Digital Media and Grassroots Anti-Corruption
Digital Media and Grassroots Anti-Corruption
Contexts, Platforms and Data of Anti-Corruption Technologies Worldwide

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1. Digital media and technologies in grassroots struggles against corruption

Alice Mattoni

INTRODUCTION

Corruption is a global social problem that manifests itself in a variety of ways across the world and there are several attempts to counter it, also from the grassroots. Activists, civil society organisations, and concerned citizens engage with anti-corruption in different manners. There have been many examples in which digital media, and especially social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, played a relevant role in the emergence and spreading of protests in the past decade, including the massive anti-corruption movement that developed in 2011 in India (Chowdhury & Abid, 2019), the wave of massive protests that hit Brazil in 2013 tackling, amongst other issues, also the corruption of the political elites (Saad-Filho, 2013), the youth-led anti-corruption protests that occurred in Guatemala in 2015 (Flores, 2019), or the anti-corruption protests that developed in Romania between 2016 and 2017 (Olteanu & Beyerle, 2018). The widespread employment of social media platforms in Indonesia contributed to creating spaces where citizens discuss information about corruption (Prabowo et al., 2018). Furthermore, the use of social media platforms might support the creation of online communities that coalesce around a shared sense of injustice and then, eventually gather in offline mobilisations. This happened in the mobilisations that occurred in Egypt in 2011, in which the Facebook page ‘We are all Khaled Said’ proved crucial in gathering the discontent of thousands of users against police brutality and, also, the then Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak’s corruption; a sense of disenchantment that went on to flow into the street demonstrations that swept across the country (Alaimo, 2015). While all these cases address the relevant role of social media platforms in anti-corruption efforts, this volume and the chapters in it move their gaze beyond this type of digital media to understand what else is going on in the world of anti-corruption from the grassroots, telling other, often untold, stories.
The chapters in this volume indeed focus on why and how anti-corruption activists decide to design, develop, and employ different types of digital media and technologies to sustain their efforts and with what consequences not so much for corruption at large, but for the activists themselves and their organisations. In so doing, they also highlight the challenges that activists and civil society organisations meet when including digital media and technologies in their anti-corruption activities as well as how they deal (or might deal) with them. Doing so is relevant because many theoretical assumptions and practical expectations still need to be further explored and connected with a broader understanding of how social change might work when supported through digital media and technologies to decrease corruption (cfr. Ear-Dupuy & Serrat, 2017). Scouting such assumptions and expectations allows us to understand how anti-corruption works today, since digital media and technologies are deeply ingrained in the anti-corruption sector: they are here to stay, even in more advanced and complex forms in the future, and increasingly employed by civil society and social movement organisations all over the world. It is, hence, essential to understand which digital media and technologies activists use to counter corruption, how they can create them and then involve others in their employment, why they decide to include digital media and technologies in their anti-corruption initiatives in the first place, and with what consequences for the overall grassroots anti-corruption movement. This volume is the first organic attempt to answer these relevant questions starting from the empirical investigations that the authors have gathered and analysed on different case studies worldwide. Beyond providing some valuable insights on how digital media and technologies has been integrated into actual anti-corruption efforts from the grassroots, creating novel opportunities but also challenges for activists and their movement organisations, this volume provides a more general discussion on what digital media and technologies implies for the struggle against corruption from the grassroots, the political actors involved in it, and their anti-corruption practices.

Before venturing into the appreciation of the specific anti-corruption initiatives addressed in the remainder of this volume, this chapter will provide a general framework for the many case studies that will be discussed below, and it does so in the following way. The next section starts with a brief literature review of corruption studies and how they have covered so far the topic of digital media and technologies for anti-corruption from the grassroots. It also explains why it is the case to shift the centre of attention from a purely instrumental view of digital media and technologies, which emphasises why anti-corruption activists and their civil society organisations employ them. To make this shift possible, the section proposes the concept of Anti-Corruption Technologies (from now on, ACTs) as a heuristic that casts light on aspects other than the scopes for which anti-corruption activists employ digital media
Digital media and technologies in grassroots struggles against corruption and technologies to counter corruption. The section that comes next discusses each of these aspects in-depth to provide a broad fresco of the variations we find in concrete examples of ACTs. It indeed argues that, while anti-corruption and even many digital media and technologies unquestionably have a global dimension, ACTs come in specific shapes due to the contexts and situations in which they are embedded, where the availability of material elements, the presence of certain symbolic aspects, and the involvement of specific social actors combine into unique configurations. Then, the subsequent section advances a typology of ACTs that takes into consideration the overall scopes for which digital media and technologies are used in grassroots struggles against corruption and discuss them considering their material, symbolic, and social dimension. The final section presents the main contributions of this edited volume: a series of empirically grounded chapters that investigates digital media and technologies in grassroots struggles against corruption from different viewpoints and concerning different countries across the globe.

THE CASE FOR THE CONCEPT OF ANTI-CORRUPTION TECHNOLOGIES

Over the past decades, scholars have produced an extensive body of literature aimed at comprehending the origins of corruption, identifying strategies to reduce it, and facing its adverse effects (for example, Rothstein, 2021; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016; Torsello, 2016; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015; della Porta & Vannucci, 2012). Numerous studies have focused on institutional approaches to combating corruption, but scholars have also recognised the crucial role that civil society actors and social movement organisations play in supporting anti-corruption efforts (for example, Larsson & Grimes, 2022; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015; Hough, 2013; Johnston, 2014; Johnston, 2005). Going more in-depth in this direction, some scholars have examined and explained the discourses, forms of protest, and grassroots initiatives against corruption at the national level (for example, Walton, 2017; Beyerle, 2014; Torsello, 2012). There is empirical evidence that actual change concerning the presence of corruption manifests not so much after the introduction of one specific anti-corruption tool but, instead, when there is a sustained interaction between civil society organisations and the tool in question. An example is the presence of Freedom of Information Acts which have an impact on corruption to the extent that civil society organisations use them to participate in budget oversight activities (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2014). With their focus on citizens’ role in keeping power holders accountable for what they do in this capacity (Fox, 2015), studies related to social accountability also recognise the vital role of civil society actors and social movement organisations, which are relevant insofar as they decide to use their voice to ask the
public administration and other public organisations for information about their activities, critically evaluating that information, and sanctioning them, although informally, in case of misconduct (Brummel, 2021; Peruzzotti, 2012; Bovens, 2007; Peruzzotti & Smulovitz, 2006). Social accountability related to corruption strongly relies on grassroots collective actions, either through institutional tools, like legal actions initiated by civil society organisations, or through the use of non-institutional tools, like street mobilisations and other forms of protest (Smulovitz & Peruzzotti, 2000).

Even more recently, scholars have combined the attention to grassroots efforts against corruption with a focus on the potential of digital media and technologies. For example, many recent works acknowledge the relevance of digital technologies when embraced by civil society organisations (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016; Rotberg, 2017; Hough, 2017; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015; Johnston, 2014). Digital media can be a precious ally in increasing social accountability and combating corruption when appropriated by actors like civil society organisations, media companies, their outlets, and popular mobilisations (Siegle, 2014). Some studies provide macro empirical evidence of the negative correlation between Internet adoption and corruption (Elbahnasawy, 2014; Lio et al., 2011; Andersen et al., 2011) and consider the presence of the Internet as relevant to reduce corruption. Recent findings suggest that the progress in controlling corruption at the global level might be linked, amongst other factors, to the increased availability of broadband Internet and the presence of Facebook worldwide (Mungiu-Pippidi & Johnston, 2017). In this regard, evidence suggests that the Internet’s presence in a country contributes to increased awareness among its citizens about corruption. As this awareness rises, corruption levels in that country tend to decrease, as measured by corruption perception and experience indices (Goel et al., 2012). Other qualitative explorations of social accountability also consider digital media as empowering tools in the hands of citizens, especially when it comes to citizens’ employment of social media platforms, hence exerting their agency towards governments as networked publics (Ojala et al., 2019, Grandvoinnet et al., 2015). Furthermore, citizen engagement with data on corruption is also considered increasingly important: for instance, in multiple African countries people utilise digital media to obtain data on corruption, collect and visualise pertinent data regarding public administration, beyond employing it to mobilise other individuals in the fight against corruption (Mutungi et al., 2021). At the same time, anti-corruption activists often engage in specific forms of data-activism (Odilia & Mattoni, 2023), that involves the collection, analysis, and dissemination of data used as leverage to sustain civic actions that tackle contentious social and political issues, highlighting the potential of data to challenge existing power structures and hold governments accountable.
Scholars have also started to categorise how concerned citizens, civil society organisations, and social movements employ digital media and technologies to reach different scopes within the framework of anti-corruption from the grassroots. For instance, Davies and Fumega (2014) suggest that digital media might support processes of upward transparency, according to which citizens can get information from governments and other public administration bodies. Platforms that allow citizens to report problems they experience in connection to public services, platforms that allow citizens to file Right to Information requests on issues that matter to them, and portals that give free access to governmental datasets on relevant topics all involve the employment of digital media in the attempt to tackle corruption (ibidem). Adam and Fazekas (2021) list, amongst others, three types of digital media platforms that are tied to civil society actors’ anti-corruption activities: crowdsourcing platforms and websites, whistleblowing platforms and tools, and transparency portals. Kossow (2020) suggests that digital media serves two broad scopes in the framework of anti-corruption initiatives. On the one hand, they support processes of upward transparency, especially thanks to crowdsourcing platforms and whistleblowing platforms, which facilitate citizens in providing information about corruption. On the other hand, they support the mobilisation of citizens against corruption thanks to online news reporting websites that give detailed information about corruption in different realms or social media platforms that allow citizens to connect and organise their discontent towards corruption. Other scholars also note that social media platforms might sustain citizens’ mobilisations against corruption and the collaboration among users who find in social media platforms ways to connect, share their experiences, have their voices heard, and publish in nearly real-time information about corruption going beyond the more traditional gatekeepers of information, like the print press (Bertot et al., 2010).

Overall, the fragmented extant literature on how digital media and technologies sustain grassroots efforts against corruption tends to focus on why activists, and concerned citizens, employ them: which are the scopes they want to reach and the reasons they decided to engage with the digital media and technologies. The emphasis is put on the instrumental aspect of digital media and technologies, treating them as tools in the hands of activists, which they use to reach their scopes, and on whether they actually contribute to reduce corruption (or not). However relevant, these are not the only aspects to take into account when evaluating how digital media and technologies intersects with anti-corruption initiatives, especially when dealing with anti-corruption from the grassroots. This chapter (and the whole volume it is part of) suggests there is much more to be understood beyond a pure instrumental perspective of digital media and technologies in grassroots anti-corruption efforts. This is so for at least three reasons.
First, corruption is not a simple rational choice matter and, as such, transcends rational incentives and legal constraints, also encompassing patterns of interactions among a wide range of actors, each having their specific attitudes and perceptions towards corruption. From this perspective, when activists design, create, and employ digital media and technologies to counter corruption, they are also reshaping their interactions with those who are corrupt, those institutional actors that should tackle those who are corrupt, and the potential allies that could sustain them. Embedding digital media and technologies in struggles to increase transparency, integrity, and accountability has a robust performative role not just for activists but in the whole anti-corruption realm. Indeed, digital media and technologies carry with them a plurality of interactions amongst a number of social actors.

Second, activists who decide to embed digital media and technologies in their anti-corruption efforts also deliberately experiment with the appropriation of older or newer technologies, hence experiencing their material constraints and understanding what they can bring with them as opportunities for countering corruption. In other words, they interact with the materiality of the technological elements they employ. While doing this, they select, discard, change, or accept what such elements offer them regarding possibilities for actions. From this perspective, when activists design, create, and employ digital media to counter corruption, they are also embedding in their individual and collective actions a material layer of digital technologies that becomes yet another essential element, when not an actor in itself in some cases, of the broader architecture of their anti-corruption initiatives.

Third, all kinds of digital media and technologies, including those used to counter corruption and promote integrity, come with various imaginaries that go beyond their material dimension. As mentioned above, the technical specifics of each digital technology are undoubtedly crucial for activists, such as those that allow the protection of total anonymity when someone wants to denounce corrupt behaviour. Nevertheless, there is more than that: when activists, often working with software developers, start thinking about designing reliable digital media platforms or applications, they also imagine a different role for citizens in society. By creating or employing digital media and technologies to counter corruption, therefore, activists are also setting in motion a series of interactions to counter corruption. Such interactions redefine what citizens should do to address corruption through digital media and technologies and, extending this beyond individual efforts, how political systems should change to accommodate new forms of participation. From this perspective, the employment of digital media and technologies to counter corruption comes with a strong symbolic dimension related to the imagination of what could be next and a normative aspect of how things should be to decrease corruption.
Digital media and technologies in grassroots struggles against corruption

Taken together, these three points suggest looking at digital media and technologies from a dynamic perspective, so that we can also appreciate how they come into being and how they, while coming into being, set in motion intricate processes that might change anti-corruption activists, the civil society organisations some of them work for, and the overall anti-corruption sector from the grassroots. In so doing, it is possible to recognise that it is never digital media and technologies alone that produces some outcomes related to corruption, but the multifaceted network of interactions that sustain their creation, development, and employment. Producing knowledge on such a network of interactions is the only way to assess how digital media and technologies have an impact on corruption itself. In this regard, there are at least three relevant dimensions that inform anti-corruption seen as a practice in which a wide array of activities intertwine, including those connected to digital media and technologies: a social dimension related to the interactions amongst a wide range of social actors; a material dimension, related to the digital technologies employed to counter corruption and their affordances; a symbolic dimension, connected to the imagination of how a good citizen should counter corruption and what type of institutional arrangements should be in place in political systems to make this possible and practical.

To capture these aspects, this volume puts forward a novel concept that works as a heuristic to grasp the multifaceted dimension of digital media and technologies in the framework of the struggle against corruption. This is the concept of Anti-Corruption Technologies considered as socio-technical assemblages whose ultimate and more abstract scope is to address the corruption issue and whose more immediate and concrete aim is to address various types of corruption and related behaviours, ranging from petty corruption to grand corruption. As will be clearer in the next section, ACTs encompass a variety of elements, including non-human actors like algorithms, and are integrated into diverse anti-corruption activities that also address corruption in more indirect ways. While ACTs can well be created outside the realm of grassroots politics, this chapter and this volume will primarily discuss ACTs that strongly connect with the collective actions of civil society associations and social movement organisations. In what follows, and building on the preliminary reflections presented above, I discuss more at length the three main dimensions of ACTs and their qualities.

THE MATERIAL, SYMBOLIC, AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF ANTI-CORRUPTION TECHNOLOGIES

As socio-technical assemblages, ACTs are not a given. They are ongoing projects that come into existence through interactions among various elements,
which are both human and non-human and are continuously evolving. Indeed, as socio-technical assemblages, ACTs are not just things but an ensemble of various symbolic, material, and social elements that come together when activists decide to embed digital media and technologies in their anti-corruption practices.

First, there are material objects and infrastructures of which ACTs are made. Indeed, while ACTs revolve around a core digital media and technologies, most of the time, other digital media and technologies can come into play, giving rise to a multi-layered technological infrastructure that sustains ACTs. For instance, while some ACTs mainly rely on a whistleblowing platform, there might be other digital media that are attached to that, including a social media platform, to spread the world about whistleblowing activities and instant messaging apps to interact with journalists interested in the leaks. Overall, the type of technological infrastructure that activists and civil society organisations decide to develop to gather, transform, and share information about corruption take many shapes. Some technological infrastructures have a noticeable level of sophistication: in some specific cases, low-tech infrastructures are best suited to gather information on corruption and, even more importantly, its effects. In addition, some technological infrastructures are developed by anti-corruption activists and their organisations, who therefore have a high degree of control over the digital media they use. In other cases, the technological infrastructure may be developed by other types of actors, such as well-established companies or emerging start-ups, and thus originate outside anti-corruption activist circles. In this case, anti-corruption activists and their movement organisations have a low degree of control over the digital media and technologies they use. The commercial social media platforms that activists employ to create communities of citizens concerned about corruption are typical examples of this. In this regard, some ACTs value their users’ privacy and security to a great extent, like in the case of whistleblowing platforms that allow the anonymous leaking of sensitive information, which involves corruption. Others, instead, hardly grant any security to their users, also because they were not constructed having in mind anti-corruption efforts and similar collective actions in the first place, like for instance commercial social media platforms. Overall, the material layer of ACTs also includes the technological affordances that each specific form of ACTs grants to its users: which actions are enabled, and which are not, for instance, partially influence how activists engage in collective actions against corruption.

Second, there are symbolic elements that have a relevant role in anti-corruption initiatives to which ACTs are tied. In this case, imaginaries connect to both the contentious issue at stake, corruption, how it can be faced,
the means through which it can be faced, that is, various digital (and, sometimes, non-digital) media and technologies, and what citizens can do to counter it. ACTs embed imaginaries related to different forms of corruption – varying according to the type, sector, level, and direction of corruption (Heywood, 2017); they are invented and employed by both governmental institutions and civil society organisations, and work at distinct levels, from the regional to the national and even the transnational. Even more importantly, ACTs combine a general understanding of corruption (its causes, effects, and ways to curb it) with a specific interpretation of what needs to be done about the specific corruption they want to address. In this way, ACTs have a global and a local dimension simultaneously, which also explains why some ACTs were able to spread, albeit with varying fortune, from one continent to another. Regarding digital media and technologies, the imaginaries might also vary and span from the over-enthusiastic embracement of one digital media platform to more sceptical viewpoints on digital media’s actual ability to support the struggle against corruption. In short, ACTs, as a socio-technical assemblage, are ordered around and embody in their elements a series of beliefs on what corruption and anti-corruption are, a series of imagined possibilities for anti-corruption actions through the involvement of citizens, and a series of understanding on the potentials of digital media and technologies for the struggle against corruption. The actors involved in designing, creating, and employing ACTs elaborate these beliefs, possibilities, and understandings, which can be further refined and reshaped through the encounters between the human actors and the technologies they use to counter corruption. Far from being homogenous, these imaginaries often result from negotiations amongst actors whose standing within ACTs is very different regarding their beliefs, imagined possibilities for anti-corruption actions, and understandings.

Third, there are social interactions that sustain the creation of ACTs in anti-corruption practices. While the intertwining of symbolic and material elements constitutes ACTs, their coming into being is also interlaced with a broad range of social interactions among several actors, which might be individual or collective, human, and non-human. From this viewpoint, ACTs are constructed through dense yet fluid social interaction that changes over time, hence rendering ACTs an ever-evolving socio-technical assemblage that is not just situated in a specific space (be it local, global, or a combination of the two), but also in a specific time. Anti-corruption activists, software developers, public officials, victims of corruption, and other stakeholders are just a few of the many actors usually involved in creating, maintaining, and using ACTs. For an ACT to be designed, developed, and eventually widely used in societies, social interactions among all these social actors are vital. Furthermore, this is true not just at the ideation stage of any given ACT: to sustain the existence and actual employment of ACTs beyond the short-term is often critical,
especially when the ACTs in point are not simply meant to mobilise people for a specific campaign but to become a more stable anti-corruption tool.

In short, to understand ACTs and their role in the hands of anti-corruption activists and movement organisations, it is vital to appreciate these three types of elements (symbolic, material, and social) as well as their constitutive interconnections in anti-corruption practices. As said above, corruption is a global social problem that can be explained through some recurrent mechanisms and processes worldwide. Similarly, anti-corruption efforts share some traits, especially when employing similar, if not the same, digital media and technologies although being situated in different parts of the world. Nevertheless, it is also true that grassroots anti-corruption collective actions emerge at the interconnection of specific activists’ imaginaries, the material aspects of the technologies that they create or employ, and the social interactions of a diverse ensemble of social actors. As such, ACTs are frequently tied to a specific country context, a particular political culture, and come with a series of beliefs, values, and understandings about corruption and how digital media and technologies can help them counter it. Therefore, ACTs can be understood better if their context is also taken into consideration. Despite some attempts at the transnational diffusion of ACTs, it is impossible to speak about the existence of a universal way to employ digital media and technologies to counter corruption from the grassroots. On the contrary, there is a flourishing of many initiatives across the globe that might even resemble one another but are often different in at least some respects. Knowing more about these differences is the first step towards a deeper appreciation of how digital media and technologies support the struggle against corruption, but also to be able to consider the challenges that emerge between the folds of the configurations of the material, symbolic, and social elements that characterise ACTs. These challenges are often essential and not effortless for activists to deal with: they need to be taken into account to develop a realistic understanding of the different facets of ACTs to understand why they reach (or not) their anti-corruption scopes. From this perspective, therefore, ACTs as a heuristic device also allow for a deeper understanding of the instrumental dimension that characterises the employment of digital media and technologies to counter corruption. In the next section, I propose a typology of ACTs that considers the overall objectives of ACTs combining them with the material, symbolic, and social dimensions discussed above.

THREE TYPES OF ANTI-CORRUPTION TECHNOLOGIES

The inclusion of digital media and technologies in anti-corruption efforts from the grassroots might take different roads: activists employ digital media and
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...technologies for many purposes because corruption is a multifaceted contentious issue that can be tackled at different levels and from different angles. That said, despite the multiple employments of digital media and technologies to counter corruption, it is possible to find three broad scopes that activists seek to reach through the support of digital media: expose corruption in societies, organise mobilisations against corruption, and enhance citizens’ participation in the policy-making cycle. While the three might undoubtedly be linked, they are frequently three different endeavours, with the latter seeing activists focused on developing novel digital channels for grassroots participation, the one in the middle targeting public opinion to change their views on corruption and, possibly, mobilise it, and the former seeing activists focused on producing information about corruption that would otherwise remain somehow hidden from the public view.

Table 1.1 singles out the different material, symbolic, and social elements of ACTs. Although the variations within each of these three elements might be many, the table seeks to capture the most relevant ones. When considering the symbolic dimension, ACTs employed to expose corruption and organise mobilisations might come with an understanding of anti-corruption that might be more or less confrontational towards power holders and the corrupted. Likewise, those ACTs employed to sustain participation might be tied to an understanding of anti-corruption that is more or less interventionist: in the case of the former, citizens acquire a central role in proposing change at the policy level; in the case of the latter, instead, citizens mostly engage in imagining novel ideas to counter corruption. Shifting to the material elements, in all three types of ACTs there are many instances of them that are created, in some cases almost from scratch, within the civil society and social movement milieu: these are hence dedicated from the very beginning to the cause for which they have been created. On the contrary, some ACTs heavily revolve around the employment of already existing digital media and technologies that have been invented for other reasons and that anti-corruption activists do not control. This is the case with the ubiquitous social media platforms, which are used across the board to expose corruption, organise anti-corruption protests and mobilisations, and even support the participation of citizens in policy-making to reduce corruption. As for the social elements, the most relevant and quite evident difference is related to the social actors’ degree of collectiveness: in all ACTs we indeed find both collective actors, some of which are well-established and resourceful civil society organizations, but also individual actors, and most prominently citizens who are not necessarily tied to any civil society organisation while at the same time being concerned by corruption and hence willing to do their bit in countering it, as individuals.

As already stated above, the configurations of the different elements are undoubtedly many, and Table 1.1 does not aim to capture all of them. It...
Table 1.1 A typology of anti-corruption technologies and their dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall scope</th>
<th>Symbolic Dimension</th>
<th>Material Dimension</th>
<th>Social Dimension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Increase Awareness</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less confrontational</td>
<td><em>anti-corruption as monitoring</em></td>
<td>Dedicated</td>
<td>Collective actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>power holders; digital media as</td>
<td>crowdsourced web-based platforms;</td>
<td>civil society organisations;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>enablers of data gathering; citizens</td>
<td>whistleblowing platforms; algorithms</td>
<td>social movement organisations;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as discoverers of corruption</td>
<td>AI-based applications</td>
<td>informal activist groups;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More confrontational</td>
<td><em>anti-corruption as revealing</em></td>
<td>Not dedicated</td>
<td>Individual actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hidden information; digital media</td>
<td>social media platforms</td>
<td>software developers;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as enablers of leaks; citizens as</td>
<td></td>
<td>concerned citizens;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sources of information</td>
<td></td>
<td>affected by corruption.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Organise Mobilisation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Less confrontational</td>
<td><em>anti-corruption as expressing</em></td>
<td>Dedicated</td>
<td>Collective actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>discontent; digital media as spaces</td>
<td>campaign websites; algorithms, chatbots</td>
<td>civil society organisations;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for discussing concerns; citizens</td>
<td>and other AI-based applications</td>
<td>social movement organisations;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as sharers of discontent</td>
<td></td>
<td>informal activist groups;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More confrontational</td>
<td><em>anti-corruption as conflicting</em></td>
<td>Not dedicated</td>
<td>Individual actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>with power holders; digital media</td>
<td>e-petition platforms, social media</td>
<td>software developers;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as organisers of discontent; citizens</td>
<td>platforms, instant messaging app</td>
<td>concerned citizens;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as account-holders</td>
<td></td>
<td>affected by corruption.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sustain Participation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Less interventionist</td>
<td><em>anti-corruption as reimagining</em></td>
<td>Dedicated</td>
<td>Collective actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>power structures; digital media</td>
<td>online deliberation platforms</td>
<td>civil society organisations;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as spaces for imagination; citizens</td>
<td></td>
<td>social movement organisations;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>as carriers of ideas</td>
<td></td>
<td>informal activist groups;</td>
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<tr>
<td>More interventionist</td>
<td><em>anti-corruption as participating</em></td>
<td>Not dedicated</td>
<td>Individual actors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in policy-making, digital media</td>
<td>social media platforms, instant</td>
<td>software developers;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>as spaces for deliberation; citizens</td>
<td>messaging app</td>
<td>concerned citizens</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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presents the most relevant variations of each of the three dimensions of ACTs and it leaves it to the rest of this volume to bring some potential configurations to life by discussing empirical data collected on various types of ACTs. As will become apparent in the remainder of this volume, outlining such typology and evoking the existence of types of ACTs is not a futile exercise in categorisation. Being able to grasp which material, symbolic, and social elements are at stake in a given ACT, and how they combine with each other, is a necessary precondition to fully understand the frictions that can cross ACTs and the misunderstandings that might arise, also among the social actors that support their creation. Additionally, it helps us comprehend the challenges that anti-corruption activists might have to face beyond the short-term and the overall potential outcomes they might achieve, also at the more general societal level. While I will go back to this discussion in the final chapter of the volume, in the next and final section of this chapter, I present the main contents of this volume which, taken together, impart a multifaceted picture of what ACTs are across the world and reveal their variations considering the combination of the symbolic, material, and social elements that constitute ACTs.

OUTLINE OF THE VOLUME

The volume includes three parts, each emphasising a different aspect of digital media and technologies in the framework of anti-corruption from the grassroots. The first part of the volume considers the situated nature of ACTs. As stressed above, ACTs come with material, symbolic, and social elements. While the material elements are digital technologies that might be widely available in many parts of the globe, the social actors that interact with them are not, and so are not how they consider corruption, imagine anti-corruption, and evaluate the usefulness of digital media and technologies to sustain their struggles. In a nutshell, the chapters included in the first part of the volume explore, hence, the relationship between the broader context, the situation of the anti-corruption initiative, and the ACTs that sustain it in three different countries.

In Chapter 2, Fernanda Odilla evaluates how digital technologies have been used in eight anti-corruption campaigns and initiatives in Brazil from the late 1990s to the mid-2010s. She shows how developing a longitudinal investigation of civil society organisations’ employment of digital technologies to counter corruption can deconstruct the idea that there is a linear interconnection between the emergence of newer digital technologies and how activists organise anti-corruption campaigns and initiatives. In short, Fernanda Odilla illustrates how the evolution, across time, of digital technologies and social movement organisations can happen according to three different patterns: at times coevolving and hence even influencing each other, sometimes converg-
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ing on certain occasions like the organisation of anti-corruption initiatives, and finally simply coexisting side-by-side with social movement organisations and activists deciding not to take advantage of the available digital technologies. Far from being casual, the coevolution of social movements and digital technologies happens thanks to at least two specific factors that go hand in hand: activists’ digital literacy and their openness towards technological innovation. Without these two factors, the other two patterns are more likely.

In Chapter 3, Germán Bidegain discusses anti-corruption from the grassroots in Uruguay, where corruption is not considered a relevant issue and, also as a consequence, civil society organisations that address this social problem are relatively scarce and, undoubtedly, quite small in their size. Germán Bidegain focuses on one of these few civil society organisations, one of the most relevant ones, *Uruguay Trasparente*, which does not exploit digital media to foster and sustain its activities. He reflects on how and why civil society and social movement organisations decide not to engage with digital media, assigning them a marginal role. Interestingly, the reason for this is not the need for more Internet availability in the country since Uruguay is one of the best performers in Latin America in this regard. Instead, some social elements of ACTs play a relevant role in determining whether and how civil society organisations would put digital media at centre stage: the type of membership, its organisational structures, and the available resources for the civil society organisation seem to be relevant factors to be taken into consideration. Indeed, the chapter also shows that the only notable engagement with digital media happened when *Uruguay Trasparente* collaborated with other social actors that shared their resources, including their technological skills, to develop an interactive website designed to ease the visualisation of electoral finance transactions and, hence, made clear the relationship between political parties in the country and their donors.

Finally, in Chapter 4, Ester Sigillò discusses the role of digital media in broad struggles against corruption in authoritarian regimes through the examples of Algeria and Tunisia. Both countries experienced protests that had the ultimate aim of fostering a process of democratisation while at the same time tackling the corruption of their respective political elites. More specifically, the chapter considers the role that digital media had in supporting the mobilisations as well as the period that immediately followed them, in which a difficult and, at times, fragile transition towards democracy started, also thanks to these mobilisations. In doing so, the chapter illustrates how activists can use digital media to support large-scale protests against the corruption of political elites in authoritarian regimes and how digital media also acquires different roles according to the stage of protest. Indeed, both in Tunisia and Algeria, social media platforms were relevant during the first moments of the mobilisations: they sustained activists’ efforts in broadening citizens’ participation in the
street demonstrations they organised almost daily. The chapter also shows that, after the initial and unitary moments of protest, the many civil society actors involved took different, when not separate, roads when it came to interpreting the mobilisations themselves, their meaning, and objectives. Digital media made this process of differentiation even more explicit. Finally, the chapter discusses what happens in the aftermath of mobilisations, illustrating how ACTs might follow different trajectories according to how anti-corruption movements evolve.

The second part of the volume presents four anti-corruption initiatives in which civil society organisations designed, developed, and employed different types of ACTs to counter corruption from the grassroots: dynamic websites that allow for the anonymous crowdsourcing of information about corruption in India; online collaborative platforms that allow for the co-creation of policy proposals hence increasing citizens’ agency on the input side of politics in Estonia; advanced whistleblowing platforms to leak relevant information about corruption in Italy; and a website to sustain the monitoring of electoral corruption in Colombia. Taken together, the four chapters reveal the diverse paths that civil society organisations might take when it comes to digital media and technologies involvement in the fight against corruption, as well as how these paths are anchored in a diverse range of country contexts. However, they also do something more: when reconstructing how each ACT came into being, the shape it took and what happened once people began to employ it, the chapters also provide insights about how the material, symbolic, and social elements of ACTs combine. In other words, they tell stories of how particular symbolic and social elements weld, sometimes almost imperceptibly, with the more concrete elements of technology to create socio-technical assemblages that might even escape the intentions of their creators.

In Chapter 5, Anwesha Chakraborty explores a web-based platform that allows citizens to report whether or not they paid a tangent to a public servant: this is I Paid a Bribe (IPAB), launched in India in 2010 and soon afterwards greeted with enthusiasm in the anti-corruption sector, even at the international level: in 2017, it won the anti-corruption innovation award of the Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption Centre and received widespread online media coverage. This case study shows how relevant the values of civil society organisations are in shaping ACTs: IPAB seems to rest on a strong technomoral political ethos, according to which the civil society organisation employs digital technologies to do good in societies and asks citizens to do the same by denouncing the payments of bribes. The context in which all this happens matters and gives a further nuance to the web-based platform and its intrinsic moral values. The chapter argues that in a country like India, with rampant corruption that is not always recognised as a malaise and at the same time with a strong history of anti-corruption struggles, the use of digital media according to a technomoral
ethos might bring unexpected results. The dispersed crowd of citizens who decided to denounce that they paid a bribe in a public office frequently did so not simply to prove to themselves that they were conscientious citizens but rather to release their sense of guilt through the public, despite anonymous confession. The chapter hence shows that users are also relevant social actors in the development of ACTs since they interpret the digital technologies they employ in ways which exceed the initial purposes of the civil society organisation.

In Chapter 6, Oksana Huss discusses how digital technologies became central in overcoming a deep political crisis due to a corruption scandal brought to light in 2012 in Estonia, a country usually perceived as lowly corrupted. Such a crisis questioned the social contract between the Estonian citizens, who were also disappointed by how the political elites dealt with the corruption scandal and the State. The chapter shows how such discontent gave rise to a series of protests that ended in the creation of the so-called People’s Assembly, which brought to the fore some deliberative and participatory democracy practices that were then incorporated into the process of creating the e-petition platform Estonian Citizens’ Initiative Portal (ECIP) rahvaalgatus.ee. More specifically, practices like crowdsourced decision-making in the spirit of co-creation and values like inclusivity to reinforce argument-based deliberation were taken into serious account when developing the e-petition platform. They were translated into specific technological affordances for collaboration and deliberation. Overall, the chapter casts light on the combination of material and symbolic elements within this form of ACT, with the latter influencing the former. That said, the chapter also discusses how, once in place, the e-petition platform underwent some changes concerning how citizens could interact with it that resulted from the actual engagement with the e-petition platform. In this case, therefore, the chapter shows that the social elements, i.e., citizen interactions within the platform, had a relevant role in reshaping the material elements of the ACTs.

In Chapter 7, Philip di Salvo presents yet another type of ACT very common in the anti-corruption sector: whistleblowing platforms. Although such online services might be used for other reasons than to fight corruption, they frequently play an essential role in revealing potential corruption scandals thanks to citizens that decide to blow the whistle, that is to say, to unveil some malpractices related to the realm of corrupt behaviours they know about often through the support of the related documentation. Of course, whistleblowers existed in societies well before the diffusion of digital media. However, as the chapter also points out, the availability of digital technologies made whistleblowing practices much more secure than in the past, when they mostly happened in the so-called offline world. The chapter goes in-depth into one specific case study, the development of the ALAC-Allerta Anticorrut
platform in Italy from 2014 onwards, to explain how whistleblowing platforms are created, according to which rationale and criteria, and how the value of security is embedded in the features of such platforms in a scalable and layered manner. While it is always possible for whistleblowers to interact with the platform securely, they also have the opportunity to increase their protection because the platform can be used, for instance, through a Tor browser, which makes it impossible to know the IP address of the whistleblower. At the same time, the whistleblowing platform might become more secure not through the employment of sophisticated digital technologies but through some operational arrangements related to how whistleblowers can interact with the platform. From this perspective, the chapter speaks about the presence of operational security achieved through a simple online form whistleblowers can fill in with relevant information about the context in which the whistleblowing activity is happening to understand better the risks and possible outcomes of the information leak.

In Chapter 8, Manoel Gehrke discusses how the civil society organisation Mission of Electoral Observation monitors electoral corruption in Colombia through a twofold strategy that involves offline and online observations of the electoral moment. The chapter explains that electoral corruption is difficult to detect only through observers. While acts of intimidation around the ballot boxes are pretty easy to see, practices like casting a vote in exchange for favours are much more difficult to emerge. For this reason, citizens’ support in denouncing what happens before elections is a relevant complementary strategy, especially in Colombia, where electoral corruption and related crimes are quite spread across the country. Recognising this need and taking advantage of the opportunities offered by digital media, the Mission of Electoral Observation decided to create a platform allowing citizens to denounce electoral corruption cases. Born as an entirely offline initiative devoted to monitoring elections in Colombia, the civil society organisation enriched its repertoire of contention related to corruption with a novel opportunity for citizen engagement. In 2011, it created the platform Pilas con el Voto, which allows citizens to upload multi-media information about irregularities concerning the elections either in a non-anonymous or anonymous manner, the latter being particularly important in those regions of Colombia which are not entirely under the control of the State. The chapter briefly describes the platform and then tackles more at length a relevant topic when it comes to ACTs, which is the effects they produce once they are released and then actually employed by citizens. Indeed, ACTs are dynamic socio-technical assemblages that might alter the material, symbolic, and social elements that sustain them in the first place. In this case, the chapter shows that creating the platform Pilas con el Voto had a spillover effect since, in 2013, the Ministry of Interior decided to create a similar platform available to citizens. At the same time, its overall reach of Colombian
The third part of the volume deals with the central role that data has in the struggle against corruption, and it does that considering civil society organisations that decided to employ digital media to focus, in an explicit manner, on the gathering, polishing, curation, and visualisation of data that might hint to corruption or related issues. It is true, of course, that other chapters in this volume also revolve around anti-corruption initiatives that gather data through crowdsourcing information from citizens, as it happens in the case of IPAB, discussed in Chapter 5. However, the chapters in the third part of the volume directly engage with specific issues related to the creation of technological infrastructures for gathering such data and the consequences of such choices at the level of civil society organisations’ priorities, objectives, and outcomes.

In Chapter 9, Alice Fubini focuses on the case of Openpolis. This Italian civil society organisation designs and develops a good wealth of data-driven web platforms to make existing data on public administration, governmental agencies, and other public bodies available online in a curated and accessible manner. The chapter explains that Openpolis does not simply put data curation and visualisation at the centre stage since it is also actively producing its technological infrastructure to smoothly make its data-related practices possible. Therefore, Openpolis accomplishes its watchdog function also through the autonomous development of its data-driven technologies. Then, when dealing with data, it employs an approach similar to the journalistic one, even arriving at the point of producing informative reports based on the data it gathers and curates. This happens, the chapter argues, also because simply making data available proved not to be a guarantee to have journalists writing stories based on them. Openpolis hence positions itself as a reliable data source for other social actors than journalists, who might be interested in delving into specific issues in the broad realm of corruption. Drawing on these characteristics, the chapter then proposes the concept of informative activism as a heuristic to understand better civil society organisations like Openpolis, which is neither only engaged in data activism nor fully engaged with data journalism: it is a combination of the two, and this makes the experience of Openpolis a hybrid showing that to counter corruption the employment of digital media and technologies alone is not enough.

In Chapter 10, Dale Mineshima-Lowe presents the multifaceted anti-corruption initiative Transparency Watch developed in North Macedonia by the national chapter of Transparency International that combines: a platform based on the open source Ushahidi developed to let citizens denounce corruption anonymously; two apps for smartphones to reach the same scope; and the related Facebook group. The chapter focuses on the decision-making process within Transparency Watch when considering designing and develop-
ing such a multi-platform strategy that heavily relies on gathering and transforming data about potentially corrupt behaviours in the country. The chapter discusses the anti-corruption initiative from the perspective of data-activism, emphasising not so much the description of the resulting data-related practices, but rather the myriad of choices that have been made along the way of its creation, precisely concerning data. In analysing the case study, the chapter suggests that ACTs that heavily rely on data consider and hence take a decision on at least three relevant aspects: how to gather data on corruption thanks to citizens; how to check the data reliability; and how to visualise data to make the information they carry with them accessible to the broader public. Overall, the initiative illustrates very well that ACTs that are more openly related to data activism, such as Transparency Watch, might not heavily revolve around just one type of digital media and technologies since the production, curation and dissemination of data requires the initiative to rely on a variety of technologies, not necessarily all of them digital.

In Chapter 11, Julia Forjan, Nils Köbis, and Christopher Starke tackle an emergent digital technology that governments, scholars, and civil society organisations are experimenting with to counter corruption: Artificial Intelligence (AI). After having defined AI, they illustrate some recent attempts to use it to predict corrupt behaviours at the regional, national, and transnational levels. In so doing, the chapter claims that anti-corruption is becoming increasingly a predictive endeavour rather than a purely reactive matter: mainly thanks to the use of machine learning techniques applied to large amounts of data from public administrations and other relevant bodies, today it is possible to single out specific behavioural patterns that might be interpreted as red flags related to corruption. The chapter then stresses that civil society organisations also experiment with AI to counter corruption and discusses the challenges and opportunities of doing so from the viewpoint of anti-corruption practitioners engaged in or having been involved in these experimentations. From this viewpoint, the chapter offers encompassing reflections on the implications of the material elements that are included in the most high-tech forms of ACTs to date, also discussing at length how the employment of AI-based technologies is deeply tied to the availability of massive amounts of high-quality data to be employed to understand whether corruption happened, or will happen, in a specific sector. The presence of such data seems to be a relevant precondition that civil society organisations have to take into account when thinking of moving their experimentation further with AI in the field of anti-corruption.

The last chapter of the volume seeks to connect the many insights that each of the previous empirical chapters provided about the employment of digital media in grassroots struggles against corruption. It does so through the lens of ACTs and considering, in particular, two main aspects. At the more theoretical level, the chapter discusses how activists, civil society organisations, social
Digital media and grassroots anti-corruption

movements, and citizens’ employment of digital media to counter corruption bring about a rethinking of what democracy should look like and what it means to be a good citizen who plays their part in seeking to achieve more transparency, better integrity, and broader accountability. At the more empirical level, the chapter considers the main points of attention and the related challenges that ACTs bring with them: from the sustainability of anti-corruption initiatives to the need to acquire and manage new technological skills to deal with digital media, the chapter takes stock of the knowledge produced across the volume and suggests some ways forward to ingrain digital media and technologies in grassroots anti-corruption efforts in a sustainable manner.

NOTE

1. In this volume, the term ‘digital media’ is employed in an encompassing manner and refers to the whole range of digital devices (i.e., smartphones, tablets), platforms (i.e., social media platforms, whistleblowing platforms), services (i.e., informational websites, open data portals, AI-based chatbots), and applications (i.e., instant messaging applications, video conference applications) currently employed in societies at large.

REFERENCES


Digital media and technologies in grassroots struggles against corruption


PART I

Contexts
2. From concerned citizens to civic bots: The bottom-up fight against corruption in Brazil from a longitudinal perspective

Fernanda Odilla

INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, Brazil has witnessed concerned citizens engaging in citizenship audits, organising social observatories, delivering training for using open data, pressuring for better governmental transparency, developing digital platforms and, more recently, using 'civic bots' (some of them based on artificial intelligence (AI) technology) to hold governments and politicians accountable. In this period, civil society also deployed more traditional and contentious public pressure tactics and e-tactics, such as street demonstrations, advocacy, e-petitions, uploading hashtags, and overflowing public officials’ email boxes to mobilise people and influence the policy-making process in an attempt to improve anti-corruption and accountability mechanisms. By providing an overview of these fertile, creative, and heterogeneous anti-corruption and pro-accountability civil society initiatives emerging since the late 1990s in Brazil, this chapter explores how the paths of digital technologies and anti-corruption civil society initiatives have developed and crossed in the struggle for more transparency and integrity, and less corruption.

Considering the increasing use of the internet, consumption of electronic devices, and development of a wide range of digital data and tools, it is expected that the evolution of digital technologies goes hand in hand with anti-corruption initiatives. There is this overall sense that activists in general make a natural transition to more digital practices across time considering the stages of the web evolution, i.e., from the era where internet users were merely spectators (Web 1.0) to the one where they became participants (Web 2.0), to what is expected to be Web 3.0 in which cooperation among users may prevail (O’Reilly, 2005; Markoff, 2006; Barassi & Treré, 2012). To critically challenge this argument and claim that digital technologies and anti-corruption
may follow different patterns of interplay, this chapter explores how the role of digital technologies has evolved in grassroots anti-corruption efforts over the years. Accordingly, it uses a longitudinal approach that allows us to contrast different anti-corruption mobilisations in Brazil. The country offers the perfect scene to look at the recent past and trace the history of anti-corruption collective actions that involve digital technologies in their different forms. This is because Brazil has seen many anti-corruption initiatives emerging since the late 1990s and early 2000s, a period that coincides with the rapid growth of internet usage in the country. It is true that the internet and mobile phones had arrived in Brazil years earlier (in the 1980s and 1990, respectively) but it was in 1998, when the Brazilian telecommunications sector was privatised, that the number of internet users started increasing rapidly and mobile phones spread (Pedrozo, 2013).

Identifying existing non-linear patterns of interaction between anti-corruption and digital technologies is crucial to critically assess the role of technology in curbing corruption. Although digital technologies are considered important resources for social movements, and digital tools have been increasingly used by activists to produce and share all sorts of content, the literature on social movements tells us that these digital tools have not always been used more, better, or more innovatively as technology evolved (von Bülow et al., 2019; Barassi & Treré, 2012). To increase the chances of achieving their goals, some actors keep combining offline and online repertoires of action, as observed in the two anti-corruption campaigns in Brazil that became legislative bills through popular petitions, which included the employment of digital technologies to support activists in impacting policy making (Mattoni & Odilla, 2021). Other actors use Web 2.0 platforms with the mindsets and purposes of the Web 1.0, while others prefer to focus on just one single platform, as was observed in the digital activist practices deployed by Italian and Chilean student movements, respectively (Barassi & Treré, 2012; von Bülow, 2018).

These lessons from social movement scholarship may be valuable for anti-corruption studies. Despite the great expectations of using digital technology as an anti-corruption tool, there is still little in-depth analysis based on empirical evidence to assess their development, use, and impact. Although this incipient field of study has offered mainly brief descriptions of initiatives across the globe, reflections on the limitations, pitfalls, and perils of using digital technologies as anti-corruption tools are increasing (see Kukutschka, 2016; Kossow & Kukutschka, 2017; Adam & Fazekas, 2021; Kossow, 2020; Mattoni, 2021; Köbis et al., 2022; Odilla, 2023). This is particularly the case in bottom-up initiatives. Civil society tools, such as whistleblowing platforms, crowdsourcing applications to collect reports on corruption, and AI-based technology to control public procurement and other public expenditures, for example, often seize public attention when they are launched. However, as
stressed by Kukutschka (2016, p. 3), ‘many of these tools go largely dormant or end up disappearing, leaving old media reports and inactive Facebook or Twitter accounts as the only evidence of their existence.’ Indeed, we still lack robust documentation and analysis on this issue, as well as on cases of enduring initiatives and their digital practices. In an attempt to help fill this gap, this chapter assesses bottom-up anti-corruption initiatives intertwined with digital technologies that have been rapidly developing through the years.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, it theorises on potential roles digital technologies have in grassroots anti-corruption fights, using Mattoni’s (2021) analysis of how the predominant views of corruption as a principal-agent problem, or as a collective action problem, may both assist activists and their digital practices. By combining the literature on social movements and (anti-) corruption, the theoretical framework is presented to argue that there may be different paths for digital technologies and anti-corruption initiatives, rather than an increasing evolution to more digital initiatives. On the one hand, this is because developing and using digital technologies to counter corruption requires specific skills, competencies, and access to information and technology itself. Hence, it entails human, financial, and technological resources that can be limiting. On the other hand, digital practices can be considered a part of a broader repertoire of action and communication, and, therefore, should not be analysed in isolation, as noted by von Bülow et al. (2019) and Mattoni and Odilla (2021).

Second, the research design is detailed. The chapter relies on qualitative research, based on interviews, participant observation on social media, and document analysis. The reader will find a retrospective longitudinal analysis that draws on extensive data gathered on eight case studies (key anti-corruption civil society initiatives that emerged from 1999 to 2016) to better analyse the changes in the past two decades and identify patterns within dynamic processes regarding the development and use of digital technologies in the anti-corruption fight. Following that, empirical evidence is presented with a brief chronological history of anti-corruption struggles and the use (or not) of digital technology by these anti-corruption initiatives. The findings suggest a highly asymmetric online presence, i.e., the use of digital technologies by anti-corruption initiatives and their respective activists varies in intensity and magnitude and is not always aligned with technological advances. Although the coevolution of some anti-corruption efforts and digital media practices could be observed, there are others whose practices diverge from and are not reflected by the expected linear web development. Some groups still rely on the features of Web 1.0 due to their lack of resources, and some value less automated and even offline actions. This chapter concludes that to better understand the relationship between digital technologies and anti-corruption initiatives from the grassroots, it is also important to pay attention to the
agency, goals, and views on anti-corruption strategies of those engaging in this fight as well as to their digital literacy and openness to digital innovation.

THE USE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN ANTI-CORRUPTION MOBILISATIONS: AN INTERSECTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Interventions to curb corruption have been following two main theoretical approaches, sometimes presented as competing theoretical frameworks: principal-agent (Klitgaard, 1988; Rose-Ackerman, 1978) and the collective action problem (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015; Persson et al., 2013). In the principal-agent model, the main conflict exists when the agent has more information than the principal and uses this prerogative to put across their interests, or to disregard the collective interest that is normally embodied by the principal. Configuration may vary depending on the unit of analysis, but agents can be, for example, public officials, and principals can be citizens. Hence, this theoretical framework assumes that an act of corruption is a calculated decision made by agents to maximise private benefits at the expense of the principals, who often cannot monitor those acting on their behalf (Rose-Ackerman, 1978). Accordingly, institutional flaws and weak top-down and bottom-up controls are considered ways of creating opportunities for corruption. In turn, corruption as a collective action problem is seen as a result of a societal coordination game between individuals in which someone is more likely to be corrupt in a situation where corruption is already perceived to a high degree or is widely experienced (Gingerich et al., 2015). According to the collective action theoretical framework, in an environment where systemic corruption prevails, acts of corruption are considered normal or the expected norm; they are socially acceptable, or even the rule (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). Within this approach, some scholars defend the need to establish a new equilibrium of social and economic exchange, what Bo Rothstein (2011) named the ‘big-bang’ type of change, to oppose corrupt practices.

Under these two theoretical approaches, digital technologies are expected to play two key roles in grassroots anti-corruption initiatives, as Mattoni (2021) detailed. To her, in line with the principal-agent framework, digital technologies would assist not only activists but also ordinary citizens to take more proactive roles in, for example, monitoring and reporting incidents of corruption or even participating in policy-making processes to improve anti-corruption mechanisms. More social control may increase the risks of being caught and punished, reducing incentives and opportunities for agents to engage in acts of corruption. If corruption is seen strictly as a collective action problem, digital technologies may support activists’ work to impact public scrutiny and increase public awareness in an attempt to change the normative understanding
of what corruption is and to raise attention to all the damage it causes to society (Mattoni, 2021). In this case, digital technologies may help to react to corrupt states of affairs by, for example, organising street demonstrations, launching online petitions, or simply allowing people to manifest their thoughts on why certain actions should not be tolerated.

