CIVIC COMPASS

THE DIGITAL TOWN SQUARE:

Crafting Policy for Online Civic Platforms

Di Natale, Marco (Civic House)
Lonati, Maricel (Civic House)
Galvan, Cecilia (Civic House)
Wright, Gastón (Civic House)

Un programa de
CIVIC HOUSE

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The digital revolution has brought about a new era of civic engagement, offering citizens a platform to voice their concerns, mobilise support, and effect change. However, this digital transformation has also introduced a myriad of challenges, particularly in the realm of online content regulation.

This policy brief delves into the ongoing debate surrounding internet content regulation, focusing on its implications for online civic participation platforms such as Change.org, Avaaz, and MoveOn. These platforms are pivotal in empowering citizens to actively participate in the political process, fostering a democratic environment. However, regulating these platforms necessitates a delicate balance between safeguarding freedom of speech and addressing concerns about disseminating harmful content.

II. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN SOCIAL CHANGE AND "BIG TECH" PLATFORMS

Commercial social media platforms, often called "big techs," and social change platforms like Change.org, Avaaz, or MoveOn, operate on fundamentally different principles, objectives, and scales.

Commercial platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram treat content as an asset integral to their revenue model. In contrast, social change platforms view content as a catalyst for political accountability and civic participation.

This fundamental difference raises critical questions about content regulation and the inherent nature of these platforms. Policymakers must understand these differences to develop effective regulations that address the unique challenges posed by each type of platform.

III. THE EMERGENCE OF DIGITAL CITIZENS AND SOCIAL CHANGE PLATFORMS

The rise of the internet and social media has provided unprecedented opportunities for communication and organising. Platforms like Change.org, Avaaz, and MoveOn have harnessed the power of technology to connect people globally, enabling them to collaborate and take collective action in previously unimaginable ways.

These platforms have given birth to a new era of "digital citizens" who can voice their concerns, mobilise support, and effect change from the comfort of their homes.

This digital transformation has reshaped the civic engagement landscape, making it more accessible and inclusive.

Regarding content regulation, social change platforms operate differently from commercial platforms. **While commercial platforms often use complex algorithms to moderate content and have been criticised for their opaque decision-making processes, social change platforms typically have more transparent and user-focused moderation policies.** They often allow users to report harmful content and take steps to ensure that their platforms are not used to spread hate speech, misinformation, or other harmful content.

For instance, Change.org allows users to create petitions on any issue they deem necessary, empowering users to start petitions about the causes they care about. However, they also have mechanisms to prevent the spread of harmful content, such as petitions encouraging hate speech or discrimination.

Similarly, Avaaz, which focuses on human rights, environmental protection, and social justice issues, has policies to ensure that its campaigns align with its mission and do not spread harmful content.

These platforms also differ from commercial platforms in how they handle user data. While commercial platforms often collect vast amounts of user data for targeted advertising, social change platforms typically collect less data and use it primarily to facilitate civic engagement and social change.

As such, content regulation on social change platforms often aligns more with transparency, accountability, and respect for users' rights.

However, these platforms need to be more resistant to the challenges of content regulation. They must constantly navigate the delicate balance between allowing free expression and preventing the spread of harmful content. This complex task requires careful judgement and a deep understanding of the social and political contexts in which these platforms operate.

These differences in content regulation and data practices reflect social change and commercial platforms' different objectives. While the former is focused on promoting civic engagement and social change, the latter is primarily driven by profit motives.

IV.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

1 **Recognise the Distinction:**

Policymakers should acknowledge the fundamental differences between commercial social media platforms and social change platforms. Commercial platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram operate on a business model that treats content as an asset integral to revenue generation. They are often larger in scale, have a broader user base, and their content can have a more significant societal impact.

On the other hand, social change platforms like Change.org, Avaaz, or MoveOn view content as a catalyst for political accountability and civic participation. They are typically smaller in scale, rely on donations or support for social causes, and their content primarily promotes social change and civic engagement.

These differences in size, scope, business model, and purpose mean that the two platforms pose different risks and benefits to users and society. Therefore, a one-size-fits-all approach to regulation could stifle the growth of these platforms and hinder their ability to drive social change.

Policymakers should consider these differences when developing regulations. For instance, smaller platforms may be subject to less stringent regulation than larger platforms. Platforms that rely heavily on targeted advertising may be subject to additional regulation to address the harms associated with this business model.

Furthermore, regulations should be designed to preserve the unique value that social change platforms provide in fostering civic participation and promoting social change. This could mean giving certain exemptions or accommodations for these platforms or developing separate regulatory frameworks tailored to their specific characteristics and needs.

By recognising and accommodating these differences, policymakers can develop more effective and nuanced regulations that protect users and society while supporting these platforms' continued growth and success.

2 Promote Transparency and Accountability:

Policymakers should encourage social change platforms to maintain transparency and accountability in their operations. This includes clear content moderation policies and open communication with users and the public. Transparency in operations can foster trust among users and ensure that these platforms are held accountable for their actions.

3 Protect Freedom of Expression:

Any regulation should balance controlling harmful content and preserving freedom of expression. Over-regulation could hinder the free flow of information and restrict citizens' ability to engage in the political process. Policymakers should ensure that regulations protect citizens' rights to express their opinions freely while safeguarding against the spreading harmful content.

