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Transparency in government institutions: a literature review

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Abstract

This paper presents a literature review on the issue of transparency in government institutions. The review is carried out through a bibliometric survey of the Scopus database, brazilian government websites, and brazilian legislation. The review explores and evaluates government transparency as it pertains to Brazilian as well as international spheres. An analysis of the articles (from 2011 to 2012) found in the Scopus database using the keyword "transparency," uncovered the following recurring themes: open government, e-government, government accountability, and communication. The theoretical scope was constructed from these issues, plus the more relevant Brazilian legislation as well as issues encountered on websites focusing on international governmental institutions. Thus, it was possible to construct a theoretical framework that should guide the development of future researches.

Keywords: government transparency, open government, e-government, accountability, communication government.

1 Introduction

Much has been said and written about the themes of transparency, sustainability, corporate social responsibility, and quality in business and organizations. Academic studies have been developed around these modern themes, according to Fairbanks et al. (2007). However, an examination of the most recent publications reveal the lack of research on the theme of transparency in government institutions. Indeed, how much has the government, in general, neglected to follow the overall trend to be transparent in their actions and practices, whatever their legal obligation to be "transparent" Brasil (2011). This paper intends to bring to light, through an international perspective, any gaps that may separate the government's rhetoric, its legal obligations, and its acts performed (or their near total absence) in the current brazilian scenario.

There is no previous literature review according scopus research until 2012, so this study intends to answer two questions: What is government transparency? And what examples can be found in the literature that deal with the implementation of transparency in government? Exploring these questions is an important objective, for society has strongly mobilized itself in favor of sustainability, corporate social responsibility, the advancement of information and communications technology (ICTs), and citizen access to information. Such mobilization has, day after day, been encouraged by the Brazilian government and, in September 2011, by the launch of the Open Government Partnership (OGP, 2011).The OGP encourages the promoting of transparency, the fighting of corruption, the fostering of social participation, and the developing of new technologies. In such manner, the OGP hopes to fulfill its mission of making governments more open, effective, and accountable. Given this trend, finding answers to the study's two research questions is a worthwhile endeavor.

2 Literature review

2.1 Transparency – what is it?

Studies conducted in the areas of business management, public relations, and democratic governments (Fairbanks et al., 2007) have recognized the practice of organizational transparency as a means to increasing reliability. Studies that corroborate these results (Welch et al., 2005) found associations between citizen satisfaction with e-government and the government. That is, if a citizen is satisfied with the electronic government, it will also be satisfied with your government representative.

Transparency in government actions and its decision-making processes is the key for having a well-informed public. Transparency embraces the principles of public relations models and stakeholder management theory, both of which stand up for responsive communication that incorporates various stakeholders in the communication process (Fairbanks et al., 2007).

Tapscott and Ticoll (2005, p. 11) conceptualize transparency as "an old force with new power" and assert that companies that ignore or fight it fail to thrive in their results.

According to the Federal Institute for Access to Public Information (Mexico, 2008), government transparency can be defined by three elements: openness of information from the government; communication or knowledge-sharing on the part of citizens; and accountability or justification, to the citizens, of decisions taken by the government. The imminent challenge for government in the 21st century is to make citizens trust government agencies (Jing, Jin et al. 2010).

2.2 Open government

According to Sharon and Natalie (2010), the Obama administration in 2009 devised principles of "Open Government," with three main goals: collaboration, participation, and transparency.

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Hans and Luis (2011) listed the initiatives of Open Government as transparency, collaboration, and citizen participation. According to the authors, public access to government information is a strategy to achieve transparency. It is now required of the U.S. government agencies to make available to the public (via Internet) their missions, activities, and results so as to facilitate public dialogue and to solicit feedback, questions, and suggestions for how to improve government (Sharon & Natalie 2010). The research concluded that the results of this initiative have so far failed to meet expectations.

Indeed, expectations are great regarding the public and the political success of information based on Open Government. Challenges, however, remain: returns on social, political, and economic values; governance mechanisms; protocols; data management; and data technology standards; and a variety of skills and capabilities, both inside and outside the government—the establishment of these are all necessary to transparency's successful practice. For many government agencies, disclosing information to the public is seen as just another responsibility that vies for time they need to carry out their end activities (Sharon and Natalie 2010).

Dennis and Susan Copeland (2011), after one year of the Obama administration, analyzed its policies and proposed a framework that synthesized the concept of open government.

