

# Platformization in the third sector

## *Reframing volunteering and civil society relations as a platform transaction*

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*In addition to platforms in paid consumer transactions, recent years have seen the rise of platforms operating in the third sector. This raises questions on how these platforms are embedded in urban spaces as well as how they reconfigure social relations in the city. This article aims to address these questions by examining how volunteer platforms (re)organize civic and social engagement in the city and how volunteering and civil society relations are encapsulated as a platform transaction. Specific attention is paid to the role of Berlin-based volunteer platform GoVolunteer in response to the 2015 refugee 'crisis' in Berlin, which spurred the emergence of spontaneous citizen initiatives and a lack of state coordination. By providing a logistical solution to this social-urban crisis the platform aimed to act as digital intermediary in a time of political chaos. As GoVolunteer developed after the peak of the crisis, it leveraged on the multitude of third sector organizations present in the city, established a large team of interns carrying out the daily operational tasks behind the scenes, and developed partnerships with the Berlin Senate.*

Keywords **logistics, volunteering, civil society, platformization, platform urbanism, platform labor**

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## Introduction

For many years, Berlin has been both celebrating as well as building the foundation for an elaborate civic infrastructure. In 2016 the city appointed a ‘Permanent Secretary for Active Citizenship’, followed in 2017 by the foundation of a policy department within the Berlin Senate specifically endowed with the task of ‘citizen engagement and democracy support’, aiming to promote, support and acknowledge civic engagement in the city of Berlin (Berlin.de 2021a). Alongside a wide variety of public actors, civil society organizations and traditional ‘volunteering agencies’ operating in the city, recent years have also led to the rise of platforms and apps which intend to encourage citizens to engage in volunteering activities, and match volunteers with projects and non-profit organizations in need of volunteers. This matching process is not one of automatic allocation or dispatchment of volunteers but one of ‘sorting, ranking, and rendering visible large pools’ of volunteering opportunities (Ticona, Mateescu, and Rosenblat 2018, 3). It is therefore sometimes referred to as ‘Tinder for volunteering’ (Theile 2019). As the founders of German volunteer app *Letsact* stated in a media outlet: ‘someone willing to volunteer quickly has no app for that’. For that reason, they developed ‘a kind of dating-app for volunteers and organizations. Here too, the successful intermediation is called [a] ‘match’, however the result is not a date or an amorous adventure, but social engagement’ (2019, no page, author’s translation).

These apps and platforms that leverage on third sector relations, especially volunteers and civil society organizations, are mainly situated in cities. This raises questions about the relationship between these platforms and urban environments (Rodgers and Moore 2018) as well as the (possible) transformation of social relations these platforms bring about. While platformization represents a primarily technical/computational process for some (e.g. Helmond 2015), platforms also play a role in the reorganization of social (and cultural) practices and imaginations (Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck 2019). This article therefore addresses how platforms in the third sector re-orientate and reorganize relations of civic and social engagement in the city and how these relations become subject to platform transactions.

Specifically, the article examines how Berlin-based volunteer platform *GoVolunteer* was initially founded as a response to the 2015 ‘crisis’ of refugee management in Berlin. The arrival of refugees in the city, mainly fleeing from the Syrian war, led to a surge of citizen initiatives to support those refugees but also demonstrated an exemplary failure of state coordination (Van Dyk and Misbach 2016). As local and regional authorities were completely overwhelmed by the arrival of these refugees, many citizens took matters into their own hands. By providing a logistical solution to this social-urban crisis the platform aspired to operate as digital intermediary in a time of political chaos by linking volunteers to civic initiatives. After the peak of the crisis, *GoVolunteer* developed into a more elaborate and sustainable platform, as it acquired a wide variety of third sector organizations, established a large team of interns carrying out the daily operational tasks behind the platform, and formed partnerships with the Berlin Senate.

The role of voluntary labor in the platform economy has been studied before, for example through the lens of ‘free content production’ (Terranova 2000) as well as less ‘obvious’ forms of free labor such as the use of people’s leisure time as a platform asset (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). Furthermore, voluntary labor in the platform economy has been conceptualized as ‘aspirational labor’ (Duffy 2016) and ‘hope labor’ (Kuehn and Corrigan 2013), referring to forms of free labor carried out in the hope of future rewards. These studies, however, focus mainly on online activities and *cultural* production (e.g. writing blogs, reviews) and do not address forms of civic volunteering. As many (local) governments in Western Europe today, however, have an interest in the promotion and mobilization of civic engagement and volunteering (Van Dyk 2018; Muehlebach 2012) at the same time as ‘traditional’ community structures and long-term commitment in organizations are not self-evident (Macduff 2005), volunteer platforms provide an interesting lens toward new forms of civic engagement in a highly dynamic urban environment.

