Changes in Brazil FOI Act Request: Moving Towards the Defense of Human Rights?

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Despite the origins of FOI being associated with Human Rights (HR), it has been legitimized as a set of tools to provide information on government structures and expenses to strengthen public integrity. But recent work indicates that COVID-19 imposed tremendous public efforts for health services and social protection. This paper analyzes open data of 522,140 requests of 242,491 requesters based on qualitative data analysis. Results indicated a significant increase in requests regarding the most urgent measures to face the pandemic related to health services and cash transfer programs. The number of requests by subjects varied significantly in relation to the requester's types of professions, education levels, and gender. The increase in requests for information on programs and measures aimed at coping with COVID-19 brings to light the demand for improvements in FOI norms and instruments, which should provide disposals and pre-defined strategies for their use in possible future similar contexts.

Introduction

It hardly needs to be stated that a global diffusion of freedom of information (FOI) has occurred in recent decades. Despite the origins of FOI being associated with Human Rights (HR), it has been legitimized as a set of tools to provide information on government structures, initiatives, and expenses to strengthen public integrity based on the discourse that transparency reduces corruption (COSTA, 2013; ESCALERAS, LIN e REGISTER, 2010; FOX, 2007).

Brazil portrays a representative case. Although the legislative discussion process of its FOI Act reports elements such as the Right to Memory and Truth, this act and associated instruments have reproduced the idea that concentrates their purpose on promoting public integrity (CINTRA, 2016; OLIVEIRA JÚNIOR e LUSTOSA DA COSTA, 2020). Besides that, FOI instruments in Brazil were forged by political dynamics of disputes and compromises of contradictory interests that resulted in lacks and ambiguities, with poor disposals on the governance of access to information in disaster situations or how to gather and treat personal data and socio-economic information of requesters (FARRANHA e OLIVEIRA JÚNIOR, 2020; OLIVEIRA JÚNIOR, 2019).

But recent work indicates that COVID-19 imposed tremendous public efforts for health services and social protection, shifting the debate on FOI and increasing demands for information in Brazil and other countries (BRAGA, CALDEIRA e SABENÇA, 2020;

DAFULEYA, 2020; MORALES, MARIÑO e MIELES, 2022; YUMNA, SURYAHADI e IZZATI, 2021). This work remains with a lack of how it affected FOI mechanisms, especially its use for a more HR perspective. Here, we explore the following issues: How has COVID-19 affected the use of FOI in Brazil? To what extent has the pandemic changed requests for information in Brazil toward a more HR perspective?

Drawing upon work on FOI, HR, COVID-19 focused on Brazil, this paper adopts an exploratory strategy to investigate open data of 522,140 requests of 242,491 requesters based on qualitative data analysis, following notions and basic steps proposed by Akinyode & Khan (2018) and Chauvette, Schick-Makaroff & Molzahn (2019). Data was collected on October 25, 2022, which allowed analyzing requests sent 30 months after the declaration of COVID-19 as a public disaster, from April 2020 to September 2022. To keep comparability, we also considered the open data of the requests and corresponding requesters in the same number of months before it, from October 2017 to March 2020.

For the analysis and comparison, we created 23 groups by interpreting the 602 types of existing subjects. Regarding the challenges of social inequalities and structural deficits in Brazil, we decided to use data on the socio-economic situation of requesters. This way, we presupposed that COVID-19 could have produced different effects on using FOI depending on the requesters' socio-economic situations.

By selecting the eight subject-groups most frequent, which represent about 75% of the total number of requests, results indicated there was a significant increase, followed by a relative decrease over time, in requests regarding the most urgent measures to face the pandemic, with emphasis on requests for information on health services and cash transfer programs. On the other hand, the number of requests on topics like energy, economy, education, and public services in general declined and did not return to the same numbers.

The results indicate that changes in the number of requests depending on the above-mentioned eight selected subject-groups varied significantly in relation to requesters' types of

professions, education levels, and gender. Although such results, we considered that some limitations in open data restricted the possibility of generating robust and more generalizable responses to its issues, especially regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the use of FOI in Brazil toward a more HR perspective.

The massive increase in requests for information on programs and measures aimed at coping with COVID-19 brings to light the urgent demand for improvements in FOI norms, procedures, and instruments, which should provide special disposals and pre-defined strategies for their use in possible future similar contexts. Additionally, the results indicate the urgent need to facilitate the correct use of instruments of request for information by citizens and enhance gathering socio-economic information from requesters without requiring personal data that allow their identification.

For future studies, exploring the texts of the requests for information with the adoption of methods and techniques based on text mining can be valuable to reduce the limitations imposed by the number of requests with undefined subjects and of requesters that did not bring their socio-economic information. In addition, further investigations into data collected after October 2022 may explore other questions, for example, whether changes to FOI requests were permanent or temporary.

1. Freedom of Information and Human Rights

The right to information has been treated as a fundamental Human Right by different international conventions, which require it to be present in the countries' regulations. Democratic transitions, advances in information technology, increased demand for responsiveness from elected leaders, and the need for participation in decision-making processes have contributed to the increased importance of such a right (BIRKINSHAW, 2006; MENDEL, 2009).

Regarding conventions that can reference this subject, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, in article 19, and the Inter-American Convention on Human Rights of the OAS, in article 13, are mentioned. This fact is linked to its importance for democracy by enabling mechanisms of participation in decisions about public policies, transparency, and fighting corruption, allowing the existence of more active citizens, and limiting excesses by representatives and bureaucrats (FARRANHA, SANTOS, *et al.*, 2016).

Also, in this approach, Mendel (2009) highlights some principles that should guide both its positivization and the development of public policies: i) maximum disclosure; ii) obligation to publish essential information by government bodies; iii) promotion of open government; iv) limited exceptions; v) facilitation of access by agile and fair procedures; vi) no impediment to access due to costs; vii) openness of meetings of public bodies for citizens; viii) verification of precedence of laws that are not following maximum disclosure; ix) protection of whistleblowers of unlawful acts.

