

# **DIGITAL PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRATIC IMPROVEMENT A PROMISING ROAD**

By  
**Gabriel Palumbo**



**Luminate**

# **DIGITAL PARTICIPATION AND DEMOCRATIC IMPROVEMENT**

## **A PROMISING ROAD**

Gabriel Palumbo<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Sociologist and university professor. He is a political analyst and art critic. He was a parliamentary advisor on issues related to institutional and democratic quality. He was a UNDP and FONCAP consultant. He has given conferences in the country and abroad and participates in the public debate from his columns in Diario Perfil, Clarín, La Nación and El País de España.

## About this report

This report was commissioned by Luminate to examine the state-of-the-art citizen participation through digital channels in Argentina.

Luminate is a global philanthropic organization with the goal of empowering people and institutions to work together to build just and fair societies.

Luminate supports organizations and governments around the world involved in promoting positive social change in four areas:

Civic Empowerment, Data and Digital Rights, Financial Transparency and Independent Media. Luminate works hand in hand with their allies to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate in the decisions that affect their communities, and make those in power act responsibly in accordance with the needs and wishes of citizenry.

Luminate was founded in 2018 by the philanthropists Pierre and Pam Omidyar. The organization is part of The Omidyar Group.

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### *Disclaimer*

*This report has been funded by Luminate. The views, opinions and conclusions expressed in the text belong solely to the author and do not necessarily represent those of Luminate.*

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## Introduction

Perhaps as never before, delegative democracy is being challenged and questioned systematically. Experts, intellectuals, opinion leaders, and a great number of citizens consider that democracy fails to provide adequate answers to today's complex demands<sup>2</sup>.

Dissatisfaction with democracy is not new, but public trust in democratic institutions and routines has declined significantly over the last few years.<sup>3</sup>

In Latin America, disenchantment with democracy has taken the path of populism. The ability to simplify problems, the promise of immediate and magical solutions, and the narratives characterizing the popular component of populism emerge as possible responses to the growing difficulties of economic life, social tensions, and inequality.

Over time, democracies have regarded various forms of participation. Delegation in institutions has never been absolute, and citizens have, in some way, claimed to be part of the future of public affairs

to some extent more than in others. Years of military dictatorship and the restoration of democracy might explain why the eighties were a time of active citizen participation.

Once the process of restoring democracy stabilized and unfulfilled expectations finally surfaced, citizen participation decreased. Within that context, during the 1990s, direct democracy was regarded as an acceptable political structure both regionally and nationally. Society was virtuous, but politics was flawed. Therefore, greater participation from social actors would become necessary to help transform and improve politics. However, uneasiness and apprehension re-emerged in academic writings, cabinets, parties, and civil society organizations after multiple trials and errors with various mechanisms of direct democracy.

Obvious solutions were non-existent. The peaceful virtues of civic participation were suddenly insufficient, and the relationship between political and civic affairs neither evolved nor improved. Civic participation critical for democratic decision-making stopped growing, and trust in democracy declined. One of the assumed virtues of participation, related to the concept of proximity, did not prove to be effective either, possibly due to both action and omission on the part of political leaders.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps, for this reason, the most promising strategy would be to paraphrase the questions: How might technology help improve democracy? Is it possible to synthesize online and offline citizen participation?

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■ <sup>2</sup> Daniel Zovatto has historicized what has been happening in the region. Although the situation goes further in time than the three decades of democratic governments, we find that enormous problems remain: "significant levels of poverty, deep inequalities persist; and in a good number of countries, a marked institutional weakness and high levels of corruption and insecurity prevail. All this has led to increased citizen dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy and the elites, expressed in some countries through broad popular discontent (the so-called "street effect"), which has generated governance crises of different intensity and consequences and even the early termination of the constitutional mandates of more than 15 presidents between 1978 and 2016." (Daniel Zovatto, 2017)

■ <sup>3</sup> This is evidenced from recent data: Latinobarometro shows that in 2017, for the fifth consecutive year, support for democracy stagnated and showed a declining trend (53% in 2017 and 54% in 2016, two points lower than in 2015). In addition, there is a general perception that the government serves the interests of only a few. This indicator increased for the second consecutive year from 73% in 2016 to 75% in 2017 (in 2015 it was 67%). Furthermore, as Gabriela Ippolito O'Donnell (2018) shows, governments are being increasingly criticized as they are perceived not to be defending the interests of the majority: only 15% of Latin Americans trust political parties, 22% in Congress and 25% in the judiciary power.

■ <sup>4</sup> The Mexican case, analyzed by Rubén Alfonso Rodríguez Vera and Gustavo Saavedra de la Cruz, is a springboard for reflection: "Citizen participation in local power presupposes distribution of power among all members of a community; This is largely reflected in various laws in Mexico, but in most cases it is ignored by the authorities in charge of applying said laws. Power is not shared, and the chance to participate in some of the stages of the planning process -especially, when the plans have already been devised, is when they are put to the consideration of the inhabitants- has been opened to organized groups, more it does not indicate what weight these opinions may have for their authorization". (Rodríguez Vera and Gustavo Saavedra de la Cruz, 2012)

What are the most significant barriers to establishing strong relationships between government and civil society in a highly-digital age? How might we avoid oversimplification of democracy through digital solutionism? Furthermore, what is the role of the State, of politics, and civic organizations in advancing the democratic experience?

## New

## opportunities

In the current context, technology, the Internet, and social media can become vehicles in enhancing civic participation and provide answers to how we might improve the quality of the democratic experience.

There are many examples--more or less institutionalized--of the impact of digital tools to encourage increased civic participation and control over the political power.<sup>5</sup>

This report is the result of research carried out in Argentina in 2019. The study focused on the election period, an optimal moment for condensed political activity, to assess citizen participation through online petitions created on the Change.org platform.

Our main hypothesis is the following: The more public debate, the more democracy improves in quality. To understand this phenomenon, we tried to identify

which motivations led different actors to participate, and which channels were particularly stimulating or perceived to be the most effective.

Our research aims to gain insight from these analyses based on empirical data and quantitative and qualitative methodologies. To do this, we redefined a few concepts to allow us to present a more accurate picture of democracy during this particular moment. The concept of democratic proximity is central to us; hence, we will reinstate its relevance in the digital age. Combined with social accountability and the relational State, we believe that such concepts can shed light on introducing old democratic discussions into new technological environments.

