A Democratic Approach to Digital Rights: Comparing Perspectives on Digital Sovereignty on the City Level

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This article will be drawing on two cases to reflect on the impact of different ways of practicing civic engagement in urban digitalization policy. Both cases reflect on the importance of cities playing an active role in the promotion of digital rights, obligation of public participation in digital policy making, and need for political digital education to enable democratic conversations on digital transformation. From a democratic theory point of view, the shifts happening through the digitalization of societies raise interesting questions regarding what modes of governance should be implemented for improving digital sovereignty, which could be in line with "locally" grounded politics. Theoretically, the article will frame these issues of governance and civic participation within the literature on "digital sovereignty," understood as going beyond national territory toward issues of independence, democratic control, and autonomy over digital infrastructures, technologies, and content.

Keywords: digital sovereignty, digital rights, participation, deliberation, democracy

Digitalization Processes and Democratic Practices

Digitalization processes raise fundamental questions from the point of view of theories and practices of democracy. These can be summarized along two lines of thinking. The first looks at the impact of digitalization on our democratic forms and practices and the quality of our democracy (della Porta, 2013; Ercan, Hendriks, & Dryzek, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2019; Hofmann, 2019; Zuckerman, 2014). The second focuses more on the need to develop approaches to digitalization that are based on democratic practice and advance democratic principles (Pohle, 2020; Ritzi & Zierold, 2019). This article is going to concentrate mainly on the latter.

The need to ensure civic engagement and participation in digitalization processes is becoming more apparent (Data Justice Lab, 2021) although challenges to participation in a datafied society persist as new forms of citizen engagement and civic agency are needed to truly democratize digitalization processes and

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advance democratic principles in the digital era. In this context, many, among practitioners and scholars, have turned their attention toward participatory practice, especially the deliberative practice of democracy (Dryzek, 2010).

Deliberative processes, in a nutshell, are about bringing together a diverse group of people to learn, share, and hear different perspectives, discuss and consider options, and ultimately reach informed and considered decisions about priorities for a specific policy field. Specific expertise and design are needed to ensure that these processes are successful in listening to the broadest possible range of voices, integrating different perspectives, and considering the systemic consequences of a decision on different segments of the population. Despite their increased popularity and dissemination (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020), critiques of these methods have increasingly been raised on multiple levels (Courant, 2021; Karpowitz, Mendelberg, & Shaker, 2012; Young, 2001). Two main critiques are highlighted here. The first is an excessive focus on the design elements of these deliberative exercises as a proxy for the quality of deliberation, assuming that communicative distortions could be eliminated (or at least controlled) through a good process design (Courant, 2021; Curato, Vrydagh, & Bächtiger, 2020). The second warns of taking "democratic shortcuts" (Lafont, 2019) within these processes; this is because although they engage large numbers, deliberative exercises tend to benefit those participating and do not always have an impact on society at large (Curato et al., 2020).

The argument of this article is that next to specific and well-designed methods for citizens' participation, we need to recover a wider democratic approach to address the questions of digitalization and data governance. Central to this democratic framing is a rights-based idea of public engagement in the decisions that will shape citizens' lives. Moreover, democratic questions are intimately linked with digitalization, as when citizens have little control over their data and their rights, they are likely to experience a lack of agency in navigating the digital space and their digital rights.

Adopting a wider democratic stance requires us to consider two main points: (a) the need to shift from an individual-based framework of rights toward a collective democratic framework and (b) turning our attention to the fact that certain digital practices and logics amplify and enact new social inequalities (Bechmann, 2019; Viljoen, 2020). These two points appear even more important when we recognize the centrality of the individual consumer and of the mantra of personalization within digital services and datafied society (Jørgensen, 2019; Zuboff, 2019) as well as the emergence of specific new forms of inequalities and questions of injustice that are related to digitalization (Costanza-Chock, 2020; Craglia et al., 2021; Heeks & Shekhar, 2019; Milan & Treré, 2020; Taylor, 2017).