This right was regulated in 2011 by the Law of Access to Public Information in Brazil (LAI - Law n. 12.527/2011). The discussion of such legislation took about nine years in Congress. The following bills gave rise to the LAI: PL n. 219/2003 (in the House) that originated the PL n. 41/2010 (in the Senate), presented by the then Federal Deputy Reginaldo Lopes. The following were joined to it: PL n. 1.019 of the then Federal Congressman Celso Russomano; PL n. 5.228/2009, authored by the Executive Branch; PL n. 1.904/2007 of the then Congressman Chico Alencar (focused on managing secrecy); and PL n. 4.611/2009. In 2010, after amendments, and debates, the PL n. 219/2003 was approved in the House and sent to the Federal Senate (as PLC n. 41/2010). Likewise, such a project was under discussion until November 18, 2011, when the President of the Republic sanctioned it: Law n. 12.527/2011 (in force on May 16, 2012) (CINTRA, 2016; OLIVEIRA JÚNIOR, 2019).

Two considerations can be made about this discussion: a) study and investigate FOI as a Human Right, where the focus of the research is to understand how people use this right, or

b) think about this right as a tool to, among others, realize the rights to health, education, and housing. Thinking about information as a means of seeking best practices for realizing these rights.

Despite of Freedom of Information is a fundamental right (UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, article 19, and the Inter-American Convention on Human Rights of the OAS, article 13), this text, in particular, works as a tool to analyze the context in which the requests for information during the COVID period were made and helps us think about aspects that need to be deepened in systematic research on the subject.

2. Access to Information and COVID-19 in Brazil

Although the foundations of the right to information date back to the middle of the last century and are related to a wide range of HR issues, the global diffusion of FOI occurred only in the beginning in the 1990s, with the rise of the discourse on the urgency of controlling corruption and the provision and dissemination of good governance principles and recommendations (ANDERSSON e HEYWOOD, 2009; HINDESS, 2009; PIETH, 2002).

Today, according to the Global Right to Information Ration (https://www.rti-ratatg.org/country-data/) of the 136 countries with formal right to information, only thirteen had approval in previous decades.

Brazil portrays a representative case. Although the legislative discussion process of its FOI Act reports elements such as the Right to Memory and Truth, this act and associated instruments have reproduced the idea that concentrates their purpose on promoting public integrity (CINTRA, 2016; OLIVEIRA JÚNIOR e LUSTOSA DA COSTA, 2020). FOI instruments in Brazil were forged by political dynamics of disputes and compromises of contradictory interests that resulted in lacks and ambiguities, with poor disposals on the governance of access to information in disaster situations or how to gather and treat personal data and socio-economic information of requesters (FARRANHA, LUSTOSA DA COSTA e

OLIVEIRA JÚNIOR, 2020; FARRANHA e OLIVEIRA JÚNIOR, 2020; OLIVEIRA JÚNIOR, 2019).

But recent work indicates that COVID-19 imposed tremendous public efforts for health services and social protection, shifting the debate on FOI and increasing demands for information in Brazil and other countries (BRAGA, CALDEIRA e SABENÇA, 2020; DAFULEYA, 2020; MORALES, MARIÑO e MIELES, 2022; YUMNA, SURYAHADI e IZZATI, 2021). In general, COVID-19 has been treated as a global public disaster, constituting a massive shock that produced pressures and changes on health systems, private services, commerce, jobs, and social aid, including in international efforts, such as in the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) of the 2030 Agenda (DAFULEYA, 2020; IWUOHA e JUDE-IWUOHA, 2020; RODRIGUES, CARPES e RAFFAGNATO, 2020).

In Brazil, as in other countries, due to the high level of contamination and dissemination and the resulting increase in the number of hospital admissions and deaths attributed to COVID, it was adopted a series of response measures to face such a disaster and its several impacts (BRAGA, CALDEIRA e SABENÇA, 2020; RODRIGUES, CARPES e RAFFAGNATO, 2020).

In the global south, besides the direct impacts on health, lockdown measures adopted as COVID-19 responses produced other economic and human challenges that strongly affected low-income and informal employment strata, who already lived with less economic security and were more dependent on public services even before the pandemic. Thus, COVID-19 and resulting lockdown measures demanded rapid responses from governments to increment and provide new health services and social protection programs, such as cash transfers and social assistance, primarily focused on vulnerable groups (BRAGA, CALDEIRA e SABENÇA, 2020; DAFULEYA, 2020; DESHPANDE, MULAT, *et al.*, 2022)

Work on information-seeking behavior has indicated changes in this new context. The spread of COVID-19 and health and social protection responses have increased, at least

temporarily, the number of searches for information about this disease and its symptoms and the measures adopted to contain it (BENTO, NGUYEN, *et al.*, 2020; CIOFANI, MPHYS, *et al.*, 2021; DU, YANG, *et al.*, 2020). The profiles of the groups who sought information regarding income, education level, age, and gender were identified as factors related to the types of sources most used and the need to avoid misinformation (FALCONE e SAPIENZA, 2021; REISDORF, BLANK, *et al.*, 2021; SKARPA e GAROUFALLOU, 2021)

Regarding work on information-seeking behavior and FOI in Brazil, scientific investigations were not found that specifically explored changes in these themes resulting from COVID-19. Nasu, Borges & Silva (2022), despite not explicitly addressing COVID as a driver of change in FOI requests, analyzed the evolution of requesters' profiles between May 2012 and May 2021, which made it possible to consider data only about thirty months in the context of the pandemic.

This investigation mentioned above brings valuable findings to justify this proposal. Its results about differences in requesters' profiles informed between 2012 and 2019 to those informed in 2020 and 2021 point out an increase in the relative frequency of requesters that, a priori, do not represent wealthy groups. In summary, it indicates increments in requesters that informed their gender as "female," education as "high school," and profession as "others," being remarkable that the defined list of options does not include "unemployed" and "informal jobs" (NASU, BORGES e SILVA, 2022, p. 41-44).

