



Article

# Social business in online financing: Crowdfunding narratives of independent documentary producers in Turkey

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## Abstract

Crowdfunding is a relatively novel concept in Turkish public discourse. Yet, activist media producers in Turkey actively use online opportunities to solicit production, post-production and distribution financing. This article explores crowdfunding as a signifier that draws public attention to media texts for which online funding drives are performed. As crowdfunding campaigns circulate through social media, they forge publics around the related films, videos, stories and, more significantly, the social causes around which these media revolve. Based on long-term ethnographic research with independent media producers in Turkey, the article scrutinizes the crowdfunding adventures behind three documentaries, *My Child*, *Ecumenopolis* and *I Flew You Stayed*, as narrated by their producers. Using the analysis of the campaigns for these documentary films as cases, I argue that in addition to being a means to raising funds, crowdfunding is a tool to accomplish social and political ends ranging from creating communities of support and attracting media attention to building a reputation of independence.

## Keywords

Activist media, documentary film, online financing, publics, Turkey

On 30 May 2013, police violently cleared a small group of protestors from Gezi Park in Istanbul's city centre. Demonstrators were opposing a governmental plan to demolish the park in order to rebuild an Ottoman-style army barracks with a luxurious shopping mall

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in it. Through the police's brutal intervention at the peaceful gathering, the state denied its citizens' right to protest, triggering a wave of anti-government demonstrations. The protests spread across Turkey with Gezi no longer referring to the Istanbul park. Instead it came to symbolize the demand for a democratic and peaceful Turkey perceived to be under threat from corruption, authoritarianism and increasing governmental control over citizens' lives. It was a threat made manifest in recent regulations on abortion and new restrictions on the sale of alcoholic beverages (İğsız, 2013). In the following days, police forces intensified their violent crackdown on protesters. Seven protestors were killed, dozens were injured and hundreds were illegitimately taken into police custody. The mainstream Turkish media deliberately ignored the news. People from all walks of life continued to raise their voices on the streets. The protests swept the country for the following 3 weeks. A unique moment that would influence the future of Turkish society in distinct ways was being experienced.

On 7 June 2013, 8 days after the protests began, an unusual ad appeared in the *New York Times*, and spread immediately through Turkish social media. Contrasting the news blackout of the Gezi protests in the national press, the ad, titled, 'What is happening in Turkey?', exclaimed, 'People of Turkey have spoken, we will not be oppressed!' The ad was unusual, not only because it sought to train the global spotlight on the Gezi protests via an influential news medium, but especially because the expensive ad was placed in the *Times* by an anonymous group of people (Toor, 2013). Introducing a novel concept to Turkish public discourse, the ad ended with a note stating that it was 'crowdfunded entirely by concerned individuals from around the world'. Central to the publicity the *Times* ad generated on social media was the collective financing of the ad, which rendered the activist performance part of a larger creative strategy. The online crowdsourcing of funds by a faceless collective agency was a perfect match to the Gezi spirit marked by anonymous people's collective will to speak up for their and each other's rights (Bakiner, 2013; Sayers, 2014).

A few months later, the Turkish documentary filmmaker Can Candan was referring to 'Gezi spirit' in our interview when he elaborated on the financing of his latest film *Benim Çocuğum (My Child)*. Candan said, 'How we made *My Child* is like how the Gezi movement happened. Anonymous people got around and supported this film, just like anonymous people were out in the streets to protect Gezi Park'. A partially crowdfunded documentary, *My Child* (2013) narrates the story of seven men and women who are parents of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) individuals. Organized around a small community in Istanbul, these parents not only stand by their children's identities, but courageously raise their voices for LGBT rights in a conservative society. In mobilizing a liberal public around LGBT rights, collective financing has been integral to the ways in which *My Child* has been signified within public discourse since its launch, in similar ways to the *Times* advertisement.

In this article, I explore crowdfunding as 'a technology of publicity' (Torchin, 2006), a signifier that draws public attention to media texts for which online funding drives are performed. As crowdfunding campaigns circulate through social media, they forge publics around the related films, videos, stories and, more significantly, the social causes around which these media revolve. Locating crowdfunding within complex societal and historical discourses, I am interested in the metaculture of collective funding. Greg Urban (2001) defines 'metaculture' as the discursive characterization of cultural objects. He notes that

[metaculture] aids culture in its motion through space and time. It gives a boost to the culture that it is about, helping to propel it on its journey. The interpretation of culture is intrinsic to metaculture, immaterial as it is, focuses attention on the cultural thing, helps to make it an object of interest, and, hence facilitates its circulation. (p. 4)

In the cases of the *Times* ad and *My Child* documentary, as well as other examples discussed in this article, crowdfunding has been central to stimulating public discourse on media productions and the issues emphasized therein.

