



# incomunicado reader

Edited by  
Geert Lovink and Soenke Zehle





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The logo for the Institute of network cultures, featuring a complex, overlapping network of thin black lines that form a circular shape around the text.  
Institute of  
network cultures





## Colophon

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# Brazil and the FLOSS Process

Alexandre Freire

This paper, more than presenting a case study, introduces the context in which digital and electronic culture, and the ideology that surrounds these cultures in Brazil, were able to influence the programs of the Brazilian Ministry of Culture. We will present the story of a project named Pontos de Cultura (cultural hotspots). We will describe how this project aims to diffuse a collaborative and free thinking/production ideology.

Today, Brazil is a world known Free/Open Source Software supporter. The current Government of president Lula da Silva has a public position on the adoption of Free/Libre Open Source Software (FLOSS) in its administration, having criticised the previous administration about the amount of money paid annually in royalties to international software companies. Two huge government programs claim they will bring FLOSS to the masses, PC-Conectado and The \$100 Laptop. The first will provide \$500 computers with FLOSS and subsidized Internet access to the general public. The second aims to design and produce \$100 laptops for distribution to schoolchildren. The Brazilian government is planning to migrate its entire infrastructure to FLOSS.

Despite all the hype in the media, these intentions have so far hardly translated into government actions. Some migrations have occurred, but only a few projects were successful. Most of the managers in the technological sector of the government are out of touch with current developments. Since they have been occupying a public job that gives, after a few years, the tenure and its safety of not being fired. As the choice for a different kind of software would force them to recycle their whole technical formation, they tend to resist these migrations.

These factors made the political position of the government contradict governmental practice. Most projects are still on paper and few efforts, in practice, have been made to promote adoption of FLOSS in government agencies. There are some successes at local





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level and there have been many telecentre efforts to present FLOSS to the population. The most remarkable is the City of São Paulo experience where the amount of people contemplated with Internet access and possibilities of computer usage was very impressive: more than half a million registered users in a network of over a hundred telecentres. The Cultural Hotspots project is being implemented throughout Brazil without bringing much attention to itself.

### *Pontos de Cultura, Forging a Group from a Collective Process*

Gilberto Gil, a famous Brazilian pop star, is involved in the Ministry of Culture in Lula's government. During its first months in function, the Ministry of Culture helped fund an event in São Paulo named Tactical Media Brazil. In this event, Claudio Prado, an old friend of Gil's, exchanged some ideas with Gil. Claudio would like to present a project to the just-installed Ministry of Culture. At this event Richard Barbrook and John Perry Barlow were also present. Barlow's presence was key, since he decided to spend some time in Brazil, keeping a strong contact with the Minister, and influencing many of Gil's positions in respect to technology.

Gil already had an interest for the subject, and went deeply into it. He declared himself a hacker. Hermano Vianna - an anthropologist interested in technology and cultural production - also influenced his positioning. Claudio Prado met some members of the staff of the organisation of Tactical Media Brazil and invited them to his house to establish a line of action. Claudio Prado then went to Brasília and hacked into a project named BAC (Culture Access Bases). Two months after the Brazilian Tactical Media Lab, Claudio Prado went to the second government-organised workshop on digital inclusion. Claudio presented some papers which he referred to as a "confidential project", architectural plans of a building to be occupied, with a theatre, studios, a library, a coffee-shop and other things, it was the plans for a BAC.

Directly after the 4th International Workshop on Free Software in Porto Alegre, he invited some people that were interested in the BACs project to his apartment in São Paulo to discuss new ideas that could be incorporated to the Cultural Access Bases. In this meeting, young activists, hackers and artists gathered to discuss what the BACs could become, although nobody really understood what this crazy grey-headed hippie, speaking on behalf of the ministry, really wanted.

Even so, the possibility of creating a way to materialise their ideas on a national scale served as a catalyst that brought together a great group of actors of distinct origins, coming from different collectives that in some way were working with similar goals.





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Some of them already had experience in collaborative projects and in networked social action, but never on a federal scale. Quickly, collaborative tools became a need and an e-mail list named Articuladores was created, connecting people from different regions of the country. Some time after, a wiki was created, through which most of the project was discussed and written: from its structural and architectural design, to the technical specifications of software and hardware that would be used in, from the rules of global management to the way the relation between Internet users should be.