3. Method and View of Open Data

Here, we present the stages of the exploratory research method, describing datasets representing their sources and the limitations resulting from their contents. This paper is based on qualitative data analysis, following notions and basic steps proposed by Akinyode & Khan (2018) and Chauvette, Schick-Makaroff & Molzahn (2019), considering two reasons. First, its sources are limited to available open data on FOI requests sent by natural people as requesters.

Second, its purpose focuses on inferring how COVID-19 affected FOI in Brazil, as indicated by its issues: How has COVID-19 affected the use of FOI in Brazil? To what extent has the pandemic changed requests for information in Brazil toward a more HR perspective?

The primary data for this investigation was gathered on October 25, 2022, from the Brazilian Portal of Open Data, option *e-SIC - Sistema Eletrônico do Serviço de Informações ao Cidadão* (https://dados.gov.br/). Such open data comprises data on requests for information and their requesters collected from the *Fala.Br* system, which represents the official FOI mechanism for requesting public information provided by the Brazilian federal government (NASU, BORGES e SILVA, 2022; SASSO, PERES, *et al.*, 2017).

Considering the date on which data gathering was made, the available open data allows for analyzing requests for information sent 30 months after the declaration of COVID-19 as a public disaster, representing the period between April 2020 and September 2022. To keep comparability, we considered the open data of the requests and requesters in the same number of months before it, from October 2017 to March 2020.

Open data was gathered in CSV format from the Brazilian Portal of Open Data and comprised information on requests, including an automatic-created ID attributed to their requesters, a subject and destination body selected by their requests from pre-defined lists, dates of reception and response, and the situation and decision of the request. Requesters' data include their automatic-created IDs, their type of profession, date of birth, type of schooling, city of residence, and if they are natural people or companies with no information that allows personal identification.

After importing open data to two corresponding tables of Requests and Requesters in a database, data was cleaned and prepared before data analysis. From a first look at the open data, it was observed that in the first 30 months, 269.271 requests were sent from 115.263 requesters as natural people. In the next 30, 252.869 requests from 127.228 requesters were sent, representing an increase of 6,32% and 7,93%, respectively.

We verified 602 types of subjects defined as simple words or short sentences in Portuguese, which requesters selected to attribute to their requests. Regarding that these subjects were associated with public sectors, programs, and public policies representing objects of the required information, we observed that they could be grouped into 23 subject-groups in English. This way, we created a table to establish the relationships between these subjects and their corresponding groups to make its analysis possible. Following, we included in the Requests table one field and fulfilled it with the information in English if the requests were sent 30 months before or after.

Regarding challenges of social inequalities and structural deficits in Brazil with remarkable implications by profession, level of education, and gender, presupposing that COVID-19 could have produced different effects on using FOI depending on the requesters' socio-economic situations, we decided to use data on the socio-economic situation of requesters. Thus, we included in our database tables for translating to English the 17 types of professions and eight types of education that existed in the data collected.

4. Results of Open Data Analysis

This section presents results of qualitative data analysis of gathered and treated open data on requests and corresponding requesters. As indicated, we examined and compared information of requests sent 30 months before and after the declaration of COVID-19 as a public disaster (Oct 2017 to Mar 2020 and Apr 2020 to Sep 2022).

For the analysis, we created 23 groups by interpreting 602 types of existing subjects. We also concentrated our analysis by selecting the eight groups of subjects most frequent in requests, representing about 75% of the total requests in the period of interest.

Regarding the analysis of the number of requests per subject-groups, we observed a significant limitation in the data on the subjects. More than 20% of requests contained general or undefined subjects that did not allow relating them to a sector, program, or policy, preventing

relating them to a specific subject-group. We also verified that the first eight groups in the number of requests in the period of interest represented about 75% of the total after subtracting the group of undefined subjects.

Table 1 presents by subject-groups the number and percentages of requests sent before (Oct 2017 to Mar 2020) and after (Apr 2020 to Sep 2022) the declaration of COVID as a public disaster, highlighting the top eight groups in the number of requests in the period of interest.

Table 1 – Numbers and Percentages of Requests by Subject-Groups

Subject-Groups	Before	After	↑↓%	Before + After	% Total	% Total minus undefined
Education and sports policies and programs	**38.657**	**20.621**	**-46,66%**	**59.278**	**11,35%**	**14,49%**
Public services in general	**38.076**	**16.329**	**-57,11%**	**54.405**	**10,42%**	**13,30%**
Social insurance and labor protection	**29.081**	**12.655**	**-56,48%**	**41.736**	**7,99%**	**10,20%**
Economy, tax, and banking	**27.921**	**7.228**	**-74,11%**	**35.149**	**6,73%**	**8,59%**
Energy, infrastructure, and transport	**22.883**	**9.411**	**-58,87%**	**32.294**	**6,18%**	**7,89%**
Health information and services	**14.415**	**17.424**	**20,87%**	**31.839**	**6,10%**	**7,78%**
Social and governmental oversight	**10.371**	**20.943**	**101,94%**	**31.314**	**6,00%**	**7,65%**
Social assistance and income transfer programs	**1.728**	**18.943**	**996,24%**	**20.671**	**3,96%**	**5,05%**
Government and public administration	1.640	11.875	624,09%	13.515	2,59%	3,30%
Agriculture and Food Supply	8.677	3.099	-64,28%	11.776	2,26%	2,88%
Industry, concurrence regulation, and consumer protection	7.919	2.868	-63,78%	10.787	2,07%	2,64%
Drugs, Sanitation, and Health Surveillance	7.002	3.037	-56,63%	10.039	1,92%	2,45%
Human rights and affirmative and social inclusion	6.155	2.945	-52,15%	9.100	1,74%	2,22%
Legislation and norms	4.691	4.093	-12,75%	8.784	1,68%	2,15%
Environmental protection and climate change	5.061	3.073	-39,28%	8.134	1,56%	1,99%
Science, research, and development	3.452	1.781	-48,41%	5.233	1,00%	1,28%
ICT policies and programs	2.948	2.237	-24,12%	5.185	0,99%	1,27%
Defense and national security	3.139	1.655	-47,28%	4.794	0,92%	1,17%
Justice, civil defense, and public safety	2.539	1.901	-25,13%	4.440	0,85%	1,09%
Cultural diffusion and incentive programs	2.870	1.332	-53,59%	4.202	0,80%	1,03%
International relations	1.518	1.755	15,61%	3.273	0,63%	0,80%
Urban policies and cities	1.895	1.321	-30,29%	3.216	0,62%	0,79%
Undefined	26.633	86.343	224,20%	112.976	21,64%	-
Total	**269.271**	**252.869**	**-6,09%**	**522.140**		

Notes: Source: Research data.