2.3 Electronic Government

Taiwan, according to some research (Jing et al., 2010), is one of the most democratic provinces of the Republic of China. Research results indicate that over 70% of public agencies surveyed provide freedom of information requests, half of them offer electronic resources for accessibility of information, and the other half provide e-mail. The authors define information and communications technology as increasingly integral to improving access to public services and information. The main difficulties are that supervisory authority is not clearly defined and rules are vague (Jing et al., 2010)

Welch et al., (2005) draw the following conclusions about the connections between trust, experience in, and satisfaction with e-government by citizens: 1) The use of the government websites is positively associated with satisfaction of e-government and satisfaction with the website and 2) e-government satisfaction is positively associated with citizen trust in government. And while citizens are generally satisfied with the provision of electronic information (transparency), there is some dissatisfaction with the transactions with and interactivity of the websites. In the government's electronic strategies/transactions, transparency and interactivity are important factors that directly affect trust and directly affect public satisfaction with e-government. Individuals who use
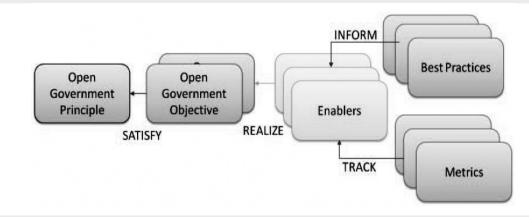

Figure 01: Components of the Open Government Initiative (Copeland & Copeland, 2011).

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government websites are not only customers but also participatory citizens (Welch et al., 2005).

2.4 Governmental communication

For a government, the difference between success and failure is often determined by communication (Fairbanks et al., 2007). Advertisements and political "marketing campaigns" generate distrust in many countries because citizens have little access to government information. The hallmarks of a democratic government and its handling of its affairs can be seen as its encouraging of government communication, informing, and being informed.

2.4.1 Government information

The concept of public information, according Batista (2010, p.40), is that it is a public asset, tangible or intangible, that can be expressed in graphic, sound, and/or iconographic forms. Because it is a public good, such information should be available to citizens, not only through the physical environment, but also through a language that is accessible, intelligible, and "translated" for the average citizen. Technological resources, such as the Internet, fall short of guaranteeing transparency.

The simple availability of information, according to Batista (2010), is not synonymous with clarity or public information. Access to information is not secured, Jardim (1999) notes, without intellectual access. Likewise, Welch et al. (2005) surmises that public administration today is focused on disseminating information, on putting "stuff" on the Internet, and on providing web services. But the mere fact of the information being exposed is not in and of itself a guarantee of citizen engagement in discussion, debate, and decision-making processes. The authors suggest that the government's use of Internet communication is rather like a one-way street, forgoing the more complex two-way street. There is a gap in communication with stakeholders that could be exploited

by the government administrations, the use of indicators, and tools for public policy.

Citizens' lack of trust in government can also pass as a lack of information or a feeling of being kept at a distance. Welch et al.,(2005) highlight this point: "The distance perceived by citizens and the lack of information between the public and the government appears to be the biggest problem that leads to a decline in confidence."

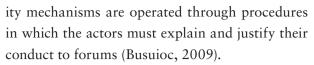On November 18, 2011, the Brazilian government enacted a law, regulating the right to public information:

> Law No. 12,527, enacted on November 18, 2011, by the President of the Republic, DilmaRousseff, regulates the constitutional right of citizen access to public information and applies to all three levels of government, the states, the Federal District, and Municipalities, effective after the expiration of 180 (one hundred eighty) days from publication. Its sanctions represent another important step towards the consolidation of Brazilian democracy and the strengthening of public transparency policies.
> CGU Portal - Accessed November 24, 2011

2.5 Accountability

The English term accountability is still without a Portuguese equivalent due to an ongoing search for an ideal concept that might materialize in global practices. Accountability is a central concept that was conceptualized (Willems & Van Dooren, 2011) to shine a light on democratic governance. Indeed, accountability keeps the public informed and the government exposed, open to questioning.

Accountability mechanisms are in fact control mechanisms, though the converse, as Busuioc (2009) indicated, is not true. Busuioc (2009) added that this control is not direct. The accountabil-

ity mechanisms are operated through procedures in which the actors must explain and justify their conduct to forums (Busuioc, 2009).

In Belgium, with the introduction of public-private partnerships, the number of accountability mechanisms has increased rather than diminished (Willems & Van Dooren, 2011). Likewise, Bovens et al. (2008) highlight that in recent years there have been efforts to strengthen existing mechanisms for accountability and creating new ones.

Bovens et al. (2008) also accord accountability such importance as to refer to it with the term "gold." They claim that no one would dare go against practice of accountability. Intuitively, all agree that government should be held accountable for its activities and way of governing. If society is unwilling to have an authoritarian regime in power, then it should check the government periodically. However, the absence of accountability can be transformed into an excess of it. Bovens et al. (2008) call such excess "industry accountability," and it too has its detractors. They complain of the accumulation of checking mechanisms, transforming how things are done into a "system of accountability," which is the sum of all that is imposed and must be managed. Still, the authors defend the information as having a reasonable purpose.

