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ARTIGO

**CITIZENS AND THEIR BOTS THAT SNIFF CORRUPTION: USING
DIGITAL MEDIA TO EXPOSE POLITICIANS WHO MISUSE
PUBLIC MONEY**

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**GRUPO TEMÁTICO: 10 Controle social e combate à
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Abstract

“Naming and shaming” has been considered part of the strategies of many regulatory and anti-corruption agencies and international organizations. This paper explores, instead, the main constraints affecting and benefits of anti-corruption grassroots initiatives that pursue this more confrontational strategy. It does that by questioning why activists choose this approach while examining two anti-corruption bottom-up initiatives in Brazil that detect corruption through bots to audit congressional members’ expenses, and then use social media to expose their suspicious findings. Evidence is taken from interviews and participant observation of text-message groups where members of both projects interact. Exposing those who misuse public money using digital media was a tactic adopted only after failing to achieve the response they expected from control agents, which suggests that it is not enough having a transparent accountability system that offers open data for citizens to oversee and investigate and channels for reporting incidents and requesting specific actions. As an unforeseen effect, the civic digital actions attracted media attention and more supporters willing to be part of the initiatives. Yet, activists recognize the risks and threats of their belligerent approach and face difficulties in financing, keeping both activists and ordinary citizens engaged, and in expanding the scope of their actions, despite the often high expectations on digital media to lower costs and support collective action.

Keywords: Accountability, Anti-Corruption, Activism, Brazil, Civil Society, Technology

1. Introduction

Exposing malfeasance by blacklisting offenders or publicizing their acts has been considered as one of the strategies of many regulatory and anti-corruption agencies as well as of international organizations and media outlets (Rusina 2020; Mulcahy et al. 2019; Paterson, Changwony and Miller 2019; Schauseil 2019; Dixit 2015; Gebel 2012; Sampson 2010; Sharman 2009). Within this context, digital media is seen as a force for good to promote transparency, accountability and civic participation, mainly because it allows rapid data collection and access to information with reduced costs (Mattoni 2020; Davies and Fumega 2014; Chêne 2016). In grassroots anti-corruption struggles, digital media are believed to play two leading roles: assisting activists in enlarging the monitoring and denouncing capacity at the same time increasing public awareness on how damaging corruption is (Mattoni 2021).

However, we still lack a better understanding about agency and choice of anti-corruption activists as well as the role of digital media in their strategic actions. In this paper, by asking what makes grassroots initiatives pursue the “naming and shaming” strategy against corruption using open data and digital media, we explore the main constraints facing and benefits of this contentious approach for two anti-corruption bottom-up initiatives in Brazil. *Operação Política Supervisionada*, OPS (Operation Supervised Politics) and *Operação Serenata de Amor*, OSA (Operation Love Serenade) are both non-violent and exclusively online initiatives that audit congressional members’ expenses with the help of bots and then use social media to expose their suspicious findings by naming the politicians.

Overall, loose networks of activists, such as the two mentioned above, are thought to be better at contentious practices than at negotiating with the government (Rich 2020, 430). In Brazil, however,

authors have already recognized that the analysis of social movements cannot be reduced to a confrontational approach due to the close relationship between state and social movements that comes in a wide range of forms, from hybrid to creative interactions, without necessarily resulting in co-optation or institutionalization (Rich 2019, 2020; Mattoni and Odilla 2021). Therefore, one valid question is: Why have these two anti-corruption initiatives decided to adopt such an unusual strategy for Brazilian mobilization standards considering the possible risks and benefits of naming and shaming congressional members who misuse public money?

By examining the formation and main practices of OPS and OSA, we found that, as typical 21st-century activist networks (della Porta et al. 2006), both initiatives under analysis favor individual autonomy, have members in faraway places and exclusively use digital media to exchange information and ideas, develop tools, and share tasks to audit public expenditures and to communicate their findings on misuse of public money. The strategy of naming and shaming politicians was not the two initiatives first option. It was only taken after not being able to activate official horizontal accountability mechanisms – i.e., official checks and balances within and across governmental agencies (O’Donnell 1999) – to act regarding their auditing results.

In the next section of this paper, we review the literature, focusing on perils and promises of naming and shaming strategies in the digital age. Following that, the Brazilian context is presented in Section 3. Then, in Section 4, the two cases under analysis and data collected are detailed. We report our key findings and analyze them in Sections 5 and 6. We conclude saying that digital media allow access to information and rapid data collection and, hence, offers low-cost tools to both individual citizens and bottom-up initiatives organize independent audits and publicize findings on corruption. Activists, however, recognize the risks and threats of naming and shaming. Their choice of pursuing a more confrontational strategy shows that it is not enough having a transparent accountability system that offers open data for citizens to oversee and investigate and channels for reporting incidents and requesting specific actions. Imposing sanctions on those proved to be guilty is considered by activists an imperative component of the accountability framework and naming and shaming from the bottom-up emerges as an attempt to fill this gap in the horizontal accountability system.