With this objective in mind, we can evaluate the relationship between online and offline environments, including their potential to enhance civic action and democratic institutions. Today, politics has assimilated the digital space; hence, we must now investigate the old questions of democracy from this perspective.

## On proximity

Conflict is no stranger to democracy; it is a fundamental feature and building block to democracy, and its value rests heavily on how different actors manage it. After all, democracy is merely a set of customs, rites, symbols, and laws, contingent on the political communities that attempt to manage its continual tensions.

Consequently, the concept and practice of representative democracy pass through democratic tensions at the outset, though this tension varies. Since the 1990s, the problem stemmed from citizen distrust toward political alliances, experienced politicians, and institutionalized practices in both worlds<sup>6</sup>.

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■ <sup>5</sup> Regarding the changes in social and political life brought about by technology, Francisco Alvarez states: "The network society transforms everyday life, different cultural manifestations, businesses, and the most diverse spheres of private and social life. The way in which public goods are generated on the Internet is of major concern and requires vigilance for freedom of access, as well as the creation of new services to help individuals overcome their limitations and bridge the various digital and cyber cultural gaps. Electronic government is culturally decisive in this phase of cybersociety expansion. Technologies expand human capacities, space and forms of social action, including cultural production and management. They also produce changes in the ways social knowledge is generated, reproduced and transmitted". (Francisco Álvarez, 2009)

■ <sup>6</sup> In this regard, it is worth remembering that in the initial stages of the transition from authoritarianism the political parties and their leaders were surrounded by the fervor and trust of the citizens. After 20 years, such fervor and trust have turned into a sentence that practically admits no nuances or mitigations. Here we bring questions that Ana María Mustapic has asked herself: How did this situation come about? What led politicians to end up being seen as a self-referential group whose energies are invested in ensuring their own survival within party organizations to the detriment of both the transmission of social demands and the task of turning them into public policies? In other words, what factors fueled the crisis of representation. (Mustapic, 2002)



The tensions surrounding representative democracy heightened considerably and generated substantial institutional reforms in addition to academic debates.

The option to deal with the difficulties surrounding this political view was to amplify the participatory dimension of democracy, thus making it more direct and less designatory.

The Latin American version of this alternative was often arduous to apply because of its highly-romanticized outlook brought about by a scarcity of insight into citizens' practices, preferences, and behavior.

After several years of experimentation, however, participatory policies began to generate critical insights. Among the proponents of this approach introduced the concept of "proximity" into the discourse of democracy. What is "democracy of proximity"? Dominique Schnapper summed it up in his book, *Providential Democracy*:

A closer look at Schnapper's text reveals two underlying ideas critical to understanding the concept of proximity: immediacy and technology.

***"It is as a response to the democratic individual's aspiration to be represented only by himself that one now observes various demands for "participatory" democracy--an ambiguous term with nonetheless positive connotations. It implies both the idea of a direct exercise of citizenship as well as a criticism of representation. It also conveys the value of "proximity" (celebrated by politicians, political scientists, and sociologists alike), as opposed to the abstract, "imaginary" or tyrannical character of all that is national and republican." (Schnapper, 2004)***

In the context of democratic proximity, immediacy involves citizens expecting that their needs be met directly, without extensively considering the expectations of the common good. This idea challenges the temporal dimension of representative democracy and poses significant challenges to the routines of political praxis.

As for the impact of technology, Ian Budge's work from the late 1990s recounts how the Internet affected people's competence in political participation and enabled actions formerly deemed impossible for direct democracy. Technology has helped dismantle operational difficulties of direct universal citizen

participation, such as voting. When it comes to the right of suffrage, the Internet has helped overcome complications related to scale and numbers while facilitating voters' qualifications at the same time.

From this perspective, online voting became vital in restoring democracy, given its efficiency in meeting the citizens' urgent expectations.

In Latin America, these ideas were accepted considerably and received much attention within the paradigm of participatory democracy. The fundamental scope of these ideas was localized, and their usefulness was recognized mostly at the municipal level.<sup>7</sup>

However, if there was a situation in which the concept of proximity was applied more extensively and in a more dispersed manner, that situation would fall within the sphere of electoral campaigns. Political scientists and sociologists explored citizens' preferences, and from that point on, the paradigm of representation changed. Replacing the process of searching for an enlightened elite expected to lead the way was the idea of representation based on the transfer of existing social demands to the political sphere.

By 2020, the questions surrounding this approach to democracy changed. Towards the beginning of the century, Schnapper wondered: "To what extent does this precedence given to particularisms over the aspiration to transcendence, and to feeling and fervor at the expense of the control of reason and law, call into question the means--as had been elaborated by liberalism and citizenship--of living together with others?"

Twenty years later, we can reformulate the question: How can technological advancement influence and enhance the

<sup>7</sup> To see this point, please read the presentation "Apostando a lo local: la "democracia de proximidad" en el Municipio de Morón by Rocío Annunziata.

quality of democracy and political participation, while acknowledging substantial changes in the subjective experiences of political participation?

This research aims to redefine the concept of proximity from a theoretical perspective. Relying on technology's capacity to gauge and capture the manifestations of democracy, we believe that we can gain valuable insight from the digital age in the 21st century and the present technological conditions.

## Building a new proximity

The idea of democratic proximity is relevant for many reasons. In the first place, it helps us understand some of the most widespread criticisms towards politicians. At the same time, it allows multiple adaptations in the digital age without making simplifications. Regardless of its use as a strategy by candidates and political decision-makers, proximity coexists with other factors favored by the digital environment; one of them is enhanced accountability.

Among the largest gaps in democracy in the region are the insufficient customs and practices of exercising control over political power. Behind the curtain of participatory vigor, control mechanisms between rulers and their governed have been broadly inferior. The citizens' capacity to monitor results and collaborate in improving the quality of democracy has weakened.

The concept of social accountability developed by Catalina Smulovitz is instrumental in understanding the digital environment and to enriching our analysis about the potential of technology in revitalizing democratic proximity analysis and to understanding the potential of the technological environment and technologies to revitalize the idea of democratic proximity<sup>8</sup>.

Accountability can be explained in its classical, legal, or political sense. For the latter, the evolution of the concept led Smulovitz to develop the idea of social accountability. This concept covers citizens, social media, and civil society organizations intervening to monitor political affairs.