The "Before" column corresponds to requests from Oct 2017 to Mar 2020, and the "After" column corresponds to requests from Abr 2020 to Sep 2022.

The first eight groups by the number of requests sent in the period of interest are highlighted in bold.

Figure 1 shows a graph concerning the eight top subject-groups, indicating percentual changes in the number of requests sent before (Oct 2017 to Mar 2020) and after (Apr 2020 to Sep 2022). It is remarkable that while there were percentual increases of requests for information on assistance and social assistance, health services, and governmental oversight, subjects related to the economy, social insurance, education/sports programs, and general public services fell.
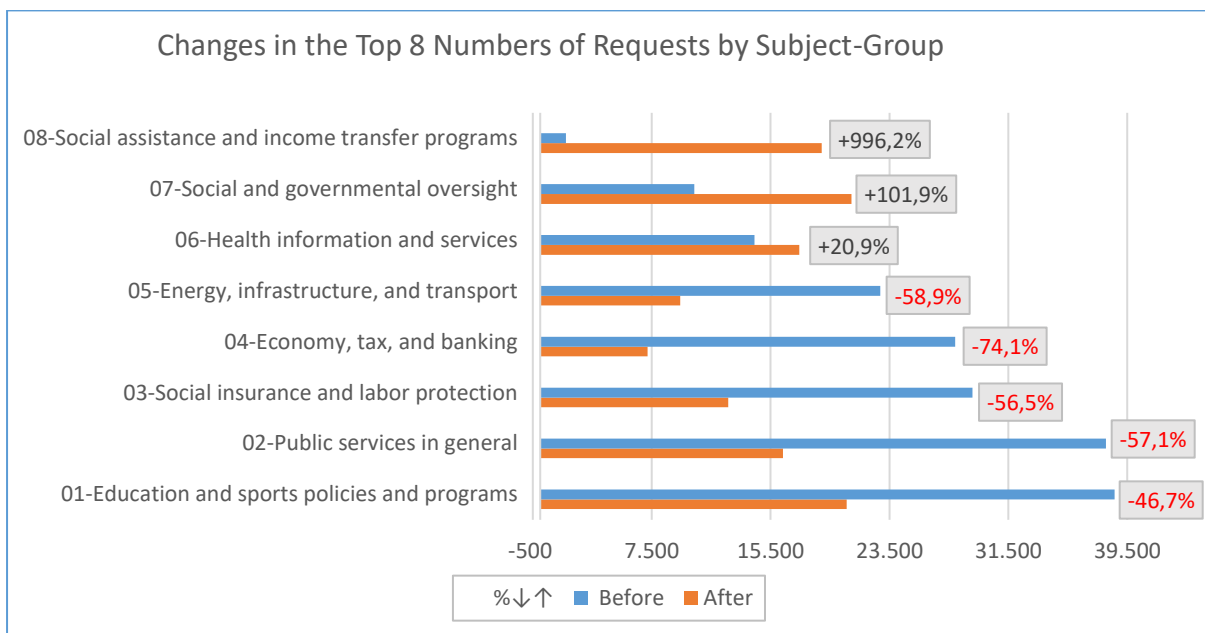

Figure 1 - Changes in the Top 8 Requests by Subject-Group Before (Oct 2017-Mar 2020) and After (Apr 2020-Sep 2022)

The above results seem to follow work pointing to increased pressure on governments for health services and programs to reduce the impact of the lockdown. However, the drop in requests for education seems to be an interesting object of more accurate investigation in the future, given the challenges posed by the need for distance learning strategies.

Observing the change in the number of requests related to the eight top groups, we then analyzed this change between them in detail month by month.

