Digital democracy in Brazil: legal obligation, political pressure and technological viability

Democracia digital no Brasil: obrigação legal, pressão política e viabilidade tecnológica

MARIA PAULA ALMADA [a]
Instituto Nacional de Ciência e Tecnologia em Democracia Digital. Salvador – BA, Brazil
RODRIGO CARREIRO [b]
Instituto Nacional de Ciência e Tecnologia em Democracia Digital. Salvador – BA, Brazil
SAMUEL BARROS [c]
Instituto Nacional de Ciência e Tecnologia em Democracia Digital. Salvador – BA, Brazil
WILSON GOMES [d]
Instituto Nacional de Ciência e Tecnologia em Democracia Digital. Salvador – BA, Brazil
Universidade Federal da Bahia, Graduate Program in Communication and Contemporary Culture. Salvador – BA, Brazil.

ABSTRACT

Digital democracy initiatives are the product of interaction between society's expectations, governmental priorities, governors' preferences, legal obligation and technological viability. This research evaluated how digital democracy initiatives held by federal government took place in 2017. We identified 119 working initiatives. Considering this total, 47.1% had as its main goal the promotion of public transparency, 23.5% tried to offer information and opportunities for people education for citizenship and 5.9% provided information and means for access to justice system. There were no initiatives to promote public deliberation.
Keywords: Digital democracy initiatives, online public transparency, online political participation

RESUMO

Iniciativas de democracia digital são produto da interação entre expectativas da sociedade, prioridades dos governos, vontade dos atores envolvidos, obrigação legal e viabilidade tecnológica. Este artigo apresenta os resultados de prospecção das iniciativas de democracia digital mantidas pelo governo federal em 2017, que identificou 119 delas em funcionamento. Desse total, 47,1% tinham como principal objetivo a promoção da transparência pública, 23,5% contavam com a participação de atores da sociedade em decisões, 23,5% procuravam fornecer informações e oportunidades para a educação das pessoas para a cidadania, e 5,9% proviam informações e meios para que cidadãos tivessem acesso à justiça. Não houve iniciativas para a promoção da deliberação pública.
Palavras-chave: Iniciativas de democracia digital, transparência pública on-line, participação política on-line

[a] Post-doctoral fellowship/CAPES holder at Instituto Nacional de Ciência e Tecnologia em Democracia Digital. Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0037-614X. E-mail: mariapaula.almada@gmail.com

[b] Post-doctoral fellowship/CAPES holder at Instituto Nacional de Ciência e Tecnologia em Democracia Digital. Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1217-2654. E-mail: rodrigocarreiro@gmail.com

[c] Professor at Universidade Federal do Recôncavo da Bahia (UFRB). Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8931-3262. E-mail: samuel.barros77@gmail.com

[d] Professor at Faculdade de Comunicação da Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA). Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5192-6896. E-mail: wilsonsg@terra.com.br

INTRODUCTION

OVER THE LAST 25 years, several factors have contributed to the incorporation of resources and tools of digital communication technologies into everyday political and social practices. Both the rapid technological advance and the widespread diffusion of these tools in society and the increased flow of information are elements that help understand the current scenario of political communication around the world. In Brazil, the stage of the development of digital democracy has been investigated by means of the analysis of initiatives that seek to improve democratic values in society (Braga, 2007; Marques, 2008; Pinho, 2008; Sampaio, 2011). However, there is lack of understanding of the set of initiatives and factors that help explain the way governments and public institutions materialize their own intentions and agendas into digital democracy projects.

In practice, experiences and initiatives involving political activities supported by digital communication technologies have not only increased significantly, but also varied significantly in their design, purpose, operation and outcome. Over time, changes in governments have been accompanied by alterations in how public entities face issues such as citizen participation, transparency of public works, and accountability, among others. This alternation may also vary according to legislative requirements, legal instruments or guidelines formalized through international projects and agendas.

The central argument of this study is that each administration expresses, through its priorities and agendas, preferences in how to use the Internet tools for democratic purposes – and this materializes precisely into the initiatives proposed by the government. The proposal is an analysis based on a census of the initiatives maintained by the Brazilian federal government in 2017. The choice of this period was strategic because it was the first full year of government of former Vice President Michel Temer, following the removal of Dilma Rousseff – on charges of liability crimes – in an alliance managed by Eduardo Cunha (MDB), then President of the Chamber of Deputies, and denounced by Operation Car Wash.