*Social accountability is a nonelectoral yet vertical mechanism of control of political authorities that rests on the actions of an array of citizens' associations and movements and the media. The actions of these groups monitor public officials, expose governmental wrongdoing, and can activate the operation of horizontal agencies. Social accountability employs both institutional and noninstitutional tools. (Smulovitz and Peruzzotti,*

The idea of transparency is not new, but the technological environments that allow, facilitate, and promote the relationship between citizens and political decision-makers have changed in recent years. The strategies behind open governance and its principles concerning constant and transparent access to and flow of information have changed the relational map, causing the variable of time to favor citizens and resulting in political teams becoming more attentive to citizens' demands. The existing flow of information, to a large extent technologically-based, underpins communication channels in the new democracy and favors proximity between the State and its citizens, demolishing unnecessary mediations of any kind.

The concept of digital accountability includes analytical and operational possibilities of improving the electorate's control mechanisms. It would be naive to think that current technological strategies complete the range of possibilities for democratic improvement, but they are undoubtedly a step forward.

<sup>8</sup> Horizontal Accountability (AH) is an important component of a democratic regime, per se and due to its articulations, real and potential, with vertical electoral and societal accountability. These articulations need substantial research as they can signal strategic opportunities to improve the currently poor functioning of many democracies. O'Donnell, 2003



While acknowledging that there are limitations, and the fact that the State may not make the best use of these open and citizen-empowering technological tools, it is true that such advancements have been considerable and more stable than those that existed before the onset of technology. Sharpened competence and training to participate in digital environments on the part of the actors involved can improve the communication circuit and the monitoring and collaborative design of public policies.

Having more platforms that prioritize resource allocation and management can be a significant step toward reintroducing and anchoring the concept of proximity in new democracies.

The hyper-presidential nature of the region's democracies can be closely linked to the fact that citizens' petitions have the State and the respective executives as privileged counterparts.

In this scenario, analyzing and establishing some projection criteria for the State is vital in assessing the processes of digital participation and their effectiveness in the future. Then, the idea of proximity must be carefully articulated alongside a State model that favors and encourages it.

Since the 80s, and after gaining critical insight around the concept of the Welfare State, there has been much work done around more or less institutionalized options to reform the idea of the State.

The relational State is characterized by an attempt to articulate management using less tangible elements, such as information and the possibility of responsible collaboration. It introduces a new way of implementing public policy and implies a redefinition of the State's role, in combination with the market and civil society. The relational State takes into account the associations among different social sectors based on capillary interactions and co-responsibility. Thus, it takes the burden away from the State

as a sole actor and distributes the responsibility in pursuit of collaboration and synergy.

In hyper-open societies like those in existence today, the evolution of state institutions always lags behind social change.

Although the Internet or technology, in general, has not influenced the characteristics of the relational State, its malleability makes for an interesting factor that completes the analytical model that we propose in this research.

## In summary

**The concept of proximity can then be reconstructed to help us think about the new digital era. It is possible to supplement physical and geographical relationships with virtual spaces that can enhance proximity and, adequately used, can allow citizens to bolster their trust in democracy. The three elements that define a new model of governance--transparency, participation, and collaboration--can be sufficiently analyzed through the lens of proximity and digital implementation. Mechanisms specially designed to establish more direct and effective relationships with citizens, such as open government schemes, public data, and collaborative public management platforms for State-owned institutions, have shown significant limitations. However, incorporating technology can improve strategic association, participation, and social mobilization toward democratic discourse. Likewise, these mechanisms have established a new relationship with actors, their actions, and above all, the interactions between the public sector and civil society.**

# DIGITAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

## Change.org and the Argentine elections

### Some general methodological considerations

Statistical data collection and sociological studies encountered an increasing number of difficulties in recent years. People's refusal to answer, false or biased answers, or scale-related problems have had a powerful impact in the field of data, to the extent that the statistical series of many decades has been broken. It is no coincidence that the electoral polls of recent years, including the projection for the open, simultaneous and mandatory primaries of August 2019, yielded such erroneous results that caught even the political class off-guard.

Technology, as is often the case, is part of the problem and the solution.

### On this research and the Change.org database

Change.org is an online platform in which citizens, without intermediaries of any kind, can create and post petitions that gain weight and legitimacy through the number of supporters or signatures it gathers. These petitions are launched on an open platform by the actors themselves, bolstered by social media, supporters, and offline initiatives. In many cases, petitions are addressed to a specific actor, be it public or private, and include a space for users' comments, which generates online dialogue that can also serve as a historical thread about the petition's growth, updates, and initiatives. Upon successfully achieving a petition's objective or "ask," the petition declares a "victory." The content and historical evolution of these petitions have been such that the quantity and quality of data stored in the Change.org<sup>9</sup> database are incomparable to other

more traditional means of data collection.

For the purposes of this research, we approached the database, given the quantitative and qualitative information it provides. The numbers of petitions, signatures, and victories are relevant data, but so are the interpretations that emerge from them. Furthermore, we worked on a strategy of in-depth and group interviews that allowed us to broaden the scope of our analysis.

We also worked with "certified" politicians or decision-maker profiles on our platform; this is a tool used by decision-makers to whom petitioners address their petitions to answer petitions targeted at them and interact with petitioners more organically. We tried to identify different uses of the platform and the capacity for interaction between professional politicians and the public.

### The time dimension in this research

Our research focused on the political variable and worked on the premise that the elections' seasons largely condenses time and intensity of actions. This premise is of considerable analytical value. Given this reason, and following the change.org platform's initiative, "Elections 2019," our team of researchers deems the election period a privileged and pivotal period of analysis. As it involved the renewal of multiple government levels, including the executive branch, the 2019 election

<sup>9</sup> In this research, every time we refer to the Change.org database, we mean the database in Argentina

brought together distinctive elements that allowed us to test some of our hypotheses on an empirical database.

At the same time, it allowed us to establish specific comparability parameters and examine the evolution of online civic participation. This research considers the period from the PASO elections of 2015 to the elections of the same modality in 2019.