Figure 2 shows a graph concerning the eight top subject-groups, indicating the number of requests sent by month from October 2017 to September 2022. In this graph, we have included a dotted line to indicate the period before and after the declaration of COVID-19 as a public disaster.
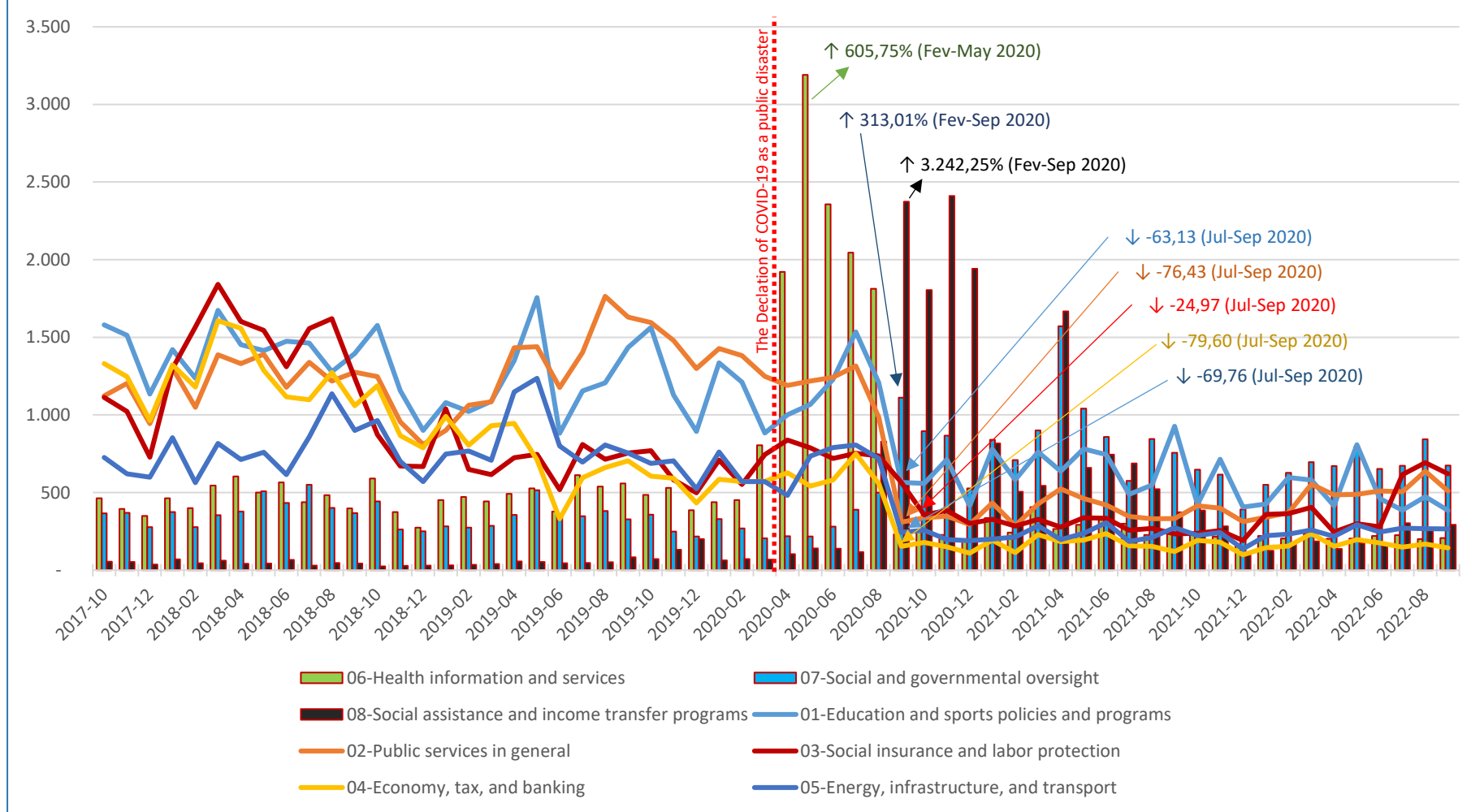
Figure 2 - Changes in the Top 8 Requests by Subject-Group Month by Month (Oct 2017 to Sep 2022)

The graph indicates rapid and significant increase after the declaration of COVID-19 as a public disaster in requests. Requests on health information and services, between Fev and May 2020, increased 605,75%. Requests on social assistance and transfer programs, between Fev and Sep 2020, increased 313,01%. Requests on social and governmental oversight, between Fev and Sep 2020, increased 3.424,25%. Remarkably, such increases are followed by a relative decrease over time.

On the other hand, the number of requests for information on energy, infrastructure, and transport (-69,76%); public services in general (-76,43%); economy, tax, and banking (-79,60); and education and sports programs (-63,13%) declined and did not return to the same numbers until the end period of interest.

Future studies that may address more extended periods will be able to explore whether the changes in the use of FOI through requests for information shortly after the declaration of COVID-19 as a public disaster represented more ephemeral or perennial effects.

Regarding the challenges of social inequalities and structural deficits in Brazil and observing the changes in the number of requests by subject-groups examined by the graph in Figure 2, we then proceeded to explore whether these changes were related to the socio-economic profiles of the applicants and whether they could indicate that the use of FOI was directed towards and by people in vulnerable situations.

This way, we presupposed that COVID-19 could have produced different effects on using FOI depending on the requesters' socio-economic situations.

Table 2 presents by types of profession informed by requesters the number and percentages of requests sent before (Oct 2017 to Mar 2020) and after (Apr 2020 to Sep 2022) the declaration of COVID as a public disaster.

Table 2 – Numbers and Percentages of Requesters by the Informed Type of Profession

Types of Profession	Before	After	↑↓%	Before + After	% Total
01-Student	13.673	6.856	-49,86%	20.529	3,93%
02-Teacher	5.219	2.382	-54,36%	7.601	1,46%
03-Researcher	3.026	1.512	-50,03%	4.538	0,87%
04-Journalist	1.759	916	-47,92%	2.675	0,51%
05-Brazilia NGO member	245	109	-55,51%	354	0,07%
06-International NGO member	57	30	-47,37%	87	0,02%
07-Labor union representative	77	22	-71,43%	99	0,02%
08-Political party member	50	20	-60,00%	70	0,01%
09-Private Sector Employee	16.314	6.153	-62,28%	22.467	4,30%
10-Entreprenaur	5.477	2.704	-50,63%	8.181	1,57%
11-Liberal professional	7.331	4.806	-34,44%	12.137	2,32%
12-Local government public servant	4.519	1.786	-60,48%	6.305	1,21%
13-State public servant	5.534	2.089	-62,25%	7.623	1,46%
14-Federal public servant	10.732	4.195	-60,91%	14.927	2,86%
15-Others	20.237	17.453	-13,76%	37.690	7,22%
16-Not indicated by requesters	21.013	76.195	262,61%	97.208	18,62%
Total	**115.263**	**127.228**	**10,38%**		**242.491**

Notes: Source: Research data.

The "Before" column corresponds to requests from Oct 2017 to Mar 2020, and the "After" column corresponds to requests from Abr 2020 to Sep 2022.