2. Choices and actions in the anti-corruption struggle in the digital age

There is little doubt about the important role of civil society in raising awareness and providing oversight to curb corruption, and how these tasks can be facilitated using digital media (Grimes 2008; Fox 2015; Rotberg 2017; Mattoni and Odilla 2021). Overall, digital media appear to have great potential to lower costs and to expand initiatives by facilitating new alliances and mobilizations, allowing new tactics and strategies and promoting more proactive collective actions that are not limited to public street demonstrations (Earl and Kimport 2011; Savaget et al. 2019). Digital media also allow activists to engage into different data related practices, such as data-creation, usage and transformation (Mattoni

2020). To the anti-corruption fight, the use of big data and algorithmic automation in combination with other types of data and media might indeed be fruitfully merged “to denounce corruption and related crimes from the grassroots, through people’s intervention, and beyond the actions of institutional actors, like governments and their anti-corruption agencies” (Mattoni 2020, 266).

Despite the enthusiasm, we recognize there are challenges that, to a great extent, constrain further and effective actions, such as poor technology infrastructures, lack of access to digital data and devices, security issues, and a reluctance and a lack of incentives to engage in anti-corruption collective actions (Mullard and Aarvik 2020). Very few initiatives that relate to corruption reporting manage to survive. They all seem to follow the same dismal narrative: there is an initial spike often followed by a great level of media attention upon their launch and then, unfortunately, many of these tools go largely dormant or end up disappearing (Kukutschka 2016, 3; Zinnbauer 2015).

Hence, we still need a better understanding of what type of technologies work better and, mainly, under which circumstances citizens engage in anti-corruption actions and choose their actions. For example, instead of just activating horizontal accountability authorities or investing in more participatory initiatives related to street protests, advocacy or deliberation to influence decision-making processes, as commonly happens (Grimes 2008), we must consider what motivates citizens to fight corruption on their own. Moreover, we should ask why citizens rely on naming and shaming strategies to promote compliance to public expending norms. To approach these issues, we consider Jasper’s (2004) strategic approach to look for agency in social-movement choices. To us, both organizers and participants of anti-corruption actions are seen as strategic actors who are constantly making choices and facing dilemmas in interactive and dynamic environments. In addition, we consider that once activists have relevant data in their hands, as noted by Mattoni (2017, 2020) when exploring digital data-practices to curb corruption, they use them to sustain different aspects of their campaigns.

Perils and promises of more confrontational strategies

Lessons from international relations tell us that both activists and academics are likely to believe that naming and shaming tends to be meaningful and influential in the case of human rights violations, even if selective and highly politicized, or just used as the first step to later build up consensus (Sonnenberg and Cavallaro 2012). However, as Terman (2021) highlighted, in international relations, shamers do not necessarily act just to deter unwanted behavior and reinforce a preferred norm; they may act driven by more individual goals, such as to boost their own reputation or even to stigmatize targets. Therefore, defying public shaming is a possible reaction that can generate, for example, intragroup status, honor or just self-protection (Terman 2021).

When the topic is naming and shaming to curb corruption, there is still little evidence regarding its impacts. Studies on tax havens, for example, suggest that shaming by international organizations and news media does matter for investors, but its effects on tax havens themselves are not consensual (Rusina 2020; Sharman 2009; Kudrle 2009; Greene and Boehm 2012). Still, anti-corruption tool kits

from international organizations have been listing naming and shaming as a possible effective tactic to constrain authorities and push for reforms (Transparency International 2002; Carr and Outhwaite 2011).

Overall, the literature on corruption is not conclusive on whether collective actions should be more or less confrontational. Wheatland and Chêne (2015) see confrontation as often counterproductive; once dialogue is not encouraged, tensions may be amplified, and stakeholders that are not very interested in the anti-corruption agenda may be put off from the debate. Zaum and Cheng (2012) also recommend non-confrontational approaches, although they recognize that it is not only possible to combine confrontational and non-confrontational actions but also that there are contexts that require contentious actions to send stronger signals to governments and authorities and to push for change. Fox (2015) reminds us that for citizens' voices to both be heard and lead to state responsiveness, it is necessary to employ multiple and coordinated tactics.

Undoubtedly, there are risks for activists and their initiatives that openly and publicly challenge power holders and elite members. Among them are reputational risks, with chances to be sued, trolled online, or delegitimized. Anti-corruption collective actions already face constraints regarding mobilization, representation, resources and sustainability (Wheatland and Chêne 2015). Therefore, if more confrontational actions result in higher costs and less support, it may not be the best strategy. Finally, there is also the risk of generating limited benefits. Activists may question, for example, what the odds are of naming and shaming resulting in politicians sentenced, paying money back, refraining from misusing public funding, or even attracting more citizens to audit publicly expenditures, or at least be more informed to vote in the next elections.