So far, platform-based volunteering only accounts for a small part of civic engagement, indicating that the main share of volunteering continues to take place *outside* the realm of platforms. Among the main volunteer platforms/apps in Germany, volunteer platform *Vostel* managed ‘to match 15637 volunteers with 804 social organisations’ since 2015 (Vostel.de 2021) and volunteer app *Letsact* managed to subscribe 80,000 volunteers and 1500 organizations (Schiek 2021). *GoVolunteer* only announces the number of annual platform visitors, 100,000 in the year 2020, but doesn’t count actual volunteers or matches (GoVolunteer 2020a). Compared to the total number of volunteers in Germany (31 million according to recent estimations, Stiftung Aktive Bürgerschaft 2021) these platforms do certainly not accomplish the dominant way of civic engagement.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, since an increasing share of non-profit organizations are subscribed to these platforms, since volunteer platforms partner with local governments, *and* because they appear side by side with ‘traditional’ volunteer agencies on government websites (see for example Berlin.de 2012c), these platforms have become increasingly established and taken-for-granted actors in the third sector by serving as one channel for the recruitment, organization and intermediation of civic engagement.

## Voluntary labor as a valuable resource

The realm of voluntary or unremunerated labor has long been, and continues to be, treated as apart and standing aside from capitalist production. Voluntary labor, either carried out around the house or in the community, is commonly related to altruism, the desire to help others and praised for its *non-monetary* nature (Wilson 2012). Furthermore, as it is regularly considered to arise from individual considerations such as one’s willingness, capability and availability to volunteer (Haski-Leventhal et al. 2018), it seems to bear little connection to macro-economic developments or capital accumulation (see for exceptions Muehlebach [2012] and van Dyk [2018]). As a consequence, there exists a tendency to posit ‘volunteering’ as opposite to ‘money’, ‘civil society’ as opposite to ‘capitalism’, and ‘social benefit’ as opposite to ‘economic

reward'. By understanding these as fundamental opposites, unremunerated labor continues to be understood as a *counterweight* to capitalism that enables place-bound forms of social reproduction in the context of 'footloose' global capitalism (Katz 2001).

It has less been treated as source of economic value that can be mobilized in its own right, in the sense that 'society is not a separate entity to take from or give back to, but a source of wealth to be harnessed' (Dowling and Harvie 2014, 881). In their examination of 'social investment funds' in the UK, Dowling and Harvie show how these funds incorporate social causes as renewed sites of capital investment, from which social benefits but simultaneously *financial returns* can be raised. In this way, processes of social reproduction are redefined as 'new investment opportunities for capital' (2014, 875). In a similar way, recent years have seen the growth of 'social enterprises' which use entrepreneurial and business-like strategies toward social and community causes (Gray, Healy, and Crofts 2003, 142). By combining 'doing good' with 'doing business', these enterprises dissolve the boundary between production and social reproduction by creating a business model *out of* social needs.

Rather than treating social and ethical causes as *external* to the business model, as do traditional philanthropy or CSR, social enterprises define social needs as the primary source of (economic) value. The majority of social enterprises is situated in cities—with Berlin as the social enterprise 'hotspot' in Germany—and many of them (69.3%) indicate the use of digital technologies for the delivery of their product or service (Scharpe and Wunsch 2019, 26).

Most platforms in the third sector also position themselves as social enterprise or analogously as 'social business' or 'social start up' (SKALA campus 2020; Schiek 2021). The platforms emphasize their 'agile' and experimental way of working, characterized by the denial of (long-term) 'planning' and 'thinking for too long' (SKALA campus 2020). They also stress their 'entrepreneurial' approach toward societal problems and are continuously experimenting with ways to establish a (viable) business model out of volunteering. Some platforms (e.g. *Letsact*) have received seed funding (Theile 2019), others (like *Vostel*) rely on a model of 'corporate volunteering' in which corporations pay the platform to engage their employees in volunteering. Again others, such as *GoVolunteer*, rely on a combination of private and public funding, for example by partnering with public 'sponsors' on concrete social causes, such as refugee integration or ecological volunteering (Van Doorn, Mos, and Bosma forthcoming).