Observing the table above, it is seen that the number of requesters by their type of profession fell in all cases except for the "not informed" type, which represents 18,62% of requesters in the period. This limitation results from the option given to requesters to select the pre-defined "not informed" type. This data raises other questions: is it necessary to have information about the requesters? Is this information (social and economic data) essential for more transparency in public information management?
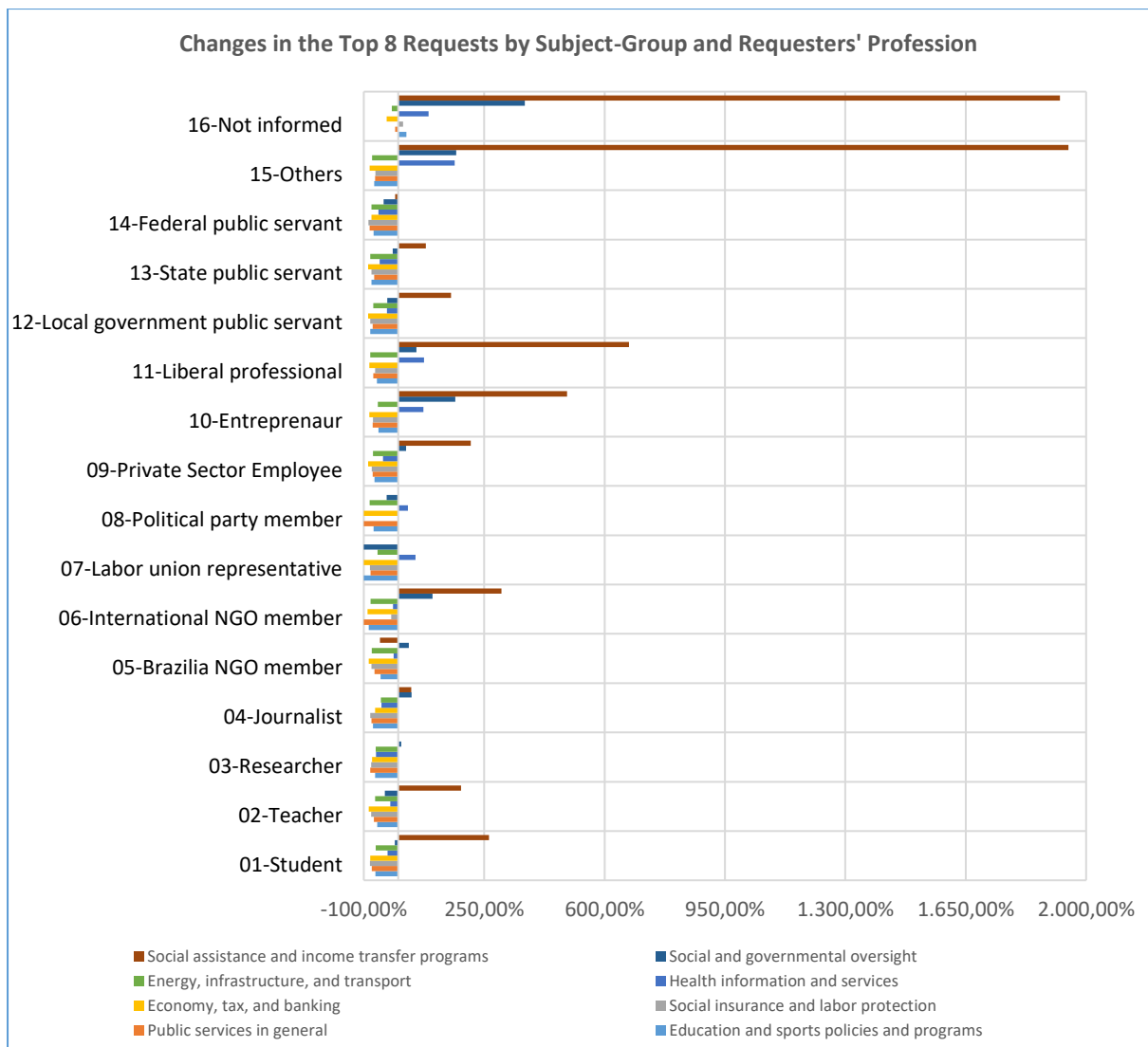
Figure 3 - Changes in the Top 8 Requests by Requesters' Type of Professions Before (Oct 2017-Mar 2020) and After (Apr2020-Sep2022)

We think that this is a subject for another paper, but it is very important to know how the unidentified answers can be influenced in the elaboration of public policies for freedom of information. Despite the limitations noted above, we present Figure 3 with a graph of changes in the number of requests on the top eight subject-groups in relation to the types of profession.

The graph presented by Figure 3 indicates that higher percentage increases in requests for information occurred in subjects related to health information and services, social assistance and transfer programs, social and governmental oversight. Notably, this growth occurred not only among requests from requesters who did not inform them of their profession but also among those who informed that their profession would be of the "other" type.

It is essential to point out that among the pre-defined options of types of professions, there are no types such as "unemployed," "informal employment," or "household and domestic services." This observation may be a topic to be developed in a review of information about requesters, with the aim of identifying whether requests are being made for vulnerable people. In our perception, it is necessary to include other occupations that reflect lower positions (domestic employment, unemployed, among others) in the labor market. Therefore, in spite of the limitations mentioned, it may suggest an increase in the use of FOI to request information on social protection and health.

Regarding the requesters' level of education, Table 3 presents by these levels informed by requesters the number and percentages of requests sent before (Oct 2017 to Mar 2020) and after (Apr 2020 to Sep 2022) the declaration of COVID as a public disaster.

Table 3 - Numbers and Percentages of Requesters by the Informed Level of Education

Level of Education	Before	After	↑↓%	Before + After	% Total
1-Elementary and Middle school	3.566	4.167	16,85%	7.733	1,48%
2-Secondary or High school	21.438	16.089	-24,95%	37.527	7,19%
3-Graduation or Bachelor's degree	39.996	17.373	-56,56%	57.369	10,99%
4-Technical Graduate degree	19.736	8.839	-55,21%	28.575	5,47%
5-Master or Doctoral degree	11.143	5.442	-51,16%	16.585	3,18%
6-No formal education	637	758	19,00%	1.395	0,27%
7-Not informed	18.747	74.560	297,72%	93.307	17,87%
Total	**115.263**	**127.228**	**10,38%**		**242.491**

Notes: Source: Research data.
            The "Before" column corresponds to requests from Oct 2017 to Mar 2020, and the "After" column corresponds to requests from Abr 2020 to Sep 2022.

