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Can crowd-funding save journalism?

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Crowdfunding is pioneering a different relationship between reader and writer.

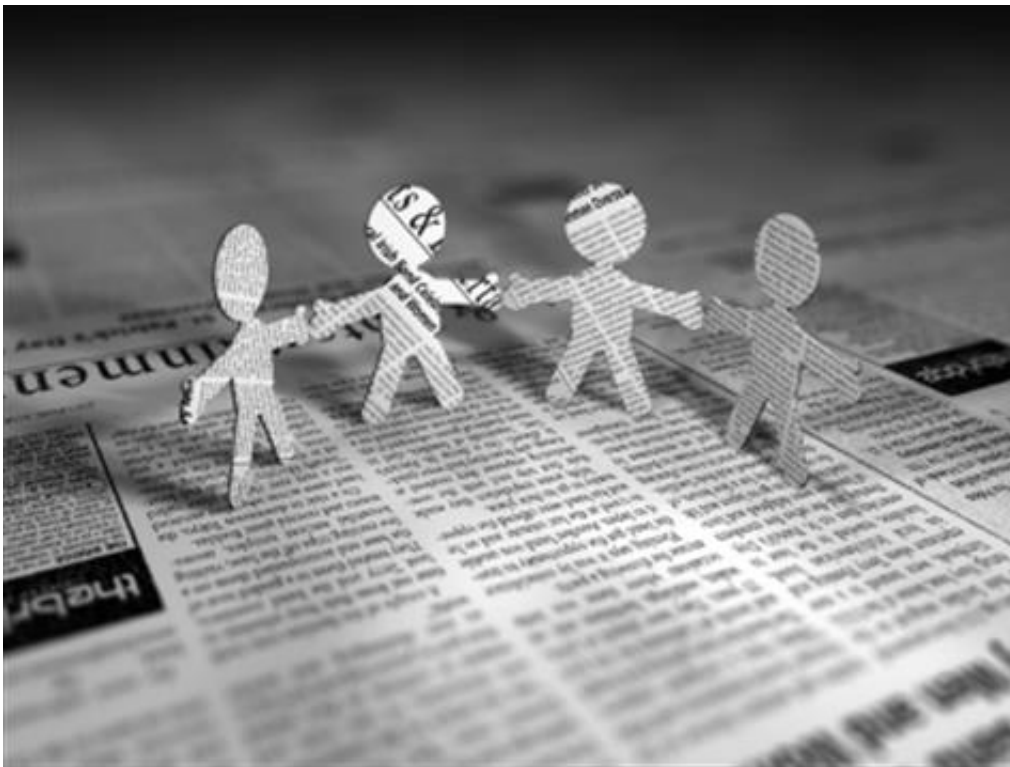


Image via *University for Peace* (http://www.monitor.upeace.org/innerpg.cfm?id_article=1052)

Some enterprising journalists are using crowd-funding to bypass the need for a big media company and serve readers directly.

In Australia, the platform that pioneered community-powered reporting was *YouCommNews* (<http://apo.org.au/website/youcommnews>) by freelance journalist Melissa Sweet and journalism academic Dr Margaret Simons. The platform, which is part of Swinburne University's Public Interest Journalism Foundation, is a not-for-profit organisation that 'uses the internet to crowd-source both ideas and resources for high quality, community driven journalism'.

Users can commission stories they want investigated and donate funds to support journalists to work on them.

Dr Simons said the platform was a response to the understanding that the business model for most large media organisations was 'profoundly challenged, probably broken'.

'The question we were all considering was whether there were other means by which public interest journalism might be supported, including via a more direct relationship between journalist and audience - without the necessary intervention of a large media company.'

YouCommNews was inspired by an American platform, Spot.Us, which also enables the public to commission journalists to report on important and often overlooked topics.

Spot.Us and YouCommNews are now closed but they have been replaced by a range of journalism specific platforms such as investigative journalism platform [Uncoverage \(http://www.uncoverage.com/\)](http://www.uncoverage.com/); community funder [Contributoria \(https://www.contributoria.com/\)](https://www.contributoria.com/) and digital journalism site [TubeStart \(https://www.tubestart.com/\)](https://www.tubestart.com/) as well as the big players like Pozible and Kickstarter.

