

A Tale of Three Platforms: Collaboration, Contestation, and Degrees of Audibility in a Bulgarian e-Municipality

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This article presents a case study based in a medium-size Bulgarian city, Stara Zagora, where three different electronic platforms intended to support the interaction between citizens and institutions were introduced and tested between 2010 and 2018. These platforms had different driving actors, somewhat different profiles, and markedly distinct effects. The construction of the first platform was pursued through an e-government project led by a municipal official and financed with funds from the European Union. The second platform was My e-Municipality, an initiative undertaken by a small group of active citizens in collaboration with the city administration. The third platform was a set of interconnected Facebook groups through which citizens protested the destruction of a local park. The article defines and assesses the three distinct models of participation exemplified by the three platforms and discusses the challenges of achieving authentic engagement and response on the part of political and administrative institutions.

Keywords: e-democracy, e-participation, full participation, digital platforms, platform politics, case study

In the late 1980s, when calls for *glasnost*² in then communist Bulgaria were picking up strength, an aphorism circulated by word of mouth quipped, “Everybody talks about glasnost, but what we really need is audibility.” The following three decades brought about a worldwide wave of glasnost/voicing going beyond anybody’s boldest dreams thanks to the communication affordances of the Internet and social media. Many have studied, demonstrated, and highlighted the new possibilities that digital media have

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² The root of the word *glasnost* is “voice.” Its literal meaning is “voicing.”

opened up for citizens to voice their views on countless issues pertaining to politics, administration, and social life in general, and the potential of this surge in digital glasnost to foster deliberative and participatory democracy (see Castells, 2013; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlgren, 2013; Loader & Mercea, 2012). Following years of optimistic speculation and accumulation of empirical studies, van Dijck (2012), a critical commentator on the visions and realities related to constructs such as the information society and digital democracy, recaps the effects of popular deliberation in electronic forums thus:

However, experience so far indicates that large-scale Internet activity in online forums, polls, communities and pressure groups is able to flourish without any influence on decision-making in official politics. The representative system is barely touched. (van Dijck, 2012, p. 55)

It appears that the audibility of citizens' concerns voiced via digital communication technologies, i.e., the degree to which they have been taken into consideration by political and administrative institutions have remained modest at best. This means that the notion of audibility, as an important counterpart of glasnost, should be recognized as more than a pun. It could serve as the entry point for a critical analysis of the role of electronic forums and platforms in the quest for citizen participation in democratic governance. Questions concerning the depth and quality of democratic participation via electronic means need to focus on audibility and the conditions of its likelihood. For the purposes of the following discussion, audibility will be understood as perceivable effect of online expression and deliberation by ordinary citizens on administrative decision making and institutional politics.

The Spectrum of Participation

The interest in digital democracy dates from the early years of the mass adoption of the Internet. Different schools of thought have seen in digital communication formats new promises for the advancement of specific models of democracy—legalist, pluralist, deliberative, plebiscitary, participatory, etc. (Bakardjieva, 2009; Carpentier, 2011; Dahlberg, 2001; Street, 1997; van Dijk & Hacker, 2018). Digital media have been seen as new conduits for providing citizens with sufficient information to help them make electoral decisions, for transmitting the electorate's comments and reactions back to its representatives, and for allowing individual expression and the formation of political opinions through deliberation.

Although closely associated with the idea of e-democracy, e-participation is a distinct concept³ introduced to capture the modes through which the input from citizens facilitated by digital information and communication technologies outside election periods can affect the day-to-day policy- and decision making by political and administrative bodies (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dutton, 1999; van Dijk, 2012). With respect to e-participation too, a review of the existing literature has shown that

³ Van Dijk (2012) defines e-participation as "the use of digital media to mediate and transform the relations of citizens to governments and to public administrations in the direction of more participation by citizens" (p. 56).

scarcely any influence of eParticipation on institutional policy and politics can be observed yet (van Dijk, 2010). Few decisions of government, political representatives and civil servants have changed on account of the input of citizens in eParticipation, one of the few exceptions being the drop of road-pricing in the UK. . . . Decision makers doubt the representativeness, surplus value and quality of the input of the new channels. Few decision makers are prepared to accept the direct inroads of eParticipation on their decisions. (van Dijk, 2012, p. 60)

Like e-democracy, the notion of e-participation has largely focused on top-down forms of citizen participation initiated and sponsored by institutional bodies and has left out a wider repertory of forms that citizen participation in political life can take, namely the different forms of the so-called extraparliamentary (Ekman & Amnå, 2012), or, more generally, extrainstitutional participation. Such forms, often labeled activism, are the hallmark of social movements and organized or spontaneous civil society groups. They fall under a wider definition of political participation as "actions or activities by ordinary citizens that in some way are directed toward influencing political outcomes in society" (Teorell, 2007, pp. 336–337, quoted in Ekman & Amnå, 2012, p. 287). Numerous studies from the past 20 years have shown the extensive and creative use of digital media in the initiation and coordination of extrainstitutional activism internationally and within individual nations (Cammaerts, Mattoni, & McCurdy, 2013; Dahlgren, 2013; Kahn & Kellner, 2004). Therefore, digital platforms should be examined with an eye to the affordances they offer for the full spectrum of citizen participation "directed toward influencing political outcomes in society," including initiatives sponsored by political institutions as well as the extrainstitutional ones initiated by social movements and the civic grassroots. Digital tools and practices that cast bridges between different types of participation are particularly important to consider because they could contribute to the consolidation of a comprehensive participatory environment and culture.