A brief discussion on the concept of digital democracy is presented in the initial section of the article, with particular attention to the argument that more emphasis must be placed on the democratic values in dispute than on generic processes or questions about the Internet and modes of use. Then, the methodological procedures of the research are presented, focused mainly on the understanding of what digital democracy initiatives are and their categorization within the democratic values triggered by the bibliography. Overall, 119 cases characterized as digital democracy initiatives were

recorded, according to the criteria presented in the methodology. The final part was intended to present the results – in view of not only issues already mentioned so far, but also of other factors such as the origin of the experiment developers, thematic axes and types of initiatives – and discuss them in order to understand the government's intentions and perspectives regarding the interface between the Internet and democracy.

DIGITAL DEMOCRACY: DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Digital democracy means the use of digital communication technologies to correct, improve, or incorporate new procedures into the political process to better meet one or more principles of democracy (Dahlberg, 2011; Gomes, 2011; Grönlund, 2003; Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Kouzmin, 2003). Therefore, there are two dimensions that, according to Silva, Sampaio and Bragatto (2016), are parallel and joined together:

> (a) the tradition of the conception of democracy and all its historical, normative and practical debate as a political system; and (b) the interactive innovations of digital technologies and their expansion into everyday life, applied to solve modern communication and information issues. (p. 19)

Whereas democracy refers, above all, to a form of government based on popular sovereignty, with rights such as individual freedom and political equality assured by institutions and constitutions, digital technologies refer to the processes of connectivity, digitization, datification, and interactivity, among others. Thus, "by adding the two together, we would first have the idea that digital democracy refers to the use of digital technologies to materialize advances of the democratic set of ideas" (Silva, Sampaio, & Bragatto, 2016, p. 19). Or, in the words of Gomes (2011), digital democracy deals with the use of "digital communication technologies to supplement, reinforce or correct aspects of the political and social practices of the State and citizens in favor of the political community's democratic content" (pp. 27-28). In consequence, the concept seen that way has to do with the materialization of the concept of democracy.

On the one hand, there is a concern with the maintenance or repair of democratic practices by offering remedies or solutions, and, on the other hand, there is a defense of new institutional designs to meet new demands, including those made possible from the existence of the Internet.

> First, it is a normative conceptualization that sees digital democracy as something that can improve the political system. . . . Second, it is a conceptualization of empirical inspiration, that is, it presupposes that what is understood by digital democracy goes through practical experience, mainly because it is the design, application and effects of tools that aim to solve real issues. That is, even if constructs or theoretical models are erected to guide or explain it, it is the dimension of use that will define it in the democratic set of ideas. (Silva, Sampaio & Bragatto, 2016, pp. 19-20)

This perspective differs from others for having a normative demand. It is not enough for the initiative to be technologically sophisticated, sociologically relevant or to digitize the citizen's relationship with the state. This normative demand avoids overvaluation of technology and thus prevents the updating of the beliefs of technological determinism, which may appear in unfulfilled expectations that suppose technology itself would solve issues of democracy, or simply digitize practices and processes of the relationship between citizen and state, without any democratic gain being observed. The key is to understand how initiatives strengthen or solve issues of democracy.

In the perspective of Gomes (2011), democratically relevant digital initiatives are those aimed at least one of these three purposes: (1) strengthening the competitive capacity of the citizenship sphere, which can be achieved through elements of transparency, participation or influence over political decision-making; (2) promoting or increasing rights and freedoms, since a democratically healthy society is that in which rights and freedoms are, in addition to being respected, valued and promoted; and (3) promoting pluralism, that is, initiatives that have their actions aimed at increasing or ensuring the diversity of voices and opinions, making room for political minorities in order to increase the competitive capacity of citizenship, its actors and agendas. Initiatives that increase the relative power of the citizen over the competing instances in determining political decision-making in the State and society – in other words, which generate civil empowerment (Arnstein, 1969; Fung & Wright, 2001; Gomes, 2011) – mean democratic gains by collaborating with a State's democratic health.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

An evaluation work was carried out between August 2017 and January 2018 to catalog and analyze the experiences and initiatives of digital democracy implemented by the Brazilian Federal Executive branch in 2017 and, thus, to understand how digital technologies are employed. In short, the research consisted in navigating through all links on all Brazilian Executive's websites

in order to survey digital democracy initiatives or projects of any kind. The purpose of the work, therefore, is not linked to the motives or strategies used to create each initiative, but its concern is centered on analyzing whether and how each project fosters these democratic values.

The research was conducted by two research coordinators and had the collaboration of five research groups, totaling thirty researchers involved. All who participated were trained by the coordinators, as they already had experience in previous evaluations. Students were divided into groups corresponding to the thematic axes, as explained below, and discussed with the coordination team the methodology parameters, such as websites' navigation, how to identify initiatives and fill out the cataloging sheet, among other situations. Still, because it was a nationwide team, the researchers carried out their activities under the supervision of the professors coordinating the respective research groups to which they were linked. The steps for the research were: (1) elaboration of evaluation guide (August 2017); (2) discussion of methodological procedures (September 2017); (3) evaluation of initiatives (October 2017); (4) delivery of individual reports by researchers (October 2017); (5) review of reports by research coordinators (November 2017); (6) elaboration of the final report that served as a basis for the preparation of this article (December 2017); and (7) review of the final report (December 2017).

