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## CLICK/GIFT

### Crowdfunding as a Socio-cultural Practice

To mark its ten-year anniversary in 2022, the Swiss crowdfunding company *wemakeit* offered shares in its company. Registered users who had already participated in crowdfunding campaigns were able to purchase *wemakeit* shares ahead of any other interested parties. Seen through a business lens, this constituted the Initial Public Offering (IPO) that is typical of startups, the flotation on a kind of stock exchange which company owners use to turn a portion of their investments and their work into profits. At *wemakeit*, this was not done via the Swiss Exchange, but via a startup called ›Aktionariat‹, which operates using blockchain technology. However, there was also no talk of a flotation or IPO but, instead, of a ›crowd takeover‹. On the colourful website that *wemakeit* set up to mark its tenth anniversary, a marquee can be seen at the top. In white on green, it reads, ›Revolution now – Revolution now – Revolution now...‹. The banner is reminiscent of a news or stock ticker. In place of the dashes are highly pixelated flags: a symbol of rebellion. Further down, we can read: ›Revolution! We've always liked to man the barricades, have gone about things differently and done things our own way.‹ There is talk of participation and having a stake in things: ›The revolution continues – and is called *Crowdtakeover*: We will be the first crowdfunding platform that belongs to the community. Be a part of it!‹<sup>1</sup>

In the following text, the story of this crowdfunding platform is used as a case study in order to closely examine the new socio-cultural practice, based on technological infrastructure, of crowdfunding and the promise of transformation associated with it. Major crowdfunding platforms have been entering the public stage since the mid-2000s – for the first time in Europe, in 2006, *SellaBand*, a Dutch company aimed

1 <<https://10years.wemakeit.com>> (in German and French).



at musicians and their fans. The beginnings of more general platforms that were not specific to just one field were marked by *Indiegogo* in 2008 in the USA, followed a year later by the long-time market leader, *Kickstarter*. In 2010, *Gofundme* (USA) and *Startnext* (Germany) also commenced their activities, among others. With a slight delay, *wemakeit* and *100-days.net* (later *Crowdfify*) were founded in Switzerland in 2012. To this day, they are the most important crowdfunding platforms in the country, and, by its own account, *wemakeit* is the fourth largest in Europe.<sup>2</sup>

Such platforms were quickly regarded as pioneering models of financing for art and cultural projects, but also for other purposes – for the development of new products, for political campaigns, or even for underinsured people needing expensive medical treatments or lawyers. It is no coincidence that the ›Crowd Takeover‹ campaign by *wemakeit* focused on the concepts of the ›community‹ and the ›crowd‹. In doing so, it followed the rhetoric of Web 2.0 from the 2000s and 2010s, in which the Internet, with social media such as Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and Instagram (2010), offers a digitally mediated community as a service or commodity in a form of digital capitalism.

Crowdfunding providers promise a ›democratisation‹ of financing options – although it is not always clear what exactly is meant by this: novel accessibility of communication channels and networks or more fundamental opportunities for participation and influence. In this context, terms such as ›community‹ and ›crowd‹ do not simply describe digitally constituted forms of sociality but also load the practice of crowdfunding with connotations of community and modernity. What is remarkable about the rhetoric on the *wemakeit* website is also the adoption (with varying degrees of irony) of the language of political emancipatory movements (›revolution‹). This seems to be about nothing less than better and fairer economic activity based on mutual support grounded in solidarity, which is only considered possible through the digital infrastructure of the crowdfunding platforms.<sup>3</sup>

Our study concerning *wemakeit* deals with a specifically European and, as it were, non-Californian form of crowdfunding, at a specific point in time: the early 2010s. At the same time, this Swiss crowdfunding platform (which was founded in the city of Zurich with a focus on art and culture and is also active in Austria in addition to Switzerland) and those involved in it are used as a seismograph to discuss media, political-economic, semantic, legal, cultural and, in a broader sense, societal shifts that shaped the first quarter of the 21st century through the double disciplinary lens of contemporary history and empirical cultural studies.<sup>4</sup> These are such current

2 The annual figures come from the companies' websites.

3 Cf. the concept of the community in such contexts, e.g., Silke van Dyk/Tine Haubner, *Community-Kapitalismus*, Hamburg 2021.

4 *Empirische Kulturwissenschaft* (empirical cultural studies), also known as European ethnology or *Kulturanthropologie* – formerly *Völkunde* (›the study of the people‹) – is, as it were, the sister discipline of ethnology/social anthropology – formerly *Völkerkunde* (›the study of peoples‹). See Regina Bendix, *From Völkunde to the ›Field of Many Names‹. Folklore Studies in German-Speaking Europe Since 1945*, in: Regina Bendix/Galit Hasan-Rokem (eds), *A Companion to Folklore*, Malden 2012, pp. 364-390.

developments that historical scholarship, with its methods, cannot (yet) be directly responsible for them. However, it is precisely this temporal proximity that provides the opportunity to historically situate recent phenomena and connect them with further questions while they are still in the process of their creation.

With the term ›click/gift‹, we refer to the concept of the ›gift‹ as formulated by Marcel Mauss in 1925, which analytically articulates a system of exchange relationships where the characteristic feature of this exchange is that gifts must be reciprocated, services must be compensated with services in return (with a time delay).<sup>5</sup> The extent to which such exchange relationships shape the moment of the click, i.e., the act of giving on crowdfunding platforms, mediated by technological infrastructure, and what role the ethical and symbolic impression of reciprocity played for this socio-cultural practice have been mentioned in the literature occasionally.<sup>6</sup> From such reflections as our point of departure, we aim at several levels of analysis: the first attempts a historical classification and asks whether and how the practices of giving that a crowdfunding company like *wemakeit* directs with its services differ from other (i.e., older) forms of financing through patrons, donations, subscription purchases or subsidies. The second level of analysis addresses the cultural and (collective) biographical contexts that shape crowdfunding companies. The third level of analysis combines perspectives of historical scholarship and cultural studies/European ethnology; here, we enquire about the repercussions of the investigated practices on the organisation and understanding of cultural financing, as well as on the relationship between art and society. In the process, we link approaches from economic history, the history of knowledge and infrastructural history (Dommann) with perspectives from cultural studies/European ethnology (Ege). Moritz Ege's studies on economies tied to popular culture (e.g., the key concept of *support*)<sup>7</sup> and Monika Dommann's research on digital infrastructures (such as the local anchoring of cryptocurrencies and data centres)<sup>8</sup> and on market transactions and their counter-concepts<sup>9</sup> constitute preparatory work. These works pursued the goal of understanding economic and infrastructural practices as part of social worlds and thus also of questioning hasty, erroneous conclusions along the lines of technological and economic determinism.

5 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by Ian Cunnison. With an introduction by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, London 1954 (date of first publication in French: 1925).

6 See, for example, Kévin André et al., Beyond the Opposition Between Altruism and Self-Interest. Reciprocal Giving in Reward-Based Crowdfunding, in: *Journal of Business Ethics* 146 (2017), pp. 313-332; Michael Hutter/Birger P. Priddat, Einleitung, in: id. (eds), *Geben, Nehmen, Teilen. Gabenwirtschaft im Horizont der Digitalisierung*, Frankfurt a.M. 2023, pp. 9-12.

7 Moritz Ege/Simon Zeitler, ›Support‹ – Eine Schlüsselvokabel zwischen Szene-Ethos, Crowdfunding und popkultureller Ökonomie, in: *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 118 (2015), pp. 203-233.

8 Monika Dommann/Hannes Rickli/Max Stadler (eds), *Data Centers. Edges of a Wired Nation*, Zurich 2020.

9 Monika Dommann, Markttabu, in: Christof Dejung/Monika Dommann/Daniel Speich Chassé (eds), *Auf der Suche nach der Ökonomie. Historische Annäherungen*, Tübingen 2014, pp. 183-205.

With respect to methodology, the article is based on a combination of semi-narrative interviews (with the three *wemakeit* founders and with two people who later joined the company's core team; in addition, two interviews with the founders of another Swiss crowdfunding platform) and source work (the evaluation of academic literature, media reports and industry documents and analysis of the Internet platform). The interviews took place between March 2023 and January 2025; they were conducted in Swiss German and translated into standard German.<sup>10</sup> Our research relies on relationships of mutual trust, some of which involve closeness but allow for a critical approach. We pseudonymised the names of the three founders of *wemakeit* and the current management team as well as other interviewees (marked with ›p‹ in the footnotes).

In section one, we discuss some essential insights from interdisciplinary research concerning crowdsourcing and crowdfunding, while, at the same time, shedding light on the knowledge production that has helped establish the phenomenon. Section two briefly presents the socio-economic constellations that influenced the emergence of crowdfunding platforms. We then proceed to the level of concrete actors, probe the context of origin in Zurich, and investigate the biographies of the *wemakeit* founders. The main part of the text (section three) is dedicated to demarcating the boundaries of crowdfunding. To what extent was this new socio-cultural practice also brought about through being semantically distinguished from other, older practices? How was crowdfunding legally categorised and regulated in the case of *wemakeit*? What is considered politically ›worthy of crowdfunding‹ on the platform – and what is not? Section four discusses the results of this case study against the background of historical trends of increasing marketisation. We argue that through the practice of ›pitching‹, crowdfunding initiated a process of learning and normalisation among cultural producers.