Media and communication scholarship has been another intellectual terrain where lively debates concerning the concept of digitally facilitated participation have occurred recently. They have been triggered by notions like "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2006) that attempt to capture the rise of active audience involvement in commenting on, critiquing, and creatively adapting the products of the media and popular culture industries. The initial enthusiasm of authors who celebrated the newfound powers of the active audience (Jenkins, 2006) and "producers" (Bruns, 2008) purportedly brought about by the interactivity of digital media has been tempered by arguments urging the differentiation between types of participation according to the extent of power sharing between elite and ordinary actors. Carpentier (2011) has proposed a gradation of participation forms, taking his cues from Pateman's (1970) broad political approach to participation and her definitions of partial and full participation as determined by the extent of sharing the power to determine the outcome of decisions (Pateman, 1970). Carpentier has insisted that participation should be conceived as a range between "minimalist" and "maximal" degrees: "While minimalist participation is characterized by the existence of strong power imbalances between the actors . . . maximalist participation is characterized by the equalization of power relations, approximating Pateman's (1970) concept of full participation" (p. 354).

Carpentier (2011) notes that in numerous studies of digital media use, participation has been equated with access to content and interaction with the system or other users. While admitting that access and interaction constitute conditions of possibility for participation, he is adamant that they are also markedly distinct from it. They do not necessarily carry the elements of “power dynamics and decision-making” (p. 69). These critical considerations offer a prism and a scale through which the participatory nature of digitally mediated civic participation environments and formats can be evaluated. The access to political information and the interaction with institutional representatives and fellow citizens certainly create conditions of possibility for political participation; however, whether participation takes place (and to what degree) is determined by the influence of citizens’ activities on decision making. From van Dijk’s (2012) observations cited in the previous section, it would appear that e-participation projects so far have enabled minimalist participation at best. True power sharing has not been the expressed goal of institutionally designed systems for e-participation or the outcome of e-participation initiatives. Audibility, understood as effective citizen input into political and administrative decisions and outcomes achieved through media platforms, has not been given due attention in e-participation initiatives.

Digital Platforms

The degree of citizens’ participation via digital systems cannot be reduced to the design of these systems alone, but it is certainly affected by it. That artifacts have politics has been established by the philosophical and social studies of technology long ago (see Feenberg, 1999; Winner, 1980). In the context of Web 2.0, online platforms have taken the role of a key technical configuration on which digital communication unfolds (Bogost & Montfort, 2009; Hands, 2013). Gillespie’s (2010) scrutiny of the discursive trajectories that have intersected to shape the meaning of the term *platform* identifies four different semantic points of origin—computational, architectural, figurative, and political.

All four of these semantic areas are relevant to why “platform” has emerged in reference to online content-hosting intermediaries and, just as important, what value both its specificity and its flexibility offer them. All point to a common set of connotations: a “raised level surface” designed to facilitate some activity that will subsequently take place. . . . Drawing these meanings together, “platform” emerges not simply as indicating a functional shape: it suggests a progressive and egalitarian arrangement, promising to support those who stand upon it. (Gillespie, 2010, p. 250)

To what extent, however, does such a promotional pitch describe the actual role of platforms in enhancing users’ participation in various areas of social life? “Platform shapes participation,” states Gillespie in a 2014 roundtable on the subject (see Clark et al., 2014). In the same conversation, Jose van Dijk launches a critical line of questioning:

What can we know about how platforms steer online communication? How much do we understand in terms of their power to massage the messages we send and receive? Are users technically literate enough to understand the invisible commercial and algorithmic mechanisms used to process their data? How vulnerable are users who have become addicted to, if not dependent on, the platforms they have themselves helped become indispensable? (Clark et al., 2014, p. 1449)

These invisible powerful mechanisms, in Dijck's view, impose an algorithmic logic that comes to replace the editorial logic of earlier media generations. The difference is critical: Algorithmic logic is more pervasive and harder to discern, thus shaping users' participation in subtle ways while giving them the perception of power sharing and freedom.