From the perspective of anti-corruption activists, however, it seems more useful to see how these two theoretical contributions can complement one another (Peiffer & Marquette, 2015), as both improving control mechanisms and raising awareness are likely to be part of their repertoire. Understanding activists’ priorities in fighting corruption is particularly relevant when thinking about what types of digital technologies configurations they engage with and why they select some digital technologies, leaving others completely out or in the background of their campaigns.

Although digital technologies are already ubiquitous and deeply entrenched in the tissues of societies (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), they are seen here as dynamic social-techno resources created, edited, stored, or accessed in a digital form that activists might use to support their struggles (Mattoni & Odilla, 2021). Hence, not only do the technological affordances that digital technologies grant to activists vary (Comunello et al., 2016) but also their access and use are linked to the constant transformation of the web. When Tim O’Reilly (2005) coined the term Web 2.0 on his website, for example, he shed light on the crucial role of the user in understanding the evolution of the web. In O’Reilly’s Web 2.0, users interacted more with less control in a new ‘architecture of participation’ that is well illustrated by, for example, the advent of social media, in contrast to the ‘read-only’ and static structure of the websites in its previous version (i.e., Web 1.0). The third generation of the web, as first described by John Markoff (2006) in the New York Times, would be defined by automation, integration, and reuse across various applications in a more personal, creative, and collaborative vein in the so-called semantic web (Berners-Lee et al., 2001; Markoff, 2006). Indeed, the web is becoming more portable and personal than before, based on smart applications in which users are already able to, at the same time, read, write, combine pictures and videos, and stream.

These stages, however, may not be linear when translated into everyday activists’ practices, as noted by Barassi and Treré (2012) and von Bülow et al. (2018). A useful theoretical framework, therefore, should consider other types of interaction in the evolution of digital activist practices rather than just expecting an evolutionary model of co-development.² For example, anti-corruption initiatives created in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the key features of Web 1.0 prevailed, may not be shaping and being shaped by the changes in the use of the web across time. Instead of a reciprocal effect on each other’s evolution, we can have a divergent path in which anti-corruption
Table 2.1 Types of interplay between the paths of digital technologies and activism practices across time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of interplay</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Features</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coevolution</td>
<td>Paths share close interaction and evolve together, often reciprocally affecting each other’s evolution.</td>
<td>High level of digital literate activists open to digital innovation with medium to high level of tech capabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convergence</td>
<td>Paths evolve independently tending to meet at certain point(s).</td>
<td>Activists with medium level of digital literacy who value offline activities but are open to digital solutions. Efforts to increase tech capacities are made if they are considered valuable for achieving certain goals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coexistence</td>
<td>The evolutionary path is moved away from one another, going in different directions.</td>
<td>Activists who value face-to-face activities and have low digital literacy and/or low tech capacities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

initiatives keep prioritising offline actions such as face-to-face meetings, street demonstrations, and on-site inspections and using features of the first web generation such as a static website to report their activities. In this case, the evolutionary path of the web is moving away from activist practices, resulting in an environment in which they simply co-exist.

Alternatively, anti-corruption initiatives and digital technologies can have a convergent path in which they tend to meet at a certain point where the most recent digital features available at that moment are embedded by activists. This may be the case with a few digital groups that started using or intensified their use of social media when they need to, for example, mobilise, or call public opinion attention to a particular corruption scandal or the necessity to adopt a specific policy to curb corruption. Or some groups may at a certain point decide to employ automated algorithms to access public data to help track corrupt behaviours. This specific interplay can be only temporary or permanent, depending on the actors’ goals and capacities, adding an extra layer of complexity to this typology of possible interactions.

This framework considers both decision-making actors and their relationship with digital technologies, as well as the technological capabilities of the initiatives. It is important to pay attention to initiators’, volunteers’, and collaborators’ digital literacy and/or openness to innovative solutions as well as to their analytical, managerial, and financial capabilities to follow the evolutionary path of the web and its main features. Table 2.1 illustrates ideal types of interplay that help us understand the relationship between anti-corruption initiatives and digital technologies from the perspective of activists.
This intersectional framework illustrated in Table 2.1 also allows us to assess a wide sort of anti-corruption initiatives that engage with digital technologies in very different forms and levels. The point is not so much to explain the impact of this on the anti-corruption movements and the activists engaged in them. It is more a question of understanding the presence and degree of digital asymmetry, even when the digital divide is being reduced and the web is developing rapidly. It is about recognising the unbalanced digital presence and comprehending why some make full use of digital tools and techniques available and others do not even have a social media account or even prefer being less digitally active over time. Hence, we believe that this framework may also be helpful to better understand the overall lived experience of technology and its application to everyday contexts by other types of activists.

METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES AND STUDY CONTEXT

Activists are considered here as strategic actors who self-coincidentally try constantly to change and create new opportunities for action (Jasper, 2004). With that in mind, this chapter applies a methodology capable of capturing dynamic processes, using a retrospective longitudinal approach to reconstruct events aiming to identify intersectional paths followed by digital technologies and anti-corruption activists. As Leonard-Barton (1990, p. 248) noted when investigating the process of transferring new technologies from their developers into the hands of their users, ‘the longitudinal retrospective approach offers the opportunity to identify patterns indicative of dynamic processes’ as they evolve over time, as opposed to single snapshots that real-time data gathering offers.

Capturing this dynamic layer is crucial to gain a broader picture of how anti-corruption initiatives came into existence and engaged digital technologies in different periods, as this study mainly aims to do. A secondary goal is comparing initiatives within the country; therefore, the longitudinal approach applied to a multiple case study was used. It augments the chances of representativeness and generalisability, in contrast to the analysis of single events (Tversky & Kahneman, 1986). This chapter does not aim to provide an exhaustive list, but an indication through representative projects aiming to curb corruption taking place in Brazil from the bottom up. The selection criteria for the eight cases explored in depth in this chapter were: being a widely-known civil society initiative created by concerned citizens that was operative in 2021, having the fight against corruption as one of its main goals when created, and primarily working to engage ordinary citizens in anti-corruption actions. The types of digital technologies employed by these initiatives were not a specific criterion, because the idea was to observe the intersection between the
initiatives and technology across time. Therefore, we have cases that were born digital, cases that were born offline but incorporated digital technologies into their practices, and cases that remained largely offline.

Events were reconstructed based on a qualitative analysis of 49 interviews, participant observation in groups of instant messaging apps, and data published on these initiatives’ social media accounts, as detailed in Table 2.2. Combining these different data sources helps to tell a more complete story about the relationship between digital communication and anti-corruption initiatives in Brazil. Online and face-to-face interviews were carried out with activists and people who were directly involved with the selected initiatives, among them paid staff, volunteers, civil servants from control agencies who supported and/or engaged in campaigns, and academics who studied some of these initiatives. The interviews were conducted online and offline in Portuguese between March 2020 and February 2022 and the names of the participants were converted into alphanumeric characters to be anonymised. Overall, the analysis presented here emanated from the perspective of activists. Although interviewees, both initiators and volunteers, have very different educational backgrounds and age cohorts (ranging from 24 to 82 years), they can be defined as concerned citizens worried about the perception of widespread corruption in Brazil.

The data was collected under the scope of the BIT-ACT (Bottom-Up Initiatives and Anti-Corruption Technologies), which employs constructivist grounded theory combined with situational analysis (Clarke, 2005). Accordingly, it first used interviews with nine experts on anti-corruption, social accountability, and civic techs applied to interviews and desk research to identify the use of digital technology as an anti-corruption tool in Brazil. Following from there, situational maps of the cases selected were developed to identify human and non-human elements, and their arenas and social words were developed (Clarke, 2005). Then, the first set of in-depth interviews was conducted and analysed through open and focused coding, and from these first analyses, further data was gathered during the second stage of fieldwork. The types of interplay between the paths of digital technologies and activists across time emerged from this analysis.

The Brazilian context, as mentioned above, allowed us to spot the dynamic paths of interaction between grassroots anti-corruption struggles and the evolution of digital technologies exactly because the internet rollout in the country was gradual and coincided with the emergence of anti-corruption mobilisations in the late 1990s. In Brazil, since the 1990s, when the term eGov was first used in the country, governments have started implementing digital systems, first to provide public services and, more recently, to promote e-participation and e-democracy (Przybilovicz et al., 2015). While governments, especially at the federal level, have grown more digital, the country has also seen an evolution
Table 2.2 Description of selected cases and data sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the initiative</th>
<th>Year of creation</th>
<th>Data sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amarribo – Amigos Associados de Ribeirão Bonito (Associated Friends from the town of Ribeirão Bonito)</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Interviews (N = 2), Twitter account, website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TB – Transparência Brasil (Transparency Brazil)</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Interviews (N = 14), website and internal meeting reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCCE – Movimento de Combate à Corrupção Eleitoral (Movement for Combating Electoral Corruption)</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Interviews (N = 6), website, social media accounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFC – Instituto de Fiscalização e Controle (Institute of Inspection and Control)</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Interviews (N = 2), website, social media accounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSB – Observatório Social do Brasil (Social Observatory of Brazil)</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Interviews (N = 2), analysis of website, social media accounts and internal reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPS – Operação Política Supervisionada (Operation Supervised Politics)</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Interviews (N = 9), participant observation on Telegram group, social media accounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vem pra Rua (Come to the Street)</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Interviews (N = 1), participant observation on a WhatsApp group, social media accounts, website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSA – Operação Serenata de Amor (Operation Love Serenade)</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Interviews (N = 13), participant observation on Telegram and Discord groups, website, social media accounts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Digital media and grassroots anti-corruption in its accountability institutions since the transition to democracy was consolidated by the 1988 Constitution (Lagunes et al., 2021). Existing accountability institutions (the Prosecution Service, the Federal Police, the Revenue Service, and the Court of Accounts, just to mention a few) gained new roles and prominence in confronting corruption. New agencies have also been created from scratch, such as the Federal Office of the Comptroller General (CGU), an anti-corruption multi-role agency within the federal executive created in 2001 under intense domestic and international pressure to improve Brazil’s anti-corruption mechanisms (Odilla & Rodriguez-Olivari, 2021).

In the Brazilian anti-corruption movement, a high level of engagement of activists can be observed, with citizens being more active with regard to state bureaucrats, mainly controlling agents such as inspectors, auditors, and prosecutors. More responsive and interactive accountability institutions may be more inclined to spotlight corruption. The same is valid for the presence of free media and freedom of speech, association, assembly, and petition. Not surprisingly, since democracy was restored, the country has witnessed corruption scandals one after the other in all branches and levels (Lagunes et
Internet access and usage have also been increasing, as pointed out by the World Bank (Almeida et al., 2017). While only 15 per cent of the over 5,000 Brazilian cities had local internet service in 1999, internet access had spread to roughly 89 per cent of the Brazilian population by 2020 (Ibidem, 2017; Cetic.br, 2020). Despite these remarkable figures, we cannot ignore the persistence of digital inequalities that affect the appropriation of technologies and the opportunities arising from their adoption by different segments of the population.4

THE PATHWAY OF CORRUPTION FIGHT FROM THE GRASSROOTS, WHILE BRAZIL BECAME MORE DIGITAL

Considering both the evolution of the web since 1999 and the digital divide in Brazil, this section presents the empirical findings in a chronological narrative, focusing on the types of interactions with digital technologies in the past 20 years. The analytical framework presented above is used here to capture activists’ main strategies to fight corruption, their digital literacy level, and openness to digital innovation while telling the story of the selected anti-corruption initiatives to access the interplay between the paths of digital technologies and activists across time.

Concerned Citizens at the Dawn of the Internet

Two of the most enduring and nationally known anti-corruption bottom-up organisations in Brazil are Amarribo and Transparência Brasil, which were created in 1999 and 2000, respectively. Since their beginnings, however, they have deployed different approaches to curb corruption, including the scope of their actions, the type of relationship with public authorities, and the use of digital technologies. As expected, they followed completely different interplay paths that were, to a great extent, closely linked to the background of their initiators.

Amarribo was created by a group of friends who were born, were living or had their businesses in Ribeirão Bonito, a town with 12,000 inhabitants located 260 km from the metropolitan region of São Paulo. Initially committed to other causes unrelated to corruption, such as the promotion of culture, tourism, and education in the town, this group of friends with backgrounds in law, accounting, consultancy, and advertising soon realised that no social project seemed to flourish because there was a misuse of public money and influence-peddling in the local administration. In addition, the group started receiving reports of incidents of corruption and, hence, decided to pursue an anti-corruption agenda. Amarribo, the acronym in Portuguese for ‘associated friends from Ribeirão
Bonito’, is one of the first groups that started fighting corruption from the grassroots in Brazil at the municipal level, and had been considered a highly successful fraud watchdog in the 2000s (Pereira et al., 2009; Montevechi, 2021). Their work resulted in the impeachment and imprisonment of several local politicians, among them two sitting mayors and the president of the local council, for misuse of public money. Evidence of corruption spotted by volunteers during their civic accounting was delivered to controlling authorities to take the cases to court. In this regard, *Amarribo*’s main strategy was contentious and grounded in the principal-agent approach. *Amarribo* also helped to raise awareness, following the collective action approach, even with low levels of digitalisation. In the 2000s, *Amarribo* became known nationally by organising workshops and distributing more than 120,000 booklets that helped establish almost 100 similar institutions throughout the country (Pereira et al., 2009).

In turn, *Transparência Brasil (TB)*, henceforth) had been initially created to be the chapter of Transparency International in Brazil. It was a joint effort made by, initially, a group of academics and then by preeminent journalists, lawyers, and businessmen with previous expertise in advocacy for improving Brazilian anti-corruption legislation. For over a decade the daily routine of the organisation was led by Claudio Weber Abramo, a mathematician and journalist with previous expertise in computer programming who focused on opening governmental data to promote transparency and accountability. Years later, Abramo became known as one of the first to introduce data journalism in Brazil, and his work influenced other digital initiatives that emerged later. Unlike *Amarribo*, *TB* neither wanted to be a channel for collecting individual reports of incidents of corruption, nor to be an organisation specialised in taking cases to court or leading impeachment procedures. During its early years, *TB* produced paper reports on topics such as campaign financing, vote buying, and frauds in rural deeds as an attempt to call attention to public authorities and public opinion, as the collective action approach suggests. A brief look at its portfolio shows that since 2001 *TB* has also invested heavily in digital technologies content to monitor public officials in the form of online databases already combining different sources of public open data. Although developing digital platforms available for everyone with access to the internet, according to interviews, the priority of *TB* during its early days was also the mainstream media.

From 2001 to 2017, the project *Excelências* offered an online database with information initially on congressional members and later on members of local assemblies and councils. It used open and public data collected manually and automatically through a web scraper, such as the incumbent’s mini biography, email address, number of votes received in previous elections, attendance at voting sessions, and criminal procedures against legislature representatives.
In the early 2000s, TB also developed other online databases open for consultation, such as Deu no Jornal, a collection of news on corruption published in the mainstream media, and As Claras, which compiled information on electoral financing for each candidate from 2002 and 2012. These projects have been discontinued, but according to the interviewees, they show how Claudio Abramo and his small team were pioneering in using digital technology to collect data and offer platforms to monitor public officials. Thanks to the inputs of Claudio Abramo, who was the first executive director of the organisation and kept the position until 2015, the TB had been, since its early years, collecting, and organising public data into relevant digital information to better inform citizens and strengthen institutions, as summarised by two of the interviewees:

All the ideas and all the implementations [were] his [Claudio Abramo’s]. Because he had technological knowledge that we didn’t have and don’t have until today. He had it, and he chose the right people, who worked and who were able to run these projects.6

TB already had this technological footprint, which is due to Abramo’s merit. He is a mathematician and has been programming for a long time. He knew what he was doing. His son is also a great programmer. And it was there in the TB the first time I heard about data scraping. […] And that was…surprising. It was possible!7

TB’s digital anti-corruption and pro-transparency portfolios have been developed along with a remarkable increase in internet access in Brazil. By 2006, local internet service providers were already covering over half of all municipalities where almost 90 per cent of the population were living (Almeida et al., 2017). While TB has been investing in digital solutions, Amarribo’s approach has never had digital technologies at its core. In the early 2000s, Amarribo’s creators used more phone calls than emails, and its website was created only in 20048 and its design has not changed much since then. Both TB and Amarribo, however, use data and information in more or less analogue formats, and also combined the models of principal-agent and collective action to pursue their anti-corruption agenda.

Joint Forces for Increasing Transparency and Social Control in the Broadband Internet Expansion

Amarribo’s work inspired another analogical initiative named ‘Adopt a Municipality’ in which control agents volunteered to be ‘godfathers’, i.e., advisors who helped concerned citizens to organise themselves to audit and monitor public procurement at the local level. This work was initially done with the support of the association of auditors of the Federal Court of
Accounts (Auditar, in Portuguese). In 2005, Auditar and other organisations created an NGO for monitoring and controlling public expenditures (Instituto de Fiscalização e Controle – IFC, in Portuguese). Partnering with Amarribo, this new institution gave continuity to the ‘adopt a municipality’ initiative and launched the ‘caravans all against corruption’ in which groups of civil servants and civil society actors with expertise in accounting and integrity, many of them from Amarribo, travelled to different municipalities to meet local authorities, and organised civil society representatives and ordinary citizens to talk about corruption and transparency in an attempt to engage people on social and societal controls at the municipal level. One of the interviewees described how the caravans worked:

Usually, we travelled to three towns, we left on a Wednesday night, had a caravan in one town on Thursday, in another city on Friday, and in another town on Saturday. In each town, we had an extensive programme: meetings with the local powers to deal with the corruption issue and with a local NGO to see what they were doing and to give suggestions on how to act. And, in the evening, there was a public hearing to make the population aware of issues and mobilise them, trying to gather more people to help the local NGO.\(^9\)

This joint effort between activists and state actors attracted media attention and inspired the creation of new organisations across the country, most of them linked to local business associations or religious groups that also combined strategies of raising awareness and civic auditing to curb corruption at the local level. In 2004, Maringá, at that time a town with 574,000 inhabitants in Southern Brazil, saw a local organisation named SER-Sociedade Ética e Responsável (Ethical and Responsible Society) being created to promote citizenship through workshops, training, plays on topics such as taxes, public expenditures, and elections. Within its structure, a social observatory was created in which lawyers, judges, accountants, public civil servants, and students would oversee public procurement in the municipality. They operated on a volunteer basis. In their first civic auditing, they spotted the overpricing of medicines bought by the local health authority and recovered the extra money paid illegally. In 2008, from the experience in Maringá, a national social movement organisation named Observatório Social do Brasil, or OBS (Social Observatory of Brazil, in English) was launched. Their work and goals had similarities to what Amarribo was initially doing with the help of the IFC. OBS was created as a networked initiative aiming to offer training and technical support to citizens in their own municipalities to hold local authorities and public services accountable. The OBS’s best practice methodology includes a series of precise steps to organise social observatories that monitor public procurement and public services by opening public data and joining
forces with public authorities to improve governance (Guerzovich & Chies Schommer, 2018; Montevechi, 2021).

One of the interviewees who knows well the observatories since their origins, highlighted that they are formed by groups of people who already know each other and are used to spending time doing offline activities together:

Maybe it is also changing a lot as an effect of the pandemic, but at the beginning, I think that the observatories, most of them, arose from these clubs linked to Freemasonry here in Santa Catarina and in Paraná states, and clubs of commercial associations, lawyers, accountants, retired public servants. So, I would say that they arose from a personal connection, from other previous networks of these people who already knew each other from other things.¹⁰

As Amarribo did, OSB also organised into a network of local organisations that prioritise local auditing. According to its website, OSB has already supported the creation of over 150 observatories in 17 states. Both Amarribo and OSB also deployed during their early years a more analogical approach, prioritising face-to-face meetings, training, and paperback handouts, even though when it was created the web was already more read-write based, i.e. users had the opportunity to share more content. However, from the interviews, it is clear that Amarribo and OSB have different views on how technology can be used to help their struggles.

Amarribo’s founder said the organisation always used the internet, referring to the website. This is not true, as its website domain was registered five years after its creation, and the last tweet on the official account was in January 2018:

You see... We always used the internet. The internet was already under development, and we had our statute on the website; we had a website. We reported all the actions we carried out. The procedures [against the mayor] were also listed there.¹¹

The OSB’s representative, in turn, recognised the importance of embedding digital technology into their daily practices, but highlighted other types of struggles in this regard, as summarised below.

We would like to have much more technology than we have today. We have the minimum. We would like to, but I can’t afford to invest in it. [...] I’m in groups of civic hackers and corporate hackers. Everybody’s frustration is to create something great, and nobody uses it. [...] There are things we launch for observatories, and not even they use it. This is because people will only use something if it makes sense in their daily routine, right? But the main problem is still the [lack of] transparency [of public authorities].¹²

One of the OSB’s representatives also highlights that technology may help their job, but it does not replace certain tasks, such as attending face-to-face
local biddings, considered extremely important for monitoring public procurement in a municipality where the level of digitalisation and transparency is still considered low. Despite some frustrating attempts to develop internal digital tools, such as an index and an updated internal digital system to organise and store their work, the efforts of OSB to try to stay on track when using the existing social media are visible. They keep records on the most popular social media applications, including a YouTube channel and a pilot podcast project. The IFC, on the other hand, managed to expand its offline actions by incorporating more advanced technologies designed to improve social accountability mainly by engaging ordinary citizens to monitor the quality of public services in the capital of Brazil. Then they launched the online survey tool Como Anda Meu Ônibus (How is my bus going) and the mobile app Adote um Postinho (Adopt a local health centre) that allowed citizens to inspect and evaluate the quality and propose improvements in public transportation and in the health sectors, respectively. The IFC also created accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, although, as it happened with OSB, it struggles to maintain and grow its digital presence.

Connective Actors and Large-scale Networks in an Increasingly Personalised Internet

In Brazil, social media’s popularity has been rapidly increasing. Brazilians were early users of social networking services, such as Orkut, and Facebook users, for example, grew from 2.4 million in 2009 to 8.8 million in 2010, to 35 million in 2011, 130 million in 2021 (G1, 2012; Volpato, 2021). Some organisations understood these new trends and were able to incorporate digital tactics into their repertoires. This is the case of the MCCE (Movement to Combat Electoral Corruption), which from 2007 to 2010 led the campaign to convert into law the citizens’ initiative Ficha Limpa (Clean Slate Law). The legislation bans candidates from running for public office for eight years if their convictions for a list of specific crimes, including corruption charges, have been confirmed on appeal (Mattoni & Odilla, 2021, p. 1135). Their campaign started mainly offline, but they introduced new tactical usages of digital technologies when the mobilisation was already in an advanced phase when they partnered with Avaaz (Mattoni & Odilla, 2021). Along with an online petition that was used to keep those who signed informed and engaged, Orkut, Facebook, and other social media outlets were used to mobilise people and to collect missing wet ink signatures. During the negotiation phase with power holders to approve and enact the bill, they combined face-to-face advocacy strategies with e-tactics, such as overloading politicians’ email boxes and uploading hashtags on Twitter.
After the successful campaign, the *MCCE* incorporated the use of social media into their daily practices. They also invested in developing digital tools, not always to fight corruption per se, but to increase social participation. In 2017, the *MCCE* launched, together with the ITS (Institute of Technology and Society) from Rio de Janeiro, an application for mobile phones to facilitate the collection of signatures for any popular initiative. The app uses blockchain technology and allows anyone to upload a bill or sign existing ones. Brazilian legislation, however, still requires a number of wet ink signatures equivalent to a percentage of the total number of voters for citizens to propose their respective bills. Years before, in 2011, the *MCCE* and the *IFC* had developed the initiative *Adote um Distrital* (Adopt a local MP) to mobilise citizens to monitor the local legislature and created a transparency index for ranking local MPs in Brasilia that could be accessed online.

The *MCCE* included among its main leaders state bureaucrats, such as auditors, inspectors, and judges who joined forces with other state actors to pass the *Ficha Limpa*. Indeed, anti-corruption bureaucrats have been cultivating close links and collaborative engagement with civil society actors in Brazil for a long time. This is also the case of the Office of the Comptroller General (CGU), the anti-corruption agency within the federal executive. First, in 2004, it launched a transparency portal where anyone with access to the internet can use a search tool to check the federal executive’s expenditures with, for example, bidding contracts, social programme payments, civil servants’ trips, and even monthly salaries paid to government workers (Odilla & Rodriguez-Olivari, 2021). Since then, with both support and pressure from civil society, the CGU has been developing guidelines for other branches at the federal, state, and local levels and also offers data-friendly ‘open-format’ information, sponsoring conferences and events such as hackathons to support civil society’s inputs, offering training, and also designing and advocating for new anti-corruption legislation.14

In the following years, with social media growing fast and more open data available, Brazil saw massive street demonstrations starting in June 2013. After these protests in which social media played an important role in the spread of both the details of the marches and the underlying grievances (among them corruption), the country also saw the emergence of other anti-corruption organisations and initiatives. Most of them, for example, the *Movimento Contra Corrupção* (Movement Against Corruption, MCC), *Movimento Brasil Livre* (Free Movement Brazil), and *Vem pra Rua* (Come to the Street), represent the so-called ‘new right’ in Brazil. Some of the people who created them took part in the June 2013 protests and later led the street demonstrations in 2015 and 2016 for the impeachment of then-President Dilma Rousseff (Montevecchi, 2021). These initiatives operate in a very different vein from the majority of anti-corruption initiatives in the country, not only because of their...
use of social media to spread both online and offline protest movements and deploy a more disruptive approach. Although most of them openly supported prosecutors and judges who brought charges against top-level politicians, senior bureaucrats, and powerful businesspeople in Operation Car Wash (*Lava Jato*), they have no formal collaboration with state bureaucrats. In addition, they do not carry out specialised monitoring activities like auditing public expenditures or cross-checking data to promote transparency, as many other anti-corruption initiatives do.

*Vem pra Rua*, for example, was created by two businessmen in São Paulo in 2014. Since then, it has been making heavy use of social media, mainly Facebook (2,175,046 followers), Twitter (255,000 followers), and Instagram (132,000 followers), and messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram to criticise politicians and expose corruption cases by publishing memes, re-circulating pieces of news, and calling for marches. They successfully created awareness and gained support and official recognition, and they also managed to build a large network to organise massive street protests, mainly in 2015 and 2016. One of the interviewees, who created a *Vem pra Rua* in her hometown of 92,000 inhabitants, details how she became engaged with the group during the first big protest scheduled via Facebook.

Someone scheduled that protest, the one on 15 March 2015. It was all over Brazil. I invited so many people through my Facebook page. I thought: if I am inviting, I have to be there because I am responsible. And I was there, but those who actually created that event [on Facebook in my town] didn’t show up […] And then a group started to go down the avenue shouting some chants and protest slogans such as “Fora Dilma” (Dilma out), that sort of thing. I loved that; I thought it was great. […] And I ended up the leader of the group. We had to decide between calling our group *Vem pra Rua* (Come to the Street) or MBL. I liked the colours of the MBL, but *Vem pra Rua* seemed more active to me. I started to try to look for it. I started contacting people, and we became *Vem pra Rua* linked to *Vem pra Rua* São Paulo. And then I got involved in all the following protests. We mobilised almost 5,000 people in our town.\(^{15}\)

It is worth mentioning that *Vem pra Rua* and other similar initiatives were born when the web was already more focused on user participation, driven by likes and shares. To a large extent, these initiatives follow a logic of connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), which puts individuals connected through digital technologies at the centre of anti-corruption discourse. As illustrated by the interviewee’s statement, this type of digital network is often based on personalised communication logics and loose ties among participants.
Civic Bots on the Rise of Artificial Intelligence

Meanwhile, non-humans also appeared in this already populated anti-corruption scenario. Civic bots have been developed by IT workers motivated by the opportunity to use their knowledge to help curb corruption in Brazil. In 2016, just after the impeachment of President Rousseff, a group of three tech-savvy friends launched the *Operação Serenata de Amor* (Operation Love Serenade, OSA) and created Rosie, a bot that uses machine learning algorithms to cross-check MPs’ expenditures using open data, spots suspicious transactions, and tweets its findings automatically, asking for help to verify expenditures classified as outliers. Using crowdfunding, they applied their knowledge to automate a task that the Lower Chamber still does manually (Savaget et al., 2019). They also created a website named Jarbas to allow people with access to the internet to browse the updated Congress members’ expenses and get more details on their spending, and made the entire project available on GitHub, a repository management platform commonly used to host open-source projects (Odilla & Mattoni, 2023).

The initiative mobilised over 600 volunteers interested in coding and audit trails on Telegram and attracted 39,000 followers on Twitter and 66,000 on Facebook. OSA also counted on the help of civil servants from the Brazilian Lower Chamber to better organise and release machine-readable data regarding MPs’ expenditures to allow Rosie to work. However, its creators have never managed to convince control agents from the Lower Chamber, the prosecution service, or the Court of Accounts to open procedures to investigate their findings (Odilla & Santos Veloso, forthcoming). Therefore, the creators decided to give Rosie an automated Twitter account to publish the names of the MPs and their suspicions when spotted by the bot. It was an attempt to engage ordinary citizens to increase monitoring and pressure on politicians. A contributor who later led OSA explained how it was initiated and its links to a programmers’ community:

The Serenata is, to paraphrase the television newsreader William Bonner when he introduced it on the Jornal Nacional, a group of very young people who, in an individual way, got organised. They saw the opportunity in the money spent with parliamentary activities, in the Lower Chamber, that publicises the data. … Serenata has always been very close to the Python community. So much so that the first sprint, which is when developers get together or curious people also get together to give ideas on the project, happened inside the annual meeting with Python Brasil. … Many developers engaged in the project because, besides its strong political-social appeal of you exposing suspicious expenditures of a congressperson, it also has the side of getting us excited to develop [the data cross-checking].¹⁶
In 2018, for financial reasons, OSA was incorporated into the portfolio of Open Knowledge Brazil. Rosie and Jarbas are maintained mainly by volunteers who are also engaged in a new project named *Querido Diário* (Dear Gazette), which is an attempt to create an automated online updated database of daily official gazettes from Brazilian municipalities to allow searches and data analysis at the municipal level. The team leading the projects changed, but remained active in the Python and open data communities. The new leaders also try to mobilise a team of ambassadors, mostly tech-savvy people, to maintain the initiatives and create new digital tools updated with the most recent web developments.

Over the years, TB has also renewed its team and diversified its portfolio by partnering with universities and other social movement organisations. It had, for example, invested in WhatsApp chatbots (for example, Edu, the bot), interactive applications to crowdsource information on the construction of schools (*Tá de Pé*), and in artificial-intelligence-based tools such as one that monitors the prices of food bought for public schools (*Tá de Pé Merenda*). This priority of keeping on track with digital solutions is reflected in the team. In January 2022, out of the 14 people who are part of TB’s paid staff, seven work with data science and software development. According to the interviewees, more recently TB has decided to focus on developing tools for activists due to issues experienced when trying to engage ordinary citizens: the number of downloads and users was disappointing despite the media it attracted, according to three interviewees. TB has also strengthened links with the social observatories to offer training and new tools to activists.

TB still relies heavily on public data and counts on the help of CGU to have access to better quality information, and other partners from public and third sectors, such as the Federal University of Campina Grande and the association of investigative journalists (*Abraji*), to develop digital anti-corruption tools. In addition, TB’s prolific portfolio, according to one of its representatives, relies on the need to attract funds to sustain the organisation:

We have a practical problem to solve: to raise funds. Who do they want to give money to? Civic technology tools have been high-level estimates. We tried for a long time to get funding for Excelências and we never got it. Donors are biased, they want new things. If you say you have a project and you want money to maintain it… For example, if it’s something that works well and delivers what it already delivers, even if it’s something important, they won’t want it.\textsuperscript{17}

With civic techs being on an upswing and attracting funds, other automated civic bots have emerged less known by the general public that also fight corruption directly or indirectly. In 2020, *Abraji*, the association of investigative journalists, also joined forces with Transparency International in Brazil to create the *Publique-se*, an automated check of whether there are legal pro-
ceedings that cite politicians as defendants or plaintiffs in the higher, federal, and local courts in Brazil. It has already identified 3,445 politicians and offers the option to download a list of procedures related to corruption (active and passive) and administrative improbity. In 2018, the civic bot *Rui* was created by the news outlet JOTA to monitor and automatically tweet anniversaries of proceedings stalled in the country’s highest court, exposing the slowness of justice (Odilla, 2023).

Another initiative, named *Operação Política Supervisionada* (Operation Supervised Politics, *OPS*), also has created a bot to speed up some procedures. However, the initiative emerged in 2013 as one of the many ones that used social media to engage ordinary citizens in monitoring Brazilian politicians. In the case of *OPS*, it started with a YouTube channel of a seller from Brasília, who recorded videos teaching how to access the expenses of congressional representatives. The YouTuber also asked for volunteers to go to the headquarters of companies hired by politicians and to take pictures and certify they were not shell companies (Odilla & Santos Veloso, forthcoming). In December 2021, the initiative counted over 200 volunteers who transformed a Telegram group into their ‘headquarters’, where they exchange thoughts, make decisions, and split the tasks. Among the volunteers, there are IT developers who created the *RobOps*, a bot that does web scraping and cross-checking on the congressional people’s expenditures and sends to the initiator, by email, suspicious cases. These tech-savvy volunteers also developed an app named *OPS Fiscalize* (OPS Oversight) that allows users to classify expenditures as suspicious or not, using their mobile phones. A Twitter bot was also created to raise awareness of higher amounts of money spent by MPs. Although it aggregated new digital tools, *OPS*’s initiator resists automating all the auditing steps and values the individual work of collaborators, who engage in tasks such as helping make requests for access to information in public bodies and manually checking receipts in some task forces he organises.

**REFLECTING ON THE PATHS OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND ANTI-CORRUPTION FROM GRASSROOTS**

Considering the intersection framework and the empirical data presented in this chapter, it was possible to observe highly digitally heterogeneous anti-corruption and pro-accountability civil society initiatives. As implied in Table 2.1 and detailed next, there are cases of coevolution at the same time as cases of coexistence and convergence in the Brazilian bottom-up anti-corruption initiatives.

*Coevolution* – It is possible to argue that those initiatives with a high level of digitally literate anti-corruption activists are more likely to engage with the
digital innovation evolution. The long trajectory of TB, for example, illustrates well the co-evolutionary path between digital technologies and anti-corruption from the grassroots. Since it was created, TB has always been led by digitally literate activists and people open to digital innovation with medium to high levels of tech capabilities. Findings also suggest that it was not just this important feature that makes TB’s path share close interaction and evolve together with the digital technologies available across time. The fact that the organisation depends on funding, mainly obtained from international donors, has also influenced its higher-tech path. The Brazilian cases, however, also suggest that the paths of anti-corruption efforts and technologies do not always evolve together, as implied by the analytical model.

**Convergence** – The OSB, for example, has never managed to create more advanced tools, despite their willingness to do so and attempts to keep track of digital technology advancement. Although the OSB leaders (who have medium to low tech capacities and resources) recognise the value of technologies and often partner with more high-tech initiatives such as the TB to expand their digital strategies for raising awareness, mobilising people and monitoring public expenditures at the local level, they stress the importance of offline action. To them, having headquarters and at least one local leader coordinating volunteers, as well as in-person meetings with authorities and other offline activities such as following public biddings face-to-face is crucial to achieve their goals.

Other initiatives, on the other hand, managed to converge more easily into a more digital environment at a certain point of their trajectories, although they also value a combination of online and offline efforts. This is the case of the MCCE, which, as OSB does, also operates by both collective action and principal-agent logic, i.e. by raising awareness while at the same time investing in advocacy to improve electoral anti-corruption legislation. In the case of MCCE, the presence of activists very open to digital solutions was observed despite their medium level of digital literacy. A similar convergence path was also followed by the IFC which initially supported the offline actions of Amarribo and later invested in creating online platforms as an attempt to engage people in civic auditing. One of these initiatives, the online platform to measure the level of transparency of local assemblies and councils, was carried out together with the MCCE. Due to the lack of internal capacities, the development of more advanced technology used by both initiatives was outsourced.

Another case of convergence is the OPS. They incorporated some emerging technologies that were a trend at that time, such as an interactive app and a bot across time without replacing its original digital practices. Although its leader does not consider himself tech-savvy, he is very open to digital innovation and managed to attract over 200 volunteers who have never been all together face-to-face and interact mainly on Telegram. Among them, there are highly
digitally literate collaborators who are encouraged by the leader to find digital solutions for their struggles. At the same time, he provides guidelines and encourages the participation of those who are not highly IT-skilled. Although when OPS was created in 2013, the web in Brazil was still in a mostly read-write phase in which user participation prevailed, the initiative has rapidly incorporated a more read-write-create format focused on user cooperation, which is a key feature of a new stage of the web. OPS, however, keeps maintaining the YouTube channel, a blog and engaging people on social media and resists automating all the auditing procedures they have been doing.

Coexistence – OSA, in turn, is an interesting case of an initiative that was born when web features were already advanced and allowed tech-savvy people to automate procedures to the extent it only needs maintenance and nothing more. Although OSA’s Rosie still seems updated and advanced when compared to other digital anti-corruption initiatives, at six years of age it has never been updated and its future may be simply to co-exist with the technologies that come next. This was exactly the case with Amarribo, that for over 20 years merely kept a website and used emails and social media. In overall terms, Amarribo exemplifies how an anti-corruption initiative can simply co-exist with all the advances observed in the technological arena. It is true that Amarribo lost influence and the capacity to lead a network with over a hundred similar local organisations over the years, but by the end of 2021, they still existed, although in what we can call a dormant stage. Their website seemed stuck in the past, as were its social media accounts. Amarribo’s key leaders are still the ones who created it in 2000 and they are people who value in-person activities pursue their goals that are largely related to taking cases to court or to lead impeachment procedures. In addition, Amarribo’s leaders have low tech capacities and low digital literacy and did not manage to leave room for more tech savvy collaborators.

The cases analysed here suggest the existence of different paths of interplay between digital technologies and anti-corruption from the grassroots that are closely linked to activists’ digital literacy and interest in innovative digital tools. Findings also show that activists’ analytical, managerial, and, mainly, financial capabilities to follow the evolutionary path of the web may also be a determinant factor to explain the type of path they follow regarding the use of digital technologies. One can argue that the combination of digital literacy with technological and financial capabilities, however, cannot be detached from a broader context, such as the scope and main goals of the anti-corruption initiatives. Indeed, our findings suggest that those initiatives more focused on local accountability often face issues of having access to digitalised public data, because active transparency is much more advanced at the federal level in Brazil. Therefore, it is expected that they invest more in face-to-face interactions due to the lack of easily accessible digital data, for example.
However, although an understanding of the overall scope and goals of the initiatives is important, it does not seem enough to explain whether their respective evolutionary paths and practices will co-evolve with digital technologies. The cases analysed showed that no matter whether the initiatives operate in more collective action, principal-agent, or a mix of both logics, their digital paths still vary a lot and are highly dependent on initiators and their capabilities. Also, the empirical data provided in this chapter does not allow us to state that the stage of digital features available when initiatives are initiated will determine whether their intersecting paths will necessarily co-evolve or eventually converge with technological advancements, although it is more likely that they were initiated already embedded into the current status of the web. For example, initiatives that were born in a more advanced web stage and that fight corruption from a more collective action viewpoint, such as the Vem pra Rua and the other right-wing groups, have since their creation been making use of the same e-tactics. Social media is still increasingly popular in Brazil and, therefore, they keep using the existing platforms to recycle pieces of news and publish cards or memes to call attention to their political agendas and mobilise people to their online and offline events.

The current web stage, based on read-write-create-cooperate formats, offers room for new types of anti-corruption technologies, and at the same time poses a challenge for organisations and governments wishing to engage ordinary citizens in a highly competitive market for users. Findings suggested that even initiatives that are more in tune with technological advances, such as the easier access of mobile phones that are impacting internet usage, find it challenging to mobilise ordinary citizens. For instance, in June 2021, 48.16 per cent of the web traffic in Brazil was via mobile phones (Statista, 2021). Not by chance, TB launched the mobile app Tá de Pé and then converted it into a WhatsApp chatbot precisely because Brazilians use the internet mainly to stay in touch with each other via audio and text messages or video calls. Still, their initiative to make ordinary citizens monitor the construction of schools resulted in a low number of users, frustrating TB’s activists. The Rosie bot on Twitter also has low rates of interaction, despite its 40,000 followers.

As can be seen, even when anti-corruption efforts make full use of the breadth of technology available, engagement can be challenging. No matter how technology lowers the costs and barriers to people’s participation, evidence suggests that is not enough for digital technologies simply to exist to have activists staying updated with technological advancements to develop new anti-corruption and accountability tools as well as to prosper in creating awareness and attracting public support.
CONCLUSIONS

This chapter assessed eight bottom-up anti-corruption initiatives that emerged in the past 20 years in Brazil to explore how the development of anti-corruption efforts intertwines with the evolution of digital technologies. The empirical evidence, analysed through a retrospective longitudinal approach, suggests that there are cases of co-evolution at the same time as cases of coexistence and convergence, despite the rapidly developing technologies over the past two decades. The Brazilian cases allow us to conclude that the transformation of digital technologies and anti-corruption efforts do not necessarily go hand in hand, but may follow different patterns of interplay.

This chapter, therefore, challenges the high expectation of a linear interplay between anti-corruption initiatives and digital technologies developments. Looking at the intersection of digital technologies and the fertile environment of anti-corruption initiatives in Brazil suggests that the path does not depend only on the stage of the web and its level of access. The digital literacy and capabilities of activists are crucial to recognising that there are cases of coevolution at the same time as cases of coexistence and convergence. This helps to advance the recognition of a wider range of socio-technical dynamics of digital technologies and anti-corruption initiatives and also helps advance a better understanding of the not always normative position of technology that scholars have traditionally emphasised, especially in the fight against corruption.

The lessons learned here may be valid for other cases not related only to Brazil, and testing this evolutionary path in other contexts will expand our still limited understanding of the use and sustainability of digital technologies to fight corruption. It seems crucial to decipher this diverse range of social and political actors who fully embrace digital technologies to fight corruption, increase transparency, and/or improve accountability, including state bureaucrats. In the case of Brazil, governmental agents have played an important role in sponsoring anti-corruption activists by organising events, training citizens, and opening data. Providing empirical evidence on different types of interaction between state agents and anti-corruption activists is also relevant to broaden the field of anti-corruption studies. It is also critical to expand the reflections regarding the integrity and governance of anti-corruption digital tools and the collection of interrelated digital technologies that activists often deploy.

Further research on these topics should also consider deploying a longitudinal approach to contrast, as is the case in this chapter, anti-corruption practices that were already there with the ones that were not, and emerged as a result of technological innovations. Moreover, a retrospective analysis may also allow us to observe whether activists change their priorities due to the development.
of digital technologies and this should be better explored by future research on the topic. Even if a new era of the web rapidly becomes established, a retrospective longitudinal look is still valid to delve into choices and impacts considering the circumstances of the time. Informing the present depends on the past and is essential to the future. One cannot understand what is happening today without understanding what came before, as Steve Jobs said to explain why he spent so much time with the older generation in Silicon Valley (Berlin, 2015).

NOTES

1. The author acknowledges that the research for this chapter has been conducted at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna in the framework of the BIT-ACT project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No 802362).

2. We borrow the von Bülow et al., (2019, p. 2) definition of digital activist practices (DAP), which understands DAP as ‘proactive actions that seek to achieve political impacts in a particular context through the use of digital tools’.

3. The work of Instituto Ethos, created in 1998, and the organisation Contas Abertas, initiated in 2005, is recognised here as extremely valuable for improving ethical values and integrity among companies and controlling public expenditure, respectively. However, the history of these two organisations is not assessed here because their main target audience has not been ordinary citizens but corporations interested in promoting ethics in business in the case of Instituto Ethos, and journalists and other organisations interested in monitoring public expenditures in the case of Contas Abertas.

4. One out of four people in Brazil still has no access to the internet. In total, this represents some 46 million people with no web access (Tokarnia, 2020).


6. Interview with CS03_INT006_INIACT conducted on 07/12/2021, São Paulo.

7. Interview with CS03_INT005_ITDEV conducted on 07/12/2021, São Paulo.


9. Interview with CS00_INT008_EXP01 conducted on 20/08/2020, online.

10. Interview with CS00_INT004_EXP02 conducted on 31/07/2020, online.

11. Interview with GG_CS00_INT004 conducted on 03/12/2021, São Paulo.

12. Interview with CS00_INT012_INIACT conducted on 26/01/2022, online.

13. Orkut, initially launched in 2004 and named after its creator Orkut Büyükkökten, can be considered the ‘grandad’ of social networking. It was shut down completely by Google in 2014.

14. In 2011, the CGU and civil society organisations, among them TB, worked together to pressure Congress to pass Brazil’s Freedom of Information Act (Lei de Acesso à Informação, LAI) which became law (Odilla and Rodriguez-Olivari, 2021). In 2012, 1,300 representatives of many anti-corruption grassroots organisations met in Brasilia at the first National Conference on Transparency and Social Control (Conferência Nacional sobre Transparência e Controle Social, Consocial), organised and sponsored by the CGU to discuss proposals to improve...
From concerned citizens to civic bots

anti-corruption mechanisms. Also, in 2012, the CGU hosted in Brasilia the 15th International Anti-Corruption Conference (IACC), co-organised by Amarribo and Transparency International and Instituto Ethos, another NGO created in the early 2000s to promote ethical business and fight corporate corruption.

15. Interview with CS01_INTER17_USER conducted on 04/11/2021, online.
16. Interview with GG_CS01_INT003_EXP01 conducted on 24/07/2020, online.
17. Interview with CS03_INT003_INIACT conducted on 03/12/2021, online.

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3. Anti-corruption and transparency in civil society organisations in Uruguay: The challenges of fostering an agenda when the attention is elsewhere

Germán Bidegain

INTRODUCTION

Uruguay stands out in Latin America as a country with low levels of perception of corruption. The country has consistently been among the best-ranked Latin American countries in Transparency International’s successive waves of the Corruption Perception Index. In the 2020 round, Uruguay occupied first place in Latin America and the Caribbean, second place in the Americas (only outranked by Canada) and twenty-first worldwide.

This scenario accounts, at least partially, for the absence of anti-corruption social movements or protests in the country. However, the civil society organisations (CSOs) that work on corruption and transparency matters point out many areas in which Uruguay faces important challenges. Some of them include: public spending transparency, political parties’ campaigns funding transparency, institutional weakness of anti-corruption and transparency agencies, and the lack of control in a finance system historically perceived as a tax haven functional for money laundering of corruption activities in other countries (Martini, 2016).

The relative positive situation of the country in terms of perception of corruption is a double-edged sword. It reflects low levels of everyday experience with corruption practices, which is undoubtedly good news. Nonetheless, the international and national perception of Uruguay as a country where corruption is not an urgent endeavour undermines national authorities’ attention to the issue and hinders the prospects of CSO development, limiting the possibility to fight the challenges outlined in the previous paragraph. In fact, the scarce CSOs that work on anti-corruption are small and count on very few resources. Interestingly, even if Uruguay stands out as the best ranked Latin American country in the ICT Development Index (International Telecommunication
Anti-corruption and transparency in civil society organisations in Uruguay (Union, 2017), digital media is not a privileged channel to fight corruption from the grassroots.

Anti-corruption and transparency of Uruguayan CSOs have not received much scholarly attention. This chapter aims to fill this void, which is a relevant task both at the country level as at the theoretical and comparative one, since much of the scholarly production has focused on cases with scandal motivated cycles of protests or more powerful CSOs (della Porta, 2017).

In fact, Uruguay is an interesting case to explore the difficulties that CSOs face to organise and further their agenda in consolidated democracies with low levels of corruption. Furthermore, it is a relevant case to assess why anti-corruption CSOs do not draw on digital media to develop their activities in contexts where it is available for most of the population and at relatively low costs. Literature usually focuses on case studies where digital media are used to counter corruption, while neglecting those contexts in which digital media are not used so much.

To fulfil these objectives, this chapter combines a thorough literature review of the Uruguayan case, systematic documental and press-review data gathering, and 28 semi-structured interviews with government officials, journalists, and civil society actors involved in the fight against corruption. The interviews were conducted between November 2020 and March 2022.

The chapter proceeds as follows: the next section presents the evolution of Uruguay from a patrimonialist governance model to a universal one. It also sketches the evolution of anti-corruption and transparency policies between 1985 and 2020. The third section maps the most relevant actors in the field, focusing on the identification of civil society actors, and analysing their resources and main demands. Through their demands, the section underscores the most urgent matters associated with corruption in the country. The fourth section develops the case of Uruguay Transparente, the only Uruguayan CSO explicitly addressing anti-corruption. The section unfolds its main strategic orientations and analyses its experience in using digital media. The fifth section presents other digital media grassroots CSOs’ efforts that, even though more oriented to transparency and access to information, stands out in the Uruguayan context. The chapter ends with some final remarks.

URUGUAY: FROM A PATrimonialist MODEL OF GOVERNANCE TO A UNIVERSALISTic ONE

Uruguay consistently ranks among the least corrupt countries of Latin America according to different measures, like the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index or the Worldwide Governance Indicators (Martini, 2016). As previously mentioned, the country ranked 21st in the 2020 round of the Corruption Perception Index and in the first place in Latin America.
Caribbean. Relatedly, Uruguay ranks very high in the comparative democracy and rule of law rankings (Varieties of Democracy, Freedom House, Democracy Index, etc.).

From a historical comparative point of view, the country has been characterised as part of the group of ‘contemporary achievers’ regarding good governance. This is a group of a few countries in the world that have progressed to high standards of corruption control after World War II (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). Regarding Latin America, only Uruguay and Chile have been included in this group. According to this framework, the good governance ‘achievers’ managed to shift from a patrimonialist governance scheme to a universalistic one, where public-resource allocation is determined by impersonal, impartial and equalitarian rule-oriented procedures (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2016).

Several factors have been pointed out to explain the exceptional situation of Uruguay in the regional context. Its long democratic tradition, the high levels of social and economic development for Latin American standard and the freedom of the press are usually mentioned as crucial factors in this sense (Martini, 2016; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015; Vaz Mondo, 2011). However, the relatively exceptional situation of the country in these aspects has a long history and for a long time coexisted with clientelist practices.

Buquet and Piñeiro (2016) offer a compelling explanation to understand the transition from a clientelist to a universalistic system of public resources allocation. Their account pays special attention to the historical centrality of the party system in Uruguayan history (Caetano et al., 1987). Since the country’s independence in 1830, two political parties, the Partido Colorado and the Partido Nacional, have disputed political power. The competition between these parties, known in Uruguay as the ‘traditional parties’, led to democratisation in 1916 and animated most of political life in the twentieth century. The two-party system dynamic fostered a model of democracy based on a pact of mutual control of the State. The co-participation of the ruling and the opposition party in the different public bodies became an important feature of Uruguayan democracy and was legally ensured by the need of legislative supermajorities to appoint authorities (in the Justice department, public administration, electoral justice, public companies, etc.) (Buquet & Piñeiro, 2016).