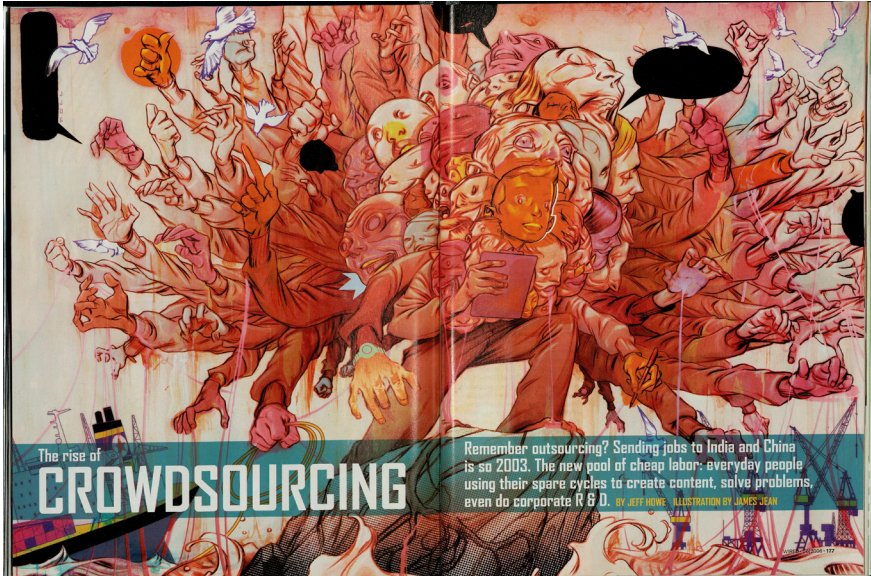
## 1. What is Crowdfunding?

The term crowdfunding, like the phenomenon itself, is a child of the 21st century and stems from American English. Merriam-Webster's online dictionary dates the term to 2006 (the year the platform *SellaBand* went online) and attributes it to the entrepreneur Michael Sullivan.<sup>11</sup> The term crowdfunding is semantically related to that of crowdsourcing, which is also dated to 2006 and is said to go back to an article by

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10 The interviews were conducted by Monika Dommann, Moritz Ege and Linda Mülli. Ege and Mülli are engaged in the Swiss sub-project of a European research network entitled ›Redistributive Imaginaries. Digitalization, Culture and Prosocial Contribution‹ and financed by the SNSF as part of the CHANSE funding line (2022–2025): <<https://redigim.arts.ac.uk>>. Valuable discussions regarding the subject matter with Lara Gruhn, Kathrin Ottovay, Julia Weisz, Rebecca Bramall and Mercè Oliva supported the article's creation. We would also like to thank Noëmi Barz and Simon Eugster for their support with transcription and literature research.

11 <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crowdfunding>>.



Crowdsourcing as utopian disruption – >A billion amateurs want your job<  
(from: *Wired*, June 2006, pp. 176-177)

blogger Jeff Howe in the tech magazine *Wired*.<sup>12</sup> At the start of >The Rise of Crowdsourcing< is a drawing of the notion of the crowd – a cluster of young people with their hands outstretched, reaching for all the world has to offer. Doves or pigeons can also be seen (a reference to the carrier pigeons of the 19th century or to doves of peace), as well as speech bubbles (a reference to the *short messages* that originated at the beginning of the 1990s). These represent the anchoring of a new technology in an old one, as is familiar from technological history, and as manifested, for example, in the concept of the tram as an extension of the railway or the airship as the rebirth of a watercraft in the air.

The term crowdsourcing was coined on the model of outsourcing (the relocation of work from the USA to Asia). It refers to the trend of providing services and content through an online crowd (i.e., a large group of scattered individuals networked by personal computers) instead of through companies and employees. While crowdsourcing refers to the internet-mediated division of labour, crowdfunding is about the internet-mediated, community-based financing of projects.

12 Jeff Howe, *The Rise of Crowdsourcing*, in: *Wired*, June 2006, pp. 176-183. See also this interview with Michael Sullivan from 2015: <<https://www.crowdfunding.de/magazin/crowdfunding-wortschoepfer-michael-sullivan-im-interview/>>.

To place this in historical context, perspectives from the history of knowledge are instructive, for, in the research literature, crowdfunding is not merely mirrored and analysed but becomes the object of attributions and visions regarding practical application and business ideas. The term is used for really quite different phenomena: crowdfunding serves as an investment, as a donation (with no reward in return), as a form of microcredit, as a subscription (with a subsequent reward), in the health sector as a substitute for a lack of social security, and in the cultural sector as a substitute for a lack of revenue or insufficient subsidies.<sup>13</sup>

After a cursory review, it becomes evident that at least part of the research literature does not describe the subject at a distance but is itself to be understood as part of the phenomenon under investigation. Leafing through the literature, which starts in around 2010 and comes almost exclusively from the social sciences, predominantly economics, one is struck by narratives that stress the continuity with older, non-digital practices, for instance, when the financing of the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty by means of a newspaper appeal at the end of the 19th century is referred to as the first instance of crowdfunding.<sup>14</sup> Reference is also made to early and precursor digital phenomena in the Internet cultures of the 1990s and 2000s. Their variety makes it difficult to draw clear distinctions from, for example, crowdsourcing, micro-finance platforms<sup>15</sup> or digital fundraising for startups.

However, the focus of the literature is on the novel nature of the phenomenon. For example, a 2010 study commissioned by the Fraunhofer Institute for Systems and Innovation Research in Karlsruhe highlighted the interactive, collaborative possibilities of Web 2.0. The potential for mass mobilisation of Internet users within a very short period of time is seen as something new that distinguishes crowdfunding from older practices.<sup>16</sup> The limited duration of the campaigns and widespread all-or-nothing principle, which links the payment of the contributions to the achievement of the funding goal, and the visibility of the interim results (>89% of 20,000 francs raised!<) intensify the pressure to act and provide additional motivation (>gamification<). However, the study also emphasises that the potential of the crowd has only been exploited to a small degree thus far; there is talk of >sleepers<, who merely need to be addressed in

13 In the literature on crowdfunding, a distinction is usually made between reward-based crowdfunding (with a fixed >reward<) and donation-based crowdfunding (without any clear >reward<), and this typology is supplemented by crowdinvesting and crowdlending. See Andreas Dietrich/Simon Amrein, *Crowdfunding Monitor Switzerland 2014*, Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts (HSLU) 2014, p. 5; id., *Crowdfunding Monitor Switzerland 2024*, Lucerne University of Applied Sciences 2024, p. 3.

14 Ying Zhao/Phil Harris/Wing Lam, *Crowdfunding Industry – History, Development, Policies, and Potential Issues*, in: *Journal of Public Affairs* 19 (2019) issue 1, e1921. See also <<https://www.crowdfunding.de/projekte/freiheitsstatue-new-york/>>.

15 See, for example, Thomas H. Allison et al., *Crowdfunding in a Prosocial Microlending Environment. Examining the Role of Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Cues*, in: *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* 39 (2015), pp. 53-73.

16 Joachim Hemer, *A Snapshot on Crowdfunding*, Working Papers Firms and Region No. R2/2011, Fraunhofer-Institut für System- und Innovationsforschung ISI, Karlsruhe 2011, p. 8.

the right way. What is more, in view of the small budgets, the projects are considered to have low levels of entrepreneurial ambition.<sup>17</sup> The study by the Fraunhofer Institute concludes that crowdfunding anchored in the creative industry has potential for growth – if the entrepreneurial focus in this sector were to be increased. What is interesting about this assessment is that crowdfunding is discussed as an instrument of fundraising and within the thinking pattern of a business studies understanding of companies, which ought to attend to business plans, market analyses, patent protection, tax optimisation, etc.

Some application-oriented studies, on the other hand, examine the success factors of crowdfunding campaigns and thus crowd behaviour. They also emphasise the primarily immaterial, ethical and identity-based motivations of the members of the crowd.<sup>18</sup> However, in this literature, the crowd is discussed implicitly rather than explicitly. It is framed above all as a potential investor who can be addressed and activated.

One exception in this regard is the 2012 brochure ›A Framework for European Crowdfunding‹, financed by startup and investment companies, which focuses assertively on the concept of the crowd. An unsourced quote by Gustave Le Bon, a founder of social psychology and author of the book *The Crowd. A Study of the Popular Mind*,<sup>19</sup> serves as the motto of the publication: ›While all our ancient beliefs are tottering and disappearing, while the old pillars of society are giving way one by one, the power of the crowd is the only force that nothing menaces, and of which the prestige is continually on the increase. The age we are about to enter will in truth be the era of crowds.‹<sup>20</sup> While for Le Bon this was about a psychoanalytical understanding of community, and, specifically, group manipulation, here, the crowd is used as a panacea for recovery from the financial crisis since 2008 and as a tool of ›creative destruction‹, with references to Joseph A. Schumpeter.<sup>21</sup> Exponents of the platform economy are happy to recycle Schumpeter as the progenitor of their disruption narrative. Even the father of modern business theory can be seen to adopt the concept of revolution within the capitalist self-understanding when he speaks of industrial mutation ›revolutionising‹ the economic structure from within.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the publications led by investment efforts, crowdfunding also presents itself as an object of study for fundamental questions of economic psychology, behavioural economics and business ethics – for example, the question of whether the

17 Ibid., p. 25.

18 See, e.g., Alexandra Harzer, *Success Factors in Crowdfunding*, Ilmenau 2013; Paul Belleflamme/Thomas Lambert/Armin Schwienbacher, Crowdfunding: Tapping the Right Crowd, in: *Journal of Business Venturing* 29 (2014), pp. 585-609.

