incomes of the projects – what’s important to us is that their income model/s is identifiable (whether it currently brings money or not).

The research data was collected online from primary sources, i.e. online platforms on which online personal projects are being developed. In addition, we analyzed multiple interviews found in online media with projects’ authors.

The study has used a mixed research method which combines both qualitative and limited quantitative research methods. The data collected was analyzed in terms of numbers and the theoretical analysis was performed to determine the findings of the study. The qualitative approach was realized by means of virtual observation and cross-case comparisons and was initially picked because the subject has not been yet sufficiently well explored. As the scope is limited and the abstraction level is high, it’s very difficult to receive in-depth knowledge using other methodologies.

Findings of this study are based on the analysis of all online platforms involved in the projects’ ecosystems. During the research, we also incorporated personal quotes of projects’ authors (where found) expressing their opinion on the employed income models. In order to identify income models, we thoroughly explored each of the features which could potentially influence their formation.

So-called ‘info-businesses’ are now being widely criticized, especially in the self-help niche. Our study doesn’t take this criticism into account and takes an unbiased look at online personal projects as any other commodity which has its buyer (reader, viewer – in our case). The nature of this study is exploratory.
Chapter 4

Analysis

The section represents analysis of 15 selected online personal projects. The research has the following sequence:

4.1. Case studies
4.2. Products
4.3. Supporting free content
4.4. Additional social media (SM) platforms
4.5. Income streams
4.1. Case studies

1) [https://www.firstclass.cz/](https://www.firstclass.cz/)

The Czech online startup First Class (or FC, in short) defines itself as “A Magazine From the World of Successfull People“. His founder Petr Casanova had been a professional journalist for twenty years before he launched the project in 2011. In the last seven years of his corporate career, he was conducting many interviews with rich and successfull people, including entrepeneurs. He said their replies to his questions, their life stories, and their philosophy in general was what brought him to the path where he’s now. In one of his interviews, he says he wanted to bring the successful people’s thinking closer to the ‘ordinar’s’ people thinking and show them (‘ordinar’ people – no negative connotations attached) that difficulties should not stop you on your way to achieving a good life – same, as it didn’t stop the rich and successful people.

“What hurts me the most is when people give up on the potential they have in themselves because they don’t believe in it,” – he adds.
In 2013, Casanova’s website became the largest internet community for personal development in the Czech Republic and also in Slovakia. The website has many sections. There’re multiple Casanova’s self-help articles (to mention some headlines: ‘Why Do We Care About Those Who Don’t Care About Us’, ‘Why People Leave Us, Even Though They Say They’re Happy With Us’, ‘How To Bounce Off The Bottom’, and around 4000 (!) more. Most of articles are self-standing, and some of them tell only half of a story – and the remaining part we can read if we purchase the printed FC magazine\textsuperscript{14}. It has 100 pages and is issued once in two months; it’s distributed only on the territory of the Czech Republic. More than that, one can order it only on the website – the magazine is not sold in physical shops or anywhere else. There’s also a mobile version of it. Casanova offers readers two options of subscription: for 6 months or 12 months:

\begin{center}
\textbf{Objednávka předplatného}
\end{center}

\begin{center}
\textbf{VYBERTE TYP PŘEDPLATNÉHO}
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\begin{tabular}{|c|c|}
\hline
Kombinované & Mobilní verze ZDARMA \\
299 Kč & 239 Kč \\
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\end{tabular}
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\begin{center}
\textbf{VYBERTE DÉLKU PŘEDPLATNÉHO}
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\hline
599 Kč & 299 Kč \\
TIŠTĚNÉ PŘEDPLATNÉ FIRSTCLASS NA 6 MĚSÍCŮ & TIŠTĚNÉ PŘEDPLATNÉ FIRSTCLASS NA ROK \\
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\end{tabular}
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\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{14} \url{https://www.firstclass.cz/2019/11/jak-se-odrazit-ze-dna/}}
*Extract from the website: readers can choose a subscription option: printed, mobile, or combined version of the magazine, for either 6 or 12 months.

Also, some issues of FC can be purchased separately, no subscription required (such as last year’s Christmas edition\textsuperscript{15}).

Coming back to the articles: some of them are open only to members of Klub FC, a premium paid online space. Its members have access to premium content – apart from articles, there’s, for example, an access to a closed Facebook group or the website’s archive:

*In the picture: FC Klub’s membership costs only 0.52 Czech crowns a day (0.02 Euro)

One of the additional benefits the members get, is an ad-free experience – the granted access to the website where no Google (or another search engine’s) ads pop up while reading the website content.

Another source of the website income are Casanova’s self-help books one can order online. Also, there’s an online dating agency (paid, of course) – we’re redirected to it once clicking on the corresponding tab. From the eshop, we can purchase mobile phone covers with Casanova’s motivational quote on it (illustration below).

The section ‘Events’ represents another source of the project income. Casanova gathers people, for example, for wine tasting or to spend a before-Christmas evening together (an event for

\textsuperscript{15} https://shop.firstclass.cz/first-class/fc-special-2019/
people who feel lonely during holiday time) – all events are in smaller groups, and participants pay a fee.

There’re only 15 videos posted now on Casanova’s YouTube channel\(^{16}\) now. Presumably, some income is generated by them, but obviously not a significant one. There’re no ‘intentional’ ads coming from advertisers on the website, but there’re popping up organic ads suggested by search engine. Casanova mentions that members of Klub FC are free from them.

We can also learn from Casanova’s interviews that in the offline world he has other sources of income. For example, he enjoys investing in real estate. However, since this is not related to his online start up, it’s beyond our research.

*In the picture: Extract from the eshop. A mobile cover for Sony Xperia with Casanova’s quote: “Negative thoughts will never allow you positive life”.

\(^{16}\) [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdeWoVbTEFlU3vMA0AMk2BA/featured]
Let us summarize:

- **Product**: self-help books, Klub FC membership (articles, closed Facebook group access, add-free experience), dating agency, events, printed/ mobile FC magazine, mobile phone covers, offline motivational events,

- **Supporting free content**: articles, YouTube videos

- **Additional SM platforms**: Facebook

- **Income model**: e-shop, dating agency, YouTube income, subscription, own sales, search engine banner ad

- **Selected quote from an interview**:

  [Journalist]: “What was the hardest part when you just started working on your project?”

  [Petr Casanova]: “I can laugh at it now. I remember feedback from our early readers telling us we’re just the next one in a row promising good content with no adds. Soon after, we’re the only magazine with zero ads sold 100%, for three years issue by issue. For advertisers in the market it was a shock. They didn’t know how to talk to their existing clients, big companies, in a situation when a magazine can survive with no ads and when they can no longer dictate magazines how to craft their content. We passed three stages: mockery, threats, and then finally requests. We didn’t care because what we had before our eyes, was our reader. He’s always been a number one priority”.

Ekaterina Jensen, the project’s author, is a certified nutritionist. Originally from Russia, she has been living in Denmark for more than ten years now.

Her journey started in 2011 when she had no luck trying to conceive her second child. This is when she randomly came across a book ‘From Childless to Fertile’ by Tine Grandjean, a Danish nutrition specialist and yoga teacher. In the book, Grandjean assures making simple changes to one’s diet can help getting pregnant. After two months of following her recommendations, Jensen finally conceived. She was so amazed by this success, that she decided to change her current job in consulting to becoming a nutritionist. Jensen sent an email to the author asking where she was studying. Grandjean had replied, and Jensen enrolled the same school, Center for Ernæring og Terapi in Copenhagen, for the next four years.

Already during her studies, she started giving private nutrition sessions via Skype and writing a blog on Blogger.com about all things healthy eating. Gradually, her blog transformed into a website where Jensen regularly posts articles on how to eat well and food receipts. The part of the website called ‘Programs’ offers eight different dietary plans to purchase online. To mention some: a two-week Mini-Detox, eight-week Anti-Age program, four-week program for parents in child nutrition with healthy receipts and advices, 10-day retreat in Portugal, and others:

17 ‘Fra barnløs til frugtbar’ – in the Danish original.
*Translation of the image text: ‘A 4-week Online Program for Parents Who Want Their Children to Grow Not Only Smart, But Also Healthy’.

