

# **‘The charity model is broken’: Crowdfunding as a way to democratise, diversify and grow funding for social change?**

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## **Abstract**

*Crowdfunding has become a billion dollar business for the digital platforms that enable it. Although crowdfunding has been used for over a decade to fund a variety of artistic or entrepreneurial individual and collective projects, more recently there has been an uptake by individuals and groups wishing to effect social change. Indeed, there have been arguments that crowdfunding’s capacity to tap into personal networks and ‘like-minded’ people – via social media networks, email and the internet – is reformatting funding for social change. Insofar as crowdfunding means that there are no gatekeepers such as government or corporate policy-makers able to direct or constrain public vision of the good, supporters argue that crowdfunding democratises the achievement of social change. Others exclaim that crowdfunding is just another neoliberal manoeuvre to ensure that the individual user pays for services – in this case, public goods – that should be, and would previously have been, funded by the state. What interests us in this article is crowdfunding’s potential for reformatting and rethinking ways to raise funds to effect social change by activists.*

**Keywords:** crowdfunding; environmental activism; social change; social media; Web 2.0 platforms

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## **Introduction**

The Charities Aid Foundation (CAF) 2016 World Giving Index states that Australia was the third most ‘giving’ country in that year (following Myanmar and the United States, in that order) (CAF, 2016). This index, billed as ‘the world’s leading study of generosity’ (CAF, 2016), rates 140 countries in three categories: helping a stranger; donating money; and volunteering time. According to CAF’s data, Australia ranked highly with regard to the first two criteria, although – despite its final status in the index – it does not rank in the top ten ‘giving’ countries with regard to the third criterion of volunteering time. Australia’s own recent research into its record of giving, *Giving Australia 2016*,<sup>1</sup> in turn concludes that 14.9 million Australian adults (80.8 per cent of

the population) gave \$12.5 billion in Australian dollars to charities and not-for-profits organisations in 2015–16. Australians have a long history of being big supporters of one-off appeals that fundraise to support victims of fires, floods and natural disasters, or to support such initiatives as keeping a children’s hospital at the front edge of medicine or maintaining an air rescue service. Such responses are a well-recognised phenomenon. As Good2Give CEO Lisa Grinham notes, ‘Australia has a strong culture of helping a stranger, helping a mate. It’s no surprise that when natural disasters hits, like the Earthquake in Nepal, we see heightened levels of giving from Australians’ (cited in Good2Give, 2016; see also Gibbs, 2013).

Concurrent with this data, which examines the situation of meeting one-off funding needs, are arguments from a variety of sources that the conventional model of charitable giving is broken and that a paradigm shift is required for the giving and doing of charity and the achievement of public goods. Here, the point is that while funding needs for short-term reactive campaigns – typically in response to specific crises – may continue to be met, charitable giving to social change organisations is potentially in crisis. As these organisations aim to support longer-term abstract ideals, or strive to address the root causes of problems rather than individual symptoms, they may lose ground. Issues cited to explain why this is the case include donors increasingly wanting to know the ‘value and benefit’ of what a charity does before giving to it, and their desire to be more actively involved in decisions as to how their contribution is to be used to address specific problems (Jenkins, cited in Radojev, 2016; see also du Bois, 2015). Crowdfunding has been framed as the new paradigm in this field, with its recent and arguably effective uptake by individuals and groups wishing to effect social change. Such uptake is the focus of this article. We aim to examine the capacities of crowdfunding as a charity model in support of social change, and consider whether it stands up to its optimistic framing as being able to democratise and revitalise the charitable funding process. More specifically, we explore the potential of three Australian crowdfunding platforms for charitable giving in the field of environmental activism: the generalist crowdfunding platform Pozible (launched 2010), which supports projects across a broad remit including social change; Chuffed (launched 2013), which only supports social change projects; and PlanetFunder (launched under this name 2015), which only supports environmentally focused social change projects.