Digital rights are increasingly being acknowledged as human rights (Jørgensen, 2019), and in the digital era, this means not only protecting citizens' rights in the online space, for example, the rights to online privacy and freedom of expression, but also includes rights such as making sure everyone has access to the Internet or that children are not denied parts of their education—as the COVID-19 pandemic made visible—because they do not have the means to access online resources. Expanding our understanding of digital rights through a democratic approach would therefore illuminate how, for instance, "securing negative rights of exit or payment (to regain control over one's own data) are not the same as securing affirmative rights to representation in the conditions and purposes of data production" (Viljoen, 2020, p. 56). A collective

framework for digital rights would hence include raising issues of justice, representation, and participation, not simply issues of access, and recognize that citizens both participate and resist in a datafied society (Bechmann, 2019).

Digital inequalities, despite what their name suggests, should be framed—through a democratic lens—as social inequalities more broadly, which touch potentially every aspect of our lives because of the widespread digitalization of our societies (van Dijk, 2020). To speak about digital inequalities, both differences and disadvantages should be acknowledged (Wyatt, Henwood, Miller, & Senker, 2000). In a democratic understanding, therefore, not only do inequalities refer to imbalances in how users may access or use digital technologies but they also need to critically affect how—due to these differences—certain users are disadvantaged while others are advantaged by digital technologies (Costanza-Chock, 2020; van Dijk, 2020).

Costanza-Chock's (2020) work illustrates very well the power of design over questions of justice and the need to better understand how designs of technologies can reproduce injustice or advance justice through varied mechanisms: First, through the distribution of affordances and dis-affordances[1] that are encoded into technologies through explicit (or sometimes implicit) design values; second, through the distribution of resources since some people get paid to do design work while some are not, and the locus of control of the design processes tends to be centralized; third, through the stories that we choose to tell about the design of technologies (design narratives); and finally, through the inclusion or exclusion of various kinds of actors from those privileged design locations where decisions about technologies are taken that are then embedded in the design.

In the following sections, this article reflects on the role of cities in advancing democratic approaches to public engagement in the development of digital strategies through participatory governance practices. Our lens will be focused on theories of digital sovereignty that adopt a democratic framing (Couture & Toupin, 2019) as we aim to analyze two examples of how local municipal governments and their citizens have been enabling public participation in addressing the question of our digital futures and what is needed from and for the public to engage in this conversation. In our approach, digital sovereignty is something that results from and requires particular modes of deliberation and representation that purposefully include a variety of actors.

Democratic Understanding of Digital Sovereignty

The term digital sovereignty has gained interest and momentum in public discourse in the last decade. During the German presidency of the European Union, the German delegation made digital sovereignty the leitmotiv for European digital policy (Auswärtiges Amt, 2020). The statement reflects an understanding of the term centered around positioning Europe as a geopolitical power, fostering prosperity

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[1] In design theory, *affordance* refers to the properties of an object that determine how the object can be used and by whom. For example, a chair affords sitting. Dis-affordances are design features that are introduced to design out certain use or users. Costanza-Chock (2020) introduced the idea of *perceptibility* and that the same affordances might be perceived therefore differently by different people depending on the identity and location in the matrix of domination.

and technological development "made in Europe" "while preserving the openness of the European single market" (Auswärtiges Amt, 2020, p. 8). This focus on digital sovereignty is prevalent in governmental discourse and entails the idea of territorial sovereignty toward other states by controlling, owning, and managing digital infrastructures, hardware, and software (Couture & Toupin, 2019; Floridi, 2020; Pohle, 2020; Thiel, 2019). Another perspective within this territorial mindset lies in defending democratic procedures against external manipulations like disinformation campaigns by foreign countries (see the scandal around Cambridge Analytica), the surveillance by foreign powers (see Edward Snowden revelations), or the polarizing dynamics created through algorithms of private platforms (Thiel, 2020).[2] The territorial notion of digital sovereignty is not limited to the defense against the infiltration of other states, but, as a special characteristic of the digital era, also in relation to private companies. Floridi (2020) speaks of a de facto corporate sovereignty since it is private enterprises that have the power to control everything from the design to the implementation of the digital. This creates a dependency of states on the corporate world to produce the technology and services they need. This does not, however, mean that states have lost all control since they are still the only ones with legitimate power to regulate the digital.

