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Analysis Model of the Capacity of the City Councils Electronic Portals to Build Conditions for Accountability

Fabiano Maury Raupp

Doctor in Business Administration from the School of Administration of the Federal University of Bahia (EA / UFBA), Adjunct Professor of the School of Administration and Management at Santa Catarina State University (ESAG / UDESC). Address: Santa Catarina State University, School of Administration and Management. Av. Madre Benvenuta, 2037 - Centro - CEP 88035-001, Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil.

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this article is to propose an analysis model of the Capacity of the City Councils Electronic Portals to Build Conditions for Accountability. This is an evaluation and exploratory study, conducted by case study, with qualitative approach. Based on the indicators of accountability, transparency and participation, identified in the studies of several authors (Akutsu, 2002; Akutsu and Pinho, 2002; Diniz, 2000; Moraes, 2004; Prado, 2004), and in the electronic portals of the city councils of 10 Brazilian capital cities with the largest number of inhabitants, an analysis model considering different levels of ability was structured.

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INTRODUCTION

The term accountability has been mentioned in the political agenda of different countries. The development of non-electoral ways of accountability; the failures and the successes of the democratic accountability; ways to minimize failures and to improve the successes; and integration of the concept into the society culture (Mainwaring, 2003) have been discussed. Even representing an ongoing process, not expecting radical changes in the political scenario, the term is present in articles on the democratic construction in Brazil (Pinho, 2006).

The democratic development requires tools that can bring citizens and government closer. It is assumed that the Internet can create opportunities for this as the digital exclusion gets significantly reduced. Therefore, the investigation of government websites becomes important to understand the focus of the e-government policies and the stage of evolution in which the governments are. The effectiveness of the actions proposed in the e-government programs is demonstrated by the results obtained in the observation of government sites in

each country (Diniz and Barbosa, 2004).

Depending on the objectives and how they are implemented, the electronic portals can contribute to the construction of the accountability. Of course when creating an electronic portal there is the risk of not having transparency, accountability and participation of the citizens, dimensions of accountability analyzed in this study, and of serving only as an electronic mural. Thus, the objective of the article is to propose an analysis model for assessing the capacity of the city councils electronic portals to build conditions for accountability. Initially, a brief theoretical foray was made into the theoretical approaches understood as necessary for framing the empirical object. The research method is presented. Then, there is a description of the model constructed and final considerations.

Theoretical Foundations:

Accountability:

The concept of accountability does not have an equivalent expression in Portuguese covering the spectrum of the existing meanings of the term in English. The absence of the concept of accountability in Brazil derives from its political poverty, since the people, not organized, expect the State to defend and protect their interests, rather than acting organized to aggregate their own interests, or to confornt the power of the State (Campos, 1990).

Corresponding Author: Fabiano Maury Raupp, Doctor in Business Administration from the School of Administration of the Federal University of Bahia (EA / UFBA), Adjunct Professor of the School of Administration and Management at Santa Catarina State University (ESAG / UDESC). Address: Santa Catarina State University, School of Administration and Management. Av. Madre Benvenuta, 2037 - Centro - CEP 88035-001, Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil.
E-mail: fabianoraupp@hotmail.com.

Only from the organization of vigilant citizens aware of their rights there will be conditions for accountability. There won't be such conditions as long as the people define themselves as under tutelage and the State as the guardian. The high degree of concern with accountability in the North American democracy and the virtual absence of this concept in Brazil are related to the link between accountability and organized citizenship; explained by the difference in the political stage of development of the two countries (Campos, 1990).

A restricted notion of accountability considers only the formal and institutionalized control mechanisms as able to demand the accountability of public officials for the acts performed. In this scope, informal mechanisms such as the control performed by the press and civil society are not considered (O'Donnell, 1998; Kenney, 2003). A broader notion of accountability considers, in addition to formal and institutionalized mechanisms, informal mechanisms, provided that there is sanction capacity of public officials by the relationships developed from the mechanisms. The practice of the accountability requires responsiveness from the public officials (ability to inform on the actions) and the ability to impose sanctions and loss of power for those who violated the duties (punishment capacity) (Dunn, 1999). The broader notion of accountability admits any relationship of control and monitoring of public officials as mechanisms to demand accountability (Day and Klein, 1987; Paul, 1991). Accountability means keeping individuals and organizations that can be held accountable for their performance. Public accountability refers to the set of mechanisms used by the actors interested in ensuring a desired level of performance of public services (Paul, 1991).

