# Participation and Deliberation on the Internet: a case study on Digital Participatory Budgeting in Belo Horizonte

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# Participation and Deliberation on the Internet: A case study on Digital Participatory Budgeting in Belo Horizonte [*]

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ABSTRACT – This paper aims to examine how political conversations take place on the digital discursive tools offered as part of the Digital Participatory Budget (OPD) in Belo Horizonte (Brazil). The authors propose an analytical model based on deliberative theories in order to investigate the discussions over this participatory program. The main sample consists of the messages posted by the users (n=375) on the commentaries section. The results show that reciprocity and reflexivity among interlocutors are rare; however, the respect among the participants and the justification levels in several arguments were high during the discussion. The authors conclude that, even in a situation in which there is no empowerment of the digital tools, the internet can effectively provide environments to enhance a qualified discursive exchange. In spite of low levels of deliberativeness, the case study shows that there are important gains concerning social learning among the participants.

## Introduction

In recent decades, there is an increasing discussion about models of democracy which emphasize popular sovereignty. The debate seeks to overcome the idea that the ordinary, non-organized citizen is apathetic or unable to influence the political system in order to improve it. Those views are concerned with the current ideal of more participatory democracies, and especially, more deliberative ones (Habermas, 1996). Having this in

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mind, several discursive experiments have been conducted, focusing on an inclusive and egalitarian public deliberation, with real effects on the political decision-making (Fung, 2007).

In Brazil, the most prominent experience of innovation in democratic institution and governance is the participatory budgeting (PB), which started in the 90s. This kind of program has as goal to share the decision power with citizens, regarding issues that affect them directly. On one hand, the sphere of citizenship has the opportunity to perform extensive discussions and negotiations, seeking to indicate what would be their most important needs. On the other hand, the State, by encouraging participation and deliberation among citizens, offer to the people a share of its power. It is argued that its ultimate objective is to achieve fairer and more legitimate political outcomes (Fung, 2007). Over the last 10 years, an increasing number of Brazilian political institutions have conducted experiments of participatory budgeting, emphasizing the use of internet.

In this article, we examine the online discussion boards available at Belo Horizonte's [Digital Participatory Budgeting](#) (DPB) website in order to understand some of the aspects that may have produced impact on the results of that deliberation among citizens. In more specific terms, we investigate how political conversations take place on the digital discursive tools offered as part of the Digital Participatory Budget (OPD) in Belo Horizonte (Brazil). The main sample consists of the messages posted by the users (n = 375) on the commentaries section. The results show that reciprocity and reflexivity among interlocutors are rare. However, the respect among the participants and the justification levels in several arguments were high during the discussion. In conclusion, we argue that, the internet can effectively provide environments to enhance a qualified discursive exchange, even in a situation in which there is no empowerment of the digital tools.

## 1. The rapid evolution of the Digital Participatory Budget in Belo Horizonte

In 2006 the City Hall of Belo Horizonte launched the first Digital Participatory Budget (DPB), which, differently from the city's regional PB, would not require physical presence of participants. The process would take place only through online voting. Belo Horizonte's City Hall would invest U$ 11.25 million in its nine regions. U$ 44.2 million budget of offline PB were maintained, meaning that the DPB had a different budget from its face-to-face version.

Through the 2006 DPB's website, any citizen with his or her voter's registration number from Belo Horizonte could choose 9 out of 36 projects (being one project per region), pre-selected by the City Hall, and by "Comforça" associations (the members of these associations are delegates elected by citizens to monitor the works approved in the PB process. The Comforça are final part of the PB process). A peculiar feature concerning the DPB was that the voter, after choosing, could know exactly how many votes each pre-selected project had so far. Citizens should vote at least in one region, but could vote in all nine projects. The 2006 DPB website (which was totally apart from the offline PB) presented basic information about each project, such as cost, location and pictures. In addition, online participation tools were also offered, such as e-mail and discussion boards. In the end, the 2006 DPB reached 172.938 participants, representing around 10% of the city's electorate.

