

Connect the City: Rights, Justice and the Digital Divide

Article by Guillem Ramírez Chico

November 30, 2020

Among the trends accelerated by the pandemic, digitalisation stands out for its pace of change. Large parts of education, work, and social services moved online in a matter of weeks. Though many people lack the connections, equipment, and skills to access what are often fundamental rights, much of this change will be permanent. In the 21st century, it will become increasingly hard to live without the internet. For cities such as Barcelona, the answer is a politics that puts people and rights at the centre of the digital transition.

Between 14 March and 18 May, Barcelona experienced a strict lockdown. Residents could only leave their homes for food and medicine, medical visits, or essential work. Until a certain normality returned in June, 73 per cent of people still employed worked from home. School-age children also stayed at home as all education was conducted online.

The pandemic has accelerated digitalisation as technology stepped in to facilitate communication, enhance social services, and sustain economic activity during the lockdown. Cities have been the main scene of this acceleration. In Barcelona, digital technologies are at the heart of the response to the health and socio-economic crises: from the manufacture of personal protective equipment and social action to support vulnerable populations to the large-scale shift to remote working. E-administration has ensured the continuity of municipal services.

Preventing physical distancing from becoming social isolation has been the principle under which Barcelona and many other European cities have operated. But the lockdown has also exposed blatant inequalities in access to and use of digital technologies. The effects of the increasingly well-known “digital divide” are clear: digitalisation affects access to human rights such as the rights to work, quality education, equal opportunities, access to public services, a decent standard of living, gender equality, and accessibility.

In recent years, “digital rights” – primarily concerning privacy, data, transparency, and technological accountability issues – have become part of the European technology agenda. The adoption of the General Data Protection Regulation in 2016 is a good example. However, the material dimension of digitalisation and its social impact has been barely present. The pandemic offers an opportunity to correct this course and put forth a progressive social agenda for the digital age: the digital transition will not work if it does not work for everyone.

Technological humanism and the people-centred digital city

For the past five years, Barcelona City Council has promoted a rights-based digital city model. During the previous municipal term (2015 to 2019), Barcelona’s digital policy advanced the city’s technological sovereignty. A network of 15 000 urban Sentilo sensors was installed to support the city administration by generating real-time data on mobility, waste management, air quality, and energy consumption. An open-source digital citizen participation platform, Decidim, was launched and is now used in more than 100 cities in 20 different countries. Free software accounted for more than 70 per cent of the municipal digital development budget, which aimed to ensure that both citizens and the public sector could choose ethical digital services – in terms of data use but also citizen control of

technology.

[...] a rights-based approach is probably the only way to place social justice within the analysis of the digital divide, and at the same time force public authorities to take action.

The current municipal government, a coalition between the municipalists of Barcelona En Comú and the social-democratic Socialists' Party of Catalonia, has broadened the focus of digital politics to promote “technological humanism”. The people-centred digital city will be built on a politics that guarantees fundamental rights and freedoms (privacy, participation, and citizen control); that democratically regulates emerging technologies (artificial intelligence, 5G) based on social use, and that incorporates the digital dimension into the existing set of social rights (education, social care, accessibility, and housing).

Social inequalities, digital inequality

Barcelona is an unequal city. According to [data](#) from 2017, a majority of the population (52.9 per cent) lives in middle-income neighbourhoods and 16.7 per cent in high-income neighbourhoods.² Almost a third of the population (30.4 per cent) lives in low-income neighbourhoods. The income of the highest-income area, Pedralbes in Les Corts, is 6.4 times higher than that of the lowest-income one, Ciutat Meridiana in Nou Barris.

The pandemic affected poorer districts disproportionately. On one hand, many low-income workers could not perform their duties offsite, nor risk forgoing their income by missing work. On the other hand, [homes](#) in lowest-income areas are generally 47 square metres smaller than the city average of 134 square metres.³ The economic crisis has only deepened the existing inequalities. Between January and August, [unemployment](#) in Barcelona grew by 2.1 per cent to reach 8.6 per cent. Lower-income areas such as Ciutat Meridiana, Trinitat Vella, and Vallbona saw larger increases than more affluent districts.

The income of the highest-income area [...] is 6.4 times higher than that of the lowest-income one [...]