Accountability, in synthetic and approximate terms, can be thought of as transparency, engagement of governments with the disclosure of the expenses, accountability, and also as holding the governments responsible for their actions (Pinho and Sacramento, 2008). The concept of accountability, according to Akutsu and Pinho (2002, p.731), comprises two parts: "the first delegates responsibility so as the second can proceed to the management of resources; at the same time, generates an obligation of that who administers the resources to disclosure the expenses of his management, demonstrating the proper use of these resources. Loureiro and Abrucio (2004, p.52) understand by "accountability or responsibility an institutionalized process of political control extended in time (election and mandate) and in which citizens politically organized should be involved, in one way or another". They also highlight the need for rules and arenas in which accountability can be practiced, as well as large trading practices among stakeholders in order to make it public and legitimate the decisions taken.

The practice of accountability requires conditions which render the availability of information about the performance of government and its results, i.e., accountability. However, it is relevant the existence of institutions that can question the information transmitted (Pó and Abrucio, 2006). The accountability, according to Levy (1999), refers not only to the premise of disclosing the expenses, but also the definition of the objects of the accountability.

Another process capable of providing better conditions of trust between rulers and ruled is transparency of government actions. Transparency is mentioned as capable of contributing to reduce corruption in the public sphere and make the relations between the state and the civil society more democratic (Pinho and Sacramento, 2004). The government transparency is a prerequisite for the functioning of the accountability mechanisms, since, in fact, these mechanisms of control and supervision are extremely conditioned by the transparency and visibility of the actions of the government. Without transparency, reliability and clarity of the information there is no Way of citizens taking ownership of the data from the evaluations to confront the public officials (Ceneviva and Farah, 2006).

The participation / interaction of citizens in the decision-making process of the government entity is as important as accountability and transparency. Santos (1993) observed in Brazil a huge urban mass, unable to participate or unmotivated for doing so, and a low rate of demands, disbelief in the institutions and in the effectiveness of the State, and a permanent denial of conflict. In this same bias, Pinho (2008) considers that Brazil is in a weak accountability situation, in which there is no participation of the society in requiring greater transparency of the State, which behaves according to a historical model of insulation in relation to the civil society. On the other hand, Abrucio (2005) states that the degree of citizens participation in social politics is remarkable. It is necessary to activate this process where it has high incidence, i.e., in the decentralized level of power. The issue of participation seems to become central regarding the improvement of democracy and accountability. However, there is no consensus among authors on this issue. Thus, while Santos and Pinho state that there is no participation, Abrucio outlines a framework in which participation has increased.

Information and digital democracy society:

The information society is now the most usual designation to indicate the set of social impacts and consequences of new information and communication technologies (Sorj, 2003). The society of information can be characterized by its systemic style, with emphasis on being: complex, thanks to its number of interactions, articulation and interdependence among the elements of a system existing in a situation; hierarchical, as part of simpler

structures for more complex structures; and configured, due to its macro and microscopic dimensions (Borges, 2000).

One of the main indicators of the development of the information society is the penetrability of the information and communication technologies - ICT in the daily life of people and the operation and transformation of the society as a whole. Another key indicator of the information society, which complements the penetration of information technologies, constitutes the level of ubiquitous operation, in a given context, of resources, information products and services on the Internet by its users, representing individuals, governments and the most different social organizations of public and private nature. This ubiquitous operation represents the achievement of often radical innovations in the functioning of the modern society, especially in the activities and processes that require access to information (Miranda, 2000).

Among the ICTs, Castells (2003) states that the Internet is a tool with great potential to promote democracy. The interactivity makes it possible for citizens to request information, express opinions and ask for personal answers from their representatives. The idea of citizens participation understood as civil occupation of the political sphere finds in the Internet technical and ideological possibilities of achieving a popular and direct driving ideal of the public affairs (Gomes, 2005). Almost all the literature on digital democracy recognizes the communicative potential of the ICTs (mainly the interaction on a large scale). This technological possibility of horizontal mass interaction would be able to interfere in the citizens' relationship with their respective government, which would reflect in changes in the operating mode of the contemporary politics (Silva, 2005).