Civil society practically rewrote the BAC project. This all happened with no central planning, even without selection of the people that were getting into it. The mailing list and the wiki made it easy for anyone that heard about the project to join and participate. The group became a mix of people that had never meet face to face and, even in this chaotically dynamics the list and the wiki were very productive. Production was done in this collaborative-based system, built according to principles of equality of voice and wide freedom of opinion. Many people that became part of this group already engaged in movements, collectives and projects related to media, art, technology, what made most of them previously prepared to be in this kind of collective authoring production situation.

There was a general sense of excitement and expectation. The exchange rhythm online was overwhelming. Lots of e-mails were exchanged, and many pages in wiki and meetings were making the whole project more and more dynamic. The more dynamic it got, the more people were joining: people with varied profiles and interests, volunteers that wanted to see a government project that would really use FLOSS to reach people. It was pure creativity. Everybody was looking to consolidate a proposal that would allow the reproduction on a national scale of a collaborative style of production only tried by those individuals in small groups outside of the state structure. They were talking about the creation of coordinated and de-centralised HackLabs, multimedia production and hardware re-appropriation.

All the work at the wiki and the list, after some time, consolidated two great proposals named BAC (Culture Access Bases) and BIC (Brazil, India and China). The BACs were thought to be great centres of production, distribution and exhibition of free knowledge and the formation of thinkers inside a collective and horizontal perspective of production. The BIC project was an attempt at integrating technology and production in south-south cooperation in order to create an approximation between rising economies and consolidate a new order against the current model of established info-politics, sustained by government of a country known for its endemic corruption and inefficiency.

Grassroots: from top-down revolution to spread guerrilla action

Unfortunately, these projects never became real. The projects were sent to the Ministry, but the politicians behind it simply ignored the result of all the collective work.







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The BAC project's idea of building big centres in big Brazilian cities was too expensive and would have demanded a huge infrastructure of equipment, security and technical personnel. The secretary responsible for the project, after ignoring all the information that we sent him as a free civil-society consultancy, was accused of corruption. Gil fired him, and the project was put aside.

Yet the energy that resulted in the BAC and BIC projects remained in the air. The people that helped build the idea wanted to see it through. Soon, another project took the place of the BACs in the Ministry. A new idea, an idea thought to reach every little corner of the country: a decentralised network of cultural producers exchanging experience about the most diverse Brazilian cultural context. This new project was called Pontos de Cultura (Cultural Hotspots), and this time the politician behind it came into contact with the people that had helped re-formulate the BAC project.

A Cultural Hotspot simultaneously produces and consumes culture. It can be a house, a room, a warehouse; any physical structure placed strategically anywhere where there is local cultural production. The purpose of the project is to gather this cultural production, and irradiate its content to all hotspots around the country (there are already 262 selected spots and they turn into more than 400 by the end of 2006), also, to give a basic infrastructure to allow people to produce cultural artefacts using FLOSS, and to distribute these artefacts in the hotspot's network, all through Creative Commons and Copyleft licenses, allowing remixing and collaboration with the other hotspots.

The Hotspots project also aims to reach places of social exclusion and poverty, this means that many projects just can't afford any hardware or software that they might need to do their cultural production. The need for hardware can be solved applying the idea of MetaReciclagem: using used computers to build useful ones, recycling e-waste. The need for software can be solved by adopting FLOSS, not only because it's free (as in beer), but also because it's free (as in freedom). We expect that every user will be a potential producer. No barrier should forbid the user to look inside the systems and learn/understand how it works. People in Cultural Hotspots can exchange their cultural production, be it as songs or movies, or as software.

### *FLOSS, Meta-Recycling and the Brazilian Culture*

Most of the people that were thinking the BAC project were excited to be a part of the Pontos de Cultura project. This could be explained by many reasons, most of them related with the practical point that this was the only way to see some of these ideas becoming reality. The group of people that started all this collective thinking/working effort, if





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analysed closely, has no strong commitment to the government goals or its ideology. Most of these people just want to see the thing done. One important issue was always the continuity of the whole thing.

One of the strongest characteristics of this new project, and, perhaps, one issue that had made many people keep up their support to the idea, was the faith that once the whole process started, the network built between the hotspots and its participants all over the country would be self-sufficient, without the need of government support for its maintenance. This belief in the self-sustainability of the whole thing, even after a Government change, is based on two strong points: the nature of the Brazilian way of network social action, along with an element of the Brazilian culture known as “jeitinho brasileiro”.

