

MIT GOV/LAB

PODCAST SERIES: POWER TO THE WHO

Episode 1: Arturo Hernandez, Founder of the Supercivicos

Introduction

What is the future of governance? How do governments innovate with citizens not just for citizens **POWER TO THE WHO** builds on our recent work at the innovation initiative of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Governance Lab. At the lab, we work with reformers, public service leaders, technologists and designers at the heart of governance innovation, where new solutions tackle complex problems to improve the relationship between citizens, government and civil society. I'm Carlos Centeno, your host and Associate Director of Innovation at the MIT GOV/LAB. And this is Power to the Who.

Arturo Hernandez, has been punched, kicked, laughed at but throughout all this, he has continued to push for the change he wants to see in his native Mexico City and he does so with a large online following built on years of experience as the host of MTV Latino. To do this Arturo founded Supercivicos 15 years ago, which translates loosely to Supercivic. Through Supercivicos, Arturo, armed with a phone camera and sometimes dressed as a Roman centurion, or the Beatles, or Jesus, is trying to change civic behavior through comedy and public pressure.

So what is Supercivicos trying to change? And is it really that bad? Let's talk about one of the hundreds of issues they're tackling. Pedestrian safety: A recent study on road safety in Mexico by the International Transport Forum, showed that 19% of road fatalities were pedestrian. In another, older study in the year 2000, focusing on Mexico City, that number was a staggering 54%. That's a lot of people dying on the street. So what do Supercivicos do? They stage "Happenings," which are comedic role-playing interventions that are meant to change citizen behavior.

For this specific behavior change, they dressed up as the Beatles, freezing midway through a pedestrian walk mimicking the Abbey Road album cover. You can watch the video on Youtube. Drivers stopped and smiled, others honked, but mostly, everybody paused. And that pause is the key moment when a person can decide to change their behavior. Today, we sit with Arturo. He tells us about the Jesus happening. One that a lot of people can relate to: In the subway in Mexico City, as in other cities, people sometimes sit on the few accessible seats available for passengers with disabilities. So in a city that is 80% Roman Catholic, Arturo dressed up as...Jesus. You can catch it on youtube if you type Supercivicos Jesus Christ. It's a great example of using local culture and beliefs to change behavior.

Arturo 02:42

In that one, it was the metro subway the subway in Mexico a lot of people especially young people, they don't respect the disability seats. So they sit there even if there's an old guy or a woman in front of them or or a disability person because I'm the video you could see that it's a blind guy and they don't they don't give the seat to them. So in that

way I say like okay let's let who can in some way like these people that would like my rationale. They pretend just to be in some way with some disability maybe they cannot walk. Let's respect them and say like they cannot walk. Who can make miracles and change that the only guy who can make those things is Jesus Christ with holy water. So I was having that Grail putting some water there and I was like throwing the water into the legs of these young people and I begin just to yell to the full to the crowd like listen guys I'm gonna make miracles like these these young guy that is seating and he cannot walk but he's gonna walk for the first time and you will see everyone who will will see this this miracle in front of your eyes. And it was like throwing the water and in some way in that that some of the people they get angry but of the pressure of everyone watching them at the end everyone stand up and one of the most beautiful things that happened in that happening and and is one of the most beautiful things because I never expect to have like that reaction is that the full I'm saying the full the full "vagon" the full Metro was like saying "Milagro! It's a miracle! Felicidades! Jesus you're great" stuff and more or less that's like Supercivicos. So, we attack like different problems, that's the beginning of the Supercivicos, then we change. But at the beginning, it was that.

I'm actually I'm now I'm preparing the, the series for Netflix, maybe it's gonna be Netflix or Amazon, I'm totally positive that this is going to be one of those big companies, and I'm gonna return to the essence I'm gonna make like happenings. So I already brought more than 50 happenings with big production. I'm actually inviting different artists from different things. It could be musicians, sports players, politicians, it doesn't matter, invite them to be part of their Supercivicos's happening.

Carlos 05:49

And I wonder there's something actually I was talking about here. I mean, we're an academic institution, right? So we are always interested in how you teach and how you learn things. I was talking to the team, and one of the things that we were wondering is, do you have a formula? Do you have a way to teach this? Because I imagine other countries, other cities would like to do something about this, or have a similar process.

