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Building the Open Parliament: The Case of Brazil*

Cristiano Ferri Faria, PhD

Twitter: @cristianofaria

Facebook: labhackercd

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In June 2013 the streets of Brazilian cities were taken over with protests by millions of citizens. It started as an outcry against the rise of public transportation fares. Then, many other issues came out including demands for better education and health systems. In short, citizens cried out for higher quality in public services as a whole.

They also manifested their wish to improve dialogue with the government and parliament. There was a clear perception that the state's lack of efficiency is somehow related to its poor communication and interactivity. People actually wanted to engage in the policymaking process and to have their voice heard by the parliament. In other words, they wanted to take part in public decision-making.

Parliaments were created to be open to the people. Today, some of them are, whilst some are not. New times, however, demand a new kind of openness. I am talking about using new processes and technological tools to harness the power of a new society: the society of the 21st century. Some parliaments in the world are experimenting with ways of implementing this vision. Perhaps they are finding a new model for democracy – an interesting and efficient combination of representative democracy and participatory democracy.

And how do citizens effectively engage in legislative affairs?

Developments in information and communications technology (ICT) mean that it is now possible to use crowdsourcing for lawmaking. There are some experimental practices in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies in this regard. For instance, the current legislature has a portal – called [e-Democracia](#) – in which citizens can draft ongoing bills in collaboration with lawmakers through Wikilegis. Wikilegis is a wiki tool adapted to draft legislation in a collaborative mode. People can submit specific comments and texts related to a bill being drafted. The portal hosts several other interactive tools, like [video forums](#) and [smart polls](#).

The Internet Civil Rights Bill, recently approved by the Chamber of Deputies, underwent this Wikilegis process. The bill is intended to guarantee the basic principles of free internet in Brazil, such as net neutrality. It was approved by the Congress and enacted as law in April 2014. Legislators really considered citizens' suggestions and inserted some of them in the final draft, making specific references to participants and their contributions in the official legislative report.

W Wikilegis (Wiki)

Art. 2. The regulation of Internet use in Brazil is founded on:

- I - the recognition of the global scale of the net;
- II - Human rights, **personality development** and citizenship in digital media;
- III - plurality and diversity;
- IV - openness and collaboration; and
- V - free enterprise, free competition and consumer protection; **and**
- VI - the social purpose the net.**

Contributors: Jose Eduardo Mendes, Marcelo Seidanha, Walter Koscianski, Marcelo Thompson

Besides using crowdsourcing for lawmaking, there is a set of other experiments harnessing citizen participation in the legislative debates. In the interactive committee hearings in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, legislators receive suggestions and qualified information from citizens in real time. It helps them to increase their ability to question ministers or specialists in a committee hearing. These practices show there is a potential new duty and role for modern-day legislators: they are becoming **crowdsourcing facilitators**.

