

Not Just Another Crowd: A Historical Survey of Community-Based Publishing

David K. O'Hara

Abstract

For too long the history of crowdfunding has been written, read, and interpreted from within a rubric of capitalism, seeing the former as merely a version of the latter rather than a viable alternative. Moreover, what has come to form the backstory of crowdfunding in popular media typically involves one or more of the following test cases: the funding of the Statue of Liberty plinth; Mozart's selling of sheet music to publicly fund a concerto; and Alexander Pope's gathering together a list of subscribers to invest in his translation of *The Iliad*. However, each of these provide us with not only a simplified understanding of history but of what we actually refer to when we talk about crowdfunding today. 'Not Just Another Crowd: A Historical Survey of Community-Based Publishing' seeks to correct this historical record, with particular emphasis on Pope's publishing history, in order to show the way in which crowdfunding is, in fact, but the most contemporary iteration of community-based publishing. More importantly, the article ultimately makes the case that crowdfunding (and community-based publishing generally) offers customers a viable alternative to traditional capitalist business models, one that replaces the transactional, consumer/seller relationship of the marketplace by instead offering exercises in community building and investment.

Key Words

Crowdfunding. Alternative Funding Models. Community-Based Publishing. Kickstarter. Alexander Pope. John Taylor. William Morris.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Crowdfunding

Research crowdfunding today (what it means, how it relates to contemporary business) and you are more than likely to find yourself encountering the same details repeatedly.

Crowdfunding is not a new business model, you will be told, because we can point to at least three notable precedents, three touchstones that are meant to illustrate the legitimacy of using 'the crowd' as a funding tool. The financing of the plinth on which the statue of liberty was to be constructed in 1885 stands as one standard example, with William Pulitzer sourcing micro-investments by selling dollar replicas of the future Lady Liberty to a souvenir-hungry public. A second exemplary story involves Mozart's exchanging manuscript copies of sheet music for financial backing to perform a series of concertos; like many campaigns today, we are assured, 'Mozart failed to reach his funding goal' on his first attempt, but he persevered, revised his marketing strategy, and was ultimately successful (Clarkson 2015).

But the earliest, and perhaps most archetypal case of early crowdfunding is that of Alexander Pope (1688-1744) who famously 'kickstarted' his six-volume translation of *The Iliad* in 1713 (Kazmark, 2013). Rather than relying on the financial support of a single patron, Pope instead sought a broader network of society elites who could chip-in prior to publication. For just a modest sum, so the story goes, each of Pope's 'subscribers' would receive printed acknowledgement of their support as well as a luxury edition of each volume. Pope published the first volume of his translation in 1715 and, in this way, successfully pioneered what we now call crowdfunding. Indeed, his subscriber-backed *Iliad* is regularly trucked out in order to exemplify what we mean by crowdfunding and how this practice has a long history as a profitable business model. Kickstarter references Pope's translation on their website (in a blog post entitled 'Kickstarter before Kickstarter', 2003). It has further been cited approvingly in think pieces in *Atlantic Monthly* ('Kickstarters of Yore: Mozart, Lady Liberty and Alexander Pope', Garber 2013), *The Financial Times* ('How to Crowdfund Your MBA', Conboye 2013), and *The Daily Beast* ('Only in the Age of Crowdfunding: \$40K Potato Salad', Siese 2014). Numerous media outlets such as *Virgin.com* ('A Brief History of Crowdfunding', Clarkson 2015) mention Pope in order to evidence a deep

understanding of the *au courant* topic, effectively reading the advent of Kickstarter and Indiegogo as something that naturally evolved out of Pope's apparent success story.

However, the history of Pope's seemingly foundational crowdfunding experiment is rather less straightforward, and far from grassroots in its ethos. The backers of his translation were in fact required to invest one guinea per volume — a sizeable sum at the time, equivalent to 'six times the actual printing cost' (Weitzman 2015). In addition, Pope already had the backing of his publisher, Bernard Lintot, who had purchased Pope's copyright — literally the right to print copies, as newly established in The Queen Anne Copyright Act of 1710 — for a likewise hefty £200 per volume, surely one of the more optimistic book deals of the period. Along with the initial backing of 575 subscribers for circa 660 copies, Pope reportedly secured £5,310 16s for himself prior to publication (all figures quoted in De Quincey, 119-120). However, when the first volume was published in 1715, trade sales fell far short of Lintot's expectations, and the losses were such that the scale of printing had to be greatly reduced for subsequent volumes.