Arturo 06:13

My formula it's first, it's to use humor that's like the first thing. But then I'm really good like, talking to the people now, like, even when people get angry, I have like, the virtue to just to, to 'carnalear' to touch them to say like "Hey sorry". But with costumes with creativity, people is not violent, people could get violent when you, because my other format is, I begin just to be using the cellular, it was like you could you could see it really well, and you could hear it really well. And you don't need like, in the night a crew to make a video like that. And especially the thing about the camera of the phone is that you could be in the, in the place in the right moment in the right, I mean, it's it's, you're a citizen now. So I begin just to to be using my iPhone, I was like the first one, I could say in Mexico, to begin just to use the camera of the of the phone, just like a surveillance camera.

Carlos 07:35

It makes it also more accessible for other people who already have a phone camera and they can see what you're doing. And maybe they can also do it.

Arturo 07:44

Exactly. Like if we don't have an authority who puts order, let's let's say use the camera just to show what is happening. And the way that the people react when you point them with an iPhone with the camera, yeah, they can get violent. And this is another format because seems like, it's someone that don't have costumes. In that way I doing this "video denuncias" is the way that I call them, these videos, is where I receive like a

punches, kick, everything happened to me. In some way, like the two way that I have my content: the content with humor with creativity, and the content with using the iPhone.

Carlos 08:38

which one is the more effective one do you think in terms of getting more allies involved in the population?

Arturo 08:46

I believe that the first one, you didn't see the people angry because you see that people like smiling sometimes they could get like angry but it's really weird, though. And the other one now, it helps because a lot of time you're solving a problem like "OK listen, those dogs are in an abandoned house for more than five days and they're like starving," and you cannot use humor in those situations sometimes. So using the phone in that way it helps because sometimes the press they take like that video and that helps just to let liberate the dog. And when I discovered this potential that had like the camera is when I decided just to make the application. OK, if we can make an application, the Supercivicos app, that everyone could make videos from different parts everywhere in Mexico City, and if we receive these videos, because Supercivicos is a strong trademark, we have like more than 5 million followers. If we use these millions of followers, like I kind of exchange with the authority, the authority is gonna react and resolve our problems before everyone. I want to say that with the Supercivicos app, you could make a report. Carlos Centeno makes a report of a water leak in the street. We receive your videos with your video, and we send them to the Sistema de Aguas, that is the authority that fixes the water leaks in Mexico. If the authority resolves that problem, I'm gonna say I'm gonna applaud them in front of all my social media. And in that way, the authority begins just to see that as a publicity as a marketing thing. Like, I'm gonna resolve the problem of Carlos, because the Supercivicos, they're gonna applaud me in social media, and they have a lot of followers. And in that way, we begin just to fix a lot of things with Supercivicos app. At the end when it was the best moment when we won the MIT Solve prize, when we solved more than 1000 reports in the full life of the of the app. But every day, we were almost resolving at least like five problems per day. Different kinds of problem.

Carlos 11:38

What is resolving it? So that people know.

Arturo 11:41

Okay, resolving is that you make a report, and at the end the authority will fix the problem.

Carlos 11:48

How did you make that happen? Because you have to get the authority to listen to you no?

Arturo 11:53

You make a report OK? We receive your report. And we already have like, the author of the report, the problem. When the authority fixes the report, we put it together. And we have like, the video with the "after", and we were like, making congratulations to the authority. And that in my point of view, that resulting thing. I mean, it begins with a problem, but at the end they authority fixes them.

Carlos 12:26

Did they ever compete? Did you ever have competition between authorities?

Arturo 12:29

Yeah. But it wasn't a good idea. Because at the end. We begin just to have a like, in Mexico City you have "alcaldias". Mexico City is divided in 17 mayors [municipalities] Alcadias. So we make an agreement with 8 of those 17. We made not an agreement that they have to resolve, most of the problems that they could make. And now that we had all the problems, we were like, every problem that has resolved was given a video in, especially in Facebook that is really strong. So we begin just to make like a McDonald's, the employer of the moment, you know, like, let's make like the mayor of the month, the mayor who is fixing more problems. And at the end, we realized that we were receiving more reports from the Alcadias, that has like more cellular phones, because people have like more money. Because they have like more cellular phones. They could make more reports. And the guy from Iztapalapa that was working really hard, but receiving not that many reports and it was an unfair thing just to say like, OK, this is the major of the month. And at the end, it was like they begin just to see that like as a problem as popularity thing that they don't like it so we decided just to cancel that.

Carlos 14:12

And how do you incentivize if that didn't work? How do you incentivize the government apart from the thing they signed? How do you think about incentivizing a government to resolve things? That's really interesting?