However, even before the rise of social enterprises, platforms have leveraged on voluntary labor as a platform asset. In the early days of the internet, Terranova (2000) already pointed to the forms of unremunerated technical and cultural labor on the Net as carried out by the early adopters of online networks and online communities. She holds that, '[s]imultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited, free labor on the Net includes the activity of building Web sites, modifying software packages, reading and participating in mailing lists, and building virtual spaces' (2000, 33). For her, this form of free labor displays an 'experimental compromise' between the individual need for cultural expression and affection from online peers and the 'current capitalist emphasis on knowledge as the main source of

value-added' (36). This shows how the joy of voluntarily collaborating online can be transformed into a valuable and monetizable asset. This celebration of participatory culture also underlies O'Reilly's (2005) notion of 'Web' 2.0 and Benkler's (2006) celebration of 'the wealth of networks', in which collaborative online communities act as enabler of individual freedom and democratic participation as well as providing new loci for capital investment. Kuehn and Corrigan (2013) go beyond the conceptualization of free online labor in terms of (direct) pleasure and collaborative communities, instead understanding it in relation to prospective paid employment. Coining the concept of 'hope labor', Kuehn and Corrigan posit that un—or undercompensated online social production is carried out 'in the hope that future employment opportunities may arise' (2013, 10). In the same vein, Duffy (2016) talks about 'aspirational labor' in which voluntary creative labor is tied to the expectation and promise of future social or economic reward.

Aside from platforms, voluntary engagement has also been treated as a valuable resource by (local) governments and policy makers in contemporary welfare states (Van Dyk and Haubner 2019). Van Dyk and Haubner argue that in Germany, voluntary engagement is increasingly treated as a 'productive resource' (264) in a context of demographic change and increasing care deficits, for example emphasizing the 'productive potential' of retirees (264–265). Likewise, Van Dyk (2018) shows how the German state is actively promoting and financing citizen engagement 'from above', while it is also reinvigorated 'from below' through the mobilization of grass roots and community organizations. In the context of Italy, Muehlebach (2012) similarly observed how volunteering has been mobilized by the state through the celebration of 'ethical citizenship' in a time of neoliberal transformation and a withdrawal of social service programs (compare Rosol 2012). According to Muehlebach, the absence of state funding of the social sector is replaced by a moral appeal to citizens to become active parts of society. This moral appeal is, as she finds, not equally distributed throughout society but predominantly targets retirees, students and migrants to carry the voluntary workload. Furthermore, by defining voluntary engagement primarily as replacement for alternative care networks and the absence of the welfare state, civil society turns more and more into a safety net for disadvantaged populations, rather than a locus of 'social-justice oriented advocacy activities' (Ilcan and Basok 2004, 134).

In conclusion, when it comes to the redefinition of voluntary labor as a valuable (financial) resource, two parallel developments are visible: one enabled by *digital* platforms, the other instigated on government's behalf. The field of platform studies concentrates mainly on digital *content creation and online collaboration*, whereas studies in the social sciences focus on volunteering as *civic or social engagement*. How platforms, then, leverage on and re-organize relations of social engagement (in particular in urban areas) is a question that remains largely open. One way they do so, as is further illustrated below, is by turning these relations into a logistical challenge, centered around 'coordination' and 'information' rather than perceiving them as result of social relations and interdependencies. Furthermore, when volunteering relations are understood as platform transactions, these relations are reconfigured as response to (societal) 'trends' that the platform

aims to resolve in an ‘ad hoc’ manner, instead of providing a more resilient and sustainable foundation underlying society.

## The role of (logistical) intermediaries in a fragmented urban space

When volunteering is considered as a resource this means that it can be mobilized, increased and managed (Cuskelly et al. 2006) as well as something that can be ‘extracted’ from society. This paves the way for a ‘logistical fantasy’ (Altenried et al. 2018, 299) of third sector relations in which the role of (platform) intermediaries is to capture and redistribute this volunteer potential as well as connect the dots between demand and supply. In itself, the role of intermediaries in the third sector isn’t something new, since many European countries have in the last decades developed elaborate volunteering infrastructures and launched plenty of ‘volunteer agencies’ (Van den Bos 2014). These (offline) volunteer agencies continue to exist nowadays, but rely, in contrast to platforms, on human-based and labor-intensive matching and intermediation processes that are less easily ‘scaled up’.

Flanagan (2019) observes a similar historical development of intermediaries where it concerns the homecare sector. Analyzing homecare brokerage through a historical lens, Flanagan examines how respectively newspaper advertisements, labor registries, and digital platforms have intervened in the ‘matching’ between households and care workers. She observes a trend from ‘dyadic’ to ‘structural’ control, in which the direct observation of the client checking the care worker in physical co-presence is replaced by platforms’ diffuse and decentralized systems of checking, involving a vast multiplicity of potential ‘bosses’. She concludes that, whereas ‘matching’ is an ‘endeavour that has long pre-dated the digital platform economy’, it ‘has changed in terms of the complexity of the networks of which intermediaries are a part and in the extent and depth of data that is collected’ (2019, 58).