## **Crowdfunding for social change**

The pattern of generous response to one-off appeals underpins the development and increasing uptake of what has come to be called crowdfunding. According to the *Oxford Dictionaries* (‘Crowdfunding’, 2017), this refers to ‘the practice of funding a project or venture by raising many small amounts of money from a large number of people’. Although this model arguably refers to all versions of public fundraising tailored in response to the achievement of a specific goal, our focus here is on digitally enabled crowdfunding. We examine the intersection of Web 2.0 platforms with an individual’s or organisation’s desire to contribute to something they feel is important. Indeed, understandings of crowdfunding have come to be closely connected with Web 2.0 technologies. Belleflamme, Lambert and Schvienbacher (2011, p. 7) define crowdfunding

as an 'open call, mostly through the Internet, for the provision of financial resources either in form of donation or in exchange for some form of reward and/or voting right'. While the main feature of crowdfunding is always to raise financial backing for specified projects, investors may themselves participate for a variety of reasons. Groups or individuals may thus invest in crowdfunding because they simply want to donate funds to a not-for-profit cause; or they might impart funds 'in return for interest payments', or for other non-financial rewards or equity (Macht & Weatherston, 2015, p. 197). Or they may desire to play a part in history through having a role in a venture, cause, innovation or creative process that is greater than their individual self (Best & Ness, 2014; Gehring & Wittkower, 2015), thereby gaining 'recognition' as well as 'personal satisfaction' (Schwienbacher & Larraide, 2012, p. 386). Perhaps they are looking for an association with high-profile causes and the celebrities that endorse them.

From its development in 2006, crowdfunding was initially a domain for the funding of initiatives in art, music, film, games, design and technology through the likes of Sellaband (launched 2006), Indiegogo (launched 2008) and Kickstarter (launched 2009). Crowdfunding has grown exponentially from this beginning, expanding to fund initiatives in journalism, medicine, civic public works, fashion, design and outer space, as well as school projects, scientific research, software development, academic research and projects for social change (Belleflamme, Lambert & Schwienbacher, 2011; Bennett, Chin & Jones, 2015; Macht & Weatherstone, 2015). This expansion of focus is not without controversy, however, with two conflicting perspectives being aired regarding the capacity of crowdfunding to support social change. On the one hand, supporters argue that crowdfunding democratises social change (Golić, 2014), insofar as its lack of gatekeepers means that government or corporate policy-makers are unable to direct or constrain public vision of the social good. As remarked by Henkel (personal communication, 10 February 2017), a successful crowdfunder and filmmaker, crowdfunding is important because it can support important social change causes that the government – given the prevalence and traction of neoliberal assumptions – chooses not to support. In the Australian context, the raising of over a million dollars through appeals to the Australian community to establish the independent Climate Council when the Federal Government of Australia abolished the Climate Commission in 2013 (ABC, 2013) exemplifies this position and demonstrates the power and efficacy of social cause-oriented community action.

On the other hand, others have argued that crowdfunding is itself just another neoliberal manoeuvre to ensure that the individual user pays for services – in this case, public goods – that should be, and would previously have been, funded by the state (see Harvie, cited in Wodtke, 2015). In Harvie's words, 'though crowdfunding enables individuals to act with self-determining agency in deciding what ... to fund, it destabilises mutual social responsibility' (cited in Wodtke, 2015, p. 181). According to this perspective, it is a problem that working towards achieving the public good has shifted from being the responsibility of states to being that of individual consumers. While the actions of individuals in such cases are clearly well meaning and potentially very efficacious, their actions play a part in normalising the neoliberal rejection of responsibility for the public good by the government. The launching of the community-funded Climate Council (n.d.) is a case in point here, and this problematic is well

exemplified by Environment Minister Greg Hunt's satisfaction in stressing that strength of public support for the Climate Council proves the government does not have to pay for the work of its previous incarnation. In his words, 'That's the great thing about democracy, it's a free country and it proves our point that the commission didn't have to be a taxpayer funded body' (Hunt, cited in ABC, 2013). Also pertinent to this perspective, it is worth noting that individual platforms make millions of dollars from fees, the production of research statistics and through industry experts being invited to be guest speakers at a variety of events. To give some insight into the scope of the industry's finances, the Massolution Crowdfunding Industry 2015 report estimated that the global crowdfunding industry raised US\$34 billion dollars worldwide (CrowdExpert, 2015–16a; see also Barnett, 2015; Clifford, 2015). Furthermore, according to Crowdsourcing.org and the World Bank, crowdfunding may surpass US\$300 billion in funding transactions by 2025 (Meyskins & Bird, 2015).