The distribution of power between both parties implied the distribution of public goods and services as well through clientelist networks, especially during the important State expansion cycle that took place between 1904 and 1958 (Filgueira et al., 2003). The two parties worked as brokers between the citizens and the State, politicising the public offices and allowing petty corruption as well as differential treatment for the citizens depending on their political linkages. However, despite the former, this model of distribution reached most of the population in a quasi-universalistic fashion and was not perceived...
as necessarily corrupt since politicians and elites did not accumulate economic resources through these means (Buquet & Piñeiro, 2016, p. 118).

In Buquet and Piñeiro’s account, this situation constituted an equilibrium that was shaken when public resources to distribute started to become scarce due to the deterioration of the Uruguayan economic situation in the late 1950s and the 1960s, leading to a crisis of legitimacy of this system and the creation in 1971 of the first serious challenger to the two party system: the left wing Frente Amplio, which started to compete with a programmatic offer (and gained 18 per cent of electoral support in the 1971 elections). The 1973–1985 dictatorship interrupted political competition, but when democracy was regained the system moved towards a new equilibrium of political competition in which the two traditional parties assumed a market-oriented programmatic offer that aimed to control and reduce the practices that were common in the previous equilibrium, and the Frente Amplio took the left side of the political spectrum (Bidegain, Freigedo, & Zurbriggen, 2021). The result of the new equilibrium was a system that moved from particularism to universalism in public resources allocation (Buquet & Piñeiro, 2016).

There is general agreement in the fact that the most important advances in the passage from a clientelist to a universalistic system have taken place since the 1985 democratic transition, with important changes taking place in different dimensions that are usually considered relevant to fight corruption: power discretion, material resources available to authorities and legal and normative constraints (Vaz Mondo, 2011).

In any case, it is important to insist that corruption has not been usually considered in Uruguay as a major public problem, with the exception of the mid 1990s, when some public scandals involving Luis Lacalle Herrera’s 1990–1995 government caught the public’s attention. These cases did not refer to patronage and classic clientelist practices, but to the personal enrichment of public figures associated with the government, creating public commotion. The press had a crucial role in unveiling these cases. Parallel to the local developments, the anti-corruption agenda gained traction at the international level, fostered by multilateral organisations like the World Bank and different international conventions (Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016; Vargas, 2004).

As Buquet and Piñeiro point out, the causal link between the scandals, the international mood and the anti-corruption political reforms that started in the 1990s still needs to be proved, but in any case, the ‘bulk of legislation regarding transparency and corruption in Uruguay was passed between 1997 and 2009’ (Buquet & Piñeiro, 2016, p. 125). In September 1998, the country ratified the Inter-American Convention against Corruption, and later that year, in December, the Congress approved the anti-corruption Law 17.060. This law created the first public institution specifically oriented to control corruption, named originally Junta Asesora en Materia Económico-Financiera.
del Estado\textsuperscript{8}, which was later renamed Junta de Transparencia y Ética Pública (JUTEP)\textsuperscript{9}. In 2006, Uruguay ratified the United Nations Conventions Against Corruption\textsuperscript{10}. Other relevant institutional and legislative reforms that must be underlined are the creation in 2005 of the Agencia de Gobierno Electrónico y Sociedad de la Información y del Conocimiento (AGESIC)\textsuperscript{11}, the creation in 2007 of the Secretaria Nacional para la Lucha contra el Lavado de Activos y el Financiamiento del Terrorismo\textsuperscript{12} (SENACLAFT), the 2008 Law 18.381 on Public Information Access which created the Unidad de Acceso a la Información Pública\textsuperscript{13} (UAIP), the 2009 Law 18.489 on Political Parties Funding and the 2015 Law 19.340, which fosters the JUTEP political autonomy\textsuperscript{14}.

The described reality does not mean that the country has not recently experienced important scandals. In the 2015–2020 administration there was an important case involving the vice-president, Raúl Sendic. He was accused of public funds misuse, due to personal use of a corporate credit card when he was in charge of the public oil company (2010–2013). This scandal further delegitimised Sendic, who was previously proved to have falsely claimed a university degree. The unjustified expenditures were highly criticised by the media and the opposition, and later provoked the condemnation of the Ethics Committee of Sendic’s party, the Frente Amplio. As a consequence of its own party’s pressure, he resigned from the vice-presidency in 2017 (Carneiro & Traversa, 2018). In 2018, he was found guilty by the Justice of embezzlement and abuse of functions. The case shows at the same time the importance of remaining vigilant to unethical practices of the political system and the low tolerance in Uruguay to this type of behaviour when it becomes public. It also casts light on the importance of investigative journalism, since the case came to light due to a journalistic investigation.

The general picture depicted does not mean that the country is free of corrupt practices. On the contrary, as I will show in the next section when developing the CSO demands, Uruguay faces significant challenges in this regard that tend to be underestimated due to the general perception that corruption is not one of the country’s most pressing issues.

ACTORS AND DEMANDS IN THE URUGUAYAN ANTI-CORRUPTION FIELD

Uruguay counts on several public institutions that work in the anti-corruption and transparency fields (Cribari & Piñeiro, 2018; Martini, 2016). As mentioned in the previous section, in the last decades Uruguay has created new public agencies that specifically deal with these matters: the JUTEP (which advises the government and the judiciary regarding corruption and crimes against the public administration), the SENACLAFT (which fights against money
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laundry), the AGESIC (which promotes transparency and e-government), and the UAIP (which promotes access to public information). Their duties combine with those of many public institutions that have historically been working on these types of issues: the Judiciary\textsuperscript{15}, the Tribunal de Cuentas\textsuperscript{16} (main oversight institution regarding State finances), and the Electoral Court (in charge of controlling political parties funding), for instance.

Regarding social action, there are not very powerful collective actors working on these issues and the country never experienced cycles of protest motivated for corruption cases. Uruguay does count on some important social movements and civil society organisations that have played an important role in shaping the political orientation of the country (for example, the labour, student, cooperativism, Human Rights, feminist and more recently the diversity movements). The existence of binding bottom-up Mechanisms of Direct Democracy (MDD) is a particularity of Uruguay that has been exploited by different social actors. Since democratic transition, plebiscites and referendums have been frequently fostered by social movements to counter important governmental orientations in diverse fields, such as pensions, the judicial treatment of Human Rights violations during the 1973–85 dictatorship, the privatisation of public companies, and the privatisation of the water (Monestier, 2010; Moreira, 2004). During the neoliberal period, in the 1990s, social movements were successful in opposing the pro-market orientation of the right wing governments in alliance with the Frente Amplio, the left wing political opposition party (Bidegain & Tricot, 2017). Between 2005 and 2020, the Frente Amplio governed the country and the right wing parties recurred to the MDD to counter its progressive agenda. Nonetheless, these parties did not have significant support of social collective actors, and their initiatives failed (Bidegain, Freigedo, & Puntigliano Casulo, 2021).

Returning to the fight against corruption, it is not surprising that there is no important collective action on it since this is not a topic considered by the population as one of the main issues that the country faces. According to the available Latinobarómetro data, between 1995 and 2020 corruption ranked among the five more important problems in only two years: 1996 and 2003\textsuperscript{17}. In both years it occupied fifth place among the most pressing problems (5.5 per cent and 5.3 per cent, respectively). Taking into consideration the 2004–2020 Latinobarómetro waves\textsuperscript{18}, it is clear that corruption weight is marginal among the Uruguayan concerns (see Figure 3.1). From a comparative regional point of view, between 2004 and 2020 the mean of Uruguayans indicating corruption as the main country’s problem was 0.7 per cent, while this percentage represented 3.2 per cent of the population in Chile, 6.6 per cent in Argentina, 9.4 per cent in Paraguay and 13.3 per cent in Brazil.

Uruguay only has one civil society organisation (CSO) fully oriented to the fight against corruption, Uruguay Transparente\textsuperscript{20}. This organisation was born
in 1995, when corruption cases started to be perceived as a significant threat in the country. Between 1995 and the present, with highs and lows, Uruguay Transparente has remained the sole CSO completely dedicated to fighting corruption. Since its foundation, it has been the national chapter of Transparency International for several non-consecutive periods, ending this relation for the last time in 2014. No other organisation has since assumed this role.

Nonetheless, there are other more recent CSOs that work on related topics, such as transparency issues, access to public information and open data. Two of the more active ones are CAinfo and DATA Uruguay, created in 2008 and 2012, respectively. Along with Uruguay Transparente and other CSOs, they integrate the Red de Gobierno Abierto, a coalition of CSOs that foster open government. In fact, Uruguay joined the Open Government Partnership upon its foundation, in 2011 (Open Government Partnership) and has been very active in fostering this agenda. The Red de Gobierno Abierto plays an important role in the Grupo de Trabajo de Gobierno Abierto, in charge of elaborating, monitoring and supporting the implementation of the Open Government Action Plans. The Grupo de Gobierno Abierto was created in 2011 and originally reunited representatives of many public institutions. Since 2013, to comply with the Open Government Partnership orientations, the academia and
civil society actors were included in the work group (Agencia de Gobierno Electrónico y Sociedad de la Información y del Conocimiento, 2022). Between 2011 and 2021, Uruguay defined five action plans. A recent balance on the open government agenda in Uruguay highlights the 2012–2017 period as particularly fertile in terms of advancing towards an open government model and placing the country as a success story at the comparative level. However, the research indicates as well that this impulse seems to have reached some limits in terms of expanding the agenda towards public institutions and social organisations that were not involved when it began (Álvarez & Scrollini, 2021).

The fieldwork conducted makes clear that both public and CSO organisations have scarce resources to perform their anti-corruption activities. In the CSO field, the organisations are very small (from 3 to 10 permanent activists, not necessarily paid) and voluntary and semi-voluntary work is the norm. When funding is obtained for specific projects the amount of resources involved is very low (‘The money was still peanuts, basically’26, ‘We are used to work with three beans and two little sticks…’27). The organisations do not have substantive membership fees, public or private sector funding. Additionally, the possibility of aspiring to international cooperation is unlikely since Uruguay is not globally considered a priority in the fight against corruption and the country has recently been classified as a high income country (Presidencia de la República, 2018). As a result, ‘It is very difficult for us, in Uruguay, to obtain funds to fight against corruption. Why? Because we rank well in the international rankings. And it’s like: “what does the civil society do in this context?”’28.

However, the interviews conducted show that public officials and civil society actors share some important insights regarding the problems and challenges regarding this issue.

In the first place, there is a common understanding that there is work to be done to raise awareness of the reality and risks of corruption for the country. Even though there is a general consideration that Uruguay has a relatively controlled situation (‘I don’t think that this problem has the magnitude that characterises Brazil or other countries of the region’29; ‘I believe that there is a shared view that our political system counts with some virtues regarding other systems of the region and worldwide, and that corruption refers to isolated cases, it is not the rule in the country’30), there is also concern regarding the risk that a complaisant account of the country’s reality may have to downplay many problems that the country does face (‘It is difficult for civil society to organise itself on an issue that even society itself does not see as a problem. Beyond that we all know that it can be a problem and there are thousands of things to improve’31; ‘I always say that we are among the best students in a very bad classroom. We do not have to settle for this, we need to think in the future’32).
In the second place, social actors and public authorities also agreed on the fact that in spite of significant recent legal advances, the political system has not considered the fight against corruption as a real priority. As a consequence, institutions like the JUTEP, the *Corte Electoral* or the *Tribunal de Cuentas* lack the basic resources (human, economic and normative) to properly fulfil the control and prosecutor duties entrusted by law. A high rank authority of one of these institutions stressed that the situation:

reflects the will of the political system as a whole to have a very nice anti-corruption system on paper, but one that does not work as it should. My conclusion is that the political system does not want strict control. In reality, Uruguay has organisations that theoretically comply with the commitments made in the OAS and United Nations Conventions, but that in practice don’t work as effectively as they should.33

This diagnosis regards the lack of political will to really strengthen the anti-corruption public institutions as well as to promote an open government culture in the public administration34.

In the third place, some particular areas were indicated by the interviewees as deserving special attention. Many stressed that, in spite of the 2009 Political Parties Law provisions regarding political campaign funding, the opacity of the system remains in place due to the almost non-existent means and efforts of the Electoral Court to apply the law35. Relatedly, several interviewees pointed out the relevance of strengthening the fight against conflict of interest and patronage practices, which time and again are denounced by the press, an actor that has taken special advantage of the Access to Public Information Law to unveil suspicious cases36. Another challenge refers to the historical role of the country as an international financial centre with low regulations. Strengthening the control of finance activities to avoid money laundering is one of the most pressing issues raised by the interviewees, even though there is recognition that important progress has been accomplished in recent years37. As some of them have pointed out, these activities do not necessarily cause public commotion and keep Uruguay outside of the radar as they do not directly involve scandals associated with public servants. According to a CSO militant, the Odebrecht case is a good example: ‘Uruguay is the only country that is not affected by the Odebrecht issue, there is no official who has received a bribe, but we provided the financial legal structure to the manoeuvres. It is a historical role of Uruguay in the matter’38. Finally, public procurement remains a challenging field due to weak capacities of the oversight institutions and the extensive use of direct procurement by some public institutions39.
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STRATEGIES AND THE USE OF DIGITAL MEDIA IN THE FIGHT AGAINST CORRUPTION: THE CASE OF URUGUAY TRANSPARENTENTE

Interestingly, and probably related with the central role of the State in the Uruguayan society, the dominant strategy of CSOs to fight corruption from civil society has been the collaboration with public authorities. In this regard, it is worth unfolding some important features of Uruguay Transparente that showcase general characteristics of the national reality.

In the first place, even though its foundation in 1995 was a reaction to the perception of the increasing risks of the extension of corruption in the country, it is key to take into consideration that this reaction was born out of the core of the partisan system. In fact, the initiative to create this civil society organisation was led by parliamentarians of the three most important political parties (Partido Colorado, Partido Nacional and Frente Amplio), who contacted other high profile personalities of social and political life of the country to ensure a representative integration of the organisation. The political plural integration of the organisation was an explicit objective followed by the founders (who operated at the personal level, not as party representatives) to impede any political appropriation of their activities. As a result, the first integration of Uruguay Transparente counted on personalities that represented the party system (one member for each party), the Judicial System (a former Supreme Court president), the workers’ union (a former president of the national general union), the private sector (a leader of an agricultural employer union and a leader of a commercial employer union), a Catholic bishop and a Methodist pastor. Therefore, in spite of purposively adopting a plural integration with the aim of representing large sectors of the society, it is clear that this organisation wasn’t born as a bottom-up initiative. On the contrary, it reunited prominent public figures from the political system and civil society, and expressed the centrality of the parties in the Uruguayan ‘partidocratic democracy’ (Caetano et al., 1987). Interestingly, after the generation of founders left the organisation, Uruguay Transparente has maintained its principle to ensure political diversity in its integration.

In the second place, Uruguay Transparente was conceived since its beginning as an organisation oriented to help the State fight corruption and strengthen the ethical values of the Uruguayan society (Comisión de Lucha Contra la Corrupción. Uruguay Transparente, 1995). According to one of the organisation’s founding fathers, they tried to avoid a rupture between the Uruguayan society and the State, a risk they envisioned due to the emergence of the 1990s scandals: ‘To create a tool so that citizens could participate in the fight against corruption was a way of allying citizens with the State, instead of...
transforming the situation into a new division between society and the State.

In order to collaborate with the authorities, the organisation performed two main types of activities. On one hand, the organisation operated as an informal and protected channel to receive corruption complaints. The Directive Board assessed the character of the complaints and, when it considered that a case involved corrupt practices, it contacted the maximum authority of the institution involved in order to correct the problematic situations. The main approach was to stay out of the public debate in order to avoid contributing to the delegitimisation of the public institutions: ‘We departed from this base: we had to support the State, not to confront it.’ Only when there was no satisfactory response from the authorities, would the organisation proceed to issue a judicial demand. According to some original members of the organisations, these were very rare cases. Most of the time, Uruguay Transparente had a fluid and productive exchange with the authorities of the institutions involved. On the other hand, it played an advocacy role to strengthen the anti-corruption institutional and normative Uruguayan frame. During the first years of the organisation, the high volume of complaints received oriented most of the efforts to this task (all members of the boards were voluntary). However, after a few years the number of corruption complaints decreased significantly and the advocacy role of the organisation gained weight in its regular work. The prestige of the members of the organisation helped to perform both types of activities: to easily reach the authorities of public institutions when dealing with corruption cases and to have fluid contact with legislators when debating institutional and legal reforms. The organisation also aims to raise awareness of the risk of corruption at the public level and to educate in moral and ethical values in order to fight against some practices that they feel do not receive the public condemnation that they should (patronage, petty corruption, conflict of interest, etc.). However, after the initial years of Uruguay Transparente, the capacity to reach public opinion has been limited.

Uruguay Transparente has experienced ups and downs since its foundation, but has managed to remain operative. After the very active initial years, the activity of the organisation progressively decreased along with the retirement of some of the ‘founding fathers’ and the loss of importance of corruption in the public opinion. In the 2000s, there was a renewal of activists and a re-foundation of the organisation, with the incorporation of new members, although with a lower public profile than the founders. In the 2000s, the organisation maintained its advocacy role (with an important part, for instance, in the debate over the 2009 Political Parties law) and instituted a short-lived (2008–2010) Advocacy and Legal Advice Centre (ALAC), in collaboration with Transparency International. The Uruguayan ALAC did not receive a large volume of corruption complaints and closed quickly. In the 2010s, the organisation entered into a low functioning period, but maintained its presence.
in the civil society as the anti-corruption CSO organisation. It has continued its advocacy role and actively engaged in the transparency and access to public information, participating in the *Red de Gobierno Abierto*. In addition, it keeps its corruption complaints channel open, however there is not an important flow of cases\(^47\).

*Uruguay occupies first place among Latin American countries in the ICT Development Index (International Telecommunication Union, 2017). Nonetheless, diverging from some regional experiences (Mattoni & Odilla, 2021), digital media does not play a crucial role in the fight against corruption in the country.*\(^48\)

In the case of Uruguay Transparente, there is a consensus between the interviewees that there is a sub-utilisation of the possibilities that exist in the country. Several reasons account for this situation. Firstly, there is a generational factor. The organisation doesn’t have activists in their twenties or thirties. Most of them are elderly or mature adults, with scarce abilities in the use of digital media. As one of them recognises, the use of digital media ‘is far below the possibilities offered by new technologies. I remember that, due to a generational issue, the creation of a website for the institution represented a lot of work’\(^49\).

Secondly and related to the former point, the rigid bureaucratic structure of the organisation makes it unappealing to young people. According to an active member:

> When you join Uruguay Transparente, you have to be a member for two years to be able to intervene and have a voice and a vote. That is unthinkable now. If you bring a youngster into an organisation, you can’t tell them “you have to wait two years to see if you can open your mouth”\(^50\).

In this activist’s point of view, younger organisations like CAINFO and DATA are more attractive to young people due to their more flexible organisation. In the third place, the current state of low activity of the organisation makes innovative efforts difficult, since their resources are oriented to keep it running: ‘Uruguay Transparente is currently operating with a small group that works to keep it alive. But it does need extra energy’\(^51\).

Finally, the described situation combines with almost non-existent monetary resources and the complete dependence on voluntary work. This situation makes it impossible to recruit young personnel or pay for digital media services. The collaboration among civil society organisations is the preferred strategy to counter these limitations:

> As an institution, I don’t believe we will have, by ourselves, the strength in the short term. We might have it, maybe, through the Red de Gobierno Abierto; to have the capacity to think of mechanisms for the application of new technologies. We can’t
alone. In that sense, DATA has a very important development, and we always try count on their support. In a certain way, we give them the leading role, since they are at the forefront of this whole process.52

In spite of this general situation, two recent efforts stand out. On one hand is the advocacy work performed by Uruguay Transparente and other CSOs of the Red de Gobierno Abierto to foster transparency and open government from public institutions. In this regard, several interviewees have stressed that there have been important advances, even though there is still great space to improve (for instance, regarding inter-institutional sharing and cross checking of public information). Recently, Uruguay Transparente has advocated for the creation of a single window system to report to the State corruption cases, with the participation of civil society representatives in the process of assessing the reports. However, these efforts refer to the use of digital media by the government and have not been fruitful yet53.

On the other hand, Uruguay Transparente participated in the Political Campaign Funding in Uruguay project, which mapped and presented, through an interactive network on a website, the funding of the different political parties and personalities for the 2014 national elections54. This project was a joint effort between the Universidad Católica (which provided the technical capacities), a journalist radio program – No Toquen Nada – (which diffused the results) and the Uruguayan chapter of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FESUR), which funded the initiative. Several features of this project deserve to be pointed out to sketch the Uruguayan reality on this matter.

First, the project showed public authorities’ lack of will to effectively conduct the duties attributed by the law. The 2009 Political Parties Law established that the parties should declare the origin of the funding of their campaigns, but the Electoral Court does not have the capacity to check on the accuracy of the declarations or to make the information available to the citizenry in a friendly manner. In fact, most of the work of the project was to convert hundreds of declarations in PDF to a compatible format (Excel) with data analysis55. According to one of the members of the project, the lack of will to engage in matters that exceed its main function of organising elections is related to its composition:

Finding irregularities associated to electoral campaign funding is a problem for the Court (...). It has a great composition to organise elections, to assure mutual control. Now, when there is a problem that belongs to everyone, and especially when there is a problem that confronts or could confront the Court with the political parties, well, the Electoral Court is very reluctant to advance in that orientation56.

Second, the economic resources to perform the project were very scarce (around USD2000). The funds were used to hire a research assistant and
a computer scientist (paid under the market price, due to its commitment to the project) to create the webpage (‘The whole project cost peanuts’). Third, and related to the previous point, the funding only allowed for conducting the project once, it could not be replicated in the following elections. This replication would have been important to keep electoral campaign funding under the public eye. Nonetheless, the lack of funding, and the fact that none of the researchers involved had this topic among their main research agenda lines of inquiry, limited the possibility to undertake a similar effort in the 2019 elections.

Fourth, in spite of being one of the few projects that is usually mentioned when asking activists, anti-corruption officials and experts about digital media use in fighting corruption in the country, it did not involve high programming skills. Basically, the project designed a website with a visually attractive network, using Gephi and hosted in GitHub. Its main contribution was to make visible to the citizenry the funding flows in a friendly manner, but as stated above, most of the work of the project was to transform the Electoral Court PDFs into machine readable data to build the networks. As stated by the interviewees, once performed, the design of the website and the networks was relatively simple: ‘It was a web page... just showing the graph and allowing to show other information, if you want. And a principal web page. There was not much requirement’.

Fifth, even though the radio program stands out among the ones with most ratings in the country and the project showed the opacity and problems of the electoral campaign funding system in Uruguay, it did not cause long term repercussions in the political debate. It did create some political reactions, notably regarding the information associated with differential media prizing of political publicity to the political parties. However, the type of discussions that emerged in the political field did not centre on the structural problems of the system, but were mostly oriented to confront political rivals. This was clearly expressed by an interviewee:

It was a rather shallow and not very honest use of the information that was generated, simply because it served to make noise and make some inflammatory posts on social networks, saying that such channels favoured such parties. But it had zero impact to problematise the issue in a quality debate.
OTHER DIGITAL MEDIA EXPERIENCES TO FOSTER TRANSPARENCY AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION FROM THE GRASSROOTS

According to the mapping conducted for this research regarding the use of digital media for anti-corruption initiatives, it is observed that there are some cases related mostly to transparency and access to public information.

Despite not being explicitly devoted to fight corruption, these initiatives are relevant to hinder the possibilities of developing discretionary practices as well as to provide the citizenry with resources to make informed decisions. For instance, a DATA activist indicated that even though this organisation does not have anti-corruption as a specific objective from a large perspective their work is related to it:

I believe that deep down we do work on anti-corruption issues, in the sense that we do activism, we try to publish data. These are tools that also serve to fight corruption in a certain way. It is not that we say “We do this to fight corruption”, we rather do it because we want people to have information to make decisions based on data, in an informed way. But in the background, it seems to me that the fight against corruption is still there.61

One example of these tools is ¿Qué Sabés?62, a website that helps the citizens to file demands to access information through the Access to Public Information Law63 and stores the demands and responses publicly. This initiative, led by DATA and CAinfo, replicates a similar experience conducted in the United Kingdom64. Some access to information demands have led to the discovery of corruption cases. Nonetheless, DATA activists are very cautious when defining their linkages with this specific field of work:

Quesabes.uy has been the origin of several requests for access of information that ended in cases linked to corruption. But does that mean that we try to be the Uruguayan branch of Transparency International? Not at all. Not even close. But I insist, there is also a matter of seriousness. We are not, we do not consider ourselves experts in this topic. And that is why I am very resistant to being considered an anti-corruption organisation.65

DATA is involved in many other similar initiatives such as Por Mi Barrio66 – a website to report different types of problems associated with subnational and municipal governments, following the United Kingdom Fix My Street initiative; AtuServicio67, a website that provides to the citizens public information on health care providers; and ¿Dónde reciclo?68, a website with information regarding recycling points and related issues. These initiatives promote the cooperation between public authorities and the citizens, acting as brokers that
contribute to the flow of information between them. Both AtuServicio and ¿Dónde reciclo? are considered success stories by their developers, since they have had a very good reception by the population (for instance, ATuServicio counts yearly thousands of visits69).

In 2020, in collaboration with the newspaper La Diaria and the Latin American project PODER, DATA launched Uruguay Leaks, a website on whistleblowing information to La Diaria. For the time being, according to the different counterparts involved, the impact has been scarce and there have not been important cases reported through the platform70,71.

Several reasons are pointed out by the interviewees to account for the small impact of Uruguay Leaks in its first two years: the launching of the platform when the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, the fact that only one newspaper is involved (they are currently evaluating the possibility of including other media outlets), and some peculiarities of the Uruguayan reality. Regarding the latter, the interviewees underscore that the scale of the country allows the citizens to easily contact a journalist to whistleblow and that the risks of this type of practice are lower than in other countries of the continent:

State repression is not strong. In other words, Mexico is very different, MexicoLeaks was born in the context of the Pegasus espionage scandal, the government was spying on civil society. We are not even close to that72; ‘In Uruguay, unlike other countries, we all know each other, it is easier to contact the governing authorities, let’s say, than in other countries where the rulers are further away, they are more distant.’73; ‘Uruguay is very particular in these things in terms of the closeness that one can have with a journalist or something like that. So, perhaps in a much larger country, like Mexico, it may be a useful tool for someone to pass on information. Here you can surely call someone you know who works in some media outlet74.

A final example of these types of initiatives is Cuentas Claras75, a project led by the CSO Cívico, in collaboration with La Diaria. It counted the support of the Open Contracting Partnership, the Latin American Initiative for Open Data and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). This project aimed to assess and show what type of analysis could be done with the data published by the government on public procurement. Also, it aimed to develop an open methodology that could be eventually used by other organisations. As a result, the project monitored, analysed and presented on a website all public procurements between 2015 and 2018. Cuentas Claras was conceived as a short term learning project. As a consequence, it is currently over, but the website is still online and the methodology developed remains available in case a CSO wants to use it.
FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Uruguay is a rare case in this book. On one hand, usually considered as ‘the cleanest country in Latin America and the one with the longest democratic tradition’ (Martini, 2016, p. 1), it does not have a strong civil society or social movements organisations working on this topic. In fact, there is only one CSO fully devoted to corruption matters and a few other organisations working on related ones, such as transparency and open government. This is not surprising, since corruption is not perceived by the population as one of the main problems of the country. On the other hand, the use of digital media in the anti-corruption civil society field is scarce, in spite of the country’s high levels of ICT development.

The explanations that have been proposed to account for the low corruption levels usually combine the strength of the political institutions, the respect of the rule of law and freedom of the press, the low potential rents due to the lack of natural resources and the passage from an equilibrium of party competition based on patronage to a programmatic equilibrium in the last decades, in a general context where corruption was not considered endemic (Buquet & Piñeiro, 2016; Martini, 2016; Vaz Mondo, 2011).

As developed in the chapter, corruption gained consideration in public opinion in the 1990s, when the press unveiled some scandals involving the Lacalle Herrera administration. The political system responded quickly and several institutional reforms took place, following the international mood and attending to the local situation. In this context Uruguay Transparente was born, the CSO specialising in the fight against corruption. However, as shown, it can hardly be considered a grassroots reaction. It reunited high profile political and social figures, and the initiative was led by political figures from the three main political parties (at the personal level). After a very dynamic beginning, the organisation had some ups and downs and its activity diminished in the 2010s. Nonetheless it remains active and the sole reference in the civil society explicitly working in anti-corruption.

As shown in the chapter, the limited use of digital media by the organisation is directly linked to its history. There is a generational factor that accounts for this situation. In order to overcome the limitations associated with the high average age of the organisations’ members, Uruguay Transparente has looked for some alliances with the academia and younger organisations working in related matters, which resulted in some specific projects with digital media use.

Relatedly, since the 2010s, Uruguay Transparente and the organisations working in open government have collaborated on the Red de Gobierno Abierto, which interacts with the authorities to foster an open government
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agenda. These organisations, especially DATA, have a more intense use of digital media and have developed and replicated some tools of other countries. Many of these platforms developed and helped to connect public institutions with the citizenry, facilitating the flow of information between them. Some of them, like ATuServicio and ¿Dónde reciclo? are considered success stories. Other tools promote accountability of public expenses and whistleblowing channels, but their impact has not been as important. As stated by a DATA activist: ‘I think that the “lighter” tools are the ones that have had the better results’.

The case of Uruguay Leaks, the local version of an international whistleblowing website, is particularly interesting in this regard. As stated by many interviewees involved in the project, two years after its launch, the response has been limited (few leaks and without significant information). Some of the main factors hypothesised by the interviewees to account for this situation regard the Uruguayan scale and the peculiarities of the local corruption reality (the possibility to directly reach the journalists to leak information, the low risks involved when denouncing in comparison with other countries, etc.). At a general level, this experience shows the challenges of the replication of digital tools developed in different contexts. Developing specific tools adapted to the local reality is undoubtedly more complex and demands more resources. This is particularly challenging in a country like Uruguay, where the anti-corruption field is characterised by little public interest, few organisations and poor resources.

Corruption is not a major issue in Uruguay’s political and social agenda. Local and international resources to work on this field are very scarce. The few CSOs that exist and the fact that Uruguay has not had a Transparency International chapter since 2014 are indicators of the low interest that this topic raises in the country. In spite of this, there was agreement between the interviewees – working in public institutions or social organisations – that Uruguay faces important challenges and needs to strengthen the controls in many fields such as political campaign funding, conflicts of interest or money laundering. The interviewees also agreed on the fact that many important institutional advances of the last decades need to be boosted by real political will, expressed in the allocation of further resources to the institutions in charge of monitoring and prosecuting corrupt practices.

The centrality of a democratic party system and its evolution from a clientelist to a programmatic oriented competition equilibrium has been indicated as one important reason for the universalistic governance model that the country counts on (Buquet & Piñeiro, 2016). However, while this new equilibrium seems sufficient to Uruguayan political parties, the anti-corruption government officials and civil society activists claim for pressing reforms.
Uruguayan civil society organisations face the major task of challenging this state of affairs and affecting the public debate so that the political system provides more resources to the institutions in charge of enforcing the current legal framework. In the current context, this seems an important issue that requires alliances with other actors and social movements in the country. Relatedly, raising the public opinion awareness and concern with the grey areas that constitute corrupt and unethical practices remain a key challenge. Digital media has not played a crucial role in fighting corruption yet, nonetheless it has the potential to contribute in the future to shake the problematic conformity that the Uruguayan political system and public opinion have on this matter.

NOTES

1. I am very thankful to the generous and insightful comments on a previous version of this chapter by the editor and the rest of the contributors of this volume during the workshop that we shared in January 2022. I also thank the interviewees for their generosity sharing their knowledge and experiences.


3. The author acknowledges that the research for this chapter has been conducted at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna in the framework of the BIT-ACT project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No 802362).

4. Interviews with interviewees 1 (09/02/2021, online), 2 (21/12/2020, online), 4 (04/12/2020 and 14/12/2020, online), 14 (07/10/2020, online), and 18 (29/10/2020, online).

5. Interviews with interviewees 2 (21/12/2020, online) and 4 (04/12/2020 and 14/12/2020, online).


8. Advisory Board on Economic and Financial Affairs of the State, in English.

9. Board of Transparency and Public Ethics.


13. Access to Public Information Unit, in English.

14. For a more comprehensive analysis on the Uruguayan anti-corruption and transparency legislation, see Cribari and Piñeiro (2018).

15. And since the 2015 reform of the Judicial System the new Office of the Attorney General and Public Prosecutor.

16. Court of Auditors, in English.
17. It is important to take into consideration that the available options in the phrasing of the questions in some Latinobarómetro waves changed over time. The options remained unchanged in the 1995–1996 rounds, in the 1997–2000 rounds, in the 2001–2003 rounds and from 2004 to 2020.

18. These waves can be compared since they maintained the same options in this question’s phrasing.


21. Interviews 1, 4 and 17.

22. CAinfo stands for Centro de Archivo y Acceso a la Información Pública; in English: Archive and Access for Public Information Center.


24. Open Government Working Group, in English. The group was created in 2011

25. Interviews with interviewees 4 (04/12/2020 and 14/12/2020, online) and 5 (26/02/2021, online).

26. Interview with interviewee 23 conducted on 28/08/2020, online.

27. Interview with interviewee 8 conducted on 08/03/2021, online.

28. Interview with interviewee 5 conducted on 26/02/2020, online.

29. Interview with interviewee 12 conducted on 16/03/2021, online.

30. Interview with interviewee 18 conducted on 29/10/2020, online.

31. Interview with interviewee 1 conducted on 09/02/2021, online.

32. Interview with interviewee 14 conducted on 07/10/2020, online.

33. Interview with interviewee 14 conducted on 07/10/2020, online.

34. Interviews with interviewees 1 (09/02/2021, online), 2 (21/12/2020, online), 5 (26/02/2021, online), 7 (15/10/2020, online), 8 (08/03/2021, online), 18 (29/10/2020, online) and 19 (18/08/2021, online).

35. Interviews with interviewees 2 (21/12/2020, online), 8 (08/03/2021, online), 9 (08/03/2021, online), 12 (16/03/2021, online), 13 (22/03/2020, online).

36. Interviews with interviewees 14 (07/10/2020, online), 18 (29/10/2020, online), 23 (28/02/2020, online).

37. Interviews with interviewees 12 (16/03/2021) and 22 (18/08/2020, online).

38. Interviews with interviewees 4 (04/12/2020 and 14/12/2020, online).

39. Interviews with interviewees 1 (09/02/2021), 4 (04/12/2020 and 14/12/2020, online) and 10 (27/10/2020, online).

40. Interview with interviewee 6 conducted on 02/02/2021, online.

41. Interview with interviewee 11 conducted on 26/02/2021, online.

42. Interview with interviewee 6 conducted on 02/02/2021, online.

43. Interview with interviewee 4 conducted on 04/12/2020 and 14/12/2020, online.

44. Interviews with interviewees 4 (04/12/2020 and 14/12/2020, online), 6 (02/02/2021, online), 7 (15/10/2020, online), 11 (26/02/2021, online), 14 (07/10/2020, online).

45. Interview with interviewee 1 conducted on 09/02/2021, online.

46. Interview with interviewees 1 (09/02/2021, online) and 17 (29/07/2021, online).

47. Interview with interviewees 1 (09/02/2021, online) and 4 (04/12/2020 and 14/02/2020, online).

48. See also Chapter 2 in this volume which focuses on the case of the Brazilian experience, which shows a striking contrast.

49. Interview with interviewee 4 conducted on 04/12/2020 and 14/12/2020, online.
50. Interview with interviewee 5 conducted on 26/02/2021, online.
51. Interview with interviewee 3 conducted on 13/08/2021, online.
52. Interview with interviewee 4 conducted on 04/12/2020 and 14/12/2020, online.
53. Interviews with interviewees 4 (04/12/2020 and 14/12/2020, online) and 5 (26/02/2021, online).
54. De dónde sale el dinero de las campañas políticas en Uruguay? https://finpol.github.io/.
55. Interviews with interviewees 8 (08/03/2021, online), 9 (08/03/2021, online), 12 (16/03/2021, online), 13 (22/03/2020, online), 15 (23/03/2021, online).
56. Interview with interviewee 12 conducted on 16/03/2021, online.
57. Interview with interviewee 8 conducted on 08/03/2021, online.
58. Interviews with interviewees 8 (08/03/2021, online) and 12 (16/03/2021, online).
59. Interview with interviewee 15 conducted on 23/03/2021, online.
60. Interview with interviewee 19 conducted on 18/08/2021, online.
61. Interview with interviewee 15 conducted on 23/03/2022, online.
63. Between 2012 (when it started operating) and the beginning of 2022, the website processed around 750 requests.
64. WhatDoTheyKnow: https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/.
65. Interview with interviewee 25 conducted on 16/02/2022, online.
69. Interviews with interviewees 24 (14/03/2022, online) and 25 (16/02/2022, online).
70. Interviews with interviewees 24 (14/03/2022, online), 25 (16/02/2022, online), 26 (17/02/2022, online), 27 (23/03/2022, online) and 28 (17/03/2022, online).
71. See Chapter 7 in this volume for a deep reflection on whistleblower platforms and the experience of the ALAC – Allerta Anticorruzione platform in Italy.
72. Interview with interviewee 25 conducted on 16/02/2022, online.
73. Interview with interviewee 26 conducted on 17/02/2022, online.
74. Interview with interviewee 24 conducted on 14/03/2022, online.
75. In English: Transparent public expenditures http://cuentasclaras.uy/.
76. Interview with interviewee 27 conducted on 23/03/2022, online.

REFERENCES


4. Anti-corruption ‘from below’ and digital media during regime change: A comparative analysis of two North African countries¹

Ester Sigillò

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, scholars of social movements have begun to reflect on the main features of grassroots anti-corruption and the diversified roles that digital media plays in different contexts. However, the literature does not focus on the specificities of those countries where profound political changes (such as a process of democratisation) are still ongoing. Therefore, societies witness a partial liberalisation in a context of reconfiguration of power relations.

This chapter explores two North African countries (Tunisia and Algeria) that have respectively experienced a revolutionary process leading to full or partial regime change. On 17 December, 2010, ordinary people across Tunisia took to the streets to demand an end to the repressive and corrupt rule of President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. However, despite prosecutions and arrests for corruption-related offences after the regime’s fall, the overall corruption level in Tunisia is perceived to have risen since the revolution. On 22 February, 2019, thousands of Algerians protested against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s decision to run for a fifth term in office. Despite Bouteflika stepping down under pressure, the Hirak Movement has continued to peacefully mobilise against the ‘corrupted clique’ of generals, businessmen, and ruling party politicians that have for years surrounded the President and are still in place (Northey & Guemar, 2020).

The two countries differ in their political, societal, and digital liberalisation levels. The fall of the dictator in Algeria, contrary to Tunisia, did not lead to the country’s democratisation (Mohammed, 2020). However, they have both faced a process of political transformation and massive street mobilisations, including contentious and politicised anti-corruption struggles. Based on ethnographic research, the chapter scrutinises the dynamics of grassroots
anti-corruption mobilisations in the two countries by discussing how digital media became an entry point into contexts of regime change. Findings show how activists in the two countries relate to digital media, embedding it in different situations, and how digital media shapes activists’ relationships with other actors, such as socio-political adversaries, national authorities, and international donors. Overall, the chapter provides an empirical analysis of the variegated use of digital media in the framework of the grassroots anti-corruption struggle in highly politicised environments characterised by fluid dynamics of reconfiguration of power in two specific situations: the post-authoritarian phase in Tunisia and the Hirak popular protests leading to the fall of the Bouteflika’s regime in Algeria.

The chapter is structured as follows. The first part sheds light on the theoretical relevance of analysing grassroots anti-corruption and digital media from a comparative perspective in two countries characterised by regime change. It thus puts forward the final objective of the contribution: rethinking the notion of ‘anti-corruption from below’ in political systems characterised by a profound political transformation through the entry point of the use of digital media. The second part sketches the methodology underpinning this chapter. Notably, after having clarified the puzzle and the research questions, it justifies the case selection and the theoretical framework drawing on grounded theory. Findings are divided into three sections. In the first section, the chapter highlights how digital media supported the revolutionary momentum in Algeria and Tunisia and describes the new position of local activists as anti-corruption agents. The second section draws the conflictual dynamics of the anti-corruption action and the ambivalent role of digital media in two different transitions. In the last section, the chapter traces the two trajectories of the anti-corruption struggle supported by digital media when it comes to the transnational dimension: the de-localisation of the struggle of Algerian activists and the technocratisation of the anti-corruption action driven by international donors in Tunisia. Conclusions summarise the main findings presented in the chapter and account for the variation of the role played by digital media in civil society’s anti-corruption initiatives in the two countries under study. In doing so, the final remarks discuss the alleged politicisation/de-politicisation of the fight against corruption in two different situations, as well as the agencies of grassroots actors.

DIGITAL MEDIA AND GRASSROOTS ANTI-CORRUPTION STRUGGLE IN NORTH AFRICA

Since the start of the wave of Arab uprisings, the presence of digital media and its role in calling for anti-regime demonstrations, as well as the production and diffusion of continuous information on social media platforms, have given rise
to the so-called ‘digital revolution’ in the MENA region (Gerbaudo, 2012; Hill 2013; Mekourar, 2016). Scholars, indeed, started to scrutinise the role of ICTs in forcing long-lasting regimes out of power (Howard & Hussain, 2011; Faris & Meier, 2012) and all the technological tools through which mobilisation and activism took place before and during the uprisings. Academic works reported how the significant diffusion of social media platforms opened windows of opportunity for political oppositions challenging authoritarian regimes (Howard & Hussain, 2011; Wilson & Dunn, 2011). Online activism was not believed to be particularly significant before the uprisings. However, some works show how relevant submerged forms of digital activism were before the uprising (Zayani, 2015). The digital space is often the only one available to civil society to discuss social, economic, and political issues in times of authoritarian repression.

Thanks to the significant diffusion of the internet, citizens could become active agents of mobilisation, as they could publish, receive, share, and comment on information, opinions, images, and launch initiatives (Howard & Hussain, 2011). In this regard, literature also focused on how advancement in digital media has helped to transform initially disorganised networks into social movements with specific identities and objectives and how collective action claims are framed and organised through digital media (Bennett & Segerburg, 2013; Frangonikolopoulos & Chapsos, 2012; Khondker, 2011; Loader, 2008; Shade & Landry, 2012). In Tunisia, for instance, digital media has enabled a very rapid exchange of information among activists, who can communicate online and establish meeting points and activities to be undertaken in real-time with no delays preventing more formal and hierarchical organisations from acting quickly (Karolak, 2017). In many ways, social media and digital media were the means for politically unaffiliated youth to work first in concert without ever having developed offline social trust (Cavatorta, 2012).

Amongst other mobilisations in the region, rampant corruption of the political elites had a primary role in the outbreak of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ revolutions subverting or shaking up several regimes in the MENA region. Indeed, since 2011, civil societies of the Arab World have played an increasing role in raising awareness to combat corruption. Before the wave of uprisings, civil society organisations were distorted and underwent systematic violation by ruling regimes to restrict the emergence of any opposition movements. In other words, the civil society sector in the Arab region was not recognised, and it faced many violations and limitations of its freedom of expression, association, and independence. Several authors shed light on the dynamics of anti-corruption mobilisations from below and on the role of civil society in denouncing political systems perceived as corrupt in the MENA region (Barakat & Fakih, 2021; della Porta, 2014, 2018; della Porta & Mattoni, 2021; Kaedbey & Naber, 2019). While digital media has been relevant also in such
Digital media and grassroots anti-corruption

protests, the academic debate on grassroots anti-corruption struggles still misses a situated analysis of the role of digital media in specific situations of power’s reconfiguration. This chapter seeks to fill this gap in the literature and scrutinises the role of digital media in fighting corruption through an in-depth investigation of two mass mobilisations that happened in two North African countries: Algeria and Tunisia.

RESEARCH DESIGN, CASE STUDIES, AND METHODS

This chapter aims at understanding how digital media is embedded in anti-corruption struggles in those countries in which profound political changes have been unfolding. In doing so, it raises the following research questions: What shape does grassroots anti-corruption struggle take in transition situations? What is the role played by digital media? To answer these questions, this chapter analyses two exemplary case studies. The relevance of Tunisia and Algeria lies in at least three main reasons.

First, the fight against corruption was superimposed on popular demands for regime change and a dynamic reconfiguration of political power. In Tunisia, the so-called ‘Jasmin Revolution’ led to the fall of Ben Ali’s regime. After the fall of the authoritarian regime, civil society organizations became the most proactive in calling for a more transparent system. Against this background, the paradigms of ‘good governance’ were disseminated by international donors and internalised by various actors claiming to be part of a ‘new civil society.’ In Algeria, the Hirak (meaning ‘movement’ in Arabic) started in February 2019 as a heterogeneous popular anti-regime movement calling for more democracy, social justice, and transparency against a military system perceived as highly corrupt.

Second, in Tunisia and Algeria, the anti-corruption action acquired a pivotal role for both new incumbents and civil society actors after the fall of the regimes. After the fall of the regime in Tunisia, there has been widespread recognition among the new government and public that corruption must be systematically addressed. On January 15, 2011, only a day after the departure of former President Ben Ali, the provisional government established the Commission of Inquiry into Misappropriation and Corruption. Since then, numerous other legal or official mechanisms have been established. In 2016, under media pressure, Tunisian authorities proclaimed a ‘war against corruption.’ Once tightly controlled under former President Ben Ali, corruption became endemic after the revolution in 2011, with everyday citizens engaging in and benefitting from corrupt practices. Thus, although numerous legal measures have been working to fight corruption, the phenomenon is perceived to be even more pervasive today than it was under Ben Ali (Yerkes & Muasher, 2017). After the fall of Bouteflika in Algeria, since the appoint-
The dismissal of General Ahmes Gaid Salah as an interim President, the ‘fight against corruption’ (framed in terms of securitisation of the country) has become one of the significant objectives of part of the establishment amid a reconfiguration of power relations. Immediately after the dismissal of Bouteflika, General Salah launched a judicial campaign against the members of the clans of the former President. Notably, he ordered the arrest of the President’s brother and close adviser, Said Bouteflika, alleging that he was conspiring with two former intelligence chiefs, retired General Toufik Mediene and General Tartag, to make changes in the leadership of the armed forces, including the removal of Gaid Salah himself from his position. After Salah’s sudden and mysterious death in December 2019, the power of the regime’s clans was reshuffled. This change became evident when General Khaled Nezzar, the former defence minister linked to the Tawfik clan, who flew to Spain in July 2019 to escape Salah’s epuration, came back to Algeria after obtaining guarantees for a retrial and cancellation of the international arrest warrant issued against him. Finally, once in power, the new President Abdelmadjid Tebboune launched a massive campaign against corruption to secure some form of legitimisation. As in the Tunisian case, the official anti-corruption campaign heralded by the new regime as the panacea for all ills has been perceived by part of the population as politically biased, embedded in a war among clans wishing to keep the power. Satirical cartoons posted by human rights activists on Twitter (and subjected to daily repression by the regime’s secret services) have highlighted this dynamic.2

Third, in the last decade or so, the two countries witnessed a massive diffusion of the Internet which facilitated the use of social media platforms. Popular protest movements in the two countries during this timeframe have led many observers to speak of the ‘digital revolution’ in the Arab world (Carty, 2014). Indeed, social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, have been recognised as essential tools that facilitated the revolutionary processes. The mobilisations have demonstrated the effective use of social media platforms (especially Facebook) and instant messaging technologies (such as WhatsApp and Signal) as an organisational tool and a means of asserting pressure on rulers. As described in this chapter, the use of digital media to fight corruption does not end with the fall of the regimes. Still, it is re-signified by local actors, including national authorities wishing to legitimise themselves in times of democratic transitions. As discussed below, digital media played different roles in the two contexts where the anti-corruption action has represented the pivotal point of the reconfiguration of power.

Drawing on the abovementioned case studies, this chapter investigates the two case studies through situational analysis (Clarke et al., 2016). Evolving from grounded theory, situational analysis elucidates varied perspectives in the data by looking at them as part of a situation involving many elements...
Table 4.1  Actors interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of interviewees</th>
<th>Number of interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Algerian activists</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisian activists</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International donors in Tunisia (GIZ – German Agency for International Cooperation; Council of Europe; United Nations Development Programme – UNDP)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local authorities in Tunisia (INLUCC)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(including non-human elements, such as digital media). These lenses allow us to move beyond the knowing subject of interviews and highlight how each element in a given situation is positioned from a relational perspective. In this regard, it allows us to pursue power analyses, primarily by analysing ‘implicated actor dynamics’ (Clarke et al., 2016, p. 15). Thus, this chapter examines the anti-corruption mobilisations in two situations: the transition process in Tunisia and the post-Hirak mobilisations in Algeria. In doing so, it analyses how civil society actors are positioned in the situations and their relations with (human and non-human) elements involved in the anti-corruption struggle, such as digital media, rules, norms, platforms, national authorities, local political groups, and international actors. This work aims to go beyond a normative interpretation of the fight against corruption by proposing an analysis based on the specificities of contexts characterised by the actors’ mechanisms of legitimisation and appropriation of different narratives under the reconfigurations of power dynamics.

The data set on which this study builds is based on ethnographic research and comprises national and international news media reports relating to corruption in Tunisia and Algeria; interviews with local activists, local authorities, and international actors (governmental, non-governmental and multilateral donors) involved in anti-corruption, transparency or ‘good governance’ activities in the two countries; manual data scraping of social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram); notes of offline participant observation (participant observation of protests and collective actions in Paris); notes of online participant observation (participation in activists’ Zoom meetings and workshops); and document analysis of local activists’ first-hand material (articles, website screenshots, documentaries, images, articles, brochures, reports, blogs).
REVOLUTIONS AGAINST CORRUPT REGIMES AND NEW DIGITAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR CIVIL SOCIETIES

In December 2010, Tunisians took to the street to reverse a corrupt and unjust regime. Some authors reported that social media platforms were beneficial in organising the widespread protests that finally ousted President Ben Ali on January 14, 2011, so that the notion of the ‘digital revolution’ paralleled that of the ‘Jasmin Revolution’ (Breuer & Groshek, 2014; Maurushat et al., 2014; Zayani, 2015). However, other authors underlined the significant regional disparities in terms of access and use of the Internet in Tunisia and that the origin of the Tunisian revolution was in the disadvantaged regions of the interior of the country deprived of Internet networks (Ayari & Geisser, 2011; Allal, 2012).