As Margo Weitzman stresses, Pope had gone out of his way to specifically attract the patronage of literary society, occasionally advertising to literate women readers specifically. Yet the same cannot be said of his marketing to middle class readers more generally: It is possible that if Pope had understood the middle class in the same way he understood his women patrons as readers, he might have been much more successful in selling his volumes

[...] London's literate population consumed massive quantities of texts during Pope's time, from his poetry to newspapers and scandal sheets. Had Pope better understood London's readership and literary climate, he could have established a more confident and efficient plan that fulfilled the expectations of his initial contract with Lintot. Subscriptions were popular during the time of Pope's *Iliad*, but Pope and Lintot relied too heavily on their upper-class

and elite subscribers to provide the bulk of the sales in a time of increased readership among the less wealthy. They failed to recognize that a cross-section of the middle class could have easily filled the gap, as could libraries in London and surrounding provinces that provided free books to those who could not afford the cheaper trade copies. (Weitzman 2015)

In other words, the people to whom Pope's translation was most attractive were only negligibly involved in its publication — the crowd, in this case, was rather select. We might even question whether Pope's 'subscribers,' by investing in his project, did anything more than boost the author's standing within a select stratum of society. Financially-speaking, he seems to have been the only one to have benefited from the project. Could the case not be made that Pope is really in fact a premier exponent of vanity publishing (as opposed to the pioneer of crowdfunding he is touted as)?

By reading the essence of crowdfunding through the example of Pope's micropatronage, we not only simplify the historical record, we seem also to be overlooking the whole ethos that drives this unconventional business model. Instead of properly differentiating crowdfunding from the traditional marketplace, we see it merely as a substitute: a version of consumers successfully targeted, marketed to, and exploited for their disposable incomes. To put it even more pointedly, crowdfunding, more often than not, tends to be framed within the logic of capitalism. The crowd, in this rubric, is merely a group of potential consumers who postpone their consumption and/or make a preliminary purchase that goes to fund a larger business enterprise. In the case of Pope, elite patrons were willing to wait for the chance to be associated with his future work, offering him an incredible store of profits up-front.¹ In a case like that of Mozart's manuscripts, it was a matter of getting a 'crowd' to invest by offering them a proxy product — the composer wants to finance a concerto, he sells off paratextual ephemera instead. The same goes for Pulitzer's peddling dollar souvenirs to fund the Statue of Liberty plinth. We hold all of the above as benchmarks in crowdfunding, yet there is little more to our analysis than observing a 'crowd' of consumers purchasing

something that indirectly went to fund a business enterprise. Our definition of crowdfunding typically ends there. Never mind that Pope took most of the money for himself and only sold his books to a limited readership. Never mind that Mozart, unlike Pope, remained financially strapped. Never mind that those paying a dollar to Pulitzer may have been doing it for far more than just a souvenir.

From Subscriptions to Community

By the time Pope had the idea to translate his Greek classics, there already existed a whole culture of subscription-based publishing. Tellingly, his methods were not all that different from that of many artists — poets, playwrights, and painters — who have sought wealthy benefactors to sponsor their work *throughout* history. Pope's sole innovation seems to be his combining of a subscription plan with the sale of his copyright (and, indeed, the misguided enthusiasm of his publisher) — something only possible after the Copyright Act of 1710. As we have seen, Pope drew not only a considerable amount of investment from his 575 subscribers in 1715 (and another £3,085 5s for his translation of *The Odyssey* published in 1723) but also an exorbitant sum from his publisher for the right to publish this work.