## Theoretical definitions in the methodological framework

Our research deals with digital political participation. To avoid vagueness in definitions, we found it necessary to establish criteria that spell out political participation for this study. The political dimension is continually expanding, and digital tools contribute to the emergence of issues excluded from mainstream media coverage or more classical research. Some elements in the digital expansion of citizens' demands can be undoubtedly classified under political demands, but they were not deemed exhaustive enough for our purposes. We provide the following as an example. Petitions related to the Health category are the most abundant on the Change.org database. Most of the time, these petitions are related to public matters and require intervention from hospitals or specific institutions within the health sector. The political nature of these types of petitions can be justified in many respects but was not considered exhaustive enough for the purposes of this research.

The purely electoral variable (perhaps the most irrefutable one) has the opposite defect. It excessively limits the political dimension to the electoral act and removes subtlety and rigor from the

category. We decided to consider the political problem as the sum of electoral issues and issues identifiable as institutional from a democratic perspective. That is, petitions related to any aspect of political parties, parliament, or institutions of the three branches of the State were included in our database out of the general database. Eventually, we added the petitions that included demands for certain rights.

Thus, for the purposes of this research, the political category consisted mainly of petitions strictly identifiable as such, namely those related to the elections and the pursuit of civic, social, and economic rights.

Petitions launched on the change.org platform are one of the most widespread forms of direct participation. Trust in the platform increases with use, responsiveness from authorities or petition decision-makers, and the capacity to impact public debates and social narratives following successful petitions. Such outcomes are unparalleled in the offline setting, where results do not materialize as rapidly as in the online environment, considering time and money investment.

The following categories from the petitions database were analyzed:

- Total petitions started between August 2015 and August 2019 (the period between presidential primaries)
- Petitions for political participation in the same period
- Total petitions started between PASO 2019 (August 11) and the general election (October 28)
- Petitions for political participation in the same period
- The Elections 2019 Movement

## Online political participation in numbers according to Change.org

Petitions started within the period of August 2015 - August 2019 (the period between presidential primaries). The following table shows the incidence of petitions related to political participation (PP), in relation to the general database within the indicated period. This study will use this data to support comparability henceforth

General database of petitions August 2015 - August 2019	<b>5391</b>
Petitions for Political Participation	<b>312</b>
Peticiones PP   Total	<b>5,79%</b>

It is also interesting to compare the most popular petitions, those that are related to the topic of animal rights, in general terms. In the period shown in the previous table, the percentage of these animal rights-related requests for the same period is 10.09%. The difference might seem insignificant, but the most important data here is not the number of petitions but rather the number of signatures. The signature count reveals citizens' interest in participating on the platform, with one topic or another.

While political petitions collected 550,218 signatures, those related to animal rights added up to 8,851,442. These figures seem to indicate, regardless of the interest generated by certain topics, that the percentage of petitions related to political participation lost some space over an extended period.

Petitions between PASO and the general election  
August 11, 2019 - October 28, 2019

If the same comparisons are made for the period between the PASO and the general elections, this will reveal an increase in petitions related to politics.

Petitions PASO 2019 - General Election	<b>273</b>
Petitions for Political Participation	<b>63</b>
PP Petitions / Total	<b>23,08%</b>

From the table above, the concentration of the political variable during the election season becomes more evident. The increase in the percentage of petitions, in relation to the total number of petitions and the number of signatures, reflects how the petitions place the issue on the public agenda. It is interesting to compare this data against other categories to corroborate this finding.

Type / category of petitions	% of total number of petitions	Total signatures collected per type
<b>Political Participation Petitions (PPP)</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>592.041</b>
<b>Health Petitions</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>1.323.430</b>
<b>Animal Rights Petitions</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>416.528</b>

Favorably, consolidated petitions related to political participation surpass those related to animal rights. Health petitions, usually the most dominant, maintained a substantial difference in the total number of signatures, but not in the number of petitions. These figures indicate that

there was greater citizen participation in terms of petitioning on political issues.

Let us now analyze the range of victories for the petitions launched between the PASO and the general election, August 11, 2019 - October 28, 2019.

<b>PASO 2019 Petitions - General Election</b>	<b>5391</b>
<b>Percentage of Victories</b>	<b>11,04%</b>

These are the petitions between PASO and the general election - August 11, 2019 - October 28, 2019

<b>PASO 2015 Petitions - PASO 2019</b>	<b>273</b>
<b>Percentage of Victories</b>	<b>4,03%</b>

Now, let us examine the percentage of victories within our database.

<b>PPP Victories PASO 2015 - PASO 2019</b>	<b>9,62%</b>
<b>PPP Victories PASO 2019 - General Election</b>	<b>7,94%</b>

The table below shows the percentage of victories by category after PASO 2019.

<b>Politics</b>	<b>22,22%</b>
<b>Health</b>	<b>18,52%</b>

<b>Transparency</b>	<b>14,81%</b>
<b>Anti-corruption</b>	<b>11,11%</b>

As shown in the table above, there is a high concentration of victories for petitions related to political issues after the PASO elections of 2019. Considering the three categories that make up this study (PPP, Health, Animal Rights), the percentage of victories within that period is 48.14%: twice the number of petitions related to healthcare, which usually yields the most signatures and victories.

## Some data from the Elections 2019 Movement

The Change.org Elections 2019 Movement website was a tool specially designed for the elections period in Argentina. Connected to the change.org platform, the movement website aggregates petitions specifically related to the electoral process. Built as

a prototype, it is relevant both from a quantitative and qualitative perspective. The data we have gathered from this tool reinforces some of our hypotheses for this study.

<b>Number of petitions</b>	<b>236</b>
<b>Victories</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Number of signatures</b>	<b>7.912.671</b>
<b>Responses from policy makers</b>	<b>86</b>

In the previous table, several pieces of data deserve attention. The total number of signatures from petitions in the movement is significant, revealing the initiative's relevance and the citizens' interest and confidence in participating in this format. The number of signatures of these petitions represents 8.7% of voters included in the national register.

The number of responses from policymakers is also worth noticing. Based on the figure above, teams of political decision-makers acknowledge the significance of this type of citizen participation, despite its non-traditional format within a digital environment<sup>10</sup>, and recognize the importance of creating spaces of proximity with petitioning citizens. Another relevant factor, not specified in the table, is the number of new petition supporters (people who signed the petition)

who joined the election movement. There were 749,901 new users who joined Change.org through this movement.

The petition with the highest number of signatures was one requesting a clean record from candidates. It gathered 345,130 signatures and received 16 responses from legislators and aspiring candidates for that position.