Besides the boom of digital social platforms, new digital media denouncing the corrupted clan linked to Ben Ali supported the revolutionary momentum. Nawaat (meaning ‘core’ in Arabic), one of the most remarkable, is a left-wing collective blog active even before 2011. Its principal founder is Sami Ben Gharbia, a Tunisian human rights campaigner and blogger who was a political refugee living in the Netherlands between 1998 and 2011. The original purpose of Nawaat was to create a platform for Tunisian dissident voices and debates to subvert the authoritarian regime. Its activities persisted even after 2011 when this online platform became the mouthpiece of protests breaking out in most marginalised areas of the country, which did not benefit from the revolutionary processes’ political (and socio-economic) gains. These movements claimed a ‘forgotten’ or ‘kidnapped revolution’ by denouncing the fact that the fall of Ben Ali had just represented the elimination of one figure and not of the entire bureaucratic apparatus, the so-called ‘deep state,’ which is still in place and represents the corrupted ruling class enrolled in the RCD, the quasi-hegemonic party ruling in Tunisia from 1987 until 2011. Nawaat thus became a reference point for the media coverage of the revolutionary claims, including the anti-corruption struggle. However, due to internal political divisions fuelled by the bumpy transition, part of its members left the online journal.

In Algeria, in February 2019, the Hirak, a popular protest movement, was born, with calls for demonstrations through hashtags against the candidacy for a fifth term of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who was finally forced to resign in April after 20 years at the head of the state. As highlighted by several activist interviewees, the Hirak Movement was born on Facebook through private messages sent between activists planning street mobilisations against the regime across the country. As the most widespread social media platform in the country, the use of Facebook is considered by citizens as the most effective way to reach the most significant number of people. As explained by an
Digital media and grassroots anti-corruption activist interviewed, a group of activists using an anonymous account launched the idea of starting protests by sending messages to their comrades and asking them to diffuse the message in their turn. A private message was used at the very beginning because, in this way, the surveillance of national authorities could be avoided. Once the momentum started, social media also helped ensure its continuity. Artists, internet influencers, rappers, football supporters, sports commentators, journalists, prominent figures in civil society, and the political opposition subsequently helped to strengthen the movement by ensuring that more and more Algerians followed the marches. Popular activists used Facebook to raise citizens’ awareness. Activists have also used digital media to structure the movement: emerging sites launching online consultations, interfaces allowing electronic voting, and adopting proposals that measure the popularity and support of the initiatives proposed. For example, surveys on social networks have been launched to determine who would be the best representative to organise the interlocution with the authorities. Thus, digital media became an essential tool supporting the construction of new discourses, animating the citizens’ debate, and promoting reflection on political issues. Influential personalities also launched individual initiatives on collective reflections and political solutions but did not always have experience in the political field, such as the Facebook group ‘écris ta constitution. Project citoyen pour un transition en Algérie’, launched on February 26, 2019, by the popular singer Amazigh Kateb, who emigrated to Grenoble, France, in 1988. As we will show in the following pages, the diasporic groups had a role in keeping the movement alive through the strategic use of digital media; in turn, digital media transformed the movement at a transnational level. Other initiatives have emerged to develop digital solutions to support the political transition. This is the case of the Algerian Center for Social Entrepreneurship (ACSE), which launched the ‘Hack Hirak,’ a hackathon to promote the use of digital media in the service of the democratic aspirations of citizens. Moreover, new online news sites made it possible to relay information on the Hirak, such as TSA or Radio M, or on social networks such as Silmiya News, a Facebook account created by students who also have the mission of leading political debates and popularising political culture. The Hirak Movement was successful insofar as it eventually prevented former President Bouteflika from running for the fifth mandate and led, if not to a democratic transition, to a partial transformation of the political landscape (Souaïdia, 2021). Indeed, on March 26, 2019, after months of unrelenting protests, General Gaid Salah compelled President Bouteflika to resign.
CONTENTIOUS TRANSITIONS: THE POLITICISATION OF THE ANTI-CORRUPTION ACTION AND ROLE OF DIGITAL MEDIA

The conflictual transition process in Tunisia impacted the grassroots activism against corruption, far from having a homogeneous political position and from being entirely independent of the elites’ struggle for power. In September 2013, the crucial year of the Tunisian transition process (after the political assassinations of two leftist political leaders in February and July and the start of the political-institutional crisis) eleven Nawaat members resigned ‘following a disagreement over the decision-making process between the Nawaat board.’ A few months later, nine journalists, developers, and graphic designers founded Inkyfada. The name is a mixture of the Arabic intifada, which means ‘uprising,’ and the English ‘ink.’ The full name means ‘ink uprising,’ including ‘the idea of a new journalism in Tunisia,’ as the editorial board director reported. The latter also posited that: ‘Inkyfada’s objective is to reveal, show and make accessible to the entire population what is hidden, so as to allow the citizens to participate in a better understanding of the world through our investigation, data journalism and the production of long-term reports, portraits, articles.’ For this reason, our journal is distinguished by using new digital media such as cartography, iconography, web documentary, and a design worked by the developers who have their lab, the so-called Inkylab. Inkyfada, contrary to Nawaat, is entirely dedicated to investigative journalism. For example, during the 2014 Presidential election, the newspaper noted several electoral irregularities. It also investigated potential military cooperation between the United States and Tunisia within the framework of the fight against terrorism. In 2015, Inkyfada collaborated with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) to deal with the SwissLeaks case. In 2016, in the context of the Panama Papers, the ICIJ called on Inkyfada to investigate tax fraud in Tunisia.

Alongside Inkyfada, other civil society initiatives flourished during the second phase of the transition process, characterised by a higher contention. Especially after the political assassinations and the following elitist compromises at the expense of the socio-economic problems of the countries, young Tunisians, through nationwide protest movements, have been calling for measures that root out systems of endemic corruption. Youth advocacy manifested itself in different forms, including groups such as unemployed graduates, artists, student unions, and social media networks. These highly diverse groups are characterised by distinct social origins, territorial affiliations, sociopolitical trajectories, and political ideals. However, one commonality across these
Digital media and grassroots anti-corruption

The initiative *Manish Msamah* (*’I Will Not Forgive’*) is one example of how youth groups advocating for accountability, justice, and anti-corruption measures are organised and mobilised thanks to digital media. The movement was formed in 2015 to defeat the Project Law on Economic and Financial Reconciliation, legislation that proposed amnesty for corrupted entrepreneurs who profited from the Ben Ali dictatorship. The initiative took root through the mutual collaboration of a group of activists on Facebook who knew each other through the 2011 protests. The movement engaged in a social media campaign (including more than 84,000 Facebook page followers) which helped increase the movement’s public image. It also fuelled the widespread dissemination of campaign information and drew the attention of international media, including *Le Monde*, *The Guardian*, and *The Washington Post*. The heightened awareness has also caught the eye of alternative local news media, such as *Naawat*, and inspired potential documentary film projects about the movement (Belhadj & Kurze, 2021).

Another initiative developed thanks to digital media was the social media anti-corruption campaign *Winou el Pétrole* (*’Where is the oil?’*), which created such a stir on Facebook and Twitter that the government was put in the uncomfortable position of responding to a viral campaign for transparency in the country’s energy sector. With the hashtag #WinouelPétrole dominating Tunisian Twitter accounts, campaigners have placed natural resource management high on the Tunisian political agenda (Pannwitz, 2015).

Despite the apparent unity of the initiatives mentioned above, they suffered from internal and external political conflicts, which eventually led to their dissolution. *Manish Msamah* fell short of putting forward a clear vision and defining a cohesive concept of alternative justice based on demands for accountability that would have addressed the legacy of corruption under Ben Ali. Rather than producing a unified voice, the movement was challenged by internal political conflict and the contradictory opinions of its members concerning the post-revolutionary establishment (Belhadj & Kurze, 2021). As for the initiative *Winou el Pétrole*? doubts regarding the movement’s beginning as a spontaneous social media campaign have stirred controversy in the media and warranted the response of political figures and party leaders. For the campaign #WinouelPétrole, in particular, managing the country’s natural resources after the fall of a long-lasting regime was a point of contention between the Islamist party and secular forces. Former Minister of Industry and Prime Minister of Tunisia’s technocratic interim government Mehdi Jomaa is another name that has frequently come up in discussions concerning the politicisation of the movement in question. As reported by *Nawaat*, Jomaa was perceived to have been complicit in the so-called ‘banana republic’ management of the country’s
natural resources for having precipitated the renewal of exploitation contracts with foreign oil companies without consulting the parliament (Szakal, 2015).

In Algeria, the conflict between clans has mirrored political disputes within the Hirak Movement. The latter is far from being homogeneous. Initially united by the common goal of overthrowing the Bouteflika regime, in more recent times, the movement has displayed its different components associated with different clans, as reported by the activists interviewed when referring to each other. Secular forces usually associate ‘Islamist’ actors with the Salah clan, while conservative forces associate the Tawfik clan with the group of ‘eradicators.’ Notably, recent political clashes erupted between modernist forces and the leaders of the Rachad movement, founded in 2007 by exiled Algerians, including veterans of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Rachad did not officially present itself as a religious movement but as a radical actor wishing to reject the establishment, ‘the source of insecurity of the country.’

In general terms, the Hirak is suffering an internal crisis fuelled by these two groups, which have supported the regime’s securitisation campaigns against their opponents at different times.

Following the death of General Salah under mysterious circumstances and the consequent return to power of the Tawfik, diasporic groups mainly composed of Rachad activists in exile played a significant role in keeping the protests alive against the ‘terrorist and corrupted regime.’ In the meantime, the Tawfiq clan warned about the resurgence of radical groups likely to hinder the country’s stability. This narrative fuelling public fear for the return of obscurantism in the country has been widely backed by several national media and social media platform campaigns, having a crucial role in the reconfiguration of power relationships. In this context, Rachad was declared a ‘terrorist movement aiming to destabilize the country and undermine its security.’

Against this polarised political background, if, on the one hand, social media platforms like Facebook have facilitated the rapid propagation of the Hirak Movement, on the other hand, they also tended to fuel the political conflict. During the outbreak of COVID-19, national authorities exploited the rules to constrain the pandemic to stop street demonstrations. These obstacles, however, did not represent a setback for the protests, as a new wave of cyber warfare started on digital social networks, with activists running new social media campaigns. Authorities reacted by shifting the repression to the digital space by shutting down websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts. Thus, protesters and their opponents fought online by creating new virtual spaces of contention, each side accusing the other of creating internet trolls and fake news to discredit, criminalise, and destabilise. Digital media thus became a new arena of contention where the boundaries between challengers and challenged have become blurred. The anti-corruption struggle was instrumentalised as a way to frame the enemy.
Moreover, the Rachad movement primarily benefitted from being active on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube in conflict with the state. According to one of its members, Rachad is very popular on social networks due to the expertise as ‘online community managers’ gained from some of its exiled activists in Europe and the US.

THE TRANSNATIONAL DIMENSION: DIVERGING TRAJECTORIES OF THE GRASSROOTS ANTI-CORRUPTION STRUGGLE

In contrast to the similarities discussed above, this section focuses on the distinct paths of digital anti-corruption efforts at the grassroots level in Tunisia and Algeria, emphasising the role played by different types of transnational actors in the two countries. In contrast to Algeria, where digital media appears to be growing organically from the grassroots within a diasporic transnational social movement, Tunisia demonstrates a different pattern. There, the predominant approach seems to be a top-down transnationalisation led by Transparency International (TI), as they seek to establish their anti-corruption methods at the local level, leveraging digital media as a means to achieve this goal. These two different trajectories might be explained by different types of institutional and political transformations taking place in the two countries.

In Algeria the fall of the Bouteflika regime did not guarantee new substantive rights. Indeed, after an initial phase characterised by a national anti-corruption campaign targeting part of the old establishment, the Tebboune regime adopted new repressive strategies against civil society actors under the pretext of having to defend the country’s stability.30 One of the main restrictive measures adopted by the Algerian national authorities is the co-option of some associations and the exclusion of others. Moreover, to prevent the independence of civil society actors, the Algerian authorities do not grant permission to obtain any assistance from foreign actors, especially in sensitive areas such as the fight against corruption. In this repressive context, the National Association for the Fight against Corruption (Association Nationale de Lutte Contre la Corruption), TI’s former local focal point, recently broke off relations with the transnational organisation and drastically changed its type of activity to avoid local sanctions or any kind of harassment.31 In addition, at the end of December 2023, the Interfaces Médias news agency (a network that brings together two digital initiatives, Radio M and Maghreb Émergent, which are considered the unique independent spaces in Algeria carrying out investigative journalism) has also been permanently shut down. Indeed, as mentioned above, repression has also involved digital space (Mattoni & Sigillò, 2022). Digital repression has significantly hindered the movement, mostly organised online, especially during the first lockdown in March 2020. The Algerian gov-
Government has employed various tactics to suppress the movement’s online presence and limit its impact. Measures such as internet shutdowns, blocking social media platforms, and surveillance of digital communications have been used to stifle the dissemination of information and the coordination of protests. By controlling the digital space, the government has sought to curtail the visibility and reach of the Hirak Movement. Despite these obstacles, the movement initially displayed resilience and adaptability, finding alternative means of communication, also thanks to the crucial support of diasporic groups, which could overcome local repression.

Given the repressive context, anti-corruption and anti-regime initiatives have been created outside the country. Notably, diasporic communities have played a significant role in upscaling the voice of Algerians from the local to the global. Important digital initiatives created by the diasporic communities range from online investigative journals managed by exiled activists to the creation of Facebook Live events to denounce corruption scandals to the creation of film documentaries and radio podcasts online. Independent bloggers living abroad (mostly in exile) also became very popular on social media platforms and contributed to the anti-corruption struggle against the regime.

The London-based diaspora has been particularly active in keeping alive some anti-corruption actions against the regime through social media platforms. However, these initiatives have been led by individuals, usually bloggers or anti-regime activists in exile, thus their impact is quite limited. Mohamed Larbi Zitout, a popular activist living in London, launched through his YouTube channel (counting more than 830,000 subscribers and Instagram (40,000 followers) an ‘anti-corruption campaign against the caste still in power in Algeria’. Despite being an action led by an individual, his videos have inspired hundreds of activists living abroad to start daily and systematic campaigns against the ‘corruption of state’ after the fall of Bouteflika.

The French diaspora has also played a role in leading anti-corruption campaigns against the regime in more recent times. The Algérie Part initiative, led by the political refugee Aboud Semmar, is an online magazine that does investigative journalism remotely, thanks to the work of anonymous collaborators living in Algeria. Moreover, Amir Boukhors, a popular blogger living in Paris, better known as AMIR DZ on social networks, is an emblematic example (with 2 million followers on his Facebook page, which was recently banned, and 1.17 million subscribers on his YouTube channel). The blogger became a reference for local whistleblowers wishing to report cases of corruption related to the regime. On his YouTube channel, he usually reveals such scandals to the public.

Contrarily to Algeria, a very closed country to foreign intervention (both national and transnational), in Tunisia, hundreds of NGOs backed by international donors have dominated the public sphere since the fall of the
authoritarian regime. In this regard, the civil society anti-corruption action has also acquired a technical connotation through the projects carried out by the initiative of professionalised associations seizing international opportunities. In other words, the anti-corruption struggle has become a professional practice under the influence of a framework diffused by transnational actors. The most remarkable example of this social milieu is the activity carried out by the association I-Watch, selected by TI as its local *chapter information* in Tunisia. As the association’s President reported:

… at the end of 2013, Transparency arrived in Tunisia, wishing to open a section in the country. They also visited other associations, such as the collective of lawyers, but the problem was that they were too politicised. Others did not have a project at all. So, the organisation trusted us. However, before becoming a chapter, we were just a focal point. We had to respect several criteria over the years before becoming an information chapter and then a fully accredited chapter. … In 2014 when we entered Transparency, we suddenly had access to much money. It was only in 2014 that I-Watch started to have a professional team.34

Thus, since 2014 I-Watch has become the reference point in the country for the anti-corruption struggle, thanks to the development of local branches in almost all the governorates, even those hit mainly by the digital divide. In 2014, the association, after having attended training provided by TI, created a dedicated department called YALAC, a securitised whistleblowers’ digital platform called Billkamcha – devices emulated from other TI local chapters all over the world, although with different names. As reported by Achraf:

Corruption after the revolution became commonplace. People should be able to report in real-time the cases of corruption and in the safer way possible. That’s the rationale behind Billkamcha.35

Thus, on the Facebook page, Billkamcha.tn, the functioning of the platform is explained to the Tunisian citizens as follows:

Billkamcha is a crowd-map developed to help citizens report cases of corruption. We aim to empower the citizens and engage them in the long fight against corruption. So far, no other groups are using maps in Tunisia for such an aim. The aim of the Map at the beginning is to quantify corruption. In the mid-term, the corruption cases reported will be used to help victims and witnesses to make their voices heard and for civil society and public servants to investigate corruption cases. The access to the data is going to be public while protecting the identity of the reporters.36

Thanks to this technological infrastructure I-Watch was able to accuse in 2016 the owner of the popular Tunisian television station *Nessma* and a future candidate for the 2019 Presidential elections, Nabil Karoui, of money laundering and embezzlement through a foreign shell company. More recently, the organ-
isation declared that a complaint against the Islamist Ennahda’s party would be submitted at the Tunis Court of First Instance for doubtful financing relating to the fight against terrorism and money laundering. Thanks to its increasing expertise I-Watch was the only anti-corruption association targeted by other international donors such as the EU to implement ‘accountability’ and ‘good governance programmes in the country in the fight against corruption.’

Despite this popularity, some actors – such as other associations involved in anti-corruption mobilisations or other activists involved in human rights associations – have made some criticisms of the organisation, arguing how it is too dependent on international agendas:

I-Watch is very active, but it is not an independent association, it is the servant of international actors diffusing a technical paradigm of the anti-corruption struggle which is not beneficial for the political development of the country.37

Beyond these criticisms, some associations interviewed have reported their decision to use a series of technological devices like those implemented by I-Watch, such as digital whistleblowers’ platforms based on specific secured software and AI devices such as dedicated chatbots on the association’s websites aiming at helping citizens to get all the information needed to denounce corruption. Some associations framed these devices according to their specific needs and strategies. For instance, the President of the association Marsad Raqabah (meaning ‘Observatory on censorship’), a former deputy of the Tunisian Parliament, decided to create an avatar, a boy called Raqib (recalling the name of the association), as a logo to represent the association. The association also uses Raqib to answer citizens’ requests on the website chat and instantly answer citizens’ requests on the website’s chat.38

However, this strategy did not prevent other civil society actors from criticising the association as deeply politicised. As reported by a member of another association, also accused of ‘polluting’ his anti-corruption activities with his political views:

Marsad Raqaba is structurally political, as a member of the parliament created it. It carries out selective activities in the anti-corruption field as it targets just the political enemies of the President, not the others.39

Overall, while the fight against corruption in Tunisia seems to have become a professional practice under the influence of a standardised framework disseminated by transnational actors, the package of techniques and technological skills acquired from international donors has been internalised and framed by local civil society actors according to their needs and strategies in a highly competitive and politicised context. In other words, the professionalisation of the anti-corruption strategy enhanced by the use of technological initiatives
Digital media and grassroots anti-corruption imported from abroad is not in contrast with its political instrumentalisation, the latter being a pattern also in the Algerian context.

CONCLUSION: ON THE DIFFERENT ROLES OF DIGITAL MEDIA DURING TRANSITIONS

This chapter has shown the results of a comparative analysis between two countries characterised by two intertwined grassroots mobilisations: the fight against systemic corruption and the struggle for regime change. In Tunisia and Algeria, digital media has highly supported these actions in variegated ways.

In Tunisia, the socio-political liberalisation after the fall of the authoritarian regime went hand in hand with the so-called ‘digital revolution.’ After 2011, digital media became more democratic, and anti-corruption movements were created and mainly developed their activities online. Moreover, in Tunisia, contrarily to Algeria, the grassroots anti-corruption struggle has been recently influenced by the diffusion of transnational practices transposed at the local level in a context characterised by huge political competition.

In Algeria, the anti-corruption struggle embodied by the Hirak Movement has mirrored the war of clans in the post-Bouteflika era. In a complex scenario of high political contention, repression, and heterogeneous alliances, civil society organisations keep acting in shrinking spaces of opportunities, where the anti-corruption struggle is far from being neutral and digital media are tools, in most cases, used to destroy the political enemies.

Overall, the comparative analysis of the anti-corruption initiatives in Tunisia and Algeria highlighted how civil societies and digital media in the particular situation of regime change are far from having pre-packaged identities and roles when it comes to the anti-corruption struggles. In these situations, newly emerged civil society actors are embedded in contentious arenas where resilient elites, clans, parties, and international actors appropriate the anti-corruption notion and re-signify it according to their objectives. From a theoretical perspective, the analysis of situations allowed us to individuate all the actors at stake, how they relate to each other, and how they re-signified the use of technology according to their objectives and goals in a context characterised by fluid and changing positions and roles.

In particular, the situational lenses shed light on the dynamics of political instrumentalisation of the anti-corruption struggle in both countries, emphasising the roles played by digital media in two situations characterised by a reconfiguration of power relations. This result is particularly interesting when considering the main differences between the two case studies: on the one hand, a country in the process of democratisation, Tunisia, and on the other, Algeria, a country that, despite popular uprisings and the fall of a dictator, is finding it difficult to break down the foundations of the authoritarian system.
In this regard, data shows that digital media has been crucial in supporting street protests. However, they play a different role depending on activists’ opportunities and constraints in the two countries. In Algeria, as in other authoritarian countries (Michaelsen, 2018), the persistence of a repressive situation pushed local activists to use digital media to overcome local restrictions. Especially during the pandemic, digital media acquired a more significant role, allowing protests to shift from the streets to the virtual space. Moreover, due to the national authorities’ digital counter-activism, the diasporic groups had a role in keeping the movement alive through the strategic use of digital media.

Contrarily, in Tunisia, the country’s opening to the massive intervention of international actors led local activists to seize the opportunities by competing to get foreign funding or assistance. The competition led to an increased professionalisation of civil society actors. Indeed, newly emerged civil society actors, those freed after decades of repression during the authoritarian regime, have been particularly receptive to the transnational diffusion of such norms and practices, even if in a diversified way. On the one hand, the opening of the transnational spectrum after the fall of the regimes represented a new window of political but also professional opportunities for local actors who, until then, had not had the chance to familiarise themselves with any other anti-corruption experience outside national borders; on the other hand, the anti-corruption programs offered by international donors allowed local activists to acquire necessary expertise, such as in the field of digital media.

Finally, findings reveal a process of technocratisation of the grassroots anti-corruption activities diffused from the top. Technocratisation as a process involves the standardisation of practices, which led to the divide between technical (as standardised, frozen, too soft, politically correct) anti-corruption activity vs. political anti-corruption (intended as more engaged, brave, flexible, and contextualised).

Overall, the de-localisation and the technocratisation of the anti-corruption struggle, respectively, in Algeria and Tunisia, let the interpretation of digital media’s ambivalent role in two complex scenarios emerge. This result is significant in overcoming normative explanations accounting for the role of digital media and the anti-corruption struggles in countries facing uncertain and fluid situations characterised by the reconfiguration of opportunities and constraints, such as regime change. Interestingly, this study raised a counter-intuitive finding. In Tunisia, where the democratisation process has granted more significant opportunities, the anti-corruption struggle shifted from grassroots spontaneous movements to a standardised technical process controlled by international donors. Contrarily, in Algeria, activists who keep acting in shrinking spaces of mobilisation have drawn on their resources, contributing to making the anti-corruption action a political struggle.
NOTES

1. The author acknowledges that the research for this chapter has been conducted at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna in the framework of the BIT-ACT project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No 802362).
2. See: https://twitter.com/ChilosAinouche/status/1477978024209485827/photo/1
3. Local activists interviewed are engaged in investigative journalism initiatives or involved in broader activities taking origins from the associative milieu and promoting transparency and good governance, such as the local chapters of Transparency International (TI) or independent grassroots actors fighting against corruption.
4. Facebook played a considerable role during the political uprisings of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011. Together with Al-Jazeera, it was one of the few reliable sources of information for protesters at that time (Aal et al., 2018).
5. The geographical disparity of internet access is still one of the major obstacles to civil society participation in the democratisation process. As reported, the ‘digital divide’ remains because access is expensive, and internet infrastructure is of relatively poor quality outside the capital (Aal et al., 2018).
6. Author’s interview with Sami Ben Gharbia, Tunis, December 2021.
10. Facebook pages, for example, collected nearly 10,000 votes for Mustapha Bouchachi, renowned lawyer, human rights activist and member of the Front des Forces Socialistes (FFS). See: https://www.observalgerie.com/actualite-algerie/alerie-bouchachi-taboo-islamists-who-can-represent-popular-movement/
11. According to the initiators, Hack Hirak was ‘the first hackathon whose aim was to put into practice Civic Tech in Algeria, a technology that allows engagement, participation or improves the relationship between the population and government institutions by strengthening communication with citizens and improving government services.’ See: https://www.facebook.com/events/2074053279560366/?notif_t=event_calendar_create&notif_id=1554747566317215.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Author’s interview with the director of Inkyfada’s editorial board, Tunis, December 2021.
15. Ibid.
19. The ‘eradicators’ were a faction within the Algerian political and military establishment during that country's civil war, which from 1992 pitted Islamist rebels against a military-installed government.
A comparative analysis of two North African countries

26. Extract from interview with a member of Rachad, Paris, March 2021. In 1992 General Tawfiq was among those wishing to interrupt the electoral process favourable to the Islamists of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and one of the supporters of the hard faction of the politico-military ruling class, the so-called ‘eradicator clan’ in favour of the elimination of all Islamists, defined as ‘terrorists’, from the armed wing of the FIS, and opposed to any dialogue with them.
30. In Algeria, CSOs are still regulated by a highly restrictive law adopted in 1990. The 1992 Emergency law, as well as government directives and practices, also continue to impose limits on the constitutional right of association.
31. Author’s interview with an Algerian activist and country expert, Paris, May 2022. The Algerian Association for the Fight against Corruption was particularly active in promoting the ratification and implementation of the UN and African Union (AU) Conventions, writing letters to the government, commenting on draft legislation, and conducting workshops to promote these instruments. The organisation was also remarkably successful in raising public awareness and addressing corruption issues in the national media. Other significant advocacy groups include the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LADDH) and the Algerian League for Human Rights (ALHR), the most active independent human rights groups in the country, yet facing continuous repressions.
33. https://www.youtube.com/c/AMIRDZBOUKHORS.
34. Author’s interview with Achraf Aouadi, President of the association I-Watch, Tunis, December 2021.
35. Ibid.
37. Author’s interview with the President of an association asking to preserve his anonymity, Tunis, December 2021.
39. Author’s interview with the member of an association who requested to be anonymous, Tunis, December 2021.

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PART II

Platforms
5. Potentialities and affordances of grassroots civic tech platforms as effective anti-corruption tools: Decoding the story of I Paid A Bribe, India

Anwesha Chakraborty

INTRODUCTION

In January 2014, several prominent Indian civil society actors and representatives of international organisations such as the World Bank and Transparency International came together in the Indian city of Bangalore to deliberate on various types of corruption plaguing societies in an event called ‘Coalition against Corruption’. One of the hosts of this event was the civil society organisation, Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy, whose co-founder Swati Ramanathan presented I Paid a Bribe, the tech platform developed by the organisation, to the audience. She explained how the advent of new information and communication technologies had brought forth a world of possibilities in terms of rethinking democratic participation and citizenship, and that a platform such as I Paid a Bribe (IPAB hereafter), was created specifically to tap into these new potentials offered by the rising new media of communication and information sharing, to inspire citizens to report corrupt practices. She also pointed out that the goal of IPAB was to reach different corners of the globe.

IPAB, therefore, was conceived as a web platform as well as a Janaagraha initiative to inspire grassroots actors globally to fight corruption with the help of new digital technologies.

Established in 2001 by Swati and Ramesh Ramanathan in Bangalore, Janaagraha claims that its mission is to transform the quality of life in India’s towns and cities through providing critical infrastructures, including digital platforms, that can enhance civic participation in city governance. The organisation is known in the global (anti) corruption sector for the creation of IPAB, an emblematic example of a digitally-based platform designed to address the
issue of retail corruption by providing a space for citizens to report bribery anonymously. As the opening vignette presented, Janaagraha’s co-founder Swati Ramanathan was keen to exploit the advent of digital technologies as it provided a great opportunity to aid the fight against corruption and to revolutionise citizen participation on various issues of public interest. The organisation, Janaagraha, did so by creating communication tools using these new technologies to empower citizens to speak up freely and in turn make them aware of their duties of citizenship.

Digital technologies specifically created for civic participation have been studied through the lens of ‘civic tech’ in a wide variety of academic debates such as human–computer interactions, political science and governance and data journalism, to name a few. These literatures talk about the varied functions of civic tech, including identifying and addressing the concerns of communities (Boehner & DiSalvo, 2016); providing platforms for citizens to take an active role in governance (Gilman, 2017); facilitating the amplification of citizen voices on local issues and even encouraging citizen journalism (Baack, 2017). Gilman (2016, p.2) defines civic tech as ‘leveraging digital tools to improve democratic governance toward more transparency, inclusion, and participatory outcomes’. In this definition, strong echoes with Ramanathan’s perspective about the potential of new technologies to increase citizen participation and fight corruption can be detected. Civic technologists make use of data to enhance civic engagement by employing a wide range of tactics such as making existing data machine-readable, enabling easy sharing of open data as well as building auxiliary services using that data (Baack, 2018).

Civic tech literature shows how the technology is focused less on creating the next big economically viable innovation or improving government efficiency (as seen in e-governance debates) and more on enhancing responsive and inclusive governance (Gilman, 2017). As such, this type of application of information technology purports to respond to social issues by bringing together multiple actors including citizens, governments, designers, engineers and the third sector (Pyrozhenko, 2011; Shiramatsu et al., 2015). Such technologies have also been lauded for their capacity to promote civic audits, which Rahman (2017, p. 751) describes as ‘organized strategic use of participatory monitoring techniques to hold government actors accountable’ that is a ‘unique mechanism for generating political accountability and redressing disparities of capture, corruption, or power’. In Rahman’s article, the connection between civic tech and its potential to address corruption is made explicit. This specific definition of civic tech for the purpose of civic audits perhaps best fits the mission of IPAB. While civic tech literature has been addressing issues of corruption, accountability and governance, corruption studies have so far paid little attention to this burgeoning literature. In fact, not only civic tech but also civil society organisations have received little attention in corruption
research. Academic literature on such organisations shows that they occupy an important space in civil society to mobilise democratic actions (Carothers & Barndt, 2000), to work for better governance and allocation of public goods (Shah, 2007), to fight and even to push for anti-corruption legislative actions (Setiyono & MacLeod, 2010; della Porta & Mattoni, 2021).

The last decade, however, has seen increased discussion on the ability of digital media to provide a wide range of opportunities for civic engagement which strengthens democratic participation, which in turn can lead to increased discussions on governance, transparency and accountability of public institutions. Gagliardi et al. (2019) see information and communication technologies as tools for social innovation and linkage between governments and citizens, while Warren et al. (2014) argue that online civic engagement builds citizens’ trust in institutions. Citing the example of Janaagraha and IPAB, Kossow and Kukutschka (2017) have posited that the use of digital media tools, including social media, is becoming increasingly common among civil society organisations to mobilise people against corruption and ‘create an active citizenry at the grassroots’ level’ (2017, p. 462)

This chapter seeks to contribute to such a stream of research by delving into Janaagraha’s IPAB tech platform; and, more specifically, by investigating the role accorded to technology to enhance civic participation for the fight against corruption. In doing so, the chapter also contributes to corruption and anti-corruption research in a twofold manner: on the one hand by understanding the contribution of civil society organisations (CSOs) and their tech platforms to anti-corruption debates; on the other hand, by extending the growing vocabulary around civic tech to the study of anti-corruption tools and practices. The rest of the chapter is designed as follows: the next section gives an overview of corruption and civil society that provides the context in which IPAB operates. After that, I present the research design, outlining the data gathering process and data analysis method, and discuss the analytical framework of affordances, the most recurring theme derived from data analysis. To gain a comprehensive perspective on the issue, I focus on the following aspects: presenting the tech platform as designed by the developers; discussing the different types of affordances of the platform: those that the designers intended and one that users imagined; and, outlining the outcomes and challenges of IPAB, leading to its initial rapid growth and eventual suspension. A final section provides concluding remarks.
CORRUPTION AND CIVIL SOCIETY SCENARIO: UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT IN WHICH INDIAN CSOs OPERATE

As discussed in Chapter 1 of this volume and in the previous section, the context in which CSOs employ digital media to counter corruption is relevant to understand why activists employ them and in which manners. The web-based platform IPAB emerged first in South Asia at a time when the region was facing an ‘epidemic in corruption’ (Transparency International, 2014) that is still ongoing and is caused by opaque public institutions, lack of protection for anti-corruption actors and widespread government interference in the work of anti-corruption watchdogs. The 2014 Transparency International report noted that corruption is on the rise in South Asia and failure to tackle it will threaten the region’s economic progress, as well as efforts to lessen inequalities. Despite 6 per cent average economic growth in the past 20 years, more than 40 per cent of the world’s poor live in South Asia. According to Transparency International’s Global Corruption Barometer of 2013, the top four sectors which the public perceives to be most corrupt in South Asia include political parties, police, parliament, and public officials, thereby strongly indicating endemic corruption in the public sector. Judiciary, business, medical and education sectors are perceived as some of the other sectors where corruption is rampant. However, the same report also lauded the role of the Indian judiciary, saying that it proved to be largely effective in checking the power of the government and strengthening anti-corruption safeguards in the country.

An important feature of the South Asian context which can potentially undermine anti-corruption measures is that corruption is not always seen as a problem. Corruption is even considered as a problem-solving tool especially in contexts where institutions are weak (Marquette & Peiffer, 2015), and therefore far from the resignation–indignation spectrum of emotions that Bauhr and Grimes (2014) discussed as reactions against corruption in spaces where it is an endemic phenomenon. Heston and Kumar (2008) argue that the Indian context is an environment where corruption is permissive and even praised and celebrated if thought as ingenious. Corrupt practices can allow a channel of social mobility and are thus accepted (Jenkins, 2007; Mehta, 2003) especially in societies like India where kinship ties are more important to safeguard personal interests (Gupta, 1995). Peisakhin (2012) notes that for people living in lower rungs of the society, such as slum dwellers, paying bribes can often be the primary way to get access to basic public services. In such an environment, it is understandable why despite many anti-corruption legislative measures (Nishith Desai Associates, 2020), corruption continues to be one of the most
important governance problems negatively influencing the lives of citizens. The strong entanglements of people’s lives with local bureaucracies (Gupta, 1995) have pernicious effects in the day-to-day transactions between the public and the state, resulting in high incidences of bribery and other forms of petty corruption. Large scams involving political parties, financial institutions, and the private sector (at times all together) are very common in independent India’s history, leading to major losses in the national exchequer.

While some scholars have noted that Indians have the propensity to tolerate corruption, it is important to mention here that the country and its civil society have seen major policy moves and protests – forms of bottom-up and top-down actions – to address the scourge. Around the end of the first decade of the 21st century, many corruption scandals involving important politicians and private sector actors were in the news, proving to be a catalyst for the large-scale street protests of 2011–12, the India Against Corruption (IAC) Movement, which attacked the ruling political dispensation for inaction and captivated the attention of large swathes of the Indian population to participate in non-violent protests (Chowdhury, 2019). Importantly, the case study under investigation, IPAB, was launched in 2010 by Janaagraha, around the same time as the inception of the IAC movement when corruption occupied a substantial part of the news cycle thanks to the big-ticket scandals and the consequent public discussions. Corruption continues to be a mainstay in India’s political discourses (Jenkins, 2007) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi has firmly cemented his role as a crusader against corruption (Varshney, 2017) through his multiple policies since coming to power in 2014, most notably the Indian demonetisation experiment of 2016 which scrapped two high-value Indian currency notes to discourage the hoarding of cash and to encourage a move towards digital payments (Sam et al., 2021). The country has also made steady progress in e-governance, which has seen rapid digitisation in the public sector allowing greater access to information and services online, ensuring transparency and plugging leakages in the system through better service delivery (see for example, Bhatnagar et al., 2003; Prakash, 2016; Mudliar, 2020; Sam et al., 2021). The role of technological interventions in curbing corruption has however been strictly discussed in the academic literature on the lines of e-governance from the top, without engaging in the potential of grassroots interventions from civil society actors.

Thus said, according to international democracy and governance indices, India in recent years has also been experiencing a major democratic backsliding with increasingly shrinking civil society spaces to protest against and criticise the powerful. The country was ranked 53 of 167 countries in the Democracy Index 2020 released by the Economist Intelligence Unit and termed a ‘flawed democracy’. The American democracy watchdog Freedom House considered India ‘partly free’ in its 2021 and 2022 profile of the
country, the first time in the last decade that such an instance has occurred. The V-Dem Institute of Gothenburg in its *Democracy Report 2021* went further in calling India an electoral autocracy, flagging concerns about democratic freedoms that were taken for granted until recently in the country and placing it alongside countries like Hungary and Turkey as those which have seen the greatest decline of democratic values in the last ten years. The same political establishment heading the federal government since 2014, which has been instrumental in multiple policies seeking to digitise and streamline governance, thereby purportedly increasing transparency, has also been criticised for introducing several measures to curb civil society spaces in the country. Most notably among these is the deregistering of nearly 15,000 associations under the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (or, FCRA), which permits NGOs to receive and access foreign funding (*Freedom House* 2020). Well-established international NGOs such as Amnesty International and Greenpeace have faced severe backlash in recent years, with the former shutting down its India office (ibidem). The country is also considered ‘partly free’ by Freedom House in its ‘Freedom on the Net’ index (*Freedom House* 2021/2022) as in recent years individuals have been frequently imprisoned for their social media posts, especially if they are critical of the various governments (federal and state level) and have been harassed if they have verbally attacked the powerful elite. At the same time, Internet penetration in the country has risen almost tenfold in the last decade: from about 93 million in 2010 to an estimated 932 million by 2022 (*Statista*, 2021) thereby ensuring huge user-generated data sets that can be stored by those in power and utilised for a variety of purposes. These elements of the socio-political context in India can help us understand the activities, the opportunities and challenges of CSOs like Janaagraha embedded in the specific milieu.

**RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODS, AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK**

To address the topic of anti-corruption efforts initiated by civil society actors, the chapter utilises a single case study research design. Case studies allow an in-depth, multifaceted investigation into a complex issue/phenomenon in real-life settings (Crowe et al., 2011; Yin, 2009): in this case, the phenomenon of grassroots interventions to fight corruption using digital media is explored through the case study of the IPAB civic tech platform. The selection of the case study was prompted by the fact that the platform is well-known in the international anti-corruption sector as a benchmark example of tech-based anti-corruption tools. By 2014, IPAB had already been replicated in about 16 countries around the globe with goals to expand further (Coalition Against Corruption Report, 2014). While being an emblematic case...
of digital media-based interventions to curb corruption, the platform itself has not received much academic attention. The few outputs available on the topic (see for example, Ryvkin et al., 2017; Kossow & Kukutschka, 2017) do not present a comprehensive view of the tech platform and the actors behind it, restricting their commentary to an external perspective on how the platform could facilitate democratic participation and improve its effectiveness in fighting corruption. With the single case study research design, I attempt here to address this lacuna and present a holistic picture of IPAB.

Having laid out the motivation for the case study-based research design, I now turn to the methods used for data gathering and analysis. The chapter rests on findings from the primary data consisting of 6 interviews with highly involved stakeholders associated with IPAB, 4 reports prepared using the online data from the platform, and 10 video texts/transcripts from Janaagraha’s YouTube channel (having considered those videos pertaining to IPAB). All these data were collected over a period of 12 months between January and December 2021. Interviews were semi-structured, between 30 to 60 minutes long and carried out online. Thematic analysis was performed allowing to identify themes and patterns emerging from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This style of analysis was preferred for the exercise as it is ‘unbounded from theoretical commitments’ (Clarke & Braun 2017, p.297). In a heavily under-researched area, the freedom that thematic analysis allows for carrying out data analysis without strict theoretical commitments renders a freer treatment of the data. The interviews and video texts were transcribed, and initial coding was performed, after which they were grouped into sets. A further round of a similar exercise of grouping codes helped to arrive at the themes, namely, creation of the platform, platform affordances, its outcomes and challenges. Recognising the sensitivity of the subject matter, all interview participants have been anonymised and assigned individual respondent numbers corresponding to the order in which they were interviewed.

As for the analytical framework, the chapter draws on the concept of affordances. The term ‘affordances’ is attributed to the works of James Gibson, an ecological psychologist, who used it to describe relationships between organisms and their environments; more specifically, what the environment offers or affords the organism to thrive, for better or for worse (Gibson, 1979; Chong & Proctor, 2019). Extrapolating this definition to the understanding of technological affordances, we are confronted with the relationships between various actors including designers, developers and users as well as the tech tools/platforms that constitute the digital ecosystems which allow these various elements to interact socially with each other. Norman (1988) notes that the perceived affordances according to designers may be different from the real affordances of the technology as experienced by users. In more recent years, scholars such as Baack (2018) and Nagy and Neff (2015) have used
the phrase ‘imagined affordances’ to denote that the functions a particular technology can offer are not only related to the intrinsic properties of that tech but also to the perception of designers and users regarding how that tech can be utilised. Here in this chapter, I use the lens of ‘imagined affordances’ to understand how Janaagraha envisioned the design and use of the IPAB platform, albeit from the organisational point of view. This analytical lens allows us to consider affordances from a broader perspective, taking into account real and perceived, intended and unintended affordances that emerge over time through technological upgrades and increased use. Indeed, as we will see below in this chapter, the affordances of the platform as perceived by the designers were complemented later by enhanced use by users, bringing up new types as the platform became more well known.

PRESENTATION OF THE CASE STUDY

IPAB, the anti-corruption platform of Janaagraha, was launched in 2010 as an online resource of crowdsourced reports on corruption (Ryvkin et al., 2017). As Ryvkin et al. (2017) clarified, the platform was not exactly an anti-corruption tool in itself insofar as it did not combat corruption head-on but one that created awareness about petty corruption. As mentioned in the first section of the chapter, through its website, IPAB provided the public with a space to report incidents of bribe giving and taking. IPAB collected these bribe reports, not necessarily to proceed against wrong-doers with legal actions, but to build a repository of corruption-related data across government departments. (Hough, 2015). The portal then aggregated these data to create reports of corrupt activities across Indian cities (Ramanna & Tahilyani, 2012). The website also allowed reporting instances where an individual refused to pay a bribe or met with an honest officer. However, such reports were significantly fewer than those instances where the individual paid a bribe. The objective of IPAB was to leverage the anonymity of the Internet to provide a voice to private citizens of India who have been the victims of corruption to report details of bribes paid, including the bribe amount, the name of the corrupt official, and services for which the bribe was extorted (Coalition Against Corruption Report, 2014). The platform, over the years, has grown into a source of open data which empowers citizens and fosters democratic processes and values (Helbing & Pournaras, 2015; Ruijer et al., 2017). It has allowed the public to add to the repository of data on petty corruption and relevant authorities to monitor the departments and areas where corrupt practices are common.

As mentioned in the introduction, Janaagraha was established with the objective to improve the quality of urban life in India. To fulfil this mission, as the interviewees explained, the organisation started multiple projects over the
years related to many aspects of city life including roads, sanitation, policing, availing of public services to name a few. One common feature that characterises all these initiatives is citizen participation, as Janaagraha approaches city governance through this lens and actively facilitates greater participation through the creation of both digital and offline platforms. IPAB, which according to Respondent 1, was one of the dream projects of Janaagraha co-founder Swati Ramanathan, was designed as a digital platform to monitor petty corruption in public offices and to track the amount of bribery prevalent in the availing of services that citizens are supposed to enjoy fairly. Respondent 4 who joined Janaagraha around 2014–15 at the behest of the founders as a consultant explained that:

… ipaidabribe.com portal was concerned with transactional corruption or, small corruption – petty corruption which happens on a day-to-day basis... with government officers, the police, the traffic police, the sub-registrar’s office, the road transport department, licensing, driving license, fitness certificate relating to motor vehicles. 

Respondent 6, who joined the organisation in 2013, was handpicked by Ramanathan to lead the team that was responsible for civic participation, including the IPAB platform. With a background in information technology, the respondent was looking for opportunities where she could continue to work in her area of expertise but with a greater social focus. In IPAB, she found a project that was, in her words, ‘innovative…daring…and full of potential’ in a country like India where corruption is rife. She also noted that while the project was initially conceived as a platform to gather data on the retail price of corruption, it soon became a space for citizens to vent their grievances and their own anguish at having paid bribes to avail of services that form a part of their rights as citizens of the country. Furthermore, once the platform gained greater visibility and complaints kept pouring in, the organisation started preparing reports using the IPAB data which they shared with relevant stakeholders in various public offices in the city of Bangalore to address grievances and initiate change in bureaucratic procedures, especially in those areas where bribery was rampant. For this purpose, two high-ranking bureaucrats were hired to advise the organisation. By the mid-2010s, the platform had gained significant traction in India and was already being replicated in several countries around the world. However, by 2017, efforts to take the platform to greater heights did not continue. This trajectory of IPAB from a well-recognised anti-corruption tool to relative obscurity will be discussed in detail in the section on outcomes and challenges.
AFFORDANCES

The way in which civic technologists envision the design and use of their platforms is intrinsically connected to the question of technological affordances. The predominant theme that therefore emerged from data analysis was related to the technological affordances of IPAB as a civic tech platform which can help us understand the diverse functions that it serves, including those that were intended by the designers of the platform, those that aligned design intentions with users’ experiences as well as those that emerged predominantly from people’s use of the platform. To address this topic, I draw upon the analytical category of ‘imagined affordances’ by Nagy and Neff (2015) which they posit as a dynamic concept of affordances taking into account diverse elements such as materiality of technologies, user perceptions and expectations from such technologies as well as designers’ intentions when creating them. This notion of imagined affordances is used here to uncover the variety of functionalities of the tech platform without privileging one particular point of view. As gleaned from the data, three types of platform affordances could be identified. These include, anonymity for users to lodge complaints without fear of repercussions, greater visibility to the bribery problem by making large data sets available freely, and affective sharing of acts of bribery by users to express guilt.

In this context, it is also important to consider the values of CSOs which shape their identities (Jakimow, 2010) and guide their own imagination of those affordances. Values of CSOs are co-produced by different actors based on the socio-political context in which such organisations operate (ibidem). Janaagraha works with governments at various levels (national, regional and local) and its public documents and reports evince a technocratic rhetoric on digitisation and governance as seen at the top, i.e., of national and state governments as well as international organisations which place a lot of faith in extensive digitalisation as a condition towards greater transparency and accountability of public offices. Bornstein and Sharma (2016) speak about the ‘technomoral politics’ of Indian civil society organisations whose moral agenda to act on behalf of public interest legitimises their role as the conscience keepers of the society. The values of good governance proposed by these CSOs are in line with the state’s vision of the same, as the organisations employ this strategy to sustain their grassroots efforts and to pass the intense state scrutiny of their activities. Janaagraha’s own role as a public conscience keeper can be observed in the strong moral core that guides the raison d’être of IPAB as a tech platform created for public good, while also placing the moral obligation on citizens to report bribery and help expand the database on retail corruption. As we will see later in the section, an unintended affordance of the
platform was how it came to be used as a space to share the guilt and burden of having indulged in the corrupt act of bribery.

One of the main purposes for creating a platform like IPAB was to provide a safe space for citizens to take ownership of their action of paying a bribe and report it anonymously. Respondent 1 noted that even in the name of the platform, the focus is on the user/public:

> When you name an officer on a public media, it has very different connotations and those are done for a very different reason. What *I Paid a Bribe* started is that the citizens should take the ownership that they gave the bribe. That’s why the name ‘*I Paid a Bribe*’.

Naming and shaming a public official on social media platforms, as Respondent 1 continued, could prove to be risky for the complainant, as such data is not fully anonymous. With IPAB, citizens could afford to utilise a secure platform, revealing their identity only if they wanted action to be taken. This affordance was designed to protect users from possible repercussions of complaining against high-ranking public officials. Respondent 4 observed that rallying against corruption is difficult in a country like India:

> But fighting corruption, people have to be specific. Now, for example, stakeholders – each stakeholder has to play a part. Each citizen has to come forward and stand up and speak and risk. There are people who will say “I know I paid the money, but don’t ask me to speak, because I don’t want to act as a resource.” So he will watch me, he will victimise me, they may even physically harm me and my family... All kinds of things. There is a price to pay to end corruption.

Thus, the creators of the platform designed it so that such risks would be minimised as the complaints would be anonymous with the data not traceable to those who reported.

By allowing people to report anonymously, the platform intended to collect large data sets as citizens would hesitate less to open up about wrongdoing. Thus, another important affordance of the platform, as envisioned by the founder and the designers, was to scale up data collection on retail corruption and render such data visible to all interested parties. As Respondent 1 explained:

> *IPAB*’s intention was to exactly find out the data. How many such instances are happening around … what are the major places where these kinds of instances are happening and how … and we also map the full process of how one particular service was to be availed. When we were getting the data, we were also trying to map in this whole process of service, what are the points where most of the bribes are being given … So, we were able to find out the loopholes and then we were able to create reports and submit them to the relevant authorities … I would say the
technology played a very key role, and I think the way we were able to scale it up because there was technology behind it.\textsuperscript{10}

A major motivation on the part of the designers was to create an online platform registering crowdsourced information from citizens on the nature and extent of exchanges of bribes, which would, in turn, promote public visibility of such actions that would eventually pressure public officials to scrutinise the activities of their departments. Respondent 6 outlined why this data was necessary:

\ldots in a country like us, no one has a clue as to how much money is actually going into something like bribes. You know, we know it is huge. It can be in any kind of amount, but where does it start? Where does it go? Who are these people where these bribes are going, which is the department where most of these bribes are happening?\textsuperscript{11}

The possibility to visualise corruption-related data would result in creating a sense of urgency among citizens to act on the situation because of its gravity (Arora et al., 2020). This sense, as assumed by the platform creators, would provide the motivation to potential users to report bribery. As we will see in the discussion on outcomes in the next section, the platform has managed to become an important repository of extensive bribe-related data since its inception.