Importantly, the presence and role of logistical intermediaries such as platforms are interdependent on the geographical context in which they operate, as well as the characteristics of this space. For Artioli, platforms can benefit from the density of urban space and spatial proximity, ‘which makes it easier to attract, pool and ‘match’ users among each other (2018, 2). With regard to the social infrastructure of cities, Uitermark and Duyvendak (2008) characterize urban areas by their ‘fragmentation of social governance’ where ‘responsibility for social problems is [...] distributed over a large number of administrative levels and institutional actors’ (115). In other words, in urban areas, responsibilities for care and social reproduction are rather scattered, and ‘public and private organizations are only concerned with a specific aspect or part of a social problem’ (116) instead of operating as ‘owners’ of a social problem. Furthermore, with the division of social governance into many small projects and organizations, room is provided for new and ‘innovative’ social actors that are considered as ‘responsive’ solutions to pressing problems, often using an experimental approach (Peck and Theodore 2015).

Platforms, then, might present themselves as response to this highly fragmented landscape and the need to 'coordinate' this, but also as a 'just in time' solution to social problems and able to flexibly respond to societal demand, as is further discussed below. As with any other platform business (Parker, Van Alstyne, and Choudary 2016), information about user needs (e.g. search behavior of volunteers), supply and demand, and market trends (e.g. what is the most 'urgent' social problem) become distinctive features of these platforms. The remainder of this article examines how platforms reframe third sector relations – particularly the availability and coordination of voluntary potential in the city – into a platform transaction and a question of supply and demand. As platform operators engage in a 'logistical fantasy' of third sector relations, they 'establish a new geography and, in a way, a new rationality of [...] management' (Altenried et al. 2018, 294). At risk here, however, is that by transforming social interactions into information dots, 'encounters are shaped more like transactions' in which 'we outsource the satisfaction of fragments of need to different people, who become interchangeable or connective nodes in an endless network' (Dowling 2016, n. p.). The data presented below are part of the author's doctoral research on 'post-welfare platforms' and is gathered during a 3-months fieldwork period at GoVolunteer as well as additional online research.

## The 'summer of migration' and the start of GoVolunteer

In 2015, Berlin was, as the rest of Germany, suddenly confronted with high numbers of refugees entering the city, mainly fleeing from the Syrian war. During what commentators dubbed 'the long summer of migration' (Kasperek and Speer 2015), the city struggled with the arrival of newcomers and declared an emergency. This refugee 'crisis' revealed several things. First, the local and regional authorities appeared to be unprepared for this sudden influx of newcomers and struggled to find the capacity and resources to manage the reception and integration of refugees. While the federal office *Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge* (BAMF) is occupied with asylum procedures, regional and local authorities are responsible for the provision of housing, education and care (Glorius et al. 2019). In 2015, the incapacity of local authorities became visible, for example, in the endless queues forming in front of the regional authority *Landesamt für Gesundheit und Soziales*, as well as the 'emergency accommodations' on the Tempelhofer field. Second, the refugee 'crisis' led to 'a new culture of helping' (Van Dyk and Misbach 2016) as an enormous plurality of citizen initiatives sprouted up in the city. Mostly of a spontaneous and ad-hoc nature, the initiatives were so numerous that scholars considered it 'impossible to provide a comprehensive overview on the daily assistance and solidarity' (2016, 208). While this 'welcoming culture' was celebrated, critics also pointed to the 'lack of alternatives' in the context of 'failing authorities' to deal with the issue (205).

This refugee situation also formed the main driver behind and starting point of volunteer platform GoVolunteer, which aims to connect (potential) volunteers with social projects and organizations in need of voluntary support. The founder of GoVolunteer Malte Bedürftig, himself engaged as a volunteer at the time, was inspired by 'the large dedication in all parts of society' as well

as 'motivated by his own experience as volunteer' (GoVolunteer 2021a). As he mentions in a public interview:

'And this power, that the people suddenly all wanted to help and said 'I can't sit here calmly when other people are doing bad, instead I want to know how I can contribute'. This was what motivated me the most and when I said: we have to use this energy, this mustn't get lost. That's why we have to show the people where they're actually needed.' (GoVolunteer 2020b, author's translation)

