Democratic disruption or continuity? Analysis of the Decidim platform in Catalan municipalities.

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Abstract

Free, open-source participatory platforms like *Decidim* or *Consul* were designed by the 15M' citizen activists in Spain. Initially implemented in Barcelona and Madrid, these platforms are spread in many countries. Castells has not examined the institutionalization of the 15M's offspring, and thus we aim to contribute by studying the rollout of the *Decidim* platform in Catalan municipalities. We examine its disruptive potential along three democratic dimensions: transparency, participation and deliberation. Our study combines in-depth interviews and an online questionnaire administered to public officials in charge of the platform and analyses also the levels of participation on the platform. The research shows elements of managerial continuity: the most valued goals are transparency, organization of information and the collection of citizen proposals, rather than deliberation and transfer of sovereignty towards citizens. However, the platform forces administrations to consider individual citizens' inputs, increases citizens' proposals and initiatives, and brings in new participant publics. Furthermore, democratic innovation is being pushed ahead by a network of activists and technological experts that continuously improve the platform and function as a counter-power (Castells, 2015, 2016).

Keywords:

Participatory platforms, local government, 15M movement, Decidim, Civic Technologies.

Introduction

This article examines the transformative use of digital platforms to engage with citizens by focusing on the case of the Decidim platform in Catalan local governments. This participatory open-source and free-software platform and its sister in Madrid, "Consul", were initially designed by activists of the 15M movement -or Indignados- in Spain. Since its first implementation in Barcelona in 2016, with a government led by a political party derived from this protest movement, the Decidim platform has been adopted by many other public administrations in Spain and other 19 countries, reaching 311 implemented instances. Castells has not explicitly examined the institutionalization of the offspring of the 15M movement because he published his last study on this in 2015 (Networks of Outrage and Hope). Nevertheless, most of his work has an empirical background (such as the Trilogy of The Information Society, 1996-8), and he has especially encouraged empirical observation of the specific configurations of the network society where particular actors, interests and values engage in power and counter-power making strategies (2016, p. 15). Thus we aim to contribute to this body of literature by studying the impact of the rollout of the Decidim platform as an instrument for democratic renewal that can sway the established power relations.

The new digital environment expands the repertoire of voice and political action from below, giving more opportunities for citizens' participation. The empowerment of new actors through digital technologies ultimately implies a push for power redistribution, which obviously generates tensions and conflicts (Castells 1997, 2009, 2015, 2016). The most recent waves of demonstrations and discontent –from the Arab Spring, the Indignados movement, promptly studied by Castells (2013, 2015), to the more recent Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong or the process for independence in Catalonia– actually show the capacity of digital media to empower collective action, but eventually the recomposition of the contested power against these waves.

Although governments and political institutions are making efforts to adapt to the new digital context, they move between contradictory pressures and forces. On the one hand, they try to regain legitimacy and reconnect with citizens by being more open, transparent and favouring participation. On the other hand, the functioning of institutions is inextricably connected with a logic of political representation and top-down bureaucratic structures that limits and conditions any innovation. In addition, as Castells has already detected in the 1990s for the case of dominant organizations in civil society (1997: 360), well-established local associations want to keep their influence in local participatory institutions and are reluctant to widen individual participation or to admit other groups (Ganuza et al., 2014).

Online platforms reflect these latent tensions. They could disrupt the representative functioning and promote more direct and autonomous citizen participation. Online participatory platforms are currently being used by the so-called cyber or connective parties (Bennett et al., 2018; Margetts, 2006) and several governments and Parliaments (Aragón et al., 2017). Some authors envisage future government functioning as an open-source platform where policies are introduced through an active user community (O'Reilly, 2011). Yet, digital platforms raise classical political dilemmas that cannot be answered simply with technology alone (Schuler, 2018). Technological applications are not neutral or value-free, but they strongly depend on the power relations and the political context where they are embedded, shaping how they are designed and work (Morozov, 2013; Webster, 2006, p. 12).

We tackle these questions by analyzing the democratic potential of the Decidim platform within the constraints of public administrations along three dimensions: transparency,

participation and deliberation. These dimensions are considered crucial to democratic improvement and open government, and show the possible disruptions with previous managerial and representative models (Åström, 2001; Chadwick & May, 2003; Fung, 2015; Oszlak, 2013).

