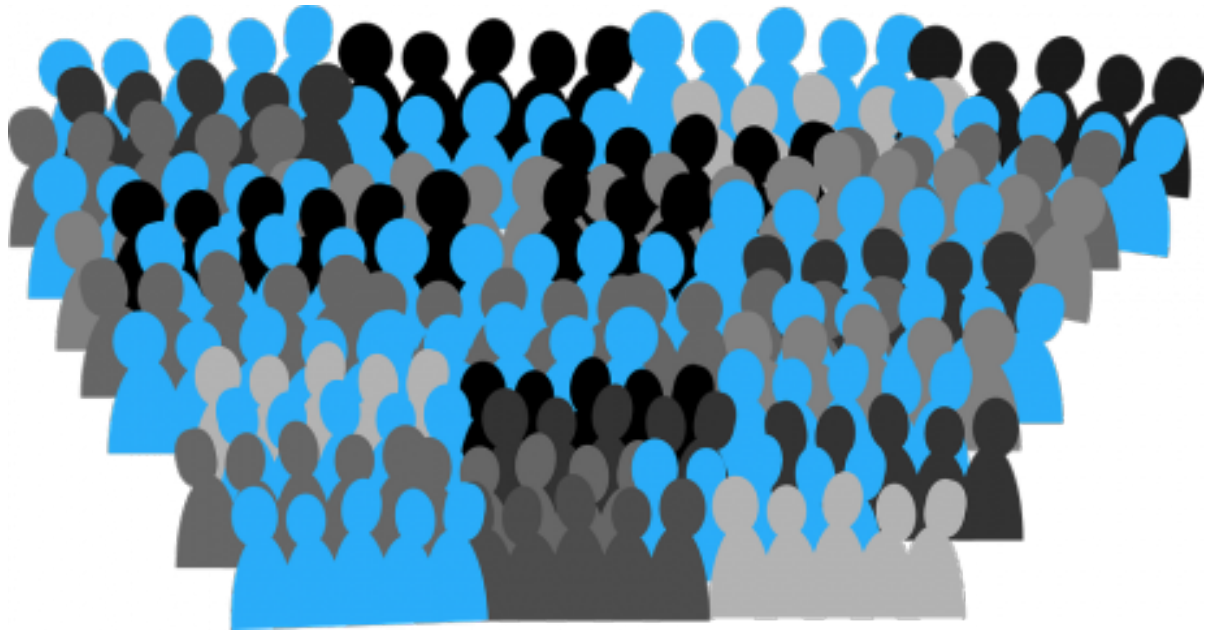## 3. «Digital platforms and democracy» by Ricard Espelt and Mònica Garriga[4]

To the extent that they overcome the traditional tyranny of space and time, digital platforms are tools for democratizing participation. But their impact on citizen involvement varies considerably

[4] Original article published in DemocraciaAbierta (29.03.2017) with the title of «Digital platforms and democracy»

Image source: Pixabay. Public domain.

The impact of digital platforms in recent years affects all areas and all sorts of organizations: from production to consumption, from political parties to social movements, from business to public administration, trade unions, universities or the mass media. The disruption they generate is cross-section and intergenerational. Undoubtedly, their outstanding assets – at least from a discursive point of view –, are self-management and disintermediation. Today, through technology, people can participate actively in processes related to any particular activity. This is why we often talk about digital platforms as tools for democratizing participation, overcoming as they do the traditional tyranny of space and time. If we analyze them in detail, however, and look at the organizations that promote them, we realize that the improvement in citizen involvement tends to vary, sometimes considerably, as does the logic behind their approach.

Cooperativism and digital commons
Fairmondo is a virtual market, similar to Amazon. A quick look at this platform originated in Germany may not be enough to realize the current relevance of this project, which happens to be one of the most paradigmatic projects in platform cooperativism (conceptualized and popularized by Trebor Scholz and Nathan Schneider) or open cooperativism (conceptualized by Michel Bauwens and the P2P Foundation). In fact, Fairmondo is a digital cooperative owned by its users, who are also its shareholders.