<sup>10</sup> Later in the report, where a more qualitative analysis is presented, there are testimonies from actors who account for some of the difficulties of political teams to work with digital environments.





## Clean Sheet

### The history of a petition

The petitioner's request was simple: No one with a criminal conviction for corruption, verified by a higher court, be allowed to register as a candidate for the elections.

On April 3, 2019, a group of activists appeared before the National House of Representatives to deliver their petition, which contained 160,000 signatures gathered on the Change.org platform. Their objective was to turn their proposal into a law. A group of legislators from Cambiemos – the ruling political party at that time, some of whom had already presented bills on the same issue, committed to discussing the citizen-led initiative during the second half of the year.

The petition delivery had a tremendous political and institutional impact. The group of petitioners was initially activated by a private citizen, Gastón Marra, with the help of journalist Fanny Mandelbaum. Marra had gained relevant knowledge from the Brazilian political experience. He reached out to Marlon Reis, the driving judge of the Clean Sheet campaign in Brazil. Through these encounters, the Argentine experience started taking shape, bringing together legislators, reporters, journalists, and other civil society representatives. Together, they

organized an initiative that demonstrated the scope of the campaign and the motivations that drove them to start and support this petition.

Citizen activation was their chosen vehicle to challenge a flawed political narrative: similar initiatives in the past failed to gather support in the committee until it eventually lost parliamentary status.

In this case study, the initiatives and the type of citizen-led efforts carried out by the activists in conjunction with legislators and their teams demonstrated the value of online and offline participation.

On August 6, 2019, the Committee on Constitutional Affairs of the House of Representatives discussed the project. The day before, the activists behind the campaign delivered the petition containing 255,000 signatures and organized another activity that gathered all the actors involved.

The mandatory primary elections were only a few days away when the Cambiemos succeeded in issuing a ruling to include in the Law of Political Parties a subsection establishing the discordance of running for elective positions for people who had a confirmed conviction in a second instance for crimes such as bribery and influence peddling. At the same time, the bill incorporated other grounds for disqualification such as crimes of embezzlement of public funds, negotiations incompatible with the exercise of public functions, illegal exactions, illicit enrichment of public officials and employees, concealment, fraud in public administration, treason, and crimes against the peace and dignity of the Nation.

For its part, the opposition accused the ruling party of its political use of the citizens' initiative a few days before primary elections. The debates that emerged from the incident intensified. The Cambiemos faced accusations of using the event as a tactic for campaign closure.

The result of the PASO 2019 elections was unexpected. None of the poll-takers predicted the crushing defeat of the ruling party. With a difference that was practically impossible to overcome in the first electoral round, the Cambiemos ceased to invest their time in Clean Sheet and instead focused on another type of campaign. The bill and the discussions were frozen until the final election when Fernández became president.

Before ending their mandate, the Cambiemos attempted to force a special session to discuss the bill and prevent it from losing parliamentary status. By November 20, 2019, signatures in support of the Clean Sheet campaign reached 310,000. The activists attended a meeting with the legislators who committed to promoting the discussion on the bill before the end of the parliamentary year.

The special session planned by the ruling party failed due to a lack of quorum. The opposition did appear at the chamber, so the bill ended up losing its parliamentary status. Nevertheless, some of the most active pro-government representatives delivered passionate speeches against corruption, sought to raise the prestige of the House of Representatives in the eyes of the citizenry, and praised democratic participation.

After this setback, the citizen-petitioners doubled their efforts in devising other creative participatory initiatives. They

continued to escalate the campaign on social networks, generated their own petitions, and created a QR code to reach more petitioners.

By the end of this report's production, the petition had gathered 357,100 signatures, and the bill was put forward in extraordinary sessions to be discussed in 2020.

Clean Sheet is a symbolic case for many reasons. Apart from the large number of signatures and support it gathered, the campaign provides remarkable insight relevant to the questions guiding our research. First, in Clean Sheet, we perceive a reconvening of the concept of democratic proximity, as presented in this report. A strong horizontal link was established through the citizens' activation (evidenced by the broad support the campaign received). This activation, in turn, generated concrete responses from policymakers. The fact that this movement was capable of getting the attention (and engagement) of legislators and politicians, it not only managed to create and sustain associative ties between citizens and political leaders but also nurtured public debate based on the impact it had on the media and the public agenda<sup>11</sup>. Similarly, it shows that citizens are receptive (at least to the issues they care about), and the relationship between institutions and the citizens-petitioners-voters becomes more dynamic<sup>12</sup>.

The initiative had more than 45 press articles, was featured in mainstream national media, as well as the local newspapers and radio stations. Undoubtedly, the petition has the most considerable federal scope and the most significant impact on the public debate in recent years.

We also believe that it is necessary to highlight the importance of having electoral qualifications, which was required in the whole process (and how superior these qualifications can be). The appearance of the Clean Sheet petition called for a very extensive investigation, documentation, and adaptation to the local environment on the part of its promoters. Later on, the events that unfolded were reflected on institutional responses that sought to give way to the initiative in parliament, as well as on the speeches of political leaders who made the campaign their own.

It is important to note that Clean Sheet managed to break through the media thanks to the collaborative

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■ <sup>11</sup> The petition obtained more than 40 media hits in the country's mainstream newspapers and generated many public debates.

■ <sup>12</sup> The conditions under which a petition becomes successful are many and varied. It is important that the objective coincides with a broader social demand and is related with a topic on the public agenda. Yet, its form, writing style and its potential to call for action in the offline world are equally important.

work of civic activism and technology. The initiative surpassed traditional possibilities of similar organizations to enter the public agenda. Partly due to journalists and communicators' work and contributions to the campaign, the issue was treated more as a public policy than a moral plea.

In methodological terms, Clean Sheet proves useful to measure the importance and role of more traditional civil society organizations in the digital age. When it comes to current social needs, traditional organizations are unable to provide this ability to deliver a message in all directions, including to those responsible

in making decisions, while taking into consideration response time, civic anxiety, and agile forms of response and integration. This context undoubtedly poses a significant challenge for institutions that seek to regain the effectiveness in citizen activation that they enjoyed a few years ago.