Other academic analysts bring up the familiar theme of user agency in the discussion of online platforms. They put forward arguments that emphasize users' creativity and resourcefulness. Users, this argument goes, play with platform affordances, repurpose features, and circumvent limitations by stepping in and out of various online platforms and offline spaces in their pursuit of cherished goals, including political participation:

Over the past several years, activists, nongovernmental organizations, media makers, and citizens have been honing strategies for hacking media platforms, sometimes literally (hello, Anonymous) and sometimes more figuratively. They have learned to take advantage of the native capacities of multiple platforms to devise interlocking campaigns that generate a groundswell of attention and interaction. (Clark et al., 2014, p. 1451)

As we know from the studies of earlier media technologies and institutions, between the possibility for tight structurally inscribed control and steering (what Latour, 1992, calls the "prescriptions" embedded into technological systems) and the free reign of user playfulness and creativity lies a vast empirical terrain in which different mediating structures interact with different types of participation in conducive or obstructive ways. That is why questions such as *Who participates? In what? For what purpose? What is the extent of power sharing?* are critical for deciding how platform configurations get implicated in processes where citizens seek to influence the decisions of political and administrative institutions.

The following case study raises these questions as it traces the construction and deployment of three different types of platforms on the site of a Bulgarian municipality. The first platform was intended for e-government understood as offering citizens administrative services by means of digital access. The second was designed and maintained by engaged citizens united in a nongovernmental organization (NGO) and motivated by the idea of shortening the way between people's concerns and the ear of the municipal departments capable of addressing the respective problems. The third platform is Facebook, which was used for the launching and maintenance of several group pages that joined together to challenge a concrete decision of the municipal administration—a grassroots-initiated instance of e-participation.

These platforms are very different in origin, technical structure, and communicative purpose. Yet, they all match the generic definition of online platforms as "online content-hosting intermediaries" and the image circulated in public discourse: "a 'raised level surface' designed to facilitate some activity that will subsequently take place" (see Gillespie, 2010, p. 250 cited earlier). As such, they render a valuable opportunity for examining the relationship between different technical and social designs and the corresponding degrees of citizen participation. Each platform represented a terrain on which a cast of diverse actors met and interacted in markedly different ways and with different results. Each platform offered citizens a distinct position and set of tools in their dealings with municipal power holders. What

kind of participation did these platforms make possible? What specific features proved instrumental for shaping participation and its effects? How did the three platforms fit into broader networks of sites, activities, and relations that shaped participation and its outcomes? By addressing these questions, the following case study aims to contribute to the advancement of a nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of the possibilities for effective participation and power sharing offered by digital platforms.

The Case Study

The three platforms under consideration came to the attention of the researcher in the course of a project focused on the use of digital media in the activities of civil society groups and organizations in Bulgaria. Activists who had created and moderated Facebook group pages as part of their campaign to protect a local park from destruction in the Bulgarian city Stara Zagora were approached for interviews. In the course of these interviews, the activists themselves brought up the examples of the other two platforms, one of which they had created themselves. Thus, an interesting range of platform designs and participation modes lodged in the same cultural setting presented itself. Whereas Facebook group pages are widely used for different kinds of discussion and organizing by online groups and administrative service platforms are created in many jurisdictions, a platform conceived, designed, and run by activists is a rare occurrence. The activities staged on the three platforms also exemplified different types of relationships between citizens and public administration that can be roughly labeled administrative, collaborative, and contentious. Because they involved largely the same set of actors and shared the same sociopolitical context, these platforms and their respective participation modes and effects could be examined comparatively.

This qualitative case study was framed with a view to encompassing the main developments in the platforms' construction and use. Data were collected through individual in-depth interviews with a small number of informants who had been variably involved in the platforms' design and utilization. Altogether, five key participants were interviewed one or two times over the period of 18 months (2016–2018). Close inspection of the platforms' features and analysis of samples of publicly accessible content posted on them were also performed. These samples included "About" pages, posts by moderators, and series of posts related to the specific events traced by the study as detailed next. Publications in local and national mainstream media and administrative documents were identified through references from the interviews and keyword searches and were used to supplement informants' accounts.

The subsequent analysis of the data focused on the relations between the citizens of Stara Zagora and the city's political and administrative power holders that these platforms prefigured and supported. The dynamics of these relationships as they unfolded on and around the three online platforms were examined with a view to determining the degrees of audibility and participation they manifested. The platforms were viewed as "ensembles of possibilities and interdictions" (de Certeau, 1984, p. 98) that are socially constructed and can be characterized along five dimensions: (1) their conception and origin (Who built them, and whose agendas were inscribed in them?); (2) their prescribed user (Latour, 1992); (3) their anticipated and manifested uses; (4) the mechanisms of audibility they involved; and (5) the power-sharing effects achieved with their help. These dimensions formed the main categories in the thematic analysis of the interviews with civic activists. Dimension 2, the prescribed user of each platform, defined by the types of user-generated action and content that platform designs anticipated, was the main focus of the analysis

of the platforms' interfaces and publicly accessible posts. This part of the analysis followed the model proposed by Woolgar (1997) that views "technology as text" (p. 70). It sought to identify the perceptions of function, purpose, and scope "written" into the platform in the process of its construction in the form of technical features, on the one hand, and on the other, the affordances "read" by users in the process of its application. Official documents and news articles concerning the platforms' projected purpose and utility were also analyzed from this perspective.