Also, Jensen offers private paid consultations during which she draws up an individual nutrition plan.

The programs’ costs vary from 29 up to 2998 Euro:

*The website e-shop: Mini detox program costs 29 Euro; Maxi detox one is for 49 Euro.*
Let us summarize:

- **Product**: nutrition programs (online and offline), private consultations
- **Supporting free content**: articles/ blog posts on healthy eating, receipts, testimonials, YouTube videos
- **Additional platforms**: Facebook, Instagram, VK.com
- **Income model**: own sales via e-shop
- **Selected quote**: “I’ve never placed add banners which Google would always suggest you to, on my website. The earnings from those adds are penny, however the look of the website is affected very badly”\(^{18}\).

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\(^{18}\) [https://interesno.co/myself/e5d5663ab9eb](https://interesno.co/myself/e5d5663ab9eb)
Ten years ago, Mark Manson landed his first ‘adult’ job as a data entry specialist at a prestigious bank in Boston. Four weeks later, he quit not being able to stand what he called a cubicle hell – to start his own online business. This ‘quit your nine-to-five’ story so typical for Millennials in a search of their digital careers, turned out for Mark becoming a well-known self-help blogger and a published author whose personal online project now fully sustains him financially.

Mark runs a website where he publishes articles, ‘all around the central ideas of personal values, emotional health, relationships, life purpose and self-discipline’. To mention some headlines: ‘Stop Trying to Be Happy’, ‘Screw Finding Your Passion’, ’10 Life Lessons I Learned from Surviving My 20s’, ‘In the Future, Your Attention Will Be Sold’, and others.

While some of the website’s content is for free (the majority of articles and all e-books), other is only accessible to the subscribed members (articles, audio versions of articles with Mark’s commentary on them, Ask Me Anything videos in which Mark answers his readers’ questions, online courses). Also, three Manson’s books (published in a ‘traditional’ offline way) can be purchased from his website’s e-shop.

Monthly subscription costs as little as $6, and the yearly one is for $48.
Let us summarize:

- **Product:** books, articles, audio commentaries, online courses, paid e-books, offline events with Mark
- **Supporting free content:** articles, free e-books, YouTube videos
- **Additional platforms:** Facebook, Instagram, Twitter
- **Income model:** subscription-freemium plus membership, e-shop
- **Selected quote:** “Here’s the thing. I’m an independent writer. What that means is that I’m not under contract at a magazine or newspaper. <…> I don’t have to sell ads or beg for airtime. I write stuff. You read. It’s simple. <…> But this isn’t a donation trip. I’ve put together a lot of amazing content for people who are willing to shell enough money to buy me a beer each month. In fact, it’s a hell a lot of value for what you pay.”
The project’s author, a Russian traveler Oleg Lazhechnikov, started his blog in 2010. Also a Millenial, he brought to life another Millenials’ dream to conduct life and work in a nomadic manner – meaning working while traveling. His travel style involves staying at a certain place longer than a typical tourist, perhaps for a few months which allows him to understand the country and people better.

During almost ten years, Lazhechnikov visited a great number of countries, amongst which he stayed longer in Thailand, Israel, Spain, and the south of Russia. From each his trip, he posts articles. Also, there’re online guidebooks on his website (not in a format of an e-book though, but of a longer post with multiple country-related topics covered).

*In the picture to the right: Lazhechnikov created a map of his trips done over 10 years: 28 countries, 162 cities and 36 touristic sights.*
Travel-related products are advertised on Lazhechnikov’s website, such as travel insurance, credit and SIM cards customized for travelers – with links to the websites of their issuers (i.e. banks, insurance companies and phone operators). Those visiting issuers’ websites following those links, get some sort of a discount, and Lazhechnikov receives his margin from every purchase. Also, there’s a promo link to Airbnb giving site visitors a discount of $32 for the very first booking as well as other accommodation booking websites. Other discounts promoted on the websites, are from tour operators, airlines, taxi services, tour guides.

*In the picture: Airbnb is linked in the article providing readers with a discount for the first booking.*

A self-standing sub-section of the website is called ‘Product Reviews’ and has an offer of ‘physical’ travel products, such as: SIM card cases with multiple pockets for those having many cards for many countries (link to AliExpress), wireless headphones which can function long time with no need to re-charge (link to the seller’s website), travel wallet (AliExpress), travel cameras (link to an online shop), motion sickness pills (AliExpress), and many others. Cashback services are the last kind of travel-related income streams of Lazhechnikov’s website.
The income model which Lazhechnikov applies, can be attributed to affiliate (i.e. partner-based) marketing when a blogger recommends certain products he had an experience with (or at least knows enough about to advertise) to his readers. When a reader clicks a link in the post to the affiliate product and makes a purchase, a blogger gets their commission.

Let us summarize:

- **Product**: travel-related products mentioned above
- **Supporting free content**: travel articles, online guides, product reviews, YouTube videos
- **Additional platforms**: Instagram, Facebook, VK.com
- **Income model**: affiliate ads (affiliate marketing) – most likely, performance-based (i.e. a blogger is rewarded only when a purchase is made by a reader – in oppose to, for example, PPC (pay per click) when a blogger is rewarded for a reader’s click as such on the ad)
- **Selected quote**:

  **[Oleg Lazhechnikov]**: “I’m more of a blogger than a traveler, because 90% of my time I spend on my blog <…> And it’s my only source of income”.

  **[Journalist]**: “You’re an Internet freelancer…”

  **[Oleg Lazhechnikov]**: “I’m not, I’m an Internet entrepreneur”\(^{19}\).

5) YouTube channel Veronika Stepanova and website www.veronikastepanova.com

*The title in the second picture says: Veronika Stepanova’s Psychological School.

Probably the trendiest psychologist of the ‘Russian’ internet, Veronika Stepanova has now over 940 thousand of subscribers on her YouTube channel.


20 https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCg0Y6Q0m3A_5X0CPY-IG3Yg/featured
Understand What I Want’, ‘Cinderella. How She Made a Prince to Fell in Love with Her’, ‘How to Understand You’re Cheated On’, and hundreds of others. Also, Stepanova sometimes shares her opinion on movies and social events and, very seldom, posts vlogs from her own life.

All of this looks positive and ‘innocent’ – however, not in Stepanova’s filing. Her view of things is so extraordinary and the feed is so expressive, that she’s called one of the most controversial women of Russian YouTube.

What is so special about her? For example, from her video on Cinderella we learn that this fairytale character is, in fact, a ‘cunning pickuper’\(^\text{21}\) who ‘manipulated the prince by playing a victim game’. As every pickuper, she utilized the ‘to mysteriously disappear’ trick when she left a prince with her slipper in his hand. Prince Charming is, according to Stepanova, ‘a spoiled rich bastard’. More than that, she predicts their divorce as a couple in the future (if there was any future in fairytales), because they are from different backgrounds and share no common topics or friends.

In her video on starting over after divorce, she’s far from the popular optimistic approach of life coaches telling divorce is a bright new beginning. “Out of the two, the divorce hits the one who’s financially less stable. Women who don’t work are at the highest risk,” - argues Stepanova. “To survive a divorce, you must create the fiercest daily schedule for yourself which will include sport every day. All your new friends must be of an opposite sex.” In other words, Stepanova is fully devoid of illusions and provides her viewers with very practical down to earth solutions. She openly speaks on things like, for example, minorities, sexual frustration, unwanted children, resentment against parents and other highly personal topics which attract many viewers.

Not only Stepanova’s views are rather radical, but also she actively (sometimes too actively) gesticulates in videos and almost never says ‘hi’ at the beginning going immediately straight to the point. Most of the videos are shot on a ‘simple wall background’ and every time she wears a new beautiful blouse.

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\(^{21}\) From the verb ‘to pick up’ – meaning a person whose goal is intentional seduction of the opposite sex.
Stepanova’s major income stream is supposedly the private counseling which she promotes in her videos. Even though the prices are not publicly announced (those interested should send Stepanova a private message to inquire about them), it’s easy to find them out from people’s online reviews. She turns out to be a very expensive specialist – a Skype consultation starts from around 500 euro. Stepanova acknowledges that and in one of her videos she even says: “If you need help, I’ll help you, I really will. If I’m too expensive for you, you can save money, take a loan, sell something – for example, your kidney. Why not? It’s an investment in the first place.”\(^{22}\) We don’t know to which extend she means it, of course, but it’s not the point of our research to find out.