So far, I have discussed those affordances that were built into the design of the platform. However, there was yet another function that was not perceived as an affordance by the creators, but which became evident as the website gained traction in the society. The creators and designers observed that emotions were a major motivating factor for the public to report bribery and that IPAB provided an outlet for the pent-up feelings and frustrations about committing such an act. Respondent 6 evocatively explained:

\ldots when people felt very heavy and they felt that, oh God, what have I done? And why did I do this? And what can I do about it? Okay, I’ve done this and I’m done with it, but I really want to do something about what I have done. And that was the place where they could come to and talk about that.\textsuperscript{12}

According to Respondent 6, people recognised the fact that bribery was an unfortunate reality in the country, and they felt helpless every time they had to partake in such an exchange. Some even swore in their testimonies that they would never again pay a bribe. For the users, the act of reporting was almost as a cleansing ritual after having committed a dirty deed.

A brief commentary on Janaagraha’s own understanding of corruption is warranted here to understand the underlying values that went into the design of
IPAB’s affordances. The interviewees, who were associated with the platform in various capacities over the years, mentioned that their intention with IPAB was to create a platform which would allow the monitoring of the price of retail corruption through people’s reports. This stems from an understanding of corruption as a principal-agent problem (Rose-Ackerman, 1978) with the people as principal and the public servants as agents. As the people are unable to monitor and hold the officials accountable because of the asymmetry in their power relations, IPAB provided them with a platform which would allow them to do so, anonymously too, thereby tilting the knowledge asymmetry in favour of the people. However, it would be incorrect to argue that IPAB saw corruption exclusively as a principal-agent problem. It also sought to promote collective action for overall public good identifying corruption as something that needs to be fought together, bringing it close to the contemporary anti-corruption/governance rhetoric which values community engagement and trust-building exercises in society (Marquette & Peiffer, 2015).

By allowing people to lodge three types of report: ‘I paid a bribe’, ‘I did not pay a bribe’ and ‘I met an honest officer’, the platform intended to show how different actors behave in diverse ways when faced with the unpleasant situation of bribery (i.e. they may or may not choose to bribe) and that not all public officials are corrupt. It sought to engage the public by placing the onus on them to take responsibility for their actions and contribute to the open repository of bribe-related data. It also recognised the phenomenon of ‘collusive corruption’, where people pay bribes just to get things done even if they are not coerced into it. The stories shared by people online bear testimony to this fact that not all were coaxed to pay bribes. In some cases, they just did so to ease the transactional process or to get the service quickly. The fact that corruption is a moral problem was a value shared by the users who chose to report on IPAB which led to the emergence of another affordance, i.e. the affective sharing of guilt through personal stories of bribe-giving and colluding with corrupt officials to obtain quick solutions.

In sum, the theme of platform affordances gives us deep insights into the designer expectations and user perceptions with respect to IPAB. As we saw in this section, three sub-themes emerged from the discussion on affordances: anonymity of users, visibility of the price and incidence of retail corruption, and opening up possibilities for affective sharing of guilt through platform use. Visibility of bribery-related data was the affordance designed by the CSO which aided its own activities and increased its presence both nationally and internationally. Anonymity was a design choice which matched the needs of the users; while the affective sharing was an affordance that was dependent solely on users’ experiences.
OUTCOMES AND CHALLENGES

As mentioned in the previous sections, the IPAB civic tech platform gained a substantial degree of popularity in the early years following its launch in 2010. Already in early 2014, Janaagraha’s co-founder Swati Ramanathan pointed out that the platform had been replicated in 16 countries with further expansion plans. By autumn 2015, the IPAB website recorded 49000 reports from 645 Indian towns and cities (Hough, 2015). Around the same year, two high-ranking public officials with extensive experience in the police and administrative services were chosen to consult with the organisation. Their work, as noted by Respondents 4 and 5, could mainly be categorised under three primary responsibilities: grievance redressal, advocacy and process reform. These consultants worked in tandem with a coordinator from the organisation going through the filed complaints, vetting genuine grievances and taking them up with respective public departments. In terms of advocacy, their work was related to educating the public, especially school and university students, about the scourge of corruption and the mechanisms to fight it. These events were organised solely under the aegis of Janaagraha and attracted high-ranking officials and anti-corruption activists as speakers. As far as process reforms were concerned, they made significant progress with one aspect of public service delivery, i.e. passport verification by the police, which was one of the key services for which many complaints were lodged. Using IPAB data, the consultants managed to bring meaningful changes to the verification process, suggesting the elimination of police verification altogether to stop harassment of ordinary citizens by the police for availing of a basic document which is supposed to be their right as citizens.

However, these kinds of process reforms were difficult. One significant challenge impeding them was intrinsically linked to the affordances of the platform, i.e. the possibility to report anonymously. One of the respondents, who was engaged with managing the platform, mentioned that over 90 per cent of the complaints were anonymous. This data had to be vetted carefully and even then, its validity was always suspect. Furthermore, as corruption is widespread in the day-to-day transactions between citizens and government in India, it erodes the trust of the citizen in democracy and creates tendencies to beat the system by engaging in bribery (Coalition Against Corruption Report, 2014). This also meant that many of these acts of bribery could be considered as ‘speed money’, that is, sums spent to avail services faster to avoid getting stuck in a bureaucratic quagmire. Therefore, it is also understandable why many complaints were anonymous, as the bribe-giver also shared part of the blame. In such a complex dynamic between the government and the governed,
potentialities and affordances of grassroots civic tech platforms

it gets difficult to fight corruption and process reforms rendering the potential of IPAB as an anti-corruption tool weaker.

Be that as it may, as of 15th March 2022, official figures mentioned on the IPAB website showed that 198,047 reports of bribe giving were registered from 1081 towns and cities. These figures point to a platform that achieved significant numbers in terms of users over the years of its existence. And yet, a closer look at the site revealed a different picture: in the years between 2021 and 2022, there were a number of bogus reports\textsuperscript{13} on the platform: the hyperlinks provided on the homepage directing to their international partners often open unreliable windows that have no bearing with anti-corruption activities. However, this issue has been remedied by the website administrators as of July 2023 as such reports and bogus links have been taken down. Furthermore, the social media pages of IPAB have been inactive since 2018. When questioned on this issue, the interviewees explained that as an initiative, IPAB has taken a backseat in Janaagraha’s plan of action in the last couple of years, while others such as I Change My City and My City My Budget which involve civic participation in providing inputs on day-to-day municipal governance having taken precedence. Respondent 1 pointed out the reason why the project is not active today:

...But corruption is a very small thing in the whole stream of projects that Janaagraha does, because Janaagraha’s work is on bringing about systemic changes. How do you make the system more transparent, more self-sufficient, is important. Citizen participation increases and accountability increases. We believe that when we work on the system, corruption gets automatically resolved.\textsuperscript{14}

While a couple of respondents suggested that they faced difficulties and opposition when trying to relay the complaints to public officials, they did not directly connect such challenges to the ultimate suspension of IPAB as an initiative. IPAB as a platform still has its website running, but these days it is more of a data collection platform. As explained by Respondent 1, the platform will continue to be of relevance to researchers who are interested in studying the price of retail corruption.

The suspension of the IPAB project begs the question of sustainability of civic initiatives. CSOs in India have the potential to (and they indeed do) address a wide range of civic issues but corruption is a much bigger problem where those in power are often implicated in criminal wrongdoing. Respondent 4 opined that curbing of corruption is generally considered to be the job of the government and not of NGOs and other similar third-sector organisations. In fact, on several occasions the team from IPAB faced resistance from public officials as they were unwilling to listen to complaints from a private organisation. Here it must also be borne in mind that the power of
CSOs has been steadily curtailed in the last years in the country. While none of the respondents from Janaagraha identified the decreasing democratic and deliberative spaces in society, this erosion of powers of CSOs needs to be accounted for when discussing the challenges that an initiative like IPAB could have faced. Respondent 4 explained, without mincing words, why the Indian context poses a stern challenge to initiatives like IPAB to take strong measures against corruption, especially with increasing restrictions on the voice of civil society to democratically negotiate with power.

... corruption as a phenomenon exists and nobody wants to take the bull by its horns. Or I would say... very few want to take the bull by its horns. Even honest people feel it is safer for them from a career point of view - whether it is a political career or an administrative/bureaucratic career or a police career. ... Victimisation is a very normal thing when you fight corruption.15

As we saw in the previous sections, IPAB, even while addressing petty corruption in the public sector, did not engage in naming and shaming of officials and stayed away from assigning blame to such actors. Evidently, this was a move to avoid direct confrontation with those in power and to instead identify the loopholes in the system where misgovernance was taking place. However, as Respondent 4 reminisced from his extensive experience working in the Indian public sector, the willingness to curb corruption must come from those who have political powers and CSOs can work as aiding that effort but cannot take the centre stage. This is because corruption is considered in such offices as a governance issue which has to be solved through the existing institutions of the government rather than third-sector organisations. Through his interview, it was also evident that entrenched hierarchies that determine who gets to sit atop the governance ecosystem render CSOs as secondary, even peripheral, partners at best. He also added that corruption is hardly a political issue in India, and that while more people and organisations should speak up about it, those in the highest seats of power need to take it most seriously and lead the way, which is unfortunately not the case.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter argued that corruption studies literature needs to consider the work of CSOs that focus on transparency, accountability and governance, and especially focus on those grassroots organisations which use digital media to fight corruption, as they have received little academic attention. Using the case study of Janaagraha’s IPAB, it highlighted the contribution of CSOs in creating civic tech platforms as anti-corruption tools to combat corruption. It showed that Janaagraha makes strategic use of digital tools to design civic
tech platforms that are supposed to enhance citizen engagement with everyday governance by providing inputs of various kinds; in the case of IPAB, it is reporting instances of bribery experienced at the hands of public officials. The platform is also meant to be an instrument that helps ordinary citizens to perform a type of civic audit, in this case, gathering and monitoring of data on the retail price of corruption and the instances of bribe taking in different public departments. When IPAB as an initiative was at its peak of activities due to its importance in Janaagraha’s own plan of action, these data were utilised to prepare reports and to initiate process reforms in public offices so that the instances of bribery would reduce in those spaces.

Three broad themes emerged from the data gathered over the entire period of 2021 through interactions with highly involved stakeholders who had worked on the project, the reports they shared with me, and additional framing of their activities as seen in their social media presence on YouTube. These themes included: the development of the civic tech platform over the years, the platform affordances, outcomes and the challenges faced by IPAB which led to it eventually being discontinued as an initiative. As we saw, the initiative and its centrepiece, the IPAB web platform, grew significantly in the first years after it was launched. The website garnered a lot of traction over the years with increasing citizen reports and even spread into other national territories as a benchmark of digital anti-corruption tools. By allowing anonymous reporting, and thereby protecting the complainants from potential harm, the website gathered large amounts of valuable information on petty corruption in public departments from different Indian cities, and especially from Bangalore, where it was created. The web platform was also used by users as a space to confess and to find an emotional relief from wrongdoing. At its height of activities in the mid-2010s, senior bureaucrats were brought in as consultants who would vet the complaints and take them up with respective authorities thereby trying to influence process reforms in public offices. However, in the last couple of years the IPAB initiative has been suspended, with the last social media activities on its diverse pages having occurred in 2017–18. The platform, that is the website, is still alive but has not received genuine complaints of bribery in the last few months. While some respondents hesitated to provide an answer regarding why this happened, others noted that the CSO has simply moved on to projects which enable citizen engagement at the input side of governance, such as signalling spaces where civic amenities are lacking, or providing suggestions on municipal budgets. Two respondents also noted that tackling corruption head-on is difficult in a country like India because of the lack of political will to seriously fight it as well as the relative powerlessness of CSOs to stand up to public officials who enjoy high social capital.

Even though the initiative has been suspended and the website is in a state of disuse, the story of IPAB nevertheless forms a valuable narrative on what
grassroots anti-corruption efforts might look like in countries where bribery is deeply ingrained in the daily lives of people and how digital platforms can be designed by civil society actors to augment voices of citizens who are perpetual victims of corruption. While the chapter has only reported the version of the story originating from the creators and designers of the platform (also because of the initiative’s suspension, user voices are difficult to obtain), it highlights how in its own small yet significant way, IPAB pushed the conversation of fighting corruption in a direction that would eventually make it a benchmark case in the anti-corruption sector.

NOTES

1. The author acknowledges that the research for this chapter has been conducted at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna in the framework of the BIT-ACT project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No 802362).

2. In this chapter, *I Paid A Bribe* web-based/ICT-based platform refers to the website, while as an initiative, refers to the project that Janaagraha undertook as one of its activities in the 2010s.

3. Video available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WUg7CX5FM4.

4. See for further details: https://www.janaagraha.org/about-us/.

5. These international indices have caught the attention of national media outlets in the last couple of years, with centrist outlets presenting the findings with little judgment, left-wing outlets critiquing the government, while right-wing outlets outright condemning such reports as being anti-India. See respectively: https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-rated-as-an-electoral-autocracy-by-global-institute-101615412313577.html; https://thewire.in/rights/india-among-top-10-autocratising-nations-democratic-slide-to-continue-v-dem-institute and https://www.opindia.com/2022/03/v-dem-institute-continues-anti-india-propaganda-reduces-democracy-rating/.

6. At this juncture, it is important to recollect that in 2010, the number of internet users in the country was less than 100 million, and according to World Bank estimates was about 7.5 per cent of the population. A self-proclaimed leading financial inclusion blog in India, *Moneycontrol*, noted that around that time, the overwhelming majority, about 80 per cent of the internet users were located in urban spaces. The typical profile of a user back in 2010 was an employed person, head of the household, earning significantly more than the national average, from the south of India and connecting online from home (Singh, 2020). While the data requires triangulation to check its veracity, these data points already help us form an outline of the typical user of a platform like IPAB: a young employed male, from the services sector, located in South India, reasonably fluent in English and in possession of a personal computer and adequate technical skills to navigate the web and file online complaints.

7. Interview with Respondent 4 conducted on 25/05/2021, online.

8. Interview with Respondent 1 conducted on 06/01/2021, online.

9. Interview with Respondent 4 conducted on 25/05/2021, online.

10. Interview with Respondent 1 conducted on 06/01/2021, online.
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11. Interview with Respondent 6 conducted on 01/07/2021, online.
12. Interview with Respondent 6 conducted on 01/07/2021, online.
13. All these bogus reports have the same theme: individuals looking for a well-functioning kidney and willing to pay a sum of 70 million Indian rupees (http://www.ipaidabribe.com/reports/paid#gsc.tab=0). Evidently, this is not the type of report that IPAB seeks from the public which further implies that the site is not being maintained and/or monitored by the Janaagraha staff.

14. Interview with Respondent 1 conducted on 06/01/2021, online.
15. Interview with Respondent 4 conducted on 25/05/2021, online.

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6. The social construction of anti-corruption technologies: Analysing the e-participation platform rahvaalgatus.ee in Estonia

Oksana Huss

INTRODUCTION

Estonia is broadly recognised as an example of fast societal transformation while ensuring effective control of corruption after the Soviet regime collapsed. In the last decade, rapidly evolving communication technologies have been increasingly considered an effective tool to counteract corruption (Chêne, 2016). Naturally, the explanations of the success in Estonia are due to the high technological development of the country, providing transparency and impartiality in public services.

In 2000, Estonia provided a legal framework and infrastructure to enable digital signatures. Consequently, most interactions between citizens and the state moved online, not only administrative but also political ones (Björklund, 2016). Estonia became the first country in the world that legitimised e-voting in national elections and that experimented with e-participation, in 2001 (Toots et al., 2016; Toots, 2019).

Nevertheless, Estonia experienced a political crisis resulting from a scandal in 2012, when an illicit political finance scheme was exposed. The trust in representative democracy was additionally undermined by the low political will and institutional failures to condemn the malpractices. Thus, e-governance, useful to reduce petit and administrative corruption, failed to prevent corruption on the input side of the political system. E-voting, which was helpful in optimising elections in representative democracy, did not change the way representation of interests is organised in society.

In this chapter, I argue that the crisis revealed the demands for a new social contract, i.e. new patterns in citizen-state relations. The search for crisis solutions took place in a process known as People’s Assembly 2013 or Rahvakogu. The new principles of co-creation and crowdsourcing, inclusivity,
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and deliberation were contested and exercised during the People’s Assembly. These principles are materialised and institutionalised in the Estonian Citizens’ Initiative Portal. Thus, compared to other e-participation platforms introduced top-down, rahvaalgatus.ee emerged from the grassroots when the society questioned representative democracy and experienced participatory democracy principles as a new imaginary for state-society relations.

Empirically, this chapter will analyse the Estonian Citizens’ Initiative Portal (ECIP) rahvaalgatus.ee. The platform was a product of the crowdsourcing and deliberation process in Estonia, known as Rahvakogu or People’s Assembly in 2013. It aimed at opening the political system on its input side and enabling political influence for ordinary citizens using e-democracy tools of the collective proposal. Both the People’s Assembly and the ECIP are analysed, as a case of an indirect anti-corruption measure in response to the corruption on the input side of the political system. The case study explores the relationship between social practices that arise in response to corruption and the material aspects of technology developed to manifest these practices in Estonia.

Theoretically, this contribution aims to revise the assumptions of technological determinism and explore the social influence on the development of digital media from the perspective of the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) theory (Bijker et al., 1987) whose underlying assumption is that the development of technology is a social process. There are many possibilities for technical solutions, but the one that materialises reflects the meanings that social actors assign to technology, their beliefs, as well as relations between the actors etc. In the case of rahvaalgatus.ee, I propose that the online portal for collective address is the materialisation of societal change, including new demands and attitudes towards the existing social contract, manifested during the People’s Assembly in 2013. In particular, rahvaalgatus.ee reflects the co-creation, inclusivity and deliberation aspects inherent to participatory democracy and challenges the conventional decision-making in representative democracy.

This chapter has policy relevance, elaborating on how e-participation can be considered an anti-corruption technology. While there is extensive research on the effects of e-governance on corruption (Chêne, 2016; Gans-Morse et al., 2018), the work on e-participation and anti-corruption remains scarce. At the same time, global regimes that promote citizen participation, such as Open Government Partnership, account for anti-corruption in practice and lack differentiated theoretical foundations about the mutual effects of using technologies to engage citizens to address corruption. I argue that e-participation is critical to address the specific form of corruption on the input side of the political system, while e-governance and e-voting are failing to do so. Importantly, accepting participatory democracy principles in society as a type of state-citizen relations precede e-participation technology, not vice-versa.
Thus, the new social contract was response to corruption (Rothstein, 2021) and provided the ecosystem for new practices and technology to strive (Mattoni, 2017).

The chapter is structured as follows. I elaborate on the analytical framework, data collection, and analysis methods in the methodological section. Further, I discuss the peculiarities of corruption and anti-corruption on the input side of the political system. In the empirical part, I explore the Silvergate corruption scandal and the following legitimacy crisis of Estonian representative institutions from the constructivist perspective. I argue that the crisis and the following protests posed the demand for and experimented with the new social contract, shifting from representative democracy to a participatory and deliberative one. The following section discusses how e-participation technologies reflect the type of citizen-state relations. The case of the Estonian Citizens’ Initiative Portal (ECIP) rahvaalgatus.ee represents the new generation of e-participation technologies compared to the previous ones developed in the country. In the following section, I bring both perspectives together and show how the core principles of People’s Assembly 2013 materialised in the ECIP rahvaalgatus.ee. I conclude with a discussion about the implications of the case study.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

As a country case, Estonia provides a unique context to analyse anti-corruption technologies in a setting of a highly developed technological infrastructure and low level of corruption. At the same time, the ‘digital culture’ or ‘culture of e-government’ evolved in the country, given high public trust towards digital solutions in citizen-state relations. (Björklund, 2016; Madise & Vinkel, 2014; Maria Vooglaid & Randma-Liiv, 2022) The analysis of the e-petition platform rahvaalgatus.ee is designed as the most likely case: while the pioneer country in e-governance and e-voting had all preconditions to succeed in e-participation technologies, five predecessor projects of rahvaalgatus.ee failed to provide an acceptable and institutionalised solution for citizens to submit their ideas for legislation and policies. Departing from this puzzle, I argue that, unlike other e-participation projects, rahvaalgatus.ee reflects the change of citizen-state relations towards participatory and deliberative democracy that manifested in the People’s Assembly 2013 practices.

Methodologically, the analysis is based on semi-structured interviews with the social movement leadership (9 interlocutors) – the initiators, organisers, and IT developers, who played a critical role in each stage of the process, from People’s Assembly 2013 to the development and use of rahvaalgatus.ee. In the interviews, I pay particular attention to the imaginaries and values of the leadership and the most salient conflicts they faced in the discussion. The con-
textual information has been conducted in 6 semi-structured expert interviews on (anti-)corruption and civil society in Estonia. In addition, visual data on the protests and secondary data, including related websites, social media, and documents, on both the social movement and technology have been collected and analysed.

To operationalise change, I rely on the role of ‘antagonism’ in the discourse theory of crisis and change by Dirk Nabers (2015). The logic of antagonism implies ‘the openness of one [social] identity to be infected by another’ (Nabers, 2015, p. 113). As a rule, ‘opposed elements are articulated as conflicting’ (Nabers, 2015, p. 122). Thus methodologically, to identify antagonism as an indicator of societal change, in the course of data collection and data analysis, I focus on the conflictual issues, i.e., themes that caused most discussions, disagreement, and contention. In addition to conflictual issues, I highlight which alternative values and processes the respondents propose as a ‘new’ solution. I reflect on antagonism on two levels: the societal level, which elaborates on the subject of the public outcry, as well as on the individual level, by identifying repeating themes among different stakeholders, independently from each other.

During this mapping exercise across all interviews, I inductively identified four concepts that were reoccurring among respondents about both People’s Assembly and ECIP rahvaalgatus.ee: co-creation and crowdsourcing, inclusivity, and argument-based deliberation. Based on the literature on the continuum of citizen-state relations from representation to partnership (Vigoda, 2002) and the difference between both, as well as conceptual work on collaborative governance (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Sørensen & Torfing, 2021) and deliberative democracy (Felicetti, 2016), I argue that the identified categories propose qualitatively different perceptions of citizen-state relations, shifting from representative democracy towards a participatory and deliberative one.

To analyse ECIP rahvaalgatus.ee technology, I refer to the analytical framework from information systems’ literature with a focus on e-participation (Randma-Liiv, 2022) while considering the ‘media ecology and media practice approaches’ that allow a situated understanding of technologies in social movements (Mattoni, 2017). I assess rahvaalgatus.ee on four levels: organisational project level, including technology’s ownership, administration, and maintenance; technology level, including functionality of hard- and software, IT architecture, development, functionality etc.; process level, including all procedural steps that the path of e-petition includes; and the stakeholder level, including mapping and analysis of individuals and organisations, as well as interrelations among them, involved at different stages of development, maintenance, and use of technology.
THE PECULIARITY OF CORRUPTION AND ANTI-CORRUPTION ON THE INPUT SIDE OF A POLITICAL SYSTEM

In democracies, the input side encompasses accumulating public interests through political parties, which represent those interests and process them into legislation. This process includes the creation of political parties, their activities, and political finance for elections. In contrast, compliance with established laws and procedures and policy implementation represents the political system’s output side. This input-output logic of the political system goes back to the political systems analysis by David Easton (1957).

There are several interrelated peculiarities of corruption on the input side of the political system. First, it is difficult to counteract, as it is not illegal but illegitimate in most cases. Thus, typical measures of checks and balances are problematic in a grey zone where formal rules are not violated. Second, the effect of corruption on the input side is devastating because particularistic abuse of the decision-making process results in legal norms favouring a narrow circle of interest groups instead of citizens. Thus, corruption on the input side restricts the possibility of fair and competitive distribution of public resources. Third, any meaningful change towards increasing political competition and opening access to political decision-making seems irrational from the side of political decision-makers on the ‘winner-side.’ It means that political parties and individual politicians profit from illicit finance by gaining material support or additional votes in exchange for particularistic favours in public office. Low prospects for success make it worth studying the exceptional cases of positive change concerning corruption on the input side of the political system.

The forms of corruption on the input side of the political system vary from illicit finance of political parties and individual candidates to clientelism, non-transparent lobbyism, etc. (Rothstein & Varraich, 2017; Varraich, 2014). All these forms have the same effect: they are based on the favouritism logic in political decision-making and skew political competition. The main challenge is that, in most cases, these practices are not illegal, or their criminal component is challenging to prove. Nevertheless, perceived favouritism in the decision-making undermines the expectations that go along with representative democracy, namely that politicians represent the interests of their voters. Therefore, illegitimate political competition on the input side fosters frustration with representative democracy and undermines trust between citizens and authorities.

Anti-corruption efforts to counteract such manifestation of illegitimate malpractices on the input side mostly take place in an indirect way (Rothstein, 2021). Their main goal is to increase trust and legitimacy of the political
system, which is different to the conventional approach of exposing and punishing corruption as a criminal offence (Wedel, 2012). The perception of political legitimacy reflects the social contract, defined in this chapter as a dynamic, discursive manifestation of relations between the society and authorities, which may vary across countries and change over time. Social movements are critical to articulating injustice and demanding a change in the social contract. They also provide space to generate ‘new meanings of contentious issues,’ as alternatives to the existing social contract (della Porta & Mattoni, 2021, p. 8; Melucci, 2009). The crisis of 2012 in Estonia and societal response to it allow for tracing a case of such a changing social contract.

CRISIS IN 2012 AS A RESONANCE OF CHANGE

The idea of Rahvakogu and rahvaalgatus.ee takes its roots in the political crisis that evolved around the Silvergate scandal. In 2012, Silver Meikar, a member of the Estonian Reform Party represented in the Parliament, published an online article about shady funding of political parties that came in cash from unknown sources (Meikar, 2012). After Meikar blew the whistle, it turned out that illicit political finance was widespread in Estonian politics and high-level officials (for example, Minister of Justice, political party secretary) were involved in these transactions. The political parties lost even more trust among the population when they indicated implausible funding sources during the investigation, like the money coming from the mother-in-law (Cavegn, 2016). Although the Minister of Justice resigned because of the scandal, the justice system failed to provide sufficient evidence for convictions. This scandal resulted in public protests in the main cities across Estonia. It turned out to be what Karlsson et al. defined as a ‘legitimacy crisis of Estonian political parties and representative institutions’ (2015).

In his speech to the Parliament, the President of Estonia Toomas Hendrik Ilves placed this political crisis in the context of societal change taking place in Estonia:

All successful states reach a certain crisis point when they have become wealthy enough. Expectations change. People’s primary needs have been satisfied, wherefore people are no longer content with what they have. … In Estonia, we are also living through an important change in our value system. Several things that five or ten years ago brought votes at elections are today looked upon with a smile. Especially among those, whom we consider to be the guarantee of our future – among the broad-minded and well-educated youth. (Ilves, 2013)

The president’s assessment of the political crisis as the catalyst of an updated value system in society corresponds to the constructivist viewpoint, according to which a situation of crisis provides discursive space for change. In line with
the discursive theory of crisis and change by Dirk Nabers (2015), the crisis occurs when sedimented practices in the society are questioned. At the same time, the crisis provides space for antagonism and the hegemonic struggle of competing discourses. The antagonism is primarily visible in the conflict lines around specific issues or practices that question sedimented practice and indicate change. After the crisis, the ideas that people identify with the most can become a new sedimented practice. In other words, a crisis is a space for alternative knowledge to rise and materialise.

Nabers’ theory provides two essential ways a crisis can provide opportunities for revising a social contract in a society. First, the crisis in 2012 in Estonia revealed how implicit norms and silent practices, like illicit political finance, became salient and disputed. In this logic, the event of Silvergate played the role of a trigger for the crisis, while the reason for the crisis was a different one: It is arising change of the norms, values, expectations and demands that become visible in this society.

Second, the antagonism in a crisis opens space for discussion and social innovation. It means society has a space to experiment and create new practices in state-citizen relations. These are structural opportunities and ‘discursive opportunities’ that trigger a change in a society (Bröer & Duyvendak, 2011). Having the possibility for engagement is necessary but not sufficient for mobilisation. People mobilise when ‘they conceived of these openings as real opportunities because they started to feel differently about their situation and their capacity to change it’ (Bröer & Duyvendak, 2011, p. 242).

In response to the crisis, civil society in Estonia took a constructive and inclusive way of elaborating solutions in cooperation with the authorities. The proposals aimed not at punishment but at institutional opening of the decision-making processes for the citizens. When public outrage spread nationwide after the Silvergate, few students saw the ‘window of opportunity’ to identify areas needing systemic change. Inspired by several influential Charters in the Soviet Union (Charter 67 in the Czech Republic, Letter of 40 in 1980), they invited 17 influential public figures to sign Charter 12, which shortlisted five areas that had to be revised (electoral system, political competition and creation of political parties, party funding, direct democracy and open decision-making) all aiming at the change on the input side of the political system. To launch the Charter, the activists closely worked with journalists, which resulted in broad media coverage of the initiative. The charter was posted online for electronic signatures to other citizens and collected over 17,000 electronic signatures supporting the demand for change within two days only.

This resulted in the so-called Ice Cellar meeting that President Ilves initiated in an informal group of Charter 12 authors, several civil society activists, experts, and representatives of four political parties represented in the Estonian
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parliament Riigikogu. In that meeting, the former Minister of Reforms and member of the e-Governance Academy, Liia Hänni, proposed that ‘no parallel institutions’ are needed to solve the political crisis in Estonia, ‘but a new process.’ With an example of a crowdsourced Constitution writing in Iceland in mind, she proposed to initiate ‘an open process to ask from the people how to renew Estonian democracy,’ which found the support of most meeting participants. The meeting participants agreed to launch crowdsourcing for the ideas to address the five areas listed in Charter 12. This decision gave the conceptual beginning of the People’s Assembly.

In the following steps, the crowd-sourcing process known as Rahvakogu – the People’s Assembly – was initiated (GovLab, 2018; King, 2019). Over 2000 proposals for institutional change in response to the crisis were generated in three weeks. They were carefully clustered into 18. The main round of discussion took place during the Deliberation Day. For this purpose, 550 citizens selected in a representative sampling were invited to discuss proposals to the parliament. Finally, 15 proposals were submitted to the Parliament, while seven were adopted as Estonian laws (three without changes and four modified). One of the adopted laws was regulating e-petitions. The Estonian Citizens’ Initiative Portal rahvaalgatus.ee was the technical response to the institutionalised possibility.

The societal response to the corruption scandal in the form of the People’s Assembly is somewhat unusual for anti-corruption social movements. As a rule, social movements raised in response to the corruption crisis aim at creating counterpowers through oversight, prevention, and judgment – what Pierre Rosanvallon calls counter-democracy (Rosanvallon, 2008), or what is known in corruption research as societal accountability (Bauhr et al., 2010). As a rule, mobilised actors of social movements against corruption are ‘positioned outside the state,’ which allows them to act as a controlling agency of ‘outside of the market,’ as they ‘do not follow a profit motive’ (della Porta & Mattoni, 2021, p. 5).

Although counter-democracy is a natural way to handle societal distrust, della Porta points out that ‘rather “the age of mistrust” requires an institutional adaptation that can transform challenges into resources’ (della Porta 2020, p. 7). Thus, the activists recognised in the political crisis the chance to ‘transform challenges into resources’ (ibid, p. 7): they questioned not only the fact of shady funding of political parties but the access to politics in general and aimed at changing the status quo. People’s Assembly did not improve trust towards representative institutions in Estonia (Karlsson et al., 2018). However, it initiated a change that is taking place gradually, resulting in new societal demands and expectations while rahvaalgatus.ee provided the platform to accumulate and communicate those expectations for co-creation and collaboration, inclusivity and argument-based deliberation.
E-PARTICIPATION TECHNOLOGIES AS MATERIALISATION OF A SOCIAL CONTRACT

Participatory governance is not a new phenomenon (Koopman & Isbister, 1958) and discussed in contrast to representative democracy for a long time (Arnstein 1969; Gittell, 1972). However, in the past decades, using new technologies and institutionalising the open government approach through the global Open Government Partnership significantly increased experimental citizen participation. Using digital technologies in citizen-state relations decreased the costs of citizen participation, which otherwise required immense coordination of resources that were impossible to generate for participation on a large scale before computing algorithms were developed for these purposes. The utopian ideas of deliberative or collaborative democracy became feasible, which pushed their conceptual development (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Felicetti, 2016; Sørensen & Torfing, 2021) and practical application on the national and transnational scale (della Porta, 2020). Researchers speak of a new generation on the ‘evolutionary continuum’ in citizen-state relations (Vigoda 2002, p. 531). The shift is taking place from the New Public Management paradigm, according to which citizens are recipients of the services of public authorities, to the new collaborative paradigm in which citizens become partners in the process of governance and not only share decision-making rights and responsibilities but also engage in the policy implementation process.

Estonia began relying on digital technologies in its public administration in the 1990s, and e-governance became a part of the social identity in Estonia. Many new people, who came into public administration and boosted e-governance, had a scientific background and computer literacy, including the former Minister of Reforms Liia Hänni, who reflects in an interview:

After regaining independence, introducing e-governance in Estonia was part of the complete reform process. It came like a separate policy project, but initially, it was just trying to eliminate the ruins of the Soviet system.11

E-Governance was introduced in the late 1990s when the x-road system provided an interoperability solution that connected different databases in different state organisations, which was crucial for integrated public services – this minimised citizens’ need to interact personally with bureaucrats and reduced administrative corruption.

An important milestone for e-democracy was the Digital Signature Act in 2000. The digital signature provided the necessary infrastructure for the future e-Estonia (Maria Vooglaid & Randma-Liiv, 2022, p. 107). In 2005, Estonia became the first country in the world to enable a countrywide, unrestricted, remote e-voting channel in legally binding elections (Toots et al., 2016, p. 5).
The share of e-voting grew to almost 50 per cent of all eligible voters in the European Parliament elections in 2019 (Maria Vooglaid & Randma-Liiv, 2022, p. 107). Complementary e-voting system for the local level of governance (VOLIS) serves to manage voting for participatory budgeting and citizen consultations in the form of polls, in addition to its primary purpose – to ensure transparent decision-making on the local level.12

In contrast to the e-voting tools that aim at improving the election process in a representative democracy, e-participation tools use digital technologies to facilitate online consultation and dialogue between government and citizens in the sense of participatory democracy. The e-participation researchers divide e-participation technologies into at least two generations: first-generation tools are provided mainly by governments in a top-down way to collect feedback from citizens on governmental initiatives. The second generation aims at citizen sourcing of new ideas and enables direct input for legislation from the grassroots (Medaglia, 2012; Toots, 2019). Some authors identify the in-between step of ‘passive crowdsourcing,’ when governments explore citizens’ needs, issues, and opinions by use of social media (Charalabidis et al., 2014).

In Estonia, some early experiments with e-participation were initiated in a top-down way. The first e-participation project TOM (‘Today I decide’), was launched in 2001 to allow citizens to make and discuss proposals for new legislation. TOM failed due to low citizen engagement, poor quality of ideas, and lack of integration into the policy-making process (Toots et al., 2016, p. 6). The online forum Themis, initiated in 2001 by the quasi-governmental foundation (the Estonian Legal Centre) was shut three years later (Maria Vooglaid & Randma-Liiv, 2022, p. 107). In consultation with civil society activists, the Government Office launched a new platform for public consultations on legislative drafts in 2007, which also failed to attract users and had no impact (Toots, 2019). Another governmental draft law portal, EIS is still operating, but its primary goal is to encourage intragovernmental consultation on the draft laws, although input from NGOs and citizens is possible. The only bottom-up alternative petitioon.ee is informal and not legally binding.

The Citizen Initiative Portal rahvaalgatus.ee is a new-generation tool for e-participation in Estonia, as it not only allows citizens to react to the draft laws but feeds new policy input from citizens in a legally binding way. Rahvaalgatus.ee enables any citizen to create proposals for legislation, share ideas on the amendments to the existing regulations, hold discussions, and compose and send digitally signed collective addresses to the Estonian Parliament (Riigikogu) and local public authorities.13 The online platform was launched in 2016. Within seven years, the platform generated 550,000 e-signature for almost 400 initiatives, 185 of which reached the Parliament (in comparison, 19 petitions were submitted to the Parliament on paper). Notably,
the use of rahvaalgatus.ee evolves exponentially: it took four years for the first 100,000 signatures to be collected, while the following 450,000 signatures were collected in only three years.\textsuperscript{14}

There are three significant differences from the previous e-participation platforms. First, in contrast to the previous top-down initiatives, rahvaalgatus.ee was built ‘bottom-up’, as a ‘collaborative effort’: the NGO Citizen OS Foundation developed the IT architecture; the hybrid organisation Estonian Cooperation Assembly (founded by the President of Estonia, but operating in the third sector) administers the platform; and the Chancellery of the Parliament manages the petitions that reach the Parliament (Randma-Liiv n.d., p. 7). Second, a mandatory procedure of the collective address with at least 1000 signatures by citizens of Estonia aged at least 16 years is regulated by the Riigikogu Rules of Procedure Act. Unlike previous platforms, it means rahvaalgatus.ee has been integrated into decision-making procedures. Third, despite the complex, collaborative management of the platform (Randma-Liiv n.d., p. 7) and unstable funding that relies on donations, the platform has been accepted by both citizens and authorities and indicates sustainable growth of users, unlike the previous initiatives.

Although the idea of e-solutions was very early in public service of Estonia, it was fully missing in the political dimension of the country, which is conceptualised in the literature as an ‘Estonian paradox’ (Toots et al., 2016). In other words, Estonia had no e-democracy, while e-governance was advanced (Pehk, 2018). The Estonian Citizens’ Initiative Portal rahvaalgatus.ee, as a bottom-up collaborative effort, manifests the change towards the generation of e-participation technology in Estonia.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE ESTONIAN CITIZENS’ INITIATIVE PORTAL RAHVAALGATUS.EE

In this section, I analyse central aspects of the People’s Assembly that materialised in the Citizens’ Initiative Portal rahvaalgatus.ee. The Citizens’ Initiative Portal technology inherited several principles of participatory and deliberative democracy that were contested but finally practised in the People’s Assembly: co-creation and crowdsourcing, inclusivity, and argument-based deliberation. The first principle is critical to citizen participation and a social contract based on networks and partnership ideas of different stakeholders instead of hierarchical governance. The second and third principles regard participation and a specific way of inclusive and argument-based decision-making, which is the foundation for deliberative democracy (Felicetti, 2016).
Co-creation and Crowdsourcing

The co-creation practices (different stakeholders work on the same matter) and crowdsourcing (different stakeholders generate different ideas or resources) became the foundation of the People’s Assembly and rahvaalgatus.ee. Already at the pre-stage of the People’s Assembly, the text of the Charter 12 was developed in a co-creation process. One of the initiators reflects:

We generated a mailing list, which in the end was like 500 emails in a little more than 2 weeks, quite intense. We had 3–4, maybe 5 meetings in real life. The meetings were a bit difficult to achieve because quite many of us were not in Estonia at the time. So basically, the email list was one of the things where we could, maybe, not agree with each other, but more specifically, put down the grounds that we were most definitely not agreeing with. Sort of, like, we should not do this; otherwise, the whole thing will be a joke. And how the text appeared was that some of us had written some stuff, some others were riffing on it.15

Crowdsourcing of citizens’ ideas to resolve the legitimacy crisis was at the heart of the People’s Assembly. Technically the crowdsourcing process was launched on the Icelandic online platform ‘Your Priorities’. It attracted around 60,000 visitors and 2000 registered users, who generated over 6,000 proposals and comments. Experts were involved only at the stage of proposal evaluation and clustering. Out of the large pool of ideas, 18 proposals were formulated and submitted to the Deliberation Day Assembly for further processing.16

The principle of co-creation was at the foundation of the technological development of the e-petition platform rahvaalgatus.ee. The platform’s alpha version was developed with the CitizenOS free, open-source code. The website is built with Java script. The code and the manual are publicly available on GitHub.17 The IT architect of the alpha version of rahvaalgatus.ee reflects:

I do open-source coding. CitizenOS is open source; you can download and install it; we don’t want money for it. If we can write much code together, as a developer community, why can’t we do this also with legislation? This leaves less room for corruption because it’s totally transparent, and everybody sees what is written through the project. … This is what keeps me in the project; what if people learnt to collaborate more? As open-source communities can collaborate, there’s rarely any harm done with open-source, and everyone can double-check the lines of code and take out whatever harmful code was written. What if we could do the same on legislation and from there, if people get into this collaboration mode… If you introduce these to the new generation, this mindset will also come to other areas, like building a playground or cleaning a park.18

The logic of open-source coding was extended to the petition process as the ‘open-source legislation’. Co-creation was integrated as a starting point in the e-participation process via rahvaalgatus.ee. Technically, the CitizenOS
system was coupled with EtherPad with similar functionality to Google Docs, which became the basis for collaborative document editing and voting. Thus, co-creation, as the ideological foundation of the platforms, was implemented technically.

Collaborative editing became, however, one of the main technical challenges, as it was very resourceful to provide user-friendly collaborative editing while coupling different IT systems. In the beta version of the platform that the rahvaalgatus.ee team launched in 2018, collaborative editing became secondary, although the philosophy of co-creation remained. Currently, every petition has a ‘collaborative phase’ – a ‘little nudge that for three days petition’s author would get and consider the feedback from the others’ before the collection of signatures begins. ‘Other people can comment on it, make recommendations, change something, write something differently’ – as the project manager reflects. However, the author can decide individually to extend the co-creation time or set the deadline for the signature collection.

Inclusivity

While the co-creation process is suitable for generating the ideas, the deliberation process is suitable for selecting the best ideas. James S. Fishkin described deliberative democracy as follows:

In a deliberative democracy, everyone’s views are considered equally under good conditions for the participants to arrive at their views. The process is deliberative in that it provides informative and mutually respectful discussion in which people consider the issue on its merits. The process is democratic in that it requires the equal counting of everyone’s views. (Fishkin 2011, p. 11)

The inclusivity of various social groups and considering their interests in the political process is an important indicator of the democratic qualities of a deliberative process. Thus, ‘Without inclusion, there may be deliberation but not deliberative democracy’ (Dryzek 2009, as cited in: Felicetti 2016, p. 15). Inclusivity was another principle inherited by the People’s Assembly and the Citizen’s Initiative Portal.

Trust is the main goal and the main challenge of inclusivity in the political process: on the one hand, there is quick prejudice towards the capabilities of lay citizens to participate in the political process meaningfully; on the other hand, inclusivity of citizens is predominantly thought as a trust-building process, especially if political legitimacy needs to be restored (Karlsson et al., 2015; King, 2019; OECD, 2013). Another challenge is collaborating in inclusive policy-making with the powerholders who broke trust.
The idea of including the political party’s representatives in the People’s Assembly, who were breaking trust, was not accepted by default. Most responses to corruption, especially the direct ones, aim at either horizontal or vertical accountability, which implies hierarchical power relations and means exclusion. With the attitude of enforcement, it is practically impossible to cooperate. Thus, there has been controversy in the preparation of the People’s Assembly about the involvement of the representatives of the political parties in the organising committee, as they caused the crisis. But in a discussion, the participants found a consensus, as one of them reflects:

One of the first decisions we made between the NGOs was: we definitely needed political party representatives to be on board. The discussion was a lot of political parties’ problems; although some thought political parties were the problems, they have caused the problems by their actions. Therefore, we cannot involve them in solving this; we have to tell them how to behave and what we want them to do. But most of us decided that if we, as NGOs, demand that if there is an issue involving us, we need to be on board since they know much more about this field. They can provide very useful information about what is feasible, what causes certain problems etc.22

The Deliberation Day, when a randomised sample of citizens meets to discuss and decide which proposals from the crowdsourcing will be submitted to the Parliament, was another highly disputed decision in the Rahvakogu process, as one of the initiators reflects. Most organisers agreed upon two steps: crowdsourcing ideas for the institutional change and expert assessment of the proposals, which would be submitted for consideration to the parliament. They saw no point in the time-consuming and resourceful Deliberation Day. Counterintuitively, many voices from politics and civil society opposed the involvement of a random citizen sample and placing the decision-making into their hands. The sceptics questioned the capacity of citizens to make rational decisions. Besides, the Deliberation Assembly required resources without a guarantee of being effective. These cleavages were more than organisational discussions. They were borderlines between politics as usual and societal innovation.

The initiator of Deliberation Day was Urmo Kübar, the head of the Network of Estonian Nonprofit Organizations (NENO), who was ‘fascinated’ by James Fishkin’s idea of ‘informed public opinion’. He pushed for this experiment. He was actively engaged with the team, building trust among all stakeholders as the precondition for an inclusive and deliberative policy-making process. On the one hand, to foster trust among organisers, they kept emphasising that the ‘People’s Assembly is not against political parties, and they are not under attack, but all trying to solve the problem together.’ On the other hand, permanent presence in the media was helpful to explain the idea of Deliberation
Day to the public. Ultimately, Deliberation Day became the main innovation of the People’s Assembly in 2013 and has been internationally recognised and studied as an example of an inclusive deliberation process.

Inclusivity in the policy process became the inherent idea of the Estonian Citizens’ Initiative Portal rahvaalgatus.ee. From the procedural point of view, the portal provided a technical solution that allowed any citizen of Estonia to submit proposals for legislation and policies. At the same time, the legally binding regulation of the petition process prescribes mandatory consideration of the proposals with sufficient signatures by the authorities. From the technical point of view, the interviews with the team show the efforts to make the platform as user-friendly as possible to ensure engagement. Making the platform more user-friendly was among the considerations for its significant update only two years after launching. On the communication level, rahvaalgatus.ee provides the translation function to enable minorities to engage in initiation and co-creation, while the petition must be submitted in Estonian.

Argument-based Deliberation

As the main semantic component of debating, the argument contributes to the authenticity of the communication process in deliberative democracy. It is closely connected to further criteria of deliberation, such as non-coercion, meaning communication free from deception and domination, and reflection, which implies the possibility of changing the opinion when engaging in an argument (Felicetti, 2016). The principle of argument-based deliberation was inherent to the People’s Assembly and continued in the rahvaalgatus.ee.

Several interviewees referred to professional debating when elaborating on the communication process at different stages of the People’s Assembly. They either had debating experience or were integrated into the community of debaters. The central role of argument-based communication came to light during Deliberation Day. Under the influence of James Fishkin’s book When the People Speak (2011), the initiator of the idea, explained:

On the deliberation days, you select a sample of the public, just similar to the public opinion polls, but instead of just asking them a few questions via phone or email, you invite people together and try to create the best possible conditions for them to come up with informed opinions. So, they really know about the issues, know the background, and have a chance to discuss with each other and hear different viewpoints before deciding their preferred solution.
When elaborating on his decisions about how to ‘create best possible conditions’ and moderate the event, the organisers relied on the impartial moderation prepared by the Estonian debating society:

> It’s very good if you have this [debating] experience and understand that debate is a normal way of discussion in society and the best argument should always win.24

There needed to be more than moderation for the effective deliberation assembly. The baseline attitude for deliberation is being open to the outcome and trust that community can deliver, as the initiator reflected:

> I forced myself to be neutral and was ready to accept any outcome. It was difficult to leave aside your preferences and be ready to embrace the outcome.25

To make the communication process inclusive, all necessary information for the debate was prepared in a neutral and accessible way. The language was understandable to everyone without a political science background. Besides, during the Deliberation Assembly, translation was provided to enable participants of ethnic minorities to discuss.

Deliberation, rooted in the debating culture, became the underlying philosophy in the rahvaalgatus.ee. The head of CitizenOS – the organisation that developed the alpha version of the tool, who is a debating trainer, proposed having arguments instead of comments as an underlying approach to discussing collective proposals. Thus, initially, there was no comment section, but the argument section instead:

Comment sections are always full of spam, not information, and we’re interested in information, not spam. So, we have fewer arguments or comments, but with higher quality.26

This approach was also confusing for the users and turned out to be one of the main challenges, as the IT developer reflects:

Some people don’t know how to form an argument. Suppose it doesn’t say “comment”, you don’t know what to write. People were confused. Especially when they wanted to put a neutral comment, partly for and partly against the original argument, they didn’t figure out that you could make separate posts. They would rather not post at all. So, the regular feedback was that if I have mixed feelings, I don’t know what to post. This was overwhelming. Also, people didn’t realise they could post both pros and cons several times, and it’s ok.27

Thus, the idea of using arguments instead of comments was compromised in the platform’s beta version to avoid confusion among users.
Finally, both the Rahvakogu process and rahvaalgatus.ee rely on the hybrid form of communication when technology is used most efficiently to reach as broad an audience as possible and coordinate the co-creation. At the same time, the offline component and personal interaction are crucial in the decision-making process. Similarly to Deliberation Day, which happened live, the petition process foresees that the initiator of the petition presents their idea in the parliament in person (given there are 1000 signatures).

CONCLUSION

This chapter explored the relationship between social practices that arose in response to the corruption scandal in the People’s Assembly process and the Estonian Citizens’ Initiative Portal rahvaalgatus.ee, as an anti-corruption technology. The platform resulted from the People’s Assembly – a social movement in answer to the legitimacy crisis of Estonian representative institutions, triggered by the illicit political funding scandal. People’s Assembly stands apart from anti-corruption social movements, as the activists channelled the protest into a constructive discussion about solutions. The new principles of co-creation and crowdsourcing, inclusivity, and argument-based deliberation evolved in citizen-state relations. These principles materialised in the qualitatively new e-participation technology rahvaalgatus.ee. The ECIP is a new generation of e-participation recognised internationally. The OECD analysis of the rahvaalgatus.ee brings this difference to the point: ‘Instead of the old-fashioned decide-announce-defend, it nurtures the culture of discuss-deliberate-decide’ (OECD 2016). In contrast to the technological determinism approach, the analysis of ECIP rahvaalgatus.ee revealed the embeddedness of the technology in the social movement (Mattoni 2017; 2020). While previous e-participation projects either failed to receive sufficient citizen acceptance, were not integrated into the decision-making process by the authorities, or remained informal in their nature (Toots, 2019; Toots et al., 2016), they required the discursive re-definition and experience of new citizen-state relations to develop an e-participation technology, that became integrated into formal decision-making processes and accepted by the citizens.