The digital divide is built around these same urban inequalities. In 2016, 96 per cent of Barcelona's inhabitants reported that they had internet access. In one of the poorest areas of the city, Torre Baró in Nou Barris, the figure dropped to 62 per cent. Research from 2016 found the average age, gender make-up, educational level, and income of the neighbourhood to be clear determinants of internet access and use.

In early 2020, social organisations in Barcelona and Catalonia published data on the impact of the digital divide on the people they serve – particularly vulnerable communities. Twenty per cent did not have a computer at home and 18.5 per cent could not freely access the internet. In households with a net income of under 500 euros a month, 42 per cent did not have a computer and 28 per cent could not access the internet at will. Socio-economic conditions play a clear role, but so does social capital. Among people of non-Spanish nationality served by third sector organisations, the percentage unable to freely access the internet climbed to 37 per cent.

The digital divide and Covid-19

The pandemic further magnified the effects of the digital divide. The Hàbitat3 Foundation is a social housing operator that manages flats for families facing a social emergency. Hàbitat3 guarantees the rent, manages the

tenancy, and ensures adequate social care. Data from a tenants' survey on the digital divide from March to June 2020 show the magnitude of the crisis.

During lockdown, 26 per cent of tenant families did not have home wifi; 16 per cent also lacked access to the internet via mobile phones or tablets, and 6 per cent did not have any type of internet connection. Among those who could connect, education and employment were the most common uses. And yet, when 45 per cent of respondents can only access the internet via a mobile phone and 50 per cent of families have three or four members, the effects of the digital divide on access to quality education or decent work are clear. The social workers of the Habitat3 Foundation also reported that many tenants also had difficulties processing administrative procedures online, taking part in online educational activities, searching for jobs, and accessing video conferencing platforms. The digital divide is also a matter of skills.

Cities take action

Shortly after the lockdown, in July, 79 per cent of Barcelona citizens believed that remote working would become the norm in the future. Sixty-eight per cent supported large-scale remote working for both the private and public sector. But if the digital transformation will generate new needs in relation to access to public services, should public authorities not create new ways to meet them?

Barcelona City Council's response indicates progress in this direction. By the end of April, 5300 mobile devices had already been distributed to students affected by the digital divide. In parallel, the city's cross-party working group for post-Covid recovery, which also features over 200 civil society organisations, included digital inclusion as a priority for the city. In the last four months of 2020, the city's emergency digital inclusion plan will invest 700 000 euros in facilitating digital access and providing training for people in lower-income areas. Among other measures, the plan will strengthen a network of neighbourhood facilities (municipal Fab Labs) where residents can access the internet and use digital technologies. The council will provide municipal offices in low-income neighbourhoods with trainers to teach people digital skills such as how to access municipal procedures online and use video conferencing software and email. Grants will go to community organisations combatting the digital divide for specific groups such as migrants and low-income women.

*[...] cities cannot overcome digital inequalities on their own
[...]*

The plan is the first of its kind in Barcelona. But cities across Europe and the United States are taking similar action to boost connectivity in times of Covid-19. Through the programme Milano Aiuta, the City Council of Milan has established a collaboration agreement with Samsung to provide free support to people over 65 who have difficulty using the internet. In France, the metropolitan governments of Paris and Nantes have adopted digital voucher programmes: in Nantes, 2000 people have received 50 euros to exchange for digital training sessions with community organisations.

The most ambitious initiative, however, is the New York City "Internet Master Plan". In January 2020, the city government found that 18 per cent of residents (over 1.5 million people) lack internet access at home or via mobile phone. In the case of people living below the poverty line, up to 46 per cent do not have home internet access. Announced before the pandemic, the plan aims to achieve universal internet connectivity for New York City. In the context of Covid-19, Mayor Di Blasio announced 157 million dollars of investment to speed up its implementation – of which 87 million came from the New York police budget.

Digital Inclusion in a multilevel context

But cities cannot overcome digital inequalities on their own – especially in a context of falling revenues and budget constraints. Actions and policies for a just digital transition will have to be deployed across various levels – from cities all the way to the European Union. If we want to give shape to a broad right to digital inclusion, we need to place the digital agenda at the centre of political debate, update legislation, experiment with policies, and forge collaborations between governments, community organisations, and operators.