Sovereignty, in its original understanding, is a form of legitimate, controlling power (Floridi, 2020), and when we speak of the digital, we speak of power as control, that is, the ability to influence the use and extraction of data, development of software, setting of standards and protocols, designing processes, owning and controlling hardware, and designing and administering services. In contradiction to the aforementioned corporate or territorial sovereignty, constitutional democracy is based on the principle that the sovereignty of the state consists of the self-determination of its citizens to enjoy their inalienable rights and for these to be represented by the state. It serves the purpose of protecting each person's rights and for them to be able to take personal responsibility for these rights (Pohle, 2020; Ritzi & Zierold, 2019; Thiel, 2019). These principles of individual and collective responsibilities and rights are thus profoundly undermined when the control of digitalization processes is concentrated in economic powers.

With the understanding that fundamental rights are the prerequisite of democracy, legitimate political action can only be understood in constant synchronization with the "will of the people" beyond the mere act of elections. Through this lens, digital sovereignty can be used as a framework to understand three relevant aspects: (a) the effect of digital technology on the capacity to maintain and enhance democratic sovereignty, (b) the need for competence in and know-how of digital technologies to allow sovereign decision making on digitalization, and (c) the need for deliberation and participation in discussing, enacting, and deciding on regulation over and development of digital technologies.

Role of Cities in Fostering Democratic Digital Rights

The role of cities as key actors in digital transition is arguably becoming a bespoke characteristic of a European approach to digital sovereignty (Calzada, 2019). In contrast to the more *state-led* framing coming from China on the one hand and the *companies-led* approach to sovereignty that has grown organically in the United States on the other, Europe seems to have started developing its own approach to

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[2] Also see the discussions surrounding the use of social media platforms during the insurrection and storming of the U.S. Congress on January 6, 2021.

digitalization. This is based on the centrality of human rights and regulations (Jørgensen, 2019), a renewed focus on questions of sovereignty (as illustrated in the previous section "Democratic Undertsanding of Digital Sovereignty"), and a decentralized city-led initiative that aims to turn some of the European values and principles of digitalization into practice.

The role of cities in the protection and advancement of digital rights is part of a broader movement initiated by the cities of Amsterdam, Barcelona, and New York, which in 2018 set up the "Cities Coalition for Digital Rights," which can nowadays count on a global network of cities. The "Declaration of Cities Coalition for Digital Rights" (Coalition for Digital Rights, 2019), also supported by United Nations Habitat, and the "Manifesto in Favor of Technological Sovereignty and Digital Rights for Cities" (Bria & Bain, 2019) set the basis for articulating the role of cities and regions on matters of digital rights and digital sovereignty. The coalition is committed to promoting and defending digital rights in the urban context through city action, resolving common digital challenges, and working toward legal, ethical, and operational frameworks to advance human rights in digital environments. They try to achieve their aims by supporting the sharing of best practices in the field of digital rights–based policy making. This approach has proved particularly helpful as a recent study highlighted how "leaders who want to help their citizens by modernizing their cities while strengthening democracy have had few resources outlining a better approach to government technology" (Bhatt, Doten, & Gilburne, 2021, p. 5).

Although digitalization is not fully within municipal governments' competence, it certainly is becoming part of cities' public services responsibility since digitalization is increasingly shaping our neighbors' quality of life, access to rights, and even opportunities to participate through digital means in the democratic life. One could argue that digital infrastructures are becoming a new "urban infrastructure" (Tavmen, 2020) that could or should be seen as a public good, similar to water, public transport, and others. Connecting the politics of the digital directly to "place," and specifically the lived and experienced city, we can also gain a better understanding of the digital—be it the digital artifacts, infrastructure, or services (Halegua, 2020)—and this understanding is, in turn, the basis from where we can start a democratic conversation on the digital transformation.

At the city level, digitalization has had a great role in amplifying more traditional forms of participation since the emergence of new tools—as part of the wave of *civic-tech* initiatives used to directly improve or influence governance, politics, or sociopolitical issues (Saldivar, Parra, Alcaraz, & Cernuzzi, 2019)—that facilitate, for instance, connecting representatives directly to citizens and holding public debates and ensure participatory decision making. These technologies can encapsulate a wide range of tools, including but not limited to petition sites (to support advocacy), citizen portals, and civic engagement platforms (to enable deliberative and participatory engagement), like in the example of Decidim in Barcelona, which is a tool designed and implemented at the city level and is currently used in several other European cities.

