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Crowdfunding Culture in Catalonia: The Revival of Civil Society?

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When Antoni Gaudí took over the Sagrada Família project in 1883, the initially planned neo-Gothic church—which had come into existence by a private initiative in 1860—steadily transformed into one of the most sophisticated architectural endeavors of the XXth. century. The project relied entirely on charitable donations, so rapid completion of the temple had never been envisaged. As Gaudí once declared, “the expiatory church of la Sagrada Família is made by the people and is mirrored in them. It is a work that is in the hands of God and the will of the people”.¹ For more than a century now, Barcelona’s most iconic temple has been raised with small donations from people, and final completion is just an estimate: sometime between the years 2026 and 2028.

Donations, subscriptions, fundraising campaigns, etc. are all based on the idea to collect money from large groups of people to support projects and initiatives. In the last few years, though, the term “crowdfunding” has gained popularity when referring to the effort of channeling a myriad of droplets into the bucket. Crowdfunding also taps the collective resources of the crowd to raise money for innumerable causes: produce a film or an album, organize a concert, publish a book, launch a satellite, test seaweeds as a potentially sustainable food, or build a submarine to explore the ocean depths, to mention just a few of them. Crowdfunding is about engaging people to contribute to projects, usually by donating small amounts of money. What then distinguishes crowdfunding from other traditional fundraising campaigns?

A distinctive component of the new generation of crowdfunding models is its symbiotic relation with the Web 2.0, also known as the “social Web”.

1 <http://www20.gencat.cat/portal/site/afersexteriors/menuitem.548116b848978a59fea66dfbb0c0e1a0/?vgnextoid=4b2796da04550310VgnVCM1000008d0c1e0aRCRD&vgnextchannel=4b2796da04550310VgnVCM1000008d0c1e0aRCRD&vgnnextfmt=detail&contentid=4e69817f3059e210VgnVCM2000009b0c1e0aRCRD>.

Crowdfunding thrives to the conversational streams of the social web and contributes to generate new ones. Unlike precedent fundraising campaigns, crowdfunding fully embraces seamless connectivity and interaction: donors are certainly expected to contribute, but they are also encouraged to comment, ask, share, and participate. And, by actively engaging people, crowdfunding open calls are able to build new online communities, which in turn contribute to expanding the social graph. In the end, a successfully achieved crowdfunding goal is more than the sum of its donations: it is a shared co-production.

While both the goals and the expected outcomes of crowdfunding campaigns are usually anchored in the physical world, none of them would happen without harnessing the vast resources of the Web 2.0. From a technological standpoint, the tools of the Web 2.0 have lowered the barriers to online fundraising: in its simplest form, it may take setting a web page and a payment gateway to channel donations (although this will need up to be supported with a sustained effort of planning, sharing, and engaging through social networks). In a few years, though, a number of online platforms especially dedicated to support collective fundraising have fueled the emergence of new crowdfunding models. Kickstarter, the world's largest and most popular crowdfunding platform, was founded in New York in 2009. At present, there are approximately 450 active platforms worldwide, and by the end of 2013 they will globally raise an annual estimate of 5.1 billion US\$ for social causes (30%), business and entrepreneurship (16.9%), films and performing arts (11.9%), music and recording arts (7.5%), energy and environment (5.9%) and other initiatives (28%).² The dominant players are the North American and European platforms, with 59% and 35% of the market share respectively.³

A most striking fact is that, as of July 2013, 30 of these 450 crowdfunding platforms were currently based in Catalonia. With a population of 7.5 million, this ratio makes Catalonia a special case in point calling for further examination. Why has such a rich crowdfunding ecosystem emerged in Catalonia over the past three years? Although there is little data on the detailed number of crowdfunding campaigns, percentage of successful outcomes, volume of funds raised per platform, etc. one of the pioneering platforms, Verkami, provides some hints on the phenomenon.

Verkami was launched in December 2010 in Mataró (Barcelona) by the initiative of "a father and his two sons: Joan, Adrià and Jonàs Sala, a biologist, an art historian and a physicist".⁴ None of them had previous experience in

2 See <http://www.crowdsourcing.org/editorial/crowdfunding-industry-trends-and-statistics-infographic/25662>.

3 Idem.

4 <http://www.verkami.com/page/about>.

crowdfunding, but they realized that their initiative—inspired by the success of Kickstarter and the like in North America—could fill a gap in Catalonia. Two years later, with more than 1,200 projects and 5.49 € million raised from more than 141.000 patrons—as contributors are known in the platform—Verkami has become the largest crowdfunding platform in South Europe.⁵ According to its founders, “Verkami campaigns represent a 75 percent of the total successful campaigns in Spain (from which 30–40 are Catalan projects, and nearly three out of four projects pledging funds in Verkami end up being funded”).⁶ No surprise, then, if the expression “let’s make a verkami” has become trendy among the cultural and creative milieux.

Verkami was the platform that film producer Isona Passola chose to raise funds for *L’endemà* [*The day after*], a documentary on the scenario that an eventual independence of Catalonia would open. After a 40-day campaign, the project collected 348,830 € from 8,101 backers, largely exceeding the initially pledged 150,000 €, and became the largest crowdfunded project in Europe. *L’endemà* illustrates how crowdfunding campaigns, by tapping profusely into social media, are able to strike a chord in audiences who share the values and goals that projects bear. In some cases, crowdfunding campaigns target inner circles of supporters and/or larger crowds of potential promoters of cultural and artistic initiatives (books, music, cinema, drama, dance, etc.); in some others, they rely on social media word of mouth to create new communities of support. The second largest project crowdfunded via Verkami was *Ictineu III*, a cutting-edge submersible research project aimed at oceanographic exploration. Scientific research has only timidly started to venture into crowdfunding, so the success of *Ictineu III* is nonetheless impressive (more than 60,000€ raised). Actually, the tiny yellow submarine is presented in the project as the heir of a pride-awakening Catalan saga: “the first manned submersible built in Catalonia since Mr. Monturiol built the first *Ictineos* in 1859 and 1864”. Who could resist?

In Catalonia, crowdfunding platforms have blossomed under a severe economic crisis, so dramatic cuts in public expenditure and R&D funding, together with the draining of credit by the banking sector may certainly have inclined creative, artistic, scientific, and entrepreneurial talent to consider crowdfunding as an alternative source. However, the recent economic downturn cannot be the only explanation of the phenomenon, since other European regions undergoing similar stress have fallen short of breeding such an ecosystem. Other variables should therefore be considered, such as the role played by the

5 <http://www.elpuntavui.cat/noticia/article/2-societat/5-societat/661895-catalunya-es-una-potencia-en-micromecenatge.html>.

6 *Idem*.

particularly dense network of groups, movements, organizations, associations, etc. that have traditionally articulated Catalan civil society. Perhaps paradoxically, the withdrawal of public entities as culture promoters, festival organizers, or event sponsors—especially at the municipal level, where the tendency to phagocytize the cultural sector has been predominant—has given Catalan civil society organizations a second wind. In this new context of forced devolution, crowdfunding platforms have timely lowered the technological barriers for these groups to take the lead, providing them with new tools to coordinate efforts, communicate, and disseminate. Nevertheless, and very much like the Sagrada Família cannot be fully understood without Gaudí's reference to “the will of the people”, the analysis of the crowdfunding phenomenon in Catalonia requires a wider look to incorporate the socio-political dimension of this new period into the picture.