Journalist Lindsey Hoshaw used crowdfunding to write a story on the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. When she pitched the story the *New York Times* was interested but she needed to raise \$10,000 to get on the research boat.

She used Spot.us combined with another social media format, Facebook causes and raised enough to write a story that might otherwise never have been told. 'I had nothing to lose and everything to gain. Plus it was exciting to be part of something so ambitious and revolutionary,' she said.

But Hoshaw's project still depended on old media. The *New York Times* played a significant role in giving visibility to the campaign. 'I think that was a huge part of this project's success. At first only a few people had donated - namely my mom - and I thought, 'oh man this is really not panning out the way I thought'. But as soon as Clark Hoyt wrote his article on the *NYT*—and mentioned in the story that he was donating—the money came pouring in. And we got donations from big names like Pierre Omidyar, Tim O'Reilly and Bette Midler.'

YouCommNews' Melissa Sweet, who is also founder of the public health blog Croakey, agrees that support from traditional media can still make or break an online campaign.

She witnessed its power in her campaign for the 'Wonky Health' column by Dr Tim Senior. 'Jenna Price mentioned the campaign in a Fairfax column and Dr Norman Swan also covered it on ABC radio - this publicity seemed to help in increasing the donations.'

But Australian journalist Sophie Cousins proved that freelance journalistic projects requiring a more modest sum can still be funded without big connections. In 2013 she raised \$1900, the price of a ticket to Beirut, through Pozible. Most of her backers were friends or family who knew about Sophie's drive to report on untold stories and underreported issues.

Having written for major publications such as *The Atlantic* and *Al Jazeera*, Cousins has found crowdfunding gives her more control over her work. 'You also have more time to spend at a place and with the people you're writing about, which undoubtedly means you're more well-informed.'

For Melissa Sweet, another pro in the world of community-funded journalism, is that you can address worthwhile topics that mainstream media organisations might dismiss as too 'niche' to cover regularly in-depth.

The flipside is that crowdfunding takes a lot of time, energy and dedication. 'It relies on having an engaged digital community of interested people. It helped enormously that Tim Senior is very engaged with Twitter and shares a lot of useful information and commentary. He brought a loyal following to the campaign.'

But should journalists cultivate a fan base, like musicians, or a set of patrons and buyers, like artists? Lindsey Hoshaw is sceptical about the idea, asserting that journalists should be cautious in thinking of themselves as celebrities: 'It's important to have supporters and people who believe in your project. But these should be engaged citizens that are interested in the project not 'fans' who idolize the reporter.'

Simons agrees. 'Fan base is not a term I would use. A direct connection and responsiveness to users/public/audience absolutely. Relationships of trust, absolutely. The journalist is now the 'brand', not, or not only, the media outlet.'

Simmons forecasts that community-funded journalism will be important in the future, particularly for stories that have a tight community of interest.

But for the journalists is it a sustainable strategy? Cousins is cautious: 'I would definitely consider it for long-term projects I'd like to pursue. But I do think there's a fine line between having good intentions and asking people for too much.'

Lindsay is also unsure if she'd be able to replicate her success: 'It was a great experiment but a lot of things had to come together to make that project successful. And there was an element of serendipity.' She thinks community-funded reporting is great for one-off stories, but is not necessarily sustainable in the long term.

Sweet is a believer. She hopes that her Croackey campaign has laid the groundwork to find other ways of funding an ongoing column. Indeed she will be soon launching a new crowdfunding project, a campaign to support a

prolonged series of articles about the need to address over-incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as a critical health and social justice concern.

To journalists who would like to give community-funded journalism a go, Margaret Simmons recommends: 'Get on social media. Work at developing the relationship of trust with the audience. Pitch well, and promote. Maintain trust. It is not easy money - it actually takes a lot of work. But it is possible to fund journalism through this method.'

'Make sure you have all the elements in place,' echoes Lindsey Hoshaw. 'You've researched the story, you have a place to publish it, you create an engaging campaign video. Get people interested and excited by the story, so you have some buy in and people who want to see you succeed.'

Sophie Cousins insists on the importance of accountability: 'Be absolutely sure you can carry out what you say you're going to do. In addition, so many people are crowdfunding these days, what makes your story special? Why should people back you? These are important questions that need to be asked.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Naima Morelli is an arts writer and curator who specialized in Italian contemporary art and art from the Asia-Pacific area.