As well as the high number of uninformed types of profession, the table above indicates a high percentage of the requesters who did "not inform" about their level of education, which represents 17,87% of requesters in the period. This limitation also results from the option given to requesters to select the pre-defined "not informed" type.

As in the case of professions, we also present a graph of changes in the number of requests on the top eight subject-groups in relation to the level of education in Figure 4.
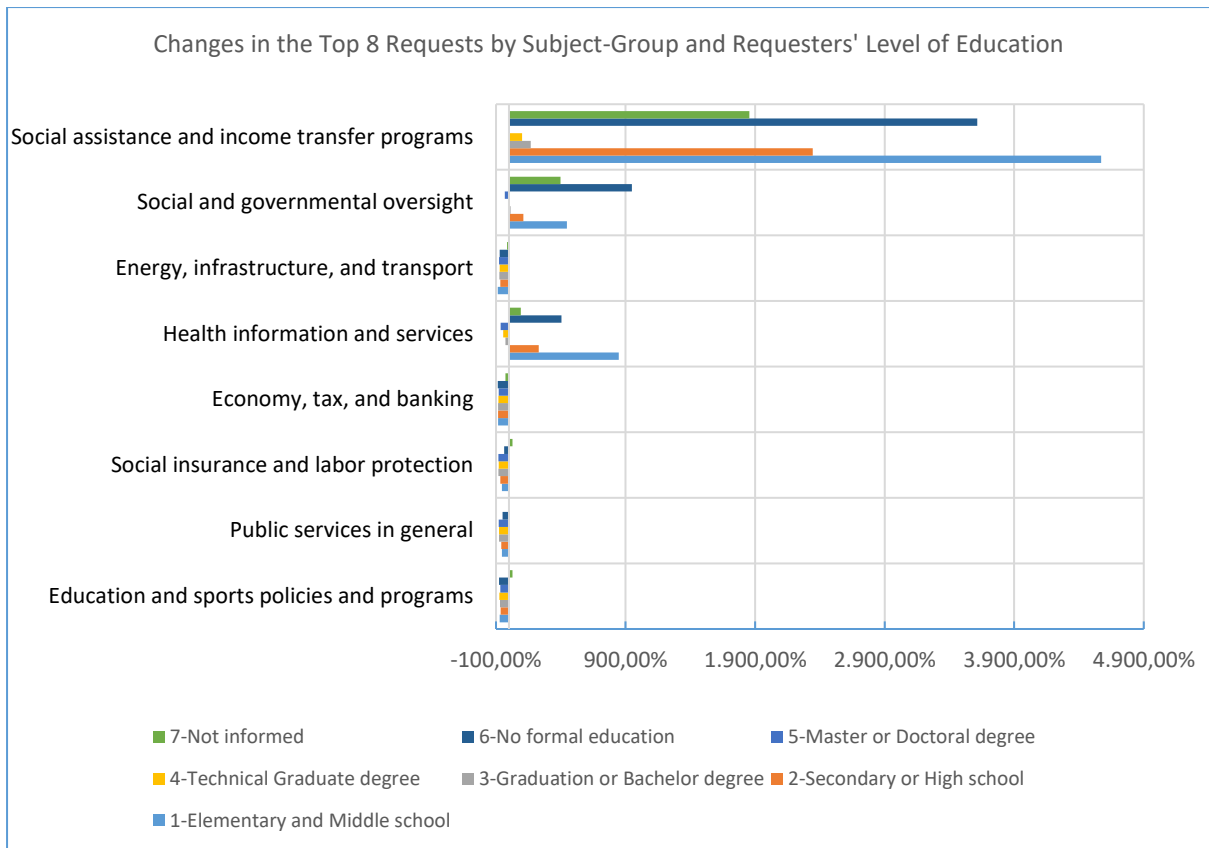
Figure 4 - Changes in the Top 8 Requests by Requesters' Level of Education Before (Oct 2017-Mar 2020) and After (Apr2020-Sep2022)

The graph presented by Figure 4 indicates that higher percentage increases in requests for information occurred in subjects related to health information and services, social assistance and transfer programs, social and governmental oversight.

We highlight the considerable increase in requests for information on those subject-groups, especially focused on social assistance and transfer programs, by requesters who informed that their education levels are "no formal education," "elementary and middle school," and "secondary or high school." Despite the limitations, this result also may suggest an increase in the use of FOI by people with low levels of education to request information on topics related to social protection. Future studies may check if these requesters represented vulnerable people.

In reference to the requesters' gender, Table 4 presents the requesters' gender by the number and percentages of requests sent before (Oct 2017 to Mar 2020) and after (Apr 2020 to Sep 2022) the declaration of COVID as a public disaster.

Table 4 - Numbers and Percentages of Requesters by the Informed Gender

Gender	Before	After	↑↓%	Before + After	% Total
Female	44.404	28.606	-35,58%	73.010	13,98%
Male	58.574	28.882	-50,69%	87.456	16,75%
Not informed	12.247	69.058	463,88%	81.305	15,57%
Others	38	682	1.694,74%	720	0,14%
Total	**115.263**	**127.228**	**10,38%**		**242.491**

Notes: Source: Research data.

The "Before" column corresponds to requests from Oct 2017 to Mar 2020, and the "After" column corresponds to requests from Abr 2020 to Sep 2022.

As in the case of information on types of profession and levels of education, the table above indicates a high percentage of the requesters who did "not inform" about their gender, which represents 15,57% of requesters in the period. Once again, this limitation results from the option given to requesters to select the pre-defined "not informed" type.