Sampling

The first step of the investigation was to survey all Brazilian Federal Executive's websites. The initial list began to be formatted from the list of websites offered by the government (http://bit.ly/33g2hfG), totaling 29 ministry sites, in addition to the two portals of the Brazilian Federal Government: *Portal Brasil* and the Presidency of the Republic's website. Councils, secretariats, institutes, agencies and other bodies are subordinate to the superior organs and, therefore, are already contemplated.

Data collection

The evaluation team navigated through all the home page links of each of the 29 sites mentioned above, including banners, menus, buttons, and anything that led to some other content page directly linked to the activity of the institution/body examined. One of the most important procedures was to search for the site map or frequently asked questions (FAQ) index to check for body names (secretariats, agencies, councils) that could somehow be linked to relevant digital

democracy projects. Moreover, every researcher sought to find, using the site search tool, the keywords corresponding to their working group (*transparency, participation, rights and access to justice* etc.) to verify whether projects could be found using this tool.

Selection of initiatives

The selection of initiatives was grounded on a main parameter, based on the proposed concept of digital democracy. Thus, initiatives or projects that seek to promote the supplementation, reinforcement or correction of aspects and practices of democracy were considered relevant. More specifically, it was sought to assess to what extent the initiative was efficient in dealing with some particularly important democratic, political or social issue – for example, need to broaden citizen influence in political decisions, increase the transparency of actions of public agents, among other aspects. For that reason, it was not enough that the initiative was technologically robust or innovative.

The second criterion concerns the initiative operation, that is, whether it was operating during the survey period. Initiatives that were published but not updated in 2017 were not considered. Those with no recent update or already *closed*, but which registered full operation in 2017, like some public consultations, were cataloged.[1]

The researchers were divided into four major groups, which corresponded basically to the thematic axes described in the following section: (1) transparency; (2) information and education for citizenship; (3) rights and access to justice; and (4) participation/deliberation. At this stage, it was decided to join participation and deliberation categories together in order to facilitate the survey, as they had similar purposes. The separation would occur in the next phase, when other researchers would be responsible for double checking. Each of the four groups navigated through all 29 major government sites and all their links, as explained earlier. The difference between the groups was the focus: while the transparency group sought, evaluated, and cataloged initiatives of such nature, the participation/deliberation group did the same for participatory projects, and so on. At the end of the first evaluation process, other researchers were asked to verify the data and, at a third moment, the two researchers-coordinators made the final evaluation.

It is worth emphasizing that a large work team may bring methodological insecurities, since the difficulty of training the researchers increases. Understanding what constitutes an initiative may vary among team members, for example. Therefore, it is important to assign the same work to different

[1] This was because the objective of the study was not to evaluate the quality of the tool or how the process promoted by the initiative took place, but rather its existence and its operation according to the parameters presented.

researchers, and they should navigate through and evaluate the same websites as those of their group. For each initiative found, cataloging was based on the following parameters: target audience, original purpose, project description, justification for why it was democratically relevant, and link.

Classification: thematic axes

Considering that initiatives and projects should foster democratic values, the categorization of initiatives was made from their purpose, which corresponds, in part and not by chance, to the areas of research in the field of digital democracy, namely: transparency; participation; rights and access to justice; deliberation and information; and education for citizenship.

Transparency

It is understood that democratic States must be transparent in order to shed light on their processes, actors, decision-making, etc. The definition of transparency permeates the visibility of data and technical, accounting, statistical and economic information about representatives and public affairs, focusing mainly on the intelligibility of these data. Thus, available open data is often a condition for transparency. In short, public transparency is what results from the use of data and information by citizens, that is, the result produced by opening of data and information, what is allowed to be seen and understood from the available data and information.

Considering that this article addressed the democratic possibilities achieved through digital environments and tools, transparency is what can be seen from data and information available in the digital environment. In turn, online tools – websites, applications, etc. – are the instruments capable of making the State more transparent and strengthening accountability processes.[2]

Initiatives of e-transparency are those that should produce, as a result, fostering of accountability, increased citizen's cognitive control, as well as possibility of inspecting and monitoring the State, that is, they should allow external actors or institutions to supervise it, monitor its processes, procedures and decision making. These are initiatives that shed light on the functioning of institutions and programs and on political actors, making them vulnerable to public scrutiny.