Publishing to a list of subscribers, however, had been an important part of English literary culture going back more than a century. The real pioneer in this regard was the self-educated, self-styled Water Poet, John Taylor (1578 – 1653).² At the time of Taylor's unorthodox business methods, the publishing landscape was structured less to benefit authors than the booksellers who themselves paid for publication and sold the books.

From around the 1580s onwards, a class of professional authors had begun to emerge. Some relied on aristocratic patrons, but others were able to take advantage of the growing audience for print and pioneer a different form of patronage. The conventional business relationship was with an undertaker, most often a bookseller, who put up the capital for publication. They either commissioned works from authors or accepted proposals. In turn they paid the author, paid the printer for

producing the work, and while bearing much of the risk also took much of any profit to be had. The undertaker also owned the copyright for any reprints. Authors tended not to do well from this deal. Sometimes payment was in kind, for instance free copies of the book, which the author could sell themselves or sell to other wholesalers. Other times it was a fixed fee: a 1624 book, *The Schollers Purgatory Discovered*, mentions a fee of 40 shillings for ‘some needy IGNORAMUS to scribe [sic]’ whatever the stationer desired. (Poyntz 2011)

The role of the early modern bookseller was thus broadly analogous to that of the modern day publishing house. Booksellers were the ones who covered costs for publication, who paid the author for their work, and who profited most from book sales. As Nick Poyntz (2011) explains in his article ‘Seventeenth Century Crowd Funding,’ John Taylor’s innovation lay in circumventing the intermediary bookseller and reaching his audience more directly — and he did this by mastering the art of the publicity stunt.³

For example, in 1618, Taylor wagered that he could walk from London to Edinburgh on foot and complete the journey without buying anything or begging. Instead, he would rely purely on what Poyntz refers to as ‘spontaneous offers of hospitality’. Even more remarkable are the unconventional methods Taylor employed in order to publish a travelogue of this journey, later to be titled *The Pennylesse Pilgrimage*.⁴ Rather than relying on the bookseller intermediaries of the day, he solicited subscriptions for the journey — and, by extension, the unwritten book — directly from his audience, payable only if he completed his feat. In this way, he avoided the traditional publishing circuit, inviting an audience to invest in the *raison d’etre* of the publication, rather than simply purchasing the book. If he wanted to make a journey and write a travelogue about it, he would ask his audience to sponsor the journey; in order for his travels to warrant sufficient interest they would, therefore, have to embody a stunt, or what he would punningly call his ‘travail’. By the time he set off on his

journey, Taylor's *Pilgrimage* had drawn funding from an extraordinary 1650 subscribers (Poyntz, 2011).⁵

Crude though Taylor's micropatronage model may have been, it does bring into focus the nature of crowdfunding as an alternative business model, in a way that Pope's example makes difficult. Whereas Pope seemed determined to finance *himself* as a society gentleman and genius of letters, others both before and after him have used crowdfunding to circumvent the strictures of the traditional marketplace in order to publish books to the widest readership possible. Indeed, according to Poyntz, we find Taylor in the *Pennyles Pilgrimage* 'experimenting [...] with alternatives to the established communication circuit of author, undertaker, printer and bookseller'.

The power harnessed by Taylor was that of a community drawn together to support his adventure-cum-publication. Instead of consumers exploited for their buying power, here we have people willing to invest in sponsoring something they have deemed worthwhile. Yes, Taylor's venture was almost entirely a spectacle, a quintessential early modern entertainment. Yes, the crowdfunding of his readers went almost entirely to producing a work that they might have purchased anyway, had it been presented as simply a book on a bookseller's shelf. Only now, these potential shoppers had become investors. They were not passively consuming only what was offered to them. They had coalesced into a community, sharing in the stunt and making possible the results of that stunt (i.e. Taylor's book). Through their sponsorship, they themselves — joined in ranks with the author and not some impersonal intermediary — had brought this book to fruition.

This is a key feature that has been largely overlooked in current day assessments of crowdfunding as an alternative business strategy: that crowdfunding, at its essence, does not simply entail the exploitation of consumers and does not capitalise on market demands alone. It is communal. It is a grassroots campaign in the proper political sense: it is a conscious effort on the part of a group of people to reclaim ownership of a system that has alienated them.