At the same time, technologies affect society by making some practices salient and undermining others. According to the initiators, the technology was designed to encourage the behaviour of co-creation, inclusivity, and argument-based deliberation and reach, in the words of the IT architect – the ‘complete mind shift’ towards collaborative policymaking. However, some core principles were compromised when rahvaalgatus.ee was updated to improve user flow and overcome technical challenges. The fact that users were confused by such innovations as argument sections instead of comments or that technology reached its limits with collaborative editing shows the recipro-
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cal relationship that the technology evolved as an actant in the complex actors’ network (Latour, 2005).

From the corruption research perspective, the case study of the People’s Assembly about the ECIP rahvaalgatus.ee, broadens the understanding of anti-corruption technologies. Suppose we consider corruption a problem analytically located between formal institutions and norms regarding social practices, as Bo Rothstein suggests (Rothstein, 2021, p. 146). Anti-corruption must be considered a change of the social contract instead of mere criminal or administrative punishment. The aim of indirect anti-corruption measures is restoring trust in citizen-state relations based on the perceptions and expectations towards legitimacy and justice, which may vary across societies and over time. In this logic, rahvaalgatus.ee became the anti-corruption technology that assists the manifestation of new social practices in response to corruption, such as co-creation, inclusivity, and argument-based deliberation.

Finally, the findings of this analysis are relevant for policy practitioners. Anti-corruption technologies are increasingly analysed and circulated among international organisations regarding ‘good’ and ‘best’ practices to transfer them from one country to another. This chapter empirically demonstrated theoretical limitations in the good practices research (Bretschneider et al., 2004; Hall & Jennings, 2008; Mössner & de Matos, 2019; Veselý, 2011). In particular, it shows the complexity of social practices one must consider when extrapolating technologies across countries. Not only do structural conditions matter for the acceptance of the technology, but discourses, values, imaginaries, and expectations are consolidated in the social contract. Thus, the success or failure of technology must be understood as a learning process in which the reciprocal relationship between different stakeholders and technologies produces change.

NOTES

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2. In 2021, Estonia had a very high Human Development Index (0.89) placing 31st.

3. New technologies and e-governance are reoccurring among various explanatory factors for low levels of corruption, in six expert interviews on governance in Estonia, conducted in the fall 2020.

4. For conceptual differentiation between anti-corruption technologies and e-democracy tools, I refer to the demand that triggered the creation of the technology. Thus, the case of the e-petition platform is considered as a form of anti-corruption technology, because it was created in response to corruption on the input side.

5. In 2017, Estonia was 17th in the ranking of the ICT Development Index.
6. In 2021, Estonia was 13th in the ranking of the Corruption Perception Index (1 is the lowest level of corruption) and 11th in the ranking of the Index of Public Integrity.

7. Although used sometimes interchangeably, the difference is that participatory democracy does not require deliberation, but deliberative democracy is necessary participatory, as inclusivity is the core characteristic to assess its democratic quality (Felicetti, 2016, p. 15).

8. Interview with Charter 12 co-initiator conducted on 16/10/20, online.
9. Interview with Liia Hänni conducted on 30/10/20, online.
10. Interview with Liia Hänni conducted on 30/10/20, online.
11. Interview with Liia Hänni conducted on 30/10/20, online.
15. Interview with Charter 12 co-initiator conducted on 16/10/20, online.
18. Interview with the IT developer of the rahvaalgatus.ee alpha version conducted on 05/10/20, online.
19. Interview with the IT developer of the rahvaalgatus.ee beta version conducted on 16/12/20, online.
20. Interview with the manager of rahvaalgatus.ee conducted on 16/12/20, online.
21. Ibid.
22. Interview with the Deliberation Day co-initiator conducted on 08/12/20, online.
23. Interview with the Deliberation Day co-initiator conducted on 08/12/20, online.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Interview with the IT developer of the rahvaalgatus.ee alpha version conducted on 05/10/20, online.
27. Ibid.
28. Interview with a user of rahvaalgatus.ee conducted on 12/11/20, online.

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7. Digital whistleblowing platforms for anti-corruption: The Transparency International Italia case

Philip Di Salvo

INTRODUCTION

This chapter looks at the relationships between anti-corruption activism, whistleblowing and information security to highlight the benefits that encrypted online whistleblowing platforms can bring in this field. In particular, the chapter presents an Italian case study of this kind: ALAC–Allerta Anticorruzione by the national chapter of Transparency International. Traditionally, whistleblowing is defined as ‘the disclosure by organisation members (former or current) of illegal, immoral and illegitimate practices under the control of their employers to persons or organisations who affect action’ (Near & Miceli, 1985). As such, whistleblowing plays a crucial role in exposing various malpractices occurring within organisations of different kinds. Corruption is certainly one of the malpractices whistleblowing can play an active part in curbing and fighting, as whistleblowers have the opportunity to present first-hand access to insights, materials and evidence that would otherwise be difficult to obtain by members of the civil society, lawmakers or journalists (Arnaudo, 2015). As corruption obviously occurs out of sight and with the explicit aim of avoiding transparency and oversight, the contribution of whistleblowers in even revealing the existence of corruption cases can be fundamental (Previtali & Cerchiello, 2021). Moreover, the act of denouncing corruption usually does not end with the exposure itself, but can be a first step towards a process of improving governance and for ‘creating ethically and legally healthy organisations and governments’ (Schultz & Harutyunyan, 2015, p. 88).

To look back at some recent and major whistleblowing cases reveals the enormous contribution that whistleblowing has had when it comes to, for instance, exposing the mechanisms of offshore economies and money laundering in jurisdictions with high levels of financial secrecy or in blatant tax havens. The so-called ‘offshore interface’, the combination of tax havens and
Digital whistleblowing platforms for anti-corruption

offshore finance centres, has indeed profound connections with corruption on a global level (Hampton, 1996) and it is definitely facilitating it, frequently with the involvement of high-ranking public officials and figures. Various ‘Megaleaks’, whistleblowing cases based on enormous amounts of leaked digital data and data journalism practices (Reich & Barnoy, 2016), have emerged since 2013, when the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) initiated its ‘Secrecy for Sale’ investigation into offshore economies. In 2016 the ‘Panama Papers’ case became the biggest journalistic collaborative project ever at the time (McGregor et al., 2017), only to be overtaken by the ‘Pandora Papers’ in 2021. Overall, the ‘Panama Papers’ investigation helped governments to recoup ‘more than $1.36 billion back in taxes and penalties’ (McGoey, 2021). All these revelations emerged from whistleblowers who shared the evidence with ICIJ journalists or other news outlets. In most cases, including the ‘Panama Papers’ whistleblower ‘John Doe’, these individuals’ identities are still anonymous.

Traditionally, whistleblowing can take two different forms: ‘internal’ and ‘external’ (Dworkin & Baucus, 1998). In the first instance, the act of blowing the whistle occurs within the involved organisation, towards higher-ranking employees or dedicated offices or hotlines; in the second one, instead, whistleblowers reach out to external individuals or organisations, such as authorities, NGOs or the media to raise their concerns and reveal otherwise inaccessible information. Although different, both forms can provide great contributions to anti-corruption initiatives (Johnson, 2003 and Mueller, 2019, among others, provide excellent collections of such instances). Whereas as a practice whistleblowing hasn’t changed much in the past decades, digitalisation has undoubtedly contributed to its innovation, introducing new practices and tools also through the adoption of information security and cryptography (Di Salvo, 2016). For instance, ‘whistleblowing platforms’ have become standardised digital tools for facilitating whistleblowing in various contexts, including investigative journalism and activism, thanks to the use of strong encryption dedicated software and other information security practices (Di Salvo, 2020). Various organisations have adopted this technology-assisted approach to whistleblowing, with the aim of adapting the practice to the environment and dangers of the ‘datafied society’ (van Es & Schäfer, 2017), starting from digital surveillance. Evidence shows that the existence of dedicated whistleblowing platforms usually has a huge impact on the volume of complaints that are made by whistleblowers and this has emerged clearly from Italy, for instance, where whistleblowing cases have increased since some of these platforms have been launched in the country (Previtali & Cerchiello, 2021).

This chapter analyses one of these, ALAC-Allerta Anticorruzione, a whistleblowing platform launched by the Italian chapter of NGO Transparency International (TII) with the aim of assisting Italian whistleblowers. The case
study is particularly interesting and has been selected for at least two reasons: firstly, *ALAC-Allerta Anticorruzione* represents one of the earliest examples of whistleblowing platforms worldwide (having been launched in 2014); secondly, it operates in Italy, a country that still lacks a proper whistleblowing culture and where a whistleblowing legal framework has been introduced only recently (Pacilli et al., 2020). Moreover, Italy is faced with an ongoing wide and impactful diffusion of corruption, with the annual Transparency International survey of corruption perceptions ranking the country among the most corrupted in the Eurozone (Transparency International, 2021). The political life of Italy has known various major corruption scandals that have made corruption perceived as systemic (Berti, 2019) with even the fourth estate providing little help in improving the situation (Mincigrucci & Stanziano, 2017). The Italian ALAC is not the only Transparency International project of this kind, as at least 15 other initiatives are whistleblowing platforms (Transparency International, 2020), but the early launch of the project in Italy and the corruption background of the country makes it a peculiar case study to understand how information security technology applied to whistleblowing can offer crucial support to anti-corruption initiatives worldwide. Starting from these assumptions, this chapter aims to answer two research questions, referring respectively to how TII operates its ALAC and to how whistleblowing platforms can contribute to anti-corruption activities overall. First, the chapter asks how the Italian chapter of Transparency International uses its whistleblowing platform. Second, it investigates which traits of whistleblowing platforms facilitate whistleblowing for anti-corruption in a digital environment.

The chapter is structured as follows: to begin, an overview of the Italian legal and cultural frameworks when it comes to whistleblowing is offered, highlighting how and why the Italian case is peculiar. The following section focuses on digital whistleblowing and its theoretical aspects, together with the role of the open source software GlobaLeaks in this context. This part also features a discussion of how digitisation has changed whistleblowing and how open-source solutions have been adopted in various fields. The section that follows describes the research design and methodology of the chapter. What follows is the core of this research, the *ALAC-Allerta Anticorruzione* and its discussion: first, publicly available data and reports about the use of the platform are discussed, to shed light on its overall impact and usage. Second, results of qualitative interviews are presented discussing the various themes that emerged from the analysis. These results are further analysed in the discussion section that closes the chapter.
WHISTLEBLOWING IN ITALY: LEGAL AND CULTURAL DELAYS AND ENCRYPTION EARLY ADOPTERS

Contrary to other countries, whistleblowing is a relatively ‘new’ phenomenon in Italy and it is still in the process of getting fully accepted in the country’s culture. Focusing on the legal and cultural elements is an efficient lens to understand whistleblowing in Italy: in fact, this allows seeing how various actors in the activist and hacktivist fields have launched technological initiatives also as responses to the very limited presence of whistleblowing in Italian culture and politics, sometimes even inspiring lawmakers’ decisions, or collaborations with them. Moreover, these limitations in the realms of law and culture do confirm the topicality of the technologies that are further discussed in this chapter, since it is the law to explicitly require their adoption in certain contexts. Significantly, ‘whistleblowing’ still lacks a commonly accepted translation in Italian and, whereas some proposals have been advanced, there is still little agreement about how to translate ‘whistleblowing’ in the national language (Accademia della Crusca, 2014; Arnaudo, 2015). This cultural delay is reflected also in the Italian legislation, which started to deal directly with whistleblowing only in the last decade (Pacilli et al., 2020, p. 370) and expressively only in 2017, with the approval of Law 179/2017, also referred to as the Italian ‘whistleblower protection law.’ Previous norms were introduced (although only for the public sector) in 2012, with the Law 190/2012. Following the adoption of the Directive (EU) 2019/1937, also known as ‘Whistleblower Directive’, at the European level, the Italian parliament was supposed to implement the EU indications on the national level by December 2021. At the time of writing (April 2022), Italy has not proceeded yet, and it has missed the original deadline for implementing changes included in the Directive (Carino & Ferrario Difino, 2021). Yet, according to NGO Blueprint for Free Speech, which analysed European national whistleblowing legal frameworks before the adoption of the EU Directive (2018), whereas none of the surveyed countries fully satisfied international standards in whistleblowing protections, Italy ranked among those with the strongest protections, together with Slovakia, France, Malta, and Ireland, at least in theory.

Among other safeguards for whistleblowers against forms of retaliation, the Italian legislation also makes references to ad hoc technological whistleblowing channels that organisations must provide, to protect whistleblowers’ identities, those of the recipients, together with the confidentiality of the complaints (Previtali & Cerchiello, 2021). For instance, for public organisations, at least two channels are required by law for ‘internal’ whistleblowing. Of these, one has explicitly to be provided in the form of an encrypted online
platform. Overall, the Italian anti-corruption authority, Autorità Nazionale Anticorruzione (ANAC), which has provided guidelines for the implementation of the norms about whistleblowing since 2015, explicitly recommends the use of digital tools to safeguard whistleblowers’ safety and confidentiality and the reliance on strong encryption as a preferred safety standard (Fiore, 2021). As it is further discussed in this chapter, these legal guidelines gave a radical push to the adoption of digital whistleblowing platforms in the country.

Whereas the introduction of whistleblowing in legal terms has been slow in Italy, the country shows interesting insights in this area when it comes to the development and use of encryption technologies for whistleblowing. It is possible to argue that the limited safeguards offered by the Italian law until recently have been effectively balanced by a faster and stronger adoption of information security and cryptography technologies. Indeed, various whistleblowing platforms have been launched in Italy since 2013 and they represent some of the earliest examples of this kind. Among these, journalistic platforms such as IrpiLeaks, ExpoLeaks or the defunct MafiaLeaks, ItaliaLeaks and RegeniLeaks should be mentioned (Di Salvo, 2020, pp. 93,133), while the Italian edition of Wired magazine is currently the only major Italian news outlet to run such a platform (Wired Italia, 2021)11. Moreover, the number of public bodies and organisations now using whistleblowing platforms is in the hundreds, thanks to the Italian law requirements and to other initiatives of TII, as the following sections of this chapter discuss in more detail. It should also be highlighted that GlobaLeaks, the internationally adopted whistleblowing software, was created and is still managed by Italian activists and hackers who campaigned widely for its use in the country, contributing to making the country one of the areas of strongest adoption of the software (Greenberg, 2012, p. 711). GlobaLeaks found in TII an ideal partner, especially for the launch of the Italian ALAC. Before looking at this case study in more detail, the next section offers an overview of digital whistleblowing platforms and GlobaLeaks, open-source software available to launch such an initiative.

DIGITAL WHISTLEBLOWING PLATFORMS AND GLOBALEAKS

Whistleblowing platforms are ‘digital services thought to give whistleblowers a way to contact and submit materials to recipients with greater security and anonymity safeguards’ whose ‘approach is to offer a freely accessible place on the Internet where a whistleblowing act can be triggered through the use of digital tools and encryption’ (Di Salvo, 2020, p. 64). ALAC-Allerta Anticorruzione, alongside dozens of other similar platforms, has been created through the use of GlobaLeaks, open-source software designed purposely for the creation of such platforms12. Relying on different and adaptable encryption
standards, GlobaLeaks is designed for shielding or anonymising the communication between whistleblowers and the organisations operating the platforms by obfuscating any information about the whistleblowers and their online interactions with the platforms and thus protecting their identities and safety during the process. The initiator of the whistleblowing platforms approach has certainly been WikiLeaks, which pioneered the technology with huge success in 2006 (Anderson, 2020; Beltramini, 2021; Heemsbergen, 2021, pp. 71–106 – among others). GlobaLeaks, which has no ties to WikiLeaks, has been developed by an international group of hackers, technologists and activists, initiated by Italians Arturo Filastò, Claudio Agosti, Fabio Pietrosanti, Giovanni Pellerano and Michele Orrù13 and presented publicly at the 2011 edition of the Italian End Summer Camp, a hacker event and conference14. The need for online anonymity and increased information security in the context of whistleblowing in investigative journalism and activism is justified by the necessity of effectively granting confidentiality in contexts where sources of information such as whistleblowers take substantial risks by deciding to reveal insider and compromising information inside or outside the organisations where they are employed or involved. Risks whistleblowers may have to face include retaliation in the workplace, job loss, harassment, lawsuits, incarceration and even physical consequences (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2005).

Regardless of the risk assessment and threat modelling of each case, recipients of whistleblowers’ complaints have a duty to make sure the needed safety and confidentiality is granted while engaging with whistleblowing. Over the Internet, the most common communication platforms do operate in the context of ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Zuboff, 2019), data tracking and monitoring and this requires that specific obfuscation and encryption strategies are used in the context of whistleblowing, since commercial technological solutions would inevitably gather and store information capable of identifying or exposing all parts involved. Of these security strategies, whistleblowing software (such as GlobaLeaks) is among the most advanced in terms of security also for the potentially most dangerous risk scenarios. The affordances made available by GlobaLeaks, though, are of fundamental value also in less sensitive contexts. In fact, whereas being exposed to pervasive and targeted digital surveillance may legitimately be a reason for concerns only for certain whistleblowers (such as those, like Edward Snowden, exposing national security-level information), retaliation may take different forms and still impact directly on the lives of those who blow the whistle (Schwartz, 2020, pp. 44–76). GlobaLeaks’ adaptability in this sense made the software a solution of choice for organisations with very different aims and scopes, from journalistic organisations, to activist ones, to official anti-corruption public bodies in different countries15.

Theoretically speaking, the GlobaLeaks team and developers fit within Stefania Milan’s ‘radical techies’ concept (2013, pp. 45–48), a definition that
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can be applied to ‘groups and networks of individuals who provide alternative communication channels on the internet to activists and citizens’ (Milan, 2013, p. 12) with a strong emphasis on privacy-enhancing tools, encryption systems and open-source software. As such, it is also possible to define whistleblowing platforms, especially when used in activists’ contexts, as ‘emancipatory communication practices’, intended here as ways of social organising that aim to create alternatives to existing media and communication infrastructure (Milan, 2013, p. 9). In particular, GlobaLeaks-powered whistleblowing platforms, such as ALAC–Allerta Anticorruzione, can be included among those anti-corruption initiatives made possible through the use of digital media and data activism that aim at empowering and engaging citizens towards forms of grassroots and forms of ‘downward transparency’, in which citizens are empowered to monitor their representatives or the institutions governing them (Mattoni, 2017).16 Whistleblowing platforms can also be intended as ‘e-tactics’ capable of leveraging certain technological affordances through their design features (Earl & Kimport, 2011, p. 8–12)17. They are particularly interesting in this sense, as they offer new and effective and safer affordances and setups to the practice of whistleblowing, adapting it to the needs and dynamics of the contemporary Internet and the ‘datafied society.’ As indicated on the project’s website18, GlobaLeaks was created aiming at four different areas of implementation: ‘investigative journalism’, ‘human rights protection’, ‘corporate compliance’ and ‘anti-corruption.’ It is interesting to note how the project was launched with anti-corruption goals in mind, marking once more the strong connections between whistleblowing software and anti-corruption actions. As this chapter discusses more in-depth, it has been indeed TII contributing extensively to this aim, by launching ALAC–Allerta Anticorruzione in Italy in 2014.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter is based on a single case study about ALAC–Allerta Anticorruzione, intended as ‘an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of similar units’ (Gerring, 2004, p. 342). ALAC has been selected as a case study for various reasons, including the Italian context in which it operates and to its success, early start, and its exemplariness for other similar whistleblowing initiatives in the anti-corruption context. When it comes to Italy, ALAC is the most successful whistleblowing platform, as the data that is discussed about the number of submissions it received and cases it helped to analyse and assess shows. At the same time, ALAC demonstrates the effectiveness of collaboration between anti-corruption (such as TII) and hacktivists organisations (GlobaLeaks) when it comes to whistleblowing initiatives. The research at the core of this chapter is based on problem-centred interviews, ‘qualitative, discursive-dialogic method of reconstructing knowledge about rel-
Digital whistleblowing platforms for anti-corruption

relevant problems’ (Witzel & Reiter, 2012, pp. 64–93) with individuals involved in ALAC-Allerta Anticorruzione. This approach, which is similar to qualitative semi-structured interviews, has been selected in order to focus the interviews on the most relevant aspects of the RQs about ALAC and in order to let them emerge from the discussion of the project’s genesis and evolution. Interviews were conducted with Giorgio Fraschini, the Whistleblowing Programme Manager at TII, and Giovanni Pellerano, Project Lead at GlobaLeaks. Interviews were conducted in Italian in November 2021 over VOIP software Zoom and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Interviewees agreed to be quoted by name and anonymity was not required, since the interviews do not disclose any sensitive information about whistleblowing cases handled by TII. Interview responses were analysed through an inductive thematic analysis and transcripts were coded twice: a first time, aiming to identify initial codes emerging from interview answers and a second one, to group initial codes into larger, focused codes which became the analysed themes discussed in the ‘Results’ section. ‘Themes’ are here intended as ‘something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represent[s] some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 10). Despite the narrowness of the sample, the two interviewees share the most profound knowledge about the case study, being the individual in charge of ALAC from the perspective of TII and the individual in charge of the development of GlobaLeaks and its technical features, respectively. Moreover, the interviewees are also among the individuals who started the ALAC project in Italy. This small-scale qualitative approach has been chosen as it had already been used in a previous study of whistleblowing platforms in the context of investigative journalism (Porlezza & Di Salvo, 2020). Moreover, the research has been conducted through a desktop analysis of various public information and reports about the platform itself, the use of ALAC by whistleblowers and the outcomes of the whistleblowers’ complaints handled by TII over the years. The analysis of this data also allowed for a deeper understanding of ALAC activities and reach.

ALAC’S RATIONALES, TECHNOLOGICAL, AND OPERATIONAL SECURITY

As declared on the organisation’s website, TII uses ALAC-Allerta Anticorruzione to ‘support those who witness corruption cases, helping them in finding the best solution for their cases’, to ‘let illicit acts emerge and give practical advice which can be useful to whistleblowers’ and, finally, to ‘make the whistleblowing process better.’ The Italian ALAC is part of the Transparency International network of international whistleblowing initiatives called Advocacy and Legal Advice Centres (ALACs) operating in over 60
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countries to ‘provide free and confidential advice and support to victims and witnesses of corruption, enabling them to assert their rights, seek redress and stand up for justice’ and following different technological standards. It is possible to view in detail the Italian ALAC’s aims and goals by looking at the information on the TII platform’s page, in a combination of – drawing on media accountability research terminology – ‘actor transparency’ and ‘production transparency’ (Heikkilä et al., 2012, p. 55). These practices refer to how organisations communicate to the public, potential users and stakeholders, and the details about their identities, activities, and operational practices. By definition, they are used by TII to assist and support whistleblowers in finding the most appropriate channels for their disclosures; this takes the form of assistance in circumscribing potential complaints by whistleblowers and in finding the right recipients for their complaints, especially when they come from a public institution, body or office. In addition to indicating the services that ALAC is providing, the organisation is also clear about what they are not providing. For instance, through the platform, TII affirms to be unable to provide legal representation to whistleblowers; to conduct in-depth investigations about specific cases beyond verification through official and public documents and to take the role of public bodies, authorities, and the media in handling whistleblowers’ complaints. In some cases, although this is not a frequent scenario, TII may still decide to handle the submissions on behalf of the whistleblowers. In sum, through ALAC, TII is offering a pre-reporting, advice service for Italian whistleblowers, whose goal is to facilitate the whistleblowing process and make sure it gets completed in the most meaningful way and following the best standards, minimising the risks that individuals may have to face when they embark on the dangerous practice of whistleblowing, making sure, for instance, that they will proceed in law-abiding ways.

Additional and qualitative and quantitative information about the usage of ALAC in Italy and its results can be also traced in the annual reports published by TII since the launch of the platform. These documents and reports are freely available on the TII website and do offer a complete overview about ALAC’s activities and results. In particular, the analysis of these documents offers interesting comparative data and insights about the whistleblowing complaints obtained and handled by TII, their peculiarities and outcomes. The data, completed by the interview analysis that follows, allows for a broader understanding of ALAC and its activities and the potential outcomes that whistleblowing platforms can provide in the context of anti-corruption activities. As for the end of 2020, TII has assisted 764 whistleblowers since 2014 (Transparency International Italia, 2020). The number of assisted whistleblowers has evolved over the years: 162 (2014–2015), 147 (2016), 157 (2017), 152 (2018), 88 (2019) and 58 (2020) (Transparency International Italia, 2020; 2019; 2018; 2017; 2016; 2015). The flexion in the number of assisted
whistleblowers recorded between 2018 and 2019 has been probably caused by the launch of another TII project for whistleblowing, WhistleblowingPA, which opened more institution-operated online platforms for whistleblowers to submit their complaints in the country, inevitably impacting the number of submissions made directly to ALAC and TII. When it comes to the qualitative characteristics of the submissions received, TII annual reports indicate that the overwhelming majority of the submissions gathered by ALAC over the years were connected with the health sector, had a local geographical extension (they mattered for the local area of the involved organisations) and mostly referred to cases of cronyism, i.e., personal favouritism in the context of public procurement and assignment of contracts. Furthermore, in every year of activity, ALAC has been used by a majority of anonymous whistleblowers over confidential ones (Transparency International Italia, 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2020). In 2020, most whistleblowers reached out to TII’s ALAC seeking assistance, consultation or an opinion about where to or how to push forward their complaints (40 per cent of total submissions), followed by contacting TII in order to have the NGO file an official complaint (Transparency International Italia, 2020).

Interviews touched on various issues related to the contribution of whistleblowing platforms (and of the Italian ALAC-Allerta Anticorruzione in particular) to the practice of whistleblowing for anti-corruption purposes in the digital era. Answers by Transparency International Italia’s Giorgio Fraschini (hereinafter referred to as ‘GF’) and GlobaLeaks’ Giovanni Pellerano (hereinafter referred to as ‘GP’) discussed a variety of issues, including the aims and goals of ALAC, its technological and operational features and security issues. Overall, three different major ‘themes’ around ALAC-Allerta Anticorruzione emerged from the thematic analysis applied to the interviews results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes are ‘roles and aims of ALAC-Allerta Anticorruzione’, ‘technological security’ and ‘operational security’ and, overall, they describe the contributions that ALAC brings to anti-corruption activities and the peculiarity of the platform and its strengths, according to the interviewees. What follows is a discussion of the interview results in light of these three themes.

**The Rationale of ALAC: Allerta Anticorruzione**

From the interviews, ALAC emerges as a tool for supporting Italian whistleblowers in finding the most appropriate ways for submitting their complaints to the right organisations and in the best way. Although ALAC has been offering this service to whistleblowers for a few years, this was not the original aim TII had in mind. The project was in fact originally intended as a sourcing strategy to investigate potential corruption cases, but later evolved to what it is now, due to the impossibility of TII to take on a pure watchdog role, says GF. When
asked to define the service, GF described it as an ‘assistance service’ which can contribute best in helping whistleblowers before they decide to speak out, offering them a safe service for their security. As such ALAC is still something different to other services for whistleblowers, and used as a reporting channel:

ALAC wants to give people security. We started from that, because no one is providing such a service in Italy. It wasn’t there when we started in 2014 and it’s not now either, because all the other channels are already pure reporting channels, including the one of the Italian National Anti-Corruption Authority (ANAC). Assistance offered by ALAC involves providing information about potential legal scenarios, soundness of the complaints and best decision-making in regard to where to submit complaints to and to which organisations and bodies. TII highlights how only on rare occasions do they take an active and direct role in advancing the complaint to other recipients. Thus, in the majority of cases, TII’s involvement stops at providing guidance and consultancy to whistleblowers before they speak out. According to GF:

Then, if a report deserves exposure, we have conveyed some of them to the media, for instance. We understand that going to the media it’s another role, as you’re not assisting the whistleblower, rather you’re exposing the story. For us it is a way, but it is really the last or one of the last. It has happened, but it is not the preferable one.

As discussed in the previous sections, ALAC is the result of the cooperation of TII with the GlobaLeaks team, who provides the software. When it comes to ALAC (and other similar projects around the world), the GlobaLeaks team covers the ongoing development and supply role consisting of the publication of the open-source GlobaLeaks software and technical assistance to organisations using it. According to GP, in particular, its open-source nature is one of the most valuable traits of GlobaLeaks, as it can be independently verified by external examiners when it comes to its own safety and reliability. This can happen in parallel to the work of the GlobaLeaks team:

We also offer some well-configured infrastructure pieces to simplify the adoption of the tool. For instance, we also provide the servers where the software is installed and those that allow it to be updated, together with mail servers that can be used by the platform to send notifications to recipients. Already in this we are going a little further than the original vision in which we were only developers. We are therefore also free service providers.

For TII, ALAC has to be framed within the organisation’s broader actions in the area of whistleblowing. In fact, in parallel to offering their own platform, TII is also managing other projects in this area, including the aforementioned WhistleblowingPA, again developed together with GlobaLeaks. Overall, TII
is working to strengthen effective, careful and law-abiding whistleblowing. Hence, TII envisions ALAC as one component of a broader action towards the support of whistleblowing in the country, which is also being enacted through WhistleblowingPA and its quest for bringing encrypted platforms to Italian public bodies and private companies. According to GF:

We try to promote whistleblowing that is done right. We even started assisting organisations to build technological platforms well before the law said they should. [...] In the private sector we run our Business Integrity Forum28, so we have made platforms for a few large companies and now we are starting to do it for some medium-sized companies that got interested in whistleblowing because of the European directive. So, yes, let’s just say we try to bring whistleblowing “done right” everywhere29.

Technological Security

Strengths of ALAC have been indicated in its technological capacities and in the obfuscation features enabled by GlobaLeaks. According to GP, for instance, the software is making digital whistleblowing overall more secure than analogical, as GlobaLeaks is capable, by design, to protect the identity of whistleblowers in a stronger way than a telephone call, for instance. According to GP, the physical world offers more opportunities for tracking and surveillance than those that meet the eye:

Moreover, there are also various possibilities of tracking in the physical domain, such as fingerprints. In a digital context, instead, many of these problems have been solved: for example, the technology is able to hide the IP address which, by analogy, is like the telephone number we previously talked about. Our technology can hide, by deletion or encryption, metadata which, again by analogy, can be compared to a whistleblower’s fingerprints30.

The security offered by GlobaLeaks was also the primary reason why TII decided to adopt the software. The software has also been indicated by GF as an empowering instrument for whistleblowers who may fear being exposed or tracked in the process. Moreover, according to GF, the software allows improved organisation on the recipients’ side, providing more possibilities for secure communication and dialogue with whistleblowers:

Technological security simply does not exist with other equipment. Therefore, this allows you to open up to and facilitate a certain number of people who otherwise would never speak out. We started from this, because when we saw the research on what were the reasons that led people not to report, one of the main ones was the fear of being tracked or discovered. [...] The second reason is that platforms are a modern tool that allows you a certain fluidity in what you can do: you can create ad hoc
questionnaires, for instance, and you can also talk for a long time and anonymously with whistleblowers. It is clearly a totally different tool than traditional channels.

The opportunity of communicating anonymously with whistleblowers within the secure environment provided by the platform is a plus that the technology is bringing to the whole process of whistleblowing, says GF, who also mentioned the instance of a whistleblower who had been in contact with TII for over a year and a half by communicating through the platform. This, according to GF, is a sign of the trustworthiness of the software, something that would not be achievable using other tools. This also allowed long-lasting cooperation with ALAC, in some instances, something that would not be possible without the features offered by GlobaLeaks. Some specific security features of GlobaLeaks were also discussed. The software offers adaptable setups and can function according to various threat models. For instance, GlobaLeaks-empowered platforms can be reached using Tor Browser. In the first case, the maximum level of security is offered to whistleblowers; with different and less-secure setups, security safeguards inevitably decrease but not to the point of jeopardising security for most whistleblowers’ threat models. Whereas without using the Tor Browser the protection is obviously lower, the security made available would still fit in the context of various less-dangerous scenarios. According to GP, if used without the Tor Browser, ALAC is not retrieving nor storing any information about the whistleblowers’ identities:

Also when GlobaLeaks is used with a normal browser, possible forensic evidence of the submissions is always concealed. This is enough to improve a situation that would otherwise be normally highly compromised, given the low security standards of most anti-corruption websites and communication systems. Even without using Tor, there are several guarantees: in any case, the information shared is only available to the designated recipients.

Operational Security

Discussions around the security offered by ALAC and GlobaLeaks software went beyond the technical specifications of the software to touch also on how ALAC improves the whole experience of whistleblowing, making it more structured for both whistleblowers and recipient organisations. This is provided, in particular, by a questionnaire feature that is embedded within the GlobaLeaks framework and offers organisations the opportunity to ask whistleblowers questions ahead of their submissions. The questionnaire can be customised and is meant to be a way for whistleblowers to better describe and contextualise their submissions to provide more background information. According to GP, this allows the provision of additional information in a secure environment capable of describing whistleblowers’ situations at the
time of the submission. This also marks a strong difference with whistleblowing intended as basic data leaking says GP, as by giving whistleblowers a space and the opportunity for detailing their submissions, more information will be available also to the recipients, in order to better frame complaints and their context without potentially having to spend months looking into the data. In GP’s view, this feature is a game changer for the handling of whistleblowers’ submissions:

This questionnaire is for me the synthesis of the GlobaLeaks innovation. The questionnaire also improves operational safety. When we ask, for example, if the submission has already been made to other organisations, we can get two types of information. On the one hand, we know the risks that a whistleblower may face for, for example, reporting the case to the police. Also, you may already know what the response of other organisations has been. This is very useful information that can be obtained with ALAC and which cannot be obtained with other data leaking frameworks.34

Compared to a situation where the whistleblower is given only the opportunity to submit the materials with little context, the GlobaLeaks questionnaire allows for stronger details about the whistleblower’s whereabouts and the dangers they may face. From the perspective of an organisation such as TII, this allows a prioritisation of intervention, making clear which cases do require a quick response. According to GP, the questionnaire offered to whistleblowers also enables a quicker validation of the submitted documents. Thanks to the inclusion of this feature in the design of the platform, the whistleblowing process gains more structure and contextualisation, helping all parts involved in having a clearer picture of the complaints’ contents, risk profiles and potential relevance. This GlobaLeaks feature is, according again to GP, a sign of stronger security:

This is another form of security. It is not technological in itself, but it is certainly operational [...] This is the innovation that has been made and that works best with GlobaLeaks, which is based on a careful search for the balance between security and usability. This allowed us to create a tool that opens a channel between whistleblowers and recipients and that can also inspire the launch of very lasting collaborations.35

The questionnaire has been an important improvement also in the perspective of TII and it marked an evident step ahead to the handling of whistleblowing, especially when compared with analogue systems, such as postal mail or telephone that had been used prior to the launch of ALAC. According to GF:

We used to receive anonymous parcels or three-hour phone calls and it was very difficult to understand what was really going on. We were also receiving emails to
which we usually didn’t get more replies after the first contact. Instead, this system grants easy management on our side together with a greater level of security\textsuperscript{16}.

The interplay between easiness of handling communication with whistleblowers, together with the security offered to them through encryption, appears to be once more the key strengths of GlobaLeaks in the context of anti-corruption initiatives.

CONCLUSIONS

From this research, \textit{ALAC-Allerta Anticorruzione} emerges as a facilitator and support tool for anti-corruption whistleblowers and, thanks to the use of GlobaLeaks as technical infrastructure, as one of the most secure available worldwide. The platform, in particular, has been discussed here in regard to its security and its efficiency in this context: on the security side, the two-layered security (technological and operational) that the platform offers comes as an answer to most surveillance and anonymity concerns that the contemporary digital environment poses. Moreover, the platform also improves the security of whistleblowers who do not want to or need to operate with the highest security standards too, securing the whistleblowing experience also when the Tor Browser is not used, for instance. This, in addition to the efforts of GlobaLeaks in making it easily understandable also by non-tech-savvy users, has had (as TII annual reports show) a positive influence on the number of submissions received by TII since 2014. This improvement, though, goes beyond pure technical security and goes in the direction of an enhanced full whistleblowing experience, also compared to other less comprehensive whistleblowing software.

As discussed, these changes have also made the work of recipient organisations easier and more focused on quick interventions for the most exposed and vulnerable whistleblowers, who can get priority assistance thanks to the additional information made available through the questionnaire, as TII has declared. Yet, it should be taken into consideration that using GlobaLeaks, even with its easier security setups, still requires some technical efforts by potential whistleblowers who may be discouraged by having to learn to use new software in an already psychologically tense situation. Whereas the software, and whistleblowing platforms in general, do solve many issues when it comes to security and anonymity, they do not provide a final answer to all issues and concerns involved in whistleblowing. This said, whistleblowing software such as GlobaLeaks represents the state of the art among the technological solutions that are available to launch communication channels for anti-corruption purposes, especially when it comes to confidentiality and the other dimensions of security discussed in this chapter. Other solutions, such as
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the crowdsourcing software Ushaidi, which is being used by the Macedonian chapter of Transparency International, while offering functional solutions in terms of communication and data gathering, come with a lower standard of security and anonymity. Other insights about the efficiency of the whistleblowing platform concept come from Tunisia, where the anti-corruption organisation I-Watch (responsible for the Tunisian ALAC) implemented GlobaLeaks for its project Billkamcha.tn, effectively raising awareness about corruption scandals in the country.

Looking closely at the case study at the core of this chapter, the contribution of ALAC appears to be two-fold: on one hand, it offers some of the highest level of security, while also providing a user-friendly and adaptable tool. According to the interviewees, the possibility of allowing whistleblowers to communicate anonymously appears as a factor expanding the number of individuals who may decide to blow the whistle, contrary to what would happen in an analogue environment, where anonymity is complex or impossible to achieve. Consequently, ALAC-Allerta Anticorruzione emerges from this chapter as an advancement in light of potential technological and organisational affordances to the practice of whistleblowing in the digital age. In addition to this practical improvement, it is interesting to analyse the role that ALAC is fulfilling within the Italian anti-corruption environment. For its aims and goals, ALAC and TII aims to fill a gap: the platform’s first goal appears to be facilitating whistleblowing by directly empowering whistleblowers rather than offering them an additional submission channel. Overall, TII looks at strategies for providing whistleblowers with the needed legal and practical advice they can benefit from in order to act in the best possible way and without committing mistakes or abuses that may jeopardise their safety and the effectiveness of their complaints. Thus, ALAC has to be seen in a broader context of activities, in which TII wants to contribute to a stronger diffusion and normalisation of whistleblowing in Italy. The WhistleblowingPA initiative, in this sense, is to be seen as a widening of the ALAC’s goals in making safe whistleblowing channels more widely available in the country. As stated by GF during the interview, were the Italian institutions more technologically advanced, ALAC and the TII support offers to whistleblowers would be ‘less needed.’ As such, ALAC (together with the whole advocacy work that TII is providing for whistleblowing at large) has also to be seen as a response to a weak technological context, where Italian institutions still lack a proper information security culture and to a legal situation that, although improved, still appears incomplete and in need of upgrade.

Finally, it should be emphasised again that ALAC was operating even before the approval of a comprehensive whistleblower protection law in Italy, thus offering a fundamental service at a time of legal uncertainty. With the development of stronger legal protections and the launch of more whistleblow-
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ing channels in both the private and public sectors, ALAC has probably seen its centrality being diminished in this context, but it still offers an otherwise unavailable service. In sum, the expertise offered by TII, together with the affordances and support made available by GlobaLeaks, are both an additional safeguard for Italian whistleblowers in need of support and a marker of the evolution of a strong whistleblowing culture in Italy: the more this culture advances, the less ALAC will be needed.

NOTES

1. This research has been conducted while the author was a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). The Fellowship has been funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) through the Early Postdoc.Mobility scheme, grant n. P2TIP1_191492.
3. The investigation is available here: https://www.icij.org/investigations/panama-papers/.
4. The investigation is available here: https://www.icij.org/investigations/pandora-papers/.
5. John Doe is the nickname given to the source of the investigation.
6. The English translation of the platform name is Anti-Corruption Alert. The project is available here, on the Transparency International Italia website: https://www.transparency.it/cosa-facciamo/supporto-ai-segnalanti.
7. The full text is available here: https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2017/12/14/17G00193/sg.
8. The full text is available here: https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2012/11/13/012G0213/sg.
10. The international implementation advancement can be tracked here: https://whistleblowingmonitor.eu/.
11. All these platforms are or were created with GlobaLeaks by Italian organisations or individuals and for journalistic aims. IrpiLeaks is the whistleblowing platform operated by the Investigative Reporting Project Italy (IRPI), a collective of Italian investigative reporters. The platform has been used as a sourcing method in various IRPI investigations. ExpoLeaks was another IRPI initiative launched in the context of the 2015 World Expo, which took place in Milan. MafiaLeaks was a now defunct hacktivist project launched by anonymous individuals with the aim of gathering information about the Mafia’s activities. ItaliaLeaks, launched in 2018, was the platform of the Agenzia Giornalistica Italia (AGI) newswire, now no longer available. RegeniLeaks was a project of the L’Espresso weekly and it was launched to gather information about the murder of the Italian academic Giulio Regeni, who was killed in Egypt in 2016. Finally, WiredLeaks is the platform used by the Italian Wired magazine to deal with potential whistleblowing cases.
12. GlobaLeaks is not the only software of this kind. SecureDrop offers a similar framework and is developed and maintained in the US by the Freedom of the Press Foundation for specific use in journalism: https://freedom.press/news/securedrop/.


14. See the original project announcement posted by the GlobaLeaks team on the Full Disclosure mailing list announcing the initial release of the software: https://seclists.org/fulldisclosure/2011/Sep/38. For the event website, instead, see: https://www.endsummercamp.org.

15. A complete list of usage cases is available here, on the GlobaLeaks’ website: https://www.globaleaks.org/usecases/.

16. See also Chapter 9 in this volume, which focuses on other Italian initiatives against corruption.

17. ‘Technological affordances’ are ‘the actions and uses that a technology makes qualitatively easier or possible when compared to prior like technologies’ (Earl and Kimport, 2011, pp. 32–34).


20. All quotes coming from the ALAC website and translated into English by the author: https://www.transparency.it/cosa-facciamo/supporto-ai-segnalanti.


22. Also in these case, these declarations come from the ALAC website: https://www.transparency.it/cosa-facciamo/supporto-ai-segnalanti.

23. All these activities are mentioned on the ALAC website: https://www.transparency.it/cosa-facciamo/supporto-ai-segnalanti.

24. WhistleblowingPA is another whistleblowing-oriented project of the Italian chapter of Transparency International. The project aims to provide public bodies with their own encrypted whistleblowing platforms, as indicated by the Italian law. For this initiative TII partners with Whistleblowing Solutions Impresa Sociale which is developing an ad-hoc whistleblowing solution, once again created through GlobaLeaks. At the time of writing, 1190 public bodies were provided a GlobaLeaks-powered whistleblowing platform (see: https://www.whistleblowing.it/adesioni/). These include municipalities, health organisations, law enforcement agencies and professional associations, among others. The existence of so many more whistleblowing platforms inevitably impacted the number of incoming submissions on the ALAC platforms.

25. Interview with Giorgio Fraschini conducted in November 2021, online.

26. Interview with Giorgio Fraschini conducted in November 2021, online.

27. Interview with Giovanni Pelleranno conducted in November 2021, online.


29. Interview with Giorgio Fraschini conducted in November 2021, online.

30. Interview with Giovanni Pelleranno conducted in November 2021, online.

31. Interview with Giorgio Fraschini conducted in November 2021, online.

32. For full security documentation, see: https://docs.globaleaks.org/_/downloads/en/main/pdf/.

33. Interview with Giovanni Pelleranno conducted in November 2021, online.

34. Interview with Giovanni Pelleranno conducted in November 2021, online.

35. Interview with Giovanni Pelleranno conducted in November 2021, online.

36. Interview with Giorgio Fraschini conducted in November 2021, online.
37. See Chapter 10 in this volume, which focuses precisely on this case study.
38. See Chapter 4 in this volume, which focuses on this Tunisian example.

REFERENCES


8. Digital technology, citizens’ engagement and electoral corruption in Colombia

Manoel Gehrke

INTRODUCTION

Electoral corruption is a type of corruption that has received scant attention from the literature on the role of digital media for anti-corruption. Electoral corruption influences how people vote, which votes get counted and, depending on its magnitude, which political parties and candidates are elected to public office. The fact that a lot of the action concerning electoral fraud is concentrated in the weeks preceding the election and reach a peak on election day (and sometimes in the few days following the elections) poses challenges and opportunities for anti-corruption organisations. Even though many of the actions of fraud last a short span of time, it requires high levels of mobilisation and capacity from governmental and non-governmental organisations on the ground.

The recent literature on corruption emphasises that the active involvement of civil society groups and the creation of coalitions is one of the only effective ways in the struggle of combating corruption (Grimes, 2013; Johnston & Fritzzen, 2020; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). Advancement in digital technology allows the development of new tools aimed at preventing, monitoring, and exposing corruption. The emerging literature on the role of technology for anti-corruption has mostly focused on e-government initiatives, the creation of new social movements and on the capacity of widely used social media platforms to allow for online mobilisation and for protests (Adam & Fazekas, 2021; Bennett & Segerberd, 2012; Kossow, 2020). Digital technology also creates opportunities for pre-existing social movement organisations to engage societies and to influence the public debate on anti-corruption. However, it is still unclear how social movements organisations that operate mostly through ‘offline’ encounters adapt digital technologies to expand their reach. To what extent does digital technology change their operations on the ground? What are
the main challenges of supporting and maintaining citizens’ participation both offline and online?

To shed light on these questions and to raise hypotheses about the use of digital technology to combat electoral corruption, I examine initiatives promoted by the Mission of Electoral Observation (Misión de Observación Electoral, MOE as a Spanish acronym) in Colombia since its creation in 2006. The MOE started with the mission of engaging thousands of volunteers across Colombia to work on a less digital task: observing elections. The crucial part of its operation was the training and physical presence of observers in polling stations to monitor different aspects of electoral integrity and report occurrences of fraud.

I argue that the uses of digital technology have allowed the MOE to improve its capacity to generate, analyse, and disseminate data on electoral corruption. This includes the use of multiple sources of data to map the risks of electoral fraud and violence across Colombia. This provides possibilities to collaborate with social movements and citizens as well as to put pressure on public authorities to prevent electoral fraud. It also includes the use of crowdsourcing technologies to detect and report vote buying, electoral intimidation, and other illegal behaviour committed by criminal organisations, electoral authorities, and party machines on the ground. Through the digital platform Pilas con el Voto (‘watch out the vote’ or ‘keep an eye on the vote’), citizens throughout Colombia can report instances of electoral corruption. The information uploaded by citizens and gathered from electoral observers allows the MOE not only to process the data to present them to the official actors and institutions (for example, prosecutors and ombudsmen’s office) that address the irregularities and nullify electoral results, but also to suggest concrete measures to improve electoral administration. The mapping initiatives, electoral observation, and citizens’ reports of electoral malfeasance constitute new forms of political participation encouraged by civil society groups against electoral corruption (della Porta & Mattoni, 2021).

Examples of similar organisations to the MOE include the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) in Ghana, created in 2000 by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD), the Kenya Domestic Observation Programme (K-DOP), Movement for Defence of Voters’ Rights ‘Golos’ in Russia, and Electoral Transparency (Transparencia Electoral) in Peru (O’Grady & López-Pintor, 2004). As of 2022, the Global Network of Domestic Electoral Monitors (GNDEM) included 251 organisations across 81 countries. Recent literature finds that the presence of domestic electoral observers on election day leads to cleaner elections, and that cleaner elections have positive implications for democratic representation and accountability (Ofosu, 2019). Crowdsourcing in electoral monitoring has also been adopted by grassroots organisations in other countries as well. This includes the use by
citizens of the Ushahidi platform in Nigeria (Bailard & Livingston, 2014) and the Karta Narusheni platform in Russian elections (Bader, 2013).

The rest of the chapter is organised as follows. First, I provide a brief overview of the emerging literature on the challenges and advantages of using digital technology against corruption and contextualise their use for combating electoral fraud. Next, I discuss the research design and methodology. Following that, I provide an overview of electoral corruption in Colombia, including the different types of strategies politicians and political parties use to illegally win votes and citizens’ perceptions about electoral legitimacy, as well as a brief overview about anti-corruption initiatives in the country, including the 2018 referendum. Subsequently, I examine the interface between digital technologies’ offline activities in its main programs: (i) MOE’s mapping initiatives of threats of electoral fraud and violence, (ii) Pilas con el Voto, MOE’s digital platform to encourage citizens to report instances of electoral fraud and irregularities throughout Colombia, and (iii) electoral observation and civic training programs. In the final section I discuss the challenges faced by MOE in adapting the use of digital technology to combat electoral fraud, including that of mobilising citizens, and provide concluding comments.

SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY, DIGITAL MEDIA, AND ELECTORAL CORRUPTION

Corruption is often a seemingly-victimless crime and carries a burden for the collective. Fighting corruption requires that agents (for example, prosecutors, investigative journalists, politicians, citizens in general) have the power and incentive-compatible reasons to do so (Fisman & Golden, 2017). This is seldom the case because the returns of monitoring and punishing corrupt behaviour individually are inferior to the costs of not acting on it (for example, because of threats of violence) and of engaging in corruption (for example, accepting a bribe in order not to investigate), particularly in contexts where corruption is prevalent. In addition, politicians who are accused of corruption have great incentives to react to revelations of corruption by using their powers to change the laws regarding malfeasance or to coopt other politicians or agents in other institutions who can protect them (for example, prosecutors or judges) (Gehrke, 2019).

To break up this equilibrium in which corruption remains hidden and unpunished, an engaged civil society is considered a precondition to put pressure on investigative authorities to discover and punish corrupt networks formed by businesses, elected officials, and civil servants. The lack of civil society pressure also makes elected officials less likely to invest in institutions (for example, laws, instruments, judicial capacity) that allow for the effective control of control (Johnston 2014). For this reason, there is a growing schol-
early interest in the consequences of digital technology for the fight against corruption (Mattoni, 2021). Digital technology makes it cheaper to collect and disseminate information that may allow for surpassing collective-action problems which are an important reason why corruption persists (Persson et al., 2013; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013). Such technology lowers the cost of information exchanges among citizens and makes the information flows more interactive and less dependent on gatekeeping dynamics (Castells, 2015).

However, the effect of the internet and of social media on corruption is also expected to depend on the political regime (i.e., whether a country is a democracy or not) and on likelihood and capacity of the government to censor them (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020). Avoiding corruption scandals is one of the reasons why dictators across the world spend resources and might lose political capital by selectively censoring the internet (Lorentzen, 2014). Depending on the context, denouncing corruption can also result in more violence against whistleblowers or those denouncing corruption since technology also gives powerful tools for state surveillance and the repression of political dissidents (Pierskalla & Hollenbach, 2013).