A much more optimistic view regarding more confrontational collective actions exists (Grimes 2008; Zaum and Cheng 2012). Naming and shaming from the grassroots can be seen as a means of deterring misconduct by reinforcing a preferred social norm and signaling there is also oversight from the bottom-up. It can raise awareness and call people's attention to hidden or unknown practices. When citizens audit, find illegalities related to politicians and publicize their findings, for example, they are more likely to attract media attention and, hence, to send stronger signals to the authorities and public opinion. Additionally, naming and shaming may motivate the opening of investigations, inquiries and trials and, if it is the case, can result in formal sanctions. It is also a way to gain visibility and, perhaps, increase legitimacy to pursue other causes or even other strategies. With greater visibility and legitimacy, it also increases the chances of inspiring others to join or to create similar initiatives.

The role of digital media is expected to be relevant as it can potentially spread findings further and scale up reactions. Digital media can be also seen as a channel for pursuing informal punitive mechanisms. Once misconduct is public exposed on, for example, social media, those whose corrupt acts were uncovered can have their image stained and careers damaged. That may also represent more risks to citizens who trigger name and shame strategies. This is so because such unofficial and informal mechanisms of sanctioning not only do not offer guarantees that formal punishment will be necessarily

enforced but also increase the odds of being exposed to intimidation – e.g., cyberbullying and court orders – from both public officials and their supporters.

Due to this cost-benefit analysis, we have reasons to believe activists engaged into nonviolent actions and focused on oversight and investigative activities tend to be more inclined to first activate official accountability mechanisms to report incidents of corruption or even to advocate for better policies rather than expose the maleficence of powerful people online on their own and the mainstream media in first place. This is particularly where citizens are able to audit governments and public officials by accessing and cross-checking a considerable amount of open and public data and there is a horizontal accountability in place to monitor, investigate and enforce penalties against corruption with open channels to citizens to request specific actions.

3. The Brazilian context

Although Brazil has a long history of corruption scandals, weak rule of law and impunity, a lot of progress has been made in the country in terms of access to information and transparency (Praça and Taylor 2014; Lagunes et al. 2021). Since the 1988 Constitution, Brazil has had a web of accountability with public agencies from all powers whose attributes compete with and complement each other to monitor, investigate and enforce administrative sanctions (Power and Taylor 2011) – but only the judiciary is entitled to enforce criminal sanctions. Brazil’s “transparency infrastructure” has become one of Latin America’s most sophisticated and extensive (Michener 2015). The Brazilian transparency infrastructure was fostered mainly by the Office of the Comptroller General (Controladoria Geral da União, CGU), which not only launched a Transparency Portal in 2004 but also joined forces with civil society organizations to pressure the Congress to pass Brazil’s Access to Information Law (*Lei de Acesso à Informação*, LAI) and release open, structured and machine-readable data (Odilla and Rodriguez-Olivari 2021).

Following up these efforts, the federal legislative and judiciary also advanced regarding transparency. The Congress makes available on their website a wide range of information from attendance and voting records, to transcriptions of the voting sessions, to sums paid and receipts used to reimburse each politician. Regarding expenditures, congressional representatives can request a refund of payments incurred while performing their parliamentary duties for expenses covering meals, car rentals, flights, and fuel, among others. Information on the companies that issued the receipts, such as data on ownership, the address and main activity and whether they are operating or not, is also available on the federal and regional Revenue Service websites.

Within this scenario, many democratic innovations have emerged in Brazil aiming to improve political accountability and responsiveness, among them initiatives that have technology at its core or are highly dependent on digital media, as is the case in the two initiatives under analysis. As Pogrebinschi (2021) highlights, Latin America, and particularly Brazil, stands out as a laboratory for

citizen participation and democratic innovations in comparison to other regions in the world. Another strong feature of the region is the fact that this experimentation, often materialized in diverse forms and institutional designs for citizen participation, has, characteristically, been state-driven.

In Brazil, scholarship on social movements and civil society initiatives have already stressed the existence of a model of state-society relations that is neither contentious nor corporatist. It does not mean that civil society has been captured as well. Rich (2019) introduced the concept of “state-sponsored activism” as a new institutional design in which the process of re-democratization in Latin America produced new state actors motivated to support civic organization and mobilization and created incentives and resources for state actors to build bargains with actors in society (Rich 2019, 20).

4. Case studies and data

We present next the two exclusively online initiatives that emerged and operate as a result of the extensive amount of open information that allows anyone with access to the internet to cross-check data to hold many public officials accountable in the country. In the case of the initiatives under analysis, skills and knowledge of their creators and volunteers are used to develop their own technological applications. They also deploy existing digital platforms, mainly social media, to help them expose politicians who misuse public money.