In the 2008 DPB votes were no longer occurring by region, but rather, there was a single voting for the whole city. Then, voters from Belo Horizonte should choose one among five pre-selected projects. All the options referred to road projects, with the goal to improve Belo Horizonte's traffic, and 124.320 citizens voted for digital PB of 2008. The 2008 DPB's website also expanded their participatory tools. Besides the reactivation of the discussion board, two new features were implemented. The first one was the possibility of posting online comments. For each project, there was an option to leave a message without having to register or even to enter identification. The second feature was a chat, opened on previously scheduled dates, in which representatives of "Planning, Budget and Information" bureau, responsible for the PB, would receive questions, suggestions and criticisms from participants.

| Version | 2006 offline | 2006 online | 2008 offline | 2008 online |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Participants** | 33.643 | 172.938 | 44.000 | 124.320 |
| **Budget (US$ million)** | 44,4 | 11,1 | 44,4 | 22,2 |

**Table 1 –** Participatory Budgeting / Digital Participatory Budgeting 2006-2008

## 2. From public deliberation to online deliberation

As for the theoretical framework allowing to understand the DPB and its implications, the key reference is to the contemporary debate on deliberative democracy. According to Dryzek (2007, p. 237), it is "the most active area" in political theory today, also because of the growing interest to increase the discursive component within the daily performance of political activities. This trend is also found in studies on "internet and politics": several studies investigate how digital ICTs could improve deliberative democracy or help citizens engage in a qualified public deliberation.

The German political philosopher Jürgen Habermas is widely recognized as one of the seminal authors in this field of studies. He argues for a true popular sovereignty, and through his deliberative model, he explains how "communicative power" is related to the "administrative power" (Habermas, 1996). Habermas' fundamental idea is the "exchange of reasons" among political actors, fostered by a set of discursive processes which are able to echo on the state structure. In discourse exchanges, participants thematize requirements for validity claims, and try to either retrieve or criticize them by means of arguments. Because participants' arguments are submitted to public evaluation and criticism, it is believed that rational expressions can also be corrected and improved through discursive exchanges (Habermas, 1996, p. 173-4).

In the search for alternatives to Habermas' model of deliberation, many scholars contend that deliberation is not solely constituted by reason. According to John Dryzek (2007), for instance, deliberation models based on excessive rationality and on search for justification by reasons that all could accept would be highly demanding. Such models tend to ignore aspects such as coercion, deception, manipulation and strategy, which are common elements in deliberative processes. A more defensible version of deliberation includes negotiation and bargain. Under certain circumstances, negotiation and bargain, as long as not based on coercion, may help participants to better understand other people's interests and even their own. If the idea of common good is related to the best solution for the greatest number of people, bargaining and negotiation should be important elements of reciprocal communication, in order to forge self-interest and detect claims for the common good (Mansbridge, 2007, p. 264).

Mark Warren also tries to expand the conditions to accomplish deliberation. This scholar argues that it is reasonable to expect participants to enter communication with strategic intentions. However, participants, regardless their original intentions, may need to craft good arguments and reframe issues in order to persuade others or to exert influence in the

course of a discussion. Warren's key argument is that those concerned with democratic institutions, "should be more interested in the outcomes of communication than communicative intent" (Warren, 2007, p. 278) Therefore, institutions should provide opportunities and incentives for dynamics that are "deliberative in function" (Warren, 2007, p. 278).

Since the Internet allow people to talk to one another and hear different points of view, without constrains of time or space, it could also be very valuable for political expression, deliberation and even decision-making (Davis, 2005). However, several studies on online deliberation showed negative results in terms of deliberativeness, and a lack of willingness from users to participate in exchange of reasons (*Ibid.*). In order to examine the digital discussion tools of participatory budgeting, and assess the level of "deliberativeness" reached by the discussion, we endorse a different and more articulated perspective, based on the analysis of three items: the *context* in which the discussion has been developed, the *structure* or *design of digital communication tools*, and *methodological strategies* employed to understand deliberation (Janssen and Kies, 2005).

## 3. The context of the discussion

As for the context of deliberation, we focus here exclusively on the *agent hosting the discussion*, i.e. on the role of the Municipality of Belo Horizonte and the way in which the users made reference to it during the whole process.

Belo Horizonte's DPB was created and maintained during the administration of Fernando Pimentel, the city's mayor from PT (Workers Party). Pimentel conducted a series of activities organized to implement the PB throughout the nearly 12 years of his administration (four as vice mayor and eight as mayor). It is important to note that we did not identify any manifestation by the municipal administration in our analysis of the messages which compose the empirical corpus of this study. the City Hall remained "neutral". No State officer expressed whatsoever their political positions.