There are many different digital crowdfunding platforms in operation throughout the world, with the Deal Index: Democratizing Finance Report estimating that, in the 2015–16 financial year, there were 1250 crowdfunding platforms worldwide (CrowdExpert, 2015–16b). Most of these support diverse projects and calls, including those oriented towards social change. Such platforms have also been presented as paradigm shifters in their facilitation of funding for projects, with particular reference to the context of funding social change. The point here is one that Chuffed founder Prashan Paramanathan has made in contending – with reference to conventional models of activist and cause-based appeal – that people do want to be generous beyond their individual interests, but that it is the model for appeal that turns them off. In Paramanathan's words, people 'are not stingy, they want to contribute, they just don't like the way that charities interact with them, particularly the big ones' (cited in Chang, 2015). According to this view, 'the big charity model is broken, and the trust too', and crowdfunders 'have a wonderful set of ideas of how it might work differently in the future' (Scevak, 2016). These wonderful ideas – which we would term affective strategies – can be summarised into four main points: the use of emotional framing; the offering of perks; knowing what happens to one's charitable donations; and the subsequent capacity to align altruistic with selfish motivations with a multiplier effect.

## **Emotional framing**

Unlike projects with a commercial orientation, projects for social change deliberately strive to engage not only a viewer's reasoned commitment to that project but also affective investment. This double focus is, of course, *de rigeur* for activists and social movements in both online and offline domains, but social change-focused crowdfunding particularly stresses the importance of orienting a campaign's affective hooks not simply to negative emotions of shock, guilt and anxiety – what is often called the moral shock strategy (see Wrenn, 2013; Jasper & Poulsen, 1995) – but to the positive emotions of being able to make a difference. For instance, when developing the visual elements of their campaigns, non-profit campaigners are instructed by Chuffed (n.d.b) to create images that induce supporters to 'feel inspired, entertained or curious'. Chuffed states this explicitly in its 'Create Your Page' advice:

For clarity, Chuffed.org is a guilt-free site. We reject campaigns that use guilt-imagery like dehumanizing photos of starving children to get donations, or graphic, disturbing images of animals.

This attitude is also supported by Henkel (personal communication, 10 February 2017) from PlanetFunder, who claims that ‘people will turn off [from charitable giving] if it is going to make them depressed’. A common mode of presentation in this manner is thus to show the cause or social change to be personally important to the originator as well as clearly marking a significant issue for others, with the plan given to tackle the issue being ‘practical, specific and neither overly simplistic nor complex’ (Amtzis, 2014, p. 144). Campaigns thus share a range of commonly used affective hooks. First is their visuality: while images might not actually make a revolution happen, they do have the capacity to be a ‘catalyst to set off a chain reaction of mass emotion’ (Mitchell, 2013, p. 96; see also McLagan & McKee, 2012). Images are thus used to generate individual and public emotions – particularly those of shock, outrage, sympathy and empathy, as well as a sense of hope and recognition of the capacity to make a difference. Also promoted is the use of emotive language – in the case of social change campaigns, often stressing crisis and urgency – as well as the communal framing of issues in terms of ‘we’ and ‘our’, and clear calls to action. Emotional framing is also facilitated by the linking of platforms and campaigns with the personalised engagements of social media (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015). Here campaigns may incorporate links to Facebook pages and utilise Twitter, YouTube and Instagram for updates and the dissemination of additional promotional materials. What is important about these interconnections with social media is that they support distinctly personalised and affective forms of social networking through which individuals can like, share and respond to a campaign.