Arturo 14:23

Yeah, in my point of view, one of the problems at least in Latin America, that when we talk about the politicians or policemen or the bureaucrats, it's like, we have a really bad perception of them. We always talk bad about them. And when they resolve even the things, we never applaud them. So we discover that it's good to criticize, but it's really good to applaud it. Criticize them when they're acting bad, but applaud them when they are acting well. And in that, in that way, we begin just to have a really good connections with all the authorities, even the party, it doesn't matter if they were, they were like coming from different parties. In Mexico, you have like, the PRI and PAN, and now Morena, who are the stronger party. And with all of them, and even with the small ones, we have an ally. They see us like, "these guys, they don't they don't receive money, they just do it because they just want to have a better Mexico." So that was our secret, criticize and applaud: I'm gonna be criticizing you, I'm gonna be pressuring you, but I'm gonna be congratulating you when you fix the things and that's it. Um, but it's really important that we have like 5 million followers. I mean, then let's not forget that for them it's like it's free marketing, it's free publicity now.

Carlos 16:15

Yeah. And what happens with the political cycle? You have a new administration, new political party in power. You have to reestablish those links, build that trust again, how does it work?

Arturo 16:30

Yeah, I mean, when we were using the app, we have like this two periods: with Mancera who was the big mayor of Mexico City three years ago, and actually, because the application was working, that well Locatel (that is the is the institution that receives all the problems. If you have a problem as a citizen in Mexico City, you have to call Locatel. You have to call because with technology we're not really good. I just didn't have that you need to call. It's like a 911 but for problems from the citizens.) So because the application of Supercivicos was working that well Locatel gave us an official number. I mean, you could make a report in your app, and automatically Locatel was giving you an official number that you could track and your report was official.

Carlos 17:33

With competing interests sometimes or maybe,

Arturo 17:33

That's what happened with the Mancera administration and when it changed to the Claudia Sheinbaum administration, they respect us so it was like a really nice story just to see that at the end our app was a really helpful tool for them to. But yeah, we have like two different administrations and at the end, they don't feel as enemies or as allies. No, they feel as allies but not like I don't know, not enemies I don't want to say enemies. Exactly, exactly.

Carlos 17:49

But no, I think that's really interesting and super frustrating, maybe and challenging. And I wonder about the I don't want to call it a business model, but how do you keep something like this alive and this must take resources, money time from people like yourself and your colleagues? How do you keep something like this alive?

Arturo 18:43

Okay. It's a difficult thing at the end, just to have like money for Supercivicos. I make a lot of conferences in different states of Mexico, I'm receiving money from that, that really, that helped me a lot. I'm receiving money from my videos in Facebook and YouTube, but this is like new. This is like three years ago I begin to receive monetization for my videos especially because I'm a Facebook guy that's like my stronger platform. I make campaigns, some big brands. It's a difficult thing because a lot of companies search los Supercivicos to make campaigns but some of those companies are not I don't see them as good companies. Like for example Walmart, they want to make a campaign with Supercivicos and maybe I didn't want to hear like the the money that they were, they offered me because I was going to reject that because it's Walmart. Walmart destroys the small shops. So sometimes I could make a campaign with bigger companies. And we make a Kickstarter, I really have at least one campaign with Kickstarter that will receive more than \$50,000. So we're trying just to get money from different parts. But the truth is, it's hard. It's difficult. It's hard.

Carlos 20:33

You were telling me about this idea? I don't know if you can, if it's already public, but like, you're gamifying, the civic change? How is that incorporated at all? Have you started that yet? Or?

Arturo 20:46

Yeah, I have it in my mind, it's coming from the old application. The old application from Supercivicos was really simple. Now, okay, you make a report, now, we can get that connection and if the authority resolves the problem, that was like, the video and applause. The new application to create the perfect triangle to make a change, I could say like, is the triangle that has like three parts: One is the authority part, the other one is the citizen part, and the third one is the private sector. So the first up was like having two sides: Like the citizen side and the authority side. The new one is to incorporate the private sector. Okay, what is gonna happen, with the new app, if you make a report with the new app, and you resolve the report or the authority resolves, fixes the report, you Carlos will have like a five points, depending on the things. Let's say like, water leak, it's five points. But you save a tree, now a tree is different, it's 15 points, and you can accumulate those points. And those points at the end, you could change it for products. I mean, for maybe tennis shoes or jeans, or maybe a plane with a ticket that gives you with a 50% or 80% of discounts. And in my point of view, that like the future of the things. I could say like, at least in Mexico, let's divide the population and I

will say that there's a 20% of the population in Mexico that is like me, like you, like the people who is listening to this podcast. They realize that we're having problems and they have to they need to be "gente de cambio" a change maker. You don't have to talk with these guys, they are already part of us. And then you have an opposite side. Another 20 or maybe another 25% that is lost. It's the guys who I call them the infected, even though it's infected, you cannot make this guy just to be a change maker. They don't care, they're selfish. But what is happening with this type 60% that are not bad people. It's people who are apathetic. It's people who are good people, but they don't realize that they need to act. To that people the gamification thing is the solution. Let's make these guys play, let's make these guys win prizes. How? Doing good things to the society. And in my point of view, the new app is the future of a lot of things.