19 Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd. A Study of the Popular Mind*, London 1896 (first French edition: 1895).

20 Kristof De Buysere et al., A Framework for European Crowdfunding, 2012, URL: <[https://d21buns5ku92am.cloudfront.net/26522/documents/17930-1351284179-FRAMEWORK\\_EU\\_CROWDFUNDING.pdf](https://d21buns5ku92am.cloudfront.net/26522/documents/17930-1351284179-FRAMEWORK_EU_CROWDFUNDING.pdf)>, p. 6.

21 Ibid., p. 5.

22 Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, London 1943, p. 83.

intrinsic motivation to donate is lessened by rewards,<sup>23</sup> or whether the boundaries between business and philanthropy or between self-interest and altruism could be blurred by crowdfunding. There is research from urban and economic geography on the urban anchoring of crowdfunding platforms and on partnerships with cities and municipalities (>civic crowdfunding<).<sup>24</sup> Other studies firmly criticise the narrative of a >democratisation of the financial world< or of financing;<sup>25</sup> they point to dwindling or limited budgets on the part of cultural institutions, which is said to have motivated crowdfunding campaigns, and emphasise that paying contributions does not yet amount to substantial participation in decision making.<sup>26</sup> There are also studies that, from a cultural economics perspective, address the effects of crowdfunding on the careers of artists and their understanding of themselves as amateurs or professionals.<sup>27</sup>

With respect to the situation in Switzerland specifically, some case studies have been compiled,<sup>28</sup> though, so far, no research has been conducted that has dealt in depth with the socio-economic configurations, the biographical backgrounds, and the political and social positioning of crowdfunding platforms, as we would like to carry out using the example of *wemakeit*. However, we are able to draw on the Crowdfunding Monitor surveys by Andreas Dietrich and Simon Amrein that have been available since 2014,<sup>29</sup> as well as on some studies on general questions of crowdfunding (e.g., success factors or reach) that Swiss platforms, including *wemakeit*, take as a starting point.<sup>30</sup>

23 See, for example, Allison et al., Crowdfunding in a Prosocial Microlending Environment (fn 15).

24 With respect to Berlin, see Paul Langley et al., Crowdfunding Cities. Social Entrepreneurship, Speculation and Solidarity in Berlin, in: *Geoforum* 115 (2020), pp. 11-20.

25 See, for example, David S. Bieri, Crowdfunding the City: the End of >Cataclysmic Money<?, in: *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 47 (2015), pp. 2429-2435.

26 Amanda J. Porter/Marcel Veenswijk, Narrative >End States< and the Dynamics of Participation in Civic Crowdfunding, in: *International Journal of Communication* 12 (2018), pp. 2367-2386. For a critical view of solutionism, see Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here. The Folly of Technological Solutionism*, New York 2013.

27 E.g., Carolina Dalla Chiesa/Erwin Dekker, Crowdfunding Artists. Beyond Match-making on Platforms, in: *Socio-Economic Review* 19 (2021), pp. 1265-1290.

28 See, e.g., Simon Amrein/Andreas Dietrich, Crowdfunding and Fundraising, in: Michael Urselmann (ed.), *Handbuch Fundraising*, Wiesbaden 2024, pp. 853-867; Titian Troxler, Crowdfunding in Switzerland, in: Caroline Kleiner (ed.), *Legal Aspects of Crowdfunding*, Cham 2021, pp. 421-449; in addition, there are studies conducted to some extent in the Swiss context: Valerie Hase et al., Engaging the Public or Asking Your Friends? Analysing Science-related Crowdfunding Using Behavioural and Survey Data, in: *Public Understanding of Science* 31 (2022), pp. 993-1011.

29 See the website: <<https://hub.hslu.ch/retailbanking/download/crowdfunding-monitor-schweiz/>>.

30 Michael Beier/Kerstin Wagner, Das Verhalten von Benutzer in Crowdfunding-Kampagnen – Herding und Social Proof, in: Social Science Research Network, 2 September 2015, URL: <<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2654765>>; Hase et al., Engaging the Public or Asking Your Friends? (fn 28).

## 2. *Wemakeit* and Its Founders in a Contemporary Historical Context

In the 1980s and 1990s, socio-political developments (such as the spread of market economy ideas – in many cases more as rhetoric) in state institutions and in the social and cultural sectors (often understood as part of a more comprehensive neoliberalisation) were intertwined with technological changes (the availability of personal computers as mass-produced consumer goods and the connecting of computers via the World Wide Web). A study commissioned by Swiss non-profit organisations attempted to outline future financing models through ›economic thinking‹ in the face of declining income from donations and political pressure. The study recommended more ›market orientation‹ and ›quality management‹ as well as ›demonetisation through exchange‹.<sup>31</sup> As of the beginning of the 21st century – after the burst of the dot-com bubble and the emergence of illegal file-sharing platforms for music and films, the financial crisis, the Occupy movement, and crowdfunding platforms (which were also a reaction to declining returns in the music business) – public and academic interest in economic systems that are neither capitalist nor state socialist generally increased. This also initiated a wave of research into alternative economies based on solidarity and established a new interest in the ethnography of reciprocity, partly motivated by utopian visions.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the phenomenon of tech billionaires like Bill Gates who became rich through platform capitalism and entered into philanthropy caused an upsurge in the academic study of donations.<sup>33</sup> SwissFoundations, the association of Swiss grant-making foundations, founded the *Center for Philanthropy Studies* (CEPS) at the University of Basel in 2008.<sup>34</sup>

Crowdfunding companies are both an effect and driver of these socio-economic and socio-technical climates. They can generally be seen as part of the world of technology startups. Some of them, however, such as *wemakeit*, are influenced more than other companies in this sector by the proximity of their stakeholders to the world of art and cultural production – often referred to as the ›creative industry‹ in the field of the promotion of economic development – and to alternative value systems.

31 Dieter Pfister, *Sozialmarkt Schweiz zwischen Unter- und Überversorgung. Befunde, Ursachen, Reformen*, Basel 1996. See also Thomas A. Becker and Institut für gesellschaftsbezogenes Management, *Zukunft der Hilfswerke zwischen Marktgesellschaft und Solidarität. Modernisierungsperspektiven intermedialer Institutionen*, Press-Information, Buchs 1996.

32 Frank Adloff/Steffen Mau (eds), *Vom Geben und Nehmen. Zur Soziologie der Reziprozität*, Frankfurt a.M. 2005; Frank Adloff, *Politik der Gabe. Für ein anderes Zusammenleben*, Hamburg 2018; Alain Caillé, *Das Paradigma der Gabe. Eine sozialtheoretische Ausweitung. Translated from the French original by Michael Halfbrodt*, Bielefeld 2022; David Graeber, *Debt. The First 5,000 Years*, Brooklyn 2011; for a reflection on this economic trend, see, among others, Timo Luks, *Die Ökonomie der Anderen. Der Kapitalismus der Ethnologen – eine transnationale Wissensgeschichte seit 1880*, Tübingen 2019, and the articles in Hutter/Priddat, *Geben, Nehmen, Teilen* (fn 6).

33 See, for example, Thomas Adam/Simone Lässig/Gabriele Lingelbach (eds), *Stifter, Spender und Mäzene. USA und Deutschland im historischen Vergleich*, Stuttgart 2009.

34 <<https://ceps.unibas.ch/en/>>.

Here and in what follows, there is a lot of talk of ›culture‹. We mostly use the word in the sense of the dominant usage in our field of research, i.e., as a term for an area of social practice (as in the terms ›cultural policy‹, ›cultural workers‹, etc.) that specialises in producing aesthetic experiences. In these cases, we understand ›culture‹ as a *source term* in the sense of historical scholarship and as an *emic concept* in the sense of cultural anthropology. Occasionally, however, we also use the concept of culture as an analytical tool (›counterculture‹, ›cultural memory‹, etc.).

Who then *are* the actors (in a cultural analysis sense) who have promoted this form of crowdfunding as a digital economy with a focus on art and culture? Behind this question is the much-commented-on fact that prominent clusters of the so-called creative industry, and also of technology corporations in the USA, have emerged from very specific urban scenes and milieus.<sup>35</sup> The well-known history of the ›Californian Ideology‹ in and around San Francisco and in the Bay Area, which, with its hippie roots and also libertarian elements, is fundamental to the Internet economy, illustrates that it was most notably countercultural and, in the broader sense, capitalism-critical<sup>36</sup> movements of the 1970s to the 1990s that shaped such milieus, which then, conversely, strongly influenced varieties of digital capitalism around the turn of the millennium. The countercultural aspect here refers to the tradition of politically oppositional movements that formed in the USA in the 1960s and tried out alternative ways of life.<sup>37</sup> However, there are also other stories that do not correspond to this well-known narrative in every respect – one of which is the emergence of *wemakeit*.