Stara Zagora, the site on which the case unfolded, is a Bulgarian city of about 150,000 inhabitants. It is located in the heart of Bulgaria amid the fertile Thracian Valley. It used to be one of the centers of the country's electronic industry during socialist times, which led to comparatively high levels of computer education, skills, and literacy among the generations growing up at that time. Nowadays, Stara Zagora is a relatively well-developed industrial and educational center. Its economic indicators are among the highest in the country. It is home to a large electrical energy production complex, equipment building, agricultural, and food-processing enterprises, and a university. The population is well educated, and the unemployment rate is one of the lowest in the country. Since 2011, Stara Zagora has been led by a young and popular mayor (born 1981), elected with 79% of the votes, who is currently serving his second term.

Platforming Administration

Given this background, it is no surprise that Stara Zagora's municipal administration wanted to be a leader in implementing e-government and initiated the construction of an e-government system as early as 2004 (Harizanova, Vladimirov, & Botev, 2010). In 2009, the municipality received funding from the state-run Operational Program "Administrative Capacity" complemented by a grant from the European Union's European Social Fund for a project entitled Stara Zagora Municipality for Better Administrative Service Through Electronic Government. The project's cost was estimated at BGN 2,368,586 (approximately €1,214,659). The key deliverable expected was a "system for integrated administrative service and provision of public services by electronic means" (Stara Zagora Municipality, 2009). Among the desired results was the "turning of the administration's face toward the needs of citizens" (Stara Zagora Municipality, 2009). Conceived in a typical administrative style, this system accessible through the municipality's website allowed citizens to request certificates regarding personal and business status, apply for permits, sign up for appointments to meet with officials, give suggestions, and report issues, including corruption, by filling in electronic forms (see <https://www.starazagora.bg/bg/elektronni-uslugi>). The system positioned the citizen as client of the city's bureaucracy. The concept of e-government was equated with e-administration. The citizen was invited to follow the set procedures as a cooperative subject of administrative control.

Unremarkable among other such initiatives proliferating across the country and the continent, Stara Zagora's Municipality for Better Administrative Service Through Electronic Government project gained notoriety because of the penalties imposed on its management by the Bulgarian courts, subsequently confirmed by OLAF,⁴ for failure to deliver key activities and outcomes. According to local informants, city

⁴ OLAF stands for European Anti-Fraud Office (see https://ec.europa.eu/anti-fraud/home_en).

employees experienced serious difficulties in making the system work. Its reputation among the intended user population was eroded by a series of scandals and lawsuits involving officials representing competing political parties who publicly accused each other of financial irregularities and mismanagement (Stara Zagora News, 2014).

The system for administrative service is of interest to this case study only to the extent that it represents an example of a type of platform sitting on the far end of minimalist participation. The administrative services it offered the citizen were mostly tools and procedures for administrative compliance. Limited in function, vision, and scope, the platform represented an electronic tethering of the citizen to bureaucratic vocabulary, rules, and procedures. The token gestures intended to facilitate citizens' initiative were the buttons that allowed the submission of so-called signals, or reports of problems, whistle-blowing concerning corruption, or giving suggestions and ideas for improvement. These signals and suggestions would sink into a nontransparent database overseen by the same officials who presumably could be responsible for the reported issues, or whose names or departments might have been cited in the potential corruption allegations.

If that was the municipality leadership's idea of "turning its face toward the needs of citizens," a handful of civically minded women and men thought otherwise. The second platform included in this study emerged out of the brainstorming of a group of Stara Zagora citizens who had met through a Facebook group dedicated to discussing the city's life and development.

My Electronic Municipality: A Platform for Collaboration

The pursuit of ways to take ownership of the idea of an electronic municipality platform originated in Facebook discussions among engaged citizens across various group pages dedicated to the city, most notably on the page *My Stara Zagora* (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/645428485467660/about/>). Some of the group's members recognized in each other a shared desire to take action toward improvement of the city infrastructure and services and push for more direct involvement of the citizenry in the municipal affairs.

Lyuba P., My Stara Zagora administrator and activist: I think we liked each other very much in the Facebook group. The two of us met there [refers to the other activist participating in the interview]. Because in the group you communicate a lot, you can easily find people that you resonate with; you haven't seen them, but you see how they write, and you find in them a good match.

Milka K., My Stara Zagora administrator and activist: You see that your opinions on many serious topics coincide; and where they do not coincide, these people can engage in a constructive dialogue. They say, "this is my opinion" and present arguments: one, two, three; they don't start attacks and insults. Everyone needs people like that in one's life, and it is normal when you meet them, to want to keep them closer to you.

The members of the small group of like-minded people found it problematic that many of their fellow citizens regularly posted on Facebook complaints and good ideas concerning things such as the city's public sites maintenance, transportation infrastructure, and other aspects of its daily life. However, there was no way to transmit these comments to the city's elected representatives and administrators who could take the necessary steps to fix what needed fixing. Everything remained in the realm of whining, rants, and gossip. Instead, the group wanted to see a connection between citizens and the municipal leadership, resulting in audibility as defined earlier, and concrete action. This led to the idea of My e-Municipality, an electronic platform that would conduct the flow of comments, complaints, and suggestions directly to the city officials responsible for making changes.