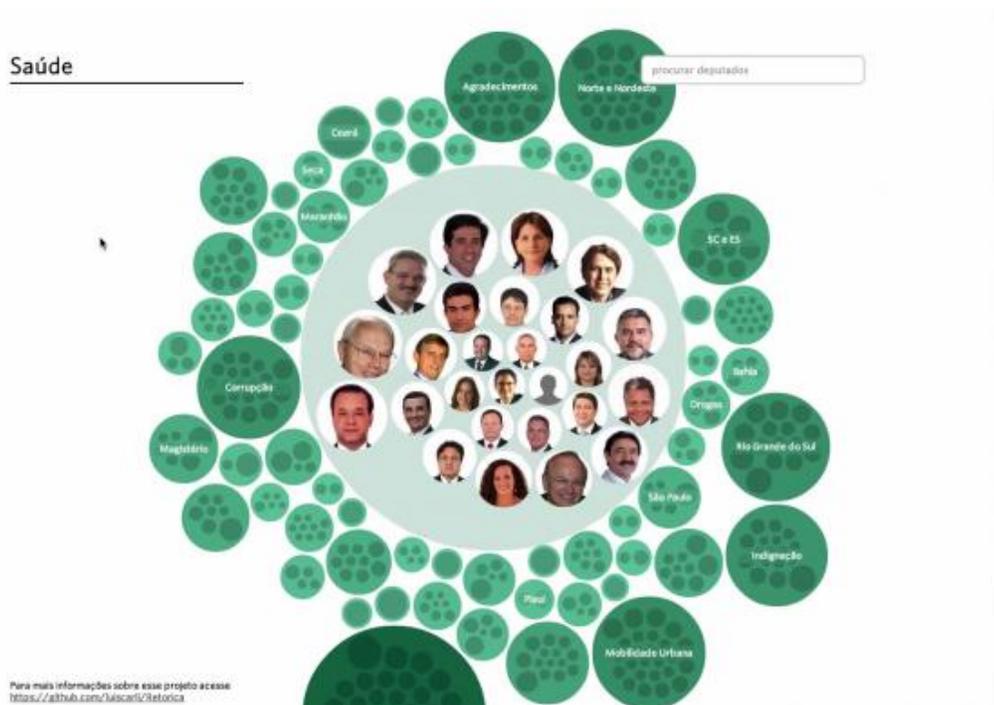
Twenty-first century parliaments must adopt a new approach to understand what people are discussing in social media platforms on policies. Parliaments need to build tools and methods

to analyze policy discussions in social media. To do so, it is necessary to connect to centers of intelligence in the area. An example of this is [Labic](#), a think-tank from a federal public university in Brazil that produced a [summary](#) (with a beautiful visualization) of the virtual discussions in social media during the protests of June 2013. It offers strategic information for decision-making in the Chamber of Deputies.

But what else can citizens do alongside lawmakers and parliamentary staff to build a more open parliament?

There are other ways to engage people, although the lawmaking process is quite complex and difficult for ordinary citizens to understand. In recent years a lot of lawmaking information has been made available in parliamentary portals. However, sometimes this official information is not always easy to find or to understand.

Citizens can also participate in creating tools that present user-friendly ways to visualize legislative information. For example, the image below shows the information about congressional speeches expressed by bubbles which represent speech subjects made in the Brazilian Chamber.



Bigger bubbles mean that that subject is more frequently used by congressmen and congresswomen in their speeches – like the economy, the most popular theme.

Clicking on the biggest bubble shows who the most frequent speakers are. The larger the faces, the more frequently they speak about the subject. So this is a simple, more enjoyable and more user-friendly manner to express the same information. This was an application made by three hackers in a hacker marathon (a hackathon) which took place in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies in October 2013. During this event, legislators, hackers and parliamentary staff sat down together to create several applications using legislative [open data](#).

These applications aim to help citizens understand the lawmaking process and to evaluate parliamentary work, as well as facilitating greater interaction between parliament and society. During the four days of the hackathon, citizens, lawmakers, and parliamentary bureaucrats learned a lot.

First, a collaborative atmosphere can be stimulated and, when that happens, innovative results can be obtained. Secondly, this represents the formation of a citizenship network, and in it, regardless of the cap they wear (politicians, hackers, or bureaucrats), all are citizens. And as citizens, each one can contribute with their own experience, knowledge, and creativity to build a better parliament.

To keep up this atmosphere of collaboration permanently, the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies has created a hackerspace in its building. In this hacker laboratory, called [Labhacker](#), citizens can freely come and contribute with projects and ideas for innovations in transparency and participation in legislative affairs.

In the picture at the top of this piece, citizens, legislators and parliamentary staff are discussing how to create new ways of using public data to strengthen social control over legislative work.

These are just a few examples from Brazil - where citizens are working with lawmakers to make parliaments more open, transparent and participatory.

Further Reading:

[Open Parliament in the Age of Internet](#): Can the people now collaborate with legislatures in lawmaking? (free ebook)

[Documentary](#) about the Brazilian Chamber's hacker marathon