*Wemakeit* was founded in Zurich in 2012 and is currently the highest-revenue crowdfunding platform in Switzerland. Despite having only just shy of 450,000 inhabitants, the city of Zurich is now known not only as a banking and insurance metropolis but also as a digital hub (including for global corporations, which appreciate its proximity to the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology [ETH Zurich]). Another defining feature of the city, however, is the fact that today's political elite of the red-and-green-governed commercial capital, as well as its cultural or cultural-political sphere, are recruited to a notable extent from the alternative scene of the Zurich youth movement of the 1980s, which kicked off at the time of the reopening of the opera house on 30 May 1980 with the so-called Opera House Riots and demands for free, alternative spaces for culture.<sup>38</sup>

35 Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture. Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, Chicago 2006; Richard Barbrook/Andy Cameron, The Californian Ideology, in: *Science as Culture* 6 (1996), pp. 44-72; Andreas Hepp/Anne Schmitz/Nathan Schneider, Afterlives of the Californian Ideology. Tech Movements, Pioneer Communities, and Imaginaries of Digital Futures – Introduction, in: *International Journal of Communication* 17 (2023), pp. 4142-4160.

36 At least in the sense of ›artistic critique‹ as understood by Luc Boltanski/Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London 2005 (first French edition: 1999).

37 See Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture. Reflections on Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*, New York 1969.

38 See, for example, Heinz Nigg (ed.), *Wir wollen alles, und zwar subito! Die achtziger Jugendunruhen in der Schweiz und ihre Folgen*, Zurich 2001; Christian Schmid/Daniel Weiss, The New Metropolitan Mainstream, in: INURA/Raffaele Paloscia (eds), *The Contested Metropolis. Six Cities at the Beginning of the 21st Century*, Basel 2004, pp. 252-260.

The biographies of the founding figures – we shall call them Michael Surber, Dinah Brügger and Stephan Gmür – are linked to the local art scene, bohemia and counter-culture, as well as to their specific history. *Wemakeit* presents itself as politically progressive and as belonging more to the left than to the right political camp – we return to this point below. The biography of *wemakeit*'s main founder (and main owner before the ›Crowd Takeover‹), Michael Surber (b. 1960), is associated directly with the 1980 Zurich movement: he had moved to the city at the end of May 1980 to study social anthropology and history, on precisely the weekend the youth riots broke out.<sup>39</sup> His choice of field of study was not accidental: at that time, social anthropology at the University of Zurich was a fashionable subject for students who were disposed towards cultural and social criticism, and it was also ›the place within the university that felt very great solidarity with the youth movement‹. At the same time, the subject matter of the social anthropology programme, its occupation mainly with non-Western, non-industrialised cultures, matched the attitude of the movement, which was characterised by the desire to break out of Western modernity. However, it is less exoticism and more the social-anthropological, defamiliarizing view of his *own* society that he acquired during his studies that Surber describes as pointing the way for his understanding of the world and his professional future as a ›creative‹: ›The ethnology of one's own society, that was somewhat shaped during those years, of course, that impressed me a lot. And the method of seeing what is your own as something foreign, that relativism, that was extremely important to me.‹ The *Verstehen* (interpretative) approach acquired in ethnology (›I know nothings‹) later helped him to come at things even seemingly so foreign as fintech and blockchain with an open mind, and to learn. ›Unideological. That's my approach. That's a distinguishing feature of mine.‹ In this demarcation from political ideologies (of the 1970s) that are perceived as rigid and restrictive, an alternative, left-wing habitus of the 1980s of self-realisation, cosmopolitanism and the search for new collectives becomes apparent.<sup>40</sup>

In 2011, together with Dinah Brügger and with financial support from Pro Helvetia, Migros Kulturprozent and the Ernst-Göhner-Stiftung, Surber began a pilot study for the *wemakeit* project. By then, he had long turned his back on both his degree (which he dropped out of because he saw no benefit in attaining the formal qualification) and the political component, in the narrower sense, of the scene that had emerged from the movement of 1980. He was active as a musician and artist and earned money as a picture editor at the agency Keystone. At the end of the 1990s, he worked on the design of websites at a large media house, but was also involved in collaborative (media) art projects.

The two other founders are one and one and a half decades younger, respectively, and were therefore socialised with other cultural reference points. Dinah Brügger (b. 1972) was a cultural events organiser, co-owner of the culture and communications agency

39 Interview with Michael Surber (p), 23 March 2023; also the following quotes.

40 See Sven Reichardt, *Authentizität und Gemeinschaft. Linksalternatives Leben in den siebziger und frühen achtziger Jahren*, Berlin 2014.

*swissandfamous* and Surber's office neighbour when he approached her for the project.<sup>41</sup> She had grown up in the Bernese Oberland. After completing commercial training, she had initially worked in hotels before carving out a career as a secretary and executive assistant at a communications group and eventually concentrating on the field of literature and culture. Pivotal for this, as she reports, was an encounter with the author Christian Kracht during a professional trip to India. After that, she started organising readings in Zurich with ›pop literati‹ like Kracht or Nick Hornby. Participation and the enabling of active cultural engagement are the leitmotifs of her own work biography. These two motifs combine the popularisation of pop literature with crowdfunding: ›I believe that in my life I have always been [tempted] by the challenge of creating a new point of access for a target group that does not yet have that, does not yet know of it, and perhaps does not yet have the need for it, but awakening that need. [...] I spent six years working with *Let's Museum*, where I promoted access to museums for a wide audience. So, that's something that endures. That, I think, is my golden thread. And, in that respect, *wemakeit* was, of course, an incredibly exciting time for me. I was able to learn a lot there about people and their needs and how to trigger these.‹<sup>42</sup>

Together with Surber, Brügger raised 450,000 francs to set up the crowdfunding provider. With her extensive network in the cultural scene, she was then primarily responsible at *wemakeit* for the acquisition of projects and consultancy in regard to the latter, but also took on many other roles in the company's management. She advocates an emphatically positive perspective on the participatory elements of crowdfunding and understands them in this sense as democratising culture. Like Surber, she has now pulled out of the operational side of the business.

Stephan Gmür (b. 1978), as part of the initial team, was primarily responsible for the design (›front end‹) and, together with ›back-end‹ programmers, for the technical side of *wemakeit*.<sup>43</sup> Of the three founders, Gmür is the most technically proficient in the narrow sense. Like Surber, however, he also pursues an artistic aspiration and is represented in prominent museum collections as a (media) artist. He describes his field of activity as a ›rotation between technology, art and design‹. He had already taught himself to programme using the BASIC language at the age of eight and had immediately connected this to the artistic realm: ›As a child, I had absorbed these possibilities and played with them and understood from the beginning that this is a cultural machine and that you can acquire it, like language and any other material. You can shape it and express yourself through it. [...] A construction that explains itself. I'm always looking for poetry within it. For me, it's about showing an alternative world where technology is not used by large companies to make us consumers, to make us all dependent in subscription models; rather, it's actually the digital commons

41 Interview with Dinah Brügger (p), 13 January 2025.

42 Ibid.

43 Interview with Stephan Gmür (p), 13 May 2024.

as an idea – not only with the software though, but also with the hardware. The idea that we are all co-owners and co-designers of this infrastructure, ideally – technology as part of culture, within the cultural discourse, not outside it. Utopia.<sup>44</sup>

With self-descriptions of this nature and with reference to the digital ›commons‹, Gmür positions himself within the sphere of discourse of web art and web activism of the 1990s and 2000s – together with their anti-commercial leanings. Gmür grew up in rural, small-town Central Switzerland. During his studies, he initially wanted to ›acquire engineering knowledge in order to work with it artistically‹ (following the example of MIT – though he did not see this realised at ETH during his electrical engineering degree). With his degree in Interaction Design from the University of Art and Design Lausanne (ECAL), he is the only university graduate among the three founders.

Gmür was the first of the three mentioned to leave the company, and he sold his shares cheaply – from a financial point of view, clearly ›too early‹, which meant that he missed out on several hundred thousand francs, which he seems to be ambivalent about today: he remained true to himself but forfeited the monetary gain in freedom. In the interview, he speaks much more critically than the others about crowdfunding, though he also emphasises positives. There is a lot he finds ›cringy‹ about ›tech culture‹. He also sees politically libertarian tendencies in crowdfunding; he calls it the ›Airbnb‹ or the ›Uber‹ of cultural promotion, because it replaces state promotion of the arts and culture, at least as it is understood by some of its proponents. Crowdfunding is driving a problematic process in which self-marketing has become the norm and a constant requirement for cultural producers and also for many other people. However, Gmür relativises his critique by referring to his own privileges: ›Of course, I come from a Swiss position and am [...] used to receiving cultural funding. We won the Swiss Design Award three times and received financial support from the city of Lucerne.‹ He positively assesses the door-opening role of crowdfunding, which can circumvent the advantages and prejudices of the privileged: ›If you are from a marginalised community that gets too little attention or is not produced, no music industry wants to take you on, while on *Kickstarter*, you might suddenly reach a big audience that even those people maybe didn't see coming, because they have some kind of blind spots – I mean that's a huge argument in favour of it, right?‹<sup>45</sup>

Viewed through a socio-structural lens, what the three founders have in common, first and foremost, is that they do not come from the urban middle class that traditionally dominates Zurich. They hail from rural regions (Eastern Switzerland, Central Switzerland, the Bernese Oberland), moved from there to Zurich, and prospered in the growing field of art and cultural production, therefore, to a certain degree, moving up the social ladder in this sense. They operate through networks that have emerged in the alternative scene while also acting in an increasingly entrepreneurial manner. They are part of that stratum that Pierre Bourdieu dubbed the ›new petty bourgeoisie‹

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

in as early as 1979 and which later also gained discursive momentum as the ›creative class‹.<sup>46</sup> The many Anglicisms that are found in the interview passages can be read as both typical of an international management and startup world and – of at least equal importance – as typical linguistic usage in an alternative (left-wing) scene that has always been guided by the anglophone world and in which one still acquires the contemporary, Anglicism-savvy language of the youth even at an advanced age.

