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# Cal Poly Institute for Advanced Technology and Public Policy Secures \$1.2 million to Build Online Transparency Platform for California Legislature

**2015 platform launch will convert video files of legislative hearings into searchable transcripts, providing unparalleled public access to state government**

SAN LUIS OBISPO — The Institute for Advanced Technology and Public Policy (IATPP) at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo has been awarded \$1.2 million from the Laura and John Arnold Foundation in support of the Digital Democracy open government platform. The funding will allow the institute to convert video files of California legislative hearings into accurate and searchable transcripts that are freely available to the public.

“State and local issues have become increasingly significant in today’s gridlocked federal government,” explained Kelli Rhee, vice president of venture development at the Laura and John Arnold Foundation. “Digital Democracy provides the tools and information needed to search and follow relevant statehouse legislation, allowing the public to better understand how state policy decisions are being made.”

Digital Democracy unlocks an entirely new data source: the full text of negotiations, debates, and exchanges occurring within California’s Capitol. Until now, this information has not been available to the public, despite the fact that California’s 120 full-time lawmakers introduce an average of 5,000 bills each legislative session.

The Digital Democracy platform includes:

— **Accurate Transcripts:** Through advanced speech-to-text technologies, future legislative committee hearings will be fully transcribed and made searchable.

— **Searchable Video Database:** Search functionality will be available for users to search and access video files that include specific words or phrases.

— **Speaker Information:** Profile pages for all speakers will track campaign donations and gift histories, testimony, bill positions, and background information about lawmakers, lobbyists, advocates, and members of the public who provide testimony.

— **Campaign Contribution Data:** Users will be able to explore financial relationships between legislators, lobbyists, unions and companies as laws are crafted and brought to a vote.

— **Social Media Sharing:** Tools within the system will allow a user to quickly and easily search, view, and share information on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other social media platforms.

“During my tenure in Sacramento, I experienced firsthand how insulated the lawmaking process is from the public,” said Sam Blakeslee, IATPP founding director and a former state senator. “Digital Democracy is designed to change that by allowing citizens a firsthand look at the deliberations and debates unfolding in

Sacramento by all the major players: lawmakers, lobbyists and issue advocates. With this tool, the public will be empowered to better understand the lawmaking process and hold legislators accountable.”

A team of Cal Poly Computer Science faculty and students are developing the advanced technologies powering Digital Democracy.

“This project showcases what we do best here at Cal Poly,” said Dr. Foaad Khosmood, a computer science professor who serves as an IATPP senior research fellow. “It’s an exciting Learn by Doing opportunity for students to build something special from the ground up and for a great cause. This project will provide our students with valuable experience in data science, artificial intelligence, natural language processing, and machine learning, all within a multidisciplinary context.”

Earlier this year, IATPP built a proof-of-concept version of the platform that was successfully beta tested with more than 200 invited power users — including media members, community advocates, members of the capitol community, and the public. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with most users indicating that such a tool would significantly improve their ability to effectively advocate in Sacramento and hold policymakers accountable.

“As the CEO of a nonprofit child, youth, and family services organization, it is essential for me to be aware of and engaged in the legislative, public policy arena,” said Jim Roberts, founder and CEO of Family Care Network Inc. based in San Luis Obispo, Calif. “Digital Democracy provides a front row seat to view and monitor the inter-workings of the legislative process and the decisions being made which can have profound impact on the children, youth and families served by my organization.”

With the generous support of the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, the Digital Democracy platform will be made accessible to the public in the spring of 2015.

To learn more about Digital Democracy, visit  
<http://iatpp.calpoly.edu/projects/digitaldemocracy.asp>

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### **About the Institute for Advanced Technology and Public Policy**

Under the guidance of founding director and former State Senator Sam Blakeslee, the non-partisan, interdisciplinary organization’s mission is to develop practical solutions to societal issues by informing and driving public policy through advanced technology. Teams of Cal Poly faculty and students, together with public policy leaders and industry experts build technology solutions to pressing real world problems.

### **Digital Democracy Leadership Team Includes**

Honorable Dr. Sam Blakeslee  
Project Director  
Former CA State Senator and Assemblyman

Christine Robertson  
Project Co-Director  
Former Chief of Staff, California Senate and Assembly

Dr. Foaad Khosmood  
Senior Research Fellow  
Forbes Professor of Computer Engineering

Dr. Alex Dekhtyar  
Faculty Scholar  
Professor, Computer Science

Dr. Franz Kurfess  
Faculty Scholar

Professor, Computer Science

Daniel G. Newman  
Institute Advisor  
CEO / Co-Founder, MapLight

Dr. Michael Latner  
Faculty Scholar  
Assistant Professor, Political Science

Honorable Gavin Newsom  
Institute Advisor  
California Lieutenant Governor

Charles T. Munger, Jr.  
Institute Advisor  
Lead California Reformer

Dan Schnur  
Institute Advisor  
Director, Jesse Unruh Institute at USC; Chairman California FPPC (former)

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