This axis basically comprises initiatives and projects aimed at: (1) monitoring of authorities; (2) monitoring of public works and policies; (3) fiscal transparency (meeting the requirements of the Fiscal Responsibility Law

[2] Accountability is the obligation of a subject to account for his/her actions to the competent authority. More specifically, in the sphere of politics, accountability happens when political agents report to State bodies and, in general, to citizens in order to justify their decisions and receive punishment or feel embarrassment in cases of misconduct. In addition, accountability is configured by the possibility of embarrassment caused by transparency, added to the perspective of sanction on the agent (Almada, 2017). To learn more, see "Conceptualizing accountability" (Schedler, 1999).

– LRF, with income and expense report); (4) opening of data; (5) Citizen Information Service (e-SIC); and (6) bidding and auction tools.

Participation

From an institutional point of view, e-participation refers to the use of communication and information technologies to enable citizens (or other actors) to influence the decision-making process at some level, so that their results generate, increase or correct some democratic value for the benefit of the political community. In other words, it is an open channel for interested citizens to send input to the political system. Participation initiatives may refer to public policies, regulations, government strategic directions, etc.

This axis basically comprises initiatives and projects such as: (1) digital platforms for public consultation; (2) online institutional forums; (3) electronic petitions; (4) digital voting mechanisms; (5) best practice bank (submission of suggestions); and (6) ombudsman (submission of suggestions and criticisms).

Rights and access to justice

This category includes the tools that promote the full exercise of citizens' rights, especially regarding access to justice, such as initiatives aimed at political minorities. They are those that go beyond the simple provision of information and, digitally, allow citizens to have greater access to justice, whether by filing complaints, accessing content that helps simplify processes or getting informed about judicial issues with practical impact on their lives. This axis basically comprises initiatives and projects that use digital technologies to: (1) denouncement and (2) conflict intermediation.

Deliberation

Deliberation is a fundamental dimension in the most essential understanding of democracy. In its most specific sense, it is understood as a method of decision making, as can be seen in courts and parliaments; and, in its broadest sense, as the process of public discussion in the public sphere. The formation of the concept of public deliberation owes much to the work of Jürgen Habermas (2003, 2011), who made an effort towards more universal bases in considering the pragmatic conditions of communication related to the normative conditions for the production of legitimate opinions by means of the discussion. In recent years, this concept has been discussed, problematized and defended by the current of democratic theory known as *deliberative democracy*.

In digital democracy initiatives, deliberation materializes into: (1) forums; (2) public consultations based on argumentative exchanges; (3) drafting bill texts, decrees and other documents using Wiki technology; and (4) online environments for the formation of social networks focused on public deliberation.

Information and education for citizenship

Initiatives of this nature act to provide citizens with important information from the point of view of citizenship and democracy. In relation to citizenship, digital initiatives provide accessible information, facilitating the formation of values for citizenship – such as laws – and clarify the initiatives or even the functioning of a particular institute or government body. Regarding democracy, it is and fast and responsive way to offer citizens data to compose the individual repertoire of information on the most varied subjects of public interest.

The difference between this category and the *transparency* category lies in the fact that the former acts to clarify issues for citizens, using digital tools to make it easier to access information that is useful for citizenship; in its turn, transparency, as already considered here, involves providing comprehensive and intelligible information that enables citizens and any interested parties to follow, monitor and inspect public works and policies and political actors. Transparency expects that the person under surveillance is accountable and held accountable for his/her actions and decision-making.

In this information and education for citizenship axis, the following initiatives, among others, can be mentioned: (1) online courses; (2) environments for children and adolescents; (3) simulators and calculators; (4) specialized booklets and dictionaries; (5) indicators and research results; and (6) database of legislation and public documents.

RESULTS

The evaluation process described in the previous section found 119 digital democracy initiatives undertaken by the Brazilian federal government throughout 2017. Table 1 brings a summary of the total number of initiatives for each democratic value. Almost half of them are related to transparency (47.1%), while participation and information and education for citizenship account for almost a quarter of the total number (23.5%). Only seven cases (5.9%) were classified as related to the democratic value of rights and access to justice. Deliberation, in turn, did not have a single case registered and, therefore,

does not appear in the tables of this study. In the next section, some causes or reasons for the numbers observed are presented. Numbers are detailed below.

Table 1

Federal government's digital democracy initiatives in 2017, grouped per democratic value

Initiative democratic value	N	%
Transparency	56	47.1
Participation	28	23.5
Information and education for citizenship	28	23.5
Rights and access to justice	7	5.9
Deliberation	0	0.0
Total	119	100.0

Figure 1 presents the types of democracy initiative in absolute numbers, organized per democratic value of the initiative. It can be noted that the occurrence of initiatives is markedly unequal within groups composed of their democratic value. In each of them, there is a type of initiative that occurs in much larger numbers than the others.