The advantages of adopting a *civic* scale for democratizing digitalization processes are multiple. The local rootedness enables citizens and city officials to become aware of problems before other actors are and to operate therefore as "critical sensors" (della Porta & Pavan, 2017). Locally embedded action on digital processes could also function as *laboratories of democratic innovation* (della Porta & Pavan, 2017), not just developing counter-knowledge or challenging the mainstream knowledge but also building *counter-expertise*, which is

embedded and embodied through place-based experiences rather than being supposedly neutral and distanced (Casas-Cortes, Osterweil, & Powell, 2008). This role for cities as sites of *experimentation* in the digital realm (Pierri, forthcoming) is finally becoming more prominent as more scholars—also from critical geography (Calzada, 2019; Kitchin, 2015; Lynch, 2019)—are now contributing to building alternative narratives to digitalization in cities that go beyond the *smart-city* paradigm. The fact that many alternative practices have been conceptualized, built, and disseminated at the *local* level is yet another testimony to the fact that digital tools are always entangled in social, cultural, and *spatialized* practices (Lynch, 2020).

But one should also not fall into the "local trap" (Purcell, 2006) of assuming the "local" to be inherently more democratic than other scales, as we learned through both case studies. The "local" can very well be a space of complexity and conflicts as well—of *strangers* that need to engage with one another (Sennett, 2020) in the tensions arising from different perspectives that coexist. If not equipped with participatory forms of governance, cities can also be another possible space for forms of *technocratic elitism* (Abel & Stephan, 2000). The extent to which local policies and programs can directly improve (or not) democracy depends on institutional arrangements and structures and the cities' mechanisms available for public engagement and participation. The following case studies—the Citizen Voices for Digital Rights (CVDR) program and the Digital City Alliance Berlin (from here on, the Alliance)—will provide an opportunity to reflect on possible city-level approaches to public engagement, their potential, and shortcomings as well.

The Citizen Voices for Digital Rights: A City-Led Initiative

The CVDR was a program of work funded by the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights, which took place from March 2020 to April 2021. It was coordinated by Democratic Society—a nonprofit organization that operates across Europe to advance citizens' participation and democratic principles—and was developed in collaboration with the municipalities of Amsterdam, Bordeaux, Milan, and Tirana.

The program aimed to engage, equip, and ultimately empower citizens with the skills, knowledge, and tools to self-advocate for their digital rights (Pierri & Wiltshire, 2021). It played a facilitatory role in bringing citizens together around the issue of digital rights and was, to a considerable extent, shaped by citizens and local digital rights activists themselves.

The CVDR consisted of three phases of work. The first phase was based on online workshops, one held in each of the four cities, bringing together local digital rights experts to provide the local context and an insight into the local priorities, as well as any existing work on related topics. The second phase was a series of events, held with a group of residents from the cities. Milan, Amsterdam, Bordeaux, and Tirana each approached the design of these series of workshops slightly differently. All workshops and events were held in the local language and facilitated by local researchers and professional facilitators. The transcripts were later translated in English to allow for a joint analysis of the themes that emerged. The transcript material was later analyzed and provided the basis of data that informed the reflections shared below.

The common aim of all the engagement workshops was to understand what people in the city considered priorities on the topic of digital rights and what they felt the opportunities and challenges of working together would be. All the workshops included an element where the participants were able to learn

from local digital rights experts and policy makers, ensuring they had a shared base of knowledge with which to move into the discussion part of the event, as well as bring their own experiences. The third and final phase brought together the participants from all the four cities at a virtual "central" event. This event had topic-specific discussions that reflected the themes that had emerged from the city-level events. This was followed by a wider shared discussion on how these issues could be tackled by residents and cities and at the European level.

Concerns and Hopes of Digitalization

The concerns and ideas that were raised by the citizens who participated in the CVDR workshops did not significantly differ from what many scholars and policy makers identified as key challenges in digitalization processes. Analysis of the data collected during the workshops and the other public events revealed how questions of digital literacy, access, and empowerment were considered *pre-conditions* for developing knowledge toward recognizing where and when citizens' digital rights are being infringed, and which systems and institutions they can trust and address to demand justice.