What was lacking in the founder's view was a 'transparent' overview of volunteer opportunities, indicating that people would lose their interest in volunteering if they didn't clearly know their options. The need for a digital intermediary was born and with the help of the founder's previous employer McKinsey & Company, the platform was developed as part of 'McKinsey Digital Labs (MDL)' which, according to the founder, 'helped us get from concept to the first working version of our website in under 6 weeks' (McKinsey & Company 2017). As can be deduced from the motivation to found the platform, the fundamental challenge is defined less as one of social inequality or social redistribution, but primarily defined as a *challenge of coordination*. As can be read in GoVolunteer's vision (2021a),

'this dynamic [of helping, EM] lost its power, because coordination was failing and many potential volunteers didn't know where to start or how to become active – an intelligent and sustainable solution was missing. [...] This new approach to transparency and coordination enabled people to turn their individual capacities into effective social acting.'

GoVolunteer was not the only 'coordinating' initiative that was launched. Others, for example, coordinated between refugees and support structures, such as housing and bureaucratic support (Van Dyk and Misbach 2016), as well as intermediating in the labor market 'activation' of refugees (Altrenried et al. 2018). However, where many of these initiatives remained rather small or ceased to exist, GoVolunteer has developed into a 'social business' that still exists (Skala Campus 2020). Since its launch, GoVolunteer has broadened its focus to other social causes such as 'poverty and homelessness', 'democracy and human rights', 'online volunteering', 'seniors' and 'education and language' and 'nature conservation', currently counting 21 different causes. The platform incorporates 1873 social projects, of which 522 are situated in Berlin. Furthermore, it has extended into other 'social brands' such as 'GoNature' (a platform for ecological volunteering), 'Skincolors' [Hautfarben] to raise awareness on racism and diversity, and even running its own co-working space 'Machwerk' (personal communication, 18-12-2020). According to its founders, what all the social brands share is a focus on 'social cohesion' and the belief in the 'potential which is stuck in people' to help other people (ALEX berlin 2016).

What is furthermore a central characteristic underlying GoVolunteer's vision, as expressed by its founder, is its capability to respond to actual and urgent situations. Its capacity to respond quickly is related to its 'agile' and experimental style of working and can therefore offer 'just-in-time' solutions to



societal trends and developments. Explaining where he imagines GoVolunteer to be in five years, the founder points to the platform's transformative nature as distinguishing characteristic and structural advantage.

'[that we observe] where currently the actual needs/demands arise. [...] I believe that we must go with the trends and important challenges of the time. The topic [of] nature protection, environmental protection, climate protection is definitely one of these. We also showed during Covid-19 that we were able to respond very quickly and organize a lot of [civic] engagement for the care of those affected by the corona pandemic. Such things, this is what I'm proud of, that we could bring about such a thing so quickly.' (GoVolunteer 2020b, author's translation).

In short, the arrival of refugees led to the rise of a 'heterogeneous' set of intermediaries (Altenried et al. 2018, 303) rather than a coordinated response by the German state. GoVolunteer, in turn, responded to this heterogeneity by acting as *intermediary of intermediaries* among the wide range of civic initiatives that sprouted up in the long summer of migration. In doing so, they fueled the logistification of volunteering by considering the volunteer process (primarily) as dots of information to be gathered on a digital platform. The according imagination of a 'marketplace' for volunteering reframes civic solidarity into a question of supply and demand, in which the role of the platform intermediary then is 'to build the bridge between these two sides' (personal communication, 18-12-2020).

Furthermore, instead of focusing on or acting as the owner of one 'social cause', the platform envisages its role as moving flexibly throughout the social sector and beyond, seeking partnerships in a wide range of topics (Van Doorn, Mos, and Bosma forthcoming). However initially designed as a response to the 2015 refugee influx, GoVolunteer could easily shift to become an intermediary for other social causes. Recently, for example, GoVolunteer partnered with the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety to develop a platform for 'ecological' volunteering called *GoNature*. To understand GoVolunteer's further development beyond the initial phase, the next section describes how the platform was able to benefit from a variety of urban networks to enlarge its business and act as an established social start-up in Berlin's third sector.

## Beyond the crisis: GoVolunteer and Berlin's social infrastructure

As the section above shows, GoVolunteer managed to transform a socio-political crisis into an enterprise that has existed since. In other words 'the political and cultural context ... is recoded as a business opportunity' (Shamir 2018, 12). To understand why the platform has existed since and was able to 'scale up', a closer look at the social infrastructure of Berlin is required. As shown, GoVolunteer has particularly benefited from the omnipresence of civil society organizations and (potential) volunteers, the availability of interns providing their free labor to the start-up as well as the partnership with the Berlin Senate in its mission to promote and mobilize civic engagement.