## **Perks**

The affective hook of the call for contribution is further strengthened through the use of rewards or ‘perks’, which the Indiegogo site (n.d.) defines as the ‘incentives offered to contributors in exchange for their support’. As noted by Indiegogo, their experience has been that:

campaigns offering perks raise 143% more money than those that do not. Perks help you attract a larger audience, make people feel more valued for their contributions, and help you spread the word about your campaign.

Perks can take a variety of forms. Indiegogo, for instance, suggests that they can be material, personal or experiential. Kickstarter’s CEO, Yancey Strickler (2011), also breaks down Kickstarter rewards into these three different categories. The first is a copy of the ‘thing’, with the campaign reward working like a pre-order for the product, and importantly providing the capital to finance its production. The second category is to ‘share the story’, by which he means to make one’s backers insiders to the creative process and to project development. Here funders might receive updates, videos, blogs, photos or even credits in a finished film or book. Small items such as props or spare/broken parts and simple tokens may also be distributed among funders. The third

category comprises actual experiences. Here funders may receive actual access to and/or participation in the project. Experiential forms may include visits to the set or office, or going out for coffee or a meal with the development team. Such experiences are often reserved for premium backers who are prepared to buy a story they can tell their family and friends. Overall, the idea is that, 'Every project should benefit its backers just as much as its creator, and it's up to you [the project founder] to define how' (Strickler, 2011).

## **Transparency**

The offering and uptake of perks also addresses our third point, that of funders wanting to know where their money goes. This is a point made in the context of arguments of crowdfunding marking a paradigm shift in charitable funding. More specifically, the point here is that funders are apparently tired of never being sure what happens to their donations – that is, whether they are swallowed up in an organisation's administrative costs or disappear through corruption, and do not in fact actually reach and assist those for whom they were intended. Crowdfunding, in contrast, is presented as having to make a point of its financial transparency, with platforms and causes having to make clear to potential funders what monies are to be used for – as without this potential funders may not invest – and perks providing an immediate reward for donating. The Chuffed site again makes this point clear:

We know that [the days of] dropping your money into a charity and never knowing or hearing where it goes are numbered. And we know that even though people are generous and they want to give, it's hard to know who's actually going to make a difference with your hard earned cash ... We've built Chuffed to make sure that even if you're only able to give \$1 of your money or a minute of your time, you know that you, along with hundreds of other generous people are building a more awesome world. (Chuffed, n.d.a)

## **Interest alignment**

The fourth point addresses the idea that one needs to be motivated to either step beyond the scope of their individual interests or to align one's individual interests with the common good, and that conventional social change models of achieving this – via moral shock and ensuing guilt – are no longer effective. This is Paramanathan's (cited in Swan, 2016) point: that while the tendency has been to see altruistic motivations and selfish motivations as opposing forces – with selfish motivations needing to be overcome – this need not be the case. In his words, 'If you tap into both altruistic motivations and selfish motivations, you get a multiplier effect. People always think one subtracts from the other but it's not true'. This possibility is best exemplified through the crowdfunding use of perks. After all, as Paramanathan points out, providing a reward for donating means a cause can tap into people's 'spending purse' and thereby into money that would not normally go towards charity (as cited in Chang, 2015). Perks, Paramanathan (in Swan, 2016) stresses, as attendant on readily achievable actions with clearly visible outcomes, can make the process of donating

enjoyable and inspirational rather than an exercise in having been made to feel guilty. Indeed, as he notes, 'campaigns that gave donors something back in return were often the most successful for chuffed.org' (cited in Chang, 2015). This enables the following description of this purported paradigm shift:

New models of fundraising are now focusing less on making potential donors feel bad, and more on promoting the benefits of giving and making the transaction win-win, including the possibility of playing the stockmarket to make money for yourself, as well as charity. (cited in Chang, 2015)