Through the lens of cultural analysis, it is striking that all three occupy something of an established outsider status within the cultural and entrepreneurial fields in which they move professionally and have also emphasised this and characterised it as avant-garde in some way: for Surber, this starts with social anthropology, which has long been a kind of outsider subject within the cultural and social sciences, and in the alternative scene; it continues in his freelance work for a picture agency and a large media house. For Brügger, it is primarily her distinct, non-academic educational biography, which, in the literary field, would not make her an outsider in a dramatic sense, though she does potentially have to fight harder for recognition as someone with an educated middle-class family history and more inherited and ›objectified‹ (Bourdieu) cultural capital. At the same time, the pop literature that Brügger propagates initially has a rather marginal status itself within this field of literature, which the event organiser also knows how to exploit commercially – and it then gains in importance more generally in this field. Gmür, on the other hand, emphasises his (lasting) oppositional view of society as a whole; as a media artist, he sits *in* the field of art (though across the disciplines and thus also *betwixt* and *between*) – which can be advantageous. All three operate in established fields of the cultural sector but are involved in its peripheral areas, and, indeed, in ones that became more central in the early 21st century.

The company's foundation also had a simple economic background, structurally related to artistic, bohemian biographies in which, often, no social security can be saved up for old age. Along these lines, Surber tells us in the interview, quite late on in the conversation: ›I enjoyed the whole thing, and I found it incredibly exciting to build a company, but there were also tangible reasons for it, because I [have ...] worked almost my entire life not on the payroll. My pension fund is practically non-existent, and I just didn't want to grow old poor. It's as simple as that. And I don't have any money from my family or anything, so I thought, »What can I do to make sure that it doesn't happen?«, then I just have to start something.«<sup>47</sup> Here, Surber alludes to the sale of the founders' *wemakeit* shares via ›Aktionariat‹, which enabled him to monetise his work for the platform and thereby rebuild his retirement savings.

This cursory look at certain biographical aspects of the three founders makes clear, by way of example, how much the history of the digital economy and a changing policy of funding for culture and the arts can be tied to local configurations: not only to the

46 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge, Mass. 1984 (first French edition: 1979); Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class. And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, New York 2002.

47 Interview with Michael Surber (p), 23 March 2023.

›Californian Ideology‹ and venture capitalists, not only to elite universities and creative ›clusters‹, but also to individual biographies of advancement in the age of educational expansion, technological change, political countercultures and music scenes (in which a number of practices of the solidarity economy, in its varying degrees, and of support were and are present), to the movement of 1980, to foundations, to the ethnological view of one's own society, to pop literature, to critical media art, and to the entrepreneurial side of (once) alternative milieus of the 1980s, which evolved over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, and not only in Zurich, into an established fraction of urban society. To what extent this is now to be related as a story of success or one of demise, as a story of a contribution to the democratisation of culture and industry or as a story of adaptation to a primarily corporate logic of action and an extension of the same, remains a question of perspective; the assessments of the interviewees themselves diverge at this point.

### 3. Crowdfunding: Constitutive Boundaries

The crowdfunding platform *wemakeit* went ›live‹<sup>48</sup> on 5 February 2012 – shortly before its competitor *100-days.net*. Those who visited the site could choose between 20 projects from various branches of art and cultural production that were appealing for financial support and – in the sense of ›reward-based crowdfunding‹ – promised a wide array of gifts in return, depending on the project and the amount of money in question: ›signed books, invitations to special events, limited edition photographic prints, a date with an actor, a personal Skype concert, a not-yet-filmed screenplay, or a birthday mix tape‹.<sup>49</sup> If the target amount was reached within the set period, which was between 30 and 90 days depending on the project, it was paid out; if not, the money was returned. In the event of success, a fee totalling 10 percent was incurred: *wemakeit* took 6 percent of the donated amount as commission and 4 percent as a transaction fee, which was passed on to payment service providers.<sup>50</sup> This principle still applies today.

As shown, scholars have emphasised that the emergent, infrastructure-supported socio-cultural practice of ›crowdfunding‹ is closely related to older forms of support but, at the same time, also sets in motion new social roles, subject positions, behavioural scripts and expectations. In various contexts, the participants themselves – including the platform operators – were encouraged not simply to offer or carry out this practice but to define it and distinguish it from other practices.<sup>51</sup> Classification

48 <<https://10years.wemakeit.com>>.

49 *Wemakeit* press release from 23 January 2012, URL: <<http://downloads.wemakeit.com/120123-wmkt-Medienmitteilung-CH.pdf>>.

50 See Dietrich/Amrein, *Crowdfunding Monitor Switzerland 2014* (fn 13), p. 12.

51 On the definition of socio-cultural practices and the question of their ›novelty‹ in digital contexts, see, among others, Klaus Schönberger, *Persistenz und Rekombination. Digitale Kommunikation und soziokultureller Wandel*, in: *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 111 (2015), pp. 201-213.



Construction site aesthetic: scaffolding with wemakeit.ch, Zurich 2012  
 (Photo: Private Archive of Michael Surber [p])

work and boundary work were therefore constitutive for the institutionalisation of crowdfunding as a socio-cultural phenomenon, and, for this reason, they will be presented in what follows by means of thick description – based on the example of *wemakeit*. This will involve the drawing of semantic, legal, cultural and political boundaries. Are the donations charitable? Does providing ›support‹ constitute a political act? Based on what criteria? And if crowdfunding companies keep the deposited money until the end of the campaign period, are they legally to be classified as banks?

3.1. *Semantic boundaries*. Let us start with the labelling – the name of the socio-cultural practice obviously plays a central role in how it is understood. On the *wemakeit* website, users click on ›Support This Project!‹ to initiate a payment to a project. From the outset, the key word that the crowdfunding platforms have used to semantically frame the actions they enable has been ›support‹, or ›Unterstützung‹ in German.<sup>52</sup> ›Support‹ is a diffuse term that includes monetary payments, without explicitly naming them, and also leaves the question of reciprocity, the counter-gift in the Maussian sense, open. This vagueness and the lack of mention of the monetary are useful in the case of

52 On the cultural semantics of these terms and how they have changed, see Ege/Zeitler, ›Support‹ (fn 7).

crowdfunding, because the placement of the practice within the traditional cultural classification scheme and vocabulary can also raise questions, which tend to fade into the background as a result of the term ›support‹.

Initially, the crowdfunding offering had prompted a certain unease among potential project initiators from the arts and cultural sector in Switzerland, as the three founders report. This is due not least to the national context: to Swiss quirks, with the country's frequently invoked, special relationship to money (possess it, but don't talk about it). Stephan Gmür explains in retrospect: ›[...] We have never talked openly about it, but it is true, in Switzerland you have to struggle quite a bit with the reserve that people have around ›begging‹. Asking for money is not Swiss, is it? So, we have trouble with this idea.‹<sup>53</sup>

However central Swiss idiosyncrasies may have been here in actuality, Gmür's wording implies that in crowdfunding, an older socio-cultural practice (›asking for money‹; pejoratively titled ›begging‹) continues in a new technological form. The very forms, names and meanings stored in cultural memory then appear problematic: begging is associated with poverty and symbolic submission, in Christian charitable contexts, with obligation (but also with protection against harm, with the sacred, and with the elevation of those who give).<sup>54</sup> Dinah Brügger talks of this same problem with different emphases: ›There was also already a fear there in the culture that it could be seen as begging – and no one wanted to beg. Her own practical work consisted not least in ›taking away this fear by means of lots of conversations and lots of panel discussions, presentations, showing that it is not just a form of begging but a form of participation in culture.‹<sup>55</sup>

The popularisation of crowdfunding therefore also demanded a new semantic framework on the part of the platforms that made it possible to distinguish between the practices of asking for money via crowdfunding, on the one hand, and begging, on the other, so that – ideally – no one had to feel like a beggar, but all could see themselves as people who enable the participation of the ›community‹. However, the difference from begging is made tangible not only due to the name but also, in particular, by the ›rewards‹, which symbolise a higher degree of reciprocity.

3.2. *Legal boundaries.* A not necessarily obvious yet important boundary that was demarcated and used to define crowdfunding while the process was underway is the legal one: between crowdfunding providers and banks. An element that both always have in common is that they collect, maintain custody of and forward other people's funds. Anyone who contributes to a crowdfunding project at *wemakeit* transfers money to the account of the *wemakeit* association (not the GmbH, or now AG, that operates the

53 Interview with Stephan Gmür (p), 13 May 2024.

54 On historical and current practices of begging, see, for example, Beate Althammer (ed.), *Bettler in der europäischen Stadt. Zwischen Barmherzigkeit, Repression und Sozialreform*, Frankfurt a.M. 2007.