Operation Supervised Politics, OPS

In 2013 a Brazilian seller decided to publish a tutorial on how to access the expenses of congressional representatives and cross-check the data on the Revenue Service website on his YouTube channel. This occurred a couple of months before Brazil erupted in huge street protests against corruption, poor public services and excess spending on major sporting events. Immediately after, in another video, the presenter asked volunteers to go to the headquarters of companies hired by politicians and to take pictures and certify they were not shell companies. This “operation” mobilized dozens of people and was named *Operação Pega Safado* (Catch a Crook), the same name as the YouTube tutorial and its sequel. The work resulted in a list of 20 politicians with suspicious expenses and became news. Since then, the initials “OPS” were kept but the name changed to *Operação Política Supervisionada* (Supervised Political Operation) and the initiative has attracted over 250 volunteers interested in donating money or in auditing legislature receipts to help in holding politicians accountable. They interact on Telegram and use their own skills to contribute to the initiative. Tech savvy volunteers, for example, developed different online tools, among them a website for the initiative, a bot that automated data collection and a mobile app but still engage collaborators into civic auditing. In 2018, OPS officially became an NGO as an attempt to formalize the still then informal organization and, eventually, get more funding.

Operation Love Serenade, OSA

In 2016, another similar initiative emerged just after the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff¹. Three friends decided to use their own IT knowledge to create an artificial intelligence system named Rosie able to do what the OPS volunteers were initially doing mainly by hand when looking for suspicious use of public money by congressmen. They launched a crowdfunding campaign and received donations from 1,286 people, exceeding by 30% their initial goal of 61,280 BRL (around \$17,000).² The money was used to pay a team of eight people, among them the initiators, for three months to develop a bot named Rosie that is able to identify suspicious expenditures of congressional people (Odilla and Mattoni 2021). The campaign also attracted around 600 hundreds of volunteers and collaborators on a Telegram group. The initiative was named *Operação Serenata de Amor* (Operation Love Serenade) because, according to its creators, it would be “cool” to have an initiative that sounds as nonsensical as the police anti-corruption investigations. They were also inspired by the Toblerone Affair in Sweden, where a politician lost her party leader position in the mid-1990s after she was accused of using her party credit card to buy personal items, including the famous chocolate bar (Simpson 2010). Serenata de Amor is a popular chocolate candy in Brazil. In 2018, OSA joined forces with the Brazilian chapter of the international organization Open Knowledge.

Although the OSA creators contacted OPS before starting the project to get information and share ideas, they have never worked together. The two cases were selected based on their relevance and similarities, especially for being non-violent, nonpartisan and exclusively online grassroots initiatives that developed technologies at the same time use an ensemble of existing platforms for social control — in both cases, to hold public expenditures by the federal legislature accountable. More importantly, both use naming and shaming mechanisms. Apart from listing congressional members who spend the most, OPS uses YouTube and Facebook to publicize their findings. OSA, in turn, created an automated account for Rosie, the bot, on Twitter to ask people to help it check each congressional person the system identifies suspicious findings.

The self-declared overall goals of the initiatives are not the same. OPS defines itself on its website³ as a network of volunteers that carries out civic auditing and offers assistance and training to civil society to monitor public spending and fight against the misuse of public money. OSA, in turn, says on their website⁴ it uses artificial intelligence for social control of public administration because they aim to empower citizens with data by focusing on accountability and open knowledge.

To better understand these two initiatives’ strategies, we combined different techniques of qualitative data collection and analysis as follows:

¹ President Dilma Rousseff was impeached by the Brazilian Senate on August 31, 2016, accused of irregular budgetary maneuvers, or “fiscal pedaling” (*pedaladas fiscais*) (Villaverde 2016).

² See <https://www.catarse.me/serenata> [last accessed on July 1, 2021].

³ See <https://institutoops.org.br/> [last accessed on July 26, 2021].

⁴ See <https://serenata.ai/> [last accessed on July 26, 2021].

1. Twenty seven in-depth semi-structured interviews with the OSA (18) and OPS (9) creators and collaborators, including civil servants, and users;
2. Participant observation of OSA and OPS' Telegram groups, where around 600 and 300 members, respectively, interact, discuss and exchange ideas;
3. Document analysis based on open-source materials, most of them available on GitHub and the initiatives' websites;
4. Observations of the initiatives and main supporters' Twitter, Facebook and YouTube accounts.
5. News articles, including TV reports, published or aired on the mainstream media.

The semi-structured online interviews were conducted in Portuguese from July 2020 to March 2021. Interviewees' names were converted into numbers to anonymize the participants. The creators interviewed talked about their perceptions, expectations, goals, motives, origin of ideas at the beginning of the initiative as well as its implementation process encompassing infrastructure, technology, funding and highlighting challenges, achievements, communication strategies and outcomes. Developers and other collaborators were asked about their reasons to join the initiative and roles they have played in its activities. All interviewees shared their views and opinion on corruption, civil society engagement and use of technology to fight corruption in Brazil. Along with the interviews, the analysis included Telegram and Discord messages, videos on YouTube, and texts published by the creators on social media and blogs. Data analysis was initially made through deductive and inductive coding (Boyatzis 1998). Particular themes emerged from that, allowing us to understand the initiatives' *modus operandi*, internal and external dynamics and main strategies used throughout time.