Although the strength of this paradigm shift is clearly debatable, in some ways its presence is easily identifiable in the Australian context. There are multiple crowdfunding platforms in operation in Australia that support non-profit, social enterprise and/or social change campaigns. Each of these has facilitated extensive fundraising for a variety of non-profit cause-based projects. By 2016, for instance, Chuffed alone collected \$10 million in donations towards socially oriented projects (as cited in Swan, 2016). Our focus now is to explore the affordances of three crowdfunding platforms within the Australian context regarding their support of environmental activists' calls for change. This focus has been chosen because in many ways environmental activism (as with activism supporting a revisioning of animal welfare) holds a highly problematic status within the Australian public sphere. That is, much activist work in this field is presented within the public sphere as contentious if not deviant, or even criminal, insofar as activist interests in many cases challenge the economic interests of government and industry. This judgement has seen activists in these fields being represented as akin to terrorists involved in acts of economic sabotage (e.g. Greer, 2013). This issue, added to the point that for many funders environmental issues may be perceived as less significant than human issues, makes environmental activism a useful context in which to measure the efficacy of crowdfunding for social change.

## **Crowdfunding within Australia for environmental causes**

The three crowdfunding platforms we are examining – Pozible, Chuffed and Planetfunder – are all Australian-based. Each supports non-profit causes, although Pozible also supports entrepreneurial crowdfunding campaigns. In each case we will detail the platform's basic structure before briefly outlining its capacities for supporting environmentally oriented social change.

### ***Pozible***

Founded in 2010 (although under a different name, Fundbreak) by Alan Crabbe and Rick Chen, Pozible is a general crowdfunding platform supporting a wide variety of causes, including environmentally oriented ones. Pozible categorises projects into fifteen themes: film & video; community & social good; music; art & craft; performance; publishing & journalism; technology & games; design & fashion; events; food & drink; social enterprise; photography; environmental; research; and sports &

recreation. The platform lists (in April 2017) a 57 per cent success rate for projects – only successful projects or those that raise their stated funding objective keep those funds – and states that over A\$50 million has been raised in pledges (Pozible, n.d.b). Within their environmental category, and between 2014 and April 2017, Pozible lists 69 completed campaigns with one live campaign still open for funding pledges. Three main categories were identifiable within the completed campaigns, as detailed in Table One below (other groupings were visible, but groups with fewer than five associated projects were not included).

**Table 1:** Completed environmental campaigns, Pozible 2014 to April 2017, thematically grouped by campaign objectives

<b>Pozible category: Environmental</b>			
2014 to April 2017: 69 campaigns funded to a total of A\$1,688,534			
Object of campaigns	1. Save ecosystems  16 campaigns	2. Save threatened native Aust. animals and birds  12 campaigns	3. Fund cultural products: e.g. documentaries, exhibitions, books, art projects, musicals.  8 campaigns

Notes: Table 1 collates information from Pozible’s Environmental category (Pozible, n.d.a)

The top ten environmental campaigns that gained the most funds were part of the top founder groups requesting funding, as shown in Table 2. As a result, founders and funders on the Pozible platform would seem to be in agreement about which are the most important and productive campaigns to support.

**Table 2:** Top ten of the Environmental campaigns with respect to fundraising, Pozible 2014 to April 2017

<b>Pozible campaigns</b>	<b>Amount raised (\$A)</b>
Help the Tasmanian devil	\$377,654
Operation OBP (breeding parrots to increase wild imbalance)	\$140,978
Fund Bob Brown and Jessica Hoyt’s legal challenge to peaceful protests	\$111,789
Operation Green Parrot	\$86,259
Great Forest National Park expansion Victoria	\$71,695
Guidebook Tasmania’s Tarkine (Bob Brown Foundation)	\$69,446
Save the Sun Bear from extinction	\$69,290 (US\$51,275 div. by 0.74)
Tarkine in motion: Artists to develop art in the wilderness.	\$58,424
Save the Liverpool Plains	\$58,142
Tracking Bunyip Birds	\$57,423



Note: Table 2 collates information from Pozible’s Environmental category (Pozible, n.d.a).

