



Bringing crowdfunding to the law

Julia Salasky, founder, CrowdJustice

Entrepreneur, lawyer and innovator – 34-year-old Julia Salasky only founded CrowdJustice last year. But since then, the first UK crowdfunding site dedicated to increasing access to justice has funded multiple cases, several of them prominent causes of national significance. Formerly a UN lawyer working on intergovernmental negotiations and online dispute resolution, and before that a Linklaters associate, Salasky conceived of fusing crowdfunding with litigation that has a public interest or that affects communities.

“On the one hand, I saw the rise of petition sites and the way that crowdfunding had become mainstream,” she explains, “and on the other, a major gap between people who need to access the legal system and those who can afford to do so. It just seemed like an obvious interception.” She points to: “A continued rise in online activism: people who really want to take part in issues that affect them, their community, people they care about, and they often feel helpless in being able to do so.”



Salasky was careful to launch in a way that “specifically accommodates the legal compliance and regulatory issues that lawyers, law firms and people funding litigation encounter”. CrowdJustice does a lot of regulatory checks behind the scenes but in many ways it operates much like any conventional crowdfunding page: set a target and make your case. CrowdJustice gives the tools to help users to promote it to the right people and to build a community around the case. If the target is reached, 93.5% of funds raised goes to cover fees, 5% goes to CrowdJustice and 1.4% to payment processor fees. The average donation is £35 and just under 90% of cases hit their target funding level.

One of their first big cases was Joint Enterprise

Not Guilty by Association (JENGbA), a campaign group for family members fighting for justice on behalf of those imprisoned under the law of joint enterprise. In February 2016, JENGbA used CrowdJustice to fund its intervention in the Supreme Court – the first ever to be crowdfunded at the highest level – and was successful in changing the law, which had been “wrongly interpreted for 30 years”, according to Lord Neuberger, president of the Supreme Court.

“The JENGbA case was a powerful way of people coming together to create real change through the law,” says Salasky. Publicity generated by such high profile cases creates “a virtuous circle”, she explains. “The more people who know about a case, the more they are likely to give and to engage with different issues. There’s a huge cross-fertilisation, so people who give to one case may well give to another.”

Following the Chilcot report, the Iraq War Families Campaign Group, which represents the families of the 179 British servicemen and women killed in the conflict, raised £150,000 on CrowdJustice. They are seeking to “bring to justice those responsible for the war”. Donors also funded a legal bid by Labour party members over a vote in the leadership election.

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CrowdJustice has seen cases from firms such as Bindmans, Leigh Day and Irwin Mitchell.

Many cases on the platform have focused on environmental and planning issues, like the local residents challenging the decision to put a permanent cruise liner on the Thames near Greenwich, because of potential pollution. They have also seen personal cases where people are trying, for example, to pay for employment tribunal fees.

“Doing something new in an industry that is naturally conservative, you have to overcome existing habits and ways of doing things in a way that benefits everybody,” explains Salasky. “CrowdJustice enables individuals and community

groups to access the legal system but it’s also a way for lawyers who can’t afford to take all their cases pro bono to get paid, and for important legal issues to get heard before the courts. That benefits society as a whole.”

Surprisingly, there is nothing comparable yet in Canada, Australia, or her native US – at least nothing quite like the CrowdJustice donation-based model. But Salasky has ambitions. “We’re looking at the US,” she says. “We already have a lot of US traffic to the site and significant inbound interest from people who want to crowdfund US cases.” Ideally, expanding into the US would involve “building local credibility and looking to establish good relationships with top public interest firms, charities and NGOs”.