Carlos 23:56

Yeah, in a way is is this going in the trend of challenges in Tik Tok and social media of like people issuing challenges sometimes in in Tik Tok, they're superfluous, you know, superficial challenges, but in your world, in your idea, it would be like, "Hello Mexico city citizens, we want to see who can do the best happening, like who can perform the best happening, you know, dress up or something and get people to respect the pedestrian walk," like you like you did with Beatles. You stopped in the middle of the of the best friend world dress dressed as The Beatles. There's a video that anyone can watch on YouTube. And people were laughing and you know, there's a change that's generated beyond the moment that it happens. It's pushed out in social media. So if you have this challenge, then you create this mass momentum, hopefully, and people are competing for the prize, but also it's fun, because you get to be featured and something like that.

Arturo 24:54

Yeah, but the application is not like not to be using costumes or whatever. You could do it. I mean, if you want to, you could do it. But it's more like a citizen guy who is reporting and saying like, "Hey, let's fix this". I mean, you don't need to get dressed as a as a Beatle to, to fix this.

Carlos 25:17

It's almost you, you solve the problem yourself.

Arturo 25:20

Yeah. All you could make missions. Because, for example, during Puerto Vallarta in Mexico, um, because the application has geolocalization they know that you're in Puerto Vallarta. And you receive a message that says I Carlos Centeno, you're in Puerto Vallarta. If you can get from the beach 100 cigarette butts, just show was that do you recollect 100 of those, this restaurant in Puerto Vallarta is gonna give you three margaritas for free, because you already make a good thing for Puerto Vallarta. That's like the thing; these kind of missions. And you begin just to be playing with a lot of things. And the companies, the public sector will love it. Because at the end, you're doing a good thing that is good for everyone. But you're promoting a trademark, like, I don't know, if the Cinopolis is gonna give you two tickets to see the new movie, I don't know. So it's, in my point of view that the future of a lot of things, these kind of technologies.

Carlos 26:35

and the private sector brands, you know, like as usually they have what's called the CSR budget for doing social impact. They reserve a chunk of money of their budget to invest in things like building a school or something like that. But in this case, they would associate themselves with the image of civic changemakers, for example,

Arturo 27:00

Exactly. And at the end, that they could give us money, it will be really nice. But we don't want money. We want your product. I mean, we want your tennis shoes. For them it's not like it's cheaper in some way I believe.

Carlos 27:17

So tell me now like going back to the, we only talked a little bit about the one in the subway with the person getting up. But maybe tell us another one of the happenings. And then tell us maybe tell us one that didn't work so well so people understand that it can be challenging. It's not all fun.

Arturo 27:38

Okay. Let me say I mean, not working well, it is when they attack us or when they show us a gun or when they beat us even if we're in customs because sometimes that happens, a lot of times.

Carlos 27:59

Do you remember one?

Arturo 28:01

Yeah. So, the the happening was to move the cars to park... They park the car in a place that they cannot park. And one of the guys didn't want to move his car. We begin just to talk with him and suddenly he punched me but really hard, really hard in my face. And because I was like with all my crew and when you're recording one of those happenings, you have a camera guy, a sound guy, a guy from production. It was me and an actor and three more guys who were the owners of the truck. I think we were like nine guys against like, in some way like this guy. And I stopped them "No, no, don't hit him". And when we just turn and I just see the guy who was like having his gun. I remember everyone watched him like really scared. And nothing, it was like a really bad situation, we just go. But yeah, that kind of situation could happen now. Even people with guns that they're gonna point at you because it's a violent country.

Carlos 29:25

How does it make you feel that you're trying to do something to change? I mean, I don't know how they perceive it that the guy with the gun but how does it make you feel like you're trying to make change happen for the better and then you are met with very violent resistance.

Arturo 29:42

No, I feel, I feel sad. I feel more more more fear just not doing anything. Because in my point of view, like most of the problem that we have is because we're apathetic. But I feel good. Now I could a lot because I'm a famous guy, if you walk with me in the street, you will see like, every minute someone like asking for a photo, or just give me a hug, or just to say hello, now that makes me now feel more secure because I am a famous guy in some ways. So in some way that becomes like a shield. When I began just to be doing Supercivicos because it was like more, more risky. I could say.