### A critical mass on both sides

When I asked in an interview what made Berlin particularly suitable for a volunteer platform, the founder answered that, among other things, it contained a 'critical mass on both sides, so a certain density of [social] projects and a certain density of people who want to help, and this is given in urban space' (personal communication 22-12-2020, author's translation). This quote very much recalls the idea of a 'two-sided' market in which both sides of the market are ideally optimally balanced (Rochet and Tirole 2003). What makes up these two 'sides' in the third sector, however, might be less self-evident as in paid consumer transaction. For GoVolunteer the 'supply' side consists of volunteers, or more precisely citizens who display a (potential) *interest* in volunteering but might still need 'encouragement' and 'mobilization' to actually subscribe and match with a volunteer project. The 'demand' side consists of the sum of civil society/community/welfare organizations, or more specifically their offer of volunteering activities or projects. In the subsequent sections, it is examined how GoVolunteer attempts to recruit these both sides and thereby solidifies the imagination of volunteering as a two-sided market.

In Berlin, no less than 24,000 'registered associations' and 1,000 operating foundations exist that rely in some way on volunteers (Berlin.de 2021b). Toward these organizations, GoVolunteer defines its role in helping to recruit new volunteers and to 'facilitate the realization of volunteer projects' (GoVolunteer 2021a). Non-profits can subscribe to the platform and create a 'project page' on which they describe their project goals, the social causes they support, the skills needed for the volunteering activity and the exact location. In response to the multitude of civic organizations, GoVolunteer defines its role once again as the coordinator of this plurality. As an employee mentioned, 'there's actually an initiative for anything, there's a project for anything. [...] but the mission, at least in Germany, is above all to bundle what already exists, because we have a thousand things for the homeless, we have a thousand things for the elderly' (personal communication 15-09-2020, author's translation).

This 'bundling' however is not just a process of organizations subscribing to the platform but enabled through a process of *target acquisition* to incorporate new projects and organizations. While during the refugee 'crisis' many organizations and initiatives approached GoVolunteer, the platform now engages in the active acquisition of civil society organizations. To attract and incorporate organizations, GoVolunteer actively searches for and recruits new organizations via e-mail and telephone. The acquisition process starts with a process of 'research' into potential projects and organizations that are not yet on the platform, mainly consisting of web research or team members' personal knowledge. Then, a standardized e-mail template is sent to all these organizations explaining the GoVolunteer platform and asking organizations to join. Within the organization, the acquisition process is guided by numerical 'targets' regarding the number of projects that ought to be acquired by the team. During team meetings that I attended, it was always celebrated when someone managed to recruit new organizations, and in general, the targets were always reached and often exceeded.

Concerning the 'critical mass' of volunteers on the other 'side' of the marketplace, it has been estimated that 37.2% of the Berlin population is engaged in volunteering, while 64.8% of the non-volunteers indicate they are 'definitely'

or 'probably' willing to engage themselves in volunteering (Kausmann et al. 2017, 87). This study finds no significant differences between gender or age groups, but finds engagement among higher-educated people to be twice as high as lower-educated Berlin citizens. Most volunteers are active in the sectors of sport, the social sector or school/kindergarten. Close to 60% of the volunteers engage in volunteering activities of two hours or less per week.

To acquire new (prospective) volunteers on their platform, GoVolunteer carries out a process that I denote as 'moral marketing'. It consists of a combination of blog posts, social media techniques and campaigns to inform, inspire and motivate people to engage themselves voluntarily, preferably using the platform. Regularly, the blog posts and social media content are built up according to a structure in which a big and complex social issue is presented, then broken down into several smaller steps, and concluded with a concrete 'call to action' to visit the platform to find one's engagement. For example, in response to the Black Lives Matter protests in June 2020, GoVolunteer wrote a blogpost about '8 Tips to engage oneself against racism'. The blog posts are not only used to inform and motivate prospective volunteers, but also used to forward people to the platform. Furthermore, the blog posts serve as a means to improve search engine optimization and increase the findability of the platform, by addressing questions about volunteering that are commonly entered in Google, such as 'how can I support homeless people' or 'how can I help during Corona' (personal communication 21-12-2020). Finally, to attract potential volunteers GoVolunteer carries out a process that is internally defined as 'community management'. It consists of the following, liking and responding to the Instagram and Facebook connections of GoVolunteer, as well as inviting new organizations and individuals to their social media channels.