Stepanova’s website is less taken care of than her channel as the overall look and feel visibly needs some improvement. However, it also generates a couple of income streams. There’re self-help webinars and various online trainings sold there including those for psychologists themselves (for example, ‘Your First Counseling’, ‘Where to Study Psychology’). Some of her articles also have a paid access.

The last income stream of Stepanova’s project comes from crowdfunding. Under some of her videos, she asks people to donate money if they want to support the development of her channel:

\(^{22}\) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gBkoRvY6pY&t=1039s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1gBkoRvY6pY&t=1039s)
*In the picture: “If you want to help my channel to develop, you can send any amount you wish to: (the payment details follow). Thanks to everyone who has already helped my channel!”.

Let us summarize:

- **Product**: private psychological counseling via Skype, webinars, online lessons, selected articles
- **Supporting free content**: YouTube videos, articles on the website, online psychological tests
- **Additional platforms**: Instagram, VK.com (not updated since 2016), Facebook, OK.ru
- **Income model**: online shop with digital products, selling an associated product with the help of the blog (private counseling), paid access to the content (articles), YouTube traffic income, crowdfunding
Marie Forleo is another example of a digital entrepreneur not fitting into the ‘conventional 9 to 5’ box: “I’m undeniable proof that traditional rules were made to be broken”\(^{23}\). Being born and raised in Jersey City\(^{24}\), she worked for NYSE\(^{25}\) and Condé Nast publishing in the early days of her career. The corporate ladder was abandoned by Marie starting dancing and becoming a hip hop choreographer on MTV. What brought her recognition and success was through another Forleo’s passion, life-coaching which she had created her personal brand around.

In 2008, she released a book for women called ‘Make Every Man Want You: How to Be So Irresistible You’ll Barely Keep from Dating Yourself!’ which was published in 16 languages. At the time, she was already working as a life coach. The following year, she founded Marie Forleo International, ‘an education company featuring an online school for modern entrepreneurs that teaches students to embrace their higher purpose in order to increase profits’\(^{26}\). The school was named B-school and it teaches entrepreneurs ‘modern marketing methods to fuel high profits’ in a course of eight weeks\(^{27}\).

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\(^{23}\) This is how she introduces herself in the ‘About’ section of her website: [https://www.marieforleo.com/about/](https://www.marieforleo.com/about/)

\(^{24}\) NY.

\(^{25}\) The New York Stock Exchange.

\(^{26}\) [https://www.inc.com/profile/marie-forleo-international](https://www.inc.com/profile/marie-forleo-international)

\(^{27}\) [https://www.marieforleo.com/shop/](https://www.marieforleo.com/shop/)
Marie’s website is her major marketing channel, and the second one is YouTube (MarieTV) where she regularly posts business-related (mostly) motivational videos, interviews and – more rarely – vlogs (to mention some: ‘Decade in Review: How to Make Next Ten Years Better than Your Last’, ‘How to Pursue Your Side Hustle Without Risking Everything’, ‘How to Forgive When You Can’t Forget’, and many others). The channel itself has over 600 thousand subscribers, and all videos are duplicated in the website’s Blog section.

There’re three products which readers can purchase in the Shop section: the mentioned B-school course, two Marie’s books (in 2019, she released the second one called ‘Everything is Figureoutable’) and an online copywriting course The Copy Cure.

In addition, Marie and her team participate in various events/conferences in the US and abroad promoting the Forleo project.

There’re multiple testimonials on the website (both video and text) coming from past B-school’s students and the channel viewers, which, in our opinion, can be considered as self-standing genre of the website’s content, since there’re long enough, comprehensive, and they positively contribute to the brand.

Let us summarize:

- **Product:** online educational course by B-school, books, copywriting course
- **Supporting free content:** audio training, YouTube videos, customers’ testimonials/stories of success, blog posts, other videos on website
- **Additional platforms:** Instagram, Twitter, Facebook
- **Income model:** YouTube income, e-shop
- **Selected quote:**

  **THAT’S HOW 99% OF WHAT YOU GET STAYS FREE**

  We’re relentless in our commitment to produce the world’s best free educational content. It’s sponsor-free and funded solely by us. Don’t begrudge us for marketing our paid programs, which allow us to feed our families, give back and continue to give you the vast majority of our creative work, free of charge.
This project is another evidence of the fact that the self-help industry pretty much embraced online personal projects. No wonder the project author Olesya Vlasova’s story is similar to those of many digital entrepreneurs – i.e. at some point she escaped the corporate world where she sold ads, to work online. In case of Olesya, her journey to her own online project started with a few-year trip to Asia (Thailand, Bali, China, Borneo…). In 2009, she published a book called ‘Asian Attraction’ based on true stories happened to her on the trip. At the beginning of her trip, she worked in the travel industry in Asia, and later, she moved onto remote copywriting and online journalism.

In 2012, she launched her own website where she published articles under the motto: “Create Yourself”. The core of Vlasova’s philosophy as a self-help writer is that one cannot ‘find themselves’ but should rather ‘create themselves’ step by step. Here are some examples of articles’ headlines: ‘When a Small Step Strategy Doesn’t Work’, ‘A Bridge Over the Crisis’, ‘How to Speak to the World So It Listens to You’, and others.

Now, in 2019, Vlasova’s website contains several sections. First one is a blog with dozens of self-help articles written over years (all available to read them for free). The second section which name can be translated as ‘A Gentle Kick’ represents the author’s self-help recordings that can be purchased online, directly here on the website. There’re two types of

*Translation of the website banner headline (below in the snip): ‘Re-Self. Physics and Metaphysics of Pivotal Life Changes’.*
recordings: 2-3-hour livestreams (one can join online or watch them later as recordings) and what Vlasova calls ‘Long Classes’ – a series of 10 to 14 livestreams combined in a 1.5-months online program. During her livestreams, Vlasova is sharing with subscribers her thoughts and experience on how one can re-build their life. Also, she answers her subscribers’ questions. Some topics of her livestreams to mention: ‘How You Can Be Yourself If You Haven’t Found Yourself Yet’, ‘How To Plan Smart’, Relationships. What to Do If You Don’t Have Any’, ‘How to Change Your Current Track of Life’, and others.

One of Vlasova’s programs which happens once a year, is particularly interesting to us. It’s called ‘A Workshop from My Business Kitchen’ – also done is a form of livestream with her subscribers. During 10 online meetings, Vlasova shares her knowledge and experience on how to create an online personal project from scratch: from an idea to monetization. Not anyhow widely advertised (and we don’t know anything about the quality), it’s truly a unique online product in the Russian-speaking Internet. What Vlasova calls an online personal project (such as hers) is exactly the topic of our research.

*Translation of the image copy: ‘Re-Build Yourself. A Year Challenge’, a livestream course one can purchase from the website.

28 https://re-self.ru/svoe-delo-v-internete
It’s worth mentioning Vlasova is not building her lifehacks out of nothing (which many nowadays self-help gurus sin) — she took a trip from not knowing what she wanted to being a successful online entrepreneur by herself. This journey involved experiments with dieting, meditation, psychology, not speaking of multiple job switches in order to be economically where she’s now.

The section of Vlasova’s website which supposedly generates most of its income, is called ‘Come Back Different’ — and when we click on this headline, we’re redirected to a self-standing website devoted to a retreat project. Together with her husband, Vlasova organizes retreat trips, mostly to Asia. During the retreats, their participants eat healthy food, meditate, do sport, and overall ‘clean their thoughts’. There’re multiple types of retreat programs organized by Vlasova, some of them happening in already existing retreat centers (since the idea itself is not new). After a few years of running her programs in the existing retreat facilities, in 2018, Vlasova started building her own retreat center on an island of Sumbawa, in Indonesia.
Let us summarize:

- **Product**: book, livestreams/recordings, retreat programs
- **Supporting free content**: blog posts, regular digest (only for subscribers) to their email box – ‘a selection of curious sources on the subject of conscious change’
- **Additional platforms**: Facebook, Instagram, VK.com
- **Income model**: own sales
- **Selected quote from an interview**:

  **[Journalist]**: “Olesya, any product in a [successful blogger’s] hands starts having its meaning. It’s often used by famous people to advertise something…”

  **[Olesya Vlasova]**: “Ads are just a form of monetization. I don’t use them as such because I prefer selling products I’ve created by myself.”