Notably, the young Stara Zagora mayor himself frequented the Facebook group pages dedicated to the city and occasionally addressed citizens' concerns. So did the city's ombudswoman, a role that involved serving as an advocate for minorities, individual citizens, and collectives vis-à-vis the institutions. Having met and exchanged views with these elected representatives on Facebook, the civic activists arranged a meeting with the mayor face-to-face and laid out their plan: to design, build, and maintain a platform that would allow citizens to submit their concerns, criticisms, and suggestions to the city administration directly. This concept had several fundamental differences from the one underlying the e-government platform described earlier. First, the proposed platform, MeO, would be designed and run by the activists themselves. Second, it would cost nothing (i.e., it would rely on voluntary work). Third, city officials would make a commitment to respond to each submitted comment within a set term, something that would be tracked by a timer and a log showing the movement of the issue through the administrative channels. Fourth, some sharing and interactive features would be added to the platform's design that would allow comments by individual citizens to be joined and reinforced by others. The process of the (social) construction of the platform was collaborative and political at the same time:

Lyuba P.: [You should have seen] how we discussed, how we thought up detail after detail—how things should look, how they should be done to work effectively together; how we reveled in our ability to come up with these terrific ideas. . . . In the end [at our meeting] in the municipality, the mayor asked how much it would cost. But we refused [to accept funding] because for us it is very important to be independent.

The platform My e-Municipality (<http://estarazagora.info/>) was created by several computer professionals participating in the group. At its core was the "innovative model of communication with institutions and of civic engagement and control. The functioning virtual environment is a consequence, an instrument, an expression of this model (or philosophy, if you would like)" (Miroslav Yonchev, administrator, <http://estarazagora.info/blog/>, December 1, 2013). The activists adamantly rejected the analogy with initiatives like the electronic government. In their model, the citizen came first.

This electronic platform was embedded in a social context of formally established partnerships and commitments with institutions and business organizations. Specifically, the regional ombudswoman took it upon herself to monitor the submitted concerns and complaints and to channel them to the respective departments that could respond most effectively. Tangled searches for the office or official in charge and long waits on the part of concerned citizens could turn into a couple of clicks and strictly timed response:

Lyuba P.: To report a pothole in the road, where should you call? Should you waste time to go to the municipal office if you can actually take a photo of it and upload it on the platform with your mobile phone, and send the notice? With exactly five clicks, it goes where it should.

The concept of My e-Municipality worked, and continues to work, in practice at the time of writing (October 2018). Inspection of the posted content shows many posts pointing to a wide range of problems concerning renovation and construction in the city, sanitation and waste treatment, traffic regulation, and numerous other areas of municipal housekeeping and daily life. From its very inception, My e-Municipality became a poster child for the innovativeness and democratic responsiveness of the mayor's office, for civic initiative and good collaboration among citizens, representatives, and administrators. It won prizes and was commended and endorsed by the local press. The NGO that the activists had founded won a moderate local celebrity status and went on to spearhead other initiatives aimed at "activating" Stara Zagora citizens—the creation of book-sharing mini-libraries, blood donation, cleanups, and others.

Preserve Bedechka: A Platform for Contestation

Meanwhile, in other quarters, other citizens did not enjoy such a generous and cooperative attention and response from local politicians, administrators, and media. In this case, the issue addressed through an online platform was contentious. The creators of a Facebook group page entitled Preserve Bedechka had been trying to draw public attention to the municipality's plan to abolish a more than 40-year-old city park and open the site for residential construction. Administered by a small team of activists (who had also found each other through Facebook), the group's page argued that the process of restitution⁵—the return of the land constituting the park to its pre-1944 owners (a major policy instituted after the fall of communism countrywide)—had broken laws and regulations and was therefore illegal and void. Content on the pages emphasized the public value of the park named Bedechka in its capacity as a recreational green area and an ecosystem. Various violations and conflicts of interest in the procedure through which the municipal council had stripped the terrain of its public park status were pointed out. In parallel initiatives, the handful of Bedechka protectors showered local and national media with press releases, documented valuable tree species in the park, contacted members of the Municipal Council, circulated petitions, and staged protests in the city center—activities that were carried out between 2013 and 2016. Their protest was largely ignored by the municipality. "It was like a war of position," one of the group administrators said, "until the excavators entered the park."

At the time the excavators entered the park, the noise the small group behind the Preserve Bedechka Facebook page was making escalated by cross-posting in other Stara Zagora-related Facebook

⁵ Restitution means restoring ownership over land, forests, and real estate to their private owners from whom these properties had been expropriated after the establishment of the communist regime in 1944. The first of several restitution laws was the Ownership and Use of Agricultural Land Act passed by the Great National Assembly on February 22, 1991. Restitution legislation has been ideologically driven and has produced controversial effects (see Leland, 2003).

group pages and through publications in the mass media and small rallies in a central city square. Their claims and activities met with some vicious counterattacks on local news sites that called the team “a political pressure group led by left functionaries” trying to “destabilize Stara Zagora” (cited on <http://forum.stz-bg.com/viewtopic.php?t=44981>). The clash and the drama caught the attention of the activists running My e-Municipality, who realized that the park was facing destruction and decisively took the side of its protectors.