Municipalities—perhaps as the more visible and better understood level of governance—were clearly perceived by the citizens involved as key in advancing digital rights, and they have the responsibility to ensure that their digitalization strategies are designed and delivered in collaborative and inclusive ways. The need for civil servants and officials to also develop better and more critical digital literacy was raised strongly, since only if and when municipal leaders and staff develop better confidence and knowledge on the topic, can they empower others to do so. This is an often-overlooked topic that risks leaving cities even more vulnerable to the predatory tactics of tech companies that are appointed to design, develop, and deliver municipal digitalization strategy and the digital infrastructures on which cities increasingly rely. As a recent study (Micheli, 2021) has revealed, private companies use specific marketing strategies to approach more experienced "smart cities" to develop bespoke products and services for them that can be offered to other cities in the future. This might also lead to inequalities *among* those cities that have more advanced knowledge and expertise of digital processes and those that have less and will end up buying products and solutions developed somewhere else and for different needs.

Issues of transparency, privacy, and accountability were also prominent as participants asked to explore innovative data governance models that promote data collection for the public good, are based on the principles of human rights, and advance citizens' participation, through citizens' science initiatives. Citizens were concerned about how their data were collected, stored, and used at the city level. It was mentioned how many people still do not pay attention to securing their personal information for the sake of enjoying popular digital platforms. Due to a lack of understanding of the full implications of accepting the terms and conditions for digital services and/or a lack of alternative options, agreeing to all the conditions set out by these companies was perceived as the unique and *default* option.

With regard to data governance, municipal governments were again perceived as playing a key role in setting the rules that shape how digitalization happens locally and its impact, based on principles of human rights and the protection of fundamental freedoms. This is in line with what emerged from a recent study (Luitjens, 2021), which claimed that local governments' role should not be limited to "repairing social

inequalities as inevitable collateral damage of datafication as we now know it. That role is to proactively protect public interests based on the type of society we want" (p. 35).

Interestingly, the majority of the participants displayed a lack of knowledge and limited understanding of how much data are collected ubiquitously in cities, not only from those who are online and access online platforms but also from every resident who is simply present in a digitally surveilled public area, uses public transport, or accesses online services for public goods and social services. After hearing more about the data-collection practices in cities and their risks, a few citizens reflected on how certain groups, who present higher levels of interactions with public services (e.g., to access social and welfare-related support), risk facing higher levels of data collection as a result of their socioeconomic conditions, where they live, and their dependency on public transport.

During the CVDR workshops, participants were also asked to engage with the fundamental question of how to make it easier for all citizens to voice their opinions on digital rights. Participants made clear the core value of centering people's voices in the debate on digital rights as people have multiple roles to play in this space—not only as experts of their own experience, educators, and advocates for themselves and their own communities but also as innovators and makers who can use technology and make technology in more ethical and participatory ways. There was also the view that if digital tools were used effectively and if peoples' voices were involved in the whole digitalization cycle (from designing to developing and deploying the technology, tools, and strategies for digitalization), this would potentially help to achieve a positive impact on other areas of the city as well, increasing overall trust between institutions and residents in the long-term.

As the impact of digitalization expands in our economies, care systems, and daily lives, more and better citizens' participation and a broader democratic approach were perceived as needed in the development of cities' new digital strategies. Without both these components, the risk emerges for cities to see societal divides widening, severely disadvantaging large groups of people, and undermining long-term trust in digital and democracy *tout-court*. The program also showed how citizens' participation in itself is not always positive or sufficient. The value of these exercises in public participation in fact depends, on the one hand, on the institutional arrangements and the effectiveness of participatory governance in permeating the cities' inner policy-making functions and, on the other, on the extent to which public participation is seen as part of a wider democratic approach. The next case will focus more on this second element.

The Digital City Alliance Berlin

Toward the end of 2018, the Berlin government signed a resolution for developing a digital strategy. The goal of the strategy was to "provide a comprehensive overview of the politically important cross-cutting issues of digitalization and thus offer added value in terms of content" (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2018, p. 1; translated from the German by Elizabeth Calderón Lüning). The senate's Department for Economy, Energy, and Public Enterprises was tasked with managing the process. The strategy process was planned for completion in 18 months, with a setup of two different phases: The production of a *green book*, to convey the status quo of Berlin's digital politics, followed by a *white book* with concrete policy measures, principles, and political projects. The process design and coordination were outsourced to an international consultancy firm.