Here, we also present a graph of changes in the number of requests on the top eight subject-groups in relation to gender in Figure 5, but without including the "others" type because of its small size compared to the other types.
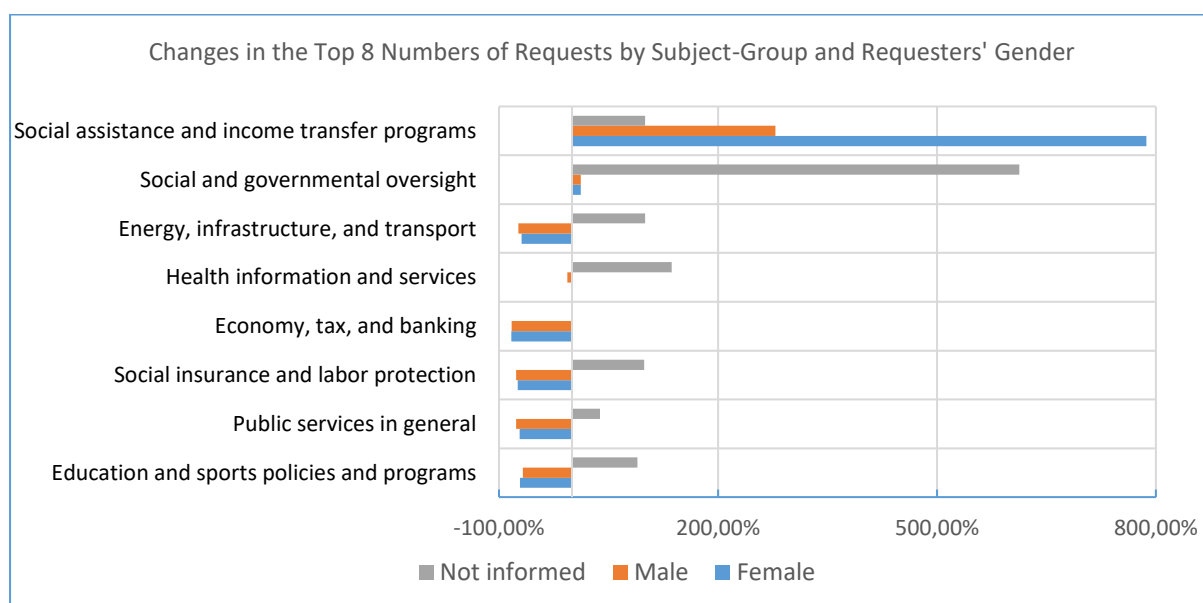

Figure 5 - Changes in the Top 8 Requests by Requesters' Gender Before (Oct 2017-Mar 2020) and After (Apr2020-Sep2022)

The graph presented in Figure 5 indicates that higher percentage increases in requests for information occurred in subjects related to social assistance and transfer programs, and social and governmental oversight.

The most relevant increase in requests by gender is related to requesters identifying as females and requesting information about social assistance and transfer programs. This result seems to be coherent with official data of the Brazilian government that points out that women was the responsible for leading 81,6% of families that demanded cash transfer programs in 2022 (MINISTÉRIO DO DESENVOLVIMENTO E ASSISTÊNCIA SOCIAL, FAMÍLIA E COMBATE À FOME, 2022).

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper explores a lack that remains in recent work on COVID-19 and FOI in Brazil, identified by the following questions: How has COVID-19 affected the use of FOI in Brazil? To what extent has the pandemic changed information requests in Brazil towards a more HR perspective?

Here, we adopted an exploratory strategy to investigate open data of 522,140 requests of 242,491 requesters based on qualitative data analysis, following notions and basic steps proposed by Akinyode & Khan (2018) and Chauvette, Schick-Makaroff & Molzahn (2019). Data was collected on October 25, 2022, which allowed analyzing requests sent 30 months after the declaration of COVID-19 as a public disaster, from April 2020 to September 2022. To keep comparability, we also considered the open data of the requests and corresponding requesters in the same number of months before it, from October 2017 to March 2020.

By selecting the eight subject-groups most frequent among requests, which represent about 75% of the total number of requests in the period of interest, we see a significant increase followed by a relative decrease over time in those related to health information and services; social assistance and transfer programs; and social and governmental oversight. On the other

hand, the number of requests for information on energy, infrastructure, and transport; public services in general; economy, tax, and banking; and education and sports programs declined and did not return to the same numbers until the end period of interest.

The results indicate that changes in the number of requests depending on the above-mentioned eight selected subject-groups varied significantly in relation to requester's types of professions, education levels, and gender. Although such results, we consider that some limitations in open data restricted the possibility of generating robust and more generalizable responses to its issues, especially regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the use of FOI in Brazil toward a more HR perspective.

The massive increase in requests for information on programs and measures aimed at coping with COVID-19 brings to light the urgent demand for improvements in FOI norms, procedures, and instruments, which should provide special disposals and pre-defined strategies for their use in possible future similar contexts. Additionally, the results indicate the urgent need to facilitate the correct use of instruments of request for information by citizens and enhance gathering socio-economic information from requesters without requiring personal data that allow their identification.

For future studies, exploring the texts of the requests for information with the adoption of methods and techniques based on text mining can be valuable to reduce the limitations imposed by the number of requests with undefined subjects and of requesters that did not bring their socio-economic information. In addition, further investigations into data collected after October 2022 may explore other questions, for example, whether changes to FOI requests were permanent or temporary.

Returning to the issues that guided this paper, for the first one, it is possible to state that a relevant challenge for Brazil is to review its FOI mechanisms and even information governance itself in a higher sense. Thus, it is necessary to reflect on FOI mechanisms

assuming their great potential to provide fast and reliable answers to crucial needs. In this paper, the rise of some subjects, such as health and social protection, demonstrated great strength in relation to this issue. This perspective and subjects can guide our attention to situations of vulnerability among requesters, but the possible most effective response may be to increase active transparency in disaster events.

The second issue is much more complex because we can suggest that the government needs to expand social and economic indicators to include questions about ethnic and racial information, salary ranges, and other types of social employment situations, as "unemployment," "informal employment" or "domestic employee." But this does not represent a simple topic. On the one hand, socio-economic information helps in decision-making and in the evaluation of government measures. But on the other hand, there are recommendations and work pointing out that the identification of requesters can lead to risks of harassment, undue denials, discrimination, and stigmatization (ARTICLE 19, 1999; RODRIGUES e MICHENER, 2018).

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