Community Based Publishing as an Alternative Model

As we have seen, community-based publishing is not a new feature of the industry. However, it can be brought historically into relief the more it appears to differ from the machinations of contemporary commerce. In the late 19th century, for instance, the advents of industrialisation and the expansion of a middle class readership brought about a sea change in the relationship between people and the store of print culture they could suddenly access.

Over the course of the 19th century, books and periodicals became increasingly abundant, while also becoming progressively cheaper and easier to access. These changes went hand in hand with an unprecedented explosion in mass-literacy [...] Census data can scarcely tell us much about the nature or quality of the population's encounters with the printed word, but they nevertheless show a rise in male literacy from 69.3 per cent in 1851 to 97.2 per cent in 1900, and an even more striking growth in female literacy, from 54.8 per cent to 96.8 per cent over the same period.⁶ By the end of the century, almost everyone was potentially a reader of print. (Taunton 2014)

Supported, in large part by the industrialisation of the book trade (alongside advancements in technology and education), the literary lay of the land becomes one of mass consumption, of readers collectively consuming an ocean of print on a daily basis.

In 1850-51, 83,300 families were in the £150-£400 bracket; in 1879-80 there were 285,100. Meanwhile the average income of a lower-middle-class family rose from £90 in 1851 to £110 in 1881 [...] During the [latter] half-century, the average family's income rose by 70 or 80 per cent[...] A working-class family who in 1851

made 20s a week, or £52 a year, earned 32s a week, or £82 annually, thirty years later.⁷ Their extra pennies and shillings, *translated into a wider consumers' market for printed matter*, did much to stimulate the book trade's quest for cheaper materials and more efficient manufacturing techniques. (Altick 1973, 306)

Indeed, much of the late 19th century's handwringing about the effects of the so-called masses being culturally in the ascendant surely comes as much from this group's new economically-central roles as consumers as it does from advancements in education and voting rights. Suddenly all forms of knowledge and information had been commodified for public consumption. Books, both high- and low-brow, could now be accessed cheaply by everyone for under 10d. As Altick (1973, 313) explains, 'the end of the expensive library novel in the mid-nineties was deplored only by sentimentalists [...] [By this time] most publishers and authors were too busy catering to the new buyer's market'. The publishing industry on the whole, still made up of family firms directed by patriarchal elites, mostly maintained their pretence of paternalistic gatekeeping while still functionally catering to the market *en masse*. The exigencies of the marketplace and of print culture generally meant that the only community worth fostering anymore was one of consumption.⁸ So beyond the emotional investment of reading a good story, what sort of relationship could a reader have with book and publishing culture during this period? Were there any alternative means of investment beyond the consumer-product relationship, beyond the economy of the vending machine?

William Morris, leader of the Arts and Crafts Movement, was a maverick whose motivating philosophy centred around the idea that industrialisation and, in particular, the industrialisation of manufacturing, had impoverished the way we live. Mixing Romanticism with social reform (Morris was an active socialist and, later in life, a proto-communist), the Arts and Crafts school vowed to put blood, sweat, and tears back into craftsmanship and, in the infamous words of Edward Burne-Jones, 'to wage Holy War on the Age'.

In 1889, Morris established the Kelmscott Press where he and his collaborators learned to set their own type and design their own typefaces. According to biographer Fiona MacCarthy (1994, 614), the press was ‘a typically Morris combination of the pragmatic and the romantic [...] not least in the way its anti-commercial principles found their own level in the market’. Over the course of seven years, until his death in 1896, Morris published 66 titles in boutique illustrated editions. 23 of these titles were his own (the first of which sold out), while the rest were made up of authors and subjects that had either influenced or were associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement, such as Ruskin, Swinburne, Shelley, Keats, and a number of medieval texts. As MacCarthy (1994, 608) explains, the founding of the press was for Morris ‘not just a matter of a new approach to the meaning of the making of the book. More importantly, *this was a new concept of a press as a community* with a life and a creative volition of its own’ (emphasis added). Associates and supporters of the Arts and Crafts movement (and of Morris’s political philosophy) now had their own press, one they could have a direct relationship with. This was a community not built upon market demands and passive consumption, but of *engagement*, of collective support of Morris’s artisanal endeavours.⁹