Data presented in Table 2 are useful to measure the difference between the initiatives grouped into the same democratic value, as well as the difference in relation to the total sample. Among the groups of transparency initiatives, monitoring of public works and policies accounts for almost half of all initiatives of this axis (48.2%). There are also significant open data initiatives (21.4%) and those aimed at promoting fiscal transparency (19.6%). In the group of participation initiatives, online public consultations dominate the category, with 75.0%. Online forums, collaborative good practice catalog banks, and ombudsmen appeared twice each.
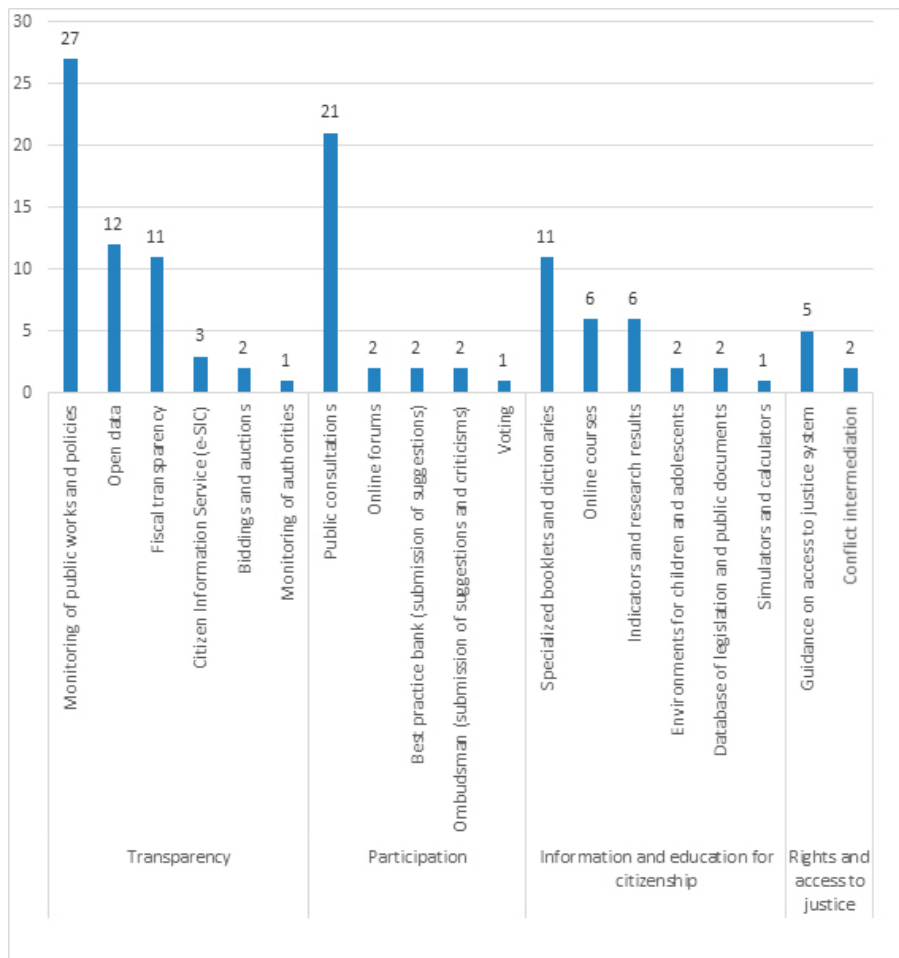
Figure 1. Brazilian government's digital democracy initiatives organized per type

In the information and education for citizenship group, the specialized booklets and dictionaries occur more frequently (39.3%). Online courses and sections for presenting indicators and research results have six occurrences each, which is equivalent to 21.4% of cases in the category. It should also be noted the occurrence of playful environments for the education of children and adolescents, and organization of legislation related to some theme, in order to facilitate access by citizens. Finally, the last group, rights and access to justice, presented only seven cases. Specific guidance on how to access justice-promoting bodies of the system occurred five times, while initiatives designed to conflict intermediation appeared twice.