There is no mention to PT or even to BH's mayor, Fernando Pimentel, but rather, only to the "City Hall" as an institution. There is propaganda of the City Halls' achievements, but that did not mean any appeal to public officers or the mayor's positioning. The discussion

continued freely, without restrictions. If observation of party-affiliation of political actors may be essential for understanding their utterances in certain policy forums, within DPB, there was no strong evidence that this aspect was determinant. In other words, there is no indication that such aspect changed or shaped significantly the behavior of users.

As a result, there was no official encouragement for discussions about traffic, i.e., the most commented issue. However, since only road projects could be chosen, local power-holders' public expressions about traffic policies impacted on the nature of the dispute. So, our key argument is that, in the discussions analyzed, there was no officer identifying him or herself as either moderating, or as belonging to the executive, who somewhat tried to direct the issues or the debates.

## 4. Communicative structure and design

The analysis of the communicative structure and the design of the DPB includes the following issues: identification, openness and freedom, discussion agenda, moderation, strength and weakness of the so created "public sphere". These structural issues are crucial in determining the *quality* of the discussion and of its results.

In the analyzed forums, although the *identification* was not mandatory, we noticed that most participants sought to present arguments in the discussion. An evidence of this is that the number of irrelevant messages (those that did not contain demands, opinions or clear positions) did not exceed the average of 5% in both forums. On the other hand, there is not any indication that anonymity helped to improve discursive equality.

The discussion tools of DPB allowed enough *openness and freedom* to the users. Apart from the vote, and the discussion boards, the site was completely open to any visitor, and identification was not mandatory. There were neither tools to control posts by time, nor any type of issue restriction. However, the discussion boards did not contain even 10 messages, while the tool to post comments showed over a thousand collaborations. One possible explanation for this lies in the fact that the discussion boards demanded a registration, while the tool to post comments did not require even identification.

The *discussion agenda* was also wide open. The City Hall officers did not get involved in directing the discussions or topics on the agenda. There is obviously an initial agenda set

by the City Hall, Public officers, for instance, defined that all 2008 DPB projects would be related to roads, they set the traffic as the issue of the program. However, no municipal officer acted to either frame it or to feed it. We noticed that the initial agenda was influential since most of the people's messages focused on traffic issues, even with neither promotion nor pressure from the municipal administration to feed them.

All interactive tools were *pre-moderated*, that is, the moderator had to release the message in order to appear on the website. When analyzing the message flow, we noticed that the moderator released the messages every single day, which certainly eases the problem. Indeed, this choice influenced the low number of rude messages detected, and the amount of zero uncivil messages, which - if they existed whatsoever - did not reach the public forum.

*Concerning the "strength" or the "weakness" of the "public sphere"* created by the discussion online, the focus of the analysis comes on the users' perception of the process as having a certain impact on public choices. There is no indication, on the DPB website, that the forum or the comment tool are "strong" and "empowered" spaces, that is, there was no proof that the messages would be considered or even read by the institutional officers. However, the content of the messages shows that people acted with the hope that their message would have some impact, either on political representatives, or on the other citizens. It is worth notice that the discussion tools operated side by side with the voting tool. This tool showed great empowerment, as the citizens' vote decided the project to be implemented. The importance of voting and the considerable empowerment of citizens may have been factors that explain why the discussion tools had become strong spaces for discussion.

At this point, it is interesting to note the peculiar ways in which participants use the tools available. On the one hand, speaking in normative terms, the tool to post comments was a weak space of discussion, because the City Hall had not empowered it. On the other hand, participants acted as if this discursive space was strong, as the users noticed an increasing flow of messages and, consequently, more chances of having their comments read and considered by other citizens. Hundreds of people entered that discursive space not only to talk, and to present their positions, but also, and largely, to try to convince other people about the best option. Or yet, the empowerment of the voting tool echoed in the comments tool.

## 5. Methodological strategies

The model of online deliberation (based mostly on Dahlberg, 2002; Janssen and Kies, 2005; Jensen, 2003) which has guided our empirical examination consists in the following criteria: *thematization and reasoned critique of problematic validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role taking, inclusion and discursive equality.* Each of these criteria give place to several variables, which are crucial in assessing the process.