The experience of the Internet is seen, at the same time, as inspiration for ways of political participation led by the civil sphere and as a demonstration that there are effective ways and means for popular participation in the public life. The "digital democracy" (and other competing entries such as electronic democracy, e-democracy, virtual democracy, cyber democracy, among others) is, in this sense, a semantic resource used to refer to the experience of the Internet and devices that are compatible, all of them aiming at increasing the civil participation potential in the conduct of public affairs (Gomes, 2005).

In the context of digital democracy, the studies and reflections on the electronic government have higher recurrence with the executive power. However, the theoretical and empirical material can also be used in research on the legislative branch, safeguarding the specificities of each power. Pinho (2008) emphasizes that the electronic government, represented by the informatization of its internal activities and by the communication with the external public: citizens, suppliers, companies, or other sectors of the government and the society, has been represented by the creation of government portals, through which governments show their identity, their purpose, their achievements, enable concentration and availability of services and information, easing the conduction of the business and the access to the identification of the needs of citizens. A portal can take the configuration of public sites to enable the citizens to perform a set of services. From the portal, many users define their next steps on the Web. Portals represent sites of intense visitation. Therefore, being recognized as a portal is directly related to the force with which the site attracts visitors. The most common services of a portal include email services, chat, search services and news services, for free or not (Cunha, 2000).

Methodological Procedures:

The research conducted to propose an analysis model of the capacity of the City Councils portals of building conditions for accountability is of evaluation and exploratory nature, conducted through multiple cases study, with a predominantly qualitative approach.

First, it was chosen to carry out an investigation of previous experiences of different authors and institutions (Akutsu, 2002; Akutsu and Pinho, 2002; Diniz, 2000; Moraes, 2004; Prado, 2004) that investigated electronic portals. Then, the electronic portals of the city councils located in 10 Brazilian capital cities with the highest number of inhabitants were analyzed. It is assumed here that, by the population size, these municipalities should have their councils with better conditions (financial, human resources) to build more developed portals, also contemplating the accountability. It is also assumed that there should be in these larger municipalities, with the existence of a more complex and plural society, the search for greater demands of the powers instituted, including the Municipal Legislative, by the civil society. The selected capital cites, the population size and the electronic address of the city councils are shown in Table 1.

An observation protocol was developed to collect the data available in the electronic portals maintained by the city councils. The Observation Protocol, according to Creswell (2007), is used to record data from multiple observations while conducting a qualitative study. The accesses to the portals were made in order to identify indicators that could reflect the presence of accountability, transparency and opportunities for participation. ***The***

Model Constructed:

From the indicators of accountability, transparency and participation, identified in previous experiments (Akutsu, 2002; Akutsu and Pinho, 2002; Diniz, 2000; Moraes, 2004; Prado, 2004) as well as the electronic portals of the city councils located in

the 10 Brazilian capital cities with the largest number of inhabitants, an analytical model was structured considering four ability levels: null, low, medium and high, as shown in Table 2.

Table 1: Selected Capital cities, population and City Council Website.

States	Capitals	Population	City Council Website
Bahia	Salvador	2.892.625	http://www.cms.ba.gov.br/
Ceará	Fortaleza	2.431.415	http://www.cmfor.ce.gov.br/
Goiás	Goiânia	1.244.645	http://www.camaragyn.go.gov.br/
Minas Gerais	Belo Horizonte	2.412.937	http://www.cmbh.mg.gov.br/
Pará	Belém	1.408.847	http://www.cmb.pa.gov.br/portal/index.php
Paraná	Curitiba	1.797.408	http://www.cmc.pr.gov.br/
Pernambuco	Recife	1.533.580	http://www.camara.recife.pe.gov.br/
Rio de Janeiro	Rio de Janeiro	6.093.472	http://www.camara.rj.gov.br/
Rio Grande do Sul	Porto Alegre	1.420.667	http://www2.camarapoa.rs.gov.br/
São Paulo	São Paulo	10.886.518	http://www.camara.sp.gov.br/

Source: Prepared based on IBGE data.