Another issue of central importance in our study, and for which Clean Sheet also serves as an emblematic case, is the exponential power achieved by linking the online world to the offline world. The ability to mobilize institutional resources, generate lateral activities for discussion and debate, and endow the citizen lobby with prestige, was very important, demonstrating that there can be an intimate relationship between online participation and the offline world.

## PARTICIPATION BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

politicians, activists, and social organizations in a new democratic experience

One of our research objectives was to offer a possible interpretation of the actors' behavior when involved in digital participation schemes. We sought to analyze this dimension qualitatively alongside our quantitative work, as we believed the interviews and group work might add additional value to the analysis. To reduce the complexity of this task, we established three categories among social actors. We analyzed citizens' actions as petitioners and respondents to different instances of participation, actions of political leaders divided into legislative and executive actors, and actions found in the more institutionalized social sector.

Following this logic, we established three categories to group the motivations towards participation: effectiveness,

visibility, and the connection between the online and the offline worlds. These three categories must be understood recursively. They are related to each other, and they complement and promote one another.

In addition to these, we identified two clear agenda traversing all the actors involved to explain political participation through digital means. One of these is facilitation. Digital media reduces complexities and processes, as is widespread and contains proven knowledge. Another agenda is that of institutionalization. In this case, the actors' motivations vary depending on their role; however, they all share the notion that digital civic participation deserves attention and will become a defining issue sooner rather than later.

## Why participate?

The most optimistic view of civic engagement has always envisaged participation as a magical solution to the problems of democracy<sup>13</sup>. However, extensive research and accumulated lived experiences contradict this hypothesis and further indicate that participation figures are never significant in numerical terms. They are often used as a response to defend local interests and certain active groups<sup>14</sup>. This reality, taken from the offline dimension, seems to be reflected in the online world in a fairly identical manner. Although the digital world has done much to shorten some distances, other constants remain and are part of the information that different actors consider when drawing up their intervention strategies.

The digital world has generated a more legitimate or professional type of activism thanks to online platforms such as Change.org, where private citizens contribute to public debates through a more personal and anecdotal approach and are segmented according to their issues of interest. Citizens who support and sign petitions and those who interact on platform forums comprise an ever-growing body that engages in digital participation. To illustrate the platform's significance and growth over time is the website's compounding number of registered users; Change.org has grown from 2.6 million users in 2015 to 8.5 million in June of 2020.

This form of participation is not without

problems and does not generate by itself committed citizenry; however, it has produced significant changes in civic participation habits that are worth noticing.

By analyzing participation on petition platforms, it becomes clear that not all petitions work in the same way. The more purpose-oriented campaigns containing a clear call-to-action, rather than complaints, tend to gather more supporters and have greater potential for public positioning.

## Seeking effectiveness

The first characteristic of participation that emerges from analyzing interviews is effectiveness. This characteristic is, without a doubt, the most critical motivation among citizens. Digital participation is "easier" than face-to-face participation and is better suited to our current times. The impact of digital media today beats the impact of their physical counterparts in a sense that what could typically take long months of work before can now be achieved in a few hours or days.

***"A petition where you go against or complain about something is not the same as petitions that involve working together; those tend to get more difficult"***

(Male, 44, petitioning citizen)

***"In petitions such as Clean Sheet, sometimes things are easier because it is not that you are supporting a person. Instead, they are abstract and general; they are not transitory"***

(Male, 44, Citizen petitioner)

■ <sup>13</sup> "Participation becomes the prerequisite that enables true endogenous development, as a process of change, transformation and autonomous appropriation of society that results from facing and resolving its contradictions and conflicts through the conscious and active intervention of all its members. It is the way to build, from its foundations, an integrated society that gives each of its members the possibility of deciding on the vital aspects of their lives. It constitutes a self-learning method that takes place in the decision-making process itself and implies an active commitment on the part of those who want to participate. ■ Cecilia Linares, PE Mora and S. Correa, 2012

■ <sup>14</sup> "Not all the functions encompassed by social participation should be taken into account in all types of government action. Certain programs, by their very nature, are more suitable for a certain form of participation. In addition, the moment behind the relationship between governors and governed, the type of debate, the consensus or conflicts that a program may generate will also play a decisive role in promoting participation in one way or another" Cabrero and Nava, 1999



The fact that petitions have a group of committed activists makes all the difference, and citizen-activists know it. Speaking of the hostility of pro-animal groups, a civic activist tells us:

**“If we had that level of intensity for corruption campaigns, things would be very different”**

(Male, 44, petitioning citizen)

When we inquired further onto this point and saw how, despite being one of the issues that always top citizen demands, matters related to corruption in general or even specific events do not reveal very dynamic activism. One hypothesis arising from the interviews is that the limited results achieved in this area discouraged participation.

An interesting point is a pedagogy that is being generated around digital activism. Citizens acknowledge both the good conditions and the challenges and difficulties that come from the very dynamics of activism.

**“We are a group that is not stable. There are two or three of us, and others are always changing. Some stay, come, and go. Some people help with some petitions but not with others because they do not share its beliefs”**

(Male, 44, petitioning citizen)

These characterizations are in line with the concept of campaigning. In campaigning, it is unnecessary to have a general agreement, and connecting with others is prioritized over having the same preferences.

Another important characteristic is how it is possible to know whether initiatives are going well, making mistakes easy to rectify. The ability to improve the quality of participation proposed by campaigns concerns the citizenry and the political

class. It is also important to understand the dynamics of a digital campaign and all the actors' involvement within the technological environment. The combination of online platforms and the actors' coordinated use of these revitalize campaigns, extend their functionalities, and maximize their impact.

**“We made the petition, and a lawyer helped with the writing so that it was accurate and did not have errors. The text was drafted at once, and that is how it remained. What we eventually changed were the headers and the images. This approach is important in order for people to share the petitions on their social networks”**

(Male, 44, petitioning citizen)

**“There was a petition in which we said something like: I am part of the legislator's team ... and it was not working, it was very slow. When we got the legislator out, everything became more dynamic and it gathered thousands of signatures in a matter of hours. When people believe that they are forming part of a politician's agenda, they tend not to participate”**

(Woman, 28 years old, politician press officer)

Digital participation incorporates the potential of campaigns and turns it into a vital citizen asset, different from what is ingrained in more traditional, similar forms of confrontation.