Because of their centrality, our primary focus is on the public officials in charge of the platform's management, whom we approached through in-depth interviews and an online questionnaire. Unveiling the problems and limitations those actors detected and experienced helps provide a more down-to-earth account of digital platforms' democratic and transformative potential without falling into unrealistic expectations.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we introduce our perspective on the continuity and change that the Decidim platform can bring about, especially concerning a more participatory model of democracy. Second, we outline the methods and data employed for the analysis, based on the use of the platform, in-depth interviews and online questionnaires. Third, we explain the results of our study, focusing on to what extent the use of the Decidim platform serves the purposes of enhancing governments' transparency as well as citizens' participation and deliberation. Finally, we conclude the paper by ascertaining the disruptive character of the Decidm platform.

Continuity or disruptive promotion of participation?

Digital platforms reframe the already classic debate on the role digital technologies can and should play in the governance of modern democratic societies. Advances in interactive digital media show the technical viability of radically more democratic alternatives than bureaucratic or technocratic models. Furthermore, as happened with previous ICTs, the debate is not about technological possibilities but a clash between different political visions and models of democracy (Anttiroiko, 2003; Chadwick & May, 2003; Fung, 2006, 2015; Hoff et al., 2000; Norris & Reddick, 2013; Van Dijk, 2000). Promoting more open models, which necessarily involve handing over decision-making and thus power, is not free of risk or conflict and involves profound changes in organizational culture and structure.

Before the last economic crisis, local citizen participation in Catalonia was fostered through institutionalizing collective bodies, such as city, district and sectoral committees, and implementing initiatives for individual participation, such as citizens' juries and participatory budgets (Gomà & Font, 2001). In many cases, the economic crisis and government budget cuts frustrated continuity and reduced the number and reach of participatory processes. But on the other hand, local governments in Catalonia have pioneered the use of web frameworks, specially Consensus, to enable online citizen participation and coordinate participation processes. From this perspective, the adoption of the Decidim platform is an incremental decision on top of previous decisions that opened up the way (Borge, Colombo & Welp, 2009; Norris & Reddick, 2013). Previous experience of citizens' participation processes and use of Consensus for participatory processes are factors that have facilitated the Decidim platform's adoption.

Consensus was designed by a consortium of local governments and engineers (Fundació Jaume Bofill, 2004), while Decidim and Consul were designed collaboratively by activists that wanted to change the extant democracy. In its full potential, the logic and functionalities of Decidim could enable a model of direct democracy where citizens and organizations can massively take part, debate and decide online, if necessary, without the intervention of public representatives. In fact, this platform is one of the best examples of civic technologies that have gained institutionalization and therefore is being confronted every day with the actual structures of the public administrations and representative institutions. In that sense, the platform's design contains disruptive elements related to the dimensions of participation,

deliberation and transparency that can collide with the rather legalistic and managerial model of the Spanish and Catalan public administration.

Potentially, the platform's strength lies in the idea of continuous crowdsourcing and deliberation: gathering online a mass of proposals, opinions and votes, to construct bottom-up public policies. However, that is only possible if citizens perceive that their contribution has a political impact (Font & Galais, 2009). Inconsistent and limited use of the platform can lead to a loss of trust in the local authorities and skepticism towards participation. Additionally, the lack of sufficient participation can seriously bias the citizen input and compromise the legitimacy of the participatory process (Font & Galais, 2009). Although digital platforms can facilitate participation, particularly among interested citizens not able to participate in face-to-face political activities (Rottinghaus & Escher, 2020; Secinaro et al., 2021), as we will see further in the analysis, the involvement of new participants and the large volume of inputs can alter the existing structures of participation and increase the reluctance of traditional gatekeepers.

Furthermore, the Decidim's collaborative philosophy of free and open-source software allows local governments to become part of a network of developers and users. The platform developers are programmers, hackers, and activists from the 15-M and the commons and sharing economy movements. Altogether with consultancy firms, researchers and municipal managers from different countries, they have created the so-called Metadecidim community, which organizes horizontally to meet platform users' perceived needs, share experiences and learn from successful and failed experiences[1]. Compared to the private offer of instruments developed ad hoc to facilitate online participation, Decidim has the advantage of cost and continuity in its provision and ability to adapt to specific new needs. Since its first implementation in 2016 by the Barcelona City Council, four versions and many new functionalities have been implemented. The historical institutional support in Catalonia to ICTs for participation has continued: the local consortium Localret, the Barcelona and Girona's Provincial Councils and the Government of Catalonia are promoting and using the platform.