4 Encourage Civic Participation:

Policymakers should support initiatives that increase civic participation on these platforms. This could include public awareness campaigns about the role of these platforms in promoting social change or partnerships with educational institutions to incorporate digital activism into their curricula. By encouraging civic participation, policymakers can ensure that these platforms continue to serve as practical tools for civic engagement.

Furthermore, general good practices to address the regulatory challenges raised by emerging technologies and digital platforms include recommendations to:

5 Promote stakeholder participation in developing and implementing regulations:

Multisectoral dialogues are an excellent method to hold conversations involving actors from various sectors, such as government, businesses, civil society, and academia, to address complex and multidisciplinary issues. These dialogues are essential for fostering collaboration, mutual understanding, and informed decision-making. Conversations about technology and ethics should be encouraged, where technology companies, regulators, and experts in digital rights participate.

6 Look into Interaction with Existing Regulations:

The interaction between different legal regulations within a country is a critical topic to ensure the coherence and effectiveness of regulations. Policymakers should work to understand how other existing laws intersect with potential new regulations in the specific case.

7 Reviewing Legislative Trends in the Region and Key Operating Countries for Platforms:

Reviewing legislative trends in tech regulation across a specific region, such as Latam, and critical operating countries for platforms involves analysing the evolving legal frameworks that govern technology-related activities, especially those related to digital platforms, in those geographical areas. "Key operating countries" are those nations that play a significant role in the tech industry, often being home to major technology companies or serving as focal points for digital innovation and adoption.
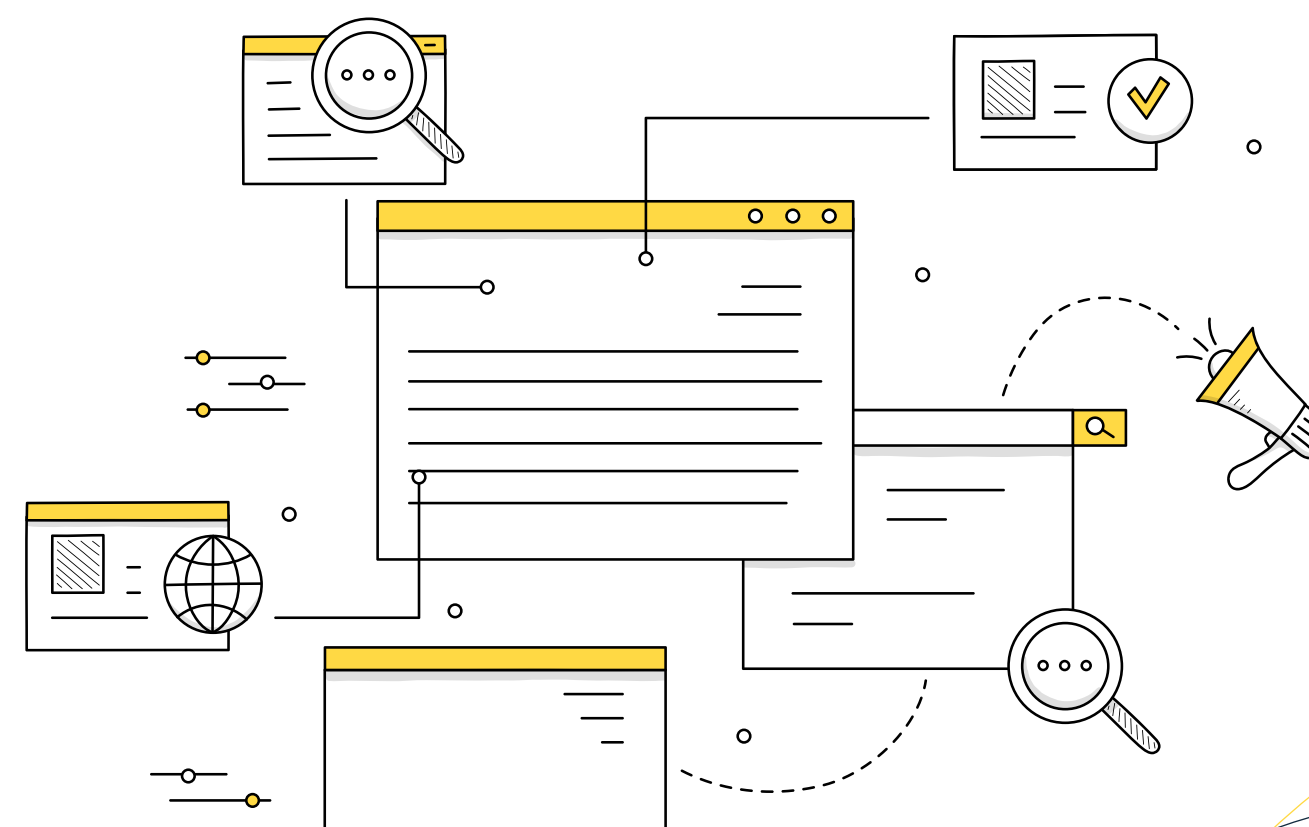
V. CONCLUSION

The regulation of online civic participation platforms presents a complex challenge for policymakers.

It requires a nuanced understanding of the differences between commercial social media platforms and social change platforms, as well as a delicate balance between controlling harmful content and preserving freedom of expression.

By adopting tailored regulations, promoting transparency and accountability, and encouraging civic participation, policymakers can ensure that these platforms continue to serve as powerful tools for civic engagement.