In addition to the political regime, the extent to which societies can effectively use information about corruption is subject to many underlying conditions since corruption reproduces existing inequalities and disparities in power. Corruption might simply be displaced to other domains or less visible actions. The effects of more information about wrongdoing might not be enough to change the status quo. In some democratic settings, revealing corruption has also been shown to have effects that might undermine citizens’ political efficacy, that is, their beliefs that change is possible and that actions under their control can influence politics (Bauhr & Grimes, 2014; Chong et al., 2015). A recent study finds that the expansion of 3G technology leads to lower levels of confidence in government (Guriev et al., 2021). One of the possible mechanisms that might explain this relationship is that this type of technology reduces the citizens’ asymmetry of information regarding malfeasance. An additional threat is that digital technology might also facilitate the transmission of false information about corruption, which can have further detrimental consequences for political efficacy.

Digital technology also poses other threats and can be beneficial to those engaged in malfeasance. The dissemination of cryptocurrencies and offshore companies, for instance, has the potential of allowing those involved in corruption to refine their money laundering schemes and to protect the fruits of corruption from discovery (Radu, 2021). Blockchain technology, for instance, can also reduce the transaction costs of corrupt transactions.

Similar to other types of corruption, electoral corruption might be facilitated by digital technology. Digitalisation makes electoral corruption easier to organise by lowering costs of transmitting information (i) between brokers and
higher levels of party machines, (ii) across brokers, and (iii) between voters and brokers. If allowed by poll workers, citizens, for instance, might take pictures of the voting ballots to prove they are voting for the ‘right’ candidate to legitimise vote-buying transactions. Parties on the ground might target voters more easily by coordinating their efforts and by having access to more information about citizens’ political preferences or their likelihood of turning out to vote (Stokes et al., 2013).

Electoral fraud is often hidden and very decentralised, making it challenging for governmental and non-governmental organisations as well as for citizens in general to know the details of their operation on the ground (Lehoucq, 2003). Some types of electoral fraud (for example, vote and turnout buying) are more likely to depend on the operation of political machines, and activities that control the fulfilment of the transactions usually take place at the ballot-box level, polling station level, or in specific neighbourhoods. Contingent on how widespread the practices are, investigative authorities including the police might lack the incentives or the motoring capacity to curb them.

Certain practices are more easily observable than others. For instance, it might be easier to check failures to comply with rules regarding vote counting than to acquire information on vote buying because the first happens in a specific setting to which electoral observers have access, making it easier to monitor public officials’ and poll workers’ activities. Turnout buying, when political parties illegally pay their potential supporters to ensure they vote, for instance, might happen across many specific locations (for example, party headquarters, voters’ homes, street markets). Domestic observers like the MOE in Colombia build on local knowledge, civic training, and citizens’ mobilisation to report electoral fraud.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

I rely on case-study methodology to assess how digital technology affects existing social movement organisations in the realm of anti-corruption. The MOE started as an ‘offline’ organisation that engaged hundreds of volunteers across the country. By examining how the adoption of digital technologies over time has changed its nature, the main objective is to generate hypotheses and inductively identify variables, causal mechanisms, and paths that illuminate answers to the research question. In Geddes’ (2003) terms, this chapter’s objective is to engage in theory creation and theory modification. It is, therefore, very limited in its ability to test theories or to provide overarching arguments about how social movement organisations react to digital technology. Most importantly, this chapter highlights the potential and diversity of solutions, and helps to populate the spectrum of the digital tools that are
being used by grassroots organisations for anti-corruption, particularly in what regards electoral corruption.

My analysis is built on primary sources and on existing research, including a field experiment by Garbiras-Díaz and Montenegro (2022). It is also informed by interviews with individuals working in the MOE and in Colombia’s main electoral organisations (Colombia’s National Civil Registry and National Electoral Council) and by my own experience working as an electoral observer in Colombia. I complement it with measures of MOE’s digital presence and with data from repeated surveys of nationally representative samples for the whole period since the MOE was created.

Similar to other studies that rely on a limited number of cases, one of the main limitations of this study is that it focuses on initiatives promoted by one organisation only. An important advantage of this study, nevertheless, is that, differently from the adoption of specific technological innovations as part of their repertoire, technological changes such as the widespread use of the internet are largely exogenous to actions of the MOE, attenuating concerns of reverse causality. The period under analysis is from 2006, when the MOE was created, to 2021. In the year of its creation, 11 per cent of the Colombian population used the internet, according to the World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database (International Telecommunication Union, 2022). By 2022, the proportion of Colombians with access to the internet had reached 67 per cent. The digital tools available to social movement organisations, even though they often need to be adapted, are usually not very costly. Many of the digital initiatives can be copied from similar social movement organisations working in other contexts and adapted to the local context.

This study also suffers from limitations in terms of external validity. The MOE is larger and better funded than most local/national social movement organisations operating in developing countries. Nonetheless, its operation and its mission are highly comparable to many organisations working on domestic electoral observation, and its crowdsourcing platform (Pilas con el Voto) is very similar to other tools of electoral monitoring across the world, including those in Russia, Nigeria, and Ghana. The representativeness of Colombia at the national level is high: Colombia’s level of electoral integrity is close to the median for electoral democracies according to the Electoral Integrity Project and very similar to many other developing democracies.

ELECTORAL CORRUPTION IN COLOMBIA

Electoral corruption in Colombia, as in many countries, has a long history (Posada-Carbó, 1997; Posada-Carbó, 2000; Chaves et al., 2015). Electoral fraud has been a fertile strategy in contexts where voting and violence have co-existed for many decades (Taylor, 2009; Ocampo, 2014). The level of
electoral fraud is one of the reasons why, despite its multiple decades of
democracy (Colombia has been a democracy since 1958), elections in the
country have a substantially lower degree of legitimacy than in most Latin
American countries – most of which had more recent dictatorial experiences
than Colombia. In 2021, only 18 per cent of Colombians believed that votes
were always counted correctly, the lowest figure across Latin America (Lupu
et al., 2021). Colombia also has the highest proportion of citizens who say that
votes are never counted correctly: 31 per cent. This figure compares to only 6
per cent and 4 per cent in Chile and Uruguay, respectively (Lupu et al., 2021).

Wealth and electoral fraud are closely related in the minds of Colombian
citizens. Approximately half of all Colombian citizens believe that the rich
always buy the elections and an additional 43 per cent say that the rich some-
times buy the elections. The remaining 7 per cent believe that the rich never
buy the elections, a figure that, among countries in Latin America, is only
higher than that of citizens of Paraguay (5 per cent) (Lupu et al., 2021). The
lack of credibility of elections is also affected by citizens’ perceptions about
ballot secrecy: 79 per cent believe that politicians can always (40 per cent)
or sometimes (39 per cent) find how one votes. Such negative evaluations of
the electoral process in Colombia are motivated by real problems of electoral
integrity.

Politicians in 21st-century Colombia use a variety of illegal tools to win
elections (La Silla Vacía, 2018). Electoral fraud can take many forms: vote
buying, aggregation fraud, turnout buying, intimidation, and voter imperson-
ation (Lehoucq, 2003). Each type of fraud requires a different set of actions
and organisation. Vote and turnout buying rely more directly on the interaction
between party activists and voters, while aggregation fraud, ballot stuffing,
and voter impersonation fraud depend to a greater extent on the collaboration
of electoral authorities or poll workers. Politicians committing electoral fraud
take advantage of the lack of state presence and of areas in which public
officials collude with or when organisations are infiltrated by criminal groups
(Ocampo, 2014). Eaton and Prieto (2017) document how subnational authori-
tarian elites ‘grasp levers of power in national institutions’ and combine it with
territorial control using electoral corruption and other forms of corruption.
Deals with armed groups provide the coercive tools for electoral intimidiation.

Some of the activities that allow for electoral corruption take place long
before election day. Electoral corruption is fuelled by illegal campaign dona-
tions and public funds deviated from elected officials who secured ‘sweet
deals’ with contractors while in office (Gulzar et al., 2022). Other types of
electoral corruption require an operation on the ground on election day (or
close to the election day) to intimidate voters willing to vote for other can-
didates, to provide cash, and goods or exchange other favours to ensure that
likely supporters turn out to vote. On election day, political parties employ
many brokers on polling stations that are there in theory to verify electoral integrity, including the work of poll workers. The presence of party brokers in polling stations allows them to check the turnout of their presumed supporters and to compare counts with very disaggregated electoral results. Rueda (2017) finds a negative correlation between the size of polling stations and vote buying. In polling places where the total number of voters per ballot box is smaller, brokers have a better ability to estimate whether voters are fulfilling their promises and recompense them for doing so.

Another common type of electoral fraud is the impersonation of voters and poll workers. Political machines often register citizens to vote in multiple places across the country, a process that is commonly referred to in Colombia as *trashumancia electoral*, i.e., voters register to vote outside of their place of residence in a seasonal pattern of migration that takes place for political reasons. This takes advantage of the flows of displacement across Colombia that were generated by its civil war (Steele, 2017) and the flexible rules concerning residency for electoral purposes. In the weeks prior to the 2019 municipal and department elections alone, the National Electoral Council nullified approximately 1 million voter registrations for voter registration fraud. In the week before the 2015 local and regional elections, that had happened to approximately 1.6 million voting IDs. These problems are aggravated by the interference of armed and criminal groups in elections (Acemoglu et al., 2013; Romero & Valencia, 2007; Valencia & Ávila, 2014), as well as the assassinations of community leaders and organisers (Prem et al., 2022).

**PREVENTING, DETECTING, AND REPORTING ELECTORAL FRAUD IN COLOMBIA**

A major scandal surfaced in 2005 and 2006 when documents revealed the collusion between dozens of congressmen, governors, mayors, and other politicians, and the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC), a paramilitary group responsible for many human rights abuses, including the killings of thousands of civilians (Romero & Valencia, 2007; López, 2010). The paramilitary group coerced voters and other elected officials while it established protection agreements with specific politicians. Political activists created the MOE in 2006 as a reaction to that scandal.

Interestingly, MOE’s director, Alejandra Barrios Cabrera, was one of the student leaders of the movement ‘La Séptima Papeleta’ (The Seventh Ballot). The movement was created in reaction to terrorist attacks and the assassination of four aspiring presidential candidates (Jaime Pardo Leal, Bernardo Jaramillo Ossa, Luis Carlos Galán and Carlos Pizarro) before the 1990 elections. Citizens demanded a Constitutional Assembly, and the movement eventually led to Colombia’s Constitution of 1991.
The MOE is governed by an assembly of civil society groups (for example, labour unions, indigenous organisations, and universities) and is mostly financed by intergovernmental development agencies (for example, UNDP and the European Union), foreign governments (for example, Swedish government, U.S. government) and foreign organisations that work in democracy promotion (for example, National Endowment for Democracy). In terms of Bennett and Segerberg’s (2012) typology, the Mission of Electoral Observation has largely continued to operate as an organisationally brokered network, that is, it has retained strong coordination of the action and has used technology to coordinate goals. However, it has incorporated some aspects of what the authors call connective action and that include co-production and the use of interactive media for citizens to engage and collaborate in the organisations’ goals. In the next subsections I analyse how digital technology has shaped the main activities performed by the MOE, starting from its mapping initiatives.

**MAPPING RISK OF ELECTORAL FRAUD AND VIOLENCE**

Prior to every election (i.e., Legislative, Presidential, Local and Regional), the MOE produces and publishes maps that predict the risk levels of electoral violence and fraud in each of the 1,103 municipalities in Colombia. The maps are published online together with a full report containing detailed analyses of the threats in each municipality across the country. The analyses are based on an array of variables measured at the municipal level: (i) territorial presence of criminal organisations, (ii) recent levels of violence, (iii) threats and violent incidents against community organisers, political candidates, and human rights defendants, (iv) threats to a free press and violence against journalists, as well as the (v) dynamics of forced population displacement. Over time, risk maps have become more sophisticated and included more dimensions such as (i) the dominance of specific political parties, (ii) abnormal levels of electoral turnout in previous elections and the (iii) presence of economic activities that are associated with electoral fraud such as illicit crops and illegal mining.

These variables are measured by the MOE itself and in collaboration with think tanks, NGOs, and universities, include the use of official data from governmental organisations. Since 2018, for instance, the MOE has itself gathered, processed, and published detailed data on all threats and actual violence (murders, bombing and shooting attacks, kidnappings) against community organisers, social leaders, and politicians as part of its Observatory on Political Violence. In the 12 months preceding the 2022 legislative elections, for instance, there were 92 murders of community organisers and political candidates, 4 disappearances, 64 bombing and shooting attacks, and 4 kidnappings.
(Mission of Electoral Observation, 2022). The data processed for this initiative was embedded on the mapping exercises starting with the 2018 elections.

For the 2018 elections, the MOE considered that in 63 municipalities there were extreme levels of risk of electoral fraud and violence, 72 municipalities with high risk, and 43 municipalities were considered of medium risk (Figure 8.1). Even though there is great variation inside the same departments and across neighbouring municipalities, there are relatively higher risks of fraud and violence in municipalities in the Amazon region, in the Caribbean and on the Pacific coasts.

The reports produced together with the maps highlight patterns and stories of electoral fraud in particular areas of the country that are more vulnerable.
to electoral fraud. The mapping strategy provides useful data visualisation tools that also get traditional media and online coverage, putting pressure on governmental authorities and raising citizen awareness. Electoral fraud is a difficult topic for journalists to cover, particularly in settings where investigative journalism is sparser such as rural areas and small municipalities. It remains, nevertheless, a challenge to understand the details of the different socio-political contexts associated with electoral fraud in each municipality. Meanwhile, those engaged in electoral fraud build on very detailed local knowledge including citizens’ political preferences and needs and are ready to exploit their vulnerabilities. Certain types of electoral fraud require a very sophisticated operation by political parties on the ground, often involving the participation of local criminal organisations or other armed groups. This operation includes, for instance, which citizens in a neighbourhood to target in order to buy their turnout or their votes, and which poll workers or civil servants would be willing to engage in fraud during election day (for example, in vote counting or in the verification of voters’ identities). The operation of electoral fraud often requires the hiring of brokers with high levels of information about local voters (Szwarcberg, 2015).

Preventing electoral fraud is challenging for electoral authorities, particularly because a portion of their own members on the territory might themselves be part of initiatives to sabotage fair electoral processes. The context is even more challenging in places where violence is a credible threat. Governmental authorities, including the national police and the army, even if not part of corrupt networks, might prefer to focus on guaranteeing security instead of cracking down on clientelist networks engaging in electoral fraud.

**CIVICS PROGRAMS AND ELECTORAL OBSERVATION**

The core activity of the MOE is to train volunteers to work as electoral observers across the country. The MOE relies on its network with universities, NGOs, and labour unions to recruit observers and also attracts them through campaigns using digital media. Most observers are university students and engaged citizens with substantial local knowledge. Between 2006 and 2022, the MOE conducted 1,636 workshops to train citizens in electoral monitoring and on different aspects of electoral administration (MOE, 2022). This civics training provides citizens with specific knowledge and practical tips about the most common types of electoral fraud they should be attentive to. Because electoral administration has many technical aspects, raising citizens’ knowledge and know-how to monitor elections helps to establish higher standards for shared beliefs on what characterises ‘clean elections’. This has important consequences for raising awareness across a fairly large group of citizens and
might change citizens’ relationship with the electoral process. Their presence can dissuade those committing fraud and encourage polling workers and other electoral authorities to perform their work diligently.

MOE’s presence in the Colombian territory has expanded over time: observers were present on election day in 21 per cent and 51 per cent of all municipalities in 2007 and in 2018, respectively. MOE uses its knowledge about electoral corruption, embedded in its mapping initiatives, when sending its observers to different locations. Figure 8.2 demonstrates that observers are more likely to be present in localities where the MOE had diagnosed higher risks of electoral fraud and violence. The coverage of municipalities with extreme risk by observers reached more than 60 per cent in the 2011 (local), 2015 (local) and 2018 (national elections), an important increase in comparison to that reached in the 2007, 2010, and 2014 elections. The other side of the coin is that, even in 2015 and 2018, approximately 25 per cent of municipalities that face extreme risks of electoral fraud and violence did not have an independent electoral observer in any of its polling places.

Observers follow a strict protocol and fill a module with specific questions on dozens of aspects of electoral integrity as well as open-ended questions in which observers can report the details of what they experienced from when the polling stations opened until when the votes were counted. The data supplied by observers is essential for MOE’s official report on every election. Observers can also take pictures (including of vote tallies) and produce videos (for example, of vote or turnout buying) with their cellphones that can later be used as proof of electoral fraud. The data produced by observers at polling stations on election day allows the MOE to obtain a more accurate picture of the details about the electoral process across thousands of polling stations in the country. Over time, digital technology has allowed the data produced by observers to have more consequences in real time. As of 2022, the MOE produces three reports as the election day progresses and sheds light on the most problematic aspects of electoral integrity as the election is taking place. The data, including pictures and videos, produced by observers is an important asset in combination with reports from citizens made possible by MOE’s platform Pilas con el Voto to shed light on electoral fraud in Colombia to provide evidence of and to deter fraud.

**Pilas Con el Voto (Watch Out the Vote)**

Electoral observation, in addition to being labour-intensive, has limited capacity in reporting the types of electoral fraud that happen outside of polling stations such as vote buying and irregularities in campaign financing. For this reason, the MOE has expanded its reach with the use of crowd-sourcing technology. Pilas con el voto (Watch Out the Vote; www.pilasconelvoto.com) is
a digital platform that allows citizens to report electoral fraud and irregularities in real time and went online prior to the 2011 subnational elections. It uses crowdsourcing technology and allows citizens to upload detailed information about irregularities and attach documents, pictures, videos, and audio recordings. Citizens can submit non-anonymous or anonymous reports that reach lawyers and experts specialised in electoral law and corruption who work for MOE. Anonymous reports can be important in regions that lack state presence or where armed groups operate.
The platform allows the MOE to filter in citizens’ allegations and to direct them to the appropriate investigative authorities, based on the information that is submitted. MOE staff have institutional interface with oversight agencies such as the Procuradoria General de la Nación (equivalent to the Office of the Inspector General in some countries), the Consejo Nacional Electoral (National Electoral Council), and the Fiscalía de la Nación (General Prosecutorial Office of the Nation).

*Pilas con el Voto* also takes advantage of the relationship between MOE and mass media outlets, as well as their digital presence. It works in partnership with some of the most important national media outlets in Colombia (for example, Blu Radio, Radio Caracol) as well as important regional newspapers (for example, *El Nuevo Día* – based in Tolima; *El Pilón* – based in Valledupar; *15* – based in Bucaramanga; *La Nación* – based in Neiva; *La Opinión* – based in Cúcuta). Reports of electoral irregularities and fraud can also be directly shared with journalists. When submitting a report through *Pilas con el Voto*, citizens are asked if they would like to share their evidence with journalists and to be contacted by them. Even though the crowdsourcing platform allows for citizens to have their identities as whistleblowers protected, some of the actions allow those conducting electoral fraud to identify them or target their communities or social groups in response.

MOE uses the information submitted by citizens in combination with reports by its observers and traditional media to corroborate evidence of electoral malfeasance and submit it to the investigative authorities. By channelling reports of wrongdoing, it puts pressure on public institutions to perform their constitutional duties. The platform’s success has led the Ministry of Interior to create its own platform in 2013 to which evidence of fraud can be submitted, the Unity of Authomatic Reception for Electoral Transparency (Unidad de Recepción Inmediata para la Transparencia Electoral, URIEL as a Spanish acronym). The importance of the MOE is further exemplified by the fact that 90.6 per cent and 83 per cent of reports containing electoral irregularities obtained by URIEL in the 2014 and 2015 elections were actually sent by the MOE itself (Garbiras-Díaz & Montenegro, 2020).

**CHALLENGES AND CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Through the combination of bottom-up monitoring technologies and expert knowledge, the MOE has managed to establish itself as a central civil society watchdog in discussions about electoral integrity. It gathers information by engaging citizens and produces knowledge that raises awareness about electoral corruption. Despite its solid institutional creation and capacity to innovate, the MOE faces many of the challenges faced by other bottom-up initiatives in terms of citizens’ involvement, as well as its dependence on funding...
from international sources. Its advocacy for more ambitious anti-corruption and electoral reforms has not been very successful.

Garbiras-Díaz and Montenegro (2022) find that publicising Pilas con el Voto is effective but that many citizens who are willing to report electoral fraud still do not know about its existence or need a nudge to be reminded of it. Citizens in municipalities that receive many ads about Pilas con el Voto on social media are more likely to report electoral fraud. The online campaign also has negative electoral consequences for candidates who are associated with electoral corruption, who lose votes as a result. The authors also find that political parties respond to citizens monitoring elections when sent a letter by the Procuradoría General de la Nación (equivalent to the Office of the Inspector General in some countries) announcing that citizens are being encouraged to report electoral irregularities.

The findings in Garbiras-Díaz and Montenegro (2022) have implications for the use of digital platforms to combat corruption by encouraging citizens’ engagement. They show that even in the case of highly technical phenomena such as reporting electoral fraud, when citizens are informed (or reminded) about their existence of platforms, they are more likely to participate. Nevertheless, it remains a challenge to encourage citizens to denounce electoral fraud in more remote areas where internet access continues to be limited.
The MOE faces challenges in supporting and maintaining citizens’ participation both online and offline. According to a measure I created based on Google trends data, the MOE has not been able to increase its digital presence over time in comparison to other kinds of things people do while using this popular search engine (Figure 8.3). Its other activities such as the monitoring of legislative debates on political reforms, and of political violence allows it to maintain an active profile during non-electoral years as well. Figure 8.3 also shows, however, that MOE managed to maintain an active digital presence even in non-electoral years (there were elections in Colombia in 2006, 2007, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2015, 2018 and 2019).4

Since MOE’s creation in 2006, most Colombians have remained sceptical about the level of honesty in elections (Figure 8.4). Citizens’ mistrust of elections is measured by a survey of a representative sample of Colombians every year conducted by Gallup and fluctuates between 60 per cent and 82 per cent. It is challenging to disentangle whether citizens’ mistrust of elections is based on objective measures of fraud uncovered by activities performed by the MOE or based on other overlapping phenomena. In addition, many of the reforms it has proposed, which include substantial changes in electoral administration as well as other anti-corruption reforms, have encountered substantial reactions by political elites.

The crowdsourcing platform Pilas con el Voto has allowed the MOE to expand its capacity to collect data, protect citizens’ anonymity and potential-

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**Figure 8.4 Citizens’ mistrust about the honesty of elections (Colombia)**
ised the verification and publicisation of fraud reports by investigative journalists on the ground. The platform can allow it to reach areas where the presence of electoral observers might be limited. Despite substantial investment in its publicisation, including online social media and through partnerships with traditional media, the platform suffers from many of the problems that characterise other digital platforms, including their limited reach (Garbiras-Díaz & Montenegro, 2020; Adam & Fazekas, 2021). The MOE’s strength lies in its capacity to gather, process, and analyse different kinds of data that allow it to paint a more complete picture about the dynamics of electoral corruption throughout Colombia.

NOTES

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2. On the same topic, see also Chapter 2 in this volume.

3. On the same topic, see also Chapter 4 in this volume.

4. In addition to regularly scheduled elections, the peace agreement referendum between the FARC and the Colombian state was conducted in 2016, and the anti-corruption referendum took place in an election year: 2018.

REFERENCES


PART III

Data
9. Data practices and informative activism in the grassroots struggles against corruption

Alice Fubini

INTRODUCTION

Journalists and activists have been playing a critical role in uncovering corruption and misgovernance. Both use data in documenting, exposing and creating public awareness on acts of corruption. However, journalists and activists often work in silos. While journalists tend to focus more on exposing corruption to public scrutiny, activists are directly invested in anti-corruption efforts. This cleavage is also reflected in the extant literature on the subject matter. On the one hand, scholars who study journalism and corruption look at how (almost mainstream) journalists represent and politicise corruption, without attributing an active role to them in terms of anti-corruption action, except in the case of specific initiatives of investigative journalism (for example, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ)). Although some authors recognise the central role of free media and journalism in the fight against corruption, they do not directly associate them with civil society organisations in a joint effort (see Weder & Brunetti, 2003; Färdigh et al., 2012). On the other hand, those who study civil society actors and their efforts to fight and prevent corruption do not consider journalists as part of the grassroots anti-corruption arena, except in the case of ‘cohesive’ coalitions in which journalists and the media are also involved as active partners (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2010).

More specifically, if we look at the literature on the role of journalism in the fight against corruption, a significant number of studies look at media as a particularly relevant arena for the studying of the representations and social constructions of corruption, starting from a critical conceptualisation of the so-called ‘watchdog role’ of journalism (Ettema & Glasser, 1998; Norris, 2014; Tumber & Waisbord, 2004; Waisbord, 2000), or more in general of the ‘social function’ of journalism (Allern, 2002). Notably there is a line of
investigation that looks at the coverage of corruption by legacy media and its effects, that reflects on the political role of media within the corruption arena (Bratu & Kažoka, 2018; Mancini, 2018; Mancini et al., 2017). Scholars point out the existence of the controversial role of journalism in (un)covering corruption (Mancini et al., 2016; Skolkay, 2016) and the politicisation of corruption and anti-corruption strategies at the level of politics, policy and polity. In short, the role of (mainstream) journalism seems to be relegated to the issue of media coverage and its politicisation, while less attention is paid to the potential contribution of hybrid forms of journalism and even less on how data journalism combines with data activism to counter corruption.

Similarly, scholars that look at how heterogeneous grassroots actors might contribute to curb corruption do not make any specific reference to the potential contribution of (data) journalism to the anti-corruption struggle. Corruption scholars highlight a positive correlation between the high number of civil society actors and a better control of corruption practices (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). Others point out that anti-corruption efforts seem to be less effective with a high number of actors involved: a good balance occurs when just a few professional civil society organisations obtain a leading role (Grimes, 2008). According to Bader et al. (2018) and Fox (2015), the coalitions between civil society organisations and other types of actors as governmental institutions that fight against corruption seem to achieve better results. Only in those studies that focus on whistleblowing, framed as a process aimed at revealing illegal, immoral or illegitimate institutional behaviour from below (see Near & Miceli, 1995), is it possible to find projects that aim to empower civil society, investigative journalists, and civil servants to combat public sector corruption. These three different actors may share the same tools, such as the digital whistleblowing platforms (Di Salvo, 2020), and they might all collaborate with the developers of the platforms, but there is still a lack of integration concerning journalists’ and activists’ skills and practices.

Moving a step forward, this chapter seeks to investigate the role of journalism within the anti-corruption arena from a different perspective by looking at how data journalism combines with data activism. In so doing, it focuses on the liminal spaces between journalists and activists, their practices, their logics (in terms of technologies, norms, behaviours, and organisational forms) and their sensibilities (Russell, 2016). More specifically, the chapter purports to expand upon an emergent line of inquiry that deals with the liminal spaces between journalism and activism with the use of digital media and (open) data (see Ahva, 2017; Baack, 2017; Deuze & Witschge, 2020; Gray & Bounegru, 2019; Milan & Gutiérrez, 2015; Powers, 2018; Russell, 2016). Ultimately, this chapter is an attempt to understand what happens when activists create their own innovative and resourceful digital informational material to fight corrup-
tion, hence undertaking the role of anti-corruption journalists and becoming de facto hybrid actors in the anti-corruption arena.

To reach this objective, this chapter draws on literature on data journalism (see Bradshaw, 2014; Coddington, 2015, 2019; Gray et al., 2012; Lewis & Usher, 2013; Parasie, 2015), and on data activism (see Baack, 2015; Gutiérrez, 2018; Milan, 2017; Hunsinger & Schrock, 2016; Schrock, 2016) to investigate the case of the Italian civil society organisation Fondazione Openpolis (Openpolis hereafter), that promotes access to public information, transparency and democratic participation practices deploying data-driven web applications and journalistic techniques. More precisely, this chapter employs two specific of both concepts as heuristics through which to investigate this Italian initiative. On the one hand, the concept of data journalism is intended from a processual perspective, as highlighted by Veglis and Bratsas (2017). The authors consider data journalism as a process of extracting information from data, writing articles grounded on that information, and embedding visualisations that rest on spreadsheets and graphics. These visualisations might be also interactive to help readers to understand the significance of the story or allow them to retrieve the source of the data on which the article is based and pinpoint more data on the same subject matter. Moreover, the authors distinguish among different stages at the basis of ‘data journalism workflow’: respectively data compilation, data cleaning, data understanding, data validation, data visualisation, and article writing.

On the other hand, the concept of data activism is understood as a form of activism through which ‘people engage politically with big data and massive data collection […] [that includes also] the various databases generated by governmental agencies in their functions, and sometimes released as “open data”’ (Milan & Gutiérrez, 2015, pp. 120–121). Considering this definition of data activism as a critical starting point, this study adopts a broader conception of data, going beyond the distinction between ‘big’ and ‘small’ data (Mattoni, 2021) and focuses on the interplay between data journalism, data work, and data culture (Baack, 2017).

The chapter is structured as follows: firstly, it presents the research design based on the single-case study perspective, introducing Openpolis, a non-profit foundation that promotes access to public information developing data-driven web applications and producing its own articles to challenge the view that journalistic practices are used just to represent corruption. Secondly, it lists the data gathered and describes the main method of analysis employed. The data collection counts in-depth interviews with the initiators, and documents depicted from Openpolis’s website and its data-driven platforms. All the data are analysed through the lens of Thematic Analysis. Thirdly, it presents Openpolis’s main features that arose through a critical analysis of the key themes that emerged from the empirical data: first, Openpolis acts as a watchdog through
the development of data-driven technologies; second, *Openpolis* incorporates journalistic hallmarks into activist actions to foster the social impact of its own databases; third, *Openpolis* represents a data source for other actors that carry out other types of anti-corruption practices. Moreover, it discusses the surfacing of a new form of activism: the emblematic case of *Openpolis* illustrates how an initiative created to use technology and data to act against corruption increasing transparency and accountability enters the journalistic field and engages in what is tentatively labelled ‘informative activism’. Finally, it offers concluding remarks and potential directions for further research that look at how collective actors situated between the realms of (data) journalism and (data) activism might contribute to promoting anti-corruption from below.

CASE STUDY

This research is built around the emblematic case of *Openpolis*, an independent and non-profit initiative based in Rome (Italy) since 2006. Its main mission is promoting free access to data and information, improving the culture of transparency and participation, and therefore empowering citizens. *Openpolis* tries to pursue all these goals through the collection and analysis of relevant public data to build a freely accessible data repository capable of producing and distributing data-based information. The main output of this effort is represented by the creation of digital platforms (Gillespie, 2010), named by *Openpolis* as ‘data driven web applications’ (DDWAs hereafter). Moreover, based on the DDWAs, this initiative produces its own articles and reports following data-driven journalism practices. Beyond the development of the DDWAs and the production of data-driven articles, it promotes heterogeneous projects and campaigns: the main one was ‘Foia4Italy’ related to the adoption of the Freedom of Information Act within the Italian scenario. This campaign was created in 2014 by the union of several grassroots actors from Italian civil society, including *Openpolis*.

*Openpolis*’s collective identity and its organisational structure have evolved over the last decade. Before becoming a non-profit foundation (in 2017) it was an association and its earliest activities date back to 2006. Currently, it supports itself through three main channels: the primary channel is represented by the acquisition of public funds (mostly from the European Union or national funds) or private funds (for example, from other foundations) for the development of individual projects. The second channel is constituted by selling editorial services or providing databases and their analyses to different actors (for example, Oxfam Italia, AcionAid Italia). The third channel consists of direct donations and seems to be at the core of *Openpolis*’s evolution. This is why, at the beginning of 2022, the initiative decided to launch a new and more structured membership campaign, seeking to leverage membership to
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further consolidate its non-profit nature and its independence from other forms of funding and to be able to devote itself increasingly to research and data analysis and journalistic coverage of topics central to Openpolis.

Due to the centrality gained by the development of DDWAs in defining the role played by this initiative within the Italian context, this study looks at each of these applications created by Openpolis, considering also its main website, openpolis.it. The following table (Table 9.1) summarises the main features of each platform, highlighting the different issues monitored and the main forms of corruption prevented.⁹ In fact, Openpolis might be considered an important actor also within the Italian anti-corruption arena and can be framed as a developer of technologies that promotes an upward transparency mechanism through open data and transparency platforms as the main tools (Huss et al., 2023).¹⁰ This mechanism, which implies the transfer of information from civil society to different levels of government or public officials (Adam & Fazekas, 2021; Kossow, 2020), deals also with digital whistleblowing platforms as the main tool¹¹ or with the use of crowdsourcing in anti-corruption.¹²

METHODS

This chapter presents the findings of an investigation based on a qualitative research design, shaped by the single-case configuration (Yin, 2018). The choice behind the selection of Openpolis as the empirical case study is related to the fact that the case study per se represents ‘a pilot case that might be the beginning of a multiple-case study’, instead of following other criteria, named ‘rationalities’. Yin (2018) distinguishes among five main rationalities that guide the selection of a single-case research method: the case study might be critical, extreme, common, revelatory, or longitudinal with respect to the phenomenon under investigation.¹³

The data collection is characterised by a multi-technique approach utilising four in-depth interviews with the initiators of Openpolis and different types of documents retrieved within the DDWAs and the main website. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online between December 2020 and November 2021.¹⁴ The sample of documents includes the most comprehensive internal report released (i.e., Impact Report 2019), which tries to depict the main impact of the different types of activities carried out by Openpolis during the first two years after the establishment of Openpolis as a foundation. The report highlights the centrality of the data chain and the main socially contentious issues at the core of Openpolis’s practices, including issues of transparency and political power dynamics. This type of annual report constitutes a unicum: the other reports are published monthly and focus just on the main themes covered.¹⁵ The data collection regards also the content
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data-driven web application (DDWA)</th>
<th>What OP aims to monitor/The main goal</th>
<th>Forms of corruption prevented by OP</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VoiSieteQui (YouAreHere)</td>
<td>Consists of an interactive tool designed as an electoral-political questionnaire for citizens/voters that returns as a result the party closest to their own positions</td>
<td>(Not applicable)</td>
<td>Available during each national electoral campaign from 2006 to 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Bilanci (Open Financial Statements)</td>
<td>Collects the financial statements of all Italian municipalities</td>
<td>– Public procurements – Conflict of interest – Misuse of public funds</td>
<td>Ongoing since 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Politici (Open Politicians)</td>
<td>Contains a history of careers on around 130,000 Italian elected politicians</td>
<td>– Conflict of interest</td>
<td>Updated until 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Parlamento (Open Parliament)</td>
<td>Allows monitoring the actions carried out by MPs and senators every day in Parliament (such as acts, votes, individual MPs or specific topics)</td>
<td>– Opacity within policy processes – Conflict of interest</td>
<td>Ongoing since 2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osservatorio Covid-19 (Covid-19 Observatory)</td>
<td>Collects data on Italian public procurements related to Coronavirus disease</td>
<td>– Public procurements – Conflict of interest – Misuse of public funds</td>
<td>Ongoing since 2020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislative Process Tool</td>
<td>Monitors the meetings of institutional representatives and their financial interests</td>
<td>– Opacity within legislative processes – Conflict of interest</td>
<td>Ongoing since 2020</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data-driven web application (DDWA) | What OP aims to monitor/The main goal | Forms of corruption prevented by OP | Status
---|---|---|---
Open PNRR (Open National Recovery and Resilience Plan) | Monitors the development of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan based on the Next Generation EU funds | – Conflict of interest
– Misuse of public funds | Ongoing since 2022
openpolis.it | Hosts the majority of the contents produced by OP, as articles and thematic reports. An additional domain (fondazione.openpolis.it) contains general information about OP, as people involved, budget, statute. | (Not applicable) | Ongoing since 2006

included within the Q&A section, in which Openpolis describes and presents the core features of each DDWA for potential users.

The empirical data briefly described above are analysed through the lens of Thematic Analysis (TA hereafter). TA is a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within data, through a recursive analysis that allows the emersion of ‘data-driven’ codes, and the emergence of the ‘key’ themes embedded in the empirical material, which represent the main units of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). Drawing on Braun and Clarke’s (2006) analytic strategy in the framework of TA, the analysis of the empirical materials proceeded following several steps, in which the production of informal analytic notes, called ‘memos’, connects data gathering with data analysis process. Indeed, memo-writing prompts the researcher to analyse data and codes early in the research process and to keep track of the various themes that emerge during the analysis: for example, which codes are associated to each theme, which themes are merged or discarded.

As a first step in the analysis, I transcribed the four interviews, reading and re-reading all the data (as the internal reports, the Manifesto and the Q&A sections of the different DDWAs) and produced initial memos. Through these notes I was able to list common issues and related codes among the different interviews, such as the tendency of all interviewees to speak about the factors that fostered Openpolis to create its articles based on data-driven platforms. Furthermore, memos were useful to note specific topics that have acquired particular relevance to define the Openpolis’s agency going on with the analysis process, even though they were not necessarily recurring across the data collected. For example, just one interviewee highlighted how using cutting-edge tools to update the dataset is crucial for Openpolis to produce daily up-to-date articles.
After a preliminary analysis of the whole data set, I began the coding process, that consists in organising the data gathered into ‘meaningful groups’ (Tuckett, 2005). Through the first stage of coding, I was able to generate a long list of codes that capture a variety of elements embedded in the empirical materials. During the coding, I created several codes adopting words used by interviewees or retrieved in some documents. Some of these ‘in vivo’ codes (for example, ‘watchdogs of the system’, ‘data availability is not enough’), have acquired relevance during the last stages of the analysis, during which I had to choose appropriate labels for the final themes and for the findings.

As a third step, I analysed the list of codes looking at how different codes might combine to form an overarching theme and sub-themes. For example, the following codes depict directly or indirectly how the vacant role of the institutions triggers the Openpolis’s agency: ‘collect data on public procurement should be an institutional responsibility’, ‘Platform Bandi Covid was created to overcome an institutional gap’, ‘watchdogs deal with uncomfortable issues’. This third stage ended with a list of candidate themes and sub-themes, and all extracts of data that I have coded in relation to them. Based on that list I was able to draw the first version of a thematic map, an analytical tool that allowed me to visualise the interconnections between themes and sub-themes.

Moving forward in the data analysis, I followed a process of reviewing themes that meant combining, refining, separating, or discarding possible themes and sub-themes. For example, the process of merging the following themes ‘DDWAs allow a variety of practices outside Openpolis’ and ‘Openpolis as a reliable source for external actors’ allowed me to define one of the final themes of this research. Then, I had to draw an updated version of the thematic map based on the final list of themes: respectively ‘acting as a watchdog’, ‘performing data journalism practices’, and ‘becoming a data source for other actors’. Finally, I concluded the analysis trying to figure out the main findings on the bases of the labelling process of the key themes. In the following sections I present and discuss each finding, which represents a core feature of Openpolis.

THREE MAIN DEFINING FEATURES OF OPENPOLIS

From the data analysis, we could observe three key features that suggest that Openpolis has been merging elements from journalism and activism, mainly towards the use of data to foster its anti-corruption struggle: first, it acts as a watchdog through the development of data-driven technologies; second, it incorporates journalistic hallmarks into activist actions to foster the social impact of its own databases; third, it represents a data source for other actors that carry out other types of anti-corruption practices. Next, each one of these findings are explored in-depth.
Acting as a Watchdog Through the Development of Data-driven Technologies

One of the key elements of Openpolis’s action is the development of several DDWAs over time. The creation and maintenance of each platform is made possible by the fact that the Openpolis’s team also counts on developers moved by the open data culture.17 To a large extent, they can be considered ‘tech activists’ (Hess, 2005) or ‘hacktivists’ (Jordan & Taylor, 2004) who are now developing tools to monitor the activities of public officials and governments and try to ensure that they are obeying the legislation. These additional monitoring actions undertaken by them lead to considering Openpolis as a ‘watchdog’ actor. It is Openpolis itself that uses the term ‘watchdog’ to define part of its activities both on its website and in the Impact Report. Under the heading ‘Watchdog campaigns and data activism’ Openpolis adds ‘We monitor political power, and we carry out campaigns to better understand its functioning’. The report instead states ‘We therefore became a watchdog of Italian political institutions, surveilling on the rules of our democracy’ (Openpolis, 2019, p. 5).

If technological skills allow the development and maintenance of the DDWAs over time, what triggers the creation of such new platforms is the perceived institutional lack of public interest and political will on topics that Openpolis considers relevant. This is the case of the Osservatorio Covid-19 (Covid-19 Observatory), created to browse data on emergency public procurement related to the pandemic. The platform makes information easily accessible and allows any citizen to monitor public tenders in the hope of increasing accountability. Moreover, Interviewee 2 stresses that Openpolis is also fulfilling a role that should be played by public actors:

This is not a reasoning that Openpolis should make, this is a reasoning that the State should make, right? Am I the one who has to create the platform on Covid-19 public procurements? This is the point.18

Interviewee 1, in turn, not only points out the vacant role of the state but also how the creation of a platform like the Osservatorio Covid-19 allows for monitoring data and exerts pressure on, according to his point of view, these absent institutions:

[Bandi Covid] is something that, in such a critical period as the one we are living through, you would expect it to be an initiative coming from the public administration […] Let’s say that, in part, the pressure that we have exerted since the beginning on these issues has helped to disseminate a series of information on all these aspects that was not available.19
Overall, what interviewees consider a lack of state action can be seen as a lack of transparency and accessibility in terms of public data. In the specific case of Osservatorio Covid-19, Openpolis is organising and providing aggregated data on public procurements related to the pandemic. To Openpolis, digital platforms like the ones they have been developing should be offered by the public sector. However, according to Interviewee 3, the ‘problem of transparency’ is not exclusive of contracts related to the major global public health emergency.

Openpolis also curbed the lack of transparency and information on the work of Italian MPs. In 2008, it launched Open Parlamento and since then it invites users, according to the slogan on the initiative’s website, to ‘get information, monitor and take part in the work of the Italian parliament’. This platform characterises the role of Openpolis as a watchdog, as it has been filling a scarcity of open and accessible data in the public sphere, increasing transparency and capacity to monitor public activities, and fostering positive changes also at the institutional level. According to interviewee 4 it seems that Open Parlamento produces an indirect effect on the institutions that decide to create the official websites of the Chamber and Senate in 2010:

Open Parlamento originates from the fact that, let’s say, at that time there was no unique source for monitoring parliamentary work […]. And then, precisely, we were interested in carrying out analyses, and we were the first ones to publish the absences and presences of parliamentarians. Two years later, the official websites of the Chamber and Senate were also launched.20

While the creation of a new data-driven platform by Openpolis seems to be a response to a lack of institutions that emerged due to its role as watchdog, the essence of this role finds its roots not only in the monitoring action per se but in the consequences that the monitoring action entails. This is brought out by interviewee 2 who, while describing the creation of the Osservatorio Bandi Covid, emphasises that the actions carried out by Openpolis are by their nature ‘uncomfortable’.

Let’s start by saying this. If we perceive that an initiative is not uncomfortable, we don’t make it. Otherwise there is no point [since] we are the watchdogs of the system.21

Although exposing and addressing issues is not an exclusive role of journalism, the data analysed here suggests that the watchdog role played by Openpolis became more effective when the initiative opened more room for journalistic practices in their daily activities, as highlighted by the second finding presented above.
Incorporating (Data) Journalistic Hallmarks Into Activist Actions

*Openpolis* not only makes public data available in its DDWAs – what can be seen more as a form of pro-active data activism (Milan & Gutiérrez, 2015), but also has started to gather and analyse data and convert them into information based on its own databases. It could be observed that this initiative has been intensifying the use of its own aggregated data to uncover, better explain and/or provide context to texts produced and published by the *Openpolis*’s team directly on the main website. In this sense, *Openpolis*’s work has incorporated journalistic elements into its activist actions. In other words, it started to act also as a (data) journalism initiative.

On openpolis.it it is possible to find multiple examples of texts produced based on *Openpolis*’s consolidated databases that combine elements of data journalism and data activism. In June 2022, for example, in the ‘Political Power’ section, a text was published highlighting in the title the unbalanced distribution of NextGenerationEU funds to the South of Italy by ministers of the Lega Party. The piece scrutinises the legislation, calculates the distribution of public money to Italian regions, and brings animated infographics showing, for example, how much money each political party (i.e. their corresponding ministers) has allocated for the South in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR, in Italian). Not by chance, the piece, which resembles a news article, was heard to be published a few days later by one of the leading national newspapers *Corriere della Sera*.

The incorporation of journalistic hallmarks into activist actions is carried out by *Openpolis* on the basis of a specific remark: its members realised that making data more accessible and easily available may not be enough to promote their goals regarding improving accountability and citizen engagement. As Interviewee 1 notes:

> [...] This was a bit naive, the idea that it would be enough to make data available in order that people start using them. [...] And so we started to do a job initially of analysis and reporting and gradually more and more, instead, a job of storytelling, more journalistic work, which would later be called data-journalism, journalism based on data, but, basically, that’s what we started to do, I don’t know, around 2006, 2007, 2008.

To try to overcome these difficulties mentioned by Interviewee 1, *Openpolis* decided to incorporate in a more systematic way new practices into its repertoire more related to journalism. The hybridisation process between data activism and data journalism took place in several phases, according to the already-mentioned internal report. The report explicitly states that *Openpolis*’s contribution should not ‘be limited to the distribution of data’ and this is why ‘it was necessary to go beyond, and become not only data suppliers, but data
analysts’ (Openpolis, 2019, p. 4). The report describes that this move was made in two steps. First, *Openpolis* worked in collaboration with newspapers and news agencies to publish reports and dossiers on data journalism. Then, *Openpolis* launched its own space (the online magazine) to explore different forms of data journalism in the many fields it engages with. As it is also stated on its website, *Openpolis* makes explicit that it ‘use[s] data to tell stories and carry out data journalism investigations of public interest’ (Openpolis, 2019, p. 4).

Between 2017 and 2019, the *Openpolis*’s production of journalistic content increased, becoming a daily activity structured with similar routines of a newsroom. This became possible also thanks to the transformation of its main website, which is considered by the interviewees as an effective online editorial platform, i.e., an electronic system for the delivery of daily information. Interviewee 2 explained they not only devoted a lot of time to develop their website two years ago but also provided a publishing platform to the editorial team. Since then, *Openpolis* has been publishing daily information, suggesting that the incorporation of journalistic features into the activist activity is also related to the creation of daily online content as many news outlets do.

The internalisation of journalism practices, however, does not seem to be superimposed on *Openpolis*’s activism features. To Interviewee 3, for example, this initiative still does data activism. He explains how the initiative deals with data and how it becomes part of their communication and promotion strategies:

> I am convinced that we do data activism, in the sense that we are activists first and foremost, as I mentioned earlier in relation [to access requests] to information, transparency, and acquisition of records, information and data. So this is a starting point. After that, however, once we have obtained those data, we use them to make civic campaigns to change things that do not convince us. This can be found everywhere in our activities […] Then, in short, this is the motivation that drives us, then we try to think all-round: we can use digital tools, articles, newsletter, [following a] multi-channel communication.25

As reported by the interviewee, both communication and promotion strategies, include, among other actions, the production of articles. Hence, it seems to emerge that hybridisation does not only concern strategies but also the collective identity of the initiative itself, characterised by a close intertwining between activism and journalism, between communication and information.

Finally, findings also suggest that the process of hybridisation between data activism and data journalism is still ongoing. The most significant example is the launch, early in 2022, of a new membership campaign to provide financial support, as highlighted on *Openpolis*’s website: ‘Participate with your opinions and ideas in our way of doing journalism […] join *Openpolis*, together
we are stronger’. This is a call to action that emphasises the direct involvement of new subscribers in editorial activities. The website mentions that every new subscriber will have ‘a direct channel with the editorial staff’, and spaces ‘where we can meet and exchange ideas’. Already in 2019, *Openpolis* indicated among its aims the necessity to move towards ‘community-driven journalism’, as stated in the Impact Report: ‘In the near future we want to put in place a multifaceted involvement of readers in our work. We have many ideas, but all go in the direction of community-driven journalism’ (*Openpolis*, 2019, p. 37). Again, the data gathered highlights how *Openpolis* intertwines elements belonging to journalism with those belonging to activism and participation: it promotes simultaneously independent data-driven and community-driven journalism.

### Becoming a Reliable Data Source For Other Actors

The hybridisation process between activism and journalism, which affects *Openpolis*’s internal practices, has also had an impact on the perception of its role outside the initiative: *Openpolis* is firstly a data source. In fact, the initiative’s contents have been used by other external actors, performing different types of practices: from extracting raw data to producing new analyses and carrying out monitoring actions or in-depth journalistic investigations to the replication or mention in other media outlets.

*Openpolis* makes an effort to be a recognised source of quality information by institutional actors as well as by the news media. As stated during an interview, the initiative has been mentioned over 6000 times by both national and local media. It wants to be perceived as a source in a spirit of synergy and collaboration without competition, as highlighted in its Manifesto, available on its website.26

Findings also show that *Openpolis* members are aware of how internal practices may be impacted by external ones. This implies structuring data and information considering their potential re-use by heterogeneous actors (mainly ordinary citizens, journalists, and developers) who have different digital data literacy. There is a clear concern to be offering Application Programming Interface (API) to facilitate data extraction for developers; plain text formats for journalists and citizens more used to spreadsheets and overall platforms that are easy to understand and navigate, according to Interviewee 4:

> When we deal with the disclosure of certain data, we basically set ourselves two objectives […] to make a platform that is as navigable as possible [and then] the release of data for those who want to do analysis […] we always try to do in two
ways that reflect two different targets of reuse […] the API for other developers […] and the release in CSV, which we say is aimed at that audience, typically journalists and various citizens.27

The engagement of external actors with Openpolis’s contents can also increase the scope of transparency by making public data reach different audiences to the point of speaking about an amplification of anti-corruption practices. To Openpolis’s creators, this is particularly the case of the use of their data and information by investigative journalists.

The fact that we have made this information available, that we are a recognised authoritative source, has also allowed other media outlets to use our data and to talk about it, to disseminate it, to carry out their own investigations or ask unusual questions of public decision-makers.28

The re-use of Openpolis’s data and contents published respectively on the platform Osservatorio Covid-19, and on Open Parlamento indicate that the spread of information promoted debates in the news media and in the legislature.