In addition, the platform's design allows a great degree of openness and transparency: all operations can be registered and available to anyone accessing the platform, providing high visibility among citizens, traceability of participation and translation into political decisions. These characteristics mean that municipal governments could feel more restricted by this type of online participation than by points of view expressed in the face-to-face participatory processes. The latter usually involve a relatively small public, generally limited to known representatives of associations and those citizens interested in politics who regularly participate in local political meetings (Castellà & Jorba, 2005). Thus, municipal governments' control over citizens' participation may dim when using digital platforms such as Decidim. However, on the other hand, digital platforms like Decidim provide relevant local information for political and technical managers, who can more easily detect and monitor problems and conflicts in the municipality.

The data: uses and perceptions of the Decidim platform

The information for the analysis was obtained through 9 in-depth interviews in the first municipalities that adopted Decidim, a questionnaire administered to the 34 municipalities using it as of March 2019 and data on the registered citizens, proposals and comments on

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[1] They coordinate, debate and participate over meta.decidim.org using the Decidim platform. Anyone can register on Metadecidim and create a proposal, debate or vote.

the platform. In-depth interviews lasted about one hour and took place in 2018. The interviews provided information on possible explanations for Decidim's use and greater detail on the council's participatory commitment and the problems encountered in rolling out the platform. The online questionnaire was administered to all Catalan municipalities using the platform as of March 2019 (n = 34), with a response rate of 88%. It consisted of a battery of 29 items based on a seven-point Likert scale, which asked about the dimensions of transparency, participation and deliberation identified in the interviews. The three sources of data are described in Table 1:

Table 1. The three sources of data for the analysis

Decidim platform in Catalan municipalities (n=62) April 2020	✓ Registered citizens (mean=2,202; max=31,259) ✓ Participatory processes (mean=6; max=42) ✓ Number of comments (mean=763; max=19,619)
In-depth interviews to platform/participation managers Pioneering group (n=9) 2018	✓ Context (political and participatory climate, reasons for adopting the platform) ✓ Reception by actors involved (technical teams, local associations and the public) ✓ Organization and functioning (prior experience, main participatory processes, organizational structure, combination with off-line participation, modules functioning, dissemination, open data) ✓ Evaluation of the platform, problems & conflicts
Online questionnaire to platform/participation managers Response rate: 88% (n= 30) March 2019	✓ 29 items (7-point Likert scale) on most relevant issues identified during the interviews: organisational context and organisational culture, actors involved and 3 dimensions of open government: transparency, participation and deliberation.

The in-depth interviews and the online questionnaire targeted professionals in charge of the Decidim platform, most of whom worked at citizen participation departments. These agents play a liaison role between the political and bureaucratic sides of the public administration and the network of local associations and citizens, affording them a privileged position from which to witness the tensions and conflicts that can arise between the different actors involved in participatory policies. Interviewing public managers is a common methodology used to study organizational conflicts and obstacles that appear when new digital technologies are implemented in the Public Administration (see, for instance, Mergel et al., 2019; Smith & Prieto Martín, 2020; Viale Pereira et al., 2017).

Three dimensions of democracy fostered by the Decidim platform

The Decidim platform can make participatory processes more *transparent*, *participative,* and *deliberativ*e. However, when asked for these three dimensions in the online questionnaire, municipal administrators in charge of the Decidim platform acknowledge that they are not achieved with the same intensity (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Questionnaire items about the perceived uses of the Decidim platform, with answers reported on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 stands for "strongly disagree" and 7 for "strongly agree" (n=30)

