



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on July 12, 2011

Government Funding Down; Scientists Experiment With “Crowd-Funding” Websites

For example, biologists Jennifer Calkins and Jennifer Gee, seeking to travel to Mexico to study the elegant quail, set up a project on [Kickstarter.com](#), a “crowd-funding” website. There they described their research project in detail and offered a variety of premiums to those pledging money for their project — everything from postcards to signed copies of the book based on the research, to outings with the researchers. The book, available for a donation of \$35, proved to be the most popular premium. “It’s one thing to buy a book about quails,” Kickstarter community editor Cassie Marketos told the *Times*. “But to know that you played a small part in making it happen is a much different experience.”



On Kickstarter, the initiator of a project determines its funding goal. Once that goal is reached, donors are charged for their pledges, from which Kickstarter takes a five-percent cut. If the goal is not reached, donors do not have to pay. For the quail project, the goal was \$4,853, which was met, with \$20 to spare, on December 24.

Other crowd-funding websites charge donors whether or not the goal is reached. One such site, [MyProjects](#), set up by the London-based charity Cancer Research UK, allows donors to select the type of cancer research they want to fund and to choose projects in their local area. “The site has videos of patients’ success stories as well as researchers,” writes the *Times*. “Science is a point of interest, [Cancer Research UK’s online communities manager Ryan] Bromley said, but the human element is ‘a bit more motivating than the science alone.’” The site itself, plus its [Facebook page](#), which has been “liked” by over 75,000 people, has managed to raise \$1.3 million since 2008.

Italian scientist Dr. Andrea Gaggioli is also hoping to harness the power of crowd funding for research. According to the *Times*, Gaggioli found that “in Italy it’s almost impossible to get funded if you are under 30,” so his dream is to raise money through his [Open Genius Project](#). “I think people will invest in projects that are carried out by young people who have no other possibilities to put forward their ideas,” the 37-year-old scientist told the paper.

The beauty of these crowd-funding initiatives is that, unlike government funding, no one is forced to contribute to them. As the *Times* puts it, “Money talks: The public decides which projects are worth pursuing by fully financing them.” Normally when the media talk about the public’s financing something, they mean the government is forcing individuals to finance it via taxation, in which case politicians and bureaucrats, not the people financing the research, are the ones deciding what gets funded. In the case of crowd funding, however, the people footing the bill are genuinely determining the ends toward which their money will be put. Thus, says the newspaper, on MyProjects, the “emphasis [is]



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on the most common cancers: breast, lung and prostate.”

Government, by contrast, funds research based on political considerations, so those with the loudest voices, the best public-relations campaigns, and (most importantly) the biggest campaign contributions tend to get the most money directed toward their preferred causes. Why else, for instance, does the U.S. government spend vastly more on AIDS than it spends on Parkinson’s disease, Alzheimer’s, prostate cancer, diabetes, heart disease, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C combined?

In addition, there is a sense of joy and satisfaction derived from directly contributing to research of one’s own choosing rather than having the funds forcibly pried from one’s wallet and directed toward politically popular research. Most of those quoted in the *Times* piece indicated as much, whether it was Gaggioli’s comment that people would choose to invest in young scientists’ projects, Bromley’s remark on “the human element” of the crowd-funding process, or Marketos’ assertion that personal financial participation in research “is a much different experience.” Even the scientists seem to enjoy connecting with the public; and they surely must prefer spending a short time setting up a crowd-funding project to spending hours or days writing grant proposals in hopes that some distant bureaucrats will deem their projects worthy of backing.

“It’s too soon to tell how widespread science crowd funding will become,” the *Times* maintains, and that is certainly true. Less glamorous research may be a tougher sell to individual donors; but then it is also a tougher sell to politicians and bureaucrats.

Nevertheless, crowd funding does demonstrate that scientific research can continue in the absence of government funding. This should not come as a surprise. “Historically,” says a [website](#) that was, ironically, produced by the University of California and funded by a National Science Foundation grant, “science has been largely supported through private patronage (the backing of a prominent person or family), church sponsorship, or simply paying for the research yourself. Galileo’s work in the 16th and 17th centuries, for example, was supported mainly by wealthy individuals, including the Pope.”

With governments the world over being forced to cut back on unnecessary spending, now may be an opportunity for history to repeat itself to the benefit of science — and, in turn, to all mankind.



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