5. Findings

The analysis of OPS and OSA's trajectories and strategies over time show that digital media play a prominent role, not only to pursue their anti-corruption goals but also in their organizing. Also, three other important topics emerged from the data: the challenges of organizing collective actions for social accountability on a volunteer basis; issues in exposing findings to public authorities, and the necessity to redefine strategies relying on both social and mainstream media to promote answerability.

The role of digital media in fighting corruption

Both the OPS and OSA emphasize uncovering certain misuses of the Quota for Performing the Parliamentary Action (CEAP is the acronym in Portuguese)⁵ by members of the Brazilian Congress.

⁵ CEAP (Cota para o *Exercício da Atividade Parlamentar*) is a monthly amount that varies from R\$30,788 to R\$45,612, depending on the state of the representative at the Lower Chamber that the elected politician is entitled to reimbursement for expenses that are not fit for public bidding, such as consultancy, lunch, taxi, or fuel. See

Both initiatives currently use bots to automate data collection and speed up analysis aiming signaling suspicious cases such as exorbitant amounts of money and payments to companies with inactive tax codes. RobOps is a bot that does web scraping and cross-checking and sends, by email, its daily findings, and the app OPS Fiscalize (OPS Oversight) allows people to classify expenditures as suspicious or not using their mobiles. Rosie is a bot created by OSA. It autonomously check Brazilian congress members' public expenses and engage citizens in a discussion about the politicians' suspicious spendings on Twitter. OSA has also developed Jarbas, a dashboard where anyone with access to the internet can browse the updated congress members' expenses and get more details on their spending (Odilla and Mattoni 2021).

While OSA relies on Twitter followers and concerned citizens to check the suspicious expenses without offering any support or training, OPS counts on their volunteers to analyze receipts, request information and investigate on their own misuse of public money⁶. The OPS's creator recognizes the importance of technology but deliberately resists to automatizing all the steps of civic auditing:

“There must be human action. My main goal is not to diagnose irregularities, but to raise possible irregularities while engaging citizens in that task. So, I can't have everything 100% automated, everything ready to go like that. I must leave something for the citizens to do. So, I think that's the big difference. They [OSA] think a lot about employing technology to do everything. And the citizen remains as a mere spectator. In my case, no. I want the spectator to be on the field for the match, to help kick the ball.”
(GG_CS02_INT001_INIACT, Feb 3 2021)

Both initiatives use open public data available on websites – mainly governmental – and, in the case of public data, they also make requests by means of the Access to Information Law to get information that is not available online. However, interviewees highlight that, despite the amount of data available, social accountability initiatives still lack data related to individuals to, for example, check degrees of kinship and to eliminate namesakes when analyzing the relationship between campaign donors, advisers and business owners and politicians.

In terms of organizing, digital media is crucial as the initiatives do not have headquarters or physical meetings. Neither the core contributors of OSA nor OPS have ever met all together in person. They have always worked remotely. Internally, OPS uses Telegram to share tasks and discuss findings and operations. Most of their technological developments are also available on GitHub. They have three different groups on Telegram where they interact: a technical one, where programmers and developers

https://www2.camara.leg.br/transparencia/aceso-a-informacao/copy_of_perguntas-frequentes/cota-para-o-exercicio-da-atividade-parlamentar [last accessed on July 7, 2021].

⁶ The accountability actions of the OPS are not limited to the Congress. They also oversee and investigate the misuse of public money in municipalities and state assemblies.

try to find solutions to automate certain tasks, such as accessing specific sites multiple times; one for general collaborators that has 251 members and where partisanship posts are not allowed, and a “coffee room” for chatting about any topic of interest. Externally, they use mainly the OPS blog and the creator’s accounts on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, as well as coverage of the mainstream media, to publicize their findings and attract new members. In 2019, the demographic profile of 328 OPS volunteers were male (90.5%), and young (53% were 19-45 years old) and with a degree from higher education (69.2%).⁷ Despite the collective action, OPS is led by one person, its creator, who centralizes the key actions and the distribution of tasks, and who survives on the donations of supporters.

Although the OSA Telegram group is still available for technical discussion, a group on Discord was opened and OSA currently focuses more on a new project named *Querido Diário*⁸. All the codes are open on GitHub, another platform used for engaging with the IT community. Twitter is used to engage with potential contributors who may check the bot's findings. With almost 40,000 followers, Rosie’s account on Twitter, as mentioned, invites people to check suspicious cases by citing the name and the state of the politician and posting the link to the details of the expenditure available on the Jarbas dashboard. Externally, the group used to communicate using social media, such as Facebook, Instagram and a blog (hosted on Medium until December 2020, but currently on the OKBR page). Although there is no measured demographics of OSA, they mainly attracted collaborators interested in programming and journalists, according to interviewees.