(see attachment)
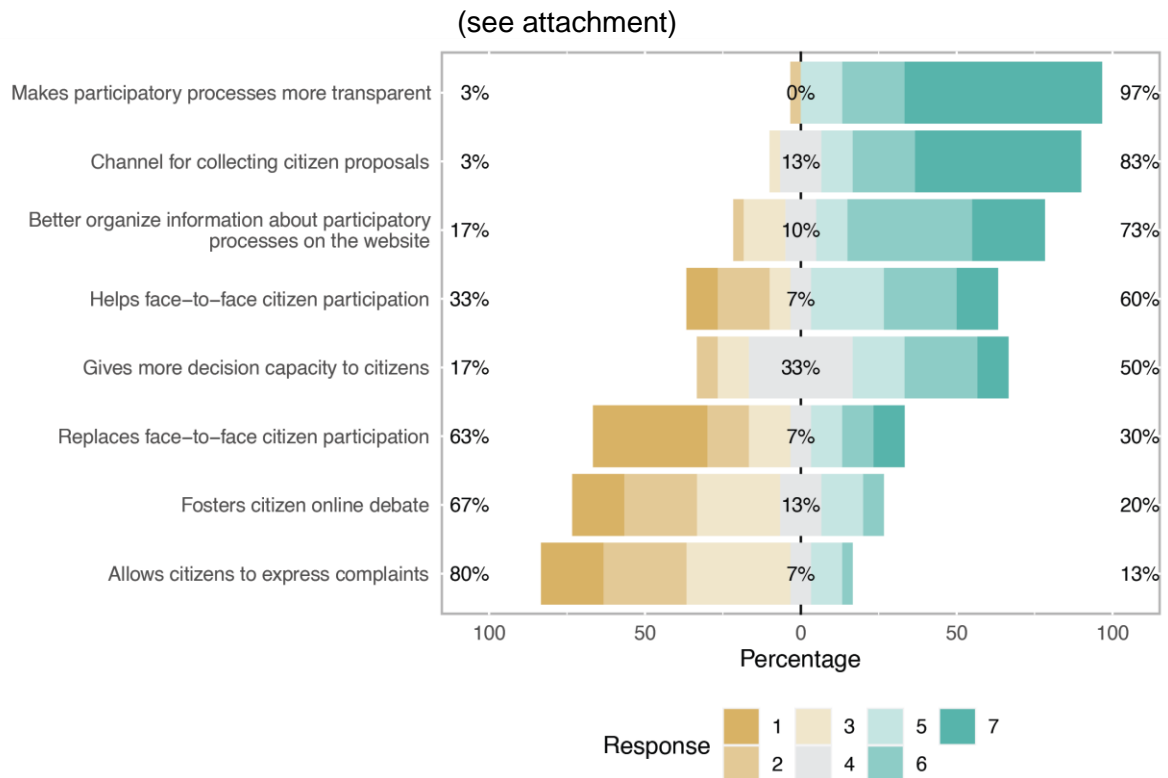
Transparency

The officials responsible for its implementation, first and foremost, see the platform as an instrument for transparency. The emphasis on transparency over the other dimensions reflects the management approach of participatory processes, which is coherent with the position of public officials and the continuing functioning of the public administration. There is wide agreement that the platform helps make participatory processes more transparent to the public (97%) and helps better organize the information website on participatory processes (73%). In-depth interviews show that the platform has generally been used as a transparency instrument to report on all phases of the participatory process (schedule, terms and conditions regulating the process, face-to-face meetings calls, or project execution status), reflect on the traceability of the process, and provide accountability for the results in different phases such as justifications for accepting or rejecting proposals or voting results. However, keeping high levels of transparency comes at a cost. The interviewed administrators explained that maintaining adequate response levels, especially concerning assessment, tracking and feedback on different proposals represents a major investment in time and resources and requires fluent coordination and communication between the different departments or services involved.

Participation

Citizen participation ranks second with some qualifications. Although seen as a useful instrument to collect citizen proposals (83%), there is less consensus on whether it actually transfers more decision capacity to citizens (50%). Together with the value given to transparency over participation, these figures show the power continuity of the managerial

and representative institutions. Also, 63% consider that the platform is not replacing face-to-face participation, and 60% indicate that it is helping in person participation. Thus, the platform is mainly seen as a complement rather than a substitute for face-to-face participation.

Up to April 2020, 289 participatory processes have been implemented on Decidim, many being participatory budgets. The number of registered citizens varies across municipalities, ranging from below 1% to over 15% of their respective inhabitants. Medium-sized and large municipalities (50.000 to 220.000 inhabitants) are more effective in achieving higher levels of registered citizens when compared with larger or smaller ones. One of the advantages of conducting digital participatory processes among medium or large populations is that they provide a forum for interaction which is not so needed in smaller populations, where continual, face-to-face interaction prevail. In addition, these middle-sized and rather large municipalities have a long participatory tradition, well-established civic associations, and a good level of economic development that fosters the platform's use.

The rollout of participatory platforms depends on the support from the politicians who head municipal governments, as only they can delegate authority in the representative model of democracy (Shah, 2007). Indeed, both the interviews and questionnaire responses highlighted the necessity of wide political support to implement participatory processes successfully. In 2020, 64 Catalan municipalities were already using the platform. They gathered a significant variety of governing political parties thanks to the existing broad political support for the platform and the help of supramunicipal entities and governments.