The *thematization and reasoned critique of problematic validity* claims address a crucial point of deliberative processes: the goal is to understand if the positions have been presented and critically discussed, i.e. if the arguments of the contributors are supported by acceptable reasons. We initially assess *Reciprocity* (1), that is, if users demonstrate to be reading messages and responding to them. It is a more elementary level, which requires no formulation of response, but rather, just the act of responding to another user, or to the subject of discussion. Messages that do not have answers will be classified as *Monological* (2). After, we assess validation, that is, if participants give justifications for supporting their argumentations. Jensen (2003) presents three possibilities of validation: the *External validation* (3) is when the citizen uses external sources to maintain his or her argument, such as facts, data, news, etc. The *Internal Validation* (4) is based on the debater's own point of view, which explicitly uses his or her standards, values and personal experience (such as testimonies) to support his or her argument (based on Young, 1996). Finally, Jensen argues that it is possible to occur an allegation, that is, the person express his or her position, but does not provide validation, or any other justification. We will call this situation as *Position* (5).

The notion of *reflexivity* refers to the fact that participants to discussion should be willing to assess the position of others, and revise their initial opinion, once persuaded by the power of other perspectives (Dahlberg, 2002). According to Jensen (2003), *reflexivity* can be measured in three ways. *Persuasion* (6), when there are explicit evidences that the user feels persuaded by the argument of another participant or by the general discussion. *Progress* (7), when the user considers another post, replies to it with new arguments or information, or even tries to create a synthesis of the arguments. Or *Radicalization* (8), when the participant reacts negatively to another post, and makes his or her previous point of view more extreme.

The *ideal role taking* considers listening respectfully and giving appropriate attention to the position of other participants; it also requires an ongoing debate which does not end abruptly. According to this criterion, we use the distinction proposed by Steenbergen *et al.* (2003): the *Implicit Respect* (9) occurs when there is neither negative nor positive positions, but when a group of concerned citizens is defended. The *Explicit Respect* (10), when there is at least one clearly displayed positive position on groups, regardless of the presence of negative positions. We would also have two forms of lack of respect. The *No Respect: rude message,* in which there are insults, sarcasm, personal attacks etc., but that does not attack democratic values; and the *No Respect: uncivil message*, in which there are discourses of prejudice, racism, hatred or attacks on democratic principles (Papacharissi, 2004). A further aspect concerning the ideal role taking criterion is an ongoing debate, that is, their regularity throughout the days, which indicates an interest in keeping the discussion, aiming at a common understanding: so, we will assess the average messages per day.

The debate should be open to all concerned citizens, and all participants must have equal opportunities to express themselves. In order to assess the *inclusion* and the *discursive equality* of the process, we will analyze the idea of *digital divide*, by presenting some data related to the number of people with Internet access in southeastern region of Brazil, as well as the implications of this issue for online deliberation. Our goal is far from conducting a complex analysis of digital divide, which is influenced by several aspects, but rather to evidence that this aspect should be considered when carrying out online participatory programs. Subsequently, we will analyze if only a few users had *dominated* the discussion, since this aspect may inhibit the participation of other citizens (such as through the formation of closed groups, which ignore the messages coming from "outsider" users). We presume, from our first analysis, that most individuals posted just one message. According to Jensen (2003), the fact that people post only once (*one-timer effect*) limits the complexity of the debate, especially when assessing reciprocity and reflexivity.

| Criterion | Variables |
|---|---|
| **Thematization and reasoned critique** | (1) Reciprocity <br> (2) Monological |
| | (3) External Validation <br> (4) Internal Validation <br> (5) Position |

| **Reflexivity** | (6) Persuasion |
| | (7) Progress |
| | (8) Radicalization |
| **Ideal Role Taking** | (9) Implicit Respect |
| | (10) Explicit Respect |
| | (11) No Respect: rude |
| | (12) No Respect: uncivil |
| | Continuity: posts per day |
| **Inclusion and Discursive Equality** | Number of posts per person. |

**Table 2 –** Criteria and variables in online deliberation processes

The other criteria which will be applied to the messages are: anonymity (13), identification (14), (user's) name (15), and date of posting (16). Even those who posted just a personal name are going to be classified as identified.