Challenges of overseeing and investigating on a voluntary basis

Although interviewees recognize that technology reduces the cost of organizing and facilitates engagement from different parts of Brazil, overall OSA and OPS initiators and collaborators admit they face issues over keeping the community of volunteers active and participative. Nevertheless, finding volunteers with IT skills has not been an issue for both initiatives according to interviewees. Some developers may be interested in using their knowledge to fight corruption while others look for opportunities to develop their careers, according to one of the OSA creator:

“If you are a developer and volunteer for Serenata or for any open project, this is recorded in your GitHub history. When you go to apply for a job, most likely the people handling the recruitment will look at that. [...] There is a big but, though. Because these developers aren’t necessarily interested in the future of the projects they help with. Their main concern is having their contribution on their GitHub profile.” (GG_CS01_INT004_INIACT, November 16 2020).

⁸ *Querido Diário* aims to use artificial intelligence to unify in one single platform the official gazettes of all municipalities, allowing the users to conduct searches and cross check information on, for example, public procurement and nominations.

OPS's creator goes along with this view, but argues that volunteers, no matter the roles they play, come and go, seeing oscillations as a characteristic of initiatives based on voluntarism. Either way, conducting a collective action for accountability solely voluntarily is seen not only as a challenge but as a major constraint to growth and the creation of a bigger impact by the creators of both initiatives. Volunteers not only come and go but are not necessarily compromised with deadlines or medium and long-term projects.

The lack of funding is another relevant constraint, even operating only online. After the impressive start to the project, OSA established a modest monthly contribution income to have someone responsible for maintaining the initiative. Almost five years after the project started, in July 2021, it had 155 individual donors but reached only 62% of the 4,500 BRL (\$868) needed to maintain its operations⁹. OPS also receives monthly donations that, in the first semester of 2021, varied from 534 BRL (\$102) in January to around 1,700 BRL (\$328) in June¹⁰. While the creator of OPS has sold an apartment to show dedication to his project and decided to convert the project into an NGO to financially survive, the initiators of OSA joined forces with Open Knowledge Brazil (OKBR) to exploit its expertise in getting funding. After the transition, the OSA initiators left to pursue individual projects not necessarily related to social accountability and, since then, Rosie has not been treated as a priority by OKBR. This all raises questions about the sustainability of social accountability action based on voluntary work. In addition, both initiatives suffer from the lack of resources and the capacity to mobilize broader coalitions, including anti-corruption officials, governments and stakeholders, as we will explore next.

Exposing findings and redefining strategies: naming and shaming as “Plan B”

Interviews and participant observation revealed that the name and shame strategy was both OPS and OSA's initial “Plan B”. Their first option was reporting their auditing findings to authorities and only publicizing them when any official action was taken. Unexpected reactions coming from the horizontal accountability system made them redefine their strategies.

In 2013, after finding out about a senator's irregular expenditures, the OPS creator formally submitted a report to the Federal Court of Accounts (*Tribunal de Contas da União*, TCU) detailing the case. A civil servant from the TCU who had access to the report contacted him and advised him he should file more complaints at once because single cases like the one presented were likely to be shelved. Following the given advice, the OPS reported incidents of misuse of public money involving 20 congressional representatives at the TCU. In addition, with the help of the civil servant who knew a journalist, the OPS findings were featured on *Fantástico*, a journalism and entertainment show broadcast on Sunday night by the largest commercial television network in Brazil. That was how naming and shaming became one of the strategies adopted by OPS. It also prompted recognition of the

⁹ See <https://apoia.se/serenata> [last accessed on July 22, 2021].

¹⁰ See <https://institutoops.org.br/transparencia/> [last accessed on July 22, 2021].

relevance of the mainstream media in amplifying the efforts and pressure to hold politicians accountable and attract more volunteers¹¹.

In *Fantástico*'s report, politicians who were involved in irregularities had their names, political parties and states shown. After specifying the reason for which each politician was named – mainly linked to suspicious car rentals and, in most cases, involving shell companies – and the amount spent, the report exposed how the parliamentarians justified their actions when they were contacted by the TV station staff. At the end of the report, information was given about how the cases were forwarded to the TCU by an organization of volunteers. The OPS creator briefly appeared saying there was information available that allowed citizens to oversee and investigate the expenditure of public money without the need to wait for official agencies to do so. At that time, OPS did not formally exist, but it was from there that the path of the organization was paved, according to its founder.

Since then, all big operations conducted by OPS have followed a similar strategy whereby they report the findings to the public authorities using official channels but also expose them not only on social media but also on the mainstream media. This happened in April 2021 with Operation Leaky Fuel Tank (*Operação Tanque Furado*) in which OPS identified over 27 million BRL involved in suspicious expenditures by the Lower Chamber representatives between 2019 and 2020 related to fuel. The OPS investigation and findings were covered in a 13-minute report on the same TV show. Politicians were named one by one along with their spurious expenditures.

In the case of OSA, in January 2017, after Rosie identified thousands of suspicious expenditures, a 5-day joint effort to check them one by one was organized. The group submitted a total of 587 requests questioning 971 reimbursements using the Access to Information Law. Without knowing it, said the interviewees, they overloaded the understaffed department of the Lower Chamber responsible for manually controlling the reimbursements. Instead of speeding up the analysis, the Lower Chamber decided to send standardized responses asking the OSA to contact the politicians directly. In the end, they only got 62 answers¹².