It is this communal spirit — later to inspire countless other reactionary, DIY alternatives to the traditional marketplace of books (from the Modernist presses of the Left Bank to the first not-for-profit publishers to arise in Minneapolis in the 1980s) — that underwrites all community-based publishing. It is, first, a reaction against the impersonal, transactional environment of the marketplace. It also is predicated on a belief that something gets lost in the pan-commercialism of the capitalist ethos, where the only roles to play are sellers and consumers. The *community* that publishers like Morris hoped to build is, in this rubric, simply replaced by a freedom to choose which product to buy. Rather than investing collectively in an on-going, mutually supportive experience, we are, instead, offered a kind of proxy liberation: ample opportunities to shop, purchase, consume. Communities are, in other words, evacuated in order to make room for competition and for the demand for individual gratification/ownership. Indeed, the publisher Matthew Stadler (2016) puts his finger on these very oppositional forces in his essay ‘The Ends of the Book: Reading,

Economies, and Publics', when he draws a contrast between the practices of publication and shopping:

Publication is the creation of new publics in a culture of reading. It includes the production and circulation of books, the management of a digital commons, and a rich social life of gathering and conversation with books and readers. All of these activities together construct a space of conversation, a public space, which beckons a public into being. Shopping — which is the prevailing culture of our time, and which drives most of the choices now being made in the publishing industry — corrodes and evacuates publics [...] What we have come to regard as democratic forces, “the people” — this abstraction that is measured in numbers, of bodies in a crowd, voters at an election, or units sold — is actually the buying power of effectively interchangeable consumers positioned at the end of a new economic form, global capitalism, that requires vastly expanding markets to sustain its core engines of growth. (emphasis added)

Given the success of the crowdfunding publisher Unbound and the expansion of Kickstarter into the book market, it is clear that a great many readers want to be more involved in the life-cycle of publishing (Lea 2016). Moreover, looking at Unbound in particular, it is apparent that crowdfunding can provide an alternative community-based forum for readers to collectively have a stake in what they read.

Since the advent of the printing press and the commodification of the book, publishers have struggled ambivalently with the premise that their books hold more cultural value than any old product in the market place (the proverbial tin of beans), while still seeking ways of shifting the most units possible to faceless demographics. Crowdfunding seems a natural way for publishers to alleviate this disconnect, by inviting readers to invest meaningfully in

the publishing life-cycle of books, by giving readers a more crucial role to play than that of the well-targeted consumer. Moreover, this invitation on the part of a crowdfunding publisher — because it involves more than a simple invitation to purchase/consume — no longer evacuates communities but assists in building them, bringing readers together as investors in the culture of reading.

Notes

¹ According to De Quincey, Jonathan Swift was reported to have 'instructed a young nobleman that the best poet in England was Mr. Pope, who had *begun* a translation of Homer into English verse, for which he must have them all subscribe; for [explained Swift] *the author shall not begin to print until I have a thousand guineas for him*' (119, emphasis in the original).

² Tellingly, Taylor is name-checked, albeit briefly, a hundred years later in Pope's *Dunciad*.

³ Inspiration for Taylor's methods can be seen in *Kemp's Nine Days of Wonder* (1600), which tells of a journey William Kempe's Morris dancing from London to Norwich. Likewise later travelogues, like that of Thomas Coryate (see *Coryat's Crudities hastily gobbled up in Five Months Travels in France, Italy, &c*, 1611), were undertaken in an independent, on-foot style similar to Taylor's. However, neither Coryate nor Kempe can be seen as proto-crowdfunders to the same degree that Taylor can. For that, one has to look perhaps to County Histories of the time which were collectively funded and produced by their respective communities.