## 6. Results of deliberativeness

In the five DPB's forums (tools to post comments), 1209 messages were posted, showing support, criticisms, protests and several discussions. Initially, we selected all messages related to the projects #4 (306) and #5 (544), as they were the most commented and voted works. We tabulated and read all messages from these two forums (850). However, among this corpus, we only analyzed messages that referred to the two most commented issues: "Slow traffic and the project serves the region" (196), and "beneficiaries of the project" (179). Those messages (n = 375) were analyzed according to the model below. For the analysis, we used *Atlas TI 5.5* software. Atlas.ti is designed for content analysis and its functions helped the codification process and also the final verification of the criteria numbers.

The overall result of the level of "deliberativeness" reached in the corpus of data that we analyzed is presented in the table below. We introduce the number of messages classified in each indicator according to the forum and to the original issue. We also indicate the percentage of those messages posted in a specific issue and forum. In the last right column, we show the number of all classified messages according to each indicator, and also its percentage.

| Codes | Forum 4 Issue 1 | Forum 5 Issue 1 | Forum 4 Issue 2 | Forum 5 Issue 2 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Number of messages** | **50** | **146** | **100** | **79** | **375 (100%)** |
| Anonymous | 1.2 | 1 (0.7%) | 3.3. | 1 (1.27%) | 6 (1.6%) |
| Identified | 49 (98%) | 145 (99%) | 97 (97%) | 78 (99%) | 369 (98.4%) |
| Dialogical | 6.12 | 9 (6.2%) | 86 (86%) | 11 (13.9%) | 112 (29.87%) |
| Monological | 44 (88%) | 137 (94%) | 14 (14%) | 68 (86%) | 266 (70.93%) |
| External Validation | 20 (40%) | 29 (19.9%) | 75 (75%) | 29 (36.7%) | 153 (40.8%) |
| Internal Validation | 6.12 | 23 (15.7%) | 8 (8%) | 9 (11.4%) | 46 (12.26%) |
| Position | 21 (42%) | 74 (50.7%) | 15 (15%) | 41 (51.9%) | 151 (40.26%) |
| Persuasion | 1.2 | 3.2. | 5/5 | 1 (1.27%) | 10 (2.6%) |
| Progress | 5/5 | 1 (0.7%) | 55 (55%) | 5 (6.3%) | 66 (17.6%) |
| Radicalization | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 11 (11%) | 0 (0%) | 11 (2.9%) |
| Implicit Respect | 13 (26%) | 38 (26%) | 25 (25%) | 32 (40.5%) | 108 (28.8%) |
| Explicit Respect | 8 (16%) | 25 (17.1%) | 15 (15%) | 8 (10.1%) | 56 (14.93%) |
| No Respect: rude | 1.2 | 0 (0%) | 22 (22%) | 0 (0%) | 23 (6.1%) |
| No Respect: uncivil | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0.0%) |

**Table 3 –** Results of deliberativeness in DPB's comments tool

As for the *thematization and reasoned critique of problematic validity claims*, about 40% of the participants claimed to be either in favor or against the project execution, or the process itself (position). Other members (40.8%) not only claimed, but also offered rational arguments to validate their claims, based on what was presented as facts and data. Finally, 12% of the participants validated their claims by making use of narratives and personal experiences. On the other

hand, a smaller amount of users were willing to reply to messages. Less than a third (29.87%) of the assessed messages made reference to another message or to the discussion itself.

If *reciprocity*, which means the simple act of responding, was low, *reflexivity*, which is an even more complex process, proved to be a rarer phenomenon in the discussion, reaching about 20% of the total of messages.