Because it is associated with the image of transparency and reliability, the concept of accountability may mean different things to different people. This also may be the case on account of not having a corresponding meaning in Portuguese, French, Spanish, Dutch and German, and there being no semantic distinction between responsibility and accountability. In American academia and in political discourse, the predominant use of the term refers to a normative concept for a standard assessment regarding the conduct of public actors (Bovens et al., 2008). The term carries an implicit suggestion of being virtuous, a positive quality in organizations or managers. This broad concept causes problems

for anyone challenging it; after all, the concept of accountability is comprehensive and yet there is no consensus on conduct that is accountable, because notions of it differ from position to position, person to person, place to place, and even moment to moment. In England, Australia, and European countries, the concept of accountability receives more limited treated, as a social mechanism. It is seen as an institutional relationship in which an agent can be taken to a forum to be held to account (be questioned, offer explanations, deliver results, and so forth). The focus of attention is on how agents operate and not on their behavior.

3 Methodology

To construct an analysis of government transparency, the research method adopted was the literature review. It was carried out in 2011 and 2012 using the Scopus database with the filter: "year from 2007", websites, and Brazilian legislation. The Scopus database was explored to ensure the quality, recognized by expert researchers, of publication, of number of articles, and of works at the national and, primarily, international levels.

The bibliometric study aimed to determine the incidence of studies on the subject, to check the relevance, the most cited authors, the countries studying the subject, the institutions, and the relationship between the most recurrent and interrelated themes. We also observed the occurrence of research in such search engines as Google scholar, ISI base, Scielo and Portal CAPES (brazilian), with the option of all the databases of selected academic queries.

From the research, based in the Scopus database (chosen as a basis for this work) the following was found: 627 records were selected, analyzed, and classified as relevant work to the research, focusing on government transparency or on the basis of government. From the articles selected for ha-

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ving titles as comprehensive as the subject of research and among those we were able to see the full text, we read approximately 45 papers (conference papers, articles, reviews, articles in press, short surveys…). The process for selection and categorization of articles consisted of reading the summaries and analysis of their content, from the authors of this research.

Although the study covers a wide range of international materials, it is still possible to conduct a more thorough investigation on the theme and sub-themes that have direct and indirect relationships to this one, such as information and corruption. Such a thorough investigation, however, was beyond the scope of this study.

The methodology used in this article conducts a synthesis of the authors who published during 2007-2012 period and their contributions to the topics, which include the principle of government transparency, with the development of Table 1, which correlates the issues in question.

4   Case studies

The literature identifies some practices of transparency in government institutions, and the following were chosen to illustrate the lack of definitions and strategies to achieve their results.

4.1   In Brazil

Cruz et al. (2010) showed in their research that public information is available in government databases as a way of promoting the transparency of public acts. They conducted their study from September to December 2009 using the electronic

Table 1: GovernmentTransparency

Concepts	Description	Source
Open Government		
"Releasing government data to the public to generate social and economic value, and accountability of governments and public agencies."	This consists of the formulation and implementation of governance that provides government data that could be used by society for their benefit and may be submitted to control.	Hans & Luis (2011).Uncovering Dynamics of Open Government, Transparency, Participation, and Collaboration. Proceedings of the 2011 44th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, IEEE Computer Society.
Electronic Government		
"Providing freedom of public information requests, information and communications technology (ICTs)"	Consists of the provision of software like: PIT, issues of "online" certificates, links like "Public Transparency" etc.	Jing et al. (2010). Transparency in e-governance. *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance*. Beijing, China, ACM.
Governmental Communication		
"Information is a public good, tangible or intangible, in the forms of graphic expression, sound or iconography."	Everyone has the right to information in its various forms.	Batista (2011). The dimensions of public information: transparency, access and communication. Transinformação,Brasília, DF, 22.3, 23 05 2011. Availableat: < http://revistas.puc-campinas.edu.br/transinfo/viewarticle.php?id=387 >. Accessed on: 14 11 2011.
"Access to information is not consolidated without access to the same intellectual…"	The information needs to be understood by citizens; otherwise it goes unnoticed.	Jardim(1999).The access of archival information in Brazil: problems of accessibility and dissemination. In: mesa redonda nacional de arquivos, Rio de Janeiro, 1999b. Available from 15 11 2011
"… and not guarantee citizen engagement in discussion, debate, and decision-making."	The citizen chooses to discuss, debate and engage in public policy.	Welch et al. (2005). "Linking Citizen Satisfaction with E-Government and Trust in Government."Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory 15 (3): 371-391.
Accountability		
"Clear relationship between citizens and politicians."	Consists in understanding t he dialogue.	Willems & Van Dooren (2011). "Lost in diffusion? How collaborative arrangements lead to an accountability paradox." International Review of Administrative Sciences 77 (3): 505-530
"Accountability of government activities and way of governing."	The government is accountable and is likely to suffer the consequences of its actions.	Bovens et al., (2008). "Does public accountability work? An assessment tool." Public Administration 86 (1): 225-242.
"Keep the public informed and the government exposed, open to questioning and placements."	The public perceives that the government is adopting public policies that best suit their needs.	Willems & Van Dooren(2011). "Lost in diffusion? How collaborative arrangements lead to an accountability paradox." International Review of Administrative Sciences 77 (3): 505-530