Then, they decided to go after the Court of Accounts and the Prosecution Service to demand an investigation on congressional people expenditures. According to a report of OSA published on Medium, the initiative “found out that there are rules that do not allow us to do so freely. The damage to the public purse must be greater than 10,000.00 BRL or 76,000.00 BRL, depending on the case, to justify the costs of an official procedure, for example. This means that congress people are informally ‘permitted’ to steal if the damage caused is less than these amounts. They will not be investigated for anything less than that” (Report published on Medium, June 17, 2017). These issues faced to activate official control units though formal mechanisms made OSA redefine their strategies.

¹¹ For a list of videos of OPS on television, see: <https://institutoops.org.br/ops-na-tv/> [last accessed on July 22, 2021].

¹² See <https://medium.com/serenata/um-m%C3%AAs-depois-do-primeiro-mutir%C3%A3o-369975af4bb5> [last accessed on July 22, 2021].

Due to the small number of responses and the frustration of not only being ignored but also of not having their findings converted into official investigations or punishment, one of the creators of OSA decided to develop a Twitter bot to highlight Rosie's findings and call for action. He remembers he broke OSA's "code of conduct" to not publicize the name of politicians until the requests of clarification were officially addressed. It was part of their strategies to avoid controversies difficult to handle. He was abroad in Italy, with to other members of OSA, when the Twitter bot was created:

I said: look, I'll create an automated Twitter account. Neither of them was against it. They were a little afraid because until then we weren't publicizing names, and they didn't know what impact it could have. It could have a million different outcomes. But I was out of Brazil, reducing the number of (bad) things that can happen related to this (...) It took one or two days after people realized that Twitter existed. We had a big discussion. I was criticized (...) But it worked out. I think the discussion ended in a short time because everyone saw the potential it had, and that it was giving cool results.
(GG_CS01_INT003_INIACT, November 13 2020)

OSA's creators remember that this resulted in immediate responses from politicians who had their name mentioned, some of them paying back the money they received as irregular refunds. When their findings were published or broadcast on the mainstream media, the number of followers and volunteers always increased, exactly as what happened with the OPS.

6. Data exposure: the role of naming and shaming in the accountability system

When analyzing tactical and strategic approaches of OPS and OSA, we observed technology enabling their work and scaling their voices. Their data practices reveals creativity and expectations regarding active citizenship, data transparency and governmental answerability in their fight against corruption. Both initiatives extract public data, tailor them to hold public officials accountable and, finally, transform data into information that can be more accessible to the wider public, showing a high level of agency exerted by activists towards data although the level of automatization varies between them two. As defined by Mattoni (2017, 736), these practices are data creation, data usage and data transformation, respectively.

What emerges from the analysis of OSA and OPS choices and dilemmas expands this view that these three data-related practices allow activists to make a difference and obtain recognition. The Brazilian cases also deployed *digital data exposure* when they realized their individual agency and collective efforts allow them to oversee and investigate but not ensure punishment of those proven to be engaging in misconduct. To OSA and OPS creators and collaborators, exposing politicians' name

and wrongdoings was a way to circumvent the lack of interest of public authorities in converting the initiatives' findings into investigative procedures and eventually in punishment.

Social and horizontal accountability can be parallel processes that include monitoring, investigating and punishment as key actions (Prado and Carson 2015). Horizontal accountability includes public organizations and officials, among them inspectors, court members and even elected officials. Social accountability, in turn, encompasses citizens as individuals, organized in collective actions or organizations such as interest groups, charities and other stakeholders. Social and horizontal accountability may be vertically integrated where there is available and accessible data to audit governments and public officials and official channels to communicate with authorities. While horizontal accountability mechanisms have forums to discuss cases of misconduct and to impose administrative or judicial punishment if they are confirmed, civil society has fewer instruments to impose sanctions.

Naming and shaming, therefore, appears as a possible attempt to create public embarrassment and to constrain authorities to react by the means of data exposure. There is a belief among interviewees that this strategy may, for example, encourage politicians to pay back misused money and to encourage control agents to take official action to both recover public funds and impose sanctions when it is the case. For instance, OPS calculated that their civic audits had already saved over 6.22 million BRL, the amount politicians had paid back after irregular expenditures were spotted by its volunteers. Some of OPSs findings resulted in politicians being sentenced, with one of them to serve time in jail. OSA also managed to make representatives pay money back, such as the one who paid 727 BRL for 13 meals on the same day (Luiz 2016).