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A blogger from Stockholm Ira Stomberg has 25ish thousand subscribers on YouTube (it’s less than the video bloggers mentioned above have, but still it’s a solid number). She grew up in Moscow and moved first to Israel when she was a teenager to spend eleven years there. Since she was a child, she has though liked a lot all things Scandinavia. When demobilized from the Israeli army, her parents bought her a trip to Stockholm as a gift. It was her first time in the Swedish capital, and she fell in love with it. In a couple of years, she moved to Sweden, first to pursue her Master’s, and later she stayed in Stockholm to live there.

Soon, she started working as a tour guide showing her favorite city to its visitors. Since at the time she had an eight-months old daughter, she came up with an idea to run tours for mums where they could come with their baby carriage or a sling. The ‘sling tours’ became very popular and brought Stomberg a certain recognition. Now, she runs different types of tours, for individuals and groups, she’s a licensed tour guide, and this is supposedly a major stream of her income.

In one of the recent videos, she said she started her YouTube channel because she wanted to “find her people”: “I wanted people on my tours who already knew who I was. Social networks...
break the ice before you meet them in person. With those who watch me [on YouTube], we already speak kind of the same language, and the whole tour goes much smoother”

*Iga Stomberg’s page on Viewstockholm.com.

Not hard to guess Stomberg’s videos are about all things Stockholm and Sweden in general, but not only. To mention some headlines: ‘Let’s Cook Swedish Cheesecake Together’, ‘What Swedes Think of Norwegians. Funny Stereotypes’, ‘Christmas in Stockholm. Fabulous Shop Windows and the Gingerbread Houses’, ‘Questions for Freelancers. What About Pension?’, ‘Promotion of a Small Business in Social Networks. What I Do’, and others. In some of her videos, she incorporates ads (for example, she introduces a language school she works with) – i.e. produces sponsored videos.

Being a mother of now two little ones led Stomberg to an idea of a baby-related business. A self-standing website/eshop in Swedish and also English sells her what’s called sling beads, neck jewelry for young mothers which will entertain a child during breastfeeding or when he’s just sitting in the mum’s hands. There’s also a blog on the website coming as a ‘supporting content’. With her jewelry, Stomberg targets Swedish mums, and her niche is ecological sling beads made of natural materials.

31 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nZmEGJkh4o&t=3007s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8nZmEGJkh4o&t=3007s)
32 [https://www.tombjorn.com/](https://www.tombjorn.com/)
With her Stockholm friend, Stomberg also hosts a podcast\(^{33}\) where they regularly discuss various lifestyle topics. On her website mentioned in the headline, one can find blog posts on topics connected to Sweden and order a city tour.

Let us summarize:

- **Product**: city tours (own sales), jewelry (own sales), sponsored content (language school videos), competency sales
- **Supporting free content**: YouTube videos, podcasts, blogposts
- **Additional platforms**: Instagram, Facebook, VK.com
- **Income model**: YouTube income, own sales via a self-standing eshop

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\(^{33}\) [https://anchor.fm/davaypochesnoku](https://anchor.fm/davaypochesnoku)
9) YouTube channel Anastacia Kay\(^{34}\) and website www.anastaciakay.com

On her YouTube channel (which is the main focus of her online efforts), Anastacia Kay talks about topics of learning, productivity, work, planning, time management, efficiency, learning languages, education, and everything that touches upon improving oneself when it comes to things both personal and professional.

She calls those topics ‘an ever-burning passion of mine’. Because she’s currently pursuing her Master’s in cognitive science at Harvard University, she can focus a lot on truly scientific recommendations in her videos (in oppose to so ubiquitous ‘lifehacks’). For this reason, one cannot really call her a lifestyle or self-help blogger. Some topics of her videos to mention: ‘4 Business Books That Everyone Should Read’, ‘How I Keep a Diary in Harvard’, ‘Time Management. Biorhythms and Productivity: How To Synchronize Them’, and others.

Kay is originally from Belarus, and since she was little, she moved around Europe with her family a lot. She lived in Belgium, Hungary, Austria, and Slovenia before she moved to the US for the studies. The blogger speaks seven languages to various extent.

\(^{34}\) https://www.youtube.com/user/funastacia
On the website, she duplicates her YouTube videos.

There’s also the ‘about’ section and the link to an eshop called ‘Favorites’ where Kay gathered all her favorite beauty products, gear, books, food, supplements, and services too. Most of the listed products have affiliated links, and one can purchase them on Amazon, iHerb, Ozon, and other eshops (where Kay receives her margin from each purchase):
*In the picture: Extract from the ‘Favorites’ section of the website.

Links to services like Airbnb, Booking.com, Flow, G Suite, and many others can also be found there. Also, Kay advertises a few hotels in the ‘Leisure’ section of the eshop (for one of them, she made a sponsored video in the past). Presumably, when a customer is navigated to the hotel’s website from Key’s one and makes a purchase, she gets a commission. The section ‘Coupons’ provides visitors with the opportunity to purchase products in other eshops on discount (now, there’re available coupons for iHerb).

When it comes to the development of her income model, Kay mentions in one of her videos that most of all she’s interested in creating trainings and workshops, i.e. various ‘speaking content’\(^\text{35}\). However, she confesses she’s “not there yet”.

Let us summarize:

- **Product**: affiliated products
- **Supporting free content**: YouTube videos
- **Additional platforms**: Instagram, Facebook, VK.com
- **Income model**: YouTube income, affiliated product sales via eshop
- **Selected quote**: “If you decided to launch your own YouTube channel, keep in mind that for the first at least 12 months you won’t earn more than 2-3 euro per month…”.

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\(^\text{35}\) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NE8HNY7GA8k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NE8HNY7GA8k)
A native Romanian speaker, Nicoreta Meitert launched her channel in 2013. (She now lives in Germany). As a certified teacher of Romanian as a foreign language, she once realized how scarce the resources for learning and teaching it were. Since she was passionate about the subject, she created her project to help Romanian learners worldwide. Her educating YouTube videos are designed to be successful with English speakers (i.e. they’re teaching Romanian from English). Some of them are role-playing. In 2017, Nico published a self-titled textbook ‘Learn Romanian with Nico’ which can be purchased either from her website or on Amazon:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzKrAcUGNwkSMOhLgNuQAwg
In the picture: One can buy Nico’s book either on her website or Amazon.

There’re multiple videos on YouTube devoted to learning languages, and only some of them – such as Nico’s ones – are based on a personal brand of the teacher. We don’t know much about her, and it looks like she doesn’t really try to be visible and known out there online for anything else, but her little project (which, still, has an identifiable income model).

In the ‘Shop’ section of her website, one can buy, apart from the book, Romanian gift cards hand-painted by Nico herself:

Here’s one of the recent Nico’s Instagram posts in which she calls what she’s doing online a ‘project’.
Let us summarize:

- **Product**: book, gift cards
- **Supporting free content**: YouTube videos
- **Additional platforms**: Facebook, Instagram
- **Income model**: YouTube income, own sales/eshop
Rohit Bhargava belongs to the early fraternity of bloggers writing about marketing. This is how he started building a community around himself and his personal brand back in 2004.

Being involved in the corporate marketing world for about fifteen years, he emphasizes he’s not ‘a sort of guy who says: “Quite your job because you should do what you’ve always dreamt of doing. You know, we got to support ourselves. <…> You can be an entrepreneur on the side while you work for somebody else”’. The interview was published in 2012, and now Bhargava is no longer a corporate guy, and his online project is what (supposedly) supports him. He is also an author of six business books and teaches marketing, innovation, and storytelling at a university. He frequently speaks at various marketing- and brand-related events.

On Bhargava’s website, one can read blog posts (some of them are non-authored), watch useful videos, buy his books as well as order him (and his company – called The Non-Obvious Company) as a business consultant (the illustration below).

