

Fostering Integrity Online: from open data to interpreted data¹

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The fight against corruption is a recurring theme in Brazilian history. Despite the undeniable recent advances of the judiciary in this area, revealing old multi-million dollar schemes and condemning the guilty, in 2018, Brazil worsened its position in the Corruption Perceptions Index. Therefore, only acting repressively when dealing with the problem has proved insufficient. Repressing acts of corruption will always be a legal and institutional necessity because there will always be those who will choose an illegal path. However, by only acting after public funds are diverted, the public manager is deprived of the possibility of immediately turning those amounts into assets for citizens, and a long and uncertain investigation that may or may not turn into an equally long and uncertain legal process is required.

There should, therefore, also be a focus on preventing acts of corruption. The use of internet applications (apps) to enhance transparency and accountability is intended to contribute to the debate focused on preventing acts of corruption and, as a consequence, may help to avoid the occurrence of damage to public patrimony and reduce the demand for repressive action. It should be noted that apps (short for applications) are computer programs that may be made to run in web browsers, on mobile devices, or both.

What does the internet add to the playing field? How can apps be used for such a purpose? Furthermore, are they effective tools that can help to prevent corruption? The internet democratizes access to information, allowing data to flow further, faster, and cheaply. It has dramatically changed the form of storage, search, acquisition, and distribution of information worldwide.

In Brazil, the right to information is ensured among others, in Article 5, items XIV and XXXIII of the Constitution of the Federative Republic, which guarantees to everyone access to information, protects the confidentiality of the source when necessary for professional exercise, ensures to everyone the right to receive from public agencies information of their particular interest or information of collective or general interest (except those whose secrecy is indispensable to the security of society and the State), and establishes an obligation of public officials to provide such information or they will be subject to administrative misconduct sanctions.

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Brazil is a civil-law system with a detailed Constitution and an extensive amount of ordinary laws. In 2011, the Law on Access to Information (Ordinary Law 12.527/2011) was published. It regulates the fulfilment of this duty by the government and, among many other obligations, in Article 8, *caput*, concurrently with paragraph 2 of that Article, establishes the responsibility of public agencies and entities to promote the dissemination of information of collective or general interest that they produce or custody on official websites on the internet. The law also states that such websites must meet specific requirements, among them, the requirement to contain content search tools that allow access to information in a manner that is objective, transparent, clear, and easy to understand (art. 8, paragraph 3, I). Thereby emphasizing that information should not only be made available but that this should be done in a manner that makes the information broadly and easily accessible for all. Based on this law, several public agency websites now have a specific link to “access to information”, which provides the legally required data.

The underlying principle of this legal standard is clear: the relationship between information and democracy is essential. Democracy fades when the truth is hidden. A system in which democratic decisions are based on misleading data is an imperfect democracy. Enhancing transparency and providing information of better quality to citizens improves the quality of decisions and contributes to a better-informed society and to the construction of a full democracy.

The Federalists Papers (USA) already highlighted how vital the distribution of knowledge of and information on political dealings is to the health of democracies. Disclosing data concerning public officials and affairs is fundamental to allow social control, without which there is no truly democratic regime. Hence, a digital archive of official data empowers citizens, facilitating their access to information of public interest.

However, even though disclosure of data is required to establish a means of communication between the public sector and the citizens, it is not enough. The virtualisation of the world has overwhelmed us with an incredible volume of raw information. The internet is the most extensive collection of knowledge ever developed by humanity. In this context, just disclosing the data is not sufficient. In an ocean of information, developing methods to process and interpret records is also essential. In order to be truly transparent, the disclosed data must be processed: it must be read, analysed and interpreted.

The use of internet apps can be helpful in the processing of the disclosed data. In Brazil, many initiatives have emerged. For the 2018 general elections, a website for consumer complaints called “Complaint Here” (*Reclame Aqui*) developed an app called “corruption detector”. The app uses facial-recognition technology to cross photos of candidates and politicians with official information about them available on the webpages of the Courts of Justice, indicating both whether they are subject to lawsuits and the type of lawsuit. It is interesting that although it is a private sector initiative, it “crawls” through open data from the public sector websites but adds a user-friendly interface to deliver the result in an easily understandable manner.

The Rio de Janeiro State Public Ministry has been developing a network of apps for such a purpose. Two examples of the first generation are Citizen Manager and Building Internal Control. The first app lists lawsuits by municipality and calculates the total amount of money currently claimed in court by local prosecutors against public and private agents accused of corruption or damaging the treasury. The app allows citizens to simulate how that money could be spent on public policies such as building schools or hospitals, thereby revealing the true cost of corruption. The second app ranks municipalities by their level of internal control maturity, which is calculated on the basis of elements such as audit, internal affairs, transparency, budget, and planning. By choosing these as the elements to demand, the project aims to fortify integrity, since governments will try to comply with the standards to avoid the embarrassment of having their images linked to poor governance. Therefore, they will work to enhance internal control according to these criteria, in order to minimise bad publicity.

Together, these two apps work to increase publicity, transparency, and accountability in the public sector, acting as mechanisms to prevent corruption because both the parties and contracts questioned in court, as well as the damage caused by them are exposed. Governmental authorities are also exposed since the comparison reveals the deficiencies of each municipality, outlining risks to integrity. It is expected that these apps will enhance citizenship, public trust, and good governance while decreasing litigation, misuse and misappropriation of public resources, resulting in less corruption.

However, there is no miracle here. These apps are a contribution to the fight against corruption, but not a silver bullet. Digitalisation is a necessary evolution due to the volume of information available nowadays. Institutions that remain restricted to analogue data processing tend to be left behind as they will fail to keep pace with the technological evolution of society. However, without the effective use of these tools by citizens and public servants, no change will come.

The effectiveness of these tools lies especially in raising awareness and facilitating, each one a little, social control. When anti-corruption bodies do their work, but do not show it to the citizens, a false perception of widespread corruption can be generated among the people. Therefore, facilitating the interpretation of the data disclosed and displaying the results of the actions taken by the public sector are essential to reduce the general sense of impunity and vital to foster public trust.

The effectivity of such apps may be reduced if, for example, the app interprets the data in a misleading way or if they are being used in a country with scarce internet accessibility. What if the interpretation of the information by the app seems misleading? A possible solution might lie in providing the code of the app to allow auditing by the people, which will then be responsible for quality control. It is worth remembering that the capacity to produce collective knowledge on the internet is based mainly on peer review.

As to the question whether such apps are still effective if, in a certain country, access to the internet is scarce. The answer could be: For this proposal to be effective, the percentage of the population with access to the internet is irrelevant. If only 10% of the people are connected, it is for this 10% that the data should be disclosed and interpreted. In other words, regardless of the percentage of people who have online access, if those who have access to the internet are better supplied with information about their government affairs and public expenses, the prospect will be better than having no information online. They are the ones who will exercise social control online and will have the social responsibility to disclose this information through other media, such as radio, newspapers or television.

It is expected that the increasing development and use of artificial intelligence, blockchain, and big data analytics will open more possibilities in the future, reshaping anti-corruption tools, updating traditional methods, and reaffirming the idea presented in this essay, that is: internet apps can and must be used to promote integrity.