Berlin is one of Europe's biggest receivers of venture capital for the digital economy (Ernst and Young, 2022) and second to London as the largest start-up hub (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2019). Berlin houses Germany's vast majority of top-funded start-ups and is becoming an important employment sector (Dealroom.co, 2020). Like many European cities, it is also a great playing field for new platform economies like flat sharing, delivery, care economy, and mobility platforms. The Berlin government has set out to become the "innovation capital" (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 2019) of Europe and is creating budgets and institutions to realize this ambition.

Although the direct effects of these platforms need to be researched further, some dynamics such as rental price increases due to vacation rental platforms (Duso, Michelsen, Schäfer, & Tran, 2021; Gennburg, Hertel, Moje, & Petri, 2021) and labor rights issues in different service platforms (Scherkamp, 2021) are becoming apparent. Public protest has also been growing in the last five years, often stemming from the city's very active anti-gentrification and tenants' movements. A prominent example is the protests against Google opening an innovation campus in one of Berlin's more central areas. The protest was centered on the topic of the digital economy's influence on the real estate market as well as the data extraction practices of large corporate tech platforms. Although the campus was (temporarily) stopped in 2018 (*The Guardian*, 2018), other large tech companies have been quick to establish themselves in the German capital. A second, well-known protest, has been against Amazon building a Berlin headquarters in the form of a tower building in the city center. This protest, emerging also in the logic of anti-gentrification, has gone further in its critique. Connecting tech workers of different platforms, from programmers to delivery people to Uber drivers as well as Amazon's own logistic workers in Poznan, Poland, the campaign maps the intricacies of the digital labor economy stemming in and from the city (https://berlinvsamazon.com/). These examples, from governmental strategies, imaginaries of economic growth, platform economies, and activist campaigns against specific dynamics stemming from the digital influx in the city, create a vivid context for digital politics in Berlin.

It was against this backdrop that the civic Alliance was formed. With organizations predominantly from civil society and academia, the network kicked off its collaboration during a meeting held at the Berlin Parliament in June 2019. The anchoring aim for the collaboration was to critically accompany the government's development of the digital strategy. From 2019 till today, the Alliance has been working on making digital policy accessible to the public, demanding more participation in digital policy development, creating spaces for debate between civil society and local government, and networking with other civil society organizations as well as political and local state actors.

The following subsection focuses on the aims of the Alliance: The idea of public participation in digital policy making and the development of a specific political instrument to practice participation.[3]

Conditions for "Good" Participation

Berlin has a long and strong history of participatory city planning when it comes to the built environment and its social ecologies. The Alliance's main demand and motivation throughout its political activities was to bring participatory expertise into the digital policy conversation and reconnect with ideas of democratic deliberation as described above. From the collected data "good" participation could be framed

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[3] The data for the analysis are the public documents of the Alliance and recordings of specific meetings.

around the following three key aspects: (a) empowerment through learning, (b) stakeholder-specific engagement, and (c) design of spaces and formats for participation.

A prerequisite for participation in digital policy making is the understanding that "digital transformation cannot be done for society but only with society" (Bündnis digitale Stadt Berlin, 2020, p. 5; underscore original). Terms such as accessibility, transparency, and comprehensibility were continuously brought up as cornerstones for "good" participation.[4] The timing of the participation was also an important critique of the Digital Alliance since the Alliance stressed the need to involve citizens during the problem description stage and in the phases where the objectives of the strategy process are set and even before this—during the procurement of external consultancy, for instance.

Both in the official statement of the Alliance as well as in the documentation of the workshops, comprehensibility and capacity building were seen as integral parts of participation, specifically in the field of digital policy. Digital urban policy and the topic of digital transformations are highly complex and opaque. Therefore, participatory processes in this realm need to exercise care in preparing the content beforehand, opening the "black box" of technology and data politics, and creating formats to understand the abstract nature of the policy topic at hand. Digital literacy was explained to mean digital empowerment—going beyond understanding how to use digital tools and toward understanding the socio-technological outcomes they produce. The ideas centered around establishing neighborhood spaces for collective learning to enable citizens to partake in the digital political conversation in the long run, since the policy field will not disappear or end, at the cusp of the digital strategy process.