Carlos 30:39

What is the future like for Supercivicos? Does that include taking Supercivicos to other cities to other countries? Would you make that happen?

Arturo 30:48

The thing that just to make that happen is just to find in different countries. A figure, a champion, a guy who is doing more or less that thing that you're doing, that means that

you're taking care for society, but you're strong you have like a followers in social media. It's not that you need to make another Supercivicos in Peru. Maybe it's a reporter that is working really well. Yeah, in my point of view, that's like the next future. I would like to have Supercivicos everywhere. But the truth is that it's difficult to find guys who have like, all these kinds of the thing that I have: I'm good with humor, I could talk with the camera, I'm brave, I'm a good runner. When the things could be bad. I'm really fast!

Carlos 30:58

I think they have to be they have to be already doing it. Like if you said they would, you know, there has to be a person. A woman who's reporting on things that are a problem, but she's also great on camera like you're saying somebody was already doing it but maybe they don't have the formula, which is why I was asking you if there's a formula. Do you see yourself like building a Supercivicos school or something like that? Where people come to Mexico and they train with?

Arturo 32:22

Yeah, I would like to do. I mean, I would like to do it. Yeah, because at the end Supercivicos has a lot of things. You could like, let's say like, let's invent the Supercivicos school. It's a school first, of activism. Then it's a school of creativity, it's a school that will teach you just to have a relation with the authority with the public. So it has, like a lot of branches, let's say. And I would like to make a Supercivicos school,

Carlos 32:57

I think you've hit on something with Supercivicos. I mean, I've seen you know, that there's the Antanas Mockus, with the behavior change, gamification of the engagement of the citizens in Bogota, and Bolivia, they had the people dress up as the zebras. So there are manifestations of this kind of approach to civic engagement and civic change. I think your formula is very intentional about making it humorous, whereas those are not necessarily the case. But I wonder if the, you know, there's this connection, this mix between the arts and comedy, especially the civic sphere is like, we have to explore a lot more there, it seems like you don't hear this much. But it sounds like it's a winning formula...

Arturo 33:47

And it's a winning formula. It's a thing that people who are acting bad, they like it, the people who is like watching the happening on the street, love it, and the people who see it on the cellulars they love it. So it's a winning thing. I'm totally positive that humor and creativity help us a lot, especially against violence.

Carlos 34:20

What would you tell people who want to do this kind of work and they have some of the skills that you were mentioning, maybe they're great on camera, you know, they're maybe they're an influencer already on social media and social networks. What would you tell them is the thing they should not do? And the thing that they should try to do the most?

Arturo 34:41

Actually, a lot of the happenings I don't make them. They go in a bad way or they're not that good. But when you speak up, because this is one of the problems that I perceive in Latin America. We don't realize It's just as simple as speak up, the way that the people is gonna react if you just do it in and a good way, it's amazing, you will resolve most of the problem, you don't have to be dressed as a Jesus or whatever. But if you do it in that way, it's amazing, it's really fun. And that like, the thing that I really liked the most, because when I just having these kind of happenings on the streets, it's like, I pass a

really good time. Everyone of us has a speciality or a virtue just to communicate things. It doesn't have to be with humor. It's just to speak up, I don't know.

Carlos 35:46

So no, basically speak up, what you should not do is stay quiet. If you have something to say, especially if you have the skill to say it. Make yourself heard, because maybe you are representing a lot of people who don't have a voice. And I think that's the case with you. I know a lot of people who would have liked to say something to the person who's not giving the seat to the person with disability. But you said it. And that already makes you almost like a spokesperson for all those people sitting around, they're a little shy, maybe they don't know how someone's gonna react. But you don't see it that way. You see it as if I speak up, something's gonna change.

Arturo 36:24

Exactly. Even if they don't, because a lot of times I speak up and they don't they don't..how do you say? Cuando no te pelan? They don't...

Carlos 36:34

...they don't listen, they don't care.

Arturo 36:36

They don't listen, they don't care. At least I try. And I'm just feel good. And that's the important thing. But I'm totally positive that if everyone, begin just to speak up and the other guy, the guy who is acting bad in some way he's gonna say like, "F**k, everyone is telling me the same thing every day," it's gonna begin just to change his attitude. I'm completely positive about that. But the most important thing is to speak up even because you're gonna feel good with yourself. That's the most important thing.

Carlos 37:21

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