55 Interview with Dinah Brügger (p), 13 January 2025.

platform), where – in the event of a successful campaign – it is held in safekeeping until the payout date.<sup>56</sup> If the campaign does not reach its target amount, the money is transferred back as mentioned.

Crowdfunding platforms thereby entered a legal grey area. Should the requirements of the Banking Act apply, that is, including the regulations and authorisation procedures regarding money laundering and anti-terrorism?<sup>57</sup> To discuss these questions, Federal Councillor Ueli Maurer (SVP) and Jörg Gasser, then responsible for the regulation of fintech and blockchain as president of the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO), had visited those in charge of *wemakeit*, among others, in their Zurich office.

When recounting this event, Michael Surber emphasises not least the contrast in terms of culture and habitus with the minister of finance, Maurer, and his state secretary, pointing out that Gasser and Maurer had to go through a not very presentable building entrance in the grimy, alternative area: ›Where the junkies always are. We had to make sure things there went smoothly.‹<sup>58</sup> Not only is *wemakeit* obviously not a bank, as he seems to say here; the company is located in the old (now gentrified) workers' quarter, home to Zurich's bohemians, and not on Paradeplatz. It thus marks a distinction from the world of banks and from right-liberal federal policy. Still – a certain pride is discernible – *wemakeit* is taken seriously by these actors.

In the meeting with Maurer and Gasser, the reservations concerning the money laundering problem were able to be dispelled, says Surber, with the upshot that the Federal Council ultimately passed a crowdfunding-friendly regulation, thereby demarcating crowdfunding from banks. On 1 August 2017, the Swiss Financial Market Supervisory Authority, FINMA, published a ›Fact Sheet on Crowdfunding‹, which stated that Swiss supervisory law does not have any specific provisions on crowdfunding and, therefore, the effective provisions in the financial market legislation are to apply.<sup>59</sup> However, it was emphasised that up to a period of 60 days, no authorisation under the Banking Act is necessary for the operators of crowdfunding platforms to forward or repay the money if no more than one million francs are received for forwarding and no interest margin business is carried out. The donation-based nature was explicitly emphasised here – and, at the same time, the ambiguity of what is meant by crowdfunding: ›For example, a contribution can be made as a donation, or a service can be provided (e.g. delivery of a product) instead of a cash contribution.‹ The criterion of being ›non-commercial in nature‹ was the decisive factor. This classificatory act did

56 <[http://downloads.wemakeit.com/app/en/wemakeit\\_tipps.pdf](http://downloads.wemakeit.com/app/en/wemakeit_tipps.pdf)>.

57 On the regulation of crowdfunding in general, see Troxler, *Crowdfunding in Switzerland* (fn 28). See also the Federal Act on Banks and Savings Banks (Banking Act [Bankengesetz, BankG]): <[https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/51/117\\_121\\_129/de](https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/51/117_121_129/de)>.

58 Interview with Michael Surber (p), 23 March 2023.

59 FINMA fact sheet on crowdfunding (Faktenblatt Crowdfunding), as at 1 July 2020, URL: <<https://www.finma.ch/de/~media/finma/dokumente/dokumentencenter/myfinma/faktenblaetter/faktenblatt-crowdfunding.pdf>>.

not assign crowdfunding platforms to the regulatory area for banks. However, the money given in support of crowdfunding projects is not tax deductible by default. For that, supporters must contact the (tax-exempt) project initiators directly.

3.3. *Sectoral boundaries.* Central to the corporate strategy of *wemakeit* in the early years was the focus on crowdfunding ›for culture‹, for projects with ›cultural aspiration‹ (Surber). In this respect, they were deliberately taking a different path than, for example, their competition at *100-days.net* (later *Crowdfify*), who did not limit their activities to the cultural field and were also not integrated with foundations and cultural policy to a comparable extent. ›*Wemakeit* really then positioned itself in this culture scene‹, says a representative of the other company. ›We [i.e., *Crowdfify*] said we're for everything, we're also for entrepreneurship.‹<sup>60</sup> The demarcation of these boundaries was, and is, likewise consequential. Initially, the company's restriction of itself to the cultural sector was associated with symbolic and material advantages for *wemakeit*, above all, funding from foundations. Furthermore, *wemakeit* did not include all projects proposed by initiators but made a selection. This curated scarcity of the offering created the aura of a certain exclusivity.

The properties of and the self-conceptions within the field of art and culture were of great importance for the launch of the practice of crowdfunding by *wemakeit*. These debates also highlight aspects of the cultural changes that were triggered by crowdfunding. The central point here is the effect, already addressed by Max Weber under the concept of ›market socialisation‹ (*Marktvergesellschaftung*), of the emergence of new social relationships through market transactions<sup>61</sup> or ›monetary relationships‹, as discussed by Georg Simmel in his *Philosophy of Money*.<sup>62</sup>

In this vein, Michael Surber mentions a fundamental criticism that *wemakeit* faced in the early years: the company drives an ›economisation of relationships within culture‹. From his point of view, this criticism of crowdfunding stemmed from a tabooing of the economic in the cultural scene, from an anti-commercialism that Surber was also familiar with from the music scene: ›For many people, money contaminates culture.‹<sup>63</sup> Part of this is also the view that ›clean money‹ only includes such money that the state raises via taxes, but not, for example, the money of sponsors. From Surber's perspective, this is a purity ideology: ›That's something where I was really unforgiving, because I find it's very often insincere.‹ The argument that artists symbolically

60 Interview with Urs Küster (p), CEO of *Crowdfify*, 1 March 2024.

61 Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie*, Tübingen 1922, student edition of the 5th rev. ed., Tübingen 1980, pp. 382-385.

62 Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money. Translated by Tom Bottomore and David Frisby*, London 1978 (first German edition: 1900).

63 Interview with Michael Surber (p), 23 March 2023.

elevate themselves by tabooing material constraints and interests but – in many cases – thereby damage themselves financially or deny their own pursuit of success has also been repeatedly put forward by the critical sociology of art.<sup>64</sup>

In this context, Surber also highlights the logic of the informal scene networks and their transformation that together shape the cultural sector: ›There are relationships [...] that consist of networks of people who are committed to each other that have grown organically, and there are relationships that are simply incentivised by economic factors, to varying degrees. Or there are also barriers: you can only be involved if you do this and that.‹<sup>65</sup> Crowdfunding not only made the economic side of things more visible; it also set such distinctions in the forms of relationship in motion – as well as the access controls to scarce goods that were based on them. Where artists had previously perhaps given guest list spots to members of the scene whom they were close to, they now entreat the latter for payments on Facebook. Furthermore: they do not just ask members of a close circle<sup>66</sup> but, in fact, all those who see the appeal for crowdfunding, all those who can be reached by any means whatsoever, for example, through sharing on Facebook – ›weak‹ and merely ›latent‹ connections within the terminology of network theory.<sup>67</sup> It is payments, not (merely) one's status in informal networks, that generate access – at least, this is the impression that arose. However, here, too, one must warn against generalisations: in fact, in most crowdfunding campaigns, the funds come predominantly from one's narrower, also analogue, social network (›friendfunding-).<sup>68</sup>

Crowdfunding therefore calls into question not only an (in any case false) image of artists who reject any economic logic but also, possibly, the logic of action of a social (counter)world – expressed in idealised terms, a lived alternative to the realm of the market, in which currencies other than monetary ones seemed to dominate (for example, belonging, coolness, ethics). ›That was the kind of unease that people had. I think it has something to do with the fact that these informal networks, that money is suddenly circulating there. [...] And that, yes, the economisation of personal relationships, of activities, that is not unproblematic, I can see that.‹<sup>69</sup> In this sense, the transformation can be interpreted and experienced by those involved as the demystification of a previously protected realm and thus as part of a problematic societal development, a progressive marketisation – even if this does not mean that the relationships were all of a sudden *only* economic.

64 See Angela McRobbie, Reflections on Precarious Work in the Cultural Sector, in: Bastian Lange et al. (eds), *Governance der Kreativwirtschaft. Diagnosen und Handlungsoptionen*, Bielefeld 2009, pp. 123-137; Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art. Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Stanford 1996.

65 Interview with Michael Surber (p), 23 March 2023.

66 See Mark S. Granovetter, The Strength of Weak Ties, in: *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (1973), pp. 1360-1380.

67 See Irma Borst/Christine Moser/Julie Ferguson, From Friendfunding to Crowdfunding. Relevance of Relationships, Social Media, and Platform Activities to Crowdfunding Performance, in: *New Media and Society* 20 (2018), pp. 1396-1414.

68 This was stated in all interviews with representatives of crowdfunding companies (based on their own observations); accordingly, the leap to other networks is possible but does not occur often.