The acquisition of both sides of the 'volunteer market', however, could not have taken place without the support of numerous interns who have joined GoVolunteer over the years. The GoVolunteer team exists of around 10 paid employees but is extended with 20–30 interns who participate in a 3-months internship in one of the sub teams, such as 'Communications' or 'Partnerships'. Over the years, this has resulted in close to 300 people contributing to GoVolunteer's operation since its launch in 2015 (GoVolunteer 2020b). It is predominantly the interns who are processing the acquisition processes by writing blog posts and engaging in online 'community management', as well as searching and recruiting new organizations via e-mail and telephone. Also, they respond to questions raised by users via the helpdesk, for example advising people about volunteering opportunities. Finally, during my stay with GoVolunteer, I discovered that these interns constitute the 'public face' of GoVolunteer in its external communication. The blogs and social media posts which the platform distributes are often accompanied by photos of interns engaging in a particular volunteering activity, thereby promoting a particularly young image of the company in the hope of attracting young volunteers.

In conclusion, next to the dependence on volunteers as *users* of the platform, GoVolunteer also considerably relies on other forms of voluntary labor in the form of interns. This shows, notwithstanding the imaginary that platforms can be equated with automation, that a lot of human effort is carried out to let platforms 'work' and to balance more or less the two sides of the volunteer

'market'. While the notion of 'platform labor' is usually understood as the labor performed by platform users (e.g. gig workers, van Doorn 2017), this notion might be broadened to also include all the human labor needed behind the scenes of the platform to enable the very existence of the platform. Furthermore, since platforms create new nodes between what was already there, the platform is very dependent on the existing availability of (local) resources. For GoVolunteer, this involves both the omnipresence of civil society organizations, (potential) volunteers and the presence of interns carrying out part of the work. Furthermore, it also involves the willingness of local governments to support civic engagement, which is addressed in the next section.

## The local politics of volunteering: the Berlin Senate as collaboration partner

To understand the growth of GoVolunteer in Berlin, it is required to refer to Berlin's political context and the way GoVolunteer is embedded within local civic engagement policies. For example, on the local government website GoVolunteer is suggested as one of the online 'volunteer agencies' alongside the eleven public volunteer agencies (Berlin.de 2021c). More extensively, GoVolunteer is also collaborating with the Berlin Senate in the execution of volunteer marketing campaigns and coaching trajectories to match refugees with volunteer work. After briefly sketching how the Berlin Senate has promoted the role of civic volunteering in the last years, it will be examined how GoVolunteer and the Berlin Senate partner up in the mobilization of volunteers.

In 2016 the city appointed a 'Permanent Secretary for Active Citizenship', followed in 2017 by the foundation of a policy department within the Berlin Senate specifically endowed with 'citizen engagement and democracy support' (Berlin.de 2021a). This policy department is endowed with three tasks: supporting and strengthening eleven locally operating volunteer agencies, recognizing civic engagement through awards and financial benefits for volunteers, and strengthening democratic and political participation. In public debate, the value and importance of civic engagement are not so much formulated as a replacement for an absent welfare state, but rather as response to right-wing extremism, racism, and 'attacks on democracy'<sup>2</sup> ('European Volunteering Capital 2021; Candidate Berlin' 2019). Furthermore, civic participation is framed in the city's history of 'freedom', 'openness' and 'diversity' after the fall of the Wall in 1989 (CEV 2019). As a recognition of its 'well-developed and sophisticated volunteering infrastructure' the city was even appointed 'European Volunteering Capital 2021', a title annually granted by the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV 2019).

How then is GoVolunteer related to the local government? First, GoVolunteer is a non-profit 'registered association' [e.v.] with an additional 'public benefit' label [Gemeinnützigkeit], which means that they have to serve a public cause but are also allowed to operate as 'entrepreneurs' as long as the profits are reinvested in a common cause and not raised for private gain (personal communication/interview Tom, date). This allows them to both receive public subsidies and earn additional money by deploying entrepreneurial activities, while being exempted from paying added value taxes. Their business model thus relies on a mix of

public funding and private enterprising. In terms of public funding, the platform doesn't receive 'general' subsidies (for the daily operation and execution of the platform), but finds public partners with which they collaborate on specific projects, social causes or target groups.

For example, in 2018 GoVolunteer partnered with and received funding from the Berlin Senate regarding a project called 'Engaged Newcomers'. In this project, GoVolunteer employees 'coach' newcomers into volunteering opportunities, with the aim of improving the refugees' language skills as well as advancing cultural and labor market integration (GoVolunteer 2021b; personal communication 04-01-2021). Using the volunteering opportunities already available on the platform, GoVolunteer is responsible for the recruitment and matching of newcomers with civic organizations. Also, it runs several educational courses, for example explaining to newcomers what volunteering means in Germany as well as teaching basic computer skills.