Crowdfunding is a novel concept in Turkish public discourse. Yet activist media producers have already discovered and actively used online opportunities to solicit production, post-production and distribution financing within the last few years (Çelik, 2012; Ekmekçioğlu, 2013). The documentary film genre has for a long time offered tools to subvert hegemonic discourses (Ginsburg, 1993; Nichols, 1991; Turner, 2002; Waugh, 1984, 2011; Zimmerman, 2000). Especially with increasing access to media production technologies made available since the late 1990s, activists in Turkey have nurtured pressing national social and political issues through the documentary medium (Koçer, 2013; Sönmez, 2011). Here, I build my discussion around the crowdfunding adventures behind three documentaries, including *My Child*, as narrated by their producers. One of them, Ekümenopolis (Ecumenopolis), tells the story of urban transformation of an Istanbul on a neoliberal path to self-destruction. It follows a migrant family set adrift after the demolition of their neighbourhood in on-going struggle for housing rights. The third documentary, *Ez Firyam Tu Mayî Li Cî (I Flew You Stayed)*, is a road trip movie. The director undertakes a dangerous journey to find the missing grave of her father, a Kurdish guerilla who died fighting alongside the forces of the Kurdistan Workers Party, or *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* (PKK), in their long battle with the state forces in Turkey's remote south-eastern provinces. The producers of these three documentaries initiated crowdfunding campaigns during the production and post-production phases of their films.

My discussion is based on long-term ethnographic research with independent media producers in Turkey. Between 2011 and 2013, I interviewed numerous media producers whose films and videos focus on social and political subjects. Seven of these filmmakers/producers were running online crowdfunding campaigns. I conducted follow-up interviews with Can Candan (director-producer), Mizgin Müjde Arslan (director-producer) and Gaye Günay (producer), whose crowdfunding campaigns were frequently referred to by other interlocutors. I tape-recorded, transcribed and analysed these interviews, which were an hour and a half each. Using the analysis of the campaigns for these three documentary films as cases, my argument is twofold. First, in addition to being a means to raising funds, crowdfunding is a tool to accomplish social businesses. A social business refers to the ends achieved in and through communication against a backdrop of larger questions of values, identity or power that inform and emerge from particular interactions (Goodman, 2007: 32). These ends, achieved through the discourse of crowdfunding, range from creating communities of support and attracting media attention to building a reputation of independence. Second, I argue that the social business achieved through crowdfunding is meaningful only in relation to the particular activist agendas and societal discourses that shape them. While the director of *My Child* highlights visibility, a state the LGBT movement in Turkey struggles for, as an outcome of crowdfunding, for the *Ecumenopolis* team,

crowdfunding meant protecting their reputation of independence from corporate money. Mizgin M Arslan, on the other hand, accentuates crowdfunding as a means towards productive dialogue on the Kurdish issue, a matter for which traditional channels of communication have been subsumed since the establishment of the Turkish Republic.

## An emergent literature

The notion of crowdfunding grew out of crowdsourcing, which itself is a novel phenomenon (Bannerman, 2013; Gerber et al., 2012; Howe, 2006). The term ‘crowdsourcing’ was coined first by journalist Jeff Howe in the June 2006 issue of *Wired*. Elaborating on the notion of crowdsourcing through such examples as iStockphotos and the Mechanical Turk, Howe (2006) wrote, ‘Remember outsourcing? Sending jobs to India and China is so 2003. The new pool of cheap labour: everyday people using their spare cycles to create content, solve problems, and even do corporate R & D’. Crowdsourced photographs for a dollar each on Getty Images, for instance, replaced images produced by professional photographers with much slower production rates and higher costs. Technical support by masses of tech-savvy independent contractors mobilized on networks like the Mechanical Turk provided both cheap and handy labour for companies like iConclude (Howe, 2006). People, on the other hand, did not want to consume passively anymore. They wanted instead to ‘participate in the development and creation of products meaningful to them’ (Brabham, 2008; Howe, 2009).

Based on crowdsourcing, the online harnessing of ideas, talent and labour to be instantaneously used for a variety of online corporate tasks (Howe, 2006), crowdfunding qualifies the specific model of raising money by stimulating large audiences (the crowd) for them to donate small amounts that ideally accumulate into a desired sum (the funding) (Belleflamme et al., 2010: 4, Belleflamme et al., 2014, Ordanini, 2009). The first online crowdfunding platform was the US-based Kiva, defined by its co-founder Matt Flannery as ‘an online lending platform that allows individuals in the developed world to loan to small business people in the developing world’ (Flannery, 2006: 31). Since its launch in 2005, ‘Kiva lenders have funded \$6 million in loans’ for projects as diverse as spinach farming in Cambodia and a carpenter in Gaza (Flannery, 2006: 31). Within less than a decade, the number of crowdfunding platforms reached 50 in the United States alone (Gerber et al., 2012). One of the more popular of these platforms, globally as well as in Turkey, is San Francisco-based indiegogo.com, which notes on its website that since its launch in 2007, it has ‘raised millions of dollars for thousands of campaigns worldwide’ (Indiegogo, 2013). In Turkey, in addition to the growing popularity of indiegogo.com, five national crowdfunding sites have been founded within the last 3 years (interview with Cemil Sobacı from fonlabeni.com, 6 January 2013).