### **Chuffed**

Chuffed was founded by CEO Prashan Paramanathan in 2013 through the ‘\$1.1 million seed funding round led by Blackbird Ventures, Bevan Clark, and the Telstra Foundation’ (Scevak, 2016) and only crowdfunds non-profit and social enterprise projects. Campaigns are grouped into eight categories: social enterprise; social welfare; international development; environmental protection; refugees & asylum seekers; health & medical; animal rights; and community (a ninth category of ‘all’ is also searchable). While all these enable the targeting of funding towards cause-based projects, the category we examine is that of Environmental Protection, an issue that is politically and publicly sensitive within Australia.

**Table 3:** Completed environmental protection campaigns, Chuffed 2014 to April 2017, thematically grouped by campaign objectives.

<b>Chuffed category: Environmental protection</b>					
2014 to April 2017: 266 campaigns funded to a total of A\$1,476,062					
Object of campaigns	1. Scholarships & sponsorships: e.g. support attendance of climate change summits, congresses, symposia, fieldwork, raise awareness, etc. 38 campaigns	2. Save/preserve ecosystems: e.g. wetlands, forests, basins, corals, oceans. 31 campaigns	3. Support legal challenges and activists: e.g. fund challenges to environmental laws, support environmental activists during protests. 26 campaigns	4. Save threatened Australian animals and birds: e.g. penguins, turtles, koalas, flying foxes, parrots, finches. 23 campaigns	
Object of campaigns	5. Fund energy renewables: e.g. solar panel campaigns, political party campaigns. 14 campaigns	6. Fund cultural products: e.g. documentaries, exhibitions, books, art projects, musicals. 14 campaigns	7. Funding addressing climate change: e.g. symposia, projects, education. 13 campaigns	8. Support women in science and leadership: e.g. in Homeward Bound. 11 campaigns	
Object of campaigns	9. Save threatened animals in the wild: e.g. tigers, elephants, orangutans, rhino. 9 campaigns	10. Rebuild or update infrastructure: e.g. trucks/utes, educational centres, community gardens. 7 campaigns	11. Save the Great Barrier Reef: e.g. Stop#Adani, save marine species. 5 campaigns		

Notes: Table 3 collates information from the category Environmental Protection at Chuffed (n.d.c)

Within this category, and between 2014 and April 2017, Chuffed lists 266 completed campaigns, with a further eighteen campaigns open and seeking funding. These 266 campaigns were ultimately sorted into eleven main thematic groups, as

displayed in Table 3, showing the kinds of causes being campaigned for and funded (as with Pozible, themes showing less than five members were not included). Notably, these campaign themes overlap with those identified within Pozible, suggesting that there are a suite of environmental issues that activist groups consider most pressing.

Table 3 reveals that the top two campaign themes in the environmental protection category were scholarships and sponsorships for individuals and groups, and funding to save ecosystems. Interestingly, none of the campaigns achieving the most funding were included in these themes. The top ten campaigns with respect to total funding raised are detailed in Table 4.

**Table 4:** *Top ten of the Environmental Protection campaigns with respect to fundraising, Chuffed 2014 to April 2017*

<b>Chuffed campaigns</b>	<b>Amount raised (AUD)</b>
Fight climate change in the Queensland court (EDO)	\$70,827
Reshape Queensland's environmental laws	\$70,248
Save the Mapleton Acadian Forest Trail from clearcutting	\$48,046
Stop largest coalmine in Australia, #StopAdani	\$44,366
Climate for Change Crowdfunder	\$41,754
Protect Tasmania's wild environment	\$41,635
Access to Justice	\$39,600
Train more detection dogs for conservation	\$37,682
Support women in science (Homeward Bound)	\$37,572
Supercharge the Adani Carmichael Federal Court Challenge	\$31,594

*Notes:* Table 4 collates information from the category Environmental Protection at Chuffed (n.d.c)

Of the 266 campaigns that set funding goals from as low as A\$400 up to A\$350,000, over 80 per cent raised some funding, with only 48 (18 per cent) receiving zero funds. Those campaigns that completely failed with regard to funding were not, however, significantly divergent in objective from the themes listed above. Unlike the case with Pozible, however, Chuffed campaigns keep all funds raised whether the target funding amount was reached or not. Further comparison between Pozible and Chuffed foregrounds the disparity in funding amounts raised in both single and totalled campaigns within the category of environmental protection. That is, not only did 69 campaigns through Pozible raise more than 266 campaigns through Chuffed, but Pozible campaigns in the environmental category typically raised significantly higher amounts than was the case for Chuffed.