Table 2

Absolute number and percentage of digital democracy initiatives in relation to democratic value and total initiatives

Democratic value of the initiative	Initiative	N	% of the value	% of the total
Transparency	Monitoring of public works and policies	27	48.2	22.7
	Open data	12	21.4	10.1
	Fiscal transparency	11	19.6	9.2
	Citizen Information Service (e-SIC)	3	5.4	2.5
	Biddings and auctions	2	3.6	1.7
	Monitoring of authorities	1	1.8	0.8
Participation	Public consultations	21	75	17.6
	Online forums	2	7.1	1.7
	Good practices bank (submission of suggestions)	2	7.1	1.7
	Ombudsman (submission of suggestions and criticism)	2	7.1	1.7
	Voting	1	3.6	0.8
Information and education for citizenship	Specialized booklets and dictionaries	11	39.3	9.2
	Online courses	6	21.4	5.0
	Indicators and research results	6	21.4	5.0
	Environment for children and adolescents	2	7.1	1.7
	Database of public legislation and documents	2	7.1	1.7
	Simulators and calculators	1	3.6	0.8
Rights and access to justice	Guidance on access to justice system	5	71.4	4.2
	Conflict intermediation	2	28.6	1.7

In the last column of Table 2, it is possible to see the percentage of the number of cases of initiatives in relation to the total number of the sample. This measure is important to calculate the occurrence of a certain type in relation to all the initiatives of the Brazilian Federal Executive government. By ranking these numbers, it is possible to realize that projects for monitoring public works and policies rank first, accounting for 22.7% of initiatives, followed by the participation initiative known as public consultations, with 17.6%, and open data initiatives, with 10.1%. Thus, it is possible to note the strong emphasis placed on the use of the Internet to promote transparency through the dissemination of progress reports on public works and policies, and, more recently, through the disclosure of public data in open formats.

Table 3

Distribution of digital democracy initiatives per area of government body promoting them

Area of government body	N	%
Management	43	36.1
Justice	17	14.3
Culture and tourism	13	10.9
Education	11	9.2
Health	6	5.0
Environment	6	5.0
Social development	6	5.0
Transportation	4	3.4
Defense	3	2.5
Work and social security	3	2.5
Industry and trade	2	1.7
Agriculture	2	1.7
Science, Technology and Communication	2	1.7
Energy	1	0.8
Total	119	100

Table 4

Bodies with more than one digital democracy project

Body	N	%
Federal Ministry of Transparency, Supervision and Control	19	16
Ministry of Justice and Public Security	15	12.6
Ministry of Education	11	9.2
Ministry of Planning, Development and Management	9	7.6
Ministry of Culture	8	6.7
Ministry of Finance	6	5.0
Ministry of Environment	6	5.0
Ministry of Social Development	5	4.2
Ministry of Tourism	5	4.2
Presidency of Republic	5	4.2
Ministry of Health	4	3.4
Ministry of Labor	3	2.5
Ministry of Transport, Ports and Civil Aviation	3	2.5
Central Bank of Brazil	2	1.7
Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply	2	1.7

Table 3 shows the occurrence of digital democracy initiatives according to the area of the body responsible for them. The area generically named as management appears first, with 36.1% of all initiatives. It is reasonable that this category occurred more frequently, since it includes the bodies linked to the Presidency of the Republic and the financial administration, such as the Ministry of Transparency, Supervision and Control; the Ministry of Planning, and the Ministry of Finance. As can be seen in Table 4, these bodies are among those with the largest number of cases. Management initiatives are mainly aimed at promoting transparency, such as monitoring public works and policies (9), fiscal transparency (6), and open data (6).

Secondly, we have the area of justice, with the occurrence of 17 cases, which corresponds to 14.3% of the total initiatives. This area consists of the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, with 15 cases (Table 4), and also the Ministry of Human Rights and the Administrative Council for Economic Defense (Cade), with one case each. The literature has recorded that, over the last few years, the Ministry of Justice has been an important promoter of participation initiatives, notably the public consultations carried out during the process of preparing the Brazilian Civil Rights Framework for the Internet (Barros, 2016). In the evaluation conducted, as can be assumed, most initiatives in this area were related to information and guidance for access to justice system bodies (4), followed by public consultations (3), conflict intermediation (2), online courses (2), and specialized booklets (2).

In third place, it is the area of culture and tourism, which refers exactly to the Ministries of Culture and Tourism. The two were brought together in the same area because of the thematic convergence. The most common initiatives are monitoring of public policy implementation (4) and open data initiatives (3). Then, it is the education area, composed exclusively by the Ministry of Education, one of the bodies that most develops digital democracy initiatives (Table 4). The role of this Ministry is mainly to monitor the execution of the many programs and projects that it develops (5), fiscal transparency initiatives (2), and indicators and research results (2).

It is also worth mentioning the areas of health, environment and social development, with six digital democracy projects each. In addition to the Ministry of Health, the health area is comprised of the National Supplementary Health Agency (ANS) and the National Health Regulatory Agency (Anvisa); all perform public consultations, and this is the type of initiative that most occurs in the area. In the environment area, all projects were carried out by the central administration body – the Ministry of Environment. These are public consultations (2), voting, receipt of suggestions for a good practice bank, online courses and monitoring of public works and policies. Finally, the social development area is focused on monitoring the policies implemented by the Ministry of Social Development.