Scholarly literature on online crowdfunding has emerged mostly out of management and economics perspectives (cf. Gerber et al., 2012). Shedding light ‘on managerial implications of crowdfunding practices used for entrepreneurial activities’, Belleflamme et al. (2010) develops a research model to compare ‘the preorder product system’ with ‘the profit-sharing system of crowdfunding’ (p. 32). Their research outcomes stress the importance of ‘community building’ as a managerial task, regardless of which crowdfunding system is used. The implication is that in comparison to traditional funding, ‘building a

community that supports the entrepreneur is a critical ingredient for crowdfunding to be more profitable than traditional funding' (Belleflamme et al., 2010: 5). Building on Belleflamme et al.'s work, Gerber et al. (2012) unpack motivational factors from the perspective of human–computer interaction. Based on interviews, Gerber concludes that campaign creators are motivated by raising funds, receiving validation, connecting with others and expanding awareness of their work, while funders seek rewards, networks of support and connections with others (Gerber et al., 2012, see also Ward and Ramachandran, 2010). The community aspect of crowdfunding comes forward among the research findings, indicating the need for novel ways of economical organization.

Ordanini et al. (2011) also conduct qualitative research into three crowdfunding initiatives, SellaBand, Kapipal and Trampoline. Falling between consuming and investing, the authors reveal, crowdfunding is 'a further step in the evolution of consumers' roles, that involves a mix of entrepreneurship and social network participation' (Ordanini et al., 2011: 444). The emergent identity of consumers who tend to invest has implications for the organization of service management. Agrawal et al. (2010), on the other hand, question if proximity and distance are significant parameters of online financing decisions. They conclude that the 'online platform seems to eliminate most distance-related economic frictions such as monitoring progress, providing input, and gathering information' (Agrawal et al., 2010: 1). Still, geography plays a role when it comes to the timing of financing. Local investors invest relatively early and 'the timing of distant investments is very responsive to the investment decisions of others' (Agrawal et al., 2010: 2, also see Mollick, 2014).

Parallel to growing management, marketing and economics literatures on crowdfunding, a media and cultural studies–oriented scholarship has simultaneously built on Jeff Howe's recognition of the crowdsourcing phenomenon. Sorensen (2012) and Aitamurto (2011) observe the entangled relationship between crowdfunding and the dynamics of such complex cultural industries as film production and news making. Focussing on the competition for public funds available for documentary film production and distribution in the United Kingdom, Sorensen (2012) uncovers 'how new ways of funding documentaries online are impacting on the documentary industry as a whole, as well as on individual films' (p. 727). She concludes that although crowdfunding methods provide alternatives to traditional methods of funding, gatekeeping mechanisms are still in place and need to be carefully examined (Sorensen, 2012: 741, also see Bannerman, 2013). Aitamurto (2011), on the other hand, sheds light on the emergent notion of community-funded journalism by looking into Spot.us as a case study. Based on the analysis of both donors' and reporters' narratives, Aitamurto concludes that crowdfunded reporting contests the conventional self-perception of journalists as independent creative workers responsible merely to their colleagues and managers. Crowdfunded journalistic processes connect reporters more directly to their publics (Aitamurto, 2011: 440).

While they emphasize novel ways of organizing media production and distribution introduced by online collective funding, neither Sorensen nor Aitamurto ignores structural continuities between traditional methods of financing and new ones. Similarly, in a recent article entitled 'Crowdfunding Culture' Sara Bannerman (2013) details both the disadvantages broached by crowdfunding phenomena and their benefits to actors, such as the removal of elite control over cultural production. She writes that 'crowdfunding platforms facilitate the mobilization of ideas, the interconnection of funders with creators, the

bringing together of ideas and resources, and new organizational possibilities' (Bannerman, 2013: 3). However, the story does not end there, as Bannerman's social revolution has a darker side. She notes, 'Crowdsourcing and crowdfunding also create opportunities for exploitation and for the extension of exploitative relations into new areas' (Bannerman, 2013: 3). Thus, the repercussions of crowdfunding nest in the complex interplay between the alterations crowdfunding makes to existing social structures and the ways in which the dominant forces of cultural production use and shape these technologies as the annex of existing configurations of power.

Building on this literature, this article provides an account on what crowdfunding achieves for individuals who undertake it. I seek to position online collective financing within larger societal discourses from the perspectives of culture producers. Following Faye Ginsburg (1994), I approach crowdfunding as a 'generative discursive space'. Approaching media as a generative discursive space breaks tendencies to fetishize the technological without losing a sense of the specific situatedness of media technologies (Wilson and Peterson, 2002). Regarding the lack of cultural situatedness in the works cited above, I hope to unpack crowdfunding experiences narrated by culturally, historically and politically situated agents. What do media practitioners themselves think about the openings and limitations embedded in crowdfunding? To what ends do they use this method of financing? In addition to accumulating funds for cultural production, agents use crowdfunding as a stepping stone, a jumpstart or a public relations tactic (Bannerman, 2013; Sorensen, 2012). What social ends do cultural producers with political agendas think that they achieve through collective funding? In what ways do societal, political and historical circumstances frame their crowdfunding drives? Answers to these questions provided by the producers of the documentary films under discussion illuminate the social business achieved through crowdfunding in particular cultural and political contexts.

### **Crowdfunding *My Child*: A drive for visibility**

By supporting this film, people stake out a claim for *My Child*. This is significant in political terms, not just in monetary terms ... (Can Candan, director and producer, 23 February 2013)

*My Child* (2013) revolves around a group of people residing in Istanbul. The main characters in the film are five women and two men who are mothers and fathers of LGBT individuals. The documentary focuses on these parents' difficult personal journeys towards accepting their children for who they are. Their journeys do not end with mere acceptance. They get organized in *LISTAG Aileleri İstanbul Grubu* (Families of LGBTs in İstanbul) (2012), a voluntary support and solidarity group for families and friends of LGBT people in Turkey established in January 2008. LISTAG (LGBT aileleri İstanbul grubu) families not only stand by their children but they courageously raise their voices for LGBT rights in Turkey. In *My Child*, by intimately sharing their experiences with the viewer, these families 'redefine what it means to be parents, family, and activists in this conservative, homophobic, and transphobic society' (Surela Film, 2013).