Concerning the continuity of dialogue, Figure 1 shows that the exchange of messages worked in the form of "waves", the exchange was higher on certain days, and was almost absent in other ones. However, apart from a few days, in which the number of posts drops considerably, the average number of messages approximates the weighted average, which would be 14.6 posts per day.
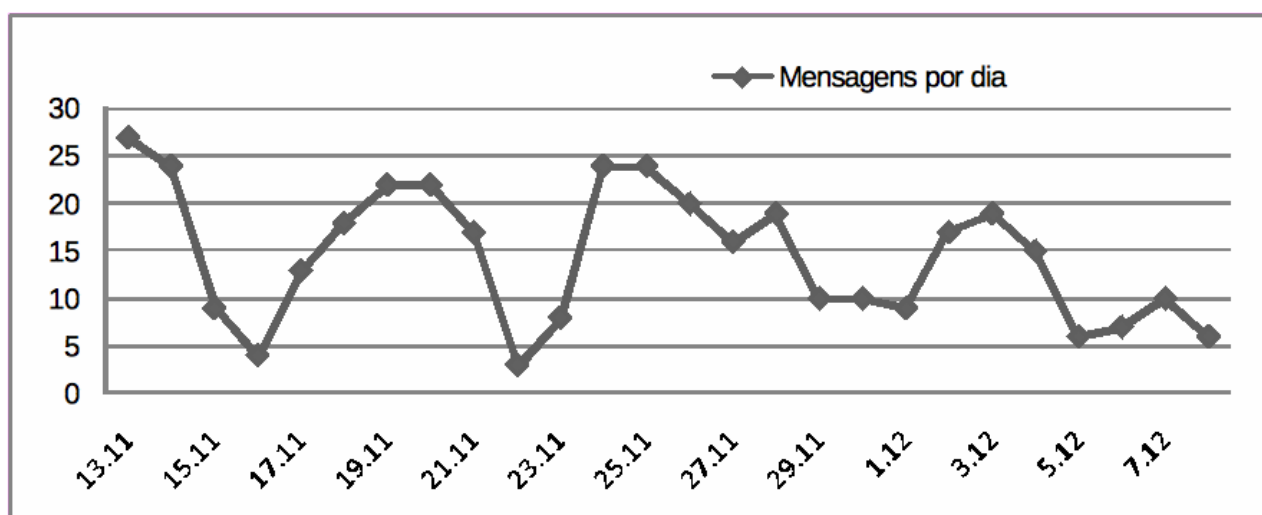


**Figure 1 –** Posts per day

The *one-timer* effect was quite high and reciprocity was low. Around 70% of participants left only a single message, and never returned to the topic, meaning a low willingness to dialogue. The idea of leaving a comment, expressing a particular point of view, but not necessarily demonstrating willingness to dialogue, was strongly adopted by the users.

Concerning the *respectful listening* code, messages that showed some form of explicit respect to individuals or groups were nearly 15% of the total analyzed in the two forums.

Messages that showed some attention, care or implicit respect in relation to the others reached 28% of the total, which means that about 40% of the messages showed some form of attention and respect to those affected by the DPB projects. The lack of respect was also low (6%), which may be due to pre-moderation.

> Concerning the *inclusion and discursive equality* criterion, among those who have posted, there was no evidence that the debate was dominated by a few participants. The first explanation for this lies in the fact that most people posted only once, but even among the most active ones, there was no user who dominated the debate.

## 7. Discussion and Conclusions

Taking into consideration the technical obstacles in the DPB website, as well as the lack of debate orientation by the municipal administration, we can say that the values of respect and argumentation were above expectations. We believe that the main reasons for that lies in the fact that the discussion tools are located on the same website of the voting tool, as well as the issue itself, once traffic distresses all inhabitants of a city.

Taking into account the asynchronous nature of the Internet, these results may have a great political value. The messages remain available for other people who visit the website later. For this third citizen (who visits the forum after the discussions), two initial arguments, which do not respond to each other, but present opinions based on reasons, may constitute a "debate" within the cognitive process of the "third party" involved. Soon, even those who just watch the debate, the *lurkers*, could benefit from reading the messages.

DPB has created a space in which discussion can happen. However, there were no mechanisms for encouraging and empowering the discursive exchange among citizens. If most individuals chose neither to read nor to respond to other participants, at least, it was possible for citizens to express their opinions about the participatory program, and about their needs and desires. Although we cannot be certain of it, nothing prevents the City Hall officers from keeping such discussions, and subsequently from using them as a feedback of the participatory process. As Warren (2007) states, one can open possibilities to

institutionalize deliberation by capturing speeches which are not deliberative *in intention,* and by producing dynamics that are deliberative *in function*.

As we sought to highlight in the studied case at stake, the high points of deliberativeness demonstrate on one hand that individuals can indeed enter discursive disputes with high levels of arguments, and respect for one another. Regarding the low deliberativeness degree of some aspects, we conclude on the other hand that there is a need for improvement related to the level of sophistication of the digital discursive tools, as well as a major performance of an institutional officer, who would not only consider the inputs of the participants, but also encourage discussion among citizens and further stakeholders themselves.

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