As mentioned above, Bhargava is also available for speaking engagements (in a typical year, he delivers between 30 and 40 talks).

He also runs a YouTube channel[^37] which now has only 461 subscribers and presumably doesn’t generate much of an income.

[^37]: https://www.youtube.com/user/rohitbhargava/videos
Let us summarize:

- **Product:** books, consulting, speaking engagements
- **Supporting free content:** blog posts, Vimeo videos, YouTube videos, testimonials
- **Additional platforms:** Twitter, Facebook (not updated), LinkedIn, Instagram
- **Income model:** own product sales via eshop, selling competency
- **Selected quote:** “The thing I’ll never do is sell or promote any of my books or other efforts from the stage. No one likes it. <…> My only goal now is to make sure your audience gets the most value … and not generating leads for myself. For that reason, with a rare exception, I typically don’t participate in events that are networking only”.
Tanya Rybakova’s project is now eight years old. It all started by chance. Rybakova was surfing the web and stumbled upon a weight loss contest run by some women’s forum. To participate, people were supposed to send their ‘before’ and ‘after’ pictures – the award for the winner was 1000 RUB (around 14 EUR) put on their phone account. Rybakova won the contest by sharing her pictures before and after she lost 55 kilograms:

![Before and after pictures](image)

After that, she started receiving messages from women asking for her advice on how to lose weight. She said she had replied to all messages and even created a community on the Russian social networking site Vk.com. Because of this, she had gained some popularity and was soon invited to take part as an expert in a video of a YouTube fitness channel. This was, she says, how she discovered ‘the whole new world of YouTube’.

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38 [https://www.youtube.com/user/tanyarybakova](https://www.youtube.com/user/tanyarybakova)
Her channel has almost half a million of subscribers, and their questions on dieting and all things healthy living are what often serve as a topic for next video. Not only Rybakova shares her experience on weight loss, but also, she has obtained professional education in the field during those years. Her videos are devoted to multiple aspects of slim body and healthy mind. To mention some: ‘How to Choose Food in a Store’, ‘How to Avoid Depression’, ‘Top 5 Reasons You Don’t Loose Weight’, ‘Carrot Cake: A Low-Fat Recipe’, and ‘Learn How Your Clothes Create Your Mood’.

Her website is a comprehensive guide on healthy living. It contains blog posts (which don’t duplicate videos), announcements of new YouTube videos, interviews, recipes, and an archive of world media publications about Tanya. She was featured, for example, in the British Daily Mail Online, The Sun, Mirror, Russian Cosmopolitan, and many others:
As Rybakova says, her major source of income (which brings more money than ads in social networks) is the educational platform, which is also a part of her website. On this platform (which is located behind the tab ‘Shop’), she sells: her two books, various courses on dieting and healthy leaving, private consultations, a video book, training plans. One of her courses gives to its subscribers, amongst others, an access to a gated forum with premium content.

Apart from her own project as such, Rybakova is a collaborator on ‘external’ projects. For example, she developed a menu for a few restaurants and a healthy food delivery service. She works a lot with brands by advertising their products within her own project and on other platforms. She’s now also a TV presenter.

Let us summarize:

- **Product:** books (regular and video), online programs, Skype consultations
- **Supporting free content:** blog posts, YouTube videos, customers’ testimonials, media coverage archive
- **Additional platforms:** Instagram, VK.com, Facebook, OK.ru, Viber (public account), Tik Tok
- **Income model:** YouTube income, Instagram income, own sales/eshop, sponsored content
- **Selected quote:**

> [Journalist]: “Your business is based on teaching people how to lose weight. Do you have any other sources of income?”

> [Tanya Rybakova]: “No, I don’t. This is my life now. I sell a number of services: consultations <…>, a nutrition plan based on a questionnaire, an online course, and others. <…>

In 2011, I started making videos, being interested in SMM, and learning from other bloggers who had millions of subscribers <…> Imagine; I simply googled ‘What Is a Blogger’ and ‘How to Become a Blogger’

39. <…>

I act intuitively and try to read a lot about brand journalism. <…>

I started consulting for money only <some time ago> when I realized that YouTube didn’t pay bloggers well. I had to either search for a job or monetize what I was already working on.

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My first Skype consultations costed 30-40 dollars each. I helped people to develop a healthy menu which suited their lifestyle. I had 2-3 calls like that a day. <…>

When my channel grew to about 30 thousand subscribers, I received my first commercial offer – to advertise a cream which I had myself already used for a longer time. For that video, I was paid around 500 dollars. <…>

Now, most of my ads are created via social networks, plus we’re putting our hands into targeting.  

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In the picture: Free Publicity School – Online courses and community. “We’ll help you become a successful author, build an ecological personal brand, increase the number of clients, and income from your business”.

What is meant by ‘free publicity’ here is a type of self-promotion (either of a business or individual) which ‘doesn’t cost a dime’\(^\text{43}\). This is when one carries positive newsworthy stories about their company or products; those stories are published in various media (mass media, blog, social networks etc.), and the brand awareness is growing amongst the target audience. This is how you ‘make a name’ which can further sell products.

Free Publicity School was born on the basis of this concept. It teaches people how to write texts, publish them, and overall grow their brand through publications.

The school was founded by Ekaterina Inozemtseva, an author who also gained her popularity in the net. Her own story started when Forbes Woman Russia published her article on how to be a wife of a startuper\(^\text{44}\). Inozemtseva, who’s not a professional journalist, was surprised such a prestigious media accepted her work. This article was followed by others, developing the same topic. Her efforts earned her husband’s business a positive (and free) online reputation.

\(^{43}\) [https://consultantjournal.com/blog/what-is-free-publicity](https://consultantjournal.com/blog/what-is-free-publicity)

\(^{44}\) Here: a person who takes part in a startup, a young businessman (Inozemtseva’s husband was the one at the time).
Later, she published a book, also devoted to the topic of startups, in one of the most renowned country’s publishing houses. “People think that writing is a Holy cow, and you can’t get published unless you’re a professional journalist”, - says Inozemtseva in one of her interviews. “However, the times have changed, and today everyone can publish interesting and useful content. The era of journalism of personal experience has come”\textsuperscript{45}.

The online school was launched in 2016. In the beginning, its main course was teaching how to write 3 articles in 10 days and get them published in the popular media. On their way, students do homework and receive qualified feedback to it. Now, the subjects thematically expanded, and the school offers courses, such as: ‘Writing a Book in 90 Days’, ‘Personal Brand’, ‘Storytelling for Business’, ‘Strong Text’, ‘Ads in Social Media’, and many others. The courses are made in a form of webinars, video lessons, practical home tasks, offline workshops, books, case studies, Q&A sessions, and other ‘genres’ (a premium version of one of the courses even includes a retreat on Bali). All courses can be purchased from the website – some of them at once, and some – with a limited (for example, one-year) access.

There’s also a notable offer for people who want that free publicity but are out of time to develop it little by little by themselves. To them, Inozemtseva and her team suggests writing a book from scratch – from an initial idea to publishing:

*In the picture: An offer called ‘A Book from Scratch’. The cost is RUB 1.5 mln. (EUR 21,652). The supporting free content contains of short demo-version of the three popular courses. There’re also multiple volume text and video testimonials prepared by former successful students – which can, no doubt, be considered as another type of non-gated content which

\textsuperscript{45} \url{https://the-accel.ru/kak-zarabatyivat-millionyi-na-neprofessionalnyih-avtorah/}
facilitates sales and, as mentioned above, supports the brand. Inozemtseva also develops her YouTube channel46 (with now 15.4 subscribers).

There’re no blog posts as such on the website, but multiple publications about the project and its author in other media. The free publicity mechanism is in its full action.

Let us summarize:

- **Product**: educational courses
- **Supporting free content**: free demo courses, students’ testimonials, YouTube videos
- **Additional platforms**: VK.com, Facebook, Instagram
- **Income model**: own sales/ eshop, YouTube income, selling competency
- **Selected quote**: “Our company’s monthly turnover is 1.5-2.5 mln. rubles47. The net profit is 30-40% of it. Each course gathers on average 150 people, and an average check is around 13 thousand rubles48”.