In addition, the analysis support the belief among activists that making their findings public encourages other citizens to oversee and investigate politicians or, at least, spread relevant information related to their audits on the misuse of public money. Some interviewees said every time they name a politician and expose their findings publicly on digital media, they are creating a record of wrongdoings and it eventually could support voters when choosing their candidates. The participants also recognized that when their audit findings were publicized, mainly by the mainstream media but also on social media, particularly by YouTubers and digital influencers, they reached people who may be willing to engage but do not know about this type of collective action for accountability. In this sense, both initiatives' name and shame strategies not only worked as a punishment/answerability mechanism within the social accountability framework, but also helped the organizations to attract more collaborators.

The name and shame approach proved to have its pitfalls. Although both initiatives count on legal counseling to avoid being criminally accused of defamation and are extra careful when exposing their findings, many participants revealed a fear of retaliation and threats. Some interviewees revealed that OSA's initial core members decided to have their passports at hand and memorized a list of countries as well as escape routes in case they felt threatened or in any dangerous situations. One OSA

interviewee remembered that they had received unexpected warnings and one day he thought he was being followed. OPS members, in turn, recognized there might be many risks, especially for those living and investigating corruption in small towns.

OSA and OPS struggle with the overall low level of engagement with the general public – on Twitter, Rosie’s posts always get a small number of likes, retweets or comments. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the bot used to tag the politicians but Twitter policy on automated actions blocked Rosie. The solution to this was to stop tagging politicians which, according to its creators, reduced the level of engagement. OPS also struggled to increase its audience. Its YouTube channel had 53,900 subscriptions but the videos hardly reached over 3,000 views. Some politicians who were investigated by OPS volunteers and who had their names mentioned also made public their dissatisfaction. On Twitter, one of these politicians accused the OPS creator of acting on behalf of his opponent, while others sent formal complaints. To him, addressing this was time-consuming and may have scared others to do the same as it increased the costs of engaging in social accountability.

In short, we can see that OSA and OPS choose a more confrontational strategy despite recognizing the risks of such an approach. Their choice suggests that it is not enough having a transparent accountability system that offers open data for citizens to monitor public expenditures and channels for reporting incidents and requesting specific actions. Imposing sanctions on those proved to be guilty is considered by activists an imperative component of the accountability framework. Naming and shaming emerged as an attempt to fill this gap in the horizontal web of accountability.

7. Final thoughts

This paper aimed to contribute to the literature on accountability and corruption studies by exploring contentious approaches to fighting corruption from the bottom-up, using digital media. It has documented how top-down and bottom-up accountability follow parallel pathways, vertically connected. Coalitions and partnerships between civil society organizations and other anti-corruption actors are expected by the literature on corruption studies to strengthen anti-corruption and integrity. However, what we saw by assessing the key actions of OPS and OSA was, instead of combining efforts, citizens change strategies and choose to adopt their own mechanisms to assure social punishment and answerability. This occurred because of the lack of expected official response and actions.

Although Brazil has on paper a well-designed multi-institutional accountability system with different agencies performing the roles of monitoring, investigating and punishing and channels open for civil society report incidents, the findings point out how the horizontal accountability system does not work properly in the case of misuse of congressional expenditures. Naming and shaming in OSA and OPS cases was the “Plan B”, to make politicians answerable and, to a certain extent, to exert pressure for any official reaction. As an unexpected effect for the initiators, they end up attracting media attention and more supporters willing to be part of the initiatives, although both have struggled to keep

volunteers and donors active and participative. Still, it was observed a permanent dilemma among activists who want to publicize anti-corruption cases but fear retaliation, being sued, or even getting canceled online. Different from what the literature on international relations show, naming and shaming as an anti-corruption strategy may be less likely to be used as the preferred tactic, and it has not been seen as a possible first step to building up consensus in the cases of OSA and OPS.

Findings have also shed light on the great difficulties encountered in financing these civic tech initiatives, in keeping both activists and ordinary citizens engaged, and in expanding the scope of their actions, despite the often high expectations on digital media to lower costs and support collective action. In addition, technology can be used as a supporting tool to speed up auditing procedures, but it does not completely replace human participation in the anti-corruption collective action. This is not to say that digital media do not play different and important roles.. As expected, digital media enlarged both initiatives' oversight and denouncing capacities at the same time was used to create public awareness. OSA and OPS used digital media to collect data and speed up auditing procedures as well as to organize collective action and to crowd-sourced voices as drivers for punishment and answerability – in the case of the latter, we recognize its limited capacity over time. In short, *digital data exposure* emerged as a tactical data-related practice, deployed along with data creation, usage and transformation, to sustain different aspects of the initiatives' anti-corruption campaigns.

This paper identified a latent tension of naming and shaming as an anti-corruption strategy from the grass-roots in the digital age. This confrontational approach often puts activists on the spot and, therefore, increases their risks and costs to engage in proactive social accountability activities. At the same time, it calls media attention and eventually attracts new volunteers. Although the article explored struggles of collective action for promoting social accountability, further research is necessary to better understand how citizens and public officials can effectively combine efforts and reduce the risks to social accountability initiatives. The role of anti-corruption technology developed from the bottom-up also deserves greater attention not only to understand what works under which circumstances but also how it can help to engage citizens in the anti-corruption fight.

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