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databases of Brazilian municipalities. This concerns the Transparency of Public Management in Municipalities: "The best socioeconomic indicators tend to imply a greater level of transparency on the part of municipalities." "The average of the municipalities was less than 50% of the transparency index used by the research." And "The level of information transparency of municipal public management was incompatible with its socioeconomic development." Transparency is limited to the dissemination of information on public management.

4.2 USA

In the Obama administration, according to Sharon and Natalie's (2010) survey, the "Data.gov" initiative provides access to public information sources that are distributed among different government organizations, locations, or custodians. "Data.gov" offers electronic access to government finance, performance, and decisions. According to the authors, however, few tools used by the "website" are or were created with a focus on the citizen. Each has its own technology information, specific language models, and many lack standardization.

4.3 Taiwan

Jing et al., (2010) research, held in Taiwan in 2009, interviewed 137 heads of public institutions of central and local governments in Taiwan. The objective of the research was to investigate how public institutions put into practice electronic transparency on their "websites." The researchers found that over 70% of public agencies have provided areas for the purposes of disseminating information. Half of the institutions provide applications to receive answers or electronic forms for user feedback while the other half still usesemail as a means of interaction. The biggest challenge, according to the authors, is the lack of integration between agencies and lack of unity in information and collaboration. The institutions deal with the provision of

such information, which they use, though there is no processing of the information so that they might be clear to users. Also, no one is responsible for assessing the transparency in the institutions.

4.4 In Latin America

Ricardo, Manuella et al. (2009) selected four types of "new" online tools in Latin America that were to be used against corruption, social control, and promoting transparency. Mexico's Guadalajara has developed an electronic form called "Report the Corruption." A complaint can be submitted anonymously, though a protocol for answering the complaint or monitoring its resolution remains to be developed. There is also the "Corruption Report" which is directed by local authorities. There is also the possibility of sending additional data that may be associated with the complaint made earlier. In Guayaquil, Ecuador, there is the "Report Online," also a form without the possibility of being monitored, without transparency. And lastly, Cartago, Costa Rica, uses as a mechanism against corruption, "Investigation and Analysis," on a link within the municipal site, but it does not promote availability for sending additional information, except through emails, letters, phone calls, or messages via mobile phones.

4.5 In Greece

According to a study by Prokopios et al. (2010), the Greek public sector has entered an "era of e-government" in order to improve the quality of services provided to citizens. Mainly through the central database called "Ermis" (Greek Public Administration Portal: http://www.ermis.gov.gr) available for all electronic services in the public sector with these main features: uniform registration and authentication procedures provided by database; ratings of electronic services in security levels, which are provided by access type and purpose; and identification by sector.

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5 Conclusions and suggestions for future studies

What is government transparency? The research points to a likely answer—the junction of the practices adopted by institutions, policy markers and managers. A great confusion can be seen to surround how transparency is defined and classified. When referring to the presentation of accounts, authors often treat such a concept as accountability, transparency, or electronic government. The study as a whole presents evidence that government is an institution that has become more open about its governance, institutions and culture and has exhibited a pre-disposition to be transparent. Nevertheless, the provision of information so as to comply with legalities cannot on its own be conceptualized as open government. Simply because electronic government interacts with its citizen or stakeholders is no guarantee that there will be transparency in institutional actions or that the main results obtained will be relevant to its activities.

Information needs to be available in clear and accessible language for the "common" citizen. When this happens, the government is compelled to be more reliable and the citizenry more participatory. When this fails to happen, the citizenry are likely to turn away, their trust in government diminished as a whole. The examples found in the literature that deal with the implementation of transparency in government are scarce and do not attend the transparency concept in its complete comprehension. However, the provision of information not always relevant to either side now serves as accountability for legal purposes only, replete with unintelligible language and technical terms known to few citizens. There are no examples cited in the technical standardization among institutions to make the stakeholder more familiar with content of interest; neither there is an interface for communication to be established.

The present study, while citing some approaches for combatting corruption, does not stop this practice. The study suggests as the target of future research an investigation into the impact of corruption in government that lacks transparency.

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