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46 [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_mA5JrpdJ6N5HxFlid8AaTg/featured](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_mA5JrpdJ6N5HxFlid8AaTg/featured)
47 EUR 21,652 – 36,086
48 EUR 188
The Age of Happiness is a ‘project about people who, after their 50, live brighter, more interesting, and more fun than when they were young, not afraid to reinvent themselves and make their dreams come true’ (from the ‘About the project’ section of the mentioned website).

“After 50 – is the only time of our life we don’t usually have a plan for. Right? Who makes plans for ‘after 50’? <…>”, – says its founder, a well-known journalist and former head of one of the major Russia media houses Vladimir Yakovlev.

“But there’re pioneers – those are people who find the courage to realize that they’re now given let’s say 25 years more to live, and it’s exactly the time to start living in a way they’ve ever lived before. For the new generation, this moment will happen later, when they’re 75... <…>
The perception of age is changing with the time. “

The project is ‘based’ (to whatever extend we can speak like this about an online thing) in Israel, since Yakovlev emigrated there a few years ago. The website is in two languages, Russian and English.

On the website, one can find motivational posts on the topic, interviews, and the related books reviews. When it comes to the project income, its main source are offline festivals organized by Yakovlev. Usually, there’re a few events a year held in different parts of Europe (Montenegro, Spain…) and devoted to the topic of healthy living after 50 (and later). The events include lections, workshops, concerts, yoga lessons, trainings, and a lot of communication and exchange of experience.

49 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWlZlzCsek0
On the website, visitors can also purchase different books on the topic of ‘life after 50’, by Yakovlev as well as other authors:

*In the picture: One of the books which readers can purchase on the website.

Let us summarize:

- **Product:** events, books
- **Supporting free content:** blog posts, YouTube videos, participants’ testimonials
- **Additional platforms:** Facebook, VK.com
- **Income model:** income from events/ own sales, eshop, YouTube income
15) #FollowMeTo

The world famous today, this project started in 2011 with a picture taken by occasion in Barcelona and posted on Instagram. The image of a girl turned her back to the camera dragging a man by his hand to follow her, has become viral and made people around the world to recreate their own version. The project authors, a young couple Murad and Nataly Osmann, though weren’t born famous the same day the picture was posted. It took them the next 1.5 year of posting similar pictures from their trips around the world before the project gathered its online popularity and the subscribers (now, Murad Osmann’s Instagram account has 4.1 million followers).

*In the picture: Murad Osmann’s Instagram account where all project’s ‘turned her back’ photos are being posted.*
The project storyboard hasn’t stopped at Instagram. In 2016, *Adweek* online wrote that #FollowMeTo was being turned into ‘a world of content’⁵⁰. Now, there’re also: a YouTube channel⁵¹ and two other Instagram accounts showing the backstage of the project, a website and many other online and offline projects the couple now participates in (for example, they worked on a travel show for a ‘regular’ TV channel).

Their website Followmeto.travel⁵² was born out of an idea to combine all Osmanns’ travel-related content in one place. The website is a two-language resource where one can learn the story of the project, read blog posts devoted to various touristic destinations, and watch videos.

In some of the posts, there’re native ads incorporated. To mention some: in a post on Saint Petersburg, we can find a list of best places to eat (the illustration below).

Native ads are also done in a form of interview. For example, there’s one with the general manager of the Grand Hotel Kempinski Geneva with colorful pictures of the hotel included. The couple also organizes trips to various destinations which everyone can pay for and join (the illustration below).

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⁵¹ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWx2TJ0pg2LyxN2ypL-34eQ
⁵² https://followmeto.travel/
There’s also a charity section on the website. Murad and Nataly encourage people to join a charity called Charity: Water which mission is to deliver clean water to every part of the world. Surely, we’re not taking this income source into consideration, but we can consider it a free supporting content, since it overall contributes to the positive brand of #FollowMeTo.

For sure, now, Murad and Nataly’s income doesn’t flow only from the mentioned sources. The project has become big, the couple has written two books and got involved in many other online and offline things.
Not only it’s impossible to figure out where else their income comes from (only Murad and Nataly know), but also this is, again, not a purpose of our research aimed at identifying income models (and not the real figures) which have been created by personal online brands in an online space. Identifying offline sources of income which appear as a result of developing an online project, can be a full-fledged area of further research.

Let us summarize:

- **Product:** trips
- **Supporting free content:** pictures, blog posts, videos, clients’ testimonials, charity campaign information, YouTube videos
- **Additional platforms:** Facebook (Nataly’s personal page), VK.com
- **Income model:** Instagram income, YouTube income, sponsored content/ native ads, own product sales via e-shop
4.2. Products

By ‘product’ we understand here entities offered by an online project which readers/subscribers/visitors are suggested to pay for and which they cannot have a free access to. As was mentioned above, it is not our goal to figure out whether mentioned products are actually sold and generate any income; the existence of the offer itself as well as its kinds is what interests us.

YouTube videos, for example, presumably generate income – however, we don’t consider them to be a product since viewers can have a free access to them. Below, we’re comparing types of products which the presented fifteen online personal projects offer. Those products can represent online as well as offline offers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Product</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Petr Casanova</td>
<td>• printed magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• online club membership (access to premium content: articles, closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Facebook group, add-free experience)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• books</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• dating agency</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• mobile phone covers</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• offline events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food for Vita</td>
<td>• online programs</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• offline retreats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• private Skype consultations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Manson</td>
<td>• site membership (access to premium content: articles, audios, videos,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>online courses, offline events, e-books)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Trip</td>
<td>• discounted bookings from affiliated partners (tickets, hotels, taxi,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>tour guides)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Services/Products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronika Stepanova</td>
<td>• cashbacks from affiliated partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• discounted financial and mobile products for travelers from affiliated partners (insurance, credit cards, and SIM cards)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• discounted travel-related products from affiliated partners (wallets, headphones, chargers, motion sickness pills, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie Forleo</td>
<td>• private Skype counselling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• online webinars</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• online trainings</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-self</td>
<td>• online video courses</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• online video live streams</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• offline retreats</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ira Stomberg</td>
<td>• offline city tours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• jewelry (ecological sling beads for young mothers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• affiliated partners’ products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anastacia Kay</td>
<td>• discounted affiliated partners’ products and services of all kinds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn Romanian with Nico</td>
<td>• book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• gift cards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rohit Bhagrava</td>
<td>• books</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• speaking engagements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• offline business consultancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya Rybakova</td>
<td>• books (‘regular’ and video)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• online courses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Out of the fifteen researched projects:

- 8 of them sell books
- 7 sell various types of online courses/ trainings/ workshops
- 7 sell offline events (meaning various types of events organized with the main purpose to meet the project’s author and spend some time with them)
- 6 suggest we hire an author due to his professional competency (because he’s a writer, tour guide, public speaker, nutritionist, etc.) – either online or offline
- 4 sell products of affiliated partners via discounted links and coupons
- 3 of the projects sell access to content pieces (articles) as such – either as a part of membership deal or separately
- 3 projects sell other type of original products (such as: an online dating option, postcards, phone covers, and jewelry)
- Only 2 projects ask readers to sign in for the site membership

Eight major types of the sold products were identified in our research (some of the types have their sub-types: for example, ‘competency’ meaning a project author/ authors sell themselves as specialists, includes: Skype consultations, city tours, speaking engagements, business consultancy, and service of writing a book).
4.3. Supporting free content

Online products analyzed in the previous section belong to the type of online content which has a paid access – compared to the content which has an open access. Blog posts, YouTube videos, pictures are the most common examples of such free content. We can see that in case of each of the projects, a certain amount of content (in some cases, that can also be products) is given away for free and the rest is sold. We’ll introduce two quotes below for a better explanation of the whole concept and claiming of its importance in the digital media.

In 2010, an American researcher Chris Anderson devoted one of his books entirely to free content arguing that many businesses can profit more from giving things away that they can by charging for them. Anderson examines the subject both as a part of a company’s business strategy and the growing online economy.