The platform turns problematic when identified with a particular political option. The case of Badalona is paradigmatic. After the 2015 municipal elections, the new government team committed firmly to implementing ambitious participatory processes, such as a participatory budget of 14 million euros and popular consultations, using an incipient version of the platform. In June 2018, a vote of confidence changed the mayoress. As a result, participatory practices and the platform's use stopped as they were associated with the previous government. In Madrid, the Consul platform was relegated basically to communicative functions after the defeat in 2019 of Ahora Madrid, the political party that promoted it.

The municipalities tackled uneven participation due to the digital divide through different measures such as providing face-to-face help for citizens to register on the platform or using small vans and trailers that travel around with information about the processes and how to take part. Most interviewed managers and politicians were well aware of the digital divide issue and applied measures to minimize possible adverse effects. These can be understood not only as a natural response to increasing citizens' participation in political decision-making but also as a strategic reaction among political actors. Likely, local governments with support among the elderly or poorer sections of society (i.e. those most affected by the digital divide) tend to evaluate online participation less favourably than maintaining or even prioritizing offline participation. For example, after the changes in the municipal government, Badalona tends to rely more on the 'traditional' offline tools of participation. Similarly, L'Hospitalet's participation in the platform remains very secondary compared to face-to-face participation. However, beyond such a genuine concern on the digital divide, local governments do not have actual data on the distribution of the digital divide broken by socio-demographic sectors in their municipalities, which hinders problem-solving. In addition, Decidim's data privacy provisions prevent socio-demographic data collection.

The concurrence of local associations has been another issue of concern when rolling out the Decidim platform. Conventionally, it is assumed that municipal governments with good support from local associations, social movements, trade unions and NGOs are more likely to conduct participatory experiments in transferring power to citizens. The reason is that

such processes involve reaching known and supportive electoral segments (Shah, 2007), and pre-existing social networks help implement programs and guarantee higher citizens' participation. However, the platform enables individual citizens to have a more direct and disintermediated line of influence over public authorities, which has caused concern among local associations. Direct citizen participation can be seen as a threat to the status quo and loss of influence of specific stakeholders in society. Therefore, certain innovations in the platform faced a cold reception in some cases, such as the proposals module and its voting systems, which place the same value on individual and collective proposals, as mentioned in some of the interviews (Terrassa and Barcelona). For these reasons, municipal governments -anticipating reluctance and knowing that cooperation from associations and organizations should improve the processes success- have worked to ensure they are involved in the process. A variety of resources have been used, such as making the presentation of individual proposals more demanding in terms of required endorsements compared to proposals from organizations (like in Sabadell and Mataró) or establishing quotas that benefit proposals coming from municipal committees formed by local associations (like in Mataró).

These findings align with other studies showing that the capacity to transform participatory processes and democratic innovations is often limited by the resistance of already institutionalized social actors (Bherer et al., 2016; Ganuza et al., 2014). Castells also warns against dominant organizations in civil society that focus on taking part and strengthening a strong state, which neither widen participation nor adapt to the Information Age (1997, p. 360) or the current Network Society (2004, 2016).

Deliberation

Only 20% of the local managers in charge of the Decidim platform consider it fosters citizen debate online. Rather than a space for debate and discussion, the platform is mainly valued as a mechanism to collect citizens' proposals (83%) and give citizens more decision capacity (50%). In fact, the platform has been particularly used for collecting proposals and voting them (e.g. participatory budgets). Although the platform includes interactive elements that facilitate horizontal communication among participants, such as the modules for debate or comments on proposals, these online discussion elements are not very much used by citizens. During the interviews, some local governments acknowledged that they had not enabled the function, as they failed to see its usefulness or could not cope with a large number of comments. Local governments prefer face-to-face meetings for deliberation (such as workshops to draw up and prioritize proposals) over online debates. That is consistent with the idea of the platform as a complement, and not a substitute, of face-to-face participation.

There are striking differences between municipalities concerning the proportion of online comments. Barcelona clearly stands out from the rest for the large number of comments, explained mainly by the success of Barcelona's PAM process initiated in 2016 with 18,191 online comments. However, the distribution of opinions in that process was quite uneven: more than a half of the proposals (51.7%) did not generate any comment at all, and most of these comments were simply replies to the proposal without leading to a conversation (Aragón et al., 2017; Borge, Balcells & Padró-Solanet, 2019).

Nevertheless, since 2020 and due to the pandemic situation, deliberation on proposals and most of the meetings and plenaries are being held face-to-face and through streaming. They combine other platforms such as Jitsi, Youtube, Teams, or Zoom also to debate proposals through synchronous chats. Most municipalities have decided to keep this combination of video conferencing and face-to-face format in the future. More women with children and professionals attend these online sessions, as they allow a better conciliation of family life and work (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2021).