The need for target-group specific approaches to participation (to reach the most marginalized groups or traditionally "quiet" communities) materialized in the careful design of actual spaces and formats of exchange. To ensure eye-level conversations and discussions, "active listening and openness to feedback, as well as an honest culture of error" (Bündnis digitale Stadt Berlin, 2020, p. 6) was presupposed and expected from the responsible parties (i.e., local state actors; Bündnis digitale Stadt Berlin, 2020). Creating spaces for knowledge exchange among all actors was seen as a form of educational empowerment as well as a way to create transparency in and legitimacy of the policy process. The design of the spaces (that could be analogue or digital) should allow and foster accessibility and inclusivity, and the formats should clearly state the scope of the decision-making power and how outcomes will be integrated into the process.

On the level of formats and approaches, the Alliance experimented practically with creating its own formats and participatory spaces. Throughout 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic had halted real-life encounters, the Digital Alliance held several online workshops and small events to develop ideas around a pilot for such participatory or deliberative formats. The result was the Round Table for Digital Policy, which could "thus be seen as an attempt to open up a space for civil society to help shape a digital policy agenda" (Bündnis digitale Stadt Berlin, 2021, p. 1).

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[4] Participatory democratic theorists would argue that this would still be "partial" participation and not live up to "full" participation as addressed by Arnstein (1969) and Pateman (1970).

The first Round Table, held in February 2021, engaged with another strategy currently being developed in Berlin—the Smart City strategy. The event (held online) was attended by more than 100 participants and was led by the Alliance, with invited guests. With the Round Table, the Alliance developed a prototype of a deliberative format, shifting power from local administration to civil society since it was organized and curated by the Alliance members. The format sought direct collaboration with government entities, where the planning of the event was previously discussed with all invited guests. It had the function of a platform for understanding the actual policy problem. It was also a way to move into the public domain policy processes previously discussed with only certain actors. The aim of unpacking the complexities of the Smart City strategy was attempted but perceived as difficult in the short time span of the actual event. Nevertheless, the good attendance and the positive feedback from all the invited guests made the Alliance positive toward continuing the format, and it aimed to institutionalize the instrument further. This would be a step toward testing new governance networks for the topic of urban digital policy, where diverse societal sectors come together to collaboratively design public policy (Hendriks & Boswell, 2018).

The Alliance's interpretation of participation and its experiment with creating a space for deliberation in the digital policy field fulfill many of the key justifications for participatory democracy (Elstub, 2018). From creating new narratives and understandings of the problems to promoting political equality and focusing on the empowering and learning quality of participatory space, participation, as described by the Alliance, sought to strengthen the democratic process and strengthen the "will of the people" in accordance with democratic sovereignty as described above. The aim of the Alliance is that "those affected get directly involved in the implementation and can break out of their passive role as consumers [making] participation go beyond talking, and instead trigger joint, cooperative action" (Bündnis digitale Stadt Berlin, 2020, para. 27).

Conclusions: Toward a Democratic Approach to Digitalization

The democratic premise on which both cases are based is the understanding that all of us have the right to be involved and shape the decisions that affect our lives. The capacity of societies to position themselves in relation to societal transformation, as we are experiencing in the digital era, is crucial to attaining any possibility of acting as a sovereign people. A lack of political positioning on questions of techno-social transformation would mean that "the instrumentality [i.e., the technology] becomes a master and works fatally as if possessed of a will of its own—not because it has a will but because man has not" (Dewey, 2016, as cited in Ritzi & Zierold, 2019, p. 37).

Discussions on what it means to be a sovereign citizen in the digital age should include everyone since they affect even those who do not own a mobile phone or have never been online (Floridi, 2020). But how we can shape these participatory practices to be more ambitious and inspired by democratic principles is not clear. We have seen before that a democratic approach to these questions would need to move beyond simply focusing on the use of democratic tools and design (like with citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries, or others) and aim instead to embed democratic principles (of equality, justice, and inclusion) and a collectivist stance at its core. Reflecting on the learning from the two cases presented above, in this final section we share some of the limits and potential of moving toward a democratic approach to public participation in digitalization.

To this end, we draw on democratic theory, the work of Iris Marion Young (2001), and the critiques she identifies to deliberative democracy approaches. Although Young's (and others') work was not developed with specific reference to digitalization processes, many parallels can still be made that are—we hope—useful and fruitful.