When it comes to the business strategy, Anderson writes: “In a regime where most of the participants are charging, freeing your content gives you a competitive advantage. <…> Anyone offering content free gains an advantage that can’t be beaten, only matched, because the competitive advantage to free - "I’ll pay you to read my weblog” – is unsupportable over the long haul. Free content is thus what biologists call an evolutionarily stable strategy. <…> It’s also a strategy that continues to work if everyone is using it, because in such an environment, anyone who begins charging for their work will be at a disadvantage. In a world of free content, even the moderate hassle of micropayments greatly damages user preference, and increases their willingness to accept free material as a substitute” (Anderson, 2010).

In his article of 2014, “Why You Shouldn’t Charge for Your Best Work”, a famous American blogger Gary Vaynerchuk writes: “Essentially, any time you are deciding what content to distribute free of cost, it needs to be a strategic decision. You need to be thinking three steps ahead. Because by giving away something for free, you’re looking to create leverage that allows you to eventually do something for profit, right? Right. So figure out what kind of content will get you what you want <…>”.

In this section, we’ll examine what kinds of content projects’ authors are willing to give away for free.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Free content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Petr Casanova</td>
<td>• articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• YouTube videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food for Vita</td>
<td>• blog posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• food recipes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• clients’ testimonials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• YouTube videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Trip</td>
<td>• articles</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• online guides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• product reviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• YouTube videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Manson</td>
<td>• articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• e-books</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• YouTube videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronika Stepanova</td>
<td>• YouTube videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• online psychological tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie Forleo</td>
<td>• YouTube videos and other videos on website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• clients’ testimonials/ stories of success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• audio training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• blog posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-self</td>
<td>• articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• regular digest sent to subscribers’ (free subscription) emails</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ira Stomberg</td>
<td>• YouTube videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• podcasts</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• blog posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anastacia Kay</td>
<td>• YouTube videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn Romanian with Nico</td>
<td>• YouTube videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rohit Bhargava</td>
<td>• Blog posts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project</td>
<td>Free Content Types</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya Rybakova</td>
<td>YouTube videos, blog posts, clients’ testimonials, media coverage archive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Publicity School</td>
<td>demo courses, clients’ testimonials, YouTube videos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Age of Happiness</td>
<td>blog posts, book reviews, YouTube videos, clients’ testimonials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FollowMeTo</td>
<td>pictures, blog posts, YouTube videos, clients’ testimonials, charity campaign information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of the fifteen researched projects:

- 15 of them use videos as a type of free content (where 13 of them are YouTube videos and 1 is a Vimeo video)
- 12 projects give ‘regular’ blog posts and website articles away for free
- 10 projects come up with original types of free content which is not repeated by other projects (namely: food recipes, online travel guides, e-books, psychological tests, audio training, articles digest, podcasts, media coverage archive, demo courses, and charity campaign information)
- Clients’ testimonials and their success stories based on the experience with author’s paid products, are a popular ‘genre’ of free content (7 projects publish them)
• 3 projects keep written product reviews – in a form of an article – on their websites (where two of them advertise own books, and one of them has reviews on affiliated partners’ products)

• Pictures: it’s clear that each platform/ article/ blog post is nowadays illustrated with pictures (it’s true for all our researched projects). However, only 1 of them use pictures as a type of free content as such, not as an illustration tool (we’re talking about FollowMeTo)
### 4.4. Additional SM platforms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Platform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Petr Casanova</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food for Vita</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, VK.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Manson</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, Twitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Trip</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, VK.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronika Stepanova</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, VK.com, OK.ru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie Forleo</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, Twitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-self</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, VK.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ira Stomberg</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, VK.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anastacia Kay</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, VK.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn Romanian with Nico</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rohit Bhargava</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya Rybakova</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, VK.com, OK.ru, Viber Public Account, TikTok</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Publicity School</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, VK.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Age of Happiness</td>
<td>Facebook, VK.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FollowMeTo</td>
<td>Instagram, Facebook, VK.com</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Out of the fifteen researched projects:

- All 15 use Facebook as an additional social media platform
- 13 have Instagram accounts
- 3 have Twitter accounts
- 11 additionally use social media platforms other than the mentioned above (including local platforms, such as VK.com)
## 4.5. Income streams

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Income streams</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Petr Casanova</td>
<td>Membership and subscription (for an offline product), own product sales via e-shop, associated own product sales, search engine ads/ display ads, YouTube income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food for Vita</td>
<td>Selling competency, own product sales via e-shop, YouTube income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Manson</td>
<td>Membership, YouTube income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Trip</td>
<td>Affiliated partners’ product sales, YouTube income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronika Stepanova</td>
<td>YouTube income, selling competency, selling own product via e-shop, crowdfunding/ donations, paywall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie Forleo</td>
<td>YouTube income, own sales via e-shop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-self</td>
<td>Own product sales via e-shop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ira Stomberg</td>
<td>YouTube income, selling competency, own product sales via e-shop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anastacia Kay</td>
<td>YouTube income, affiliated partners’ sales via e-shop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn Romanian with Nico</td>
<td>YouTube income, own product sales via eshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rohit Bhargava</td>
<td>Own product sales via e-shop, YouTube income, selling competency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanya Rybakova</td>
<td>YouTube income, Instagram income, own product sales via e-shop, sponsored content, affiliated partners’ ads, selling competency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Publicity School</td>
<td>Own product sales via e-shop, YouTube income, selling competency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Age of Happiness</td>
<td>Own product sales, YouTube income, e-shop</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Out of the fifteen researched projects:

- Except for three, all projects sell authored products via a website’s e-shop (to mention some: project authors’ books, trips, online courses, postcards, and phone covers)
- As it was already mentioned above, 6 projects sell their authors’ professional competency (‘hire me as’)
- 3 projects sell products of affiliated partners (either via e-shop or via sponsored links)
- 2 gate their premium content with the help of membership: while a part of the content is available free of charge on the website, members have access to better stuff and some other perks. In one of the mentioned cases, own author’s products are available via membership (in oppose to own products which can be sold via website’s e-shop)
- 1 exploits a ‘classical’ subscription model where subscribers get physical paper media (previously introduced online) regularly to their doors
- Two projects incorporate sponsored content. Also, one of the projects advertises partner’s products via native ads where they blend with the website/ post content and though deliver added value to readers
- Only one project hosts display ads on a website
- One project, apart from selling own products via an incorporated e-shop, has also created a separate page where it sells an associated product (the case of Petr Casanova and his online dating agency)
- One project (FollowMeTo) from its beginning was an Instagram-based project – in this case, we can say Instagram is a self-standing income source for them. 12 other projects also have their Instagram accounts, and theoretically we should also include it as an income source. In the same time, we should keep in mind that for most of the projects Instagram is more of a thing to support their brand rather than generate income

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53 Actually, more than 3 projects sell affiliated products – via their YouTube channel. However, in this chapter we consider ‘YouTube income’ as a self-standing flow of income and don’t divide it further into subtypes.
• Also, only one project asks viewers to donate money in order to support it
• Since all projects have their YouTube accounts, YouTube income is a separate source of income we need to mention here (regardless of it bringing an actual income or not)
Chapter 5

Conclusions

Conclusions

In order to define income models of fifteen selected online personal projects, we took a closer look at several aspects which played their role in its shaping.

First, we examined what kind of products (both online and offline) personal projects offer their readers/viewers/subscribers for a fee. With the help of cross-case comparison, we discovered ‘physical’ printed books are the type of products most frequently sold on projects’ websites. However, in none of the cases it’s a major source of income, but rather an imagery component. The second and third places are taken by ‘info’ products which are developed by projects’ authors, such as various types of online courses and offline events, which, in most cases, require authors’ attendance (either online or offline). This is presumably what constitutes their major source of income. Those are products which are inextricably linked to their author’s personal brand and it’s hard to imagine they’ll be sold well if the brand is gone.

Next in popularity type of a product directly connected to a personal brand, is competency. Authors market themselves as representatives of certain professions and though sell their skills – they’re either touristic guides or writers or nutritionists (etc.). Again, once the brand is gone, this source of income will be eliminated. Much less frequently personal projects are willing to sell products of affiliated partners on their websites (however, on their YouTube channels it’s not a problem). When sold on websites, this source becomes a major source of income (this happens in case of only two of the researched websites), paid careful attention to, and is supported by detailed product reviews written by authors.