*My Child* is Can Candan's third feature-length documentary film. Candan's work focuses on social and political issues ranging from grumblings about today's Turkish youth within the Turkish educational system to the lives of Turkish immigrants in

Germany, whose experiences are entangled within discourses of exclusion and belonging. The director explains his motivation for making *My Child* as follows:

In Turkey, LGBT individuals are discriminated against in tremendous ways. Not only that, but they are also constantly the subject of prevalent hate discourse and crimes. These people and their experiences are rendered invisible in this society [...] At the same time, a group of very brave people set off by saying 'we as parents of our LGBT kids will do something to change this'. LISTAG parents openly tell their stories. We all need to hear them. This is what this documentary is about. (Interview on 23 February 2013)

Potentiating 'an ice-breaking effect' with the tagline of 'a family film', Candan seeks to reach average Turkish households likely unfamiliar with LGBT issues, to render LGBT experiences visible to popular audiences, and eventually to 'conceive change in a homophobic and transphobic society' (interview on 23 February 2013).

Scholars continue to debate whether and how political documentaries affect societal transformations (e.g. Christensen, 2009; Waugh, 2011). Asking if documentaries have ever produced change, Jane Gaines (1999) coined the notion of 'political mimesis'. She writes that aestheticized realism has the potential to 'align the viewer with a struggle that continues beyond the frame' (Gaines, 1999: 93, also see Taussig, 1993). To Gaines, mimetic action triggered by political documentary is bodily, thus empirical. Bill Nichols (1991), on the other hand, writes that political documentaries operate primarily 'on the viewer's consciousness, raising it in the vernacular of progressive politics' (p. 69). David Whiteman (2004) criticizes investigations that focus on film as a finished product regardless of whether they position its political impact in bodily reactions or trace it through discourse. Locating that 'impact' in the social practices of media production, distribution and circulation, Whiteman (2004) offers 'the coalition model' for analysing the political effect of documentary film. Applicable to the case of *My Child*, the coalition model conceptualizes films as 'part of a larger process that incorporates both production and distribution (not simply as a "product" for consumption)' (Whiteman, 2004: 51). Films have the capacity to sustain alternative spheres for public discourse. Considering this potential as critical for social movements, the coalition model incorporates 'production as well as distribution, activists and decision makers as well as citizens, and alternative as well as dominant spheres of discourse' in assessing the political impact of a documentary (Whiteman, 2004: 54).

A total of 2 years after the start of its production, *My Child* has reached more than 16,000 people in movie theatres, as well as an unknown number of people who have seen it in film festivals and special screenings. The documentary was released on DVD in December 2013. In those 2 years, dozens of articles, interviews and news pieces featuring *My Child* and the LISTAG families appeared in newspapers (Surela Film, 2013). More than a few TV shows hosted Candan and LISTAG families on national television. This media visibility opened new terrain in which LISTAG families could further their activist work (cf. Whiteman, 2004). For instance, after the film's release, *LISTAG Aileleri İstanbul Grubu* (2012) parents travelled to more than a dozen cities in Turkey and gave talks about their experiences, further stimulating similar initiatives by local groups. Around the time the film premiered in February, when media attention around the film was at its peak, Candan noted in our interview, 'The help line of LISTAG did not stop ringing' (23 February

2012). People called day and night to share their own experiences with LGBT family members, ask LISTAG parents questions and join the initiative. Moreover, the LISTAG parents were invited to the Turkish Parliament in Ankara and screened *My Child* for a group of liberal members of parliament. Following the screening, a LISTAG representative addressed the press and stressed the need for constitutional protections for LGBT individuals. Footage of the meeting was aired on primetime news programmes that night.

The increasing visibility of LISTAG in the media, as well as in political venues, was made possible by *My Child*. The success of *My Child*, as defined by Can Candan, as well as according to the coalition model, was due to a carefully executed public relations campaign built around the documentary. On 2 December 2012, the crowdfunding campaign for *My Child* was launched on Indiegogo, which unlike some crowdfunding sites provides flexible funding solutions for campaigns that fail to reach their funding targets. Like other crowdfunding sites, Indiegogo entices donors with donor gifts that vary by funding level. At its conclusion on 9 April 2013, the campaign raised US\$18,050 of its US\$40,000 goal. The project team established six funding levels ranging from US\$10 to US\$5000 with donor gifts ranging from the inclusion of contributors' names in the film's credits as donors and associated producers to exclusive production updates to signed DVDs of the film. In 4 months, 210 people donated through Indiegogo to *My Child*'s production. Of these 210 people, 73 donated US\$10, 46 donated US\$25, 85 donated US\$50 and 5 people donated US\$100. One donor donated US\$1000 in exchange for two tickets to the premier of the film in a nearby theatre.