From a democratic point of view, the first and main issue of public participation processes—as these are currently delivered—refers to the fact that the structural inequalities that exist in our societies make it almost impossible to achieve truly open and rational debates (Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012; Young, 2001). Building participatory and deliberative procedures on digitalization within the current systems of uneven power structures and deeply influenced by the current "corporate digital imaginaries" (Pierri, 2021, p. 207) runs the risk of falsifying the debates and limiting what is even conceived as possible since the most powerful actors are likely to keep maintaining significant influence over political processes and decisions. Online forms of participation are, in fact, not free from old and new types of barriers and exclusion since not everyone benefits the same from using digital tools for political purposes (Schradie, 2019; van Dijk & Hacker, 2003), and a significant *democratic divide* still can be seen as a result of the digitalization (Norris, 2001).

A democratic approach to public participation should, therefore, address the practical implications as well as acknowledge the asymmetries of power in the debates on digitalization currently dominated by discourses of corporate sovereignty. The municipal level can arguably deal with these asymmetries. As seen in both cases, the municipality is seen as key in advancing digital rights. On the one hand, it allows a more tangible experience of the complexities of digitalization, making its citizens the experts of their lived experiences. On the other, the role of cities as focal markets for much technology production can serve as a lever for insisting on digital rights. With both cases pointing out the need for critical digital literacy not only for citizens but also public servants, a more level playing field can be provided for collaboratively forming democratic digital policy.

Drawing on theories of democracy (Stewart, 1996) we should also be reminded of the fact that the "public" does not speak with one but *many* voices and that a democratic understanding of public participation would therefore need to balance divergent and at times oppositional interests among the many actors involved; for instance, acknowledge the rights of those citizens who oppose data collection as well as those of citizens who would instead benefit from those data. This is why scholars of deliberative democracy have built the argument for robust sortition—or random selection—which, in turn, can maximize the diversity of opinion and give a platform to voices traditionally farthest away from decision making. Random selection is, in fact, an approach that has been widely preferred over other means to ensure greater inclusiveness and political equality given that it provides everyone with an equal chance of being selected (Fishkin, 2009). Although fundamental, this "descriptive representation," which is concerned with ensuring a good proportion of women or other underrepresented groups in deliberation, might not be enough to ensure inclusivity and true representativeness and does not provide an approach to address the conflicts and divergence *within* groups. Issues of *deliberative voice* (which focuses on speech participation) and questions of *authority*, which refer to the perceived influence of underrepresented voices in the process, are instead crucial to advance democratic principles (Karpowitz et al., 2012).

As shown in the Berlin case, the need for target-group specific formats and methodology should be stressed to make less loud voices heard and listened to. A further strategy found in both cases is to insist on a democratic framing of digital rights: Not through an individual lens (as tech companies mainly do) but as a collective framing that would allow cities to appreciate the impact of digitalization on the wider population. This would allow us to move away from simplistic negative and individualistic discourses on digital rights (e.g., the right to delete content) toward an affirmative and collective framing of digital rights that can address the population-level effects of digitalization (including questions of widening inequalities).

Finally, theorists of democracy have many times highlighted the need to *think* collectively in the public domain (Stewart, 1996) and the fact that better "public learning" and active citizenship are necessary for governments to address complex problems to which few experts might not have all the solutions. While the citizens who participate in debates on digitalization (as in the two cases illustrated above) may not be experts on human rights, international law, artificial intelligence, or data harvesting, they are still best placed to understand their needs as citizens and communities existing in an increasingly digital world. For public participation to contribute to public learning though, the "educational" component cannot be left unplanned but should be intentionally built into the design of the process itself. This educational element, as we have seen before, is very central to *deliberative* approaches to participation (Dryzek, 2010), where the aim of engagement is not to gather the uninformed opinions and views of citizens but rather to ensure participants could hear from subject-area experts and read informative briefing materials before any discussion, which would provide a base of introductory knowledge to later expand on.

This learning approach can also be seen beyond specific participatory or deliberative processes and as a building block of popular education that builds capacities to understand, voice concerns, and develop ideas for steering digital transformation. This approach very much aligns with the idea of digital sovereignty as a right as well as an *ability* to enjoy that right. In this sense, the educational component (both on the topics of digitalization and on the democratic processes of being an active citizen taking part in deliberation) is what enables digital sovereignty as an *ability* that can (and should) be developed.

If this understanding of digital sovereignty is the new leitmotiv for European digital policy, cities can play an important role in both implementing this strategy and making democracy a characteristic of the European approach to digitalization.

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