What [Bandi Covid] has achieved are hundreds of press mentions and certainly a few parliamentary interrogations.29

It happens that our publication [on Open Parlamento] is included in parliamentary acts, because it serves as the basis for parliamentary inquiries, as well as proposals for legislation.30

In sum, according to the interviewees it seems that Openpolis’s databases and informative material have been used increasingly as sources of data by a wide range of actors in the fight for more accountability and less corruption. The actors who mostly reuse these data are journalists who mention articles or reports made by Openpolis or perform further investigations on certain topics directly involving the non-profit foundation or, instead, starting from data available on DDWAs. Both citations and cases of collaboration are listed in the press review’s section on Openpolis’s website, such as the case of co-investigation realised in June 2022 by Report, an Italian television programme of investigative journalism and Openpolis’s members on EU Recovery funds.31 The direct involvement of Openpolis’s members on that issue can be traced back to the recent launch of the OpenPNRR platform on 20 May 2022 during an event at the Italian Chamber of Deputies.32
OPENPOLIS AS AN INFORMATIVE ACTIVISM INITIATIVE

The three main features of Openpolis presented in the previous section can be seen as a starting point to discuss further how collective actors situated across the realms of (data) activism and (data) journalism might contribute to foster the fight against corruption from the grassroots. Indeed, the case of Openpolis illustrates how an initiative created to use technology and data to counter corruption and foster accountability also promotes the re-use of public data by other actors incorporating roles and features which are more likely to be found in journalistic endeavours. Findings suggest that Openpolis’s action repertoires and tactics in the anti-corruption arena combine the realm of journalism with the one of activism, leading to a hybrid form of activism. This new form of activism is here tentatively named ‘informative activism’, which is characterised by the three main aspects discussed in the previous sections. First, when civil society and social movement organisations engage in informative activism, they tend to act as watchdogs supported by digital technologies. Second, informative activism initiatives tend to incorporate practices that are usually found in the journalistic realm with those practices that usually characterise more the realm of activism, hence combining within the same civil society organisation skills and roles that would otherwise remain separate. Third, civil society and social movement organisations that embrace informative activism also enable other actors to engage in additional watchdog practices.

As illustrated in the previous section, Openpolis started acting as a watchdog through the development of data-driven technologies mainly to circulate hidden or poorly accessible public information. In doing so, the goal of the organisation was to enable the creation of opportunities to hold decision-makers accountable and expose issues through the design of digital tools. This new ‘ethos’ was developed over time and has to do with the decision to incorporate journalistic practices into its data activism repertoires. What Openpolis has been doing is aligning with Norris’s (2014) definition of watchdog journalism which is linked to investigating the powerful and decision-makers as well as disseminating hidden information. It is worth mentioning that Openpolis’s watchdog role has also characteristics of a pro-active data activism effort, that ‘involves a series of practices at the intersection of the social and the technological dimension of human action [with the aim to] actively pursuing the exploitation of available data for social change’ (Milan & Gutiérrez, 2015, p. 122). As it can be seen, the watchdog dimension of Openpolis combines journalism and activism elements.

Findings, however, suggest that the incorporation of journalistic hallmarks into activist actions goes beyond the watchdog practices. Aiming to foster
the social and political impact of its own databases, Openpolis decided to reformulate its website and to develop an editorial platform in which it not only creates daily content but also uses its own databases following the data journalism workflow. A clear frustration was evident from the interviews while discussing the outcomes of Openpolis’s initial strategy, when it was aggregating data, making it available in platforms that are easy to navigate, but such effort was not accompanied by widespread reuse of those platforms. Openpolis’s new journalistic practices seem to be focused on monitoring as their main anti-corruption mechanism, while expanding to the creation of journalistic content on corruption-related topics, such as public procurements, power dynamics, and potential clientelism within the public authorities and political actors. In sum, the production of data journalism contents integrates well with the prevention strategy in which Openpolis collects, analyses, and updates the data contained in its DDWAs, and then uses it as a starting point for writing articles and reports to uncover facts.

Empirical evidence also supports the understanding that Openpolis’s databases and published texts are a source of data for other actors, in particular the ones that carry out other types of anti-corruption practices. In fact, the non-profit foundation provides not just open data, but also a digital data infrastructure (Gray et al., 2018), concretely represented by the development of the DDWAs. These platforms allow monitoring of specific socially contentious issues related to different forms of corruption by both Openpolis and external actors, some of them also directly engaged in the anti-corruption arena. On one hand, Openpolis’s work, therefore, has been able to raise awareness and promote debates in the mainstream media and in the legislature due to its hybrid approach that mixes activism with high-quality data-driven information. On the other hand, its deliverables also allow other people to conduct their own investigations and produce new analyses.

These three features can be seen as the core of informative activism (Fubini, 2023), which could hence be tentatively defined as a type of collective action that combines (data) activism and (data) journalism hence revolving around data-related practices sustaining both the monitoring of specific social problems and the production of contents on the related contentious issues. Used in these terms, informative activism tries to highlight a specific nuance within a continuum between data journalism’s and data activism’s fields of action in the digital age, going beyond some similar but not complementary concepts already discussed in the literature. Take as an example ‘information activism’ (Halupka, 2016), a form of political participation that does not take into consideration the production of news content, but just the consumption and the sharing processes made by activists. The other is ‘activist journalism’ (Olesen, 2008), which highlights how investigative journalism is a political act within the boundaries of professional journalism.
At the same time, the idea of informative activism allows for discovering proximity relations with the concept of ‘data journalism’ from a processual perspective (Veglis & Bratsas, 2017), adopting some of its practices, and following hybridity dynamics (Chadwick, 2013). Looking at the literature on journalism, scholars speak about ‘hybrid news practices’ (Hamilton, 2016) to go beyond the dichotomy between legacy and alternative media (Atton, 2008; Bailey et al., 2007; Prehn & Jankowski, 2002; Rennie, 2006), but also conceptualise the news as a ‘relational social practice’ (Ostertag, 2020) that involve different forms of public connection in terms of ‘anchoring practices’ (Raetzsch & Lünenborg, 2020). However, this new form of activism seems to overlap just partially with journalism, considering all the specificities related to newsmaking routines, norms, and logics.

Proximity relations can be found also looking at the concept of ‘data activism’ (Gutiérrez, 2018; Milan, 2017) and related theoretical (Milan & van der Velden, 2016) and analytical developments (Beraldo & Milan, 2019). Informative activism, therefore, can be situated close to Milan and Gutiérrez’s (2015) representation of data activism and neighbouring fields of action. In their representation, data activism is at the intersection, among others, of data journalism and media activism, civic hacking, and advocacy data journalism. The case of Openpolis, however, provides evidence that there is another form of activism that, as said, combines the dimensions of acting as a watchdog, doing data journalism and being a veritable source of data and information.

Framed in these terms, informative activism moves its path from the interconnections between data journalism and data activism, offering a new theoretical perspective that aims to capture these proximity relations that characterised both fields of action also in the anti-corruption struggle. Indeed, informative activism allows for going beyond the conception of the role of journalists and activists as silos in the fight against corruption, attributing to journalists an active role also in terms of anti-corruption actions, beyond the media coverage of corruption and its politicisation. To conclude, informative activism is a modality of action that belongs to collective actors situated across the realms of (data) journalism and (data) activism. These hybrid actors, as Openpolis, are playing a critical role in monitoring governmental institutions, uncovering corruption and misgovernance.

CONCLUSION

This chapter explored the case of the Italian initiative Openpolis, that since its first activities in 2006 has been developing digital content to, according to its own website, ‘produce useful and quality information’. Openpolis has been incorporating in its daily practices, repertoires, and tactics from journalism...
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acting more like a watchdog, to produce data journalism content as well as to be a source of data and information to other people, especially the ones engaged in anti-corruption struggles. Given the combination of these three features (acting as a watchdog, performing data journalism practices, and becoming a reliable data source for other actors) *Openpolis* emerged as a specific case of what I tentatively named ‘informative activism’, a concept introduced in this chapter that combines elements of both data activism and data journalism.

Despite any possible limitation due to a single-case study analysis, the peculiarity of *Openpolis* in combining data activism and data journalism to pursue its goals allows us to state that there is room for innovation in the already multifaceted anti-corruption field, particularly in the digital era. More specifically, the experience of *Openpolis* and the related formulation of ‘informative activism’ highlights the necessity to go beyond the idea of data journalism and data activism as two separate fields of action in the fight against corruption. In fact, through the introduction of informative activism, this chapter assessed how anti-corruption activists enter the journalistic field, hence transforming both the activists and the journalist’s role in the fight against corruption. As emerged from the analysis, actors who pursue informative activism tend to be ‘watchdogs of the system’ who put at the centre of their monitoring strategy the development of data-driven platforms, following a pro-active data activism approach. Furthermore, at the same time, these hybrid actors convert their own dataset into public information: they use their aggregated data to uncover, better explain and/or provide context to their contents, such as articles and thematic reports. In this sense, informative activism initiatives tend to incorporate journalistic elements into their monitoring actions. In other words, they start to act also as a (data) journalism initiative in the anti-corruption arena, performing a variety of what scholars define as ‘instruments and activities’ (or practices) for the fight against corruption (Bader et al., 2019; Carr & Outhwaite, 2011; Holloway, 2006; Huss et al., 2023). Informative activism initiatives such as *Openpolis* tend to combine ‘monitoring and reporting’ activities with ‘awareness-raising’ trying to foster ‘citizen engagement’ through the use of open data (Huss et al., 2023) and pursue advocacy actions, largely fed by information that comes from monitoring (Holloway, 2006). The main output of these anti-corruption activities is the production of their own reports on specific topics, such as public procurement, asset declaration of politicians, or public expenditure. Moreover, these hybrid actors are able to strengthen their own technological and journalistic skills, performing another key ‘anti-corruption activity’ defined by Carr and Outhwaite (2011) as ‘capacity-building’.

In sum, looking at the role of *Openpolis* from the informative activism perspective, it seems that there is a tendency towards civil society organisations that appropriate journalistic practices from an activist viewpoint, hence rede-
fining the role of journalism in societies and activists’ expectations towards the journalistic profession, its practices, and its ability to effectively support anti-corruption efforts.

To conclude, defining how collective actors situated across the realms of (data) journalism and (data) activism might contribute to foster the fight against corruption from below as ‘informative activism initiatives’ has several implications within the framework of anti-corruption. First, informative activism brings out a more nuanced role of journalism in the fight against corruption in the digital era, beyond the media coverage of corruption and its politicisation (Mancini, 2018; Mancini et al., 2017; Skolgay, 2016). This entails a redefinition of the role of journalism and its practices (mostly linked to the processes of datafication, platformisation and hybridisation intrinsic to the digital era), within the debate between corruption scholars that look at how heterogeneous grassroots actors might contribute to curb corruption (Bader et al., 2018; Fox, 2015; Grimes, 2008; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). Second, it fosters the emergent line of inquiry that deals with the liminal spaces between journalism and activism (as Ahva, 2017; Baack, 2017; Gray & Bounegru, 2019; Milan & Gutiérrez, 2015; Powers, 2018; Russell, 2016) also within Corruption Studies. Third, it assesses how informative activism may enable the diffusion of alternative narratives (Milan & Van der Velden, 2016) both inside and beyond the legacy media, shedding light on the implications of these entanglements not just in terms of content production.

Moreover, defining informative activism as a type of collective action that revolves around data-related practices performed on public data, might challenge the broad debate on the role played by open data in curbing corruption. The issue of corruption is very often relegated to the context of e-government (see Grönlund & Flygare 2011; Shim & Eom, 2008). However simply publishing open data will not necessarily result in a more open transparent government. Opening data that has no adequate information quality leads to less transparency and even less trust in the government (Janssen et al., 2012). Informative activism plays an important role in making data truly open, increasing its comprehensibility for those who are interested in corruption but do not have the resources to collect the data, and turning it into stories that matter for the fight against corruption.

NOTES

1. The author acknowledges that the research for this chapter has been conducted at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna in the framework of the BIT-ACT project funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No 802362).
2. See the project co-funded by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Program: Anticorruption Policies Revisited (ANTICORRP), and in particular its ‘Work Package 6’ which analysed the relationship between media and corruption.

3. See MIUR PRIN 2017 – 2017CRLZ3F: ‘PolitiCanti. The Politicisation of Corruption and Anticorruption Strategies in Italy’ and it follows the path of the ANTICORRP.

4. See for example Chapter 7 in this volume.

5. See DIGIWHIST, an EU Horizon 2020 funded project that brings together six European research institutes, with the aim of empowering society in the fight against corruption through the development of digital tools based on open data, and, simultaneously to increase trust in governments and improve the efficiency of public spending across Europe. (http://digiwhist.eu/).


7. As regard the Transparency laws: Italy counts on the so-called Severino law (L.190/2012), and the Law 97/2016 – Transparency Decree, that introduced the institute of ‘generalised’ civic access (so-called FOIA).


9. Voisietequi differs from the other platforms for two reasons: firstly, it does not respond to the logic of preventing corrupt practices; secondly, it was conceived as an interactive tool and was not supported by a database from which further content could be produced.

10. According to Open Data Charter, data is open if it is: open by default; timely and comprehensive; accessible and useable; comparable and interoperable; for improved governance and citizen engagement; for inclusive development and innovation (National Open Data Charter, September 2015, https://opendatacharter.net/principles).

11. For further details on the use of digital whistleblowing platforms as anti-corruption technologies within the Italian context, see Chapter 7 in this volume.

12. For further details on crowdsourcing for anti-corruption purposes as in the Indian case of I Paid a Bribe, see Chapter 5 in this volume.

13. Among the previous research on Openpolis, two comparative studies should be mentioned: one on data journalism in Italy conducted by Porlezza and Splendore (2019), in which Openpolis was classified as an example of data journalism and broadly defined as a ‘data journalism agency’. The other study, instead, compares the Italian case of Openpolis with the Spanish initiative Civio. Both are defined as slightly different examples of ‘informative activism’ initiatives (Fubini, 2023).

14. The fourth interview involved just one of the initiators that is also a tech developer, and was carried out one year after the others to collect up-to-date data on the development of the different platforms: specifically Open Parlamento and Osservatorio Covid-19.

15. At the time of data collection, there were no other reports available on openpolis. It: later, the so-called ‘Activity Reports’ were published, one for 2021 and the latest one for 2022.

16. Thematic Analysis can follow also a ‘theory-driven’ approach.

17. Openpolis’s team counts 15 members spread around three areas: the management area (management and administration), a technical area (software development,
data science, user experience), and the editorial area (data analysis, content production).

18. Interview 002, Initiator and Tech Developer, conducted on 08/12/20, online.
19. Interview 001, Initiator, conducted on 01/12/20, online.
20. Interview 004, Initiator and Tech Developer, conducted on 19/11/21, online.
21. Interview 002, Initiator and Tech Developer, conducted on 08/12/20, online.
22. The Lega Nord officially was founded at the end of 1989 with the union of several regional autonomist movements in northern Italy. Since late 2017 it has been called just ‘Lega’: from being an independence party in the north, the Lega Party has become a nationalist and sovereigntist party close to local and foreign far-right movements.

24. Interview 001, Initiator, conducted on 01/12/20, online.
25. Interview 003, Initiator and Journalist, conducted on 16/12/20, online.
27. Interview 004, Initiator and Tech Developer, conducted on 19/11/21, online.
28. Interview 001, Initiator, conducted on 01/12/20, online.
29. Interview 004, Initiator and Tech Developer, conducted on 19/11/21, online.
30. Interview 003, Initiator and Journalist, conducted on 16/12/20, online.

REFERENCES


10. Involving citizens through multi-platform strategies: 
*Transparency Watch* in North Macedonia

Dale Mineshima-Lowe

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores how civic activism utilises digital media to engage citizens in combatting corruption. It provides a case study of how civil society organisations (in this instance, *Transparency International-Macedonia*) are employing digital media and developing digital tools for creating awareness of the types and levels of corruption occurring within North Macedonia as well as creating a means for civic engagement in the processes of combatting corruption. It is through the examination of the *Transparency Watch* (TW) project in North Macedonia that we begin to understand the complex strategy for developing and employing digital media to engage citizens. In doing so, the chapter views activism for countering corruption from the grassroots level through data collection and infrastructures. It explores the opportunities and challenges faced by grassroots and civic organisations in such endeavours.

TW as a case study assists in developing our understanding of the processes and decision-making involved in the deployment of digital media and tools by civic organisations and grassroot movements. Through this we can begin to better analyse how the relationship between data, civic activism and anti-corruption efforts are understood in practice. At the heart of this case study is this relationship between data production, its uses and civic activism. From this case study we begin to question the how, what and why of data production by civic activist groups and grassroot movements in the framework of their anti-corruption efforts. Addressing these questions allows us to grasp civil society actors’ assumptions on and perceptions of the importance of data (Cinnamon, 2020, pp. 628–29) and of the ways in which they can be utilised. Such assumptions do not always give consideration to the value placed on what data is collected and from whom, as has been raised by some researchers.
who have referred to the idea of production/collection of ‘good enough data’ (Gutiérrez, 2018, p. 5; Gabrys et al., 2016). TW allows us to examine why data is produced and what purposes presentation in different formats serves – for example, within a visual ‘live’ map of specific instances of corruption as reported/verified, and through numerical representation of total numbers and types of corruption by categories. From examination of the proposed outcomes, we can then delve into the earlier processes and decision-making that were the foundations for the development and deployment of a multi-platform strategy. In the specific case of TW, a multi-platform strategy refers to its creation of an Ushahidi-based open-source platform for reporting instances of corruption, creation of both Android and Apple-based mobile phone apps to interact with the platform, and the use of a dedicated Facebook group. The early processes and decision-making for the project are key to understanding the rationale for the selection of these specific digital tools, and how these have also evolved over the span of its running since 2011. It also showcases TW as a case study of data activism ‘in-practice’.

To this end, the chapter will be separated into several sections. In the next section, the chapter provides a review of two different strands of current research linking the evolving literature on civic activism and digital technologies to anti-corruption efforts. These two strands will provide the framework for better understanding the decision-making in the development of the TW platform for the reporting of incidents by citizens, as well as the deployment of a multi-platform strategy by TI-Macedonia. Following this, the next section will provide an explanation of the choice of case study and briefly describe the methods employed in the data gathering and the analysis. This section will be followed by a description and examination of the multi-platform strategy through archival documentation and interviews with key actors involved in the TI-Macedonia project to identify key considerations in its development and deployment. Here it focuses on four key points relevant to the design and deployment: a) accessibility; b) visualisation; c) security and privacy; and d) challenge sustainability of citizen engagement in using the platform. It then provides analysis of how the data collected by the multiple digital tools are ‘used’ for distinct but inter-related outcomes. The conclusion offers reflections on lessons learned from this case study to better understand how a multi-platform strategy of digital media can be used to counter corruption. It will also offer considerations of how this study may be useful to other practitioners designing and deploying digital technologies in anti-corruption efforts.

FRAMING DATA IN CIVIC ACTIVISM

Over the past decade there has been a growth in literature on grassroots organisations and their use of data. Some authors have highlighted the underlying
assumptions about data perceived as a tool of power and one of influence that can be harnessed by grassroot activists. This in turn creates a particular framework for understanding how digital technologies are used by civic activists in production and adoption of data for challenging social issues (Cinnamon, 2020; see also Burns, 2018 and Kennedy, 2018). For this case study, ‘crowdsourcing’ platform Ushahidi, combined with the use of social media such as Facebook and the evolving mobile technology over the past decade, provides the framework for analysing digital tech choices.

Crowdsourcing For Civic Engagement and Data Production

‘Crowdsourcing’ as a term refers generally to the idea of using digital technologies for collaborative purposes – whether to co-create, share knowledge, coordinate activities, or find solutions to societal challenges (de Vreede et al., 2013). While there are a number of crowdsourcing platforms that exist for various types of engagement of people, there has been little research conducted as to what drives people to engage with crowdsourcing activities. One such study by de Vreede et al. (2013) produced a theoretical model that identified three specific elements for user engagement in crowdsourcing: ‘topic, goal clarity, and motivation to contribute’ were deemed crucial for user engagement (ibid, p. 94). These identified elements are crucial to the selection and use of Ushahidi for the TW project. Ushahidi was one of the forerunners in crowdsourcing applications – created as an alternative means of broadcasting information in the post-election violence in Kenya 2007 when the government established a ban on free media and placed restrictions on all public reporting of events. It is an open-source mapping tool that filled a gap in early crisis management events and was utilised in particular for its ability to accurately map geographically using reports from citizens via text messages, online reporting, or social media posts (de Jong et al., 2016, pp. 79–80). Early uses of the crowdsourcing app did so for improving crisis management coordination, such as in 2010 with crisis mapping in the aftermath of the earthquake in Haiti (Morrow et al., 2011; de Jong et al., 2016).

Evaluations and research into the use of the platform across different projects demonstrated its relevance as a mapping tool and for the engagement of citizens (Morrow et al., 2011; Mora, 2011; Hellström, 2015). However, a few key issues were raised in some studies related to the methodologies employed by organisations that could affect the quality and quantity of information collected. Methodological considerations about the reporting structure – through different input modes of data collection, the processing of data – in terms of timeframe, and credibility within the validation stage to counter fears about data manipulation and representativeness of data gathered (Morrow et al., 2011; Mora, 2011) were seen as crucial. Such methodological considerations
are determined by the users of the platform (for example, organisations), and located within the development stage of using Ushahidi rather than with the platform itself. Ushahidi has been described as ‘only 10% of the solution’, and that ‘the other 90% is up to the organisation using the platform’ (Meier, 2010).

**Mobile Technology and Social Media in Corruption-fighting Efforts**

Within corruption-fighting literature and beyond, there has been growing research into how digital technology – in particular, how social media and mobile technology are used to mobilise citizens (Berki et al., 2011; Wickberg 2013; Hellström, 2015; Dubow et al., 2017). Their uses have increased over the past decade for combatting corruption. One such study by Hellström (2010) discusses the use of mobile technology for combatting corruption, and promoting good governance and accountability. A few of the key lessons learned from Hellström (2010) focused on the design of mobile tech use and identifying the intended beneficiaries, inclusion of clear guidelines for engagement by citizens with such tech (for example, in terms of anonymity), and that use of mobile technology was a part of a larger strategy for combatting corruption.

Other literature has examined the use of mobile phone technology in relation to specific uses related to corruption fighting in a number of areas, such as the use of smartphone technology for monitoring of health and education services, government budgets, and comparing performance of government bodies in different districts (Chêne, 2012).

Like with the growing body of literature examining the relationship between mobile technology and citizen engagement, there has been growth in studies examining the use of social media to also engage citizens. Recent studies have analysed social media use for anti-corruption campaigns in Indonesia (Yulianita et al., 2020), as well as examining how the use of social media by activist groups can create new opportunities for collective action. However, Berki et al. (2011) identified social media as a means of creating new opportunities and also how activist networks online could reflect and create new divides. In particular, the study identified a ‘digital divide’ as a real possibility of new tensions, and as a factor that has not been a part of the conventional thinking by drivers for use of social media in anti-corruption efforts. There seems to be a widely held perception of digital technologies as something ‘good’ for combatting corruption without addressing the possibility of the alternative. The growing use of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram as outlets for reaching citizens and to encourage citizen engagement has been seen as both a significant opportunity, but one with significant challenges. Some of these challenges identified revolved around internet access – costs, connectivity as well as hardware availability, and differentiation across regions within many countries; as well as the fact that different social media serve different
Involving citizens through multi-platform strategies

purposes in terms of content and distribution (Frolova et al., 2017). Another challenge raised focused on the anonymous nature of social media – allowing for reporting without fear of reprisal and at the same time creating a ‘credibility burden that could hinder its effective use in the anti-corruption fight’ as identified by those examining social media for use in corruption-fighting within Nigeria (Uzochukwu et al., 2014, p. 5). Other studies have focused on how initiatives were defined and measured in terms of outcomes achieved and of the longer-term sustainability of many initiatives to have a real impact on government institutions and legislation (Quaggiotto, 2011).

The Nexus of Civic Activism, Digital Technologies, and Anti-corruption Efforts

While the literature presented previously is by no means exhaustive, the considerations it highlights shed some light on the growing use of digital technology for anti-corruption efforts. It has viewed the growth in use of digital technologies by civic activist groups as a positive and easier route to engage citizens for a variety of causes or social challenges in our developing world of technofixes. However, this growing use and reliance on digital technologies, and the data produced through them for supporting activist causes, should be viewed through the lens of a wider strategic trend we are seeing develop. This interrelationship between activism and data through digital tech revolves around organisations’ growing communication strategies. As Mattoni (2020) mentions, activists use digital media as part of a broader strategy of communication to reach a diverse range of goals. There is perhaps an underlying assumption about perceptions of power and agency of data held by civic organisations and grassroots activists (Cinnamon, 2020). This assumption will be discussed later in the chapter’s discussion and analysis of TW and the perceived role of data for driving anti-corruption outcomes.

However, one notable aspect not addressed in many such studies to-date has been the one of accessibility. This is something that will be briefly addressed later in the chapter, when examining activists’ key considerations for developing and deploying a multi-platform strategy. Indeed, it is interesting to note that there has been growth in the use of social media, mobile technologies, and crowdsourcing platforms like Ushahidi. Nonetheless, these digital technologies not only require connected and secure infrastructures both at the national and regional levels, but they also need to be accessible to users. This is so because without it, the ability of civic activism to make effective use of digital technologies for combatting an issue like corruption, is much more challenging.
CASE STUDY AND METHODS OF ANALYSIS

Corruption is seen as a serious obstacle within many countries where it has a fundamental impact on the social and economic rights of citizens, as well as on the overall progress of a country towards becoming a stable democracy based on good governance and the rule of law and with a prospering economy. North Macedonia is no different from many other countries around the world, facing issues of governance, corruption and outward migration flows of its younger generations due to social and economic issues, which in turn have created additional social and economic strains in the country. The selection of North Macedonia is one of access and interest. The author of this chapter has direct connections to the TW project through work with the think tank, Center for International Relations (CIR), which developed TW in cooperation with TI-Macedonia team.

Transparency Watch is a project ‘encouraging citizens to report corruption’ by launched in July 2011, creating a comprehensive system for reporting cases on corruption using crowdsourcing technology based on the Ushahidi platform. TI-Macedonia initially encouraged citizens to report corruption they experience or witnessed, using a dedicated web-based platform and a free SMS number (075/076 145111). The platform was created for two purposes:

a. Empower victims and witnesses of corruption to use electronic tools, internet and social media, to address their grievances and thereby enable them to hold institutions accountable in the implementation of anti-corruption related laws.

b. To strengthen the ability and willingness of institutions to receive and act upon corruption-related complaints and to bring about systemic improvements (Transparency International-Macedonia, 2010).

Linked to the platform was the creation of the Advocacy and Legal Advice Center (ALAC) within North Macedonia. ALAC was created to provide those reporting incidents with the opportunity to gain legal advice to pursue corruption claims through the North Macedonian legal system should they desire to do so. The overall aim of the project was to address ‘tackling and eliminating corruption from society in North Macedonia, as a means for establishing governance and a system of rule of law’, highlighted on TI-Macedonia’s website. As TI-Macedonia’s Secretary General, Metodi Zajkov stated, ‘Although there had been numerous efforts to tackle corruption in [North] Macedonia, the problem persists to be a major issue in most public and social spheres of the country’ (Neos, 2013, p. 107). Additional pressure back in 2011 of corruption as a serious problem in various sectors of the country’s economic and political
life was seen as a priority due to its impact on European Union membership prospects.

As stated in the Introduction, TW is a case study that allows us to analyse the role and impact of data infrastructures on civic engagement specifically focused on anti-corruption efforts. It is on the how and why of the data infrastructures developed and employed – in this particular case, the decision-making process on selection for the TW platform itself as well as the other digital tools created and how these along with TI-Macedonia’s social media presence collectively form the multi-platform strategies for combating corruption in North Macedonia. The two strands of literature introduced earlier provide the framework for better understanding and analysing the decision-making process and outcomes mentioned. It rests upon highlighting some of the underlying assumptions previous literature has mentioned about data production and civic engagement through digital technologies. Alongside this will be analysis related to the overall digital technologies strategy deployed in the rapidly evolving technological arena over the past ten years.

The data collection uses a multi-method qualitative research approach. This entails archival and online documentation about TW, data collected from and showcased on the live TW platform (both quantitative and qualitative data), review of TI-Macedonia’s Facebook page and presence, and three semi-structured interviews with the initiators and decision-makers of TW and the multi-platforms strategy using digital technologies. The documents include internal reports, news articles and briefs, speeches, and visual data sets collated and collected from the TW platform. The TW platform is the central hub for processed and verified corruption incident reports, and the TI-Macedonia site contains some of the public reports, news briefs, and articles on the multi-platforms used for TI-Macedonia’s anti-corruption strategy. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online between December 2021 and January 2022 and involve senior decision-makers both from TI-Macedonia and the CIR. There are always strengths and limitations to research methodologies selected. The use of multi-method qualitative research should provide a good depth of understanding of the decision-making processes that were drivers for the multi-platform strategy used in this case study. It will in most cases also allow for corroboration of facts between documentation and interviews.

Ethical issues and considerations were taken into account in the data collection – in particular as it involved interviews on a sensitive topic, but also in the review and analysis of the TW project data. Ethical considerations were raised due to the nature of the topic (corruption) and protection of interviewees’ current and future well-being given the potential changes to future governments within North Macedonia. The author’s institution’s specific ethics review procedure was followed to obtain consent from participant-interview-
ees prior to participation and provide interviewees with anonymity due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

ANALYSING THE MULTI-PLATFORM STRATEGY: KEY CONSIDERATIONS TAKEN

A clearer understanding of the decision-making processes for the development of TW starts with an explanation and description of the landscape in which the project emerges within North Macedonia. It addresses the key question of how do civil society actors decide what digital media is best for them to counter corruption?

Landscape For Decision-making

Since its inception in 2006, TI-Macedonia has been working within the country towards its vision of the ‘elimination of corruption from the Macedonian society and the establishment of a system of rule of law and a society in which citizens and institutions oppose corruption and unlawful policies’ (TI-Macedonia website). While work on corruption-fighting had been ongoing, a major turning point came with the publication of the 2010 Global Corruption Barometer. The report highlighted the high level of corruption perceived by citizens within the country. The barometer results for North Macedonia highlighted government institutions were viewed as a large part of the corruption problem within the country. This, along with the United Nation’s Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) 2011 report on corruption in the Western Balkans served as the impetus for reshaping corruption-fighting strategies within North Macedonia. It was noted in the UNODC’s survey on public sector bribery completed in 2010 that ‘one in six respondents were exposed to some form of bribery with a public official in the 12-months before the survey’ (UNODC, 2011b). This survey included over 28,000 people in 2010 from the region. In addition to this finding, the report provided comprehensive data about sectors and corroborated the Global Corruption Barometer findings, that corruption was seen as a major issue among citizens within the region and how it impacted their everyday lives.

Much of the corruption reported in the UNODC report by North Macedonians was paid out to speed up processes and shorten waiting times for such things as doctor appointments and public services (UNODC, 2011a, pp. 24–25). One of the interesting results of the UNODC report in 2011 was that it noted bribery was not one way, in that an almost equal percentage of respondents said they instigated the offer to bribe an official as those who dealt with public officials who either explicitly or implicitly requested a bribe (UNODC, 2011b). The reports highlight that for those looking to tackle corruption within the region,
and specifically in North Macedonia, it was not only looking at combating corruption within institutions but involved finding ways to positively impact citizens’ daily lives so that bribery would not be seen as the ‘normal’ that embeds acceptance of corruption at lower levels. Here, it is not just about the grand corruption to be tackled, but the petty corruption that has longer-lasting impact on democratic governance, rule of law and protections for citizens.

**Key Considerations in Development of the Multi-platforms Strategy**

**Capacity and vision**

It was from the findings in these reports about how corruption was being experienced and perceived, that those within the *TI-Macedonia* office began to look for new strategies to fight corruption and came to view engagement of the population directly as the answer. As Zajkov commented, there was recognition in 2010 that ‘any successful anti-corruption initiative must be grounded in citizens’ experiences and engage constructively with government to bring about real changes’ (Neos, 2013, p. 107). The findings highlighted in the UNODC report and by *TI-Macedonia* in 2010 (TI 2010/2011) coincide with staff discussions at the CIR about factors impacting economic development of countries globally. As a CIR staff member with extensive background in economics and economic development noted back in 2010, ‘there’s a link between corruption and economic development’ and it would be ‘interesting to see …given new technologies, if there’s anything that could be done’ to facilitate efforts to combat corruption and ‘see what effect it has on economic development’.9

This led to the CIR team thinking about possible solutions and then seeking a possible case study of where it could be tested. The ‘match’ between CIR and *TI-Macedonia* came by chance with another CIR staff member from North Macedonia who happened to have connections to *TI-Macedonia* at the time.

Two other key points in the decision-making process focused on capacities, and involved the timeframe for development and financing of such a project. While the timeframe for the actual development of the platform was stated to be around two to three months by those involved in the technical support, there were also a few days related to sourcing the technical expertise to work with Ushahidi’s platform and source the financial support for the initial development of the TW platform. In addition to the limited funding available to *TI-Macedonia* for undertaking this pilot project, other financial support was provided by the CIR, and the team were able to obtain a grant from the National Endowment for Democracy.10

**Target audience within the larger population**

It is through the collaboration on the development of a digital tool to combat corruption and acknowledging that any anti-corruption strategy should include
civic engagement, that we begin to see where activism and digital technologies meet. Work began on developing the rationale that would shape what kind of technology would be selected for the pilot project. The ‘target’ audience of the country’s population was a key consideration by the team in the selection of the type of digital tech selected for TW. While the general feeling was for all sectors of the population to engage with the corruption monitoring tool, many in the team acknowledged that in terms of engagement, the younger North Macedonian population were a group that needed to be reached and were seen as less engaged in politics and the governing processes back in 2010/2011 and more focused on the availability of economic opportunities. The perceptions and experiences of corruption were seen by much of the younger generation as undermining governance and economics – issues that were stunting the growth of the economy and opportunities available in North Macedonia. There was recognition within the team that any failure to significantly tackle corruption would perpetuate apathy within civil society and risk a further ‘brain drain’ of the country’s younger generation who were looking elsewhere for economic security and opportunities. In fact, it was a prominent note during the interview when speaking about the development of North Macedonia’s multi-platform strategies that this corruption-fighting work was seen as fundamental to the continued democratic development of the country as well as its future economic prospects.

**Accessibility issues**

In terms of the initial thoughts about how to use digital technology to engage citizens in the fight against corruption, focus was on how corruption impacted economic development and governance and looking at how technology could be used to ‘empower marginalised communities’ to report instances of corruption confidentially. This led the group to examine a variety of digital technologies deployed in other parts of the world and looking to see how these technologies were being utilised: could they be adapted and repurposed for corruption monitoring, and what levels of engagement of civil society had been experienced through these various platforms. Another important note impacting development was examination of engagement by North Macedonians (in particular, the younger aged population) with social media and mobile phones in 2010. Given the digital engagement trends seen in the country, along with this younger section of the population having been identified as the target audience, it was decided that the development of a platform that could be accessed from a web-browser on a mobile phone or computer would be the best means for engaging the target audience as well as the larger population. People were already using these technologies in their everyday lives and there was a huge growth within the mobile phone take-up over the few years prior to TW’s launch, with growth expected to continually rise for the foreseeable future.
The aim was to find a means of utilising this growing technological trend to enable citizens to anonymously report instances of corruption via Facebook, email, and mobile phones. After consideration of possible solutions and having utilised other digital media to engage citizens (for example, creation of a Facebook page), the team decided to create the web-based TW using the Ushahidi crowdsourcing platform.

As noted by the team and others, including David Kobia, co-founder of Ushahidi, the open nature of the platform is what distinguished it as a new approach. Where the more traditional approach to information gathering and sharing was seen as unidirectional in terms of flow of information (for example, an organisation would collect and be the source of information from stakeholders involved and then collate, process and share this data), Ushahidi allows for multiple stakeholders to submit ‘live’ data reporting, that then is subsequently translated, categorised and geotagged to be shared with the wider community via the platform’s mapping tool (de Jong, 2016, p. 81). This key point about stakeholder interaction with the platform and the multi-directional flow of information made the platform a good fit for what the team envisioned for TW as a corruption-monitoring tool. It allowed interested citizens and other organisations to access the data collected and visually see where incidents of corruption were occurring and what types of corruption, rather than a written report of the data collected delivered annually. The ability of Ushahidi to collect data from multiple sources (for example, text messages – SMS, email, online website link, and smartphone applications) was an important consideration.

The platform would have multiple access points for users, providing a means for collection and collation of data on the corruption monitoring taking place across the everyday lives of citizens. In addition to the crowdsourced web-based platform, additional tools – both digital and more ‘traditional’ were created to enable access for all citizens. These included a telephone number, email address, postal address, and later, both an Apple-based app and an Android-based app to allow users a quicker means of reaching the web-based crowdsource platform. This reporting of incidents is the first step of the process and is stored within the project’s secure database. At this point of the process, details of the report are not included in data appearing on the TW platform (in terms of incident type/place), but the report will show as a ‘Reported Incident’/‘Received reports – raw count’. This designation lets visitors to the platform know about an incident being reported but contains no details of where or what was reported (Ushahidi Staff, 2013).

Visualisation as an important factor in combating corruption

TI-Macedonia’s Secretary General Zajkov thought the idea that individuals could see the data collection visually and via a free platform, would be a good
Digital media and grassroots anti-corruption

means to engage citizens. In evaluating the choice of digital technology to engage citizens in corruption monitoring in the organisations’ decision-making processes we see the view held was that ‘the new platform will reach far more people than any other project we have done in the past’ (Zajkov in Geelan, 2011a). Zajkov stated that ‘I strongly believe the social media have the power to engage a diverse mass of young people who can make big changes in society through their active involvement’ (Geelan, 2011a). In particular, the mapping and report metrics through Ushahidi to present a ‘true’ picture of corruption on the ground was an important part of the decision for using the platform.

In reflecting on this choice of digital technology – it exposes how, as Cinnamon (2020) and Gutiérrez (2018) discuss, grassroots organisations are drawn to digital technologies that enable them to proactively engage in data production. Within the TW platform – visitors are provided with two views of trended data – it shows all reports submitted, as well as details for validated reports (Neos, 2013, p. 110). The platform provides multiple streams of data visually – there is the geographic map, a dynamic timeline that allows users to filter data by month/year, and a table that allows for selection to specify the type of incidents reported one is interested in and to view data related only to that category. The data from the dynamic timeline and the listed categories of incidents reported informs what geographical data is shown on the map. That data is being produced not only to be utilised for proposing policy changes to governments, but more importantly, the data and access to it in ‘real time’ is part of the larger communication strategy to create engagement of citizens in the normative discourses about corruption. The mapping, timeline, and categories list are viewable by visitors to the live website https://transparency-watch.org/.

The visual allows for greater impact on ‘holding people to account and make sure people really feel a part of the anti-corruption process’ (Geelan, 2011b). The visualisation of the corruption incident reports also allows citizens to take a more active interest in what types of corruption are occurring and where, in terms of location, and this allows for citizens to feel like their ‘voices’ are being recognised through incident reports. This in turn encourages awareness among other citizens and hopefully, the desire to engage in discussions and actions to address corruption as an issue (locally and nationally).

Security of data and privacy of participants

In the early development stage, TW identified some key challenges, these included: the issue of access via multiple mediums, privacy for individuals electing to file reports, and security of sensitive data. In delving further into this issue of security of data being collected from multiple points (as demonstrated in Figure 10.1 – Data Processing Structure Plan), it was learnt that a number of levels of security have been put in place to prevent hacking and breaches to
access the data and trace its lineage. During the interview, the levels of security were created from the point of contact by citizens with an incidence report through storage of the ‘raw’ data, to the process of validation and conversion of the qualitative data of raw reports into quantitative categorised ‘readings’ of the data collected.\footnote{Due to the sensitive nature of the data being collected, the interviewee asked for details not to be recorded and published, to maintain integrity of the security protocols in place.}

In addition to securing data and minimising access to raw data, there is also the issue of privacy for individuals reporting incidents. One of the key provisions made for privacy was the setting of the 5-kilometre radius of incidents on the mapping tool. This was because ‘reports of corruption are inherently of risk to the person reporting it’ (Ushahidi Staff, 2013), so this is the reason for the safeguarding feature mentioned earlier – whereby details of reports are only displayed on the platform site once there has been validation of the reported incident and where the reporting party has approved the report to appear publicly in detail.

Multi-platforms strategy: data collection and inter-related outcomes

In this section, we explore and analyse key issues related to the multi-platform strategy used for corruption-monitoring in this case study. Presented below is a graphic that outlines a draft of the TW site process for the data production process. It highlights the thought process of decision-making, as well as the capture, verification, and communication of the data collection, through the TW platform as well as through social media.

Data collected

While TW started with its platform designed through the Ushahidi crowdsourcing tool, the plan from the beginning was to expand to include mobile phone apps with the growing mobile use within the country. As the prevalence of mobile use has grown in North Macedonia along with advancement in mobile technology, this allowed for the creation of mobile apps (Android and Apple) that can be linked to the TW platform. These were completed in 2012 and 2013 respectively for the Android app and the Apple app. The apps offer the same basic functionality as the platform on the website and in fact are integrated with the platform for the recording of incidents and viewing of the mapping tool and data\footnote{\cite{Neos, 2013, p. 111}.} (Neos, 2013, p. 111). The Android mobile app allows users to report cases of corruption as well as view reported cases by category and geographic location – as available via the platform on the internet (Transparency International-Macedonia, 2012). One important aspect to note about the app (listed as Prijavi Korupcija – Transparency International-Macedonia in the Android app store), is that the application does not reveal private information to the public. In addition to the web form via the platform for reporting inci-
Note: Permission for re-use of the graphic here provided by CIR and TI-Macedonia.

Figure 10.1 Data processing structure plan

Despite the use of the smartphone apps available, reports can still be filled in via telephone or email to the TI-Macedonia team, as well as using the hashtag #korupcjaMK on Twitter. One note of the apps' use via the smartphone was
someone logging a report at Skopje International Airport coming into the country, and their experience with border control and customs officers. The following two graphics (Figures 10.2 and 10.3) show results of all data collected in 2011 and then in 2021. It demonstrates the level of data collected; however, it only provides total numbers in terms of traffic and not the number of incident reports or categories of incidents submitted and then passed through the verification process (refer to Figure 10.4 for an example of these details).

Figure 10.2 Data collected of incident reports from 2011

Processing of the data: Verification and validation of incident reports
The processing of data is a part of the verification-validation stage. Once a report is received, TI-Macedonia / ALAC (Advocacy and Legal Advice Centre) staff then perform an investigation of the reported incident. A review of the complaint is conducted based on the information submitted, any related data, and on interviews with complainants. This investigation could be quick, or it may last months before a resolution is reached. A decision is based on the available information, including follow-ups with citizens throughout the process, and with inclusion or reference to institutions or government entities as necessary. Only through this thorough process, taking due diligence to
Figure 10.3 Data collected of incident reports from 2021
determine the validity of individual reports, will the case then be decided as admissible or if not, unsubstantiated, or false. Once a report has been validated, it will be updated on the project’s website from ‘Reported Incident’ to ‘Validated/Verified’. It is only after the completion and passing of the validation stage that complainants are then asked if they agree to have the anonymised report details included on the platform site as part of the data visibility. At this point in the process, ALAC$^{21}$ will provide complainants with the findings of the review and present options available to the citizen should they wish to pursue the complaint further and take legal remedies in their own capacities$^{22}$ (Neos, 2013). This processing of data through the validation stage represents, as Morrow et al. (2011) and Mora (201) mentioned, a means of ensuring credibility, as well as countering fears about data manipulation. The credibility issues are of importance in data activism, as Cinnamon (2020) and Gutiérrez (2018) mention, due to how and why activists use data collected from digital technologies like TW. It also integrates what was said by Meier (2010), that the data collected in the use of an Ushahidi-based platform is only as good as the verification and validation processes that an organisation creates around collection. Figure 10.4 demonstrates the composite results of incident reports from 2015 as an example, that have gone through the verification process and
are then assigned to categories. The figure indicates 84 incident reports filed during the period and categorised under 12 categories of corruption.

![Diagram of categories of reports](image)

**Figure 10.4** Data collected of incident reports from 2015 to highlight the categories of incident reports

**Communication of data: accountability and contribution to systemic improvements**

The overall purpose of TW\(^2\)\(^3\) was to ‘enhance the quality of democratic governance by enabling citizens to participate in the fight against corruption by using new electronic tools and at the same time, to effectively hold their government accountable and contribute to systemic improvements’ (Neos, 2013, p. 108). This contribution to greater accountability of the government and the implementation of systemic improvements would lead to improvements in people’s lives and prospects. It links to issues about the uses and perceptions of ‘power’ of data by civic and grassroots organisations. The issue of ‘poor data’ was a concern raised by the TI-Macedonia/CIR team as well as by earlier users such as Ushahidi Haiti who identified ‘data, technology, accuracy and credibility, exposure and privacy’ (de Jong et al., 2016, p. 88) as key issues for the credibility of a project overall. Such concerns and Ushahidi’s own assessment that ‘poorly identified (and displayed) data not only gives the public a false picture of what’s really being reported but does not provide...
the organization accurate information views to be used [for] monitoring and evaluating the project’ (Ushahidi, 2013), were reinforcement for creating a validation process within the TW process. This was created to minimise the damage that false claims could have on the overall work of the project. These decisions and modifications to processes demonstrate a key point raised by the likes of Gutiérrez and Milan (2018) and Cinnamon (2020) of ‘the way that discourses that ascribe value, power, and agency to data shape a belief that citizen engagements with data can lead to the advancement of grassroots political goals’ (Cinnamon, 2020, p. 625). Within projects like TW, there is an understanding of how engaging citizens in corruption monitoring creates ‘data’ about citizens’ experiences of corruption for pursuing resolution of the issues raised. This data also provides quantifiable examples of corruption in terms of the number of experiences and trends (types of corrupt acts) found. In both cases, the data can and is used to build awareness and change attitudes among citizens that can then travel ‘upwards’ to have impact on institutions and policymaking within the country.

For example, ‘In the period from 2012–2015, a total number of 481 written letters were sent as requests for access to public information, complaints, appeals and additional contacts on local and national level. Total number of answers from the institutions is 318’ (Transparency Watch, 2016). While the content of the correspondences described here cannot be shared publicly in order to secure clients’ identity and privacy, it does demonstrate how data production from the grassroots level is understood as a necessary tool to drive changes in legislation and processes. It is a tool for impacting governmental changes, but importantly as well, it has the knock-on effect of increasing public awareness and attitudes about corruption in North Macedonia. An example cited from the TW documentation and interview (2021) was the impact that TW was having on legislative change through the use of data produced in multiple ways. Here we are referring to numbers produced of the total incidents reported, the total number of validated reports, and then using the specific details of some reports to highlight corrupt practices that should be changed. On November 09, 2015, the Assembly adopted the law for protection of the reporting persons. This change refers to the whole country, not for particular cities or regions, and allows for whistleblowing by those working within public institutions.

The use of data production has been one part of TI-Macedonia’s larger strategy for fighting corruption. It has paired this with the use of traditional media and social media. To this end, in 2013, a team of TI-Macedonia lawyers collaborated with journalists working in the field of civil and investigative journalism for NOVA TV24 to create a series of TV stories reporting on the analysis of citizen reports submitted to TW. The story documentaries aired on regional stations in North Macedonia with special debates on the topics high-
lighted in the stories, for the purpose of creating awareness and drawing the public into debates about corruption, governance, and engagement for change (Neos, 2013, p.112). Additionally, it created a Facebook page as another tool to connect with supporters and provide updates on reports and events, similar to Berki et al.’s (2011) reflections on how social media tools could be harnessed to fight corruption. This page has been set up to provide users with information and updates about corruption-related issues and legislation within the country and has around 1.8 million members signed up. This is seen as an interesting uptake given the population in North Macedonia is somewhere around 2 million.

CONCLUSIONS: REFLECTIONS ON CHALLENGES FOR FUTURE DIFFUSION

Arguably one of the key challenges that the TW project has experienced, like many of the digital technology tools used for combatting corruption, has been that of sustainability. Sustainability here relates to two things: firstly, it is sustainability of the platform itself as a digital tool. The TW platform is now over ten years old and requires upgrades to keep it working but also to allow it to consider digital and societal changes that have occurred over the past decade in North Macedonia. Related to this issue of upgrading is the requirement for funds to make new improvements to how the platform works, how it integrates with the mobile applications created, and how the entire infrastructure is secured from the growing global threats of cyberattacks.

The second way in which we can consider sustainability is in terms of users of the TW platform. Over the past decade, while overall growth has been seen in hits to the platform, and the number of reported incidents has also increased, the report numbers have also fluctuated. The link between the TW platform and the TW Facebook page provides a good strategy for countering sustainability issues related to users.

Other reflections are related to sizing and transferability of a multi-strand strategy that uses social media in combination with a crowdsourced platform and mobile apps, like TW have. There is perhaps a strong possibility of diffusion for use of such a strategy by other grassroots and civic activists’ organisations in combatting corruption. The two key questions that will have a more determining impact on using TW as a model for other similar organisations based elsewhere, are: a) funding to develop and deploy a crowdsourced platform with associated mobile applications and a social media presence combined to reach citizens and impact discourses around corruption within a country, and b) the ‘landscape’ within the prospective country. By ‘landscape’ I mean, what type of government is in place, what has been the role of civic organisations previously in the country and how do people perceive their
Digital media and grassroots anti-corruption

role in relation to institutions, and how do they view the issue of corruption within their country or communities?

Despite such large question marks about the adaptability and possible diffusion of the TW platform and strategy elsewhere, it should be noted that there has been specific interest by other groups in getting assistance and advice from TI-Macedonia to develop similar platforms of their own. TI-Macedonia has over the last several years assisted others to develop similar, smaller platforms. For example, TI-Macedonia have used what it has learned to assist Kosovo’s TI team to develop a similar platform to monitor public procurements specifically.25 One of the key questions in considering the diffusion of the ideas and multi-platform strategy used by TI-Macedonia is WHY would other grassroot groups decide to do so? For what purpose and to what end? What considerations do other groups share like TI-Macedonia’s own? If like North Macedonia, other grassroot groups are looking to ‘hit’ multiple outcomes simultaneously – using data production as a means to drive change at the institutional and societal levels, raising awareness to drive citizen engagement directly in combatting corruption – then a multi-platform strategy would maximise impact. Such a strategy would also allow an organisation with limited resources to consider how they can tier development of their corruption-fighting strategy to achieve desired outcomes in the longer-term.

NOTES

1. Fieldwork for this chapter was completed with the support of Transparency International-Macedonia, the Center for International Relations (USA) and with financial support from UACES (University