Conclusions

The case of the Decidim platform is an example of technologically-driven innovation whose implementation falls into a combination of elements of continuity and disruption. On the continuity side, the platform's adoption is first and foremost a top-down decision made by local governments who also decide how far they want to go in the transfer of sovereignty towards citizens. There is no reason to believe that technology per se will make governments more responsive, innovative or democratic. In most cases, the platform's adoption aimed at bringing in a better digital tool to existing participatory processes -in the context of a historically participatory experienced territory such as Catalonia. As revealed by the questionnaire results, the platform tended to be seen as a complement to face-to-face participation and mostly used as digital support of participatory processes traditionally based on face-to-face interaction. Although digitalization might be regarded as an opportunity to increase participation reach, particularly in specific moments such as presenting proposals or voting, the most valued goals achieved are transparency and the management of information and proposals, which shows continuity in managerial efforts. More ambitious goals like participation in decision-making or citizen online deliberation are less prominent, indicating certain accommodation of the platform to the already existing administrative and bureaucratic routines. In these cases, the platform use closely matches the managerial model of e-governance, and its usefulness lies in making the tasks involved in participatory processes more efficient and adopting policy decisions in line with the preferences of affected stakeholders (Åström, 2001; Chadwick & May, 2003; Fung, 2015; Oszlak, 2013).

However, even the most conservative deployment of the platform can imply some disruptive dynamics. Firstly, the use of digital platforms can motivate the participation of new publics and new actors and increase the number of proposals, citizens' initiatives, and other different inputs. It can attract a new profile of participants, as has happened with the latest video conferencing and embedded chats. Local governments are well aware of the digital divide problems and have undertaken measures to diminish its impact. Also, the reach of new publics and the increasing number of citizen proposals and inputs can alter the balance of forces in the political arena. Whether in government or the opposition, political parties are susceptible to this issue because of its potential effect on the electoral competition. As happens with other cases, digital platforms have a disintermediation power that can be resented by traditional gatekeepers of participatory processes like local associations. It is in line with Castells' little hope for the transformative potential of civic associations given their interest in reinforcing a strong state where they take part (Calabrese, 1999, p. 176; Castells, 1997, p. 360).

Secondly, in several municipalities, including Barcelona, the platform has enabled the rollout of relevant participatory processes such as participatory budgets, citizen initiatives and co-creation and co-production experiences for the first time. Simultaneously, due to the platform's architecture and functionalities, its use in municipal participatory processes forces administrations to consider individual citizens more than when processes are limited to traditional forms of offline participation. That is basically because of the transparency and visibility of the communication flows and the traceability of all the interventions on the platform.

Thirdly, the network generated around the digital platform management can help the process of experimentation and diffusion of innovation. A common platform facilitates the transfer and exchange of knowledge and experience between administrators. That makes comparisons between local governments easier, stimulating new ideas and generating pressures to mimic successful experiences. In addition, Metadecidim, the network of activists and technological experts overseeing the platform, acts as a counter-power pushing

for disruptive democratic innovations, generating tensions with the old logic of bureaucratic structures and representative democracy.

Our study has some limitations. In order to more clearly assess the dynamics of power and counter-power configurations, other key agents involved in participatory processes -such as citizens, local associations and even local politicians- should be interviewed and surveyed in addition to public officials. The local associations' reluctance towards implementing the platform deserves to be studied in further detail, particularly the differences between various types of civic associations and their perception of threat to their role as intermediaries between citizens and administrations. Some important organizations (i.e. Federation of Neighborhood Associations, Scouts, or Som Energia) are starting to adopt the Decidim platform for internal democracy, which could help change these perceptions.

To sum up, participatory online platforms constitute an illustrative case of the uneasy balance between, on the one hand, the democratic transformations that platforms can bring about and, on the other hand, the hurdles created by a complex array of stakeholders and the prevalence of managerial models of governance. Public administrations must remember that hindering the democratic potential of the online platforms they adopt will generate pressures and claims from technologically savvy movements and an increasingly more autonomous citizenry. Full-fledged participatory platforms can contribute -as Castells envisaged in his analyses of the Information and Network Society- to deepen democracy at the grassroots level and adapt the political institutions to the network logic. However, they risk being just another missed opportunity if they are not accompanied by an effective acceptance from public administrations and political decision-makers to support more participatory governance.

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