Lyuba P.: Yes, in the beginning of 2016, we started digging to see what this was all about. Until then, Preserve Bedechka had been three-four people who had worked for the cause, later we joined in. Then we decided to get more people together and to get to the bottom of things. . . . We didn't know the other people [the Preserve Bedechka members] until then. But in the same way as it happened with the platform [My e-Municipality] we liked each other. And because [name of one of them] was in Sofia and [name of another] in England, their cause had not reached many Stara Zagora citizens. . . . Facebook became a very serious weapon; sometimes it is more than a medium. . . . In this way, Bedechka became a cause for the whole city, because we managed to reach more people and tell them about the problem. People hear that there is a problem somewhere, but they do not realize how much everything is actually corrupted . . . how much we have already lost this park.

The joined virtual and embodied forces of the two activist groups proved a factor to be reckoned with. In this alliance, the collaborative activism of the My e-Municipality group turned into the contentious sort overnight. The group's high profile in the city and the legal documentation amassed by the combative Preserve Bedechka team formed a strong new collective actor that set out to challenge the city administration's decisions concerning the park. The members of the two groups brought together two distinct and valuable forms of social capital—local and cosmopolitan. The My e-Municipality group had gained local visibility and public trust and established channels of direct interaction with the local media and the mayor's office. The Preserve Bedechka activists were natives of Stara Zagora who had moved to the capital, Sofia, and other cities. They included professionals with expertise and connections in the areas of architecture, sociology, public relations, media, and civil society organizations.

Lyuba P.: In fact, in Preserve Bedechka we are people who know how to accomplish things and we think several moves ahead. We have a philologist in the group, a children literature writer who is appointed as our spokesperson, I have a degree in marketing and know how to manage a business, how to present an idea, with visual means, if you'd like. We know how to use the social networks and how to reach more people through various approaches. We do everything to the best of our ability; we divide tasks and work in teams. We have a chat in Facebook that we use all the time, we write each other day and night; we have turned into a big family. . . . We also have a closed group where we organize our documents and upload the most important items and themes for discussion.

This formidable team lacked formal legal competence, but drew on its collective intelligence to accumulate it at a rapid pace. Soon, group members working under the flag of Preserve Bedechka started challenging municipal acts related to the regulation of the park on a legal basis and won arguments vis-à-vis municipal lawyers.

The responsive mayor who had embraced the My e-Municipality platform proposed by the activists did not find them very “likable” this time around, as they themselves put it. The united group putting up resistance to the destruction of the park Bedechka emerged as troublemakers who stepped on the toes of powerful economic interests in the city and exposed the complicity and incompetence of city politicians and officials.

Contention clearly needed different tools than cooperation, and the activists found them in the multipurpose platform Facebook. The battle for the park had to be fought through legal arguments, but also through events and rallies designed to win over the support of the local and national publics. The mayor’s office found itself under dual pressure—the landowners and developers on the one hand and the park’s protectors on the other—and had to decide whose side to take.

The complex legal, architectural, financial, and economic arguments over the park’s status and the restitution of its land dragged out for a long time. At the time of writing, it would be premature to conclude whether the case and the cause have been won or lost by Bedechka’s protectors. The scale is tipping toward the protection side with some compromises, but the final gavel has not sounded yet. A valid claim to be made, however, is that, because of the sustained publicity achieved by Bedechka’s protectors and their incessant monitoring, commentary, and collective action at the different turns of the case, the fate of the park was elevated into public prominence and commanded the attention of the city administration. A live public consultation was held on January 23, 2017. A municipal referendum was called on June 18, 2017, to address the question whether the territory should stay a park or be transformed into a residential neighborhood. The Protect Bedechka team mobilized resolutely to promote its position, throwing all its accumulated clout and experience into the campaign leading up to the referendum. Although only 15% of eligible Stara Zagora voters cast a vote in the referendum, 80% of those who did supported the preservation of the park. That gave the municipal administration sufficient grounds to get off the fence and to change the formal designation of the land back to public park. The Bedechka case became an inspiration for a number of other groups around the country fighting to protect urban green space—a spontaneous resistance front against multiple commercial interests and land grabs affecting neighborhood parks, playgrounds, and recreational areas in cities.

Discussion: Platforms at Stake

As indicated earlier, five main analytical dimensions were used in the comparison of the three platforms: (1) their conception and origin (Who built them, and whose agendas were inscribed in them?); (2) their prescribed user (Latour, 1992); (3) their anticipated and manifested uses; (4) the mechanisms of audibility they involved; and (5) the power-sharing effects achieved with their help. Additional aspects of the platforms’ technical and social organization also proved relevant in the course of the analysis. The main characteristics of the three platforms related to the five analytical dimensions are compared in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of the Three Platforms Along Five Analytical Dimensions.