For two interrelated reasons, the film's crowdfunding drive was a transformative apparatus in its public relations work. First of all, the drive launched just before shooting started and so helped jumpstart the film's budget of approximately US\$200,000 (cf. Reid cited in Bannerman, 2013). To jumpstart a project is critical in the Turkish cinema industry where institutional resources for cinema production are not only gradually more competitive, but also highly politicized (Harani, 2013). In 2013, out of 1147 film projects that sought funding from the Turkish Ministry of Culture (the only remarkable national funding offered by the state) only 141 projects qualified for production support (Sinema Genel Müdürlüğü, 2013). Recently, the ministry added a new criterion to project selection. In order to qualify for funds, applicant projects now need to comply with 'the general morals of the Turkish family structure' (Güneysu, 2013). From the ministry's perspective, LGBT individuals and their families fail to meet those standards. A documentary like *My Child*, which aspires to shed light on non-traditional LGBT families, is *ipso facto* non-fundable by the state.

In less than 6 months, *My Child*'s Indiegogo campaign raised US\$18,000 of its US\$40,000 target. Although the amount raised on Indiegogo did not reach the project team's expectations, it built a level of credibility around the project. Online donations made even before shooting started conveyed to the film's producers and crew the public urgency of a project like *My Child*. Encouraged by this, the documentary team knocked on institutional doors in search of further funds. Candan explained, 'When we finally accumulated some money on Indiegogo, we could go and ask for money from such institutions as Amnesty International' (interview, 6 December 2013). Amnesty International, the British Embassy and the Consulate of the Netherlands donated between €10,000 and €25,000 to the production of *My Child*. These institutional donations were virtual outcomes of the Indiegogo campaign and the active public that emerged around it.



Second, the campaign helped train the media spotlight on the documentary and its subjects both via social media and traditional mainstream media. Underlining the importance of social media in the *My Child* campaign, Candan notes,

Especially social media makes a huge difference in crowdfunding initiatives. Say you funded my project and you tweet its Indiegogo page. Your 2,000 followers see it immediately. Some of them retweet it even though they don't donate. The *My Child* campaign has become viral on Facebook and Twitter. (Interview, 6 December 2013)

In fact, the campaign did not simply go viral on its own, but was carefully executed on social media. Crew members replied to every message received on indiegogo.com and connected with over 5000 people on Facebook by posting updates on production and screenings.

In crowdfunding, performances of public-making and fundraising processes are induced (Luka, 2012). The technologies of publicity put at work by activists 'not only aid in the mounting of social justice causes, but in the cultivation of audiences, and more importantly, publics' (Torchin, 2012: 139). As discourse on *My Child* accumulated on social media, the campaign was also attracting attention from newspapers. Again, the documentary crew managed public scrutiny very carefully. Candan explains,

When we launched the campaign we said, this project needs to be visible in the press. We thought out our press relations early on. We utilized all of our connections in our networks. News about the film soon appeared in the papers. That's how we reached more and more people. (Interview, 6 December 2013)

Of dozens of news items, interviews and opinion pieces that appeared in Turkish newspapers, Candan refers to the ones carried in *Hürriyet* as the most remarkable. An influential mainstream daily newspaper, *Hürriyet* is also known for its homophobic and transphobic language (Özbay, 2014). Yet, on the week starting 9 February 2013, a sequential interview with Candan followed interviews with five of the LISTAG parents (Arman, 2013). Candan notes that through this series of interviews, LISTAG parents and *My Child* reached an audience of 3 million people. Shared widely on Facebook and Twitter, the interviews elaborated on the lives of the LISTAG families, *My Child* and its collective financing and production.

A public emerged as much around the idea of collective funding as the LGBT-sympathetic subject of *My Child*. As Warner (2002) notes, a public is a social space that circumscribes people who are otherwise strangers, and it comes into being as an entity only when addressed in relation to circulating texts, objects and ideas (p. 50). The crowdfunding discourse around *My Child* has functioned as a mode of addressing an audience, and by virtue of addressing that audience has turned engendered a public around *My Child*. Warner (2002) explains the process of transformation from strangers into a public by virtue of being addressed via Althusser's notion of interpellation (1971),

In the moment of recognizing oneself as the person addressed [by the police], the moment of turning around, one is interpellated as the subject of state discourse. Althusser's analysis had the virtue of showing the importance of imaginary identification – and locating it [...] in the subjective practice of understanding. (p. 58)

A documentary film that cultivates its subjects' lives outside the boundaries drawn by institutionalized homophobia and transphobia, *My Child* has attracted attention from an audience sensitive to LGBT rights. It has done so against a backdrop of increasing governmental control manifested in a variety of areas ranging from the withholding of public funds for cultural production to police violence used to repel peaceful protestors. As a rare financing option, perhaps the only one available to the making of an LGBT-sympathetic documentary in contemporary Turkey, the crowdfunding of *My Child* further engendered a social space that circumscribed the film's audience. The circulation of discourse about its collective financing in social and traditional media transforms *My Child's* audience into an active public.