69 Interview with Michael Surber (p), 23 March 2023.

It becomes apparent here that crowdfunding in the cultural sector generated new resources while also creating ›discomfort‹ and initiating changes. Either way, this sector soon proved too small for *wemakeit*'s business model: in the years that followed, the company expanded its business beyond its initial scope. Step by step, other business areas were opened up: campaigns for small enterprises, mostly with ethical aspirations (e.g., ›unpackaged‹ shops, ecological chocolate suppliers, micro-breweries), sports clubs, and also social objectives, for example, campaigns by NGOs, neighbourhood groups, and individuals in need of support. *Wemakeit* evolved into Switzerland's leading crowdfunding provider.<sup>70</sup> The company thereby also erased the boundary that defined all things cultural as constituting a particularly valuable and meaningful purpose: ›Now, today, in 2024, [we are at a point] where we are actually saying, hey, we want to give everyone the opportunity to start a project, to try it out, unless it has some kind of defamatory content or violates our guidelines, but, otherwise, we are now very broad.‹<sup>71</sup>

3.4. *Political boundaries.* The guidelines mentioned also create boundaries – political boundaries that are partly combined with legal and sectoral ones. *Wemakeit*'s guidelines state that ›[t]he editorial board has the right to reject projects when these do not conform to our guidelines and our values or if a project is not suitable for any other reason‹. In addition, ›[i]t is prohibited to disseminate defamatory, offensive or illegal information. In particular, pornographic, racist, glorifying violence [sic] or similar contents must not be published.‹<sup>72</sup> From the outset, *wemakeit* presented itself as politically progressive. Giorgio Miller, who is responsible for a new crowdinvesting platform at the company, sums it up in this way: ›*Wemakeit* has its own value system. And it is definitely more left-wing than right-wing.‹<sup>73</sup>

In what follows, we trace the demarcated boundaries around the political core of the brand on the basis of two small *causes célèbres* in the company's history – one somewhat positive and one negative incident. An early example of a political crowdfunding campaign that ›suited‹ *wemakeit* was the campaign of the student Donat Kaufmann, who in autumn 2015, under the heading ›Mir langets!‹ (I've had enough!), collected just under 150,000 francs in order to place an ad on the front page of the free newspaper *20 Minuten*: ›You can buy attention – but not our votes‹ could be read on the first page, and, on a second page, the names of all the crowdfunders. The campaign was responding to a front-page advertisement from the right-wing nationalist SVP that had appeared in the same publication in September 2015 ahead of the national parliamentary elections and had promoted its election song ›Welcome to SVP‹ with colourful images.

70 This is how they portray themselves: <<https://wemakeit.com/pages/best-crowdfunding-platforms-switzerland?locale=de>>.

71 Interview with Joëlle Strasser (p), managing director of *wemakeit*, 10 April 2024.

72 <<https://wemakeit.com/pages/guidelines>>.

73 Interview with Giorgio Miller (p), 10 April 2024.

**Jetzt Song kaufen...**  
**Welcome to SVP**  
 Sende eine SMS mit dem Text "SVP 2015" an die Nummer 900.

**20 Minuten**

**WELCOME TO SVP**

[www.welcometosvp.ch](http://www.welcometosvp.ch)

CHF 5.50 wird der Hälfte von Beatrice Honegger zuzugewiesen und der Song automatisch per SMS versendet.

›Welcome to SVP‹ – election advertising for the Swiss People's Party (cover of the Swiss free newspaper *20 Minuten*, 15 September 2015)

The crowdfunding appeal that Kaufmann launched on *wemakeit* contains a simply-produced video. ›Hello everyone. I'm Donat‹, it starts. You can see Kaufmann's head donning a red woollen hat; the long-haired young man is sitting on a sofa in front of a white brick wall. ›And I think a large part of me would rather not be in front of this camera right now, but an even larger part of me is just saying: ›I've had enough.‹‹ As explained by the video and accompanying text, the tenor of Kaufmann's appeal was directed against non-transparent campaign financing, which, in his view, benefits the right-wing parties, and against a campaign that was ›devoid of substance‹. It made Kaufmann ›famous overnight‹. He had launched ›the most successful Swiss crowdfunding project of all time‹.<sup>74</sup>

The campaign's point of departure was the crowdfunding principle that even small donations can make a difference if only a large number of them accumulate: here, the default was to be five francs; over 12,000 people participated. The *20 Minuten* front page that was attained through this crowdfunding entered the public spotlight, and, as a result, also the national electoral contest of autumn 2015, three years after *wemakeit*'s foundation. This took place both via the new medium of the crowdfunding

74 Interview with Donat Kaufmann by Rafaela Roth, 25 September 2015, URL: <<https://www.watson.ch/schweiz/svp/541179419-donat-ueber-20-minuten-crowdfunding-ich-fuehle-mich-wie-mitten-in-einem-tornado>>.

**Jetzt wählen!**

**«10 Millionen Einwohner in unserer Schweiz! Wollen wir das wirklich?»** 100 Mio.

Toni Brunner, Parteipräsident SVP Schweiz

**Liebe 20-Minuten-Leserinnen und Leser**

Jährlich wächst unser Land wegen der ungenutzten Zuwanderung um eine Stadt St. Gallen (48000 Personen). Wenn das so weiter geht, wird die Schweiz bereits im Jahr 2030 über 10 Millionen Einwohner zählen, die die Hälfte davon Ausländer und Eingebürgerte sind. Die SVP ist die einzige Partei, die hier Einhalt gebietet. Die SVP will, dass wir die Zuwanderung wieder selber steuern. Nur so können wir dafür sorgen, dass die Bevölkerung in der Schweiz gesund und lebensfähig bleibt. Am 18. Oktober können Sie dabei mithelfen. Besuchen Sie unsere Landstrassen, unsere Wohnanlagen und Häuser. Kulturwandel am Arbeitsplatz, immer mehr

**Stellen Sie bei den Wahlen am 18. Okt. die Weichen richtig! Danke.**

**Haben Sie Fragen zu den Wahlen?**  
 Gratis-Hotline: 0800 002 444


**Kostenlose kompetente Auskunft!**  
 Ab dem 14. September bis am 17. Oktober können Sie sich kostenlos über die National- und Ständerwahlen 2015 informieren. Wie wählen man richtig, wie kann man seine Stimme zugunsten der Schweiz am besten geltend machen? Wir sind von Montag bis Freitag von 11.00 - 19.00 Uhr und am Samstag von 9.00 - 15.00 Uhr für Sie da.

**SVZ ist die einzige Partei...**

- ... die garantiert, dass
- die Zuwanderung begrenzt wird
- die Missbräuche im Asylwesen beseitigt werden
- kriminelle Ausländer ausgeschafft werden
- ein Anschluss an die EU verhindert wird

Darum am 18. Oktober **SVZ wählen.**

[www.svp.ch](http://www.svp.ch)



Mir langets!

von Donat Kaufmann

Politik Journalismus

Baden

Ansehen auf YouTube



Lasst uns gemeinsam ein Zeichen setzen und mit dem Kauf der Frontseite der Zeitung «20 Minuten» auf die absurden Züge des aktuellen Wahlkampfs aufmerksam machen.

CHF 147'271

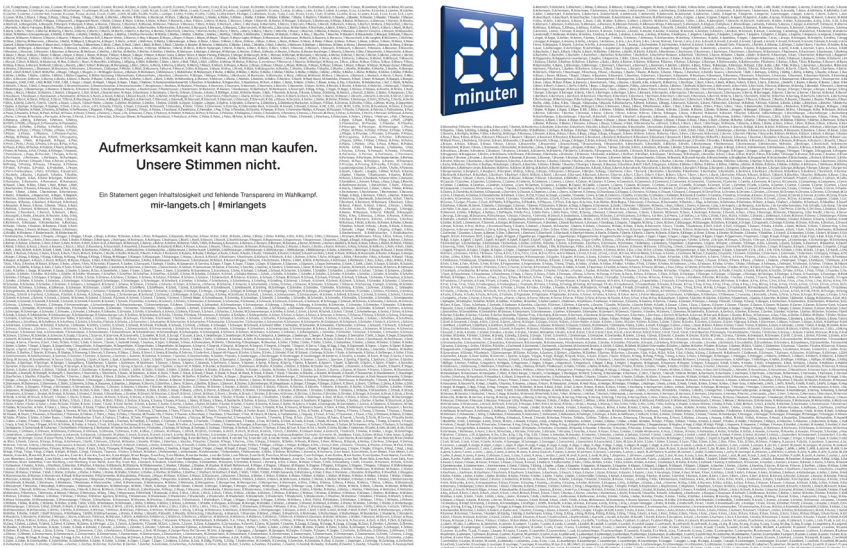
106% von CHF 138'815

So funktioniert's ▾

12'237 Unterstützer\*innen

Erfolgreich abgeschlossen am  
11.10.2015

Donat Kaufmann, »Mir langets!« (I've had enough!) crowdfunding campaign, 2015  
(<<https://wemakeit.com/projects/mir-langets/show/news?locale=de>>; see also <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SPcUjtzrIA>>)



»You can buy attention – but not our votes« – the counter to the SVP's advertisement  
(cover of the Swiss free newspaper 20 Minuten, 14 October 2015)

platform and in the traditional medium of the print newspaper. This campaign thus helped to popularise the crowdfunding principle itself. At the same time, the incident made the thesis of a democratisation of financing options more plausible – after all, an ›utterly normal‹ student with no money of his own had understood here how to stir up a significant political and media storm. (However, it is also true to say that it did not result in any longer-term shift in resources during the electoral contest.)