### ***PlanetFunder***

PlanetFunder, an Australian crowdfunding platform dedicated to environmental projects and initiated under this name in 2015 (previous versions existed from 2013), has a different history from the previous two platforms. It developed from a crowdfunding platform purpose-built to support a single-cause campaign. The trigger

for the new platform was a feature-length social documentary, *Rise of the Eco-Warriors* (2014), produced by Virgo Productions, directed by Cathy Henkel and produced by Richard Hearman, Cathy Henkel and Mark White. The documentary tells the story of a group of passionate and adventurous young people from nine countries who leave their known worlds behind to spend 100 days in the jungles of Borneo. Their mission is to work with the local people to help save the rainforests and endangered orangutans in the region. This includes building an orangutan rehabilitation centre, introducing a satellite monitoring system called Earthwatchers, replanting a forest and building a global support network. The producers used the Pozible platform to raise funds for the post-production of the film. However, during the cinema release, the impact of the film's messages and inbuilt call to action resulted in a 'demand' from audiences for a revenue-raising mechanism to support the orangutans and local communities seen in the film, and to continue the work on the ground in Borneo initiated by the eco-warriors. First called Rainforest Connections and tied to the documentary project, this platform was later renamed PlanetFunder and broadened in scope to encompass a wide range of social enterprise projects aimed at protecting forests and the environment. More specifically, it describes itself as striving to support 'the earth restoration economy – the movements, people, projects and ideas that have the potential to restore the natural world' and 'hold the biological integrity of planet Earth at their core' (PlanetFunder, n.d.). This platform has to date raised A\$480,000 in online donations for over 200 environmental projects located around the world, with such projects including the funding of:

- opposition to coal seam gas mining
- koala colony protection campaigns
- land care groups to restore and regenerate biodiversity
- wildlife rehabilitation shelters and enclosures in Indonesia
- community owned solar installations in Mullumbimby, New South Wales
- training Aboriginal farmers in alternative-timber forest products
- social entrepreneurs in developing new eco-tourism programs
- replanting endangered rainforest species and rewetting damaged peat swamps in Borneo
- the protection of Cassowary rainforests in Far North Queensland
- the rescue and rehabilitation of Borneo orangutans
- training and equipment for firefighters in Borneo
- *The Bentley Effect* documentary about the campaign against unconventional gas
- *Rise of the Eco-Warriors* documentary for outreach about palm oil and orangutan welfare (from PlanetFunder, n.d.).

The success rate of PlanetFunder's campaigns was not available – its site simply states that PlanetFunder 'has an awesome track record' (PlanetFunder, n.d.) – and although it is not possible to search completed campaigns, current campaigns – of which there were nine listed – tend to give modest funding targets. Of these nine, only one asked for A\$10,000

and one was asking for A\$2000, with the others asking for A\$1000. These projects, like those listed above, fit within the categories identified for the other platforms.

### **Some implications of crowdfunding for social change**

Chuffed doesn't just raise money. It raises communities. I realised that I was creating a community of people who have bought into my cause. An invaluable resource of future soldiers to fight in the battles that undoubtedly lie ahead. (Caslick, cited in Chuffed, n.d.d)

Although this analysis is too small for the drawing of strong conclusions, it is of interest that while there may be great variety in the funding amounts raised by specific platforms and with respect to specific causes, crowdfunding is successfully carrying out its remit of bringing people together with projects that matter to them, community building and allowing ease and convenience in one's donations – a point also made by Rob Caslick, and cited above, in discussion of his project funding experience with Chuffed. Crowdfunding also enables the win-win scenario outlined by Paramanathan (2016), where personal interests are able to coincide exactly and easily with philanthropic interests. It facilitates the easy connection of activists and their causes with broad social networks, as exemplified by the majority of campaigns using social media, as a key component in their raising of awareness and promotion of campaigns. In achieving these connections, Paramanathan is at pains to stress the potential of crowdfunding to make the entire process of supporting a cause as easy and guilt-free as possible, with campaign or cause supporters not being judged on their commitments or investments or their identifications.