Cultural production, once dealing with digital media, is mainly based on information. Today, information can be shared and copied at very low cost. Entire movies can easily be downloaded from p2p networks, bypassing the whole entertainment industry infrastructure. Since we are dealing with GPL or CC licences, intellectual property rights governing these digital cultural goods are not an issue and the authorial rights are preserved.

Social Networks have some defining characteristics. When we talk about a network, we are referring to a social structure that has no “head” and no centre, a structure that is reduced to nodes and connections. Connections between nodes are only possible if a communication protocol is established between them in a way to make a long-term relationship (more in Castells, 2003). When we talk about Social Network protocols we are not talking about TCP/IP or X-Modem, Social Network Protocols are the chosen media of communication and action methodologies.

Collective work is only possible if all the members committed to the work know how to collaborate in a productive way. To build this reality, a methodology (that should be adaptive and flexible to local realities) needs to be established between the members of the community. The elaboration process for the BAC and BIC projects, detailed above, was possible, even without community member’s preparation because most of the people acting in that step of the process already knew a common protocol, a same way to act and interact.

Besides a protocol, commitment is needed. It is a well-known fact that commitment to collective action requires a sense of usefulness, a belief that the whole thing will result into something. Three structural features are common in many of the case and can be regarded as the basic features required of any successful online community. These features are ongoing interaction, identity persistence, and knowledge of previous interactions (Kollock, 1999:235). In other words, people must see the community happening before a mass commitment takes place.

This happened because by cooperating in this kind of communities, people define their





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own identity (Foina, 2005). This is likely to be one of the reasons for the rapid spread of the Pontos de Cultura project, as it enables people able to define their own local cultural identity by means of active dialogue within a national context (what some people call the Interactionist perspective – see Mead, 1982), and sharing within different cultural contexts and locations in Brazil. The first step, the construction of the network itself, was the key to start the whole process. Once fully functional, this network will connect cultural producers, digital artists, FLOSS developers and computer technicians in a way to create a self-sustainable social structure. The physical infrastructure is being implemented together within this structure; knowledge and resources for maintenance and, if necessary, replacement can be found inside the social network itself.

Replacement is what brings us to the second issue pointed earlier in this paper as a Brazilian characteristic. Brazilian culture is not the issue here, but one strong national urban identity is based, beside of some other issues, in the ability that most of the Brazilians have (or believe they have) of finding practical solutions in the most adverse situations, mainly improvising with the available resources. This is called “Jeitinho Brasileiro” – “the Brazilian way”. In academic terms, this means that we keep finding creative ways to convert an abundant resource, time, in a very rare resource, materials.

Applying this idea to the hardware infrastructure of the social network that the implementation of the Pontos de Cultura project is building, results in the fusion of the MetaReciclagem methodology to the whole thing as a way to guarantee the functioning of the communication channels and computer infrastructure after a possible lack of governmental funding. This cultural characteristic named as “jeitinho brasileiro” is not only applied to hardware, but also, once applied to FLOSS, it seems very similar to the Levy (1984) and Stallman (2002) concept of hacking.

We have hacked a project in the Brazilian government, and we believe that this project has a chance to succeed. Now, we need even more people to help us. We need to find more knowledge in these types of action, we need to learn, to teach. We need bandwidth and computers, and we need funding. But most of all, we need to collaborate with other groups that are interested in ICT4D, now that despite all the hype, only local and focused action can have a real social impact.





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The following people were interviewed:

Jon W. Anderson / Solomon Benjamin / Enrique Chaparro / Jan P. Nederveen Pieterse  
/ Richard Rogers / Roberto Verzola / Thomas Keenan / Anriette Esterhuysen / Ednah  
Karamagi / Sylvestre Ouedraogo / Muthoni Dorcas / Beatriz Busaniche / Steve Cisler /  
Felipe Fonseca / Shudda Sengupta / Bernardo Sorj / Tracey Naughton / Ravi Sundaram  
/ Ned Rossiter / Michael Gurstein / Sally Burch / Monica Narula / Nnenna Nwakanma /  
Ralf Bendrath / Maja van der Velden / Geert Lovink / Soenke Zehle

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The term *incomunicado* generally refers to a state of being without the means to communicate. *Incomunicado* currently implies not only being out of touch, but also being readied for violation, or potentially so -- contact is withheld; protective authorities are out of reach. In extra-judicial places across the world, access may be blocked and reporting may be late, but information still seeps out. The *Incomunicado Reader* aims to be part of this information collection, and provides reflection on where the discussion could begin anew.

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