There is another dimension of civic pedagogy that it is equally important to highlight. One key factor in the projection of technology ingrained in a democracy is its potential for qualifying participation. There are multiple forms of training, but to be effective, they must reach all sectors. The idea of collaboration here becomes relevant because learning must necessarily be shared.

Amid citizens, the pedagogical actions begin with their interests. Often, the problems and issues submitted through this participatory scheme are complex, especially when the petition is not communicated clearly enough to raise awareness about the issue. Hence, the citizens lead and generate the awareness-raising themselves.

**“At the beginning, people did not sign up because they did not know what a Clean Sheet was. We had to explain it to them.”**

(Male, 44 years old, petitioning citizen)

We know that this petition has been the most successful one out of all petitions on Change.org that were tagged as “political” or related to political affairs, but developing the campaign was not easy. At first, the topic’s complexity hindered its growth in that it affected the number of signatures it was gathering, so the initiatives that accompanied the petition aimed to explain the issue and raise awareness of its impact.

Difficulties also serve as a source of knowledge in the process of petitioning. Citizens are challenged to draw new strategies when they do not receive or encounter responses from people in power. One promoter of the petition

***“As citizens, we have to realize that we must change strategies. Maybe on social media, we should start being more confrontational with politicians to get them to react. It is not right that only two or three politicians are supporting us”***

***“It is important to publicly expose politicians on social media. This exposure has to be positive; it should be contagious.”***

***“What is certain is that the possibilities of participation are communicated. There are people who see that they can have an impact and are willing to act and get involved. This is how some people end up becoming leaders themselves.”***

However, effectiveness is not the only dimension sought by citizens. Political teams and decision-makers related to digital citizen participation are also driven by an effectiveness criterion; this was evidenced from group interviews we conducted with teams of policymakers from all levels.

***“It depends very much on the activity of the petitioner. Whether the group tags you, sends you a message on social media, that urges you to respond”***

(woman, 40 years old, national legislator team)

***“The classic way of gathering signatures has now gone digital, it is easier, and it’s possible to reach places that are otherwise impossible to access”***

(Man, 45 years old, political advisor to a local legislator)

***“We found out that profiles of legislators were being developed and then we decided to participate”***

(Woman, 31 years old, political advisor to a legislator)

***“When a project is not being discussed, we try to push through a request made by someone close to us”***

(Man, 33 years old, legislative advisor)

## Seeking to be seen

Visibility is another motivation for digital participation. The actors understand that digital environments are privileged spaces where their petitions or the responses that they receive on their petitions are noticed and received by the public. To some extent, this ensures the effectiveness of their actions.

***“The bottleneck of petitions and citizen participation happens in the legislature. The only way to avoid it is by raising the issue on social networks and in the media.”***

(Woman, 47 years old, activist)

***“The digital space makes it visible, and that puts pressure on the institutions”***

(Woman, 40 years old, member of national legislator’s team)



## Uniting the two worlds

***"There are similar projects that achieve nothing because they do not seek external influence. There are legislators that only do what they are supposed to do in Congress, and that is it"***

(Woman, 40 years old, member of national legislator's team)

Many times, having an institutional position is not enough to take political action. Incorporating technology and understanding its dynamics is part of an interesting pedagogy for political reference. Different actors also share this view.

***"We were in a campaign, we went out to the neighborhoods, and we saw that it was difficult. People did not go. The idea was, then, to spread the message and that is why we decided to put together a petition in Change"***

(Woman, 28 years old, head of the press for a politician)

***"In politics, you have to seek advocacy; it is not just being a Congresswoman, and to be able to achieve it, it is necessary to be able to stand out from the rest. You have to appeal to creativity so that they notice you and thus you generate a citizen presence that supports the projects"***

(Woman, 40 years old, member of national legislator's team)

***"We know that citizen initiatives (bills) that do not start in Congress are not binding, so what we want to do is to give citizens a voice, so that they have a say, talk about this, this is an issue for debate, reveal that there is something else "***

(Male, 56 years old, political activist and digital activist)

***"Working outside the petition, outside the online space, is very important. You must have a good relationship with legislators. Many times, when one of them responds, others feel compelled to do the same."***

(Woman, 32 years old, activist)

We established the category of interconnectedness to account for an element that became clear in the research and is highly relevant in theoretical and practical terms. There is a strong consensus in all sectors about the need to connect the online and offline worlds. Likewise, to recognize the growing importance of digital spaces and the institutions' capacity for concrete change. Such knowledge combines the intuitive with the conceptual and redesigns the nature and methodology of participation.

Both among citizens and political decision-makers, this idea is useful to explain the interaction between both spheres. Citizens know that to bring about reform, a law, or a specific action, they must delve into the institutional, the legal, and the political realms. In turn, politicians at all levels acknowledge that the benefits they draw from the information, receptiveness, and priorities raised from digital environments ought to be completed in the physical world, in a timely and direct fashion.

***"It is necessary to complement online participation with offline participation, especially in terms of advocacy. Virtual participation in matters of concrete advocacy in public policies has the advantage of facilitation and keeps the right balance between effort and impact"***

(Male, 56, head of a social organization).

***"Online initiatives allow you to gather 100,000 endorsements with zero logistics. But it is not enough to wield direct influence"***

(Male, 56, head of a social organization).

Another interesting point, which answers the core questions in our research, is that the interviews allowed us to see that the arrival of the digital world cornered civil society organizations that have not yet adapted to the new model. Some organizations have even been challenged by activists.

***"The digital space also allows you to overcome the existing distrust that is generated even among civil society organizations"***

(Male, 44, petitioning citizen)

***"We held a meeting where we delivered the signatures and looked for allies: institutional ones as well as journalists and citizens"***

(Man, 45 years old, political advisor to local legislator)

***"Never had we managed to position a project such as we did by using technology"***

(Woman, 28 years old, politician press officer)

***"It happened that once we joined a particular petition, without knowing who had started it. This person was very surprised, and very strong feedback was generated. Then people came from some organizations, and a whole series of discussions followed, with meetings and stuff."***

(Woman, 28 years old, responsible for the press of a politician)

As stated, this concept of interconnectedness is transversal and is recognized by all the actors as an incentive to participate. Decision-makers' teams and, above all, those in government positions are well aware of this connection.