More recently, in 2021, GoVolunteer partnered with the Berlin Senate in a marketing campaign called 'Volunteers of Berlin' which consists of a portrait and interview series of volunteers in Berlin. These portraits are distributed on GoVolunteer's social media channels as well as the local government website *Berlin.de*, and are intended to portray 'inspiring stories' to mobilize people to engage themselves in society. As GoVolunteer received funding for this project, it regularly happened that the campaign was adapted according to the wishes of the Berlin Senate. For example, the Senate demanded that the 'Volunteers of Berlin' campaign should include diversity with regard to volunteer's age, gender, neighborhood district and volunteer activity, as well as pay attention to the volunteers' creative capacity to deal with Covid-19. Furthermore, in the stories of volunteers, the 'Berlin engagement landscape' was to be celebrated as outstanding.

While the campaign was, on the one hand, a marketing tool for GoVolunteer to attract more users to its platform, it was at the same time a marketing campaign for the Berlin senate. In this way, the campaign shows an interesting case of the co-existence between digital platform operators and the local welfare state, in which platforms are also (partly) dependent on the state for funding and exposure. While GoVolunteer thus presents itself to the outside world as 'social business' and 'social start-up', it is at the same time benefiting from and leveraging on local governments that are interested in the mobilization of volunteers.

## Conclusion

The arrival of platforms in the third sector raises questions about how these platforms are embedded in urban space, as well as how they re-orient and re-organize social relations in the city. This article addressed the effect of platformization mainly as a process of logistification, in which (social) challenges are defined as *challenges of coordination* and *communication*, rather than being embedded in relations of social interdependency. This also means that these platforms perceive themselves less as the owner of, or responsible for, particular social causes, but are instead able to move flexibly with societal 'trends' that appear, and thereby provide a 'just-in-time' and 'responsive' solution to societal demands. The GoVolunteer platform did so in response to the 2015 refugee

crisis in Berlin, but also envisions this playing into future demands such as the climate crisis (e.g. ecological volunteering).

Furthermore, the article showed how, notwithstanding the ‘disruptive’ nature that is often tied to platformization, platforms are also embedded in urban space, since the urban context sets the conditions of possibility for the platform’s operation and reach. For example, platform GoVolunteer could benefit from the omnipresence of civil society organizations and (potential) volunteers in the city, the availability of interns providing their free labor in the daily operation of the platform, as well as the political interest of the Berlin Senate to promote and mobilize civic engagement. Since platforms, as logistical solutions, create new nodes between what is already there, they are highly dependent on the existing availability of resources.

Previous academic work has already examined how voluntary labor is transformed into a platform asset. While these debates commonly understand voluntary labor in terms of content and cultural production, this article shifted the focus to civic volunteering as a platform asset. Volunteer platform GoVolunteer is in fact leveraging on *two sources* of voluntary labor, one being the users of the platform, the other being the supply of interns providing their free labor to enable the daily operation of the platform, especially contributing to the acquisition of new platform users. This demonstrates that, notwithstanding the common assumption that platformization means automation, a lot of human effort is carried out to let the platform ‘work’.

The future development of platforms in the third sector is something both unknown and uncertain. As mentioned in the introduction, so far, the reach of these platforms is limited, with the exception of US-based *Volunteermatch*. Nevertheless, the platform operators I spoke to expect this platform-based ‘volunteer market’ to grow in the next few years, especially among younger generations who are both tech-savvy and looking for novel ways for ‘doing good’. Furthermore, platforms form partnerships with (local) governments as a part of their social policies as well as with corporations, under the header of ‘corporate volunteering’. What is remarkable is that these platforms pass relatively unnoticed and unquestioned, both in public and academic debate. They appear as one of the recruitment and coordination channels of civic engagement alongside other third sector actors, as well as being incorporated by these actors (e.g. non-profits that subscribe to the platform). But perhaps it is exactly *this* feature that makes platformization, or rather ‘actually existing platformization’ (Van Doorn, Mos, and Bosma [forthcoming](#)), so pervasive: its omnipresent nature, its maneuvering in a wide variety of ways, and, rather than existing in one ‘pure’ form, its embeddedness and adjustment to local contexts and affairs.

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## Notes

- 1 The reach of these platforms in Germany is also relatively small in comparison to US-based platform Volunteermatch, which claims to have connected 16,4 million volunteers so far.
- 2 At the same time, however, some 'civic' or volunteering organizations are in fact led by right wing organizations which mobilize anti-migration sentiments.

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