### **Crowdfunding *Ecumenopolis*: A drive for independence**

None of the logos seen in this film are used for a commercial end. They just coincidentally appear among the images shot to portray a scientific notion. (The opening credits of *Ecumenopolis*)

This project could not possibly be financed in any other way but collectively. (Gaye Günay, producer, 6 December 2013)

As a rallying point for the masses who voiced their growing anti-government dissent in June 2013, the protests around Gezi Park began in order to prevent the eponymous 9-acre urban green space in Istanbul's historic Taksim neighbourhood from being transformed into a shopping mall. Against a backdrop of police violence and a national media black-out, the protests immediately came to exceed the limits of the green in Gezi Park. Yet the demonstrations kept returning in their discourse to the notion of the violation of Istanbul's citizens' right to their city, specifically their right of access to the common space of Gezi Park. Massive protests like the Gezi movement do not just come out of the blue. Gezi was 'the latest manifestation of a movement that has been stirring for some time. The shopping mall is only one component of a plan to entirely redesign Taksim Square into a more car-friendly, tourist-accommodating, and sanitized urban centre' (Cassano, 2013). A culmination of many local resistance movements, the Gezi Park protests meshed with other urban movements in Istanbul that have specifically organized themselves against the increased urban transformation undertaken by the current government (Köse, 2014).

The 2011 documentary film *Ecumenopolis* provides an in-depth context for the Gezi protests through an insightful depiction of contemporary urban development in Turkey and its effects on people's lives. *Ecumenopolis* discusses Istanbul's rapid urbanization against a backdrop of a larger, neoliberal transformation. Through interviews with experts, academics, writers, investors, city-dwellers and community leaders, the film provides a holistic picture of urban transformation in Istanbul. *Ecumenopolis* not only questions the larger historical, economical and political dynamics of this makeover, but by following a migrant family from the demolition of their neighbourhood to their on-going struggle for housing rights, the documentary also sheds light on the experiences of urban citizens. Building on urban preservation movements in Istanbul organized by members of civil society, including academic institutes and vocational bodies, *Ecumenopolis* helped bring the discussion of Istanbul's development to a larger public that is itself directly but often unwittingly subject to the carnage of urban transformation.

Like many other independent documentary productions focussing on social issues, *Ecumenopolis* was produced by grace of alternative means of financing that include the utilization of connections within the film industry, and obtaining sponsorships for equipment and post-production work. For distribution expenses, the producers launched a crowdfunding drive; at the time, the first in Turkey for a media project. The drive set its fundraising target at 18,000 Turkish lira (approximately US\$8700) to be raised in 3 months. The campaign's page on [www.projemefon.com](http://www.projemefon.com), a national crowdfunding platform, featured a 7-minute trailer and a project synopsis which read,

More than just a film, *Ecumenopolis* is in fact an activist stand coming into leaf against the painful situation in which our beloved Istanbul finds itself ... Our city's future is under threat and it is time to own this city ... We want to convey *Ecumenopolis* to people in movie theatres so that these issues, which politicians deliberately avoid, can be discussed by the public ... We made this film because we wanted to question what is happening to our beloved city, rather than being onlookers. Now we are searching for a way to collectively distribute it. Can you help us?

In 3 months, an amount slightly over the modest target was raised through contributions by over 200 people. The donor gifts offered per crowdfunding custom by the film's production team ranged from a signed postcard to t-shirts to film posters. The film was released in three movie theatres and reached to over 25,000 people in the following few weeks.

Sorensen (2012) writes that 'relying on a community for funding and distribution lends itself to a certain subject matter. Supporters are not only financially supporting a film, but also its cause' (p. 739). On the other hand, from the perspective of those seeking funding, a crowdfunding initiative is similarly not merely about securing production or distribution funds for cultural productions (Bannerman, 2013; Gerber et al., 2012). Articulating the specific metaculture of a project (Urban, 2001), crowdfunding achieves the social and political ends which are sometimes more critical for culture producers than obtaining finances. *Ecumenopolis*' producer Gaye Günay complements this observation. In addition to the collective production emphasized in the campaign's synopsis, Günay's narrative on crowdfunding highlights another interrelated notion central to *Ecumenopolis* and the activist agenda that informs its making: independence from corporate money.

In her recent ethnography, *Refractions of Civil Society in Turkey*, Daniella Kuzmanovich (2012) writes that 'the notion of *bağımsız* [independent] speaks of the question of proximity and distance in general but holds some connotations of speaking of proximity and distance to the state in particular' (p. 52). In defining independence as being not only distant from the state but also removed from the corporations in cooperation with the state, Günay states, 'when we set off down that road, we said that *Ecumenopolis* will be an independent film. Crowdfunding seemed to be the right way to go' (interview, 6 December 2013). As *Ecumenopolis* depicts the rumbling generated by urban transformation as an outcome of the neoliberal, capitalist system, independence from corporate interests was a prerequisite of the project for the documentary's team. To liberate itself from capitalist carnage, government control and the systematic stripping of citizens' rights to the city requires that citizens first become aware of the connections between the neoliberal, capitalist system, its policies, urban transformation and individual lives. Günay notes, 'the idea that *Ecumenopolis* as an independent documentary would be realized with

the support of people who believe in the project, who own up to their city seemed to be the best option' (interview, 6 December 2013).

In evaluating the political impact of a documentary film, David Whiteman (2004) writes, '[one must] consider the role of films in the efforts of social movements to create and sustain alternative spheres of public discourse (in addition to focussing on mainstream public discourse)' (p. 52). *Ecumenopolis* provides an alternative space for the public discussion of urban transformation. Its crowdfunding discursively counterparts *Ecumenopolis*' discourse and its activist agenda. A review on the day of its cinematic release stated, 'A film which is realized by the contributions of the people believing in the film's quality and sincerity, *Ecumenopolis* calls on its viewers not to remain onlookers. Because cities belong to all of us' (Özkan, 2012).