Yet, there is also the counterexample of a political campaign that, two years later, led to discussions about political boundaries that resonated in the mass media. In 2017, *wemakeit* initially permitted a crowdfunding campaign for the right-liberal ›popular initiative No Billag‹; however, the campaign was removed from its website after just a short time. ›No Billag‹ aimed to abolish the fee for receiving radio and television and would have meant the end of public service media in Switzerland. The initiative was defeated in March 2018 by 71.6 percent of the vote. The initiative came from the Young Liberals (youth wing of the FDP) and was supported by the SVP and the Swiss Trade Association, though not by the other parties. *Wemakeit* thus drew a political line here; they ›censored for political reasons‹ (Surber) – though the reasons are recounted differently by those involved: two people from the *wemakeit* team point out that the campaign contradicted the values of the company. The public statement at the time was also formulated along these lines: the initiative was too extreme for *wemakeit*; it was ›politically dangerous‹, and they did not want to offer it ›a platform under any circumstances‹.<sup>75</sup> Surber, on the other hand, says in interview that his motivation was founded primarily on economic factors: ›I simply said that if we allow this, we will infuriate so many of our customers that I would prefer to put up with the shitstorm from the right, because they don't do crowdfunding anyway.‹<sup>76</sup> As a private company, to which alternatives exist, one can make such decisions and draw such boundaries.

Surber's statement that the political right does not use crowdfunding in any case may come as a surprise. His justification for this assertion is revealing: the principle of solidarity is simply more important on the left. ›On the right‹, investments and donations that follow a profit-oriented or charitable logic are accepted, but ›if you want to do something [a campaign, an art project...]: either you have the money – or you just have to forget about it.‹ In this sense, *wemakeit* founder Surber interprets crowdfunding as a socio-cultural practice that differs from the liberal principle of allocation of resources by the market. Nevertheless, the question remains as to how crowdfunding can be classified within larger socio-economic transformations of cultural financing at the start of the 21st century.

75 Quoted from Sermîn Faki, *Wemakeit stoppt Crowdfunding von No Billag*, in: *Blick.ch*, 6 November 2017. Billag AG was responsible for collecting television and radio licence fees in Switzerland from 1998 to 2018.

76 Interview with Michael Surber (p), 23 March 2023.

#### 4. To the ›Click/Gift‹ via the ›Pitch‹ – New Cultural Skills

The emergence of digital infrastructures such as crowdfunding platforms has been popularised through narratives that revolve around concepts such as innovation, revolution, disruption or networking. Our article shows how a shift in perspective that understands infrastructures locally and describes them thickly as socio-cultural practices brings specific constellations and biographies, as well as political, cultural and legal conflicts, into view. However, behind the ›click/gift‹ are also activities such as programming and design work, conceptual work, political lobbying, legal negotiation processes, engagement with cultural attitudes (such as the aversion to ›begging‹), and attempts to reverse them (for example, through digitally mediated formats such as offers of rewards). In order to understand how the ›click/gift‹ was able to become technically established, legally legitimised, socially accepted and economically validated, popular discourses on technology must be radically contextualised, historicised and localised. Behind the ›click/gift‹, as our eponymous neologism suggests, are interconnections of infrastructure, sociability and economy that are loaded with presuppositions and intertwined with location-specific contexts.

Historically, the rise of crowdfunding actually coincides with an intensified marketisation of various areas of society and is entangled with this in a confusing way. The remarks on the change in governance with respect to cultural policy and the discussion concerning the economisation of social relationships already hinted at this. At the same time, platforms such as *wemakeit*, which position themselves in a broader sense as alternative, social-entrepreneurial and progressive, articulate an unease, for example, towards ruthless economic profit orientation and top-down processes, in the entire way they portray themselves. They promise democratisation, community and solidarity, to a certain extent away from or even entirely beyond the market and the state. At the same time, however, the relationship with the market and the state is cooperative and not antagonistic. When hostility emerges, it is more likely to be directed against a political opponent. With the constitutive boundaries that are drawn, as cited above, and such instances of embedding within macro-processes, *wemakeit* is not representative of the field of crowdfunding companies as a whole; however, it brings to light certain motives and entanglements of click-based giving as a cultural practice of the present day.

The political and economic context of all this is not always that of a radical policy of austerity, as it sometimes appears to be in the critical literature: as central as the policy of austerity and spending cuts is, for example, to the growing importance of individual health crowdfunding in countries such as the USA, this does not currently play a major role in Switzerland, even if the domain of crowdfunding for social issues is growing, which does, indeed, point to unmet needs. On the other hand, funding in the field of cultural policy in Switzerland is perceived by many people engaged in the cultural sector as insufficient or too focused on major flagships; yet, it is rather continuity that can be observed here and not so much radical cutbacks. The budget of the Department of Culture of the City of Zurich, for example, has remained at

around 1.6 percent of the city's total expenditure in the last decade – with certain fluctuations.<sup>77</sup> Crowdfunding has not replaced traditional cultural financing – but it has been and still is part of an ongoing shift.

We would like to conclude by arguing that this shift plays out not least at the level of concrete practices, ›subjectivation techniques‹ (Foucault) and social relationships. The rise of crowdfunding is embedded in the rise of so-called social media: Facebook, Twitter/X and Instagram, etc., make it easier to promote campaigns, even if, de facto, the leap out of one's own closer networks only rarely takes place in actuality. Nevertheless, the promise that this can happen (as with Donat Kaufmann's *20 Minuten* campaign) is also a part of crowdfunding. At the same time – and this is almost a cliché – social media have established specific forms of reporting on oneself, self-expression and communicating about such content quite generally across all ages, but especially among younger people. Those seeking crowdfunding must commit to their own economic and content goals and thus present themselves as an ›entrepreneurial self‹ to a greater degree than many who are engaged in the cultural sector were used to previously.<sup>78</sup>

Crowdfunding is closely interwoven with these stories of media and subjectivation techniques, and, in a way, it has driven them forward, as shown by the stories from the *wemakeit* founders and their successors about the learning effects of crowdfunding in the early days – especially among professionals in the cultural sector. They describe this time as a process of collective learning and normalisation in which new skills were acquired: all those involved had to train themselves in a new logic of action, try out unfamiliar forms of self-presentation and practise a new way of addressing people from their environment.

The fundamental task was to make a project palatable to the public already at an early, semi-finished stage of its development, as Dinah Brügger emphasises: ›This was also a *learning* for culture. It was a *pitch*, and we didn't really know that yet.‹<sup>79</sup> What is meant by this is the routinisation of the practice of ›pitching‹, popularised by venture capital investors during this time. It was previously established in the film industry, among others. In somewhat more general terms, the lesson to be learned consists in turning towards the audience and orienting oneself to what actually appeals to them – and in presenting oneself as a subject who is guided by that. What is more, one can now get feedback earlier and, to a certain extent, operate more interactively.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, a transition is also described here – against the background of the affordances of

77 Presidential Department of the City of Zurich, Kulturleitbild 2024–2027. Ausgangslage, Strategie, Zahlen, Kulturförderung, Zurich 2023, URL: <<https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/de/aktuell/publikationen/2023/kulturleitbild-2024-2027.html>>.

78 See Ulrich Bröckling, *The Entrepreneurial Self. Fabricating a New Type of Subject*. Translated by Steven Black, London 2016 (first German edition: 2007).

79 Interview with Dinah Brügger (p), 13 January 2025. Italics indicate that she used these English words in her German statement.

80 Crowdfunding sceptics such as Evgeny Morozov, on the other hand, have criticised the fact that this increased the chances of success primarily for projects that were relatively easy to explain, e.g., for documentary films that reinforce a particular worldview and are designed in the interests of a special audience: Morozov, *To Save Everything* (fn 26), pp. 25-27.

social media: from a rather bureaucratic logic of action based on text-based media (requests/applications/forms) to the audiovisually staged performance of charisma and authenticity (pitch videos). Brügger explicitly points this out: ›People were very good at writing applications, but being in front of the camera oneself and promoting one's project in a very authentic, honest way was also something very new. The Swiss are also a bit camera-shy. That took some overcoming for many.‹ Brügger speaks of a ›turn-around‹: ›[...] to now turn that around and say, hey, if you think what I'm doing is great, then be a part of it and support me, though, in fact, you'll also get something great in return – this turnaround was new to all of us. And we had no idea how it would land.‹<sup>81</sup>

In such practices, the history of cultural financing through crowdfunding and broader histories of culture, media, knowledge and the economy intertwine most strongly. Crowdfunding serves different purposes, takes different forms, sometimes more resembles a donation, and sometimes a subscription, or an investment, or a simple purchase. The socio-cultural shift that is associated with it consists not least of a ›molecular‹ change in behaviour.

However, amidst all this, the material side of things should also not be forgotten: according to Crowdfunding Monitor Switzerland, reward-based and donation-based crowdfunding grew rapidly up until 2017 (to approx. CHF 29 million a year), then remained at the level of roughly 25 million before rising to just under 45 million in 2020 during the pandemic and falling back to approximately 29 million in 2022. It levelled off at this value again in 2023.<sup>82</sup> In other words, the click/gift is now a largely normalised, everyday socio-cultural practice, though it tends to fill gaps and operate as a complementary tool without replacing conventional financing channels.

(Translated from the German by Josephine Draper)

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81 Interview with Dinah Brügger (p), 13 January 2025.

82 Dietrich/Amrein, Crowdfunding Monitor Switzerland 2024 (fn 13), p. 9. For comparison: the volume of private donations in Switzerland in 2023 was around CHF 2.25 billion; see <<https://zewo.ch/de/news-spendenstatistik-2023/>>.