DISCUSSION: EXPERIENCES OF DIGITAL DEMOCRACY AS A RESULT OF LEGAL OBLIGATION, POLITICAL PRESSURE AND TECHNOLOGICAL VIABILITY

It is important to emphasize that this work is not intended to be a definitive guide, since this field is dynamic and presents constant changes. In any case, it is possible to draw some conclusions based on the evaluation which, as already

mentioned, resulted in the mapping and analysis of a total of 119 initiatives. The first issue that emerges is the concentration of initiatives in the transparency category (47.1%), which can be explained by the legal instruments approved in recent years in Brazil, making governmental data and information publications mandatory (Almada, 2017).

Participation initiatives altogether account for almost a quarter (23.5%) of the total evaluated. Most of them refer specifically to online consultations. The number is so significant that only online consultations represent 17.6% of all federal government digital democracy initiatives. If only participation initiatives are considered, this number reaches 75%. Online consultations are thus the main mechanism employed by the federal government to listen to and receive input from society (Barros, 2017).

The initiatives cataloged as information and education for citizenship reveal attempts to increase the informational repertoire of citizens with content aimed at clarifying government actions and the functioning of bodies and ministries. It is the elementary standard of communication between State and citizen, that is, the minimum expected from the government in terms of information that helps the citizen understand, even partially, the administrative machine, besides being a fast and responsive way to compose the individual repertoire of information on various subjects of public interest. It is therefore understandable that this category accounts for almost a quarter (28 cases, 23.5%) of the total initiatives, as they require less development and maintenance efforts.

The absence of deliberation initiatives during the study period has no easy explanations, but some may be assumed. In addition to the demand for human and technological resources, it is hypothesized that deliberation initiatives are more costly politically. As argued by Barros (2016), opening a channel for the free expression of citizens may give rise to questions and criticisms – strategically undesirable – to political actors and public policies. Certainly, this is a hypothesis that cannot be tested in this study, but it can be indicated as a possible explanation for the lack of deliberation initiatives throughout 2017.

With regard to legal instruments, Brazil has advanced in the last decade in providing tax information on expenses, revenues and public works, and in providing real-time information on the Internet, especially after the formalization of Complementary Law No. 131, of May 27, 2009, known as the Public Transparency Law and, subsequently, with the promulgation of the Law on Access to Information, LAI (Law No. 12,527, of November 18, 2011).

The Transparency Law is an addendum to the LRF, amending its Article 48 on tax management transparency to reinforce the need for budget transparency and expanding federal public administration's positive experiences throughout

the country. The Transparency Law requires the publication, in real time, of detailed information about the budgetary and financial execution of income and expenses in electronic means widely available to the public (Internet), and it much occur until the first business day following the date of accounting entry in the respective system. This includes a concern regarding the inability of the average citizen to understand the content available there, which is why the law provides for the obligation to offer simplified versions of reports in the online environment. For this reason, a range of digital initiatives have been observed throughout the evaluation, aiming to give visibility to this information: revenues, government spending, and general spending.

Another factor that may explain the largest number of initiatives in this category is the implementation, on virtually all Federal Executive's websites, of the *Acceso à Informação* [Access to Information] page, which explains the purpose of LAI (to regulate access to public information in Brazil), as well as facilitating the requests for public information provided by the new legislation. As required by LAI, these pages include e-SIC (which includes federal executive bodies and entities), through which citizens can follow the progress of their requests, file an appeal, consult the answers received and, if necessary, submit complaints. In addition, Decree No. 8,777, of May 11, 2016, established the Federal Executive's open data policy by regulating opening of data in this instance of government. The fact that open data initiatives account for 21.4% of transparency initiatives indicates that open data policy has been implemented, at least considering the existence of platforms for publishing datasets.

The concentration of initiatives in these two aspects, transparency and information, reveals that Brazil has gone through a period of implementation and organization of practices driven by public policies designed around the idea of openness. As it was seen, this occurs from the consolidation of a set of rules responsible for guiding the development of initiatives that have followed the pattern of technology adoption over time. From the simple transposition of content to digital platforms, such as the publication of budget reports in PDF format, to the use of geolocation tools and data visualization, the fact is that the evolution stage of transparency in Brazil follows international standards (Almada, 2017). In this case, actions of this nature can be understood as part of a worldwide trend towards opening of data and transparency, driven by international agreements, such as the Open Government Partnership (OGP)[3], which began in 2011 with the goal of promoting transparency, fighting corruption and using new technologies to strengthen democratic governance.