Only three of the research projects sell media content as such (meaning, articles and blog posts) – two as a part of paid site membership deals and one in a form of paid access. In comparison with mainstream media literally selling articles on their websites, online personal projects (which also produce a lot of content), don’t bet on that as a major source of income. Only in one of the cases, a physical offline magazine is sold via the website by means of subscription.
A minor number of projects develop their income model even further by offering original products which are, on the one hand, connected to their brands, but, on the other, can be sold as self-standing items – for example, the mentioned phone covers or postcards.

We can conclude that personal brand underlines the nature of the majority of products. When it comes to the nature of the sold content/products, they’re very different from ‘typical’ content offered by ‘legacy’ online media. Content as such (meaning articles, blog posts, and various kinds of video content) is rather an imagery thing (with the exception of two projects) which makes it possible to sell other things.

Second, we investigated the content/products which online personal projects give away for free. We discovered it doesn’t differ from any other online media – videos, articles, blog posts, pictures are offered by 100% of online projects. Those things can be based on their authors’ personal experience (written from the first person), but not necessarily. Along with this ‘traditional’ content, personal projects offer a more ‘developed’ one: e-books, free online courses, audio trainings, psychological tests…). Those are the products which can also be offered by legacy online media, but it doesn’t happen too often. This mentioned free content usually represents demo version of the paid content (for example, a free online course as a demo version of a paid online course).

Happy clients’ testimonials are the type of free content which, in our opinion, plays a big role out of all types of the free-to-access content offered by personal projects. The length of the testimonials can reach or even exceed in some cases length of articles or blog posts. This content obviously serves paid content by encouraging readers to buy products. On the other hand, in our opinion, it can be taken as a self-standing content serving also non-commercial purpose of informing readers and motivating them. Apparently, we can read about how someone’s life has changed after they purchased an online dietary course and lost weight. In the same time, it can give us motivation to lose weight without purchasing any course. More than a half of projects use this mean to attract readers/future clients. Product reviews (including book reviews) serve the same function but are exploited by a minority of projects, usually those selling products of affiliated companies.

In comparison with paid products/content, which is different from what regular online media offer, free-to-access products/content are rather typical for all mentioned media.
Third, we created a table above giving an overview of additional (meaning other than a website or YouTube channel which are the cores of the projects\textsuperscript{54}), social media, platforms which project authors use to attract their audience. Presumably, those platforms also generate some income, but in most cases, they’re used a brand-building tool (letting more people know my brand exists out there). Nothing new was discovered here; all projects use the same platforms as both individuals and corporations use nowadays (Instagram, Facebook, VK.com and Twitter – depending on the country). In one of the cases, a LinkedIn profile of the project author is advertised on the website (this is probably important as the author markets himself as a marketing specialist with corporate experience and showing his resumé can help attract more clients). In all cases, the brand’s consistency is kept across all platforms.

Finally, we investigated where online personal projects’ incomes come from.

Advertising and own product sales (we include here both authorized products and competency as a type of product) are the two prevailing ways to monetize projects, since only for two of them the income flows from the ‘classical’ media subscription/membership. Own product sales become possible due to the development of their author’s online personal brands facilitating them.

There’s a definite cautiousness over displayed/banner ads on the websites (only one of the projects host them) – presumably, because it damages their look and also, the income flowing from those ads is questionable when audiences are not large (as they’re in case of larger online media). Instead, as it was mentioned above, advertisers’ products are rather sold via sponsored links and sponsored content (which is, still, more frequent on YouTube). Though, the classic case when an advertiser sponsors an article because there’s a mentioning of them, seem to work only for two of the researched projects.

When it comes to relying on readers/viewers supporting them in a form of donation, it’s never the main source of income for online personal projects. In fact, none of them have a donation button on their websites. In the same time, as we mentioned above, there’s one YouTube channel (which is the main related project’s platform) which asks for this kind of support.

Coming back to the given early definition of an income model (which is more than simply a variety of revenue streams and represents a high-level look at the business revenue structure) and keeping in mind our two research questions, we can observe the following:

\textsuperscript{54} With the exception of FollowMeTo where Instagram was initially a major platform
As the research shows, online personal projects exploit the same two basic income models as the legacy online media do, namely: advertising and subscriptions. However, advertising is much more in use, and subscriptions are rather rare. In the same time, there’s an entity which online personal projects borrowed from business rather than from media, which is an e-shop. Unlike media which core purposes are to inform and entertain, online personal projects direct their content efforts to readers, so they finally purchase products from their e-shop. None of the projects exist as a pure media, but rather as a business entity. In fact, those projects are digital shops where monetizing underlines content, not the other way around (as it should be, ideally, in case of media). Of course, this doesn’t mean those projects don’t still deliver an informative and entertaining content. Both online and offline products can be sold in those shops.

Online personal projects create an income model which can be described as ‘free+paid’, where they give away a lot of content for free – hoping it’ll attract readers/ viewers to eventually pay. For the legacy printed media, this situation is unimaginable: as if on let’s say Mondays and Tuesdays a newspaper was for free, and Wednesdays and Thursdays it was to be paid for. For online media gating content with the help of subscription, a model ‘paid+free’ is more applicable (meaning, if it was only possible to gate all content, if readers were willing to pay for it, they’d have done it – and sometimes, they’d have ungated some content to show loyalty to their readers). In our opinion, not only free content allows online projects’ authors sell their paid stuff, but also, it’s a mean for them to create and sculpt their online brand. Regardless coming from different parts of the world, online personal projects follow very similar income strategies. Those strategies are feasible and, in some aspects, differ from the traditional online media’s strategies.

A personal online brand plays a major role in forming of the projects’ income models. In case of those projects, we’re talking about personal branding in the context of self-marketing – and marketing implies sales. Those are business entities rather than self-presentations created for the purposes of self-expression. The shaped online identities selling products exist at intersection of entrepreneurial journalism, media entrepreneurship, and content startups. We construct ourselves via media, but also our constructed selves create new types of media. Online personal projects enabled identities to sell themselves in a cyberspace, not only as brands, but also as brands producing certain products.
• Early online personal projects (as we mentioned in the theoretical part) were run (in a form of posting regular notes) by their authors to become visible out there which would allow them to get a better job in traditional media. Nowadays, online personal projects are being created by their authors with the ultimate purpose to rather never come back to the corporate world. This can be a proof online personal projects formed a **self-standing type of media** (both as a genre and economically) which can ‘employ’ media people giving them an alternative to working for traditional (be it online or offline) media.

**Limitations and future research**

The case study methodology used in this work, is rather limited in its current state and could have been enriched, for example, by conducting interviews with the projects’ authors on their criteria when choosing a certain income strategy. Also, a larger sample of projects can be analyzed to portray the preference in income models in statistical terms (% of usage of each of the mentioned income models when, for example, 100 projects were analyzed). When it comes to the theoretical part, it could have been focused more on the available research on online personal projects as such, if such research was available – which is not the case.

A future study could focus on projects coming from one single country (for example, the US) or working in the same niche (for example, travel). The topic can also be developed in the direction of picking only one income model and examining of its applicability to various projects or online platforms. Further research on the role free content plays in today’s online media startups and forming of their income models, will also contribute to the topic.
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APPENDIX

Examples of other online personal projects future research can be focused on

1. www.matthewhussey.com and his YouTube channel

2. www.brainpickings.org

3. www.zenhabits.net

4. www.shoemakingcoursesonline.com

5. www.stodnevka.ru

6. www.womanur.com and the YouTube channel Womanur Ada Konde

7. www.senseat.ru and YouTube channel Mum of HEDONISM

8. www.nondrinker.ru

9. www.mirimanova.ru

10. www.marinamogilko.co and her YouTube channels linguamaria, Silicon Valley Girl and Marina Mogilko

55 https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9HGzFGt7BLmWDqooUbWGBg
56 https://www.youtube.com/user/WOMANUR
57 https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=masha+zolina
58 https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAQg09FkoobmLquNNoO4ulg?view_as=subscriber
59 https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCiq1FgtEK7LRAOB1JXTPig
60 https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCLJl8-mbCfoiWMkh1F1qfjA