Is this a paradigm shift or democratisation in the giving sector? Does ease of commitment count as a paradigm shift? Is it a paradigm shift to have one's affectively driven individual interests – and indeed one's consumerism – acting as the foremost driver and barometer of one's altruism and one's commitment to social change? These are complex questions that take us into issues of what may be considered worthy motivations for social cause support, and whether 'right' action is somehow better when difficult and seen in opposition to our selfish individual interests. The point we want to draw forth here concerns the nexus that platform-based crowdfunding builds between activism and social change and neoliberalism. And here our question concerns whether crowdfunding – a fundamentally neoliberal paradigm – can effectively take up the work of social change. Our answer is both yes and no. On the one hand, crowdfunding clearly can be brought to the purposes of social change. Arguably, each campaign striving to provide support for environmental projects is also working to inculcate a shift in public attitudes with regard to the environment. Campaign stories, after all, are educative in alerting audiences to specific issues, and are arguably also successful in showing how some of the problems at hand can be addressed. On this front at least, crowdfunding's digitalised platforms are extremely effective insofar as the criteria for a successful campaign – personalised stories, a focus on affect as well as reason, a use of images (video and still) as well as text, and the asking for very little whilst still offering a perk for contribution – match well with the affordances of digital communications and networking and with the requirements of successful activism.

On the other hand, crowdfunding runs in accordance with a neoliberal logic of market success informed by popular support. Projects only succeed if they appeal to

potential funders, meaning that the action or social change being sought already needs to have attained a high level of popular support. This is exacerbated with platforms that require founders to achieve their stated funding goal before they receive any donations. Added to this is that crowdfunding can only be pertinent and successful if the desired action or social change can be detailed and is deliverable in monetary terms. This is an important but problematic point insofar as it requires ideas of social change to be transformed into very specific kinds of goals, which can be given a financial footing and which will appear personable and thereby significant to funders. Another problematic relates to the tendency of Web 2.0 technologies to facilitate the development of what has been called echo chambers, meaning that appeals for support may not often be shared outside 'safe' networks. This, of course, is what results in the win-win situation to which Paramanathan alludes, but it is a restriction of the potential educative and deliberative effects of social change-oriented campaigns if they are only shared with those already ideologically predisposed to support them. These points together – despite the generic Web 2.0 promise of expanded networks – deliver a much reduced domain in which to strive for ideals of social change. At the same time, and arguably even more problematically, they proffer a redefinition of social change away from broad ideals encompassing systemic change to small-scale practical projects. This would mean that ideals of social change – as manifested within and supported by crowdfunding – take on the work of 'fixing' in-system problems rather than reconceiving systems themselves.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Giving Australia (2016) was funded by the Australian federal government through the Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership and drew on the expertise of the Australian Centre for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Studies.
- <sup>2</sup> When celebrities are seen as doing philanthropy – that is, giving their time and donating money – this raises the profile of causes and creates public interest (Dumas, 2014). That is, high-profile celebrities – such as Angelina Jolie and Lady Gaga – can be recognised as inspiring role-models for social change, specifically when they have ambassador roles, as in the case of Angelina Jolie being the Goodwill Ambassador for the UNHCR (McHugh, 2014). Lady Gaga also inspires, motivates and mobilises her fans to support philanthropic social change causes (Bennett, 2014). As Louise Walsh, head of Philanthropy Australia, notes, 'crowdfunding projects go through the roof' when there is just one well-timed 'tweet from an A-list actor' (as cited in Dumas, 2014). For this reason, crowdfunders will typically try to get high-profile celebrities to support a campaign through their own social media accounts. This makes causes visible to a multitude of potential funders on social media, and as a consequence can render philanthropy 'very fashionable' (Lady Gaga, cited in Bennett, 2014, p. 141).

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