### **Crowdfunding *I Flew You Stayed*: A drive for dialogue**

I love it when I can speak and communicate through films ... I want especially the families of soldiers who died in this war to watch this film because what we have lost is common ground for us to meet. (Mizgin M Arslan, director and producer, January 2013)

During the Gezi protests in June 2013, seven people were killed and dozens of demonstrators were injured. Some lost their eyes because of the plastic bullets deliberately fired at them by police. Hundreds of citizens were taken illegitimately into police custody. Mainstream national media ignored the presence of millions of people on the streets of several cities in Turkey. The failure to cover the events around Taksim Square, the location of Gezi Park, where tens of thousands of youth and political activists engaged in street battles with police indiscriminately firing teargas grenades, was one of the triggers of the Turkish public's outcry and solidarity with protestors (Öktem, 2013 Guardian).

The news blackout during the Gezi protests opened up a productive space for empathy with the experience of Turkey's Kurds, who have been subject to such a blackout for decades. As a nation-state established on the construct of ethnic homogeneity, Turkey has denied the existence of the Kurds for most of its modern history. Kurds could become prominent businessmen, even prime minister, but their ethnicity could never be mentioned. Several Kurdish uprisings were violently stamped out, and south-eastern Turkey, home to a majority Kurdish population, was left to stagnate. During the 1990s, at the peak of the war between PKK forces and the Turkish army, the murder of Kurdish journalists and businessmen by the state's paramilitary forces, as well as the indiscriminate detention of Kurdish people, could never breach the state's censorship of Turkish media. These events remained unfamiliar to the people of western Turkey who never received news about the Kurdish conflict other than what the state fed them unless they sought it in alternative ways. With Gezi, however, this privileged state of ignorance was shaken, opening a reflexive space for dialogue about the Kurdish issue, Turkish media and the state.

Silenced in the mainstream Turkish media for decades, Kurdish subjectivities have, on the other hand, found a voice in cinema. As Ayça Çiftçi notes, 'any story told in the Kurdish geography carries traces from the social history of the Kurdish issue' (Çiftçi, 2012). Documentary films constitute a sphere of social history and an alternative plane of existence, expression and dialogue for the Kurds (Çiçek, 2011). The Kurdish peace

process, which found new footing in late 2012, has presented the Kurds and Turkey with a great opportunity not only to solve the Kurdish issue peacefully, but also to push Turkey towards a more advanced level of democracy. With recent shifts in state discourse (Ayata, 2011; Yeğen, 2009), cinema productions that cultivate Kurdish experiences in Turkey have begun more visibly articulating the political debates and popular discourses about, and providing spaces of dialogue for, the Kurdish issue. One of these films, *Ez Firyam Tu Mayî Li Cî (I Flew You Stayed)* (2012), is a crowdfunded documentary by Mizgin Mûjde Arslan. In her documentary, Arslan narrates her personal story of searching for the grave of a father she never knew. A PKK guerilla who left his pregnant wife behind for a political cause he believed in, Arslan's father died fighting on the side of the organization. His grave is in Maxmur, in Iraqi Kurdistan, where he spent his time caring for refugees in the camp. Hoping to find his grave, Arslan undertakes a long, dangerous journey from Istanbul to Maxmur. In Maxmur, she meets people to whom her absent father was a real parent. As she documents her encounters, her journey turns into a means to question not only a beloved parent who chose to leave her behind but a bloody war that lasted for decades and left behind wounded people.

*I Flew You Stayed* completed the festival circuit in 2012 and was received very well. The first screening of the film was held at the Istanbul Film Festival, where it participated in National Competition, in April 2012. The film received Best Documentary at the Amed International Film Festival, and honourable mention in the Short Film and Documentary Competition in Boston. Prominent Turkish film critic, Alin Taşçıyan, exemplified the film's positive reviews in describing *I Flew You Stayed* as 'a very rare sample of nominative documentary, which succeeds in giving light to a generation having gone through a trauma due to the political turmoil of an era' (Taşçıyan, 2013). Encouraged by such positive reception, Arslan initiated a crowdfunding campaign on Indiegogo in early 2013, hoping to generate funds to bring the film to larger audiences. The campaign set a target of US\$16,000 to be raised in 3 months for the digital distribution of the documentary in movie theatres. The perks offered to donors included signed postcards and permission to stream the film online. Only US\$4000 was raised. Unable to undertake a movie theatre distribution, the producers released the film on DVD.

Kurdish media producers who interweave social and political agendas with their filmmaking are often marginalized within Turkish media worlds. In *I Flew You Stayed*, Arslan's search for her father's grave, for instance, is a cry out against the hegemonic history which has labelled her beloved father a 'terrorist' (cf. Lebow, 2012). Thus, the documentary in and of itself is a breach of the official state narrative in Turkey. Impeded by official and unofficial national censorship, Kurdish documentary filmmakers like Arslan move between local, national and transnational media worlds to advance their cinematic work (Koçer, 2013). Kurdish filmmakers have always financed films through a constellation of alternative methods, including the use of personal finances, the borrowing and lending of equipment, and exploiting international cinema production funds. Against the backdrop of national and international film production politics, through which Kurdish filmmakers hone their media practice, crowdfunding emerges as a viable method of securing additional funds.