The open source, innovation and the commons constitute its DNA. Launched in 2013, its development has been made possible by a series of microfinancing campaigns, which have raised hundreds of thousands of Euros. Although its dimension is global - more than 12.000 members and two million products - its logic is local. Fairmondo is now evolving into a federation of local cooperatives in each country where an organization gets started. Unlike Amazon, democratic governance is key to its operation.

We can distinguish different types of technological platforms, depending on what economic model they promote. So, for instance, the role of technology as a space for interaction between equals (P2P) can be linked to the emergence of the Collaborative Economy. In any case, as pointed out by Mayo Fuster, if we are to attempt a critical analysis, it is fundamental to ask what the business model is (basically, to distinguish non-profit from for-profit projects), what technology they use (closed or open source; that is, democratically replicable or not) and what access they allow to the knowledge that is generated (if the data are public or private). Another layer can be put on top of this trilogy: the governance of the platform - which is nearly always intrinsically related to the organization that promotes it. This is why, when ascertaining the democratizing role of any technological platform, it is essential to undertake a holistic analysis of its economic, social and political approach.

Reviewing each project critically is particularly relevant in a playing field where citizens no longer act as consumers of goods and services, but also as producers and suppliers of their own goods. Some digital platforms have already been denounced, in fact, by those offering services in this way for causing job loss and favouring insecurity. The Uber app is a good example. Nor can the derived social impact on the community be excluded from the assessment of their democratizing function. That is, for instance, the impact in terms of citizen relocation of the activity of Airbnb: in addition to observing the platform as a tool for

exchanging dwellings among equals, we must analyze in detail its actual use and its social and economic impact.

In short, platform cooperativism or open cooperativism, whether it focuses on the social strength of cooperative values or on the need to reappropriate common goods, calls for a detailed critical review of the local activity of its digital platforms. This is a different approach from that of the global analysis of the impact of technology, which quite often hides the replication of models generated by undemocratic digital environments.

La Teixidora, a democratic digital platform

Being aware now of the risks of partial evaluation of the impact of technology and the key elements to be considered in analyzing it, let us return to our starting point: democratizing participation. Given the importance of local assessment of global digital tools, let us now see the case of the multimedia platform La Teixidora, which allows us to synthesize the aspects which, in our opinion, shape democratic participation.

This initiative, launched in 2016 in Barcelona, organizes in real time a collaborative structure with the aim of mapping distributed knowledge generated in different parts of the city during conferences, meetings, workshops and other offline meeting formats related to technopolitics and the commons. To do this, it appropriates several open source tools (collaborative editor, wiki, content storage spaces) and uses a Creative Commons license which, while recognizing authorship, allows anyone to adapt the contents and even use them commercially. Two significant apps illustrate the value of its functionalities in relation to democratizing participation:

1. In March 2016 La Teixidora covered, with a team of some twenty people, a debate on Collaborative Economy (Economies Col·laboratives Procomuns). The classified data were then transferred to the Decidim Barcelona platform, which has helped to define, through a broad participatory process, the Municipal Action Plan of the Barcelona City Council.
2. At the same time, the tool has been used to monitor the fifteen teams which have been following the economic development program La Comunificadora, whose aim is the promotion of social transformation projects and the advancement of entrepreneurship. Through La Teixidora, the participants have been able to establish a space for exchanging knowledge among them, with the mentors, with the city service managers and with citizens in general. All its contents are open and reusable.

In short, through this platform, both processes have been able not only to contribute proposals, but also to form an open learning space. And by mapping participation, which makes these processes – both of which are promoted by the Public Administration - transparent and accountable, thus improving their democratic quality. At the same time, the information and the learning from their use are helping to redesign the technological platform itself and adapt it to the needs of the communities involved.

As we have seen, although digital platforms tend to create spaces for interaction, with no intermediation, they differ widely different in nature and scope. This is why it is important to