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Digital crowdfunding has seen an exponential increase in its use in the past few years. This new form of internet-based charitable fundraising is usually hosted on for-profit websites and relies on networks of people coming together to donate funds to help specific people or causes. In *GoFailMe: The Unfulfilled Promise of Digital Crowdfunding*, Erik Schneiderhan and Martin Lukk situate the growth of digital crowdfunding within the decline of the welfare state in the United States and Canada and provide analysis of how this relatively new form of charity has taken shape in both countries. The authors’ main claim is that digital crowdfunding promotes a myth of meritocracy and equal access to charity, but ultimately only a few end up receiving help and complete their crowdfunding goals. Success in digital crowdfunding is structured by such factors as access to the internet, knowledge of digital marketing and branding, and pervasive perceptions of “worthiness” and “deservingness,” which intersect with social location to make some less likely to receive help and complete their crowdfunding goals. This book offers an excellent analysis for understanding how digital crowdfunding reproduces social inequality through both technological and socio-structural systems.

The book, which is composed of five chapters, provides a theoretical and historical background as well as an empirical account of the inequity of access to and disbursement of digital crowdfunding. The first chapter sets out the theoretical justification for the book. The authors situate neoliberal ideology as a driving force in both the rise for the need of crowdfunding and the foundational force through which digital tools such as GoFundMe have been developed to “solve” social issues. Schneiderhan and Lukk discuss how a “techno-solutionist” paradigm, which maintains that technology can be used to solve social problems, is used as a means to individualize social welfare as well as promote the idea that digital crowdfunding is a form of democratizing entre-
This paradigm has emerged in the context of a declining welfare state in both the United States and Canada, where the social safety net has been eroded and individuals find themselves in need of charity in increasing numbers, especially during and immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 2 examines the factors that influence crowdfunding use. The authors make the claim that national differences in funding and availability of social welfare programs undergird demand for charitable fundraising. Schneiderhan and Lukk examine crowdfunding use across the nineteen countries where GoFundMe operates, and they find that between 2018 and 2021, the United States has the highest ratio of campaigns created per capita, at 509 campaigns per one hundred thousand residents. This is followed by Ireland, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. They compare these numbers against countries like Germany and France, which respectively have produced 15 and 9 campaigns per one hundred thousand people in the same three years. The authors say that the variance observed among countries can be explained by differences in political contexts, sources for support, and government funding for welfare issues. This is supported by the authors’ finding that most campaigns are related to raising funds for education or health-care costs, which are domains that are traditionally funded in strong social welfare systems. Other important factors that affect the use of crowdfunding are digital literacy and race; the authors, for example, find that seniors and people of color are underrepresented in their data.

In chapters 3 and 4, Schneiderhan and Lukk describe the characteristics that make up successful campaigns, as well as the uneven distribution of who actually ends up reaching their crowdfunding goals. For digital crowdfunding campaigns to be successful, they require keen knowledge of visual marketing logics and of leveraging one’s social capital to create awareness and buy-in. Two main kinds of visuals were used for the campaigns analyzed: happy times, with pictures of happy families and individuals, and struggle and pain, which depicted individuals in hospital beds and otherwise undergoing hardship. Through this visual analysis, the authors highlight the need for campaigners to sell their experiences of hardship, which, they argue, injects logics of capitalism into stories of suffering and need. However, most individuals who create campaigns do not reach their goals. Schneiderhan and Lukk find that only 17 percent of the campaigns analyzed met or exceeded their goals. These failures have deep repercussions for the individuals involved, who along with experiencing hardship also face feelings of rejection and exposed privacy.

Furthermore, the authors also examine the role of the GoFundMe platform in facilitating campaign success. They argue that the platform’s involvement in online fundraising is emblematic of a shift toward the corporatization of welfare fundraising. This is done partly through platform affordances that only show campaigns that are deemed to be successful on its front page, while systematically hiding and preventing access to most campaigns. In addition, GoFundMe does not operate as an altruistic actor, as it profits from multiple sides. GoFundMe receives payment from both donors and fundraisers, and its contract states that it may sell the data it collects. There is a lack of transparency in how GoFundMe uses this data and on how much profit it makes from the fundraisers it hosts. Schneiderhan and Lukk question the ethics of such a profit model and challenge readers to imagine a better system for helping people overcome hardship.

Chapter 5 offers some concluding thoughts regarding the role and use of digital crowdfunding. Schneiderhan and Lukk acknowledge that this form of fundraising plays an important role in supporting individuals going through a hard time, but they also note that, due to the corporate for-profit context in which this fundraising happens,
there are many issues of access, equity, and transparency. These issues ultimately end up reinforcing social inequality, and many are not able to access help when they most need it. To address this, the authors suggest two solutions. The first is a short-term solution that asks for more transparency from GoFundMe and other digital crowdfunding platforms. This, coupled with more stringent regulatory oversight from governments, would aid in addressing some of the structural inequities seen in the data. The second solution is a long-term call to action to demand governments to step in and support individuals going through emergencies and hardship. Government intervention and support is needed to ensure that there is a strong safety net available to those who need it.

Schneiderhan and Lukk’s book offers an important contribution to the emerging literature on the platformization of charity. Its scope is ambitious, and the data presented speak clearly to the authors’ main claim—namely, that digital crowdfunding is not an equitable solution to providing charity, as it mirrors and reproduces structural inequities seen outside digital realms. The strengths of the book lie in its data-driven analysis and the comprehensive view of the contexts that give rise to the demand for digital crowdfunding. In addition, Schneiderhan and Lukk’s use of qualitative data is compelling, as it humanizes the individuals seeking digital crowdfunding help and adds a more nuanced dimension to their claims.

Given the scope of the book, there are a few topics that are touched on superficially. It would have been beneficial to see a more in-depth intersectional analysis of digital crowdfunding, with perhaps more qualitative content to frame these findings. Furthermore, the authors devote some time to discussing the role of platforms in corporatizing charity and the technological and governance-based structures that ensure their ability to profit. The role of platforms in fostering new forms of charitable social practices is an emerging area of research. It would have been valuable to see more engagement with this literature in order to provide a more in-depth analysis of how platformization is transforming this social practice.

Overall, Schneiderhan and Lukk’s book offers a detailed and data-driven account of the failures of digital crowdfunding in democratizing charity. The book is clearly written and accessible, appealing to readers of both academic and lay backgrounds. GoFailMe is a great resource for those seeking to expand their knowledge on the rise of and access to digital crowdfunding.
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