	Administrative Platform	Collaborative Platform	Contestation Platform
	Stara Zagora Municipality for Better Administrative Service Through Electronic Government	My e-Municipality	Preserve Bedechka Facebook Group Page
Conception and origin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •City administration; publicly funded 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Civic collective organized as an NGO •IT professionals as volunteers and NGO members •Voluntary design and maintenance work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Activists pursuing a cause
Prescribed user	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Any citizen as client of city administration •Individual citizen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Any citizen as critical monitor and user of city infrastructure and services •Aggregative mutual support possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Any citizen interested in the cause •Individual citizen as critical thinker •Individual citizen as member of a civic collective
Uses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Administrative services •Flagging problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reporting issues and suggesting solutions to city administrators and corporations responsible for public utilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Discussing city policies •Expression of critical views and analyses •Suggesting alternative solutions •Organizing protest
Mechanisms of audibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •None/Nontransparent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Tracking and timing of response as built-in features •Collaboration agreement with elected officials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •No direct mechanisms •Pursuit of publicity through mass media and staging events in public places
Power-sharing effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Better access to administrative service •More efficient compliance with government requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Faster response to and tackling of issues flagged by citizens •Better collaboration between citizens and city administration on housekeeping issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Pressuring city administration to open issues to public input •Revision and reversal of policy

The strictly administrative platform (Stara Zagora Municipality for Better Administrative Service Through Electronic Government) was conceived and designed by politicians, bureaucrats, and computer

professionals. It assigned the citizen the role of an individual law-abiding subject of the state governing apparatus. The built-in or prescribed user of this platform was an individual looking to conform to bureaucratic requirements for reporting and registration. Only token invitations for expressing concerns and reporting issues were offered. To the extent that these invitations would be taken up, this would be done by isolated private persons. It was left to the representatives of the powerful institution that operated the platform to respond at their own pace and will. Thus, the kind of power sharing and civic participation supported by this platform was minimal. The politics inscribed in it was a one-sided, nonnegotiable top-down demand for compliance. There was no implied participation in deliberation or decision making. Audibility was only formally alluded to by the system through the features allowing citizens to "signal" administrative improprieties and register complaints with no clear commitment for follow-up.

The collaborative My e-Municipality platform was conceived and designed by citizens with an active interest in improving their city in terms of infrastructure, day-to-day maintenance, business and administrative services, and other developmental aspirations. The prescribed user of My e-Municipality was technically the same citizen as with the administrative platform, but in a different subject position. Here, she or he was not only enabled to issue a comment or signal, but also entitled to a timely response. Municipal administrators had formally committed to responding within reasonable time frame, and that response was being relentlessly tracked and exhibited by the functionalities of the platform itself. The content of issues to be reported was not predetermined; it was left open to users to select according to the needs of daily life. These arrangements and agreements between a collective standing for the citizens of Stara Zagora and the political and administrative leadership gave citizens a sense of power sharing. Theirs was, of course, soft power that could be diffused at any time, but nevertheless, the commitments made by the administrations raised audibility and the degree of citizen participation by several notches.

Notably, the platform allowed concerns and suggestions expressed by individuals to be reinforced by others who shared them. In this way, each individual voice could in principle be amplified by an aggregation of supporters. Citizens were not doomed to stand alone vis-à-vis the city administration. They could spontaneously trigger or intentionally summon their own supportive force. These features of My e-Municipality had not emerged out of the expertise of a top professional design team or a super-benevolent administrative leadership, but from the collective design process in which fellow citizens with professional skills and care for the public good had "thought up detail after detail—how things should look, how they should be done to work effectively together" (see Lyuba's comment earlier). These same fellow citizens had advertised the platform in various social and public online and offline fora, thus propelling its visibility, the trust in it, and its effectiveness. Judging by the record of numerous issues posted by citizens and checked with the "resolved" mark that could be found on the platform, it could be assumed that the audibility achieved through this kind of collaborative effort toward better civic housekeeping had been reasonably high.

The mayor and his team as well as the ombudsman had played a key role in the rise of this platform to recognition and popularity. They had rightly seen in it an innovative channel to interact with the citizenship in a constructive way toward making the city a more hospitable place. The collaborative housekeeping effort benefited all sides.

Finally, the third platform, Facebook, represented by the two group pages examined in this study, offered a generic communication apparatus that was well understood and skillfully used by the active citizens concerned with the fate of the park Bedechka. While they had not invented the group-building features of the platform, they acted as competent appropriators of these features for their own ends. They were the ones administering the respective group spaces and defining the terms and norms of communication in them. Typically, the subject position that Facebook prescribes to its user is that of a socialite and network flaneur who is out to gain attention, friends, and popularity and indulge her or his desire for consumption and entertainment. However, in the hands of the activist-administrators of the Save Bedechka group, this position was intentionally and successfully redefined. Their choice of topic, communication style, and tone defined the user of the platform as the active citizen determined to unite with others and to challenge administrative decisions that contradict her or his interests and values.