⁴ Full title: *The Pennylesse Pilgrimage; or, the Moneylesse Perambulation of John Taylor, alias the Kings Magesties Water-Poet; How He TRAVAILED on Foot from London to Edenborough in Scotland, Not Carrying any Money To or Fro, Neither Begging, Borrowing, or Asking Meate, Drinke, or Lodging*.

⁵ At the time, there were somewhere between 200,000 and 260,000 people living in London (see Stephen Porter *Shakespeare's London: Everyday Life in London 1580-1616*, 2009, 3), meaning Taylor's subscribers made up .6% of the total population of the city. His next work, *A Kicksey Winsey, or, A Lerry Come-Twang*, was a broadside directed at those subscribers who had failed to pay him and satirised his own efforts to track them down.

⁶ See also Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (1973) 170-172.

⁷ See also Levi, *Wages and Earnings of the Working Classes* (1885), 48, 52-53.

⁸ One might ask at this point, whether Victorian literary fandom — for instance, the mania surrounding the final instalment of Charles Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop* — might be considered a community in the sense described above. The answer is unquestionably yes. Of course these people embody shared reading and book culture (and one does not need a bestseller or thousands of readers to find such community). However, the publishing industry has in no sense built or incubated such community because there is nothing communal in a sales transaction, nothing reciprocal in targeting readerships alone.

⁹ Here we might stop consider William Blake's influence on Morris, but it is worth noting the complex network that Morris enlisted (in fact, invited) into the Kelmscott Press operation. In contrast, Blake's self-published work seems rather more an instance of 'outsider art' than of community-based publishing.

References

Altick, Richard. *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*. WW Norton, 1973.

Clarkson, Natalie. "A Brief History of Crowdfunding." *Virgin*. June 5, 2015.
<https://www.virgin.com/entrepreneur/a-brief-history-of-crowdfunding>

Conboye, Jenina. "How to Crowdfund Your MBA." *The Financial Times*. July 3, 2013.
<https://www.ft.com/content/29ebfc16-0649-11e6-9b51-0fb5e65703ce>

De Quincey, Thomas. *The Works of Thomas De Quincey: Including All His Contributions to Periodical Literature*, Volume 15, Adam & Charles Black, 1863.

Garber, Meghan. "Kickstarters of Yore: Mozart, Lady Liberty, Alexander Pope." *Atlantic Monthly*. June 29, 2013.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/06/kickstarters-of-yore-mozart-lady-liberty-alexander-pope/277389/>

MacCarthy, Fiona. *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*. Faber and Faber, 1994.

Poyntz, Nick. "Seventeenth Century Crowdfunding." *Mercurius Politicus*. December 13, 2011. <https://mercuriuspoliticus.wordpress.com/2011/12/13/seventeenth-century-crowdfunding/>

Siese, April. "Only in the Age of Crowdfunding: \$40K Potato Salad." *The Daily Beast*. July 10, 2014. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/07/10/only-in-the-age-of-crowdfunding-40k-potato-salad.html>

Kazmark, Justin. "Kickstarter Before Kickstarter." *Kickstarter*. July 8, 2013.
<https://www.kickstarter.com/blog/kickstarter-before-kickstarter>

Lea, Richard. "How Kickstarter Became One of the Biggest Powers in Publishing" *The Guardian*. September 14, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/sep/14/how-kickstarter-became-one-of-the-biggest-powers-in-publishing-crowdfunding>

Porter, Stephen. *Shakespeare's London: Everyday Life in London 1580-1616*. Amberley Publishing, 2009.

Stadler, Matthew. "The Ends of the Book: Reading, Economies, and Publics." *Literary Publishing in the Twenty First Century*. Eds. Travis Kurowski, Wayne Miller, and Kevin Prufer. Milkweed Editions, 2016.

Taunton, Matthew. "Print Culture." *The British Library*. 2014.
<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/print-culture>

Weitzman, Margo. "Literary London: Pope's *Iliad* and the Eighteenth Century Book Trade." *Homer Among the Moderns*. Ed. Ada Palmer. University of Chicago, 2015.
<http://homeramongthemoderns.pressbooks.com/chapter/chapter-four/>