Another aspect to be emphasized is that the large number of digital democracy initiatives promoted by control bodies can be attributed to the character

[3] OGP's eight founding countries were Brazil, the United States, the United Kingdom, Indonesia, Mexico, Norway, the Philippines, and South Africa. At that time, these countries approved the Open Government Declaration and announced their national action plans.

of their own activities, such as the *Escala Brasil Transparente* [Transparent Brasil Scale] initiative, which consists of a methodology created by the Comptroller General (CGU, whose functions were absorbed into the Ministry of Transparency, Supervision and Control) for the purpose of assessing compliance by states and municipalities with the LAI, based on the requirements of this law. Therefore, these are tools and technological solutions developed for control bodies to exercise their monitoring.

Regarding political participation through digital means, it can be observed that this is still a lacking dimension of development. The gains in technological innovation witnessed in recent decades have not yet been reflected in consistent online federal participation projects. Despite the many successful experiences around the world that have been recorded in the literature, the online participation proposed by the Brazilian government occurs almost entirely through online consultations.

Consultations in Brazil take place in a decentralized manner. Each body is responsible for the technological means on which their respective consultations are made. According to Barros (2017), the United States and the United Kingdom bet on a single platform through which all consultations are held. This model has the advantage of standardizing the way of consulting, giving minimal parameters to their promoters, but also decreasing the participants' cognitive effort to send them input.

As it was seen with regard to transparency, legal or institutional means that constrain or enforce certain conduct are responsible for developing initiatives. The same can be said, in particular, for online consultations, which are performed by the bodies as part of their modus operandi (Pó & Abrucio, 2006). Most of them have institutionalized practice to consult online during the process of drafting any standard or regulation. In addition to consultation, the Federal Executive's online participation initiatives offer citizens few options. Despite Dilma Rousseff's attempt to establish a National Policy for Social Participation with Decree No. 8,243 of May 23, 2014, strictly speaking, there is no normative guidance obliging the implementation of projects that reduce the distance between the political sphere and citizens, nor public policies by the state to foster participation, much less an organizational culture that drives actions in this direction.

In two previous moments, Dilma government launched initiatives to encourage popular participation. In 2013, following the political crisis resulting from the demonstrations that took over the country (the so-called June Journeys), Dilma Rousseff management launched the *Participatório da Juventude* [Youth Participatory Observatory], which initially featured thematic forums focusing on public policy discussion for the youths, but which has

been losing attention over time both of users and of managers. In 2015, the government launched the *Dialoga Brasil* [Dialogue Brazil] platform, which promised to be the space where ideas would turn into proposals, divided by areas of government action. The government enlisted some ministers to promote this user-friendly platform, but has failed to reach significant participation numbers. In 2017, in turn, the federal government did not implement any innovative initiatives to promote participation; not even one attempt was found.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Analyzing digital democracy initiatives by the Brazilian Executive branch is also a means of understanding how the government projects ideas, styles, and preferences regarding democracy and its values, assuming that, in practice, governments materialize these issues into initiatives or projects. This article is therefore the result of the effort to understand federal government agendas of interests, and institutional and strategic preferences during 2017.

To achieve this goal, as described in the "Sampling" section, the federal government websites have been reviewed. The research started with a list, which was on the presidential website, of the then 29 ministries, plus *Portal Brasil* and the Presidency's website. The results pointed to some trends and gaps. The first issue concerns the concentration of initiatives that seek to promote public transparency, a fact which, as noted earlier, is largely due to the obligations imposed by the legislation. However, there is little or no progress compared to previous years, as the main websites in this category have been in operation for at least seven years, such as the *Portal da Transparência* [Transparency Portal] and the *Portal Brasileiro de Dados Abertos* [Brazilian Open Data Portal].

Another trend observed is the low investment in more innovative projects of participation that seek to meet the demands of the population through tools more relevant to the current moment of technological evolution. The government has not implemented any new initiatives, nor has it sustained further experiences in previous mandates. Constancy was observed only in public consultations, which, in some cases, are required by the internal rules of the bodies – such as regulatory agencies. In any case, it is possible to see that the lack of legislation capable of guaranteeing more effective participatory spaces, in analogy with what was discussed about transparency, is a way of understanding how participation, as a democratic value, is understood by the current government.

In short, institutionalization, as internal regulations or laws, has proved to be a fundamental step in maintaining digital democracy initiatives between one

government and another. It is possible to understand that there has been a change in understanding digital democracy, especially if it is considered that Temer management represented a radical change in the government plan of his predecessor, Dilma Rousseff. It can be said that a participatory model gave way to a liberal model. There is an indication, for example, that Temer government weakened participation and retained what was politically inexpensive or most valued by the coalition actors that seized power. It is in this sense that the maintenance of transparency initiatives are understood, at least at the moment when the evaluation was performed: as a response to the rules and expectations of actors perceived by the government as relevant, rather than based on an understanding of the set of democratic values important to digital democracy. M

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