Digital policy is rising up the agenda at all levels. In June, UN Secretary-General António Guterres presented a Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, with goals such as digital inclusion and universal connectivity by 2030. The Spanish government has presented its España Digital 2025 plan that promises investment in 100 per cent broadband connectivity, new technologies, and digital skills. In Europe, the European Commission has urged governments to ensure that at least 20 per cent of the investments made using the Next Generation EU funds is in the digital realm.

But we need to go further: a rights-based approach is probably the only way to place social justice within the analysis of the digital divide, and at the same time force public authorities to take action. In this case, it is up to national governments to update the current legal framework in order to adapt them to the needs of the digital transition. This means reinforcing what have been considered strictly “digital rights” but also recognising that access to social and political rights – the right to participation, education, accessibility, social care, gender equality, work, and housing – now involves internet access, the requisite skills, and suitable conditions to use digital tools on equal terms.

It is in this sense that Barcelona has called on the Spanish government to recognise the right to digital inclusion as a new generation social right. Barcelona has proposed to transform the generic term “right to digital inclusion” into concrete, actionable rights – rights that, if necessary, can be taken to the courts. These include the right to an open and free internet, the right to basic training and vocational training in the knowledge and responsible use of new technologies, and the right to non-discrimination in access to public services for lack of digital skills.

This does not mean that cities cannot do anything about the digital divide until this happens. On the contrary, promoting digital inclusion involves developing policies to ensure internet access at the micro level. It is about imagining solutions such as a digital discount scheme for low incomes, ways to finance fibre optic connection in neighbourhoods where there is less coverage, increasing the number and type of devices per family, and facilitating the exchange of knowledge and digital skills. The local scale, at the city, district, neighbourhood, or community level, is best suited to testing policies for digital inclusion.

Local governments have a key role to play in solutions like these by detecting vulnerabilities and needs and, to some extent, funding these policies. They can also build an ecosystem of inclusion, linking private technology operators with community organisations working with groups affected by the digital divide, and generating regulatory and financial incentives for their collaboration.

The truth, however, is that introducing social justice and human rights into the debate on digitalisation is a precondition for overcoming the digital divide. That is why, in the post-Covid era, it is more urgent than ever to work for the recognition of a right to digital inclusion and to place the debate on inequalities and social rights at the heart of the European digital model.

The European path to digitalisation

Europe lies between the Silicon Valley model of platform capitalism and data economy, and the Chinese model of digital development at the service of political control. In both cases, digitalisation generates winners and losers.

The European path must offer an alternative to this dichotomy.

This means strengthening Europe's ability to play the digital game by developing the capacity for industrial innovation, common data spaces, and artificial intelligence, as already announced by the European Commission. But above all, it means offering a fair digital transition that lives up to the European values of democracy, equality, human rights, and social cohesion. Justice considerations affect all sides of a digital transition that is necessarily multifaceted. Tax systems need to properly record the activity of transnational digital platforms. Clear limits must be placed on the private sector's ability to profit from personal data, on the basis of our fundamental rights and freedoms. Governments and the private sector must transform modes of production and consumption towards ones that contribute to the ecological transition.

Europe lies between the Silicon Valley model of platform capitalism and data economy, and the Chinese model of digital development at the service of political control.

Cities must be able to regulate the impact of digital platforms on the urban realities in which they operate. Emerging technologies – especially artificial intelligence – must adhere to ethical criteria so as not to reproduce existing social inequalities. At a time when digital connection and skills determine equal opportunity and access to social rights such as education, work, healthcare, accessibility, and public services, they must be available to everyone.

This last dimension places social justice at the heart of the debate on digitalisation: digital inclusion is a matter of human rights. This is probably the main contribution of the lockdown experience to the European digital model. Integrating it into progressive political agendas will be essential to the European path to digitalisation through a fair digital transition.



Guillem Ramírez Chico is a political scientist with a master's in international development from the University of Amsterdam. He currently serves as a policy advisor on city diplomacy and digital policy at Barcelona City Council.

Published November 30, 2020

Article in English

Translation available in Catalan

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/connect-the-city-rights-justice-and-the-digital-divide/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space. Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.