***"Our team has a vision about proximity, and we frequently go around the City. It is unthinkable that we do not have a strategy to consolidate this proximity in the digital space"***

(Male, 43 years old, political leader)

***"The feeling we have is that the more participation you generate, and the more channels there are, the more chances you have that the system will be healthier. We are interested in talking about participatory processes, which are of different kinds; some are digital, and others are physical"***

(Male, 43 years old, political manager)

***"Accountability processes in the physical world have to do with presence and face-to-face contact. But obviously this posits a scale problem that the digital engagement helps to correct"***

(Woman, 41 years old, political official)

***"It is necessary to combine strategies. The digital is innovative; it generates amplification, it offers another type of scale, but we must not overlook physical presence--being there, going, seeing. The digital space is key, even in the ways people interact, but at some point, you have to meet"***

(Woman, 41 years old, political official)

***"We have many co-creation meetings as well, looking for collaborative platforms. In the digital sphere, this works very well. In the last edition of BA Elige, we introduced the possibility that initiatives could be co-created"***

(Woman, 41 years old, political officer)

Needless to say, there is some distance between citizens' expectations concerning digital participation and the reality expressed by officials, especially executives. For the latter, be it for conceptual or political reasons, both the concept of proximity and the scope of different campaigns require the offline dimension.

## Seeking to control

Another existing incentive for participation, which is also of great interest in our study, is the capacity for accountability promoted by digital tools. Citizens perceive that these tools favor control over politics and this, in turn, encourages participation.

***"In matters of corruption, the only one who can generate enough pressure is the citizenry, and today there is no better way to do it than from the digital world"***

(Male, 44, petitioning citizen)

***"We were thinking about doing something to control legislators, how they vote and so on. A kind of more rigorous monitoring"***

(Male, 44, petitioning citizen)

Apart from their critical role, digital environments favor collaboration between citizens and political leaders. Many times such collaboration is not entirely genuine, and action is somehow "forced." However, in any case, a space for co-creation and interaction is created, generating a new form of association.

***"Citizens respond very well to the feedback offered by the politicians' responses. When the citizenry participates in the bill, feedback is generated, and everything works better."***

(Woman, 47 years old, activist)

***"The political class has to realize that it has to be open to the common citizen because it is the common citizen that is going to push through the networks so that things come about"***

(Woman, 47 years old, activist)

The possibility of combining tools within the digital environment and "translating them onto" the physical world is one of the virtues of the new forms of participation. Both effectiveness and pedagogical value are increased as association is promoted, improving democratic proximity as new civic leadership is generated.

Together, this is an invaluable asset that should be supported and encouraged, although some limitations cannot be overlooked.

The most apparent limitation refers to the relationship between political leaders and citizens. Political decision-makers have not yet fully acknowledged or understood the change of era, in that they work following an old agenda and methodology that reinforce distrust and disinterest on the part of citizens.

## The interviewees told us

***"Politicians keep using the tools that social networks offer them as if they were blogs. They upload the information they produce and believe is important, but they do not involve the citizens."***

***There is never feedback on that. Only a few politicians respond to petitions."***

(Male, 44 years old, petitioning citizen)

***"Politicians have professionalized virtually nothing; even less will they have something as new as this"***

(Male, 56 years old, head of a social organization)

***"We do not have people working exclusively on digital engagement"***

(Woman, 40 years old, member of a national legislator's team)

There is something typical about the exercise of digital participation on the part of citizens, clearly seen from our study, which can be of value not only for diagnosis but also for the future. As far as citizens' views are concerned, digital participation has instrumental use. Citizens perceive it as a tool rather than a method, and they use it like any other efficient device at a given time.

The possibility of qualifying participation is a stumbling block in the physical world, and it continues as such in the digital world. This scenario is an exciting terrain to explore and intervene. Improving the reflective character of participatory practice will improve the entire ecosystem and improve the quality of democracy. Citizens, organized representatives of civil society, and political decision-makers must find a way to share experiences and knowledge to restore trust in democracy and find the most appropriate modes of response.

## Considerations for future improvement

### *Advancing institutionalization*

One of the most important conclusions from this report is that all the actors would benefit from advancing a controlled institutionalization process of some forms of citizen participation in digital environments.

This trend, proven in other countries, is irreversible and requires technical knowledge and political sensitivity.<sup>15</sup>

### *Building trust in the digital environment*

Despite the ubiquitous use of technology, when it is related to electoral or political issues, distrust often appears. Problems exist and, therefore, must be minimized in order to build stable collaborative ties.

### *Improving the quality of participation*

We know from our research that citizens opt for digital participation for instrumental reasons. This reality reduces civic learning and undermines the power of participation because the profound changes generated in the democratic experience remain hidden.

#### *The recommendation*

Propose spaces for the institutionalization of digital participation to maximize its most dynamic aspects in civic terms. There are established institutions that can work digitally to become more efficient and to lower costs.

#### *The recommendation*

Create campaigns to build trust in democratic digital innovations involving all stakeholders.

#### *The recommendation*

Offer training and qualification schemes for participation, which involve citizens, political decision-makers, and civil society organizations: workshops, collaborative events, talks with representatives, and civic activists.

<sup>15</sup> In this respect, it is useful to look at some initiatives around the world. One of the most interesting ones is the parliamentary monitoring platform, which originally emerged in England, and is being used effectively in different African countries. Another good example is FIXmyStreet, which allows citizens to be linked with officials and which has recently been successful in the city of Montevideo. To see more cases of institutionalization and cooperation, visit the site <https://www.mysociety.org/>

### Helping those who participate

We have observed that participation decreases due to either lack of results or excessive responsibility for some of the actors.

### Building audiences

Digital participation is a civic pedagogy enhanced by reaching as many audiences as possible. Today, technology allows for segmentation, which makes participation more effective.

### View from the top

In political cultures like ours, state action is a determining factor. It is highly likely that if the State gets involved and works effectively, it will promote more participation and benefit from it. This possibility is why we believe it is important to propose a deliberative space for the State, citizens, and civil society, so they take decisive steps and confidently move forward.

#### The recommendation

Help committed activists, giving them visibility and tools to improve their effectiveness.

#### The recommendation

Set up and promote occasions for discussion, information, and training. Cooperate by offering seminars, social media, and collaborative apps that encourage audience participation.

#### The recommendation

Promote a permanent forum or a liaison area among the actors involved to imagine initiatives and seek the institutionalization of the possibilities generated by digital participation.

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