Although Facebook marshals users' sociality into simplified forms (see Dijck, 2013), when skillfully deployed, it allowed the unfolding of collective deliberation, identity formation, and action. As one of my informants claimed, it had proved to be more than a medium; "It can be a weapon." The progressive consolidation of social and cultural capital in the process of group communication focused on the city of Stara Zagora (the My Stara Zagora group) led to the emergence of a strong and dedicated collective actor with a will to advance the public good generally understood. When this actor crossed deliberative paths with the Save Bedechka group where the elements of a contentious collective action frame had already been elaborated (injustice, agency, and identity—see Gamson, 1992), the potential for a high degree of audibility and participation was created. It was, notably, only a potential because in principle, the city administration could keep ignoring the group's protest forever.

Unlike the other two platforms, the Facebook group pages had no audibility arrangements built in. They did not rely on a social context of predetermined compliant or collaborative relationships between citizens and administration. The general framing of the problems to be tackled had not been determined by a preestablished shared interest between the two sides. As much as these conditions created risky openness and uncertainty with respect to audibility, they were the ones that made it possible for political contestation to be staged. The Facebook pages enabled citizens to form a participatory force that opted for strong participation—that is, for equitable power sharing and having a decisive influence on concrete administrative decisions, as opposed to the institution holding decision-making power by default.

At the same time, the Save Bedechka initiative demonstrates that effective participation in the civic and political sense in which both sides wage comparable degrees of power could not be engineered through Facebook (or, arguably, any platform) alone. It was only made possible through the generation of a stream of collective action that included marches and rallies, knocking on the mayor's door, arguing with city lawyers, distributing leaflets, dancing around ancient trees, cleaning garbage and documenting species in the park, and wooing the mass media. The platform—the Facebook group pages—floated over this stream, navigating and often directing it, but unable to go anywhere without it. Audibility was only produced through the complex dynamics of interconnected activities and the visibility achieved through various media and physical presence in public sites.

Should Facebook be credited, then, for providing a conducive environment for maximalist civic participation? A conclusion like that would be overstated. Facebook is not designed as an instrument for

democratic power sharing, but it contains a number of features that can be “read” and appropriated by motivated citizens as tools for civic participation and political contestation. The reflective and creative redefining of the open elements of the platform’s group-building functionality on the part of the activists led to the nurturing of the oppositional identity and collective agency that turned the citizen group into an empowered actor. While the platform’s technical script did not invite or guarantee such a development, in this case, it did not prevent it either.

Conclusion

The initial analytical dimensions used to typify the three platforms and the participation modes they supported can be further fine-tuned as a result of the analysis of the empirical data of the case study. The analysis has demonstrated the importance of locating the center of initiative and control with regard to the respective platforms’ design and operation. The nature and the openness of the subject position that a platform creates for the citizen has proved to be a key criterion with respect to the degree of participation that can be realized. The external arrangements defining the relationship between citizens and administration within which the platform is embedded and the broader action repertoires of which platform communication constitutes an element have demonstrated a decisive influence on the outcomes of platform-based activities. The degree of citizen participation occurring through the platform was also affected by the nature of the issues at stake: participation in what and for what ends? Dealing with controversial issues that involved challenging the decisions of powerful institutions required a much richer repertoire of organization and action than any single platform would support. Here, but also in the example of collaborative power sharing through the My e-Municipality platform, the evidence provided by this case study highlights the critical role of the civic collective. Higher degrees of participation involving power sharing and the possibility for citizens to influence administrative decision making were present in those instances where (1) platform design and operation was in the hands of such a collective and (2) the platform functionalities allowed for civic connection (Dahlgren, 2009) and the emergence of collective identity. Left alone vis-à-vis power holders, individual citizens stood little chance of gaining attention and audibility, especially on contested issues.

The analysis of the cases shows that audibility as a feature built into platforms and secured by the social arrangements surrounding them represents an important criterion by which the democratic effectiveness of these platforms can be assessed. E-participation remains an exercise futile at worst and formal at best if no thought is given to the commitment of political and administrative institutions to take into consideration citizens’ contributions in the course of decision making. Yet, the tale of the three platforms indicates that audibility is not a matter of technical ingenuity or a promise easily given by power holders. Audibility is achieved through active involvement by citizen collectives in the process of platform construction and maintenance and in a myriad of accompanying activities for which the platform serves as a launching pad and anchor.

The theoretical conclusions that follow from placing the notion of audibility at the heart of e-participation, then, suggest several directions in which the concept needs to be redefined. First, it should be seen as only one strand in a broader strategy of civic participation comprising both institutional and extrainstitutional, and digital and embodied forms. Second, platform politics constitutes a key generative force of e-participation not only as the politics that unfolds on digital platforms, but also as the political

process that leads to the construction of platforms themselves and their integration into a complex grid of power relations and struggles. Third, contentious e-participation requires platforms free of administrative and political control that offer civic actors openness and adaptability. Finally, strong e-participation is accomplished by civic collectives with shared identities, goals, and rich action repertoires, as opposed to isolated individuals following procedures set by powerful players.

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