The way in which Arslan describes her motivation to crowdfund is noteworthy. The following appears on the film's Indiegogo project page:

Be no longer a passive audience in order to be part of a film ... Your support is important for providing independent and young filmmakers with the possibilities of shooting the topics considered taboo and the stories neglected up to the present in Turkey.

Similar to the crowdfunding campaign pitches of *Ecumenopolis* and *My Child*, the public outreach for *I Flew You Stayed* addresses an audience that is becoming politically and socially active by virtue of supporting independent films on neglected, taboo subjects. The vocabulary Arslan uses to signify her campaign experience, on the other hand, parallels the vocabulary used recently to signify the Kurdish issue. Frequently returning to the notion of empathy and dialogue in our interview, Arslan notes that her film coincided with 'a season of peace':

*I Flew You Stayed* was my story at the beginning. It has now become the story of a people, a country, and an era. I want people to own this story. I want the film to reach more people. Film can speak the words that people cannot. (Interview, 5 January 2013)

Although the amount reached at the end of the campaign period was not sufficient for the wider cinematic release Arslan hoped for, she seemed more than happy with her crowdfunding experience. Arslan says,

I received lots of messages after the campaign's launch. I felt that I was not alone in what I did. People who could not donate money asked if they could do something else for the film. A young man offered to design the film poster. Another one spoke to the movie theatre in his city. Others just shared their experiences of war. Replicating the spirit of *I Flew*, the crowdfunding campaign helped open up space for dialogue where I met with many people from all walks of life. (Interview on 5 January 2013)

To Arslan, that space of dialogue was more meaningful than the amount of money gathered through the drive.

## Conclusion

Fourteen-year-old Berkin Elvan was shot in the head with a teargas canister fired by a policeman near his house in Okmeydanı, Istanbul on 16 June 2013. When he was shot, Elvan was on his way to buy bread for breakfast. After 269 days in a coma, Elvan died on 11 March 2014. Over 1 million people gathered in Şişli for his funeral. In the wake of local elections, Prime Minister Erdoğan asserted that the boy was a violent protestor who threw iron marbles at the police. On 14 March, the *Times* featured a full-page ad commemorating the life of Elvan. The ad, titled 'Justice for Berkin', read,

Fifteen-year-old Berkin Elvan died after 269 days in a coma following an injury inflicted by a teargas canister shot directly to his head. The Turkish police, Erdoğan's 'heroes', shot him on his way to buy bread. Those responsible do not have a conscience. Use yours. (*The New York Times*, 14 March 2014)

Placed in the *Times* through crowdfunding, the ad, available on the *Times*' website, circulated widely in Turkish social media. The ad generated massive interest in its

prominence as well as its financing. As Oltaç Ünsal, one of the campaign's organizers stated, 'Democracy in Turkey, anywhere for that matter, can only be achieved when silent masses act' (Cush, 2014). Indiegogo, according to Oltaç, provided the crowd with the means 'to reach those who can "act" towards a goal' (Cush, 2014).

For activist media projects, crowdfunding functions as 'a technology of publicity' (Torchin, 2006), which brings attention to what is being funded. In such projects, by extending the actual media and its production, what is being funded is the social and political cause around which the project revolves. As crowdfunding campaigns circulate through social media, they forge publics around these causes, as well as related films, videos and stories. Identifying the metaculture of collective funding, which is the discursive characterization of cultural objects and their making, requires locating crowdfunding within complex societal and historical discourses.

In this article, I focussed on three crowdfunded documentaries and looked into how their producers discursively characterized their films in relation to their financing methods. In Turkey, documentary films are increasingly becoming platforms through which popular dissent is channelled and expressed by filmmakers. Because the state's institutional resources for cinema production are not only gradually more competitive, but also increasingly politicized, such social documentaries rarely receive cinema support funds from the Ministry of Culture, the only noteworthy source of funding offered by the state (Harani, 2013). Thus, initiating crowdfunding campaigns in addition to using personal finances and developing collaborative projects is increasingly a significant option for independent documentary filmmakers.

For documentary films like *My Child*, *Ecumenopolis* and *I Flew You Stayed*, crowdfunding has also been central to their characterizations. Based on the producers' narratives, I argued that crowdfunding is a tool to accomplish social businesses, which are the ends achieved in and through communication against a backdrop of larger questions of values, identity or power that inform and emerge from particular interactions (Goodman, 2007: 32). These ends achieved through crowdfunding discourses range from creating communities of support and attracting media attention to building a reputation of independence. Social business achieved through crowdfunding, on the other hand, is meaningful only in relation to the particular activist agendas and societal discourses that shape them. While the director of *My Child* highlights visibility, a state the LGBT movement in Turkey struggles for, as an outcome of crowdfunding, for the *Ecumenopolis* team, crowdfunding means protecting their reputation of independence from corporate money. Arslan, on the other hand, accentuates crowdfunding as a means towards productive dialogue on the Kurdish issue, a matter for which the channels of communication have been subsumed since the establishment of the Turkish Republic.

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