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Increasing the quality of democracy through sovereignty devolution

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NOTE

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Introduction

In September 2015, Madrid, the capital of Spain, initiated a participatory democracy project, Decide Madrid (Madrid decide), to enable participatory strategic planning for the municipality. Less than half a year after, in February 2016, Barcelona – the second largest city in Spain and the capital of Catalonia – issued their own participatory democracy project: decidim.barcelona (Barcelona we decide). Both cities use the same free software platform as a base, and are guided by the same political vision.

Since the 15M Spanish Indignados Movement, Spain has witnessed a silent but thorough democratic turn, from a crisis of representation to new experiments in participatory democracy, just like Decide Madrid or decidim.barcelona. Grounded in the technopolitical movements of the 15M, this turn reflects the critical role of ICTs (and their hacker ethics) in reconstructing politics, as discussed below.

Politics 2.0, e-Politics, e-Participation and the 15M Spanish *Indignados* Movement

On March 11, 2004, Spain suffered its worst terrorist attack ever in history. Al-Qaeda claimed the lives of almost 200 people in Madrid, after bombing several trains during rush hour. The event happened three days before the general elections that also decides the Prime Minister. This incident occurred one year after the Spanish government had supported the invasion of Iraq, going against the will of almost the entire Spanish population (Traficantes de Sueños, 2004).

In the period between 2004 and 2011, the Spanish political arena was witness to many citizen initiatives where ICTs played a major role, especially in accessing extra-institutional information and circumventing state institutions to coordinate and engage in political action. Realising the potential of horizontal communication, extra-representative (Cantijoch, 2009) and extra-institutional ways of organising flourished during these years, weaving a dense but distributed network of activists who

self-organised and harmonised their ideas, protocols, tools and procedures. Finally, on May 15th, 2011 came the outburst of the 15M Spanish Indignados Movement. Hundreds of thousands took to the streets and squares of dozens of cities in Spain, demanding better democracy, camping for a full month. The reasons that brought the citizens on the streets, and, later on, in local assemblies, were many – financial crisis, housing crisis, high unemployment (with the highest youth unemployment), corruption, and an overwhelming sense of lack of political legitimacy of democratic institutions. One of the clearest demands of the movement was the improvement of democratic processes and institutions, especially by increasing transparency, accountability and participation with a keen recognition regarding the key role that ICTs could play in realising the same. Ideas of direct democracy, deliberative democracy and liquid democracy were intensively brought to the public agenda, often times by using prototypes (e.g. quickly designed and released digital tools that worked for real, with the purpose to proof that a specific goal or task could easily be achieved) that used open, public data, building ICT-assisted decision-making platforms, and/or by making arcane information publicly available and accessible to enable whistle-blowing against corruption (Calvo Borobia, Gómez-Pastrana & Mena, 2011).

The Movements Enter the Institutions

In the short term, the 15M had little effect. It only marginally affected the municipal elections of May 2011 (Anduiza, Martin & Mateos 2012), but there was an increase of null and blank votes, and a clear shift of votes from the two major parties to minority/alternative ones. Notwithstanding this, it did contribute to strengthening the network of those citizens who had been active outside of institutions such as organized civil society/ NGOs, labour unions and political parties.

The local elections of 2015, however, brought significant changes to many city councils – Madrid, Barcelona, Cádiz and Badalona, to name a few – with the emergence of parties that were a result

of the institutionalisation of some currents within the 15M Indignados Movement. But changes were not restricted only to these municipalities. Even municipalities led by right-wing parties, like Premià de Mar and Manresa, seized the chance to foster participation, with the belief that it was about time to open up institutions, thus answering to increasingly strong demands for openness, transparency and accountability.

The new local governments took office in an environment of strong digital development but a weak culture of participation – arguably caused by the many legal and political barriers to political engagement.

As the data from the World Economic Forum’s Networked Readiness Index shows (Baller, Dutta & Lavin, 2016), the overall digital performance of Spain is not very low (35th in the global ranking), but the economic and political frameworks usually drag the country downwards in the global ranking. The indicators under the readiness sub-index perform quite well, including what concerns individual usage. But the political and regulatory environment (47th in the sub-ranking), human capital or skills (57th) as well as business usage (4w3rd) are very low, and government usage and social impact only barely higher (32nd and 39th) respectively.

In the public sector, Spain has made big efforts not to lag behind digital leaders in terms of public e-readiness and e-government. So, the relative slow development of the digital economy is in stark contrast to the strong advancement of the digital government. As data from United Nations Public Administration Network (UNPAN 2016) shows, the efforts have had very good results both in terms of absolute values (as measured by e-government and e-participation indices, ranking 17th and 7th respectively) and in terms of its relative position in the global ranking. In other words, even if the legislative bodies are not correctly dealing with updating the legal framework to the digital era, the Public Administration is filling this gap through active commitment in digitizing public services and fostering digital uptake.

