

# DECIDIM FEST

→ 18-20  
November  
Internet

#DecidimFest20

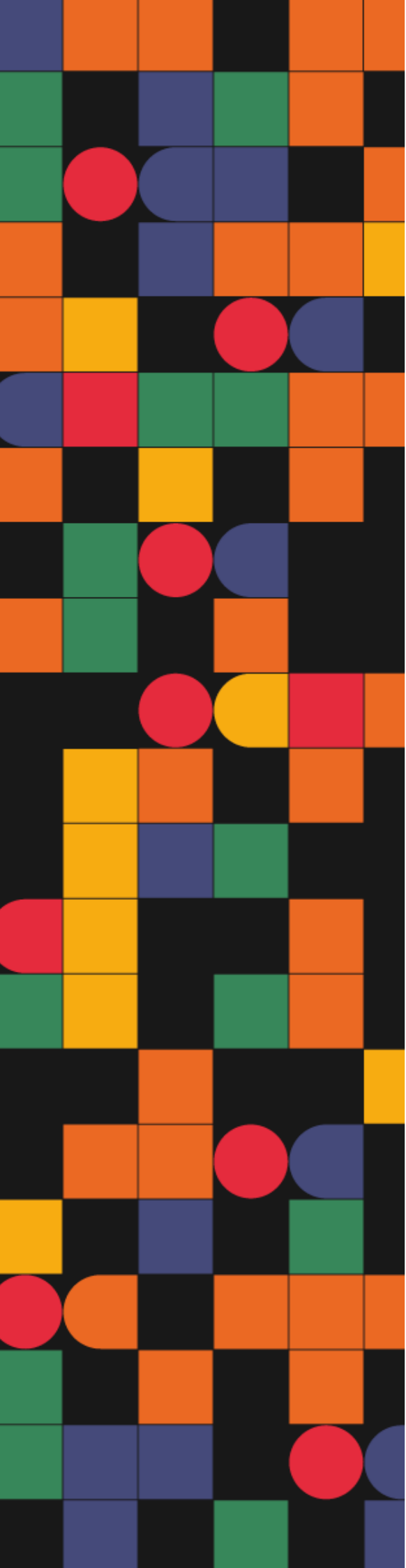
Democracy & Technology  
in Times of Emergency

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Ajuntament de  
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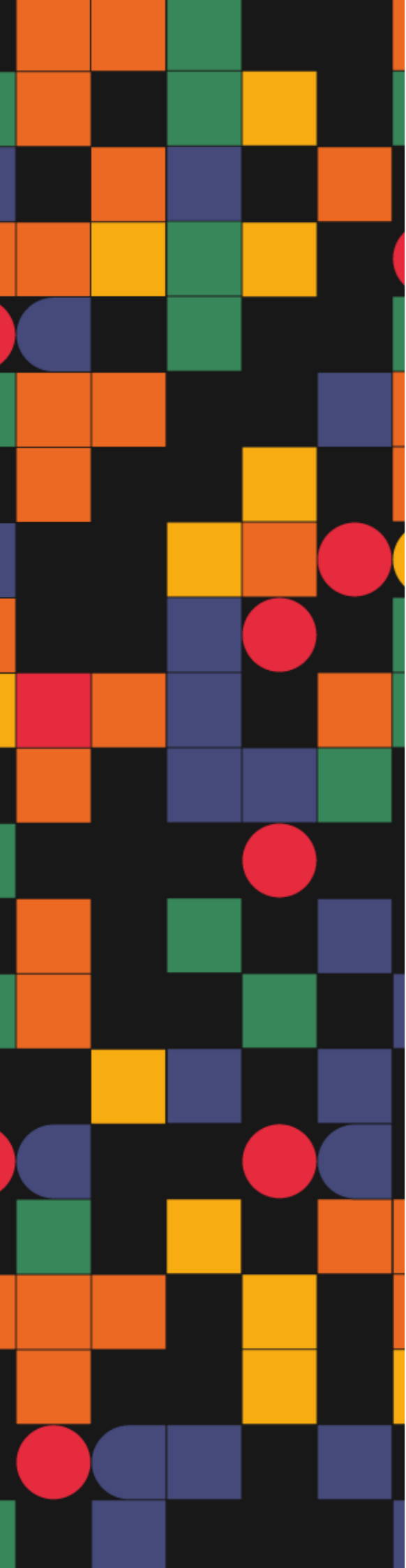
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## ► DECIDIM FEST 2020 PROGRAM



# The urgent need for technological democratisation in times of pandemic



By Arnau Monterde (Barcelona City Hall, decidim.org)

The advent of the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on society as a whole has highlighted a series of issues that have to do with our vulnerability as a society, while at the same time highlighting the need to safeguard some of the pillars of public and community life that we need to hold our communities together when everything falls apart. More specifically, here the focus is on the current crisis which has highlighted how little our voices count at a time of crisis, when suddenly the entire political chain of command is recentralised by default. Knowledge garnered from other disciplines, together with any form of participation in the decision-making process that falls outside the “expert” sphere occupied by politicians, doctors and epidemiologists is reduced to zero. Furthermore, in the context of lockdown, one of the most extreme physical manifestations of this crisis, the importance of the digital world and our dependency on the big Internet providers (known operators) and the technology giants known as GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft) has grown more than ever. For this reason it is necessary to start to recognise, when we are talking about the digital world, that, as a society, we are dependent on huge privately owned entities that are making decisions about us today, and we are seeing how utterly impotent we are, the public sector in particular, which has had nothing to say for itself during the many months since the pandemic began.

And this is where the urgency lies. Not only the urgency of finding a common solution to the coronavirus crisis that will benefit the whole population, but also, and no less importantly, of beginning to define other ways of thinking, understanding and building new relationships with the digital world, with this privatised and centralised digital world that is completely beyond democratic and civic control. It is no coincidence that in this advanced and quite sophisticated phase of surveillance capitalism, as Shoshana Zuboff points out, the concentration of the economic power of these companies is increasing, as is their capacity to colonise the world with their products. They do this through the constant extraction of the data that we - the people or the users - generate, and which provides “the fuel” for a new economy based on the capacity to process this data and use it to control, monitor (in both the direct and indirect sense), and even manipulate, our social, individual and collective behaviour. This centralisation and total privatisation is taking place at all levels of the Internet, in the infrastructure (cables, satellites, antennas and servers), in the code or software (where the large social networks are still far from open source), and in the massive data silos generated every second and processed via algorithms and the drumbeat of an artificial intelligence, still far from being auditable or open, and above all imbued with the prevailing inequality biases within our society.

The present consequences of this scenario are not insignificant. Renata Avila talks about data colonialism and the new ways of colonising our society and our knowledge, in a process that is uncontrolled. There is limited collective resistance to the plundering of our privacy and of the information we generate in the communication processes in different media that are essential to our daily lives. This brings us to what Eurydice Cabañes calls algorithmic governance, processes and models in which forms of government are not only mediated but reconstructed by a specific view of how the world is organised. More specifically, Paz Peña points out how Silicon Valley constructs the world in its own image and likeness. Silicon Valley governs the world based on design, through its digital products that are born of the relationships, socialisation and intensive use of digital technology designed by white upper middle class males with a uniform world view. Due to the fact that it is imposed and totalised by default, it becomes useless as a model for conceptualising our societies, societies that aspire to be open, free and diverse, and that are so very necessary in the 21st century. And the most subtle thing of all is this finesse, this unawareness of the associated risks, this non-perception of the fact that we are permanently constructed and driven by the decisions of others that keep us in a permanent state of alert: connected, willing and available, addicted to this model of connection that seeks to maximise our attention in order to hold us back, bombard us, or test the latest algorithms of personalised recommendations for anything and everything, algorithms that are always so successful. As Geert Lovink points out, all of this goes through processes of design which are already political in nature, and that focus on this constant capture of attention or addiction, and that do so by way of experiential systems of interaction and thousands of other mechanisms that keep us connected and that constitute an ideology inherent to social networks.

From a different perspective, Ingrid Guardiola situates the voluntary servitude of this collective moment of conscious acceptance of our role as servile providers of the data that feeds the machines that feed the algorithms and that is fed back into our lives again. In short, we could talk about a permanent state of manipulation that is consciously accepted. The privatisation of public, emotional, social, and political life is a reality insofar as all forms of interaction pass through private means. And the social networks are not the only protagonists. This model of colonisation is heading for all the digital spaces that are yet to be conquered. A paradoxical case is that of the arrival of Google in schools. Under the guise of "usability" and ease of access, the company has virtually become the norm and the model for digital education - and even more so since the advent of lockdown. Google colonises an area of such vital importance as the education of children who are still (partly) free from the Matrix without meeting any form of resistance. Google, even if it says otherwise, captures, stores and processes data on pupils from as young as 4-5 years of age, a forced relationship that begins when schools voluntarily register them for their first email account, introducing them to the universe of Brin and Page (its founders).

Entering the layer of uses is a more complex scenario, one that is full of contradictions in which we see creative explosions, conflict, rebellion, emancipation, and re-appropriation, and also fear, violence, aggression, control, and a long etcetera. One horrifying case, as Javier Sanchez Monedero explains, is the use of surveillance technologies during refugee crises where algorithms, data and surveillance technologies are coordinated for the absolute control of the identity (including the digital identity) of those who cross borders in order to escape from war or poverty to reach Fortress Europe, people who become marked for life and find themselves with no way forward. No less important is the inten-

sive use of social networks by ultra-right-wing groups who, thanks to the way that these networks are designed and the lack of democratic control over them, have found a perfect platform from which to bombard us with fake news, spread lies, confront, construct content that foments machismo, violence, and hatred, feeding communication wars on the web as points from which to dispute public debate.

It is because of all these things and their irreversibility that there is an urgent need to understand, to face up to these issues and to move towards scenarios which run contrary to this new digital order. Reformist scenarios which regulate and stop the uncontrolled expansion of these giants; symbiotic scenarios in which to exploit and deconstruct many of the powers full of contradictions of corporate social networks as new colonised public spaces, and disruptive scenarios which promote and reinforce the development of autonomous, democratic, open and free processes and technologies at the service of society as a whole. Obviously, for this to happen, a change of mentality is needed in all those natives of the corporate social networks, and within a society that simply ploughs ahead and that is devoid of any critical faculties, as Geert Lovink points out. This change must come from what is concrete, from the exploration of these new digital territories that we need both to build and to recover at the same time, and as Paz Peña tells us, that will allow us to stand up to Silicon Valley. The time has come to open up new digital spaces that are not commercialised or aimed at creating addiction, spaces that permit open and collective deliberation and the construction of knowledge, spaces for autonomous digital and collective self-organisation, spaces for cooperation and the generation of strong and supportive bonds, diverse spaces that are free from violence and that, as Red Levadura points out, displace polarisation, leading us towards new encounters, consensus and productive dis-

sent, a form of dissent that produces solutions to conflict that are not based on a hatred of the other, of what is different, of the invisible, or of the subordinate.

There are horizons close at hand in which some ways of thinking, developing, and spreading free democratic technologies are already emerging, as is the case with Decidim, together with many others. This is happening at all levels - open and community infrastructures, free hardware and software, data justice, and design justice or critical artificial intelligence. There are many robust projects that are advancing and moving towards other ways of understanding the digital society, in which collaboration, open knowledge, democratic governance and common sense prevail over purely extractivist and market-based logics. The time has come to start building a **global alliance for digital rights, democratic technologies** made up of multiple networks capable of starting to provide collective and authoritative responses to this permanent colonisation and governance of our forms of interaction. At the same time, we must launch a **plan for a technological transition** that will allow us to produce, scale, sustain, care for, and build open, free and common technologies that empower communities, that generate autonomy and emancipation, that build new economies, and that underpin a diverse and robust ecosystem that can sustain this transition in the face of surveillance and platform(s) capitalism.

Barcelona, 18 November 2020

Arnau Monterde

(Barcelona City Hall, decidim.org)

# The new discourse of voluntary servitude

By Ingrid Guardiola (University of Girona)



Here are some brief pointers on how technological protocols act as instruments of control, with serious consequences for the subject's construction and socialisation processes.

## Platform capitalism

The state of emergency became a field for instructional, disciplinary operations, leading to a pause in our lives in public places and a generalised house arrest. This led to an increase in digital capitalism, along with its contradictions. More specifically, the thing that increased was platform capitalism, or what the sociologist David Harvey called during the lockdown, the *Netflix economy*. According to Nick Srnicek, "platform capitalism" consists of those global digital platforms which act as infrastructures for extracting data in order to ensure their economic growth. We are talking about Facebook, Amazon, Uber, Tinder, Airbnb, etc. Many of these networks vastly increased their number of users and interactions during the lockdown. In the end, they are service platforms, such as Blued, a Chinese gay dating application that already includes monetised streaming services, news feeds, games, online shopping and advice on management subrogated abroad. The streamers are institutionalised, professionalised and considered to be corporate assets, tools for extracting data flows. Information is a highly valued asset. Has-

htags like #coronadiaries transfer a lot of power to the company, the power of knowing how people were experiencing the pandemic in real time. This means that the Instagram and Twitter servers have a clearer idea than we or politicians do about what our future will be like.

## From discipline to control

Social distancing is a form of control. The structure of the public sphere is based on power relationships. The social internet, as a new public sphere, is not exempt from social distancing or power management. In 1992, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze wrote *Postscript on societies of control*, where he foresees aspects arising from power management as problems: irrational technocracy in the hands of global computerisation, the financialisation of the economy and biometric control. Deleuze says that we have gone from the disciplinary society, which Foucault expounded on in the 1960s, to societies based on diffuse, corporatist control with codified individuals. According to Deleuze, control is organised through numeric systems, or modulation. The strategy is to foster incentives, challenges, competitions and group sessions, with rivalry as a motivational force that pits individuals against one another, dividing them, atomising them. The mass disappears, the important thing is the code, the password, the "dividus" and the masses of data.

The current society of control has turned the panoptic into a new spectacle. Since 9/11, the concept of "security" has been capitalised by the state and international politics. The current health crisis adds a new layer and a new pretext in international security: from bioterrorism to viral pandemics. With the coronavirus, *corona tracing apps* have been approved, cyber-surveillance based on anonymised geolocation, in order to detect close contacts, know if there is a risk of contagion or detect new foci. Some call them Safe Paths. We should ask ourselves what we are losing through everything we are doing in the name of security, and who benefits from that security.

## Machine self-learning

In 2010, Big Data became a new business paradigm. When the researcher Mike Ananny downloaded Grinder, the Android Store automatically recommended an app called *Sex Offender Search*, considering that all gays are sexual delinquents. That same year, Watson appeared, cognitive intelligence that can understand, reason and learn from humans. Since 2015, many companies have been developing strategies relating to predictive artificial intelligence and self-learning machines. In spite of the fascination that they can induce, self-learning algorithms based on neuronal networks create inclusive and exclusive forms of social order. Impersonal systems where it is difficult to understand the conclusions they reach or make a complaint if they conclude that you are guilty of something or that you do not qualify for a grant, subsidy or loan. The more the machine learns about the basis of our social prejudices, the more we wash our hands of the processes of detection, categorisation, classification and prediction. According to Lewis Mumford, it was precisely the taxonomy and collection of information about our surroundings that fostered the development of human language and practical intelligence. What do we lose when we delegate this to machines and their protocols?

## Prediction and Modulation

As Shoshana Zuboff warned in the 1980s, the specificity of the algorithmic architecture of these environments not only make it possible to automatise tasks (as Ford did with his assembly-line system), but also that each automatism process generates information, and this information is used to predict the behaviour of users and alter it in one way or another. All of this personal information, and the data that comes from interacting with others, is compiled in order to give these tools a predictive character. In 2012, Michel Kosinski said that through *Likes*, they can predict personal attributes such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, political options, personal characteristics, intelligence, happiness, the use of addictive substances, age, gender and if the parents of the subjects had separated. Shoshana Zuboff calls this "surveillance capitalism" which commercialises private human experience, understood as behavioural data. The benefit of this is a predictive product, behavioural models for now and for the future. We can even maintain that what is commercialised is the future. In other words, everything these behavioural factories accumulate is everything that you will lose.

A recent academic article indicated that many prisons have become testing grounds for artificial intelligence linked to surveillance technology. These are factories that monitor the prisoners, who are completely datified (even in terms of vital signs), data-production factories, instead of their previous role as provisional places for manufacturing products. For example, in Hong Kong, the prisoners wear Fitbit devices to analyse whether they are suffering from an overdose or are about to start fighting, although they do not have the opportunity to connect to digital devices. In 2018, in Sweden, a state agency launched Krim:Tech, a hub for renewing, digitalising and smartifying work with prisoners. This is double involuntary servitude.

## The modulated subject or cognitive automaton

Foucault said that 19th century modernity is inseparable from the way in which the mechanisms of power coincide with new forms of subjectivity, a specific body politics that indicates how to make the new multiplicities of individuals useful. There is a sector of artificial intelligence which, as Bernard Stiegler said, aims to “proletarianise the human mind and extract value from the nervous system”, including the brain. A subject profiled by social networks is an isolated individual who is analysed by using social-segmentation techniques. This is a profile in a digital genotropism bubble, where the idea is to attract similar profiles. These spaces transfer the obsession for metrics and scores in accordance with a competitive, adversarial logic, as described by Deleuze. For example, in 2017, Tinder launched its Tinder Gold application, a paid service which acted as a personal assistant to help you find a date and made you more visible, for €25 a month. The metric managed the application's libidinal possibilities and our euphoria and depression.

Mark Fisher affirmed: the capital follows you when you dream. And it does so via applications such as Fitbit, Dreem and Neuraling, Elon Musk's app, which understands depression or insomnia as electrical problems in the brain, which can be corrected by applying electronic technology. Apart from creating states of mind, they also regulate consciousness and memory. Since 2016, the algorithmic timing of social media modulates the most relevant moments of your life, exempting you from the need to give them their necessary value. If we eliminate from our lives elements such as the management of our personal memories or internal pain, what remains is “the cognitive automaton” (Mark Fisher). An anti-subject that delegates to machines their taxonomic capacity for collecting and

understanding data, producing memories and meanings and creating a social framework of shared trust. We are speaking about subjective destitution through what some people call “narcocapitalism” (Laurent de Sutter) and others call “neuroliberalism” (Mark Whitehead), a modulating capitalism in an apparently free society which is a narcotic through and through, the effects of which are just the flip side of the depression that it continually causes.

For all of these reasons, it is no wonder that one of the most purchased products during the lockdown was Alexa, Amazon's voice-controlled assistant, an artificial intelligence which, according to Andreas Hepp, represents a robot-as-servant archetype. We communicate with these bots without any need for understanding them or us.

## Voluntary servitude

All of this leads us to travel a long way through time and cite a reflection from La Boétie's book *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude* (1549), which he wrote when he was 18 years old, but was published posthumously thanks to his friend Montaigne. La Boétie theorises about tyrants, and affirms that a tyrant's power comes from the people. “How can so much pain come from a single person?”, the author wonders. La Boétie states that for power to be effective, it needs the servility of others, for them to become accustomed and for the lack of freedom to be compensated by a suitable system of leisure activities. La Boétie also indicates that when we lose freedom, we lose value: “*subjected people do not feel happiness nor passion in combat*”, like a cognitive automaton. Lastly, he tells us that only a few defend the tyrants, while the rest simply respond to a series of established orders; i.e. to a social protocol. What dehumanised form have the new tyrants turned into? Into the “titans of information”?

## Final note

In October 2020, the Nesta Foundation published a special investigation entitled *Using Collective Intelligence to Resolve Public Problems*. Since Pierre Levy started to talk about “collective intelligence” in 1994, this term has been used by various people. There is a need for a new era of “sovereign collective intelligence”. Nesta's dossier contains some popular initiatives that compare the general will and the territory's political management. Without both of these elements, there is no worthwhile collective intelligence. How do you give predominance to the general will (diverse, open to dialogue, capacity for negotiation) over the cognitive automaton?

The above-mentioned social platforms should be analysed as a public issue. What Digital Welfare State do we want, and how does this e-governance relate to traditional public governance? What social forms does it generate? Are my social networks a tool for subjective destitution and for registering social prejudices derived from policies of hate? Do I have the impression of managing my own time or is it the machine that controls it? What relationship should public institutions and authorities have with these virtual places where we delegate all of our conversation, our feelings and our political decisions?

Speaking about disconnection and free tools is all very well, but while the main ingredients of the traditional public sphere, such as work, family and public institutions, continue to foster platform capitalism, it makes no sense to opt for a policy of placing blame on the general public. If we want healthy digital citizenship that can use an effective collective intelligence, we must first create tools and ways of resisting the psychological, emotional and cognitive control intrinsic to most of these places, strategies of denaturalisation for voluntary servitude with rewards that are not always satisfactory. All of this involves

some humble, unyielding work to reappropriate our language, our communication and our digital socialisation. To recover our descriptive and taxonomic capacity, and foster a non-authoritarian design where no protocol can substitute people's capacity for negotiation, participation and decision-making.

Ingrid Guardiola  
(University of Girona)

# Stuck on the Platform Regression after the Network Demise

By Geert Lovink (Institute of Network Cultures)

*"Internet is the God that failed."*

Johan Sjerpstra

In this social media age, the dream of many students is to start their own platform. This motive already presumes an entrepreneurial aspiration many are not even aware of. How did the platform become such a desired object? This is how artists, activists, designers and geeks envision how to reach their audiences—while in the meanwhile becoming rich and famous. Why strive to become an influencer when you also become the owner? The ambition is a neo-liberal version of the 1980s demand: "We do not want to have a piece of the cake; we want to own the whole bloody bakery." Welcome to platform fetishism where social relationships are defined by the values created in social interaction itself. In this outgoing neo-liberal age the idea is to look down on the poor suckers that can only buy and sell. The trick is to persuade others to play according to the rules that you, the owner aka designer of the market, set.

The promise of the platform is an easy one: everyone benefits, both producers, customers and founders. No winners or losers, everyone's included and plays along. The robust software platform as *Kulturideal* has long replaced the homepage, blog and website and the related web design studio as a start-up model. We long to harness value instead of losing ourselves in the



messiness of the rhizomatic network. The platform dream has further consolidated the 'venture capital' mode of operation of hypergrowth in the shortest amount of time, aimed at a 'unicorn' market domination and eventually monopoly position. While only very few will become billionaire, the lottery aspect of the ruthless Darwinist strategy still attracts many. It's hegemonic, as they say. Elon Musk's appeal has not yet faded. The celebrity obsession is such that the pop critique of capitalism will not really question the right to become a billionaire. We all want to run our own platform—regardless of what we are longing for.

Platforms create marketplaces, simple connectors of supply and demand that bear little if any cost of production, yet are rarely neutral. They are not mere 'service providers' as in many cases the platforms are also significant players themselves in those markets. Revenue-wise these are not 'technology' companies but advertisement giants.<sup>1</sup> Platforms do not merely stage, organize and regulate 'markets', they also command outsized influence over neighbouring businesses and the wider ecology (think of road congestion and air pollution of hovering empty Uber taxis or the delivery of each e-commerce package in comparison to a visit to a mall or shopping street where items can be purchased all at once). The

<sup>1</sup> Quotes and summary of Ana Milicevic, *The Trouble with Platforms*, <https://pando.com/2020/06/29/trouble-platforms-google-amazon-facebook-apple-market-cap/>.

core of the capitalist rationale remains socializing costs while privatizing profits under the banner of personal choice and convenience.

Internet platforms turn hegemonic the moment the medium is no longer 'becoming' and close down to finetune 'behavioural modifications' of its userbase. The internet simply is. Its name is rarely mentioned anymore (as happened to the study of the internet). Instant connectivity is simply there, even in places with hardly any access. The platform is the message: content is tired, platform is wired. According to Marc Steinberg, platforms have become a universal translation device: it's the place where money, people and commodities meet and transactions can happen. See them as abstract mega nodes. "Almost anything can become a platform if one merely calls it such."<sup>2</sup> We scroll down its never-ending, ever-changing pages and move away from the previous static emphasis of 'new media' as archives and databases towards a regime of temporary liveness plus transactions ("Only 1 room left!"<sup>3</sup>). A cruel, never-ending metamorphosis of small differences: the offer you can't refuse.

The platforms that we inhabit are aspirational media for the users that go there in search of something. I am here, now what do I want, again? Unlike the rational, cold and empty search engines, designed by IT-engineers and library scientists, today's psychological platforms offer personalized, fuzzy information for the swiping dazed and confused. Unlike searching through the darkness of the archive, being able to compare the platform is giving us the feeling of being on top of the world.

Platforms as gated 'safe' spaces know us intimately, they recommend us according to our tas-

<sup>2</sup> Marc Steinberg, *The Platform Economy*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2019, p. 1, 92 and 115.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.checkbook.org/boston-area/travel-websites-mislead-by-falsely-declaring-few-rooms-remain/>.

te, preference, previous orders, search history and likes. Platforms remember and know how to comfort—and trigger us. We, messy humans, despise to start each time from scratch. Dear token, please save the settings for me. After all, we're not cold scientists, interested in objective knowledge. We'd like to save time, take shortcuts and appreciate that the machine acknowledges our weak these spots and remember for us, and talk to us, tell us how close the Uber driver is, what comparable products cost elsewhere and what this user that just showed up is sharing with others. We're petty and break down easily as our busy multitasking lives are on the brink of collapse anyway, all the time. This is why we find comfort on the platform, our new virtual domicile, formerly known as homepage.

What Europeans call regression and Americans neo-feudalism, both describe the return to earlier stages of psycho-capitalist development. In her review of McKenzie Wark's *Capital is Dead*, Jodi Dean contrasts digital platforms to water mills. "Platforms are doubly extractive. Unlike the water mill, peasants had no choice but to use, platforms not only position themselves so that their use is basically necessary (like banks, credit cards, phones, and roads) but that their use generates data for their owners. Users not only pay for the service but the platform collects the data generated by the use of the service. The cloud platform extracts rents and data like land squared."<sup>4</sup> Jodi Dean describes the neo-feudal tendency as "becoming-peasant, that is, to becoming one who owns means of production but whose labour increases the capital of the platform owner." Here, platforms are seen as meta-industrial infrastructural networks, parasitic in nature, driven by higher forms of exploitation and extraction. Both platform workers and users are regressive 18th-century pre-industrial figu-

<sup>4</sup> See <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/neofeudalism-the-end-of-capitalism/>.

res, almost-proletarians (entreprenariat as Silvio Lorusso coined them<sup>5</sup>), stuck in stressful, depressive pseudo-work that neither feels productive nor satisfactory.

In this situation, all we can hope for are sporadic peasant revolts. Where is the 21st century equivalent of the skilled, self-educated, and most of all, self-conscious worker that understands the need to organize? Instead of conspiratorial, professional revolutionaries, we're left with do-good NGO workers on temporary contracts. This leaves us with the desire to leave behind the (neo) feudal stage and fast forward to the classic, early 20th-century strategy question of revolution and reform, rejection or adaptation, abolition or 'civilization' of the platform-as-form. Should platforms be dismantled or appropriated? According to accelerationists, platforms are the technological expression of 'planetary computation', constructs that can be reprogrammed for post-capitalist purposes. The platform structure itself is not questioned, rather it's embraced because of its efficiency, smoothness and scale: Everyman Their Own Platform.<sup>6</sup> This discussion has yet to start, to make up from the lost decade in which we failed to discuss alternatives and mindlessly installed every app. In the VPRO Counterlight TV documentary on Dutch television, Evgeny Morozov correctly criticizes the digital feudalism thesis, not because it fails to describe the misery we're in, but because of its implicit linear thesis that we ought to progress (back) to capitalism.

In 1961 James Baldwin told an audience at a forum on US nationalism and colonialism: "Time passed, and now, whether I like it or not, I can not only describe myself but, what is much more horrifying, I can describe you!" This is the original promise of alternative media. Victims or minori-

ty groups do not need to be represented and can speak for themselves, thank you very much. It is increasingly the question of whether the current social media platforms still can be used for this purpose. It is time to leave the platform.

Key is the early stage of self-organization when a core and network can build, in the shadow of the perpetual present, without being bothered by filters, trolls, secret services, algorithms and other automated authorities. How can we communicate and come together without having to entirely depend on offline encounters? An important source of inspiration in this respect can be the federated Twitter alternative Mastodon. "Twitter has only two discoverability layers: your network and the whole world. Either a small group of contacts or everybody in the whole world. That's crazy," Carlos Fenollosa explains.<sup>7</sup> Mastodon, instead, has an extra layer between your network and the whole world: messages from *people on your server* called the *local timeline*. The Mastodon idea is to show how exciting it is to log into the unknown and realize that there are people who share your interests.

Call it organized networks. This is what Ned Rossiter and I have been working on.<sup>8</sup> Core networks of organizational units, cells with a purpose that consist of strong links—operating in opposition to the 'weak links' logic of the 'friends of friends' platforms. Organized networks focus on common tasks that need to be done, not on 'updating' solitary users. Please liberate us, lonely, desperate souls. Refuse, walk away, Not *What's New* or *What's Happening* but *What's to be Done*.

Geert Lovink

(Institute of Network Cultures)

<sup>5</sup> <https://networkcultures.org/entreprenariat/>.

<sup>6</sup> Compare [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jedermann\\_sein\\_eigner\\_Fussball](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jedermann_sein_eigner_Fussball).

<sup>7</sup> <https://cfenollosa.com/blog/you-may-be-using-mastodon-wrong.html>.

<sup>8</sup> See Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter, *Organization after Social Media*, Minor Compositions, Colchester, 2018.



## Digital borders and surveillance humanitarianism

By Javier Sánchez Monedero (University of Cardiff)

"Bassam is one of the 100,000 Syrian refugees who are living in Jordanian refugee camps and receiving aid through the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) [...] Before going to the supermarket, Bassam receives an SMS informing him that his allowance is ready for collection. Once in the shop, using an iris scanner, Bassam verifies his identity in the UNHCR database, which sends an electronic payment order to the shop". (Madianou, 2019).

### Introduction

Increasingly, governments, businesses, international organisations and non-governmental organisations have chosen to use digital identities and infrastructures for the governance of migrants and refugees. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) considers that the difficulty faced by these people, who are often undocumented or even stateless, in proving their identity is a limitation to accessing services and socio-economic participation, including access to employment, housing, a mobile number or a bank account (Latonero & Hiatt, 2019) and that the solution is the creation of large inter-operable biometric databases. Currently, according to the agency, 8 out of 10 refugees it currently assists already have a biometric digital identity.

Parallel to the development of digital infrastructures by states and organisations, the rise of smart phones and social networks has given rise to new socio-technical spaces in which refugees, traffickers, governments and large corporations can interact with each other and with

technology (Latonero & Kift, 2018). In fact, many researchers and humanitarian organisations view the provision of mobile phones and internet connection to be a form of assistance in itself.

While the co-existence and use of all these data sources and systems could contribute to guaranteeing rights, raising awareness of vulnerable groups or planning humanitarian assistance, they also pose numerous risks of becoming social control and classification systems, as we will see in the examples of the UNHCR's ecosystem of tools and the databases promoted by the EU.

Finally, although the narratives around these systems concentrate on their technical features, their role extends far beyond that. They are deeply political in building what is known as 'digital borders', 'digital passages' and 'surveillance humanitarianism', often obeying social order logics. Therefore, the audit and evaluation of these socio-technical systems requires multiple disciplines that analyse the technological components but also the practices around them, the experiences of the affected communities and the associated policies.



## Surveillance humanitarianism

Registering asylum seekers is an obligation for humanitarian organisations and host states. The reasons range from simply keeping track of the population, providing assistance or helping them to buy a mobile phone or open a bank account to fighting against fraud and human trafficking. The UNHCR has an internationally-deployed repertoire of applications for: documentation and registration of persons, data and statistical repository, biometric identity management and aid distribution management, among many others. Since 2018, the so-called Population Registration and Identity Management EcoSystem (PRIMES) has sought to integrate several of these tools and databases so that they can be interoperable with each other and with other external systems, such as civil registers, systems of other humanitarian organisations - such as the WFP's SCOPE and UNICEF's Primero - and collaborating companies (UNHCR, 2018). An example of the integration of various tools would be the electronic payment programme that the UNHCR has implemented in Jordan alongside the biometric identification company IrisGuard and the Cairo-based Amman Bank, which was illustrated in the case of Basam at the beginning of this text.

As we have mentioned above, these infrastructures do not serve a purely management function; rather, they also have a documenting and population analysis function that helps to make better decisions, for example, regarding stateless persons, while increasing their transparency and improving their visibility.

## Digital borders

The European Union has also implemented its digital infrastructure for migrant and refugee governance. One such system is the Eurodac (European Dactyloscopy): a centralised database of finger-

prints of asylum seekers (category I) and irregular migrants (categories II and III), initially set up to support the European asylum system, which states that responsibility for asylum lies with the country through which a person entered, or was discovered, in the EU. For example, if a person applied for asylum in Greece but was found in Germany, Eurodac reveals, through his/her fingerprints, the date and country of entry into the EU. In this case, the asylum seeker should be deported to Greece. Eurodac also presents problems related to practices, since each European country seems to follow different and arbitrary categorisation logics which determine the future rights of the people recorded in each category (Lyneham, 2017). Eurodac is currently undergoing a process of reform to expand the range of information collected, including photographs and a biography of the person, as well as integration with various surveillance tools on a continental scale. It will thus become part of a huge biometric database of travellers, visas, criminals, *irregular* migrants and asylum seekers; it will also unify and share biographical and biometric identities between EU member states and European security agencies. Despite the *simplicity* of its operation and the minimal data fields, Eurodac is currently being monitored by human rights organisations who claim that this tool, which was originally designed exclusively for asylum purposes, has become a system of surveillance and control which can be accessed by police forces.

## (De-)focusing technology on the analysis of socio-technical systems

The case of Eurodac shows us how a tool designed for one purpose can be re-used, at any time, for other purposes: a particularly sensitive issue when biometric data that can identify people for the rest of their lives are included. In the humanitarian field,

this type of risk has led Oxfam, unlike other organisations, to establish a moratorium and a subsequent refusal to collect biometric data, which, they conclude, responds more to pressure from international donors than to real needs (Rahman et al., 2018). In recent years, as opposed to centralised identity projects, 'self-sovereign identity' solutions have been proposed such as the ID2020 project. These are decentralised systems under the control of the user, who can grant or refuse access to his/her data to governments and companies. Once again, in order to assess these systems, we must go beyond technology and include practices and contexts. As is the case in refugee camps or at European borders, in the face of a situation of asymmetry of power between two parties, the protection offered by informed consent does not seem to be sufficient (Cheesman, 2020).

In addition to the risk of them being re-used for other purposes, there is also a consensus on the criminalising effect of these systems, which often mix anti-fraud narratives with the existence of connected biometric systems that generate alerts on a continental scale, which are shared with different police forces. This concerns not only the systems in use, but also EU-funded research projects. The iBorderCtrl project has developed and tested, in several countries, a smart border post that incorporates a lie detector to differentiate between migrants who are travelling in good faith or bad faith. The technology and capacities of iBorderCtrl have been described as "pseudo-scientific" and "technically insufficient", which makes us think that the real aim of this type of project is not to carry out the tasks that they claim, but to respond to a political agenda of creating new subjects and managing populations through technology that increasingly determines life opportunities and fundamental rights (Sánchez-Monedero & Dencik, 2020).

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# No man's land? Bodies that matter in Silicon Valley democracy

By Paz Peña O. (Al Sur, [acoso.online](https://www.acoso.online))



## On White Man's Land

The planet is full of so-called no man's lands. Such examples include America, when it was plundered by the Europeans; the 'gringo' Far West; and even the same environmental and social places of sacrifice which, in the name of capitalist industry, crushed all the species that lived there because, deep down, no one important had claimed that land. The concept of No Man's Land is the ideological operation underlying the colonialist logics that establish hierarchies in societies. Some species are more important than others; some bodies are more important than others. The same thing happens with digital territory.

Researchers [Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias \(2019\)](#), for example, speak of a "new state of capitalism" where, with the production and extraction of personal data through specially designed platforms, the colonial appropriation of our lives in general is naturalised. The digital No Man's Land operates, therefore, on two fronts. First, this ideological operation means that personal data is considered to be a raw material that is naturally available to capital, just as if it were an oil well. Second, large companies are considered to be the most capable for the processing and, therefore, for the appropriation of this raw material. Thus, just as historical colonialism was presented as a civilising project, nowadays society is presented as the natural beneficiary of the corporate project of data exploitation.

Delving further into this provocation, it could be said that the digital No Man's Land is at the service, primarily, not of any capital, but of the capital of the white Western male, who has developed capitalist and extractivist logics with personal data, which are ready for his service, enjoyment and profit. These capitalist logics of the digital No Man's Land are accompanied by an epistemology which, according to Mexican researcher [Paola Ricaurte \(2019\)](#), is a new evolution of the post-positivist paradigm, and which is based on three assumptions: (1) the data reflect reality; (2) data analysis generates the most valuable and accurate knowledge; and (3) the results of data processing help us to make better decisions about the world. For Ricaurte, this epistemology goes far beyond Silicon Valley: it has become dominant even in non-Western states, making data colonialism extend through several layers that reach far beyond the individual experience of people with commercial platforms.

Like all colonisation processes, this is a forced plundering. While the mechanisms may be more civilised than 500 years ago, that doesn't make them any less violent. One example is the long Terms and Conditions documents, which are often not even written in our own languages and which contain legal language that is impossible to comprehend, forcing a consent that is extremely individual, solitary and unequal. A liberal simulation of autonomous, free and rational in-

dividuals who, in a notarial document, sanitise imposition and domination. As if all people could freely say "NO". As if, as [Sara Ahmed \(2017\)](#) says, the experience of being subordinate does not also mean being deprived of the ability to say "NO" and, therefore, being available to the will of the other. In this context, the hegemonic digital territories, built upon these colonialist foundations, are more than a simple No Man's Land. Rather, they are more of a White Man's Land.

## On gender-based violence in White Man's Land

Living a life without violence is a human right. Hegemonic platforms, meanwhile, following colonialist logics, have prioritised economic extractivism over the bodies of the victims. Violence against women is deemed to be acceptable collateral damage. This sounds difficult to assume when it comes to industries that are closer to gringo political liberalism than to Trumpian conservatism, which, in recent years, has been filled with fervent militant workers of liberal feminism. How can such liberal, educated and politically correct people choose to treat gender-based violence as acceptable?

This is easier to understand when we examine activism against gender-based violence in the platforms, and the pathetic responses that these platforms have given. In 2020 it may be a good idea to remember that, [for the last 15 years](#), Asian feminists have started to present studies on the ways in which platforms have facilitated this violence. Since 2013, [international bodies have started to recognise](#) the alarming and global existence of violence against women in technology. We're now in 2020, and very little meaningful progress has been made by platforms to combat gender-based violence. Rather, there has been a series of superficial developments,

policies that remain unclear and reporting channels that turn their back on you rather than listen to you. With non-existent figures.

Not having figures for complaints and action taken on gender-based violence is one of the constants of hegemonic technologies. Twitter, for example, does not publish figures despite the fact that, for example, a person could potentially report content for the non-consensual dissemination of intimate images. Facebook, which also has a reporting tool, presents a very general and overall report which does not allow the phenomenon to be specified or for a geographical breakdown to be provided. Figures that serve for very little.

Transparency on these issues has long been demanded from feminist activism. Having transparency on gender-based violence figures allows us to understand the true extent of the problem, which therefore enables research, campaigns and public policies to be developed on the subject. It seems curious that platforms that are dedicated to collecting and segmenting every single interaction of a person on a platform - and not only of the users of their services - say they do NOT have data on gender-based violence. Rather, we know that this is a cover-up operation. They don't want women to think that they aren't safe on their platform. They don't want women to abandon their platform and leave them without business: some industries are built upon the bodies of others.

Some businesses are built on the outsourcing of the bodies of others. Little has been spoken of how, in practice, the platforms have outsourced the work of reporting victims for free. It is the activists who have taken on the burden of guiding victims of online gender-based violence along the winding roads of avoiding harassment and seeking answers on the platforms. [It is they who have dedicated their time, while also exposing themselves to violence.](#) It is they who must

warn contacts on the platforms about errors in their algorithms or in their human moderators. They are not paid for these services. They are not supported for these services.

For liberal feminism, the same one that is co-opted by the hegemonic platforms, gender-based violence on the platforms is a problem of omission, not collateral damage resulting from a business model that makes millions from people's interactions, regardless of whether or not that interaction involves hate speech, misogyny or violent attacks on women and other minority groups. The problem, they say, lies in the lack of diversity of technological equipment. This is a curious logic. Because although the diversity gap is evident and must be addressed, it ends up essentialising the wide range of identities, races, genders, social classes, etc.

More worryingly, it is statements such as those made by Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein in a book called "[Data Feminism](#)", which refer to how the field of data science and artificial intelligence is dominated by white males from society's elite that speak of the "risk of privilege". According to them, this is the phenomenon that makes those in the most privileged societal positions - those with good education, respected credentials and professional recognition - poorly prepared to acknowledge cases of oppression in the world. According to this interpretation, the tech bros elite would be the victims of their own segregation. Oppression is an omission, almost a historical misunderstanding. Privilege has been built into the air, economic domination is just an unintended coincidence.

But the economic domination of capital is an essential part of the hegemonic technologies and the construction of its elites. [The figures say it and endorse it in this pandemic](#): it is a multi-million Euro industry, the likes of which we have never seen before, because its domination is also based

on hoarding services, making them cheaper and making the labour system more precarious, thus making only a handful of white men brutally rich. Privilege is consciously built on the crushing of bodies that do not matter for its capital.

## Against the solutions

So, how do we get out of this mess? Hegemonic technology has flooded us with solutions: independent external boards that have little-to-no influence and which regulate and select themselves, late codes of ethics, internal commissions for reviewing the prejudices of their platforms and stopping third parties, in a transparent and participative way, from reviewing their algorithmic decisions, among others.

But perhaps the key to getting out of this mess lies exactly in the fact that nobody has the key. Those who say that they have the key are lying, and they know it. Before seeking solutions such as full and erect explanations - typically male, [as Joanna Zylińska would put it](#) - perhaps it would be better to concentrate on the problem, or rather, to paraphrase [Isabelle Stengers](#), to think about the problem together. About why it is a problem and, perhaps more difficult, for whom is it a problem, and whether the questions that we are asking are part of the problem. The key to this mess is that parts of the key are scattered in thousands of places, yet we are only looking in a handful of them.

The problem with hegemonic technologies is that they lie, brazenly. We're told that they are pure automation, but hundreds of thousands of workers are made invisible under the click fever. They tell us that they contribute to democracy, but they are deeply authoritarian. They tell us that they are participatory, but they are just an obscure model of top-down decisions. They tell us that they are disruptive, but they are just a continuation of

existing power structures. Today they tell us that they are ethical. Tomorrow, they will tell us that they are feminist and decolonial. They will describe themselves with all the possible labels to distract us from examining them, making them transparent, holding them accountable, intimidating them and rightly regulating them.

The problem with hegemonic technologies is that they were not built in a wasteland. Here, there was already data on bodies with a history. And this history slips through its algorithmic decisions. Today there will be patches, but these will not withstand the weight of history. That the territories, no matter how barren they seem, always have someone to claim them. Especially when the violence of their colonisation has been sustained. In this conflict, in this claim for digital territory, the true process of digital democratisation will open up.

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# A three ingredients recipe for combating digital colonialism in the city



By Renata Ávila (<A+> Alliance for Inclusive Algorithms)

Visual and noise pollution. Gentrification. An awful lot of traffic and badly designed roads that make it difficult to get from A to B. Insecurity. Police everywhere. Barriers. Padlocks. Exclusive locations only accessible to the few. Bad government or a lack of government. Benefits only for the few. Absence of communal spaces and abandonment of collective projects. An architecture of exclusion. You may think that I'm referring to the city where you live, or where you don't want to live. You may think that I'm describing urban space.

But I'm not. What I am describing here is the Internet, and what it has become over the last twenty years. A space that massive numbers of people connect to without the development of any kind of methodology or ecosystem that would enable them to open up new possibilities. An Internet that has filled up with all sorts of noise and chatter, but that has failed to deliver on the promise of increased knowledge, more dialogue or greater democracy.

A poor, limited, and closely monitored Internet for the poor contrasts with a premium Internet for those who can afford to pay for broadband and access to content services. Content that is more entertaining than educational. Content limited in diversity, homogeneous in terms of language and perspectives, and that creates more uniform societies by eliminating diversity. Very similar to the process of gentrification within a

city. There are parallels between online and offline scenarios involving policing, increased surveillance, and following anyone who steps out of line. Our online mobilisations are as predictable and as vulnerable as our protests in public space.

Perhaps the difference lies in the fact that opportunities do still exist for organisation and mobilisation in local space, whereas they are rapidly being eliminated and suppressed in the closely monitored and highly segmented online space.

Why is it that what has happened in the city can be compared with what has been happening on the Internet over the last two decades? Both are spaces that have undergone profound demographic and architectural change, processes which have generally resulted in a deterioration of the quality of life and sense of community, pollution, and the dominance of a very few monopolies and the suppression of democracy.

And the fact is that the parallel problems of the city and the Internet lead us to a point of convergence: the communal, digital and physical spaces for exercising citizen rights are developing under logics of exclusion, distance, walls, artificial barriers, the limitation of contact between people from different backgrounds, the commodification of encounters, datification for marketing purposes, and the suppression of spaces for co-creation aimed at improving the ecosystem

and people's lives. And it is possible, precisely in this space where problems converge, to find opportunities to apply common solutions to both.

Another kind of digital transformation is possible: the three-step recipe.

Something interesting is happening, something that places all the pieces on this chessboard in the strategic position from where they can now be moved in order to win. The urban space is connecting, its corners and its nooks and crannies are being digitised, and the city and the Internet are becoming hybrids. Interactions and public spaces are becoming ever more closely linked to their online equivalents. The city is now a mix of sensor systems, cables, wires, CCTV cameras and devices that control transport, mobility and service provision. And it is precisely now that we need a citizens' movement to emerge, to demand a digitised city at the service of the people, and a digital space, a citizens' Internet. To grasp these opportunities, at this unique moment in time that inevitably demands our participation, I propose a humble three-step recipe with three starting points, and three priorities in order to enable spaces for renewal and the replacement of existing systems:

## 1. A resounding 'no' to the surveillance city. And a counter proposal.

This requires regaining our right to anonymity in hybrid digital-physical spaces. Regaining the ability to get to know the city and to move around it without being recognised, without constantly updating our location, without CCTV cameras that monitor each and every one of our movements. And defending it as a space where we can assert our rights. If the transformation of our cities is translated into new spaces of surveillance, segregation, monitoring, and the control of every single movement, sound and activity on top of the CCTV cameras, we will lose out in terms

of community life, and the fabric of our community will suffer.

In addition to a moratorium on surveillance systems in cities, the proposal that I venture to put forward would involve the reallocation of the whole of the surveillance and control budget to the creation of creative spaces, spaces in which people can meet, spaces that promote digital creativity precisely in those areas identified as dangerous. And the evaluation of the effects of these creative, welcoming spaces and of technological participation by vulnerable populations as a viable alternative. With effort and funds invested in education instead of surveillance.

## 2. A welcome to the data economy for everyone

My vision of the connected city of the future is focused on people, on their dignity, and on community spaces that include technology. That are technophile rather than technophobe. And of course data has a fundamental role to play in the equation. But not data purely for the sake of data, or demanding power over data to subsequently make no use of that data, but rather a vision of purposeful data that can be used to ensure greater transparency, accountability and responsiveness, and better systems in our city. This is the central focus of "regaining control over our personal data" and gaining access to open public data: the key to activating a community data economy is to equip citizens with the tools, skills, capabilities, software and hardware they need to be able to benefit from it. And that is a role that the connected city can play. A city that nurtures the skills and capacities of communities to equip them with data of public interest.

Much has already been done, through platforms such as [Decidim](#), but efforts are still needed to make them sustainable, provide them with resources, place them within inter-institutional ecosystems

tems and to increase the opportunities they offer for creativity and action to members of all social strata, in physical and digital hybrid spaces.

Achieving this is important not only as a counterbalance to the use of data by the technological monopolies, but also as a guarantee of digital and data autonomy that resides with people, rather than in isolated projects.

### 3. Reclaiming a free digital culture

The global COVID-19 pandemic has once again underlined both the importance of green space for our physical health, and that of cultural space for our mental and social well-being. With museums and cultural institutions actively bringing citizens together via free events, a space has been opened up for a digital layer that includes those who cannot attend events or visit cultural spaces, recalling the early days of the Internet when there was a commitment to a free and inclusive digital culture.

In view of corporate capture, intense pollution through advertising and monitoring, and the concentration of the production and distribution of online content in the hands of the few, the city could provide an alternative by supporting the production and distribution of free licensed digital content. An alternative that could rescue both culture and space at the same time. By combining it with today's digital distribution opportunities, rather than an Internet of connected things, we would have an Internet of connected urban cultural points and the sharing of P2P content. Exploring the opportunities for distribution via community citizen networks. Reinventing concerts and the theatre as hybrids to which many more people can have access. A cultural space free from the padlocks that protect spaces that can solely be accessed via payment, and that only offer humdrum content. A space that invites remixing and an exchange of content with

other cities, that rescues its own sound and film archives, that reinvents culture by rediscovering and distributing its own. A space for exchange with other sister cities that makes it possible to discover 'the other' far away from the culture of consumption, appearances, and entertainment. A space for building a new shared digital culture.

The combination of these ingredients can lead us towards a formula for a possible urban digital future, one where creativity is centre stage, where the power of technological empires can be diluted, allowing us to be creative without being dependent on them, where there can be a renewal of generativity, freedom and the recovery of our power to create new social and cultural architectures, dissolving barriers, bringing cultures together, shaping new communities and opening up new possibilities.

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## Situated technologies and digital self-management

By *Eurídice Cabañes* (ArsGames)



### 0.- Introduction:

The emergence of the coronavirus pandemic has done nothing but trigger privatisation tendencies and promote data extractivism and algorithmic governance. The public spaces we used to inhabit have been almost completely replaced by private spaces. What's worse, the digital infrastructures necessary for public management are increasingly provided by private companies, leading to a covert privatisation of education, health, surveillance, etc. Only large companies have the resources to store the vast amounts of data that we produce, and the algorithms that are sophisticated enough to manage it. But can we continue talking about public education when the new digital space in which this education occurs belongs to Google? Can an algorithm protected by an intellectual property, which we don't know how it works, decide who is arrested or not for a crime? Can we be digital citizens in environments where, just by entering, we become products? Do we have to adapt to global homogenising technologies instead of generating technologies that adapt to our needs? Can the future ultimately be guided by a commercial interest?

We will address the urgency of a digital autonomy that includes open-access data and software, but also the entire network infrastructure; the urgency to fight for the right to inhabit a

digital space that is not governed by commercial interests, but by the common good; and the importance of generating situated technologies and - why not? - the proposal for game-based governance.

### 1. Problems of digital dependence

#### 1.1.- Emergency:

While our social relationships, work, leisure and virtually all facets of our lives increasingly take place in digital environments, the emergence of the global pandemic has significantly accelerated this trend. The emergency has forced us to resort to teleworking or remote learning, involving a massive deployment of proprietary software by the general population as well as companies and institutions of a public and private nature.

While we used to build citizenship in the public space, by swapping streets and squares for social networks, the possibilities of inhabiting the world have become restricted to private spaces, both the home and the digital spaces in which we operate. This emergency, more than ever, has exposed the lack of public digital infrastructure and the dependence on large technological giants in what could be considered a covert privatisation of public services, in which gover-

nments are increasingly handing over telecommunications infrastructure contracts to private, often transnational, companies.

### 1.2.- The covert privatisation of public resources

Let us think about one of the clearest examples of such privatisation: education. In order to guarantee the right to a high-quality public education, the state guarantees the entire infrastructure: the building in which the teaching is delivered, the heating, the electricity, the internet, the teachers, etc. When this education has become digital, in the vast majority of cases the public infrastructure for this education has not been guaranteed: no space, no heating, no electrical connection, no internet and no devices to connect to, widening the gap between those who privately have everything they need and those who do not, with the latter being excluded from the universal right to education.

But the privatisation doesn't end there, even in cases where there has been full access under ideal conditions, where families privately provided everything mentioned above. In the vast majority of cases, Google Classroom, Zoom and other proprietary tools have made up for the lack of public infrastructure, determining the conditions of access, transit and interaction with the space without us being fully aware of the conditions or having access to the code or the algorithms that govern them.

What we know is that these kinds of proprietary systems do not respond to the interests of the students. Rather, they respond to the interests of the large companies which profit from data extractivism, with these companies monitoring children's information and measuring their progress, comparing it with that of other students and predicting their future learning (Selwyn, 2015). Minors, who can't even have their own social media account because they aren't old enough to con-

sent to the transfer of their data, are unknowingly giving away thousands of pieces of information to large corporations that will undoubtedly restrict their future possibilities, with the approval of the education community and their families.

As X-net denounces in the article entitled *Don't sign the authorisation to use Google Suite in schools*, "if the students' data reach the market of information traffic for commercial use, the violation of minors' privacy can radically affect their future, exposing them to lifelong eating disorders, academic failures, sociability problems, bullying, etc. [...] data coveted by insurers, recruitment companies and marketing and communication companies, who could use the data in all sorts of contexts (health or car insurance contracts, recruitment processes, entry exams, advertising or marketing campaigns, etc.) without even the children knowing that their personal life has been exposed from a very early age when they were still unaware of their life options and when their personality was still being formed" (X-net, 2019)

Google is currently being sued for collecting information from more than 80 million teachers and students in New Mexico, and using said information for its own business purposes. (Singer and Wakabayashi, 2020)

This is just a small example, but the covert privatisation of public services reaches practically all areas. Surveillance cameras in public spaces detect and identify citizens using private facial recognition algorithms. Algorithms to which we do not have access (neither citizens nor the governments that hire the service), which are capable of determining who is arrested and who is not. State-owned information is also stored on Amazon servers, with the current president of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, saying the following about Amazon's 2.5 billion Euro investment in the construction of data centres in Aragón: "Cloud-based computing,

besides promoting technological progress in the private sector, will allow the public administration to improve the services that it provides to citizens". In other words, the data of citizens from different public areas are in the hands of private transnational companies (Jiménez, 2019).

The more information we give away, the more we are feeding the monster of algorithmic governance, whereby the algorithms that govern us are modifying our thoughts, behaviours, rights and freedoms, while deciding how cities and the lives of their inhabitants are managed. Let us not forget that algorithms are not neutral. Rather, they are proven to be sexist, racist and classist (Sandvig et al., 2016 and Hamilton, 2019) and are governed by commercial interests, making them easily bribable.

## 2. Proposals of digital autonomy

### 2.1.- Situated technologies

It is curious, to say the least, that given so many different contexts and needs around the globe, the digital technologies that we use are global. They are homogeneous and homogenising technologies, which do not respond to the interests and needs of the people who use them, but to those of the companies that own them, for whom the product is us and our information. Therefore, they will not hesitate to introduce elements in the design that allow them to extract more information about us (unlocking your phone with your face or fingerprint, constant notifications to be constantly connected and other dark patterns to encourage addiction) and that have little to do with usability issues.

This means that the world's population is adapting to technology that is controlled by the interests of large internet corporations.

It is in this sense that I propose the term "situated technologies" which is based on the concept of "situated knowledge" by Dona Haraway (2004) and refers to technologies that are generated from local needs and contexts.

For this to happen, we need data to be decentralised, anonymous and for the people who generate it; open-access software programmes in which the code can be accessed and modified to adapt them to the specific needs of each community; and high-quality public infrastructures that include servers, internet connection and a large computing capacity, which simply cannot remain in private hands. Without these, the struggle for technological self-management will not be possible.

### 2.2.- In contrast to algorithmic governance, game-based governance<sup>1</sup>

*Let us imagine a future in which cities are modelled, tested, designed and re-modelled through interactive and collaborative games [...] The games can be used to facilitate complex urban development processes at all scales (such as high-quality public space, urban safety, sustainability, etc.), where both stakeholders and other participants can better understand the processes. (Gerber and Götz, 2020)*

Algorithmic governance processes are opaque, hierarchical and asymmetric. Or, in the words of Keenan (2017), they have reached a "privacy singularity" whereby companies know much more about us than we do about their algorithms that govern us and determine our future, in many cases stigmatising entire communities or neighbourhoods<sup>2</sup>.

We propose transforming this into a process of game-based governance, by which it is the citi-

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed study of this concept please see Cabañes (2021)

<sup>2</sup> For an example, please see Sandvig et al. (2016) or Hamilton (2019).

zens who make collective decisions on their data and how to manage it as well as on their algorithms, interacting in a playful way with both in order to make consensual decisions. This would be possible through open-access software video games that work with open data and human computing in public infrastructure that supports the entire system.

Experimenting with video games that work with real data will allow us to test measures prior to applying them, encourage citizen participation in political management in an informed and conscious way, resolve conflicts and reach solutions that are compatible between different points of view. According to Tan (2014), "urban design, policy and action plans generated collaboratively through games will increase social coherence and local agency, as well as reduce costs and time in urban development processes".

In short, game-based governance would mean placing technologies at the service of citizens, and not the other way around.

While this idea hasn't yet been 100% implemented, we can find pilot experiences in places as diverse as Boston, Bangalore, Cape Town, Istanbul, Nairobi, Moscow, Shenzhen and Sydney, working on specific issues such as climate change, migration flows, management of public spaces and the circular economy, among others. As stated in the Games for Cities<sup>3</sup> platform that collects information on these experiences, these types of practices "are already giving way to a practice of creating cities that is deeply rooted in the collective experience, creativity and intelligence of increasingly diverse groups of people. This will be crucial for building sustainable urban futures".

<sup>3</sup> <http://gamesforcities.com/>

### 3.- Conclusions

If our future is increasingly defined by what happens in the digital environment, and this depends on the commercial interests of the main technology companies that have the infrastructures and sufficient power to process the large amounts they extract from the public, the future is far from being defined by giving priority to the common good. We need to reverse this process, using technologies to increase social inclusion and direct democracy in decision-making.

For this we need digital public spaces (public in all the necessary infrastructure), in which we have power over how they work as well as over the data we generate.

It is in our hands to fight for the right to make a collective decision on our future, including open data and the appropriation of these technologies that instead of being governed by commercial interests, become governed by common interests.

Eurídice Cabañes  
(ArsGames)

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# We, our (data) bodies: reproductive justice as a framework for digital sovereignty



By Alejandra López Gabrielidis & Toni Navarro

*Bodies navigating digital space are as much computational as they are flesh*

Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism*

## Data as a second body

If we understand the body as the axis around which a person structures their experience and their emotional life, we see that today this function as the "central pivot structuring our experience" is, to a great extent, fulfilled by objects and by digital data. It is through these that we interact with the world and with others, as digital spaces and environments have a powerful, almost overwhelming impact, pervading every aspect of our daily lives. When we ask ourselves how we got here, we see that the processes of digitisation have not been homogeneous but have varied and evolved over time. In fact, we could identify two specific junctures in terms of the worldwide processes of digital conversion, based on the evolution of the object converted, and the type of digital memory used. To differentiate between them, they can be referred to as *digitalisation* and *datification*.

Digitisation took place during the first stage of the generalisation and global expansion of these technologies which started in the 90s and continued until the start of the new millennium. During this stage, cultural goods, that is the so-

cial body, were the principal objects of digital conversion. The storage methods involved in digitisation were primarily the internal memories of user devices and the external memories attached to them, or in the case of online services each company's private servers.

During the datification stage, we are producing massive amounts of data, so much in fact that we have reached a paradoxical extreme: we are now capable of producing more data than we are capable of storing. But beyond this exponential growth, with the arrival of social networks, personal computers, smartphones, and quantified self practices, the object of digital conversion has become the individual body. Our bodies and their movements, gestures, relationships, and exchanges with other bodies, are constantly being abstracted and quantified by our devices. The characteristic method of storage in this new stage is the cloud, which has resulted in centralisation, privatisation and verticalisation in the digital world. In the cloud model, our devices act almost as a simple interface, as they externalise data storage and computing power to vast remote infrastructures belonging to the handful of companies that make up the technological oligopoly.

Under these circumstances, it is important to note that datification not only implies that more information about us exists, but also that

we ourselves are intertwined with the data, both psychologically and socially. In order to deal with the problems that datification entails, it may be useful to start describing and perceiving this technical unfolding as a change and as a broadening of the spectrum of our bodily reality. In this sense, we could say that today, our bodily reality comprises and articulates both somatic and digital elements: we not only interact with the world through a flesh and blood body, but also through a body of data that is effectively becoming ever larger and more relevant to our day to day experience.

And despite being something extremely familiar and intimate that constitutes, modifies, and shapes our psychological and social reality, we are dispossessed of this body, because it exists in privatised spaces, in those vast technical infrastructures that we call "the cloud".

## Reproductive capacity of the body of data

This dispossession is nothing new for all those who have historically been deprived of agency over their own bodies, such as women. For this reason it has been one of the main focuses of feminist struggle, especially since the Women's Health Movement of the 1970s, which was characterised by an attempt to "restore the bodily autonomy of people who felt disaffected with the medical establishment, and were excluded from the decision-making process with regard to their own health care".<sup>1</sup> The women in the movement attempted to become literate in, and to experiment with, medical technology, in order to redesign or re-purpose the tools that had been used to manage their health from a paternalistic

perspective, and which excluded them as active subjects. Their aim was to contribute to women's reproductive sovereignty by making users active agents in their own health care.

## What does such activism have to contribute to debates on digital sovereignty?

There are certain parallels between the situation as it was then, and as it is now: just as in the 1970s the relationship between those who were in charge of providing health care and those who were receiving it was a profoundly unequal one, marked by exclusion from decision-making, the same imbalance exists today between those who are in charge of providing technical solutions, and the people these solutions are aimed at. However, beyond this, our objective is to take the idea of the *body of data* a step further, asking ourselves whether it has reproductive capacity. In a sense it does, given that it allows the generation and birth of Artificial Intelligence.

Broadly speaking, Artificial Intelligence can be understood as "the ability of a system to correctly interpret external data, to learn from that data and to use the knowledge gained to achieve specific tasks and goals through flexible adaptation."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, in its development a qualitative dimension linked to programming and algorithm design is related to a quantitative dimension connected to the data set with which it is trained. These two dimensions interact with each other in the sense that the more data available to an artificial intelligence for training purposes, the more precise its generalisations will be, and the more complex and sophisticated the patterns it can identify.

<sup>1</sup> Helen Hester, *Xenofeminism. Gender technologies and the politics of reproduction* (Polity press, 2018)

<sup>2</sup> Andreas Kaplan; Michael Haenlein (2019) "Siri, Siri in my Hand, who's the Fairest in the Land? On the Interpretations, Illustrations and Implications of Artificial Intelligence", *Business Horizons*, 62(1), p. 15-25.



The extraction of patterns in the machine learning model does not occur from the top down as a set of rules for data handling, but from the bottom up: "learning algorithms... are algorithms that make other algorithms... computers [that] write their own programmes... [this is] the opposite of programming."<sup>3</sup> In this process by which algorithms give rise to new algorithms, data is fundamental. It is in this sense that we conceive our body of data as having a certain reproductive capacity.

To say this is not to ignore the fact that the materiality of data is different from that of biological bodies, nor the fact that, historically, the struggle for reproductive justice has had a racial dimension. Our intention is clearly not to disregard the suffering of those populations who have been subjected to forced sterilisation, or to equate this with the usurpation of the reproductive capacity of our data bodies. Through this metaphor we simply aim to offer an image that may be useful when thinking of them as an extended corporeality, one that is directly related to the development of Artificial Intelligence, as there is a difference between claiming rights or sovereignty over something that is derived from us (as the idea of personal data suggests) and something that constitutes us (as suggested by the idea of a body of data).

Bridging the gap, we find a wide range of useful metaphors intrinsic to the feminist struggle that can usefully be transferred to the digital world. Thinking along these lines we also find the idea of "digital consent" promoted by initiatives such as the Feminist Data Manifest-No<sup>4</sup> for example, understood not as a simple click but as an action that should be free, reversible, informed, enthusiastic and specific.

<sup>3</sup> Domingos, Pedro (2015). *The Master Algorithm: How the Quest for the Ultimate Learning Machine Will Remake Our World*, Nueva York: Basic Books, p. 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Cifor, M., Garcia, P., Cowan, T.L., Rault, J., Sutherland, T., Chan, A., Rode, J., Hoffmann, A.L., Salehi, N., Nakamura, L. (2019). *Feminist Data Manifest-No*. Available at: <https://www.manifestno.com/>.

## Reproductive justice for the data body

But what do we mean when we talk about reproductive justice? According to Loretta Ross,

*reproductive justice is a positive strategy that links sexuality, health, and human rights with social justice movements by placing abortion and reproductive health issues within the broader context of the well-being and health of women, families, and communities. Reproductive justice argues that the ability of any woman to determine her own reproductive destiny is directly linked to the conditions in her community, and that these conditions are not simply a matter of individual choice and access.*<sup>5</sup>

Thus, this approach is not only about ensuring access to abortion, or denouncing abuses by the medical establishment, it also involves ensuring that the social, economic and political conditions are in place to guarantee that real choice does exist. As Helen Hester states, the intersectional understanding of reproductive justice "has as much to do with the support needed to bear and raise children in conditions of safety and freedom as it does with the decision to prevent unwanted births."<sup>6</sup>

With this in mind, demanding reproductive justice for our data bodies would not only mean aborting unwanted AIs or denouncing the abuses of large technology corporations, but also safeguarding the means for them to develop in accordance with our collective interests or needs. If the slogan of the Women's Health Mo-

<sup>5</sup> Ross, L. (2006). *What is reproductive justice?* SisterSong Reproductive Justice Collective. Available at: <https://www.trustblackwomen.org/our-work/what-is-reproductive-justice/9-what-is-reproductive-justice>

<sup>6</sup> Helen Hester, *Xenofeminism* (op. cit.)

vement was "Our Bodies, Our Selves", the slogan of a progressive data culture should be "Our Data, Our Purposes".

When we talk about AI, a completely idealised and ambitious imaginary is often activated with reference to a moment of great revelation or technological singularity, but the truth is that AI is something much more prosaic, and something that is already a part of our daily lives. The uses of AI today impact on different aspects of our reality, ranging from the personal or domestic use of digital assistants such as Siri, Alexa or Cortana, online translators, customer services provided by chatbots, and the recommendation algorithms used by the technology giants to offer personalised advertising services, to the uses that smart cities make of it - for example the intelligent traffic lights programmed by machine learning which improve service by capturing traffic data, or the case of ambulances in China that are connected to an AI platform that finds the fastest routes with the fewest obstacles.

AI, in this sense, is a new agent that adds to the psychological and social fabric, and it is interesting to note that many of its applications are in some way linked to social reproduction, that is, to tasks that produce and reproduce the ways in which we relate to each other in society. In fact, one of the most controversial aspects of AI is linked to the danger that algorithmic norms may reproduce and automatise racist and discriminatory attitudes.

In this sense, there are two aspects to the reproductive capacity of our data which are different sides of the same coin: on the one hand it has the potential to train algorithms and give rise to new, more "intelligent" algorithms, while on the other and as a consequence of this, there are also the social reproduction functions that are frequently performed by the applications of these intelligent algorithms, or artificial intelligences.

Although the problems of privacy in the digital age are undoubtedly important, the autonomy of our data bodies not only aims to preserve our privacy, but also to generate more democratic tools that are capable of channelling their potential in order to influence social proxemics and morphogenesis.

The reproductive justice of our data bodies as a framework for tackling the challenges of digital sovereignty signals the need to imagine and construct conditions and guarantees of autonomy that will allow us to decide on our socio-technical present and future in a more horizontal way. These notions represent an exercise in techno-political poetics that seeks to evoke images or figures that are strong enough to expand in our imaginary with ease, triggering collective involvement, will and action and directing it towards techno-material empowerment projects.

Alejandra López Gabrielidis & Toni Navarro

# Feminist infrastructure: technological sovereignty against online violence against women

By Inés Binder & Martu



Every time a feminist collective decides to set up its server or migrate from commercial services to self-managed projects, it is taking another step in the construction of a feminist internet. Whether intuitively or as a political exercise, it is a radical change in our relationship with information and communication technologies.

We believe that building a feminist infrastructure is part of a comprehensive strategy against online violence against women, manifesting itself not only in male chauvinist and misogynist attacks but in violence that involves inhabiting environments that have not been conceived, designed or managed by and for us.

## Violence against women in digital territories

The naivety of the idea that digital territories would bring the opportunity to construct new, more egalitarian relationships was quickly demonstrated (Vergés, 2013). For more than a decade, and since the advent of mass mobile phone use, women and gender dissidents - especially feminist activists - have faced large amounts of violence in the digital environment, a reflection of the structural violence they face on a daily basis.

Today we are facing four major phenomena of violence: the organised ultra-right, violence against women amplified by technologies, the criminalisation of protest and inhabiting an internet that was not made by or for us. To make it clear: violence against women kills. And information and communication technologies amplify that violence (Donoso and Prado, 2014; Luchadoras, 2017; Ging and Siapera, 2018; Vergés and Binder, 2020). They are used to monitor, threaten, extort, intimidate, install hate speech, control, disseminate intimate images without consent and to intercept personal correspondence, among other things.

The advance of the organised ultra-right in digital networks is an unavoidable fact, and feminists are one of its main targets (Marwik and Caplan, 2018; Proyecto Una, 2019; Wikiantiderechos, 2020). We are not only talking about fascist and neo-Nazi groups, but also about an ultra-conservative offensive by ultra-religious groups, white supremacists, pro-life organisations and, no less dangerous, the huge mob of 'incels', that sub-culture that spews out its emotional defects with extraordinary violence. These sectors poison the private social networks, persecute us, attack us and denounce our contents in a systematic and organised way.

This is taking place in a context, moreover, of flagrant criminalisation of protest (Megarry, 2018;

Cerva Cerna, 2020). Feminist activists, defenders of land and human rights in general, are monitored on a massive scale by states and companies. We are the target of smear campaigns, defamation and insults that not only delegitimise our work of organising and expanding rights that we promote every day, but we also face gruelling legal proceedings that seek to demobilise us.

A fourth phenomenon amplifies this violence; namely, that we inhabit an internet that is not made by or for us. Platforms that are plagued by gender and race biases, predominantly in English, concentrated in terms of ownership, infrastructure and code in the global North. This internet is designed by white men from the central countries. It is a capitalist, patriarchal, extractive and polluting Internet that does not reflect the values and principles of the feminist society in which we want to live (Reagan Shade, 1998; Cruells *et al*, 2017; Ávila Pinto, 2018; Vergés, 2019, Vedetas, 2020).

## Feminist strategies to tackle online violence against women

In the face of this violence, feminists have developed different strategies, some intuitively, and others with a high degree of organisation. But all of them are aimed at tackling violence, making it visible and building safe spaces in which we can live in peace. First and foremost are self-defence and mutual support (Goldsmann, 2019). Institutional responses to violence against women are often slow and insufficient. Support networks, friends, helplines, physical and digital self-defence and self-care form the basis of the response to violence.

Making violence visible is another strategy (Verges and Binder, 2020). It is a case of placing an is-

sue on the public agenda that affects more than half of the world's population and which is not given sufficient coverage. This includes campaigns, public reports, research and production of feminist knowledge, the development of media and feminist journalism and the production of indicators and observatories.

Another major strategy is political advocacy, at all levels, which pushes states, companies and international bodies to recognise violence and to take action to deal with it. Progress has been made in terms of human rights, internet governance and data protection. Our presence in Internet decision-making structures must be guaranteed.

The last one, and perhaps the one that interests us most in this space, is the construction of a feminist infrastructure that allows us to build safe online spaces that respond to our principles. We want to close the digital gender gap, have spaces for self-learning and experimentation (Toupin, 2014), inhabit distributed feminist social networks and live free digital lives.

## Digital infrastructure for feminist technological sovereignty

The construction of a feminist internet arises from the desire of women, lesbians, non-binary and trans people to inhabit an internet in which we feel safe. While it still isn't entirely clear what technological sovereignty implies (Hache, 2014; Hache, 2018; Couture and Toupin, 2019), when we talk about infrastructure, even in this area in which we reflect on digital infrastructure, we can outline certain definitions. On one hand we refer to the servers, the code and the content that make it possible to connect with each other and have spaces online. But we also refer to the knowledge, the relationships, the energy, the

time and the care that make it possible to set up and maintain said infrastructure. We can't have an online server if we don't have colleagues who can spend their time maintaining it. We cannot have an online server without the knowledge of our peers that allows us to share knowledge and learn horizontally. And we are not just talking about technical knowledge, which has historically been denied to us, but also about the emotional management needed to maintain it: how to ensure that the responsibility and stress involved in managing the body of movement does not have a negative impact on our lives.

Feminists have succeeded in politicising all spheres of life, understanding that there is no area that can escape feminist criticism and action: the economy, institutional politics, work, life trajectories, affectionate relationships, upbringing, care, health and our relationship with the environment. We also want to transfer this criticism to this model of capitalist, extractive, polluting technological development that is founded on colonial exploitation. We don't only want to criticise it. We also want to experiment in building alternative feminist infrastructure models with the hope that, one day, they will become hegemonic. So, what does building a feminist infrastructure entail?

On the one hand, we feel it must value self-management. It should be made clear that self-management is in no way equivalent to precariousness, which we already know a great deal about. Just as we are aware of our consumption in the food and textile fields, we should be equally alert in the technological field. We should commit to collectives, cooperatives and projects that are working very hard to provide technological services that are free from hetero-patriarchal logics.

It also means that the networks we deploy should be decentralised and distributed, eliminating by design the possibility of power being concentra-

ted in a handful of nodes. We must have control over our data, know what data and metadata our activity generates and demand that it is stored on our devices, not on faraway machines that we know nothing about. The only way to guarantee this is for all the code to be free and open. Free, not in the libertarian sense of freedom, but as a strategy against the privatisation and compartmentalisation of knowledge.

We can't lose sight of the ecological aspect, either. We must fight against the plundering of territories in the global South and the violation of the rights of those who extract metals and minerals for the manufacture of electronic devices. We want to escape from the logic of infinite consumption and its programmed obsolescence strategies. We also want to consume less energy, which is a scarce commodity. Do we need to have everything available, anywhere, 24 hours a day? Must we watch all videos in 4K? Do absolutely all websites require thousands of database connections?

Above all, we want an internet that recognises feminist genealogy and which preserves our memory. We cannot allow all the power of feminist action and reflection to be stored away in the territory of the patriarchy. Millionaire men who hold an interest in us while we work as slaves, producing information that feeds their data-hungry machines. Our memory, in our infrastructure. A feminist infrastructure that recognises all the contributions of women, lesbians, trans and non-binary people in its development.

We recognise, therefore, that the latest technology is not necessarily the best. The feminist infrastructure is comprised of new and old technologies: handwritten algorithms and notebooks, P2P connections and Hertz radios, embroidery and complex data visualisations. A set of high and low technology, which recovers ancestral knowledge and combines it with the latest deve-

lopments, as long as this make sense to us and our practices.

We need to develop our own feminist infrastructure as a strategy against violence that involves inhabiting digital territories designed for a universal human being who looks little like us, and much like those who exercise violence against us. We need to develop our feminist infrastructure because we do not want it to respond to the logics of capital. Rather, it must respond to the logics of the collective construction of knowledge and mutual care. We need to develop our infrastructure because what we want, simply, is to live in peace.

*Inés Binder & Martu*

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## An outlaw technology to create information freedom in science

By Alexandra Elbakyan (Sci-Hub)



Democracy is strongly intertwined to the idea of information freedom and information access rights. Today however most people who live in democratic countries are denied their right to access information in science. Academic journals have a price tag high enough to effectively prohibit their free circulation in society, or in other words, put them under censorship. An unique technology from Kazakhstan, developed in 2011, has put academic censorship to an end by opening free access to tens of millions academic journals. That is a website Sci-Hub that has 500,000 unique readers every day. Most people all over the world support Sci-Hub, but the website is outlawed in every country. How and why that happened?

Democracy is strongly intertwined with information freedom. The ancient version of democracy existed in Athens in 6th century BC. All citizens discussed issues of the state in a big assembly, and made collective decisions. Hence, freedom of speech was essential for democracy, and it was even more like a citizen duty, not a right in the modern sense. That was a freedom of information in the form of speech freedom.

Then medieval ages came, and democracy disappeared for about 20,000 years. Medieval ages end by the 15th -16th century with the invention of the printing press. Books, journals and newspapers started to be printed in high counts. People fought for freedom of printing, or press freedom, so that newspapers can publish criticism of governments without censorship. That was the atmosphere in which our modern version of democracy emerged, with press or media freedom

as its main attribute. That is what leaders of the past proclaimed:

*A free press is one of the pillars of democracy.*

Nelson Mandela

*Freedom of the press is a precious privilege that no country can forego.*

Mahatma Gandhi

*Our freedom depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost.*

Thomas Jefferson, pare fundador dels EUA

In the XX century information technologies developed rapidly, radio, TV and computer and Internet were invented. Freedom of speech and press freedom were fused into a more general concept of information freedom. In 1966 in the

USA the law about 'Freedom of Information' was introduced, forcing the government to disclose information: for example, publish secret documents in open access. Hence citizens can participate in governing.

That «right to information» was discussed a lot in the 2000s by governments and even in the United Nations. In 2010 the UN published a wonderful report named: «Freedom of Information: the right to know " with an analysis of information freedom in different countries of the world. In fact that report says nothing about the right to know at all, and I'm going to explain why.

Since the 2000s it has become very common to publish reports ranking countries of the world according to their democracy level, so there are free democratic countries and authoritarian countries where freedom of citizens and press are limited. I was born and grew up in Kazakhstan, and according to the report called «Freedom of the Press 2017», Kazakhstan is an authoritarian country without press freedom, or with censorship.

What is censorship today? That is restricted access to the Internet and websites, because all media are operating online. In 2008-2011 in Kazakhstan access to LiveJournal website was blocked. It was a very popular platform where any person could publish any articles. According to the government, LiveJournal was used by terrorists, so it was blocked.

By that time though, technologies were available already to bypass any government block. Today the main technology used is VPN. Back then it was much more convenient to use special websites called «anonymizers». They worked that way: first you take the link of the LiveJournal article that you want to read, then you go to such a website and paste the link, press the button and the article opens. I used the 'anonymouse.org' website.

At the same time, in 2008-2009 I was a student and learned about a new technology called «brain-computer interfaces» that can directly connect your brain to the computer, making it possible to control mouse buttons or type some text by thinking about it. I wanted to dedicate my university final year project to that.

I started to work on my diploma and discovered that all the information I needed was published in academic journals. But they were paid-access: to read any article in that journal you had to pay around 30 dollars – otherwise the access to it was blocked by paywall. I had to read about 100 papers, and that was a huge amount of money for me back then.

So I made it another way: I searched the Internet and finally found a way to steal these articles, to get access to this information for free. That could be done using the university proxies, and passwords for them were available on hacker forums. Then I came up with an idea to create an application to automatically steal these articles. It could be designed as some kind of P2P decentralized network. Back then, eMule was popular – a decentralized network similar to torrents. I used an eMule client to download a lot of science documentary movies for free.

Something similar could be done for research papers. For example, people install the application, and then go to the university where they work or study. University is subscribed to some journals so, while people are at the university, the program has free access to journals. Other people are outside academia or their university does not have subscription to that journal. They launch the application, and it sends requests to its network, requesting other applications installed on other computers. Then the article is downloaded for free by some computer located at the university. I started discussing the idea at these hacker forums, but it did not cause a lot of interest.

In 2011 I was a web programmer and a member of various online forums where scientists came together. Today all communications are done on social networks. Back then another technology, forums, was popular. In social networks billions of users are managed by a single company. Forums are more democratic and decentralized: every forum is running on a separate server.

I was a member of a molecular biology forum, but the most popular topic was not biology but: how to get access to information in these research journals? It was the same problem that I encountered while working on my diploma. People attempted to read some science articles, but articles were paywalled with high prices – the access to information was blocked. Hence people posted many requests on science forums asking for help, for somebody to send them these articles. Forums were flooded with 'Help!' requests, so the problem with access to academic information was very hot.

I said before that in Kazakhstan LiveJournal website was blocked, to get around this block I had to go to a special website, enter the article URL there, press the button and the article would open. I thought the same must be done for academic journals too. It took about three days to code and start this project. I started the website on the 5th of September 2011 and posted an advertisement on the molecular biology forum saying that now there is a «service to access research literature» that can download science journals automatically. People were dancing from happiness, thanked and praised me. Nobody said that is theft or law breaking.

The service immediately gained a huge popularity in Russian science community, and in other countries: India, China, Iran and others. There was a huge flood of users from these locations. Users from Iran said that their country is under sanctions, so they cannot even buy subscriptions to these journals legally.

Sci-Hub started in 2011, but the problem of blocked access to research journals was discussed much earlier, since the 1990s. The first person who voiced the issue was a physicist Paul Ginsparg. In his interview to the Time magazine he said that academic publishers run a dishonest business, they collect huge profits and limit access to information and he would be happy to see this system collapse.

In the early 2000s the issue sparked a very active discussion among scientists. A journal named PLoS emerged, created by biologist Michael Eisen, Nobel Prize Harold Varmus, and Patrick Brown, the biochemist. Michael Eisen published an open letter calling scientists to reject publishers that use the paywall model. The letter got ~ 34,000 signatories from 180 countries. A movement for Open Science was born.

There were many boycotts and other events against the system, one boycott was organized by well-known mathematician Timothy Gowers in 2012 against science publisher Elsevier. Timothy Gowers' letter collected ~17,000 signatures.

So the problem was discussed since the 1990s, but the access remained restricted. Corporations were more powerful than the research community. And then in 2011 Sci-Hub emerged to solve this problem technologically. Sci-Hub is a technology to unblock information access. Today about half a million users are coming to Sci-Hub every day, and the Sci-Hub database counts with 85 million research articles.

However, according to current law, science journals are the «intellectual property» of publishers. Hence what Sci-Hub is doing is almost equated to theft – it is called 'piracy' – and these laws work in all countries of the world. The access to scientific knowledge is illegal in all countries of the world today.

Sci-Hub is constantly sued, the first lawsuit came from Elsevier and other publishers in the year 2015. As a result, a US court fined Sci-Hub for 15 million dollars and Sci-Hub was legally prohibited in the US. That happened regardless of the public opinion that was totally on the side of Sci-Hub and supported free access to science information. But the project was declared to be illegal. In France, Italy, Sweden and Russia access to the Sci-Hub website is blocked at the ISP level, and people must use VPN technology or search for alternative addresses to unblock it.

Let's return to the UN document we discussed in the beginning: «Right to Know: Freedom of Information». In this report, nothing is told about the problem to access science information. The report only mentions press freedoms, but such an important issue as access to science journals is totally missed here. Why? Restricting access to science journals is a clear form of censorship.

However, that censorship is enacted not directly by the government, but through some capitalist machinery – and that can be the reason why this issue stays in some blind spot and not being recognized as it is: restriction of information freedoms and censorship.

*Alexandra Elbakyan*  
(Sci-Hub)

## Strategies and alliances for halting the spread of fear and hatred on social media

*By Marta G. Franco (Red Levadura)*



Anyone who has used social media in recent months will have noticed that they are increasingly uninhabitable places. In fact, they'll have been noticing this for several years. There have always been trolls, but if we were to mark a turning point in their ability to sabotage public debate, this would be Donald Trump's presidential campaign in 2016. In the series of events that have turned the Internet into a toxic environment, we have to mention the harassment crusades that have taken place on the 4chan forums, and on Forocoches in Spain. More dramatically, we must also include the way in which the new leaders and parties of the alt-right (very similar to the classic 'far right') have relied on these tactics and have encouraged fake news and online bullying<sup>1</sup>. If we adorn the cocktail with personal data mining and the conspiracies and fears that can be unleashed by a pandemic, the picture becomes particularly worrying. And if this happens while the virus is forcing us to stay at home, and the space of public debate moves to social networks, it is clear that this is a problem that will require intervention.

<sup>1</sup> To understand in which corners of the internet so much hatred is spread and fuelled, we recommend reading the essay Leïa, Rihanna & Trump. De cómo el feminismo ha transformado la cultura pop y de cómo el machismo reacciona con terror [Leïa, Rihanna and Trump. How feminism has transformed pop culture and how 'machismo' reacts with terror], by Proyecto Una (Descontrol, Barcelona, 2019). For evidence on how the spread of hatred is secured through organised strategies that are repeated around the world, we recommend the studies of Julián Macías and his project Pandemia Digital (<https://www.pandemiadigital.net/>).

For this reason, in April 2020, a group of people launched the Levadura Network, presenting it as an open space "against hate, fear and the tactics that try to divide us", with the aim of "flooding social media with real stories, those of mutual support, care and collective solutions to emerge stronger from the crisis". Those of us who started the Network are a small group of digital researchers, designers and communicators who work with NGOs, social and academic entities or in activist spaces. Through a series of tweets, emails and an online form, we brought together 400 people from these and other areas. Our name explains what we are: an alliance of diverse profiles who seek to bring together projects and ideas, knead them (with "levadura" meaning "yeast", in English) and make them grow.

With these 400 people, we opened a series of Telegram groups, video meetings and cloud documents (and also a few WhatsApp groups and mailing lists, although we haven't made as much use of these channels). Through this collaborative environment, we have shared our analyses on how hate speech can be spread on social media, as well as insights and certainties about what kind of messages can be used to address it. The network has helped us to share our views on the climate on social media as the pandemic progressed – from the desire to applaud healthcare workers and finding ourselves in a state of despair, boredom and anger – and to design common

strategies and messages. All in heterogeneous groups, with the challenge of combining different degrees of involvement and experiences.

The most tangible products are multiple actions and communication campaigns. The first ones were loaded with that collective feeling that is summed up by the phrase "We'll stop this virus together"; included slogans along the lines of [#PeopleLikeYou](#) and [#TheStrengthOfATeam](#); and sought to demand mutual support and care in order to weave complicities and gratitude. We even managed to slip this narrative into the printed edition of Spain's most widely-read newspaper with the help of a famous figure. We searched for empathy and resilience through WhatsApp chain messages and Facebook groups. In June, we wanted to intervene in a very specific context, LGBTI+ Pride. We invented the celebration of [Hetero Pride](#) as a call for cisgender and "allied" heterosexual people to get involved in the fight against LGBTIphobia. When the pot banging protests and the most exclusionary Spanish nationalism started to take hold, we began to investigate the possibility of raising an inclusive and hate-free patriotism: a controversial path that has taken us to places where we did not envisage ourselves ending up.

From the Levadura Network comes the Twitter account [@nolesdescasito](#), which shares strategies on a daily basis that seek to halt the spread of hate messages, ranging from the most basic security strategies to the creation of new narratives. We have also launched [ElegimosHablar.org](#) (<https://elegimoshablar.org>), a website that encourages people to embark on a personal journey to incorporate dialogue and care strategies on social media through a series of emails and online resources. The website contains lots of work and content that can be used to share our objectives. Our role is to seek synergies and make them reach more people.

## Ten initial ideas

To explain the communicative coordinates in which we at the Levadura Network operate, I will now provide a list of 10 ideas that we wrote in order to define it. The list was defined in June, so it includes the ideas previously put on the table by the Network's co-founders, nuanced by the experiences of the first months.

### 1. Two models of the future competing on a global level

The struggle is evident on social media: we are in a time of crisis, in which some sectors promote fear and hatred to force social regressions and loss of rights. An alternative to this is the possibility of a future built on empathy, interdependence and mutual support. Our role is to help the latter grow.

### 2. We're at a disadvantage on social media. Unfortunately, we are currently losing

The way in which social media platforms are designed makes it easier for hate messages to spread rapidly and reach large numbers of people. This is because its business model revolves around capturing our attention and getting us to spend lots of time on the platform, in order to increase advertising revenues. The platforms know that polarising messages capture our attention more. Because of our survival instincts, we tend to remember more what frightens us or makes us nervous. Those who create fake news and spread hate messages know this and take advantage of it.

### 3. We understand the world through our mental frameworks

The messages that circulate most, those that go viral, are those that tell stories that people can associate with their day-to-day experiences,

those that they identify with. The content you most take on board is that which best matches your pre-existing ideas about the world, and the mental frameworks that you usually apply to understand it. Confirmation bias leads us to focus on the messages that match our pre-existing beliefs, and to ignore those that do not coincide with our mental frameworks.

### 4. We are moved by feelings rather than facts and figures

Trying to debunk emotional messages with data is ineffective, especially in environments that are as immediate and saturated as social networks. If a person is racist, it is not because he/she has read a statistic that shows that people of other ethnicities are inferior (obviously no such data exists); rather, it is because they have experienced subjective processes that have led them to internalise that belief (which is certainly related to their insecurities and fears). Fact-checking and the debunking of hoaxes are necessary journalistic activities, and we therefore need repositories of data that can help us check suspicious information. However, these are not going to help us convince anyone who has already let themselves get carried away by hate.

### 5. Rejecting frameworks is unhelpful and counter-productive

If I have a view of the world, a deep-rooted opinion or a prejudice, it will be very difficult for you to persuade me otherwise. And it will be even more difficult for you to do so with a simple tweet. We must escape from the frameworks constructed by those who want to spread fear and hatred. We mustn't use their words, not even to counter their ideas. By doing so, we will be reinforcing their frameworks and helping them to grow. As George Lakoff says, if we tell you "don't think about an elephant", you're going to think about one. We are more likely to find common ground with the use

of different words, searching for genuine shared frameworks or creating and boosting other frameworks and flooding them with new narratives.

### 6. There are some frameworks that we share with a social majority

Before the Network began, some of the co-founders carried out an investigation into public opinion in Spain, concluding that it was divided into three main blocks. On one hand, there are those who share progressive or left-wing values (30%). On the other, there are those who hold authoritarian values (30%). In the middle, there are those who we refer to as the 'middle audience': people who are not mobilised and who do not identify with set ideologies, but who share values such as solidarity and the defence of democracy and public services (40%). With these people, we can seek understanding and empathy.

### 7. The far-right targets the middle audience to mobilise it through fear and hatred

At the time of writing this text, perhaps there is no longer 40% of the population in this middle group, as the COVID-19 pandemic has taken its toll and some people have veered towards more selfish and exclusionary positions. Vulnerable situations are being exploited by certain political entities to make this happen. On the other hand, those of us who participate in communication activism and who want to halt the progress of the dark side are not managing to reach this "middle audience". We are facing great difficulty in getting out of our echo chambers (our 30%). This is the challenge faced by the Levadura Network.

### 8. We're all in the middle audience

In reality, we aren't so different from one another. When you talk to non-politicised families, you'll see that anger is growing all around us. Some of our friends are starting to feel afraid. Sometimes

we're afraid too. We don't need to come up with sophisticated designs or large-scale marketing strategies. Rather, we need to identify what we have in common with one another. In fact, we know that if something seems 'pre-cooked' or imposed on social media, it is broadly rejected. So, let's narrow down the challenge: a communication that succeeds in stopping hate messages on social media will be one that operates within frameworks shared by a social majority, enunciated from an honest, credible and close position.

### 9. We need spaces in which we can bake together

We formed the Levadura Network because we want to give ourselves the time and space in order to collectively build these frameworks and narratives, to imagine words and images that can reinforce the things that we share. We also want to do so strategically, connecting with initiatives that are already under way, adding yeast to them and maximising efforts. In order to carry out a wide-reaching communication campaign, perhaps it would be more effective to assemble a team of professionals and to design a meticulous plan. However, we thought it would be more interesting to open this space in which we could connect with and integrate diverse sensitivities. This allows us to try out new ideas and avoid the inertia or 'bubbles' in which the projects we've already been involved in tend to run out of steam.

### 10. We can't take anything for granted

This ten-point list is actually endless, because the lessons learned from the Levadura Network, at least for now, are not exhaustive. It's important to accumulate certainties and new knowledge. We must also know how to combine different levels of involvement, participation, desires and expectations; care for the community; and cooperate in safe spaces. This is also endless because, logically, what I'm telling you here is the

vision of a single person, enriched and grateful for the things that have been shared.

And this leads us to the current situation of the Levadura Network. After several months of intense work, and a break that took the wind out of our sails for a while, we are now getting back on track and will be launching some new initiatives in the coming weeks. The form for joining our platform remains open, available at [redlevadura.net](http://redlevadura.net). We would love to count on your help for our next adventures.

Marta G. Franco  
(Red Levadura)

## An antidote to polarisation, fake news and democratic fatigue: the civic lottery<sup>1</sup>

By Arantxa Mendiárat (Deliberativa, Democracia por sorteo) & Ernesto Ganuza (IPP/CSIC)



Having a political responsibility nowadays is not an easy task (if it ever was). Besides needing to deal with increasing complexity, people who hold political office are constantly required to seek compromises between contradictory interests and to provide solutions in a scenario that reaches beyond elections. But being an ordinary citizen isn't easy either. We are the most educated society of all time, we have online access to all the world's knowledge and we receive global news in real time. However, we are going from crisis to crisis, we have increasingly less confidence in the political system and, worse still, we have the feeling that we have no means of influencing the way things are going.

All of this leads to polarisation, fake news, democratic fatigue and much more. Politics calls for a more flexible, complex and transparent organisation, which will restore trust between citizens and the political system. In this context, the civic lottery, which allows randomly-chosen people to be involved in political decision-making, is an appropriate tool for radically improving the political system.

We've always been told that party democracy was the best possible system for managing public affairs in large societies such as our own. We got tired of hearing that it was the least bad system and that it was not possible to think of any other alternative. However, our political system may

no longer be so good and pragmatic for dealing with issues in complex societies. To begin with, it was created more than two hundred years ago, and in the beginning it wasn't even called a democracy. Since then, social changes have completely transformed the political forms, which now struggle to find a place in a system that was designed back in the 18th century. This is because 1) it is no longer possible to represent a (complex) society as parties did back in the 19th century: neither the plurality of preferences, nor the differences or solutions to a problem fit into organisations such as parties; and 2) because the instruments of a party-based political system are inefficient and undemocratic in the 21st century when compared to a society that is capable of learning about anything in a matter of minutes, that is capable of generating vast scientific knowledge about any problem and whose solutions always involve hybrid measures.

Our system, by contrast, leads to a pronounced lack of confidence in political institutions and in political action itself. They call it democratic fatigue because it continually pits us against each other, leaves out long-term commitments and hardly gives us any information about the criteria with which the decisions that affect us were taken, at a time when doing all of that individually is more accessible than ever before through new forms of media. The management of the coronavirus pandemic is a good example: the decisions



are not transparent, the measures lack context for the majority of people, and we are witnessing an astonishing media war between parties in the midst of an escalating crisis. This democratic fatigue can have dangerous consequences for all of us. For some people, the political work undertaken by parties might become trivialized, and they may feel that it would be performed better by experts or charismatic leaders who are capable of ignoring democratic procedures. This is considered to be a real risk by academics and specialists who analyse [public opinion](#) surveys.

But no, the alternative to this fatigue doesn't necessarily need to be less democracy. It's true that democracy generates conflicting sensations. It is an ideal that is rarely questioned, but we don't tend to think that people are prepared to actually reflect and debate rationally, nor is it common for us to believe that a political system based on people like us is the best way to manage public affairs. The idea that those who lead us must know is so embedded in our DNA, after two hundred years, that we are even capable of renouncing democracy in favour of an idolised efficiency. But the political experience we have witnessed in recent years, and the scientific evidence we have gathered, suggests otherwise. Democracy is better because it respects the principle of political equality that allows us all to have a voice in public affairs (not just a few of us). When that happens, the results are more (not less) politically efficient than those we get from other alternatives.

Let's think about political polarisation. Many people think our society is polarised due to the peculiar personality of certain politicians and that, therefore, this could be solved by simply changing the personalities. Scientific studies [point out](#), however, that social groups become polarised when we join up with people who tend to think like us, or when we organise ourselves into groups in which this homogeneity does not en-

courage debate, and not because certain people have certain characteristics. Polarisation therefore increases if political organisation avoids diversity and debate, which is what happens in a system that revolves around parties. The [civic lottery](#) makes it possible to simultaneously include diversity and debate in politics.

The civic lottery has been used for years to complement the representative system, helping governments to make decisions or allowing recommendations to be made that are later subjected to a referendum. In the more than 300 cases recorded in an [OECD](#) report for 2020 (which has spoken of a "deliberative wave" in recent years), we can see how governments at any territorial level (local in half of the cases, regional in 30% of the cases and national in 25% of the cases) organise civic lottery experiences (citizens' assemblies or citizens' juries) to solve complex questions that also involve long-term commitments. The recently completed Citizens' Climate Convention in France, for example, comprised of 150 randomly-selected people, served to make a decision on the measures and criteria that were required in order to reduce CO2 emissions in the country, taking into account social justice criteria that account for the different lifestyles of French citizens.

Civic lottery experiences first began in the 1970s. Hundreds of them have been held in many countries around the world at all territorial levels, but it is now that we are witnessing a global boost to their deployment as a mechanism for political reflection. This system prevents polarisation, increases the political confidence of its citizens and allows compromises to be reached on controversial issues with a longer-term perspective. One such example is the abortion legislation in [Ireland](#), which was approved in a referendum in 2018 after a debate in a Citizens' Assembly which consisted of randomly selected people. In the last presidential elections in France, three par-

ties included civic lottery mechanisms in their electoral programmes, such as the creation of a constituent assembly consisting of people selected by lottery, or a lottery commission, to consider the re-establishment of the Republic. Before the pandemic, the Spanish Ministry for Ecological Transition was organising a citizens' assembly of 100 randomly-selected people to debate the political measures to be adopted in order to tackle climate change.

All experiences include a deliberative dynamic based on information provided by experts (from academia, civil society and interest groups, thus making their contributions more transparent). These experts are proposed by the organisation and by the participants themselves. Sufficient time for debate is also guaranteed, as well as a series of conditions that allow the participation of a highly diverse range of people (ensuring remuneration, covering care tasks, etc.). When used extensively, the civic lottery can be a mechanism to improve current political systems with more, not less, democracy. It also puts a different form of political organisation within the reach of our imagination. If governments do not start using it massively for complex, controversial and long-term issues, thus restoring confidence in the current systems, the entire system will have to be changed.

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# Democracy in the era of Trap: cracker culture, feminisms and hacker ethics for the new constitution in Chile



By Francisca Keller, Matías Toledo & Sofía Brito  
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## 1. Background

18 October 2019 was made possible in Chile thanks to the collective action of its students who rose up against the price of metro tickets, with their mobilisations leading to a great popular revolt<sup>1</sup>. However, there is still little analysis of the basis of the networked thinking of the digital natives, who were able to find the combined strength required to influence the rest of the globe<sup>2</sup>. These are young 'makers' and counter-cultural 'prosumers' who burst into the public sphere with new languages, means of protest and erotic dances in public space, defying all attempts to repress them. It is this Chilean youth that reveals a break with the political class and traditional forms of social mobilisation, revealing a hybrid between the digital and the physical. The revolt in Chile is sustained by memes, remixes<sup>3</sup> and the public raising of flags to half-mast, which were previously raised by trap and rap idols such as Calle 13 and Bad Bunny in Puerto Rico<sup>4</sup>. Also,

combat techniques taught online such as bomb disposal tutorials, how to 'parkour' over police cars and various laser games - which were first seen during the uprisings in Hong Kong - made it clear that the internet was undoubtedly a fundamental tool for new popular organisations<sup>5</sup>.

The misunderstanding of these values of co-production, where citizens stopped being mere recipients of institutional actions, led the government to define the movement as "an alien invasion" and to declare the need to combat this "powerful enemy"<sup>6</sup>. The political class, in turn, despises the movement for not having a formal leadership and for being capable of disrupting the normalities and certainties of those who guide political, economic and even police decisions (Guell, 2019). The declaration of a State of Emergency and the police repression led to multiple eye injuries, deaths and torture of the demonstrators. Sexual political violence caused the protest to focus on the concept of ACAB ("All Cops Are Bastards"), demonstrating the need to fight against a police state which has

been committing human rights violations since the dictatorship of the 1970s.

Despite the police repression that took place under the State of Emergency, the demonstrations became increasingly massive and slogans such as "evade", "it's not thirty pesos, it's thirty years" and "Chile woke up" gradually developed and became more commonplace. The street - which, like a trap video, shouted "fire" - began to host new graphic media with vast requests that led to the demand for a Constituent Assembly. However, the political class did not consider the radical transformations that democracy needed. At a speed that the citizens could not understand, a plebiscite for constitutional reform was proposed from Congress. Its citizen participation design ignored the emergence of self-organised territorial assemblies, which, in turn, did not succeed in applying pressure, since the ideal mechanisms for the systematisation of their conclusions did not exist.

As such, a constituent process was imposed that only included mechanisms of representative democracy under the figure of the Constitutional Convention, which excluded the secondary world and proposed a system of constituent elections supported by a party logic, deepening the mistrust in the political class and therefore leading to protest and the 'cracking' of the urban space. In order to secure effective participation in Chile, it is crucial to use the means proposed by young people and to deploy new technologies. Doing so will help to avoid the pitfalls of a process that is still being managed by the same figures as always.

## 2. Secondary citizens, "flaites" and feminists making history

In the context of popular revolt, the trap artist

Pablo Chill-E<sup>7</sup> appeared in the streets of downtown Santiago, encouraging the protests. International trap icon Pablo Chill-E burst onto the scene with his song *FACTS*<sup>8</sup>, which shed light on a series of events highlighting Chile's historic inequalities<sup>9</sup>. Later, Pablo would extol a new class consciousness: that of the "flaites". Asserting the origin of the term, which seems to derive from the English word "flyer", the "flaites" will grow wings: not only to demonstrate their ability to *make money*<sup>10</sup>, as the song says, but in order to crack a system, just as the private licenses for making music were also cracked. This creative force will empower Pinochet's peripheries to emerge from the marginality and vulnerability that only feeds experts in social analysis.

With the help of their computer, the "flaites" cracked licenses and built communities of resistance on social networks. Digital culture will allow them to open up space, creating a huge creative industry such as the record label Shishigang Records. Together, and reinforcing the social work of many generations, the Coordinadora Social Shishigang<sup>11</sup> platform will emerge from Puente Alto, allowing the historic Chilean neighbourhood organisation to return to the public sphere, creating a mutual solidarity network where people can help people. Under the slogan "we have nothing to lose", the "flaites" will be that "alien invasion" that is so misunderstood by the political class. Located in the city centre, the "flaites" are part of an informed citizenry that

1 "The generation of youths who made Chile open its eyes". Consulted at <https://eldiariodelaeducacion.com/2019/11/04/la-generacion-de-juvenes-que-desperto-a-chile/>, published in November 2019.

2 "Mass metro evasion in NY". Consulted at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ssuVMd2bv7k> in November 2019.

3 "Metro evasion memes". Consulted at <https://www.concierto.cl/2019/10/memes-evasiones-metro/> in October 2019; and "Pot Banging", consulted at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVaTuVNN7Zs> in October 2019.

4 "Desahogo". Consulted at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dbB\\_gTlhFDU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dbB_gTlhFDU) in October 2019.

5 "Demonstrations in Hong Kong with laser beams" <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/20190807/463931317224/manifestacion-hong-kong-luces-laserautoridades-directo-video-seo-lv.html>, consulted in November 2019. "Here's how to neutralise a tear gas bomb from the Hong Kong police". Consulted at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7FwCjw28> in November 2019. "Shadow over the guanaco", consulted at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zglb8uD7wK8> in November 2019.

6 "Alien invasion". Consulted at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QK\\_94J7YUo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2QK_94J7YUo) and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZYmvDEqwq8> in October 2019.

7 20-year old Chilean trap artist shines a light on the situation in the suburbs of the southern part of Greater Santiago.

8 To understand the idea, please listen to his song 'Facts': [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTHH\\_Py4VP8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTHH_Py4VP8)

9 With his Coordinadora Social Shishigang platform, Pablo Chill-E denounces the accumulation of capital by the country's richest 1% and the hunger that exists in the neighbourhoods. To understand the situation, please watch the following video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7So-rp3NGU>

10 To understand the situation, please watch the video for his song "Flyte": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7So-rp3NGU>

11 To learn about the status of the constituent process, please read: <https://lavozdelosquesobran.cl/coordinadora-social-shishigang-el-camino-popular-hacia-la-convencion-constituyente/>

does not fear police violence. What is there to fear, if you have been living with military tanks in a permanent state of emergency?

Meanwhile, by giving new meaning to social networks, Chilean feminists have managed to denounce the violence exercised by the powerful ruling class: the judges, the police, the state and its many administrative figures. Feminist movements have struggled throughout history to break the chains of formal democracy. In Chile, at the beginning of the 20th century, an intense struggle took place outside the limits of legality for the recognition of women as citizens, but also for biological, economic and social emancipation. Later, in the 1980s, set to the backdrop of soup kitchens and feminist protests, people organised against the dictatorship under the slogan: "Democracy in the country, at home and in bed" (Kirkwood, 1986). In recent years, and by taking up this tradition of struggle, feminisms have once again burst into the public space and into everyday life, questioning the forms of social and political relations that are imposed by patriarchal capitalism.

Following this line, as well as realising that women are considered to be "second-class citizens", concepts such as intersectionality have allowed us to understand that it is not only being a woman that maintains this condition, since the lives of subordinates are crossed by issues such as race, class, sexual identity and disabilities. Thus, as soon as the demand for a "Constituent Assembly" started to be raised, the feminist movements demanded that it be feminist and pluri-national, realising that this was the only way for it to be truly democratic.

In July 2020, popular revolt and digital media succeeded in connecting the Coordinadora Social Shishigang platform with constitutionalist feminists, process designers, 'teknopirates', representatives of the Decidim Association

and open-access software for the promotion of a radically democratic society. By creating a friendship that was strong enough to place empathy at the centre of the process, a transfer of knowledge was initiated that sought to channel the cracker strength of the revolt into a hacker ethic for the decentralisation of power. In this way, the implementation of a methodology and digital technology under the name of LA CONSTITUYENTE began, allowing the social organisations of DISTRICT 12 - the largest district in the southern suburbs of Santiago - to prototype the use of the DECIDIM.ORG open-access software for citizen participation in the development of its constitution.

### 3. Hacking the 1980 Constitution, from below and in the era of trap.

The constitutions drafted since exclusion have meant that, despite the universal recognition of citizenship at the formal level, in practice it is generally white, heterosexual property-owning men who are able to influence and make political decisions that affect society as a whole. This has translated into growing distrust of democracy and its institutions, corruption scandals, penalties differentiated by social class - ethics classes for the rich, deprivation of liberty for the poor - and the fact that the chance of living a dignified life is determined by economic capacity show that Chile is not really a "democratic republic".

In light of this and in the age of Wikipedia, it is necessary to create a feminist constituent process and technology i.e. one that is built from the same territorial assemblies and which allows the voice of the invisible people to be heard. Thus, the assemblies and the territories must first decide on the thematic areas to be discussed (edu-

cation, health, citizenship, pluri-nationality, etc.) according to their own affiliations. The assemblies, meanwhile, with the appropriate technology, will be able to debate and comment on the issues that are raised, comparing the contents of the 1980 constitution with other constitutions in the rest of the world.

Chile was a great neo-liberal laboratory, and it must therefore be a great laboratory of the "pro-common", creating new experiments that will allow a system supported on the margins to be hacked into for good.

It is with this impetus that *La Constituyente* arises: a platform that serves as a space for horizontal political debate, questioning the logics of representation that have historically silenced our voices and imposed the limits of political participation. *La Constituyente* comprises an open team that embraces collective talent and citizen creativity; a territorial team organised by district; and a network of voluntary workers who will be responsible for connecting the assemblies with technology and for organising proposals for subsequent voting. As such, the platform will make the processes of debate and deliberation visible until the proposals are voted on. As a result, it will be the communities themselves who systematise their discussions, without the intervention of "experts" who externally draw conclusions "from above" on the results of the political deliberation. This is the democracy of affection; that which arises in the era of trap.

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# Tools for participation and self-determination of rights for support networks in the COVID crisis



By David Vila-Viñas<sup>1</sup> & Daniel Ayuda<sup>2</sup>

## Premises

The crisis affecting central aspects of our health, relationships and economic situation has resulted in new situations of vulnerability, and the protective capacity of Public Administrations is not enough to handle it<sup>3</sup>. It is communities and neighbourhood groups that have organised assistance networks (Martinez, 2020) to address these needs and rights. The objectives of these networks are diverse and the traditions that structure their operation are many<sup>4</sup>. To help contextualise the analysis in this talk, where appropriate, the ideal model of a neighbourhood support network on a local scale in a medium-sized city like Zaragoza will be taken as a reference, although occasionally it will also be discussed on the basis of a sectoral support network, such as the one that links domestic and care employees, on the same urban scale.

The aforementioned plurality does however enable us to highlight affinities with some characteristics of democratic technopolitics and others that stress such approaches and pose new challenges<sup>5</sup>:

- An explicit commitment to self-organisation and horizontality in decision making, establishing standards and the distribution of obligations and rights.
- The prevalence of a pragmatic perspective in the implementation of this commitment, expressed in an adaptation of the operation to the various inequalities and gaps that cross the fabric of these communities. For example, in terms of social capital, access to digital resources and the social determinants of health (Ramsetty and Adams, 2020).
- The persistence of working environments embedded in the tools of leading cognitive capitalism corporations<sup>6</sup>, as a condition for operating effectively.

<sup>5</sup> To delimit the notion of technopolitics in our context, see Toret (2015) as a "tactical and strategic use of digital tools for organisation, communication and collective action" (p. 35), Barandiaran and Aguilera (2015): 161 et seq.) regarding the paradigm shift implied in the characterisation of collective action and Barandiaran (2019) in its contrast with functional technopolitics in the dominant groups.

<sup>6</sup> For a general approach to this framework and its influence in fundamental sectors of production and social relations, see, among other references, Vercellone et al. (2014), as well as Vila-Viñas and Barandiaran (2015).

- The contrast between the existence of enormous direct political power in the capacity to address needs and social transformation and a lesser impact on public policy, linked to a very fragmented impact on the sphere of public opinion.

In the initial phases of the deployment of these networks, it seems especially relevant to openly reflect on the role of techno-democratic tools and environment. In this sense, the relevance of the specific functionalities of Decidim<sup>7</sup>, as well as other related technologies, should be assessed for these networks. This can be given as a list of its needs - functions: 1) to give identity and recognition to the network; 2) to transmit information; 3) to debate; 4) to respond to doubts and queries; 5) to file the resulting information; 6) to propose inwards and outwards (campaigns); 7) to survey and collect information from the participants; 8) to share an agenda; 9) to generate maps and lists of resources and needs, 10) to promote collective financing and 11) to create participation spaces (assemblies) for commissions and specific groups.

From the premise of enormous modesty regarding the knowledge that can be considered complete in these networks, the intervention aims to open a collective discussion on two levels. More specifically, in terms of the possibility of addressing these needs one by one from free technopolitical environments. But also taking a long-term look at the contribution of technopolitical movements to this new wave of construction of autonomous institutionality around issues of: 1) Scalability: Does it make sense to build a common code for the different networks, so that it would be easier to elevate certain processes to an urban or supra-municipal scale? In other words: is

<sup>7</sup> For a general framing of the platform in the technopolitical hypotheses, see Barandiaran et al. (2017). To highlight some of its features as a digital commons, see Calleja-López and Vila-Viñas (2020).

it possible to create different organisations (multi-tenancy) by geographical area or to use the functionality of bodies for city-wide representation? 2) Modularity: Does it make sense to adapt platforms that have been established for certain functions, such as Decidim, to partially different uses? To what extent are the different lines of development strategically compatible? Can we think of a continuity between neighbourhood or community self-organisation initiatives and the conquest of a democratic city government? 3) Duality: Can the contributions of technopolitics reduce the eventual duality in the operation of networks between participants-users and coordinators or should they nevertheless work from this premise?

## Possible uses

The use of participation tools such as Decidim for the organisation of such networks and the effectiveness of their self-determination of rights objectives cannot be analysed as a whole, but rather by considering in detail what it can bring to each of the different participation needs of such networks.

1. **Giving greater recognition and identity to the support network.** Although the debate on the solidity of the features of this identity is profound and cannot be predetermined here, providing a homogeneous environment for sustaining participation could be beneficial.
2. **Sharing information.** Very different kinds of information are transferred on these networks. It makes sense for information related to resources and offers for those participating to continue to be in WhatsApp groups, which is the most frequently used platform for the self-organisation of groups as it tends to be used and expires

quickly. A different issue is more structured information about the life of the network for both participants and the public. Many of these networks already have blogs, which can be incorporated into Decidim. Email newsletters and, extraordinarily, even SMS messaging may also make sense.

**3. Holding discussions.** Two situations should be distinguished in this regard: a) the rather operational discussions of working or coordination groups, which would be held on instant messaging services, despite the limitations and costs involved; and b) strategic discussions and the more time-consuming generic deliberation. For this, the Decidim environment offers many advantages, as it has a history, can organise and prioritise the information and agreements adopted, combine online discussions with the results of in-person meetings, etc.

**4. Responding to doubts and queries.** This is a frequent activity, whether it concerns legal matters (regulations in force, trade union rights, application for benefits), or other technical matters (configuration of antennas) or general issues (status of institutions). To this end, what is very interesting is the possibility of organising the information using guides, previous consultations, FAQs prepared by the network itself or others. Furthermore, this enables specific queries to be attended to in an asynchronous way, initially by the expert but then by the rest of participants on forums, through the format of “proposals”, follow-ups, summary of appropriate posts, etc. And finally, the possibility of linking with in-person or online events specialising in a particular subject.

**5. Archiving relevant information.** Having an archiving function for materials, re-

sults, queries, key information, agreements-standards and discussions could be useful, precisely to alleviate the problems of dependence on personal contacts of some networks.

**6. Make proposals inwards and outwards.**

This is the main organisation model of the activity flows on Decidim. In its typical function, it is unlikely that networks will use it, since citizen-administration dialectics, the substrate for direct access to participation rights on similar platforms, is difficult to convey in this case using this medium.

**7. Conducting surveys and consultations with participants.**

This can be a very useful tool for measuring needs with some ease and for targeting resources and interventions as effectively as possible.

**8. Share and co-create an agenda.** Although it is a consolidated functionality on Decidim and useful for the networks, it is unlikely that large numbers of participants would follow the agenda by this means, when their most common connection is through WhatsApp and Facebook.

**9. Generate maps and lists of resources and needs.**

A large part of the networks' activity consists of listing specific, geolocalised needs with the group of participants who can then collaborate to work on them. Although sharing spreadsheets is now the most common method, some groups have created ad hoc mapping tools. It is worth noting that, for example, the impact of the *Frena la Curva* (Stop the Curve) initiative was mainly based on this functionality<sup>8</sup>. It would not be impossible to integrate a functionality of this type into Decidim,

<sup>8</sup> See <https://frenalacurva.net/>

which already allows for proposals or meetings to be geolocalised. The main problem seems to be, however, weighing access to information against the protection of participant data. It should also be considered that location is not an equally relevant feature for all information.

**10. Enhancing collective financing.** This environment could also host the presentation page detailing the ways to participate in the collective financing of the network. Although it is not expected to have much traffic, it could be the reference page for campaigns launched by other means, including visualisations that make the investment received, the goals achieved, etc., transparent. In the long term, it would not be unthinkable that the distribution of existing resources could be substantiated through a participatory budgeting process.

**11. Creation of participation spaces (assemblies) for commissions and work groups.** Although it is not foreseeable that this will be the communication method of the network or the groups for most of the participants, it is a clear and easy feature.

Do they tend to federate at the municipal and supra-municipal level? What would be the specific meaning of this eventual escalation?

A second question concerns the relevance of integrating the various participation tools in a centre such as Decidim. While many of the functions can be adequately addressed there, it does not seem likely that the weight of other proprietary technologies, such as WhatsApp or Facebook, will be diluted. Similarly, other free technologies can reasonably replace proprietary ones, such as Next Cloud with Google Drive, without going through Decidim.

A final issue that prompts reflection is the aforementioned situation of duality, at least in terms of participation within networks. It is common to find a majority of participants receiving and giving support, along with a minority of people playing critical reference and coordination roles. Apart from how this influences participation, it leads us to ask: Which functionalities relevant to the majority of participants can be covered on platforms such as Decidim? And alternatively, how could at least the relevant ones be covered for those who take on greater coordination tasks?

David Vila-Viñas & Daniel Ayuda

## Open questions

Beyond the technical feasibility and the relevance of transferring some of these functions to the Decidim environment, it is important to integrate this discussion into the context of the struggle for rights, of getting organised to make rights effective given the lack of protection from the market and many institutions (Méndez de Andés et al., 2020). The first question concerns the trajectory of these networks: Do they tend to replicate the composition and functions of neighbourhood and union associations, with a degree of overlap or functioning as an extension?

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## (CO)INCIDIM: Experience of using Decidim for Social Movements



By Marta Anducas (Platoniq. Creativity & Democracy) & Dante Maschio (Engineria Sense Fronteres), in collaboration with Pau Parals (Platoniq. Creativity & Democracy)

At (Co)incidim, we come together to make a joint impact. We bring together social movements, socio-environmental groups and individuals who stubbornly stick to the idea of building a more open, fair and caring society for both people and the environment.

Together, in (co) —in meetings, for cooperation and aggregation—, we aim to affect local, metropolitan and national policies, because we believe that the general public has a right to give their opinions and to take part in the management of common assets. However, we are aware that in order to participate with well-founded decisions, we need to reinforce the right to information, to re-evaluate and learn from collective wisdom and to empower ourselves, so as to create a general public that is critical and able to debate and make decisions for the common good, rising above capital and individual benefit. And in order to achieve this, we believe it is important to adapt ourselves to today's world and innovate democratic systems through the introduction of digital tools. Tools that are no substitute for in-person processes, but which complement them in order to make more progress.

(Co)incidim is a digital tool for citizen empowerment that has just started to blossom. It is the result of a symbiosis between Engineering Without Borders (ESF) and Platoniq, thanks to the stimulus of Barcelona Activa via its “We promote

what you do” programme and Decidim, the digital citizen-participation platform, the starting point for (Co)incidim.

### Taking back control of water and energy

Since 1992, Engineering Without Borders (ESF) has been carrying out international cooperation, advocacy and awareness-raising projects in the field of water and energy. Thanks to 28 years of experience, we have been able to form a critical discourse that focuses on the governance model for these assets. In order for water and energy services to respond to local needs and to ensure the universal right to access them, their management needs to involve citizens and communities, as a guarantee for democratic quality and to respond to common interests.

Here at home, the struggle for access to basic supplies should not be underestimated, by any means. If we consider that, despite the neoliberal offensive in the 1990s and the flagrant failure of privatisations promoted by international financial institutions, only 10% of the world's population is supplied by private companies, while in Catalonia, this figure rises to 80%. In the field of energy, the system is controlled by 5 big companies which, although it is prohibited by law,

control its generation, distribution and commercialisation. In practice, these situations create a privileged market and the destabilisation of power, where a group of big companies control water and energy management, responding to their own commercial interests.

Faced with this situation, social movements, such as Aigua és Vida [Water is Life], the Movement for Public, Democratic Water in the BMA (MAPiD) and the Alliance against Energy Poverty (APE) have organised to fight against injustice concerning the universal right to basic supplies. Some particular needs are identified in this struggle.

With water, the service is managed by Aigües de Barcelona—a mixed company controlled by the Agbar group—which supplies 23 metropolitan municipalities. The Supreme Court's recent controversial ruling, which supported the questionable legality of the incorporation of the company, has put a stop to the imminent plans for returning management to municipal control. However, the movements continue to call for the creation of citizen forums for oversight and the joint creation of public policies. But first, it is necessary to guarantee the right to information, a key premise for ensuring decent citizen participation. Faced with an opaque company and a weakened, co-opted administration, this is an ambitious challenge: how to coordinate the residents of 23 different municipalities spread over 600 km<sup>2</sup> or more?

In the field of energy, one of the APE's successes was the approval of Catalan Act 24/2015, which prohibits cutting off supplies in situations of economic vulnerability, applying the principle of caution. In order to enforce the law, various municipalities have set up Energy Advice Points (PAE), in order to help residents guarantee their right to supplies. However, due to the malpractice committed by supply companies and widespread disinformation, the need has been iden-

tified for the PAEs to provide information and other connected services on the one hand, and on the other, to compile, through crowdsourcing, data, information of interest and problems that arise from energy poverty, such as people in the territory having their supplies cut off.

## The creation of (Co)incidim

Faced with the above situation, and taking into account the changes in the way we communicate socially, due to the appearance of platforms and social media, there is a need to take a step forward in promoting new methodologies which enable us to create community forums where collective intelligence can appear, strengthening it through cooperation and networking and freeing it from the wave of cognitive capitalism and platforms that privatise knowledge and interactions, for the use of only a few.

The synergy between ESF and Platoniq - Creativity and Democracy arose from this position. Since 2005, the latter has developed open-source software which it uses to foster citizen empowerment and participation. While the similarity of values between the two organisations was important initially, the complementary nature of their paths and knowledge became a key factor for the creation of (Co)incidim: the in-person participation processes promoted by ESF are reinforced and complemented through the inclusion of new technologies and methodologies promoted by Platoniq. At (Co)incidim, participation became hybrid.

This hybridisation is possible due to the adaptation of the Decidim digital citizen-participation platform. The decision to use Decidim is not just about the concept of "open source", which might be the most popular aspect. It goes beyond this, to the ethical way of understanding software and its development, distribution, use and commer-

cialisation, as well as the values shared by the three sides of collaboration, transparency, integrity, non-discrimination and, above all, freedom. It is this regard that this methodology can inspire social movements when they are building communities for tangible or intangible purposes.

This is how the (Co)incidim project was founded: by creating a Decidim variant adapted to the needs of social movements in the fight to guarantee universal water and energy rights, focusing on people and their role in decision making.

## Technical aspects of (Co)incidim

At (Co)incidim there are two main participative processes: [Participating to improve water management in the BMA](#) and [the Energy Map](#). There are also various assemblies in operation, but they are private and can only be accessed if you are part of a work team (Interested? Send an email to [bcnaigua@gmail.com](mailto:bcnaigua@gmail.com)).

Technically speaking, the great new feature provided by the platform is the General Map ("Awesome Map"). This component, which can be added to any participative forum, shows a full-screen map with all the georeferenced meetings and projects published within a process or assembly. The points on the map are shown with markers in various colours according to the category. When you click on the marker, it shows the information for that point. In our case, we have compiled data for three proposed components (energy advice, municipal transparency data and reported cut-offs) in order to create the energy map. In addition to the map's visualisation, the component also enables the crowdsourcing of data via the creation of new points (proposals) by any platform user.

Other essential components for our processes and assemblies are the survey component, through which we have been able to evaluate the

general public's priorities concerning the water supply in the metropolitan area; the page component, where we have been able to share the survey results; the meetings component, which has enabled us to centralise the content, minutes and commitments acquired at each meeting, participative texts, through which we have been able to revise and amend—together and remotely—the arguments concerning water process, collaborative drafts, which enabled us to jointly produce the "Manifesto for Water in the BMA"; the monitoring component, through which we have been able to monitor the progress of the project in terms of goals, actions and expected results; and the proposal component which, in addition to its use for the energy map, has also been used to create a map of organisations, propose actions to be carried out and report the platform's technical errors.

## Challenges and future prospects

The main challenges we encounter are the same as those that have been posed by citizen participation for a long time. First, there is the question of redistributing power, which must be implemented not only in the model of governance for basic services, but also throughout the democratic system, in order to recognise the role played by the general public. In this regard, and as the project aims to achieve goals that are obligations for administrations, it is necessary to ask how to make them jointly responsible. Here we come across another big structural challenge facing the management model for the basic services we have: how to guarantee a balance in the distribution of power and the influence of certain stakeholders?

Taking into account the above challenges, the strategy we follow is based on recognising the general public's situated knowledge, trying to coordinate the existing range of views and perspec-

tives, evaluating and recognising in this way the power that the general public has. This is the philosophy behind the crowdsourcing of data via the maps, which we believe legitimises the process of demanding recognition, the creation of forums for the general public and the redistribution of power that we require from the administrations.

In the design of a hybrid process such as (Co)incidim, it is necessary to ask ourselves how to connect digital and in-person processes. And even more importantly, how to avoid the generation of a new inequality—digital inequality—in a project that aims to make the right to participation accessible.

With this project, we have also encountered challenges concerning the design of the Decidim platform. If it is decided to adapt the platform to specific needs, such as those we find with (Co)incidim, we need to explore the potential of components such as “Proposals”, which is currently highly focused on demands aimed at the administration. Or small modifications that could facilitate citizen participation, such as allowing the possibility of adding a proposal or amendment in a single step or exploring better visualisation and interaction with Decidim on mobile devices.

Lastly, our aim is for (Co)incidim to become the seed for many projects promoted by the general public, thereby contributing to a social wave that can break away from the democratic system as it is understood today. The decision to implement new tools and mechanisms where participation is in itself a tool for pressuring and calling for the redistribution of power. Coming together to promote this type of project to become an indelible footprint on the road towards the democratisation of our societies.

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# Technopolitical Autonomy

## What it means and why Decidim is a good example



By Xabier E. Barandiara (UPV/EHU: University of the Basque Country)

### 1. Decidim and Philosophy

In one of the many meetings that used to accompany municipalist technopolitics in the pre-COVID era, Pablo Aragón stressed that it was clear Decidim was led by a philosopher, MetaDecidim being an example of this. At that time I had been away from the academy for two years, immersed in the complexities of the administrative machine, the Github factory, and the participatory life of Barcelona. Nothing seemed further from philosophy than that life. But Pablo’s comment made me think. It must have somewhat influenced my education, my career in the project that then occupied my life. Not only had I mobilised the resources of my activist life to manage and coordinate the Decidim project. Nor was hacktivism alien to philosophy.

However, at that time there was no time to reflect and let Minerva fly. With time and distance, I have managed to raise my eyes to the past and bring to light the way in which, consciously or unconsciously, we have been building Decidim collectively, guided by principles and ideas that emerged among so many other conversations in the trenches of the office, the meetings, the cafés and the corridors. If there is a common thread between a long, collective philosophical conversation and Decidim, it is undoubtedly the one marked by the concepts of Autonomy and Technopolitics.

### 2. Autonomy, Freedom, Life

From the Greek *auto* (oneself) and *nomos* (norm, custom, law) the word autonomy alludes to the capacity to govern oneself, to direct oneself according to principles set by oneself. Since modern times (even much earlier), the concept of autonomy has been key to human self-understanding and to the aspirations of freedom, agency and recognition that guide our behaviour. “Who are we?”, “Where are we going?” These are questions that presuppose that we are not carried, but that we walk, that we are not a *what* but a *who*, that we are subjects and not subjected (although an endless number of measures of subjection allow us to walk in a world that makes us increasingly orthopaedic), that we are, in short, *free* (although we walk constantly in chains).

Beyond a legal or political framework, or within it, the concept of autonomy has also guided research into the origin and nature of living beings. A system is alive insofar as it is autonomous, that is, insofar as it is capable of producing and reproducing the conditions of its own existence, of constructing and repairing itself organically, of growing and coordinating its organs, of distinguishing itself from its environment and of avoiding being destroyed. Cellular metabolism is the most concrete and clear expression of this autonomy: a cell builds and repairs its membrane, differentiating it from its environment by creating



a biological “self”. At the same time, it absorbs molecules from its environment to incorporate them into a distributed network of chemical reactions that remains constantly active, generating energy to feed its own functions and to produce and repair its own material structure. Biology is science (which is a different science from organic chemistry or mechanics itself), precisely because living beings produce their own rules of existence: they define what is good and bad for themselves, they regulate themselves and behave accordingly, developing along the way their own preferences, their ways of life, each of which requires the study of their physiology, history and way of being. This form is what Aristotle called soul, *anima* in Latin, from which words like “animal” are derived, but also “to be animated”, or “to breathe life into” (*insuflar ánimo* in Spanish) or “to revive” (*re-animar*) someone who is dying. The power of life is shown as the capacity for self-creation, *autopoiesis*, thus able to sustain itself<sup>1</sup>.

Autonomy is also an irreplaceable concept for understanding some of the most important contributions of contemporary psychology and neuroscience. Beings with mind, with psyche (another of the Aristotelian forms, from which the word “psychology” is derived), are those capable of determining our behavioural rules, of becoming aware of our desires and action, of self-guidance. In other words, beings with mental life are organisms capable of autonomous agency, not determined by innate or unconscious reactions, nor governed by external forces, but by an endogenous, reflective activity. At the neuro-physiological level, we are free people in that we can modify the neuronal connections that govern our behaviour through our own actions. Neuronal plasticity, the growth of dendrites (the

cellular branches that join neurons in the dense network of the brain) and the chemical modulation of synapses (the surface on which neurons shake hands, chemically transmitting electrical activity to each other) are modified according to the very activity of the neurons themselves and the human body in interaction with its environment. In this sense, the brain is an organ that configures and governs itself as a result of its own activity. These modifications are especially profound when an integrated, coordinated activity occurs throughout the brain, as if it were a sort of global consensus: this is what various neuro-scientific theories identify as the moments of maximum consciousness.

Among living beings, we humans are the ones who are born most prematurely, with the greatest plasticity and with the longest period of development until adulthood (both in absolute terms and in proportion to the average life of each organism). We are born and grow vulnerable, needy, and dependent in the same proportion. The game, this virtual space of security in which we assume, adapt, and invent the rules of interaction, is the privileged place of growth and learning, of the autonomous development of human capacities. This game always requires a margin of protection and care, of security and trust, provided by the rest of society. During the period of development (which lasts a lifetime) we are autonomous but dependent, inter-dependent, which leads to a radical sociality of our own identity, to always being open to others.

In terms of the ethical framework, the concept of autonomy alludes to positive freedom, to being able to act in conscience, in a reflective manner, according to one’s own authentic desires and motivations, without submission or coercion from other agents. If we came to the world genetically determined or completely programmed by our society, we could not understand ourselves as responsible for our behaviour, nor mas-

ters of our destiny; there would be no room for manoeuvre, no capacity for action, no possibility of change, everything would be reduced to a chain of events. Equally deprived of freedom, we would find ourselves at the other extreme, when we are subjected to the domination of other people or social structures through the threat of destructive violence, through the systematic disciplining of our institutionalised life, or when we are numbed by fear or ignorance.

In the socio-political sphere, autonomy refers to the sovereignty of a collective or territory without the form of domination or submission to a hierarchical or bureaucratic structure. The philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis places the origin of this conquest of social autonomy in classical Greece, in the Greek *polis* capable of questioning and re-programming the inherited codes of conduct and doing so through democratic mechanisms (citizens’ assemblies, councils, juries by drawing lots, etc.).

### 3. Technopolitics and autonomy in the digital age

Life is supported and sustained by structures that go beyond what individuals can do for themselves. Autonomy always extends and sustains itself over an environment that is in turn altered and constructed by the autonomous systems themselves. Cells, minds, societies, always expand beyond the membrane, the skin, the wall: we build biofilms, nests, scaffolds, infrastructures, cities and networks. Artefacts (from *ars + factum*, something made with skill) that exist and persist beyond individuals, technologies that articulate knowledge and expand human autonomy with canes, wheels, bicycles, boats, cars and planes; with monocles, glasses, telescopes and X-rays.

Some technologies promise and allow mental lives to be connected and animal behaviour to be coordinated in extraordinarily subtle ways. Imagine that you could transmit your thoughts simultaneously to hundreds of organisms, instilling in them your ideas and passions without even touching them, equally absorbing their experiences and knowledge; building your desires, habits and projects with them. All this is already possible thanks to the most powerful technology ever invented by human beings: language. Thousands of years after its invention, its words have lasted and it is possible to travel back in time and space through writing. Centuries later we can transmit them in written, spoken or performed form at the speed of light through a chat message, a phone call or a video conference. Today there is a silent hyper-connected army of slaves that blindly obeys the voice of their master, his inscribed word: coding. Without autonomy, without passion, without hesitation, computers execute billions of instructions (which would be equivalent to devouring several million books) every second, every minute, every day, in every pocket.

Politics is the space of production and destruction of collective autonomy, of the capacity to do things together or to submit others to do them. Technopolitics is the way in which this articulation of political power is realised through artefacts (their production, manipulation, configuration and control) upon which individual and social life is extended<sup>2</sup>. Along with the emergence of language and writing, few technological extensions have had more effect on politics

<sup>1</sup> This level of organisation of the subject of autonomy mainly means the capacity to produce, reproduce, repair and modify adaptively the organic infrastructure in living beings (we will return to this with Decidim).

<sup>2</sup> “By ‘politics’ we will understand the structure and flow of the exercise of power in a given social system or organisation. ‘Power’ is the ability to structure or influence individual or collective behaviour with a purpose. By ‘technique’, we understand the intervention of knowledge on the subject (physical, bodily, social), ‘technology’ being the systemic and systematic dimension of the structuring and structured effects of such intervention. ‘Technopolitics’ is, therefore, the ability to determine behaviour in a social system according to how the intervention of knowledge about bodies (machine, biological or social) organises that system”. (Barandiaran, 2019, p. 177)

than the invention and expansion of money: the abstraction of the exchange value between goods and services and its entry into circulation without direct ties to the people, goods and services it represents. The original autonomy of Greek society (masculine, citizen, non-slave, but society in the end) was progressively blurred throughout history and contemporary democracies are only now succeeding in questioning their fateful submission to an increasingly global, powerful and, yes, increasingly autonomous economic and financial system.

In recent decades there has been a profound change in the power relationships made possible by technologies. The combination of capital flows and this army of obedient computers has given way to the growing accumulation of technological power by large digital corporations. This is what Shoshana Zuboff has come to call “Surveillance Capitalism”: the latest mutation of information capitalism into a futures market for human behaviour: the effective control of our freedom and its wholesale through massive data mining, processing with Artificial Intelligence and the manipulation of digital environments with the ability to predict and guide our future. This poses an unprecedented threat to human autonomy (personal and collective) as the case of *Cambridge Analytica* and more recent leaks from Facebook workers have revealed. Human autonomy is for sale, mechanised, digitised, lifeless, deceived as a personalised digital government system.

## 4. Decidim as an autonomous technopolitical project

In this context, it is necessary to define and give content to the concept of technopolitical

autonomy<sup>3</sup> as the *capacity (of each and every one) to design, produce, deploy and manage the technological environments that determine our social relations*. Decidim and the MetaDecidim community institute one of the most advanced global examples of technological autonomy: a community capable of democratically designing and maintaining the digital environment it uses for its own self-governance, offering the rest of the world the opportunity to appropriate and adapt this environment to strengthen and increase its own autonomy.

Technopolitical autonomy has implications which are as complex, profound and widespread as our technological and social environments. The best way to address these implications and understand them is to describe how the project and the Decidim community have taken charge of developing them.

The first and most visible of Decidim’s contributions to technopolitical autonomy is the digital service that can be used on its software: a whole platform infrastructure for participatory democracy (the most advanced, complete and configurable in the world at the moment). Decidim’s technopolitical design has many virtues and features, and there is not enough space to list them here. However, we would like to highlight some of the most innovative ones. Worthy of special mention among them is the sensitivity to hybridisation between synchronous in-person or virtual spaces (where voice, body image

<sup>3</sup> Some people have sought refuge in the concept of “technological sovereignty” to deal with the alienating and pervasive threats of corporate technological development. However, the concept of sovereignty alludes to a position of superiority, supremacy or power-over which is precisely what the sovereign exercises over his subjects. It is generally understood that the State must assume the supreme role of watching over the rights of its citizens. Decidim has generally opted for the concept of “technological autonomy” because, as we have been developing, this is a concept based on the notion of power-with, which implies a fundamentally decentralised participation of the components of an autonomous system instead of their submission to an authority (which may or may not, in turn, be administered by democratically chosen powers).

and real-time interactions are the fundamental means of democratic production) and digital or asynchronous spaces (where textuality, but also image, visual and digital organisation of information, and interactions at different time scales are dominant). This hybridisation allows the power of digitalisation to be interwoven with pre- or extra-digital democratic practices and lifestyles and vice versa.

Equally important for Decidim has been the co-production of the architecture of participation, taking into account the diversities and needs of different democratic, organisational and institutional traditions. Another important virtue of the democratic model used by Decidim is to put proposals at the centre (more so than people), ensure their integrity and traceability, as well as converting them into specific actions and/or public policies and monitoring them. The protection of people’s privacy, their anonymity and the secrecy of the vote is another of the great virtues of how democratic participation is understood at Decidim. No less important is the way in which Decidim enables individual participation to be transcended through a complex system of bodies and assemblies, as well as through grouping and expressing oneself collectively, and through the possibility of producing proposals in a collaborative and recognisable way, both at meetings and in digital processes (asynchronous collaboration). But none of this would have any real technopolitical value if there were not a parallel process of democratisation of the technological infrastructure itself.

It is at the level of the code and production that we find some of the most notable characteristics of technopolitical autonomy of the Decidim project, starting with its open, free and accessible computer code. The AfferoGPLv3 license allows and requires that any person participating on the platform has access to the code and can read, audit, use, modify and distribute it without any legal

or technical hindrance that blocks the computer system under the form of ownership. However, even with such a license there are many ways to block or restrict the code from being truly democratic. One of them is to have an internal architecture that does not easily enable collaboration. Decidim was created precisely to deal with this problem, present in other platforms, and chose a modular, collaborative and configurable architecture. Other aspects of the architecture are also important, such as the APIs (or data interfaces) that allow the operations of each module to be audited by third parties, thus providing real-time transparency of the platform’s activity.

Many software projects try to gain economic and competitive advantage by making their free software products not work properly without other paid services or exclusive services, or which are controlled by the commercial interests that guide the project. In the case of Decidim, we are constantly committed to preventing such traps and ensuring that adjoining services are also free (map servers, video-conference servers, statistics, etc.). Not only is the software free, but so are all aspects of graphic design: icons, fonts, frames, buttons, etc. Democratising software also requires reducing the difficulties of use, understanding and adaptation. Consequently, Decidim has a complex and open documentation system, which includes installation, settings and use guides.

But the greatest achievement in the task of contributing to the autonomy of the project is undoubtedly in the intermediate space between the political layer of the type of democracy it makes possible and the technical layer that carries it out: MetaDecidim, the technopolitical community that manages the common project. It is a democratic community that is fundamentally in charge of designing and debating the new functionalities of the platform, of providing technical, educational, and political support to admini-

nistrators and users of the platform, of articulating discourse and narratives around the project of democratising technology and developing technologies for democracy, and of governing the various aspects of the project. Of special note among them is the association Decidim, which gives legal support to the whole project, progressively taking charge of channelling and managing the coordination of the development and maintenance of the project's infrastructures. Behind the association and the community there is a complex ecosystem of agents (public institutions, associations, foundations, companies and cooperatives but also researchers, hackers, data scientists, developers, activists and citizens) that is coordinated through the different community participation bodies, processes and events, and the MetaDecidim platform. Until now, the development of the project has been the result of a public-common partnership in which various public institutions (mainly, and led by, Barcelona City Council) underpin the security and care needed for the progressive emancipation of the project.

## 5. Beyond Technopolitical Autonomy

It is the fundamental circular nature between developing a technology for democracy and democratising technological development that makes Decidim a particularly exemplary project from the point of view of technopolitical autonomy.

Tackling the complexity of the challenges of a world as interconnected and opaque as the one we live in, will require an unprecedented capacity for participatory coordination. In the wider field of the struggle for human survival, Decidim can provide the decisive infrastructure to enhance productive collective intelligence in the face of extractive artificial intelligence. Today,

Decidim already contributes to municipal organisation, the self-management of production and consumption cooperatives, the management of common issues, the multi-scale coordination of multiple associative spaces, the challenges of democratically designing the lines of scientific research at an international level and the large-scale coordination of various social movements. Its future is a set of pull requests that are yet to be realised.

If we understand that life is characterised by its capacity to produce and modify the organic infrastructure necessary for its own maintenance, if the human mind and consciousness are based on the capacity of the brain to modify itself in a coordinated manner through the activity it generates, if political autonomy is based on the capacity to question and redefine the codes of social behaviour, then perhaps we can also embark on our conscious projects of democratic life via Decidim. Furthermore, we should understand that in order for freedom not to end where the profit of the big corporations of digital capitalism begins, the freedom of each and every one of us must begin where the freedom of others begins; this requires building together, democratically, the spaces of life, *through* the digital and *crossing* the digital towards the conditions that make it possible. *Technopolitical autonomy all the way up, all the way down, all the way through.*

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One of the peculiarities of the concept of autonomy is that it is always incomplete, always in conflict: we autonomous beings are precarious and vulnerable by nature, the same quality of self-modification that makes us free opens us up to a radical fragility, a vulnerability towards others and the opportunity to be captured for other purposes, to be forced, threatened, seduced, moulded. That is why individual and collective freedom is always an unfinished task, an affir-

med, frustrated and threatened possibility all at the same time. If it exists and to the extent that it does, it is because there is also the impulse to affirm the living, to resist oppression, to adapt to new threats, to enjoy new developments. Paraphrasing Eduardo Galeano, we can say that "we are what we do to reprogramme what we are", Decidim is the program to get it done, MetaDecidim is the programme to do it.

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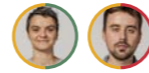
# Program

Wednesday 18/11

10:00 - 10:10

Opening.

Lucía Martín & Marc Serra (Ajuntament de Barcelona)



10:10 - 10:30

The urgency of technological democratization in times of pandemic.

Arnau Monterde (Ajuntament de Barcelona, decidim.org)



10:30 - 11:00

After platform capitalism and the discourse of voluntary servitude.

Ingrid Guardiola (Universitat de Girona)

Moderates: Arnau Monterde (Ajuntament de Barcelona, decidim.org)



11:00 - 11:30

Digital borders and surveillance humanitarianism.

Javier Sánchez Monedero (University of Cardiff)

Moderates: Marilín Gonzalo (Newtral)



12:00 - 12:30

Networks in the age of platform capitalism.

Geert Lovink (Institute of Network Cultures)

Moderates: Antonio Calleja López (Internet Interdisciplinary Institute, Tecnopolítica, Heurística)



12:30 - 13:00

Resisting digital colonialism.

Renata Ávila (<A+> Alliance for Inclusive Algorithms)

Moderates: Karma Peiró

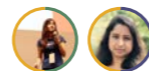


13:00 - 14:00

Decidim dialogues: Sustainability and scalability in free software projects.

Alba Roza (Foundation for Public Code) & Jaya Allamsetty (Jitsi)

Moderates: Carol Romero (decidim.org, Localret)



# Program

Thursday 19/11

10:30 - 11:30

Technopolitical Panel: participation and research.

- Technopolitical Autonomy: what it means and why Decidim is a good example.

Xabier E. Barandiaran (UPV/EHU)

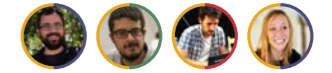
- Scalability and bottlenecks in digital participation.

David Vila (Universidad de Zaragoza) & Daniel Ayuda

- Democratising research in digital innovation: ideas for citizens-led research commissioning processes from small experiments.

Clara Crivellaro (Open Lab, Newcastle University)

Moderates: Luce Prignano (Universitat de Barcelona, Heurística)



12:00 - 12:30

An outlaw technology to create information freedom in science.

Alexandra Elbakyan (Sci-Hub)

Moderates: Mariona Ciller (SokoTech)



13:00 - 14:00

Panel: Decidim Stories.

- Introducing and coordinating Decidim in a federal, direct democratic system.

Lars Kaiser (Urban Equip) & Carlo Beltrame (Puzzle ITC)

- Cercles.coop facilitating democratic participation at the cooperatives with Decidim.

Sergi Alonso (Coopdevs) & Lorena Torró (CoopCat)

- (CO)INCIDIM: Use experience of Decidim from the Social Movements.

Marta Anducas (Platoniq. Creativity & Democracy) & Dante Maschio (Enginyeria Sense Fronteres)

- Democracy in Times of Trap; cracker culture, feminisms and hacker ethics for the new constitution in Chile.

Francisca Keller, Matias Toledo & Sofia Brito (Coordinadora Social Shishigang)

Moderates: Marc Serra (Ajuntament de Barcelona)



15:30 - 16:00

Xarxa Oberta. Open Network for digital inclusion in the neighborhoods.

Efraín Foglia (exo.cat)

Moderates: Arnau Monterde (Ajuntament de Barcelona, decidim.org)



16:00 - 16:30

Situated technologies and digital self-management.

[Eurídice Cabañes \(ArsGames\)](#)

Moderates: Antònia Folguera



16:30 - 17:00

No Man's Land? Bodies that matter in the democracy Silicon Valley style.

[Paz Peña \(Al Sur, acoso.online\)](#)

Moderates: Gala Pin



17:00 - 17:30

Strategies and alliances to curb hate and fear in a polarized world.

[Red Levadura](#)

Moderates: Elisenda Ortega (Ajuntament de Barcelona)



18:00 - 18:30

Anonymous vs la extrema derecha anónima, dos caras de la misma moneda?

O caminos bifurcados?

[Gabriella Coleman \(McGill University\)](#)

Moderates: Carlos del Castillo (eldiario.es)



18:30 - 19:30

Decidim dialogues Decidim: Participation by design.

[Amy X. Zhang \(University of Washington\)](#), [J. Nathan Matias \(Cornell University\)](#)

Moderates: Pablo Aragón (decidim.org, Eurecat, Universitat Pompeu Fabra)



## Program

Friday 20/11

10:00 - 10:30

The deliberative wave: where it comes from and how to catch it.

[Arantxa Mendiharat \(Deliberativa, Democracia por sorteo\)](#)

Moderates: Olivier Schulbaum (Platoniq, Creativity & Democracy)



10:30 - 11:30

Panel: Citizen Assemblies.

- The digital participatory process that fed into the French Climate Assembly.

[Eloïse Gabadou \(Open Source Politics\)](#)

- Deliberation: Surfing the digital wave.

[Mauricio Mejia \(OECD\)](#)

- Citizens Assemblies everywhere: raising the question of scale in deliberative democracy.

[Kelly McBride & Mel Stevens \(Democratic Society\)](#)

Moderates: Arantxa Mendiharat (Deliberativa, Democracia por sorteo)



12:00 - 12:30

Research Driven Art.

[Caroline Sindere](#)

Moderates: Tayrine Dias (Tecnopolítica, Internet Interdisciplinary Institute)



12:30 - 13:00

Decidim Dialogues: Refactoring gender.

[Vera Rojman \(DecidimFemDev\)](#), [Alejandra González \(DecidimFemDev\)](#),

[Thais Ruiz de Alda \(DigitalFems, Datos Contra el Ruido\)](#)

Moderates: Carol Romero (decidim.org, Localret)



13:00 - 14:00

Panel: Towards a feminist internet.

- The right to have our own infrastructure: how to set up a feminist server with a home connection.

[Inés Binder & Martu Isla](#)

- We, our (data) bodies: reproductive justice as a framework for digital sovereignty.

[Alejandra López Gabrielidis & Toni Navarro](#)

Moderates: Thais Ruiz de Alda (Digital Fems, Datos Contra el Ruido)