Table 2: Analysis Model:

Accountability	
Capacity	Indicators
Null	Lack of any kind of report and / or impossibility of locating it
Low	Partial disclosure and/or after the due date of the set of legal reports of the expenses incurred
Medium	Disclosure on the due date of the set of legal reports of the expenses incurred
High	Disclosure, beyond the set of legal reports, of complementary reports
Transparency	
Capacity	Indicators
Null	Lack of any kind of indicator of transparency of the activities of the councilors
Low	Details of the sessions (agenda, minutes of the sessions)
	City Council news on the activities of the councilors
	Availability of legislation
Medium	Availability of legislation with the possibility of download
	Videos of the legislative sessions
High	Disclosure of materials in processing phases
	Live videos of the legislative sessions
	City Council TV channel
	City Council Radio station
Participation/Interaction	
Capacity	Indicators
Null	Absence of any channel for citizens participation
Low	E-mail of the City Council
	E-mail of the departments of the City Council
	E-mail of the Councilors
	Electronic Form
Medium	Home Page of the Councilor
	Twitter
	YouTube Video
	Monitoring user actions
High	Ombudsman
	Return code

Source: Prepared by the author.

Regarding the accountability process, will be considered as of null capacity the portal in which it is observed that there isn't any kind of report and / or inability of its location. In case there is a partial disclosure and / or after the due date of the set of Legal Reports of the expenses incurred, the electronic portal has low ability for accountability. The medium capacity of the portal will be displayed from the disclosure on the due date of the set of Law Reports of expenses incurred. The high capacity of the portal will be identified if there is the disclosure, in addition to the set of Legal Reports on the due date, Complementary Reports of the expenses incurred.

Regarding transparency, the portal will have null capacity in case of absence of disclosure of any kind of indicator of the councilors activities. Low capacity is defined by the presence of at least one of the following indicators: details of the sessions (agenda, minutes of the sessions); City Council news on the activities of the councilors; the legislation available. The medium capacity will be identified in the portals that present, cumulatively, at least one of the following indicators: provision of law with the possibility of download, videos of the legislative sessions. The high capacity will be identified in case the portal presents, cumulatively, at least one of the indicators of low capacity, at least one of the indicators of medium capacity and one of the following indicators: disclosure of materials in processing phases; live videos of the legislative sessions; City Council TV channel; City Council

Radio station.

In terms of participation, it will be considered as of null capacity the portal in which it is observed that there isn't any kind of channel for citizens participation. Low capacity will be identified in case the portal presents at least one of the following indicators: E-mail of the City Council; E-mail of the departments of the City Council; E-mail of the Councilors; Electronic Form. It will be considered as of medium capacity the portal that presents, cumulatively, at least one of the low capacity indicators and one of the following indicators: Home Page of the Councilor; Twitter; YouTube video; Monitoring user actions. The portal will be considered as of high capacity, it has to present, cumulatively, at least one of the indicators of low capacity, at least one of medium capacity indicators and one of the following indicators: ombudsman; return code.

Conclusion:

The electronic portal is considered a technology capable of enabling conditions for building accountability of public events. Confirmation of the use of the electronic portal for this purpose lacks empirical research, particularly in relation to the city councils, given that the literature contains research on the Executive branch.

The objective, therefore, is to propose an analysis model for assessing the capacity of the electronic portals of the city councils for building conditions for the accountability. From the indicators of accountability, transparency and participation, identified in the studies of several authors (Akutsu, 2002; Akutsu and Pinho, 2002; Diniz, 2000; Moraes, 2004; Prado, 2004), and in the portals of the city councils located in 10 Brazilian capital cities with the largest number of inhabitants, an analytical model considering different capacity levels (null, low, medium and high) was structured. It is understood that the model developed allows assessing the construction conditions for the process of accountability, transparency and participation through electronic portals of the city councils, also important to leverage the construction of the practice of accountability.

The lack of indicators of international experience is justified by the need to build a model that focuses on the Brazilian reality. Therefore, we started from a condition considered great (structure and content of the portals of the largest capitals), to then investigate its applicability in electronic portals of the councils located in smaller municipalities.

For future studies it is recommended to investigate indicators that the electronic portals may be migrating from the stage of electronic murals for promoters of incentives to the practice of the local democracy, which is a breath given the importance of the legislative branch, being necessary to remember that this movement also depends on the organization and pressure of the civil society, an aspect that this study did not contemplate, but that will be object of future investigation.

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