And, despite the fact that participation is generally – and increasingly – agreed to be a good thing, the reality is that as a concept it still belongs to an industrial era understanding that is almost exclusively institution-led and discrete. This results in isolated initiatives where citizen voice is heard (Peña-López, 2011a).

The literature shows that the crisis of participation and representation is pushing citizens outside of institutional politics (Fuster & Subirats, 2012) and into new kinds of organisations (Peña-López, et al., 2014; Espelt et al., 2016) which are strong in digital and social media (Sádaba, 2012). However, these efforts do not seem to be able to establish a dialogue with the institutions of representative democracy in order to perform the task that is needed – reform of the aforementioned institutions (Font et al., 2012).

Decide.Madrid & *decidim.barcelona*

Madrid, from late 2015, and Barcelona, from early 2016, engaged in a participatory process based on the open source solution CONSUL (<https://github.com/consul/consul>). CONSUL is the web software initially developed by the City Council of Madrid to support its strategy for open government and e-participation, that was later on adopted by the Barcelona county. Barcelona county is an administrative division that comprises the city of Barcelona and 310 other municipalities. It has an independent government body elected by the local representatives of all the municipalities.

While the former (*Decide Madrid*) mostly focuses on particular proposals and participatory budgeting, the second one (*decidim.barcelona*) has been used as a supporting tool to draft the strategic plan of the city for 2016-2019. Both city governments have ambitious plans so that the platforms become the axis of all decision making of the city, where the citizen will have a personal profile through which they can propose, engage with, and monitor all the activities, topics, etc. that they might be interested in.

The success of the initiatives and the strong political vision behind them have caused a proliferation of plenty of other initiatives around the whole state, especially in Catalonia, working to emulate the two big cities. These efforts share free-software-based technology, procedures and protocols and reflections, both on open events as well as in formal official meetings. What began as seemingly a one-time project, has expanded in scope and longevity, with the Barcelona County Council leading the regional level efforts, and other municipalities across Spain sharing the same principles as the Mayors of Barcelona and Madrid.

Of course, the big question is whether this has had any positive impact on the quality of democracy, which was the very first intention of the promoters of the participatory initiative in Barcelona.

The abundance of open documentation available (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2015, 2016) demonstrates that *decidim.barcelona* has increased the amount of information in the hands of citizens, created momentum around key issues, and has led to an increase in citizen participation. There are several citizen-contributed proposals that have been widely supported and legitimated, and accepted to be part of the municipality strategic plan. There has been an increase in pluralism without damage to existing social capital. These improved participatory cultures have had a positive impact on democratic processes, especially in creating legitimacy around decision making.

This can be summarised in four key points:

- Deliberation becomes the new democracy standard.
- Openness as the pre-requisite for deliberation.
- Accountability and legislative footprint as an important by-product to achieve legitimacy.
- Participation leads to more pluralism and stronger social capital, which fosters deliberation, thus closing the (virtuous) circle of deliberative democracy.

Although the scheme may be simple, we believe that it already features most of the components of a new democratic participation in the digital age.

What remains to be measured and analysed is the strength and stability of the new relationships of power and how exactly these will challenge the preceding systemic structures and lead to newer ones. Some aspects of this shift have been identified in what relates to new relationships between citizens and institutions. They are also evident in the emergence of new tacit communities, para-organisations and relational spaces. However, the real trends and the hypothetical final scenario will only become clear after several iterations of the same project evolve over a continuum of participations, radically different from the discrete participatory structures of the present-past.

What is clear is that the engaged and transformative citizenship initiated by *decidim.barcelona* has established some reference points that need to be thoroughly measured and compared with former parameters used to define and assess democracy. Some such directions include, a deeper study of:

- The diminishing role of intermediation and traditional institutions (e.g. governments) and civic organisations, in favour of individual participation and new liquid collectives and para-institutions.
- The increasing role of informed deliberation, evidenced more than in the number of proposals submitted in the number of interactions and exchanges among participants; both tacit – as in supports or comments and explicit – as in real communication between participants in the digital platform, in events or in social networking sites.
- The balance between institutions (representation), experts (local leaders) and individual citizens, who now make up a new ecosystem of actors with new roles and relationships. There is an increase in the amount of networks and communities; a multiple, liquid and reconfiguring affiliation to these networks that are sometimes indistinguishable from ad-hoc clustering.

These aspects can be summarised in one point: the devolution of some sovereignty in matters of democracy to the citizen in a structural, and not temporary, way.

By leveraging the power of ICTs to bring more actors and more resources into the political arena, democratic processes can improve the state of democracy. Time will tell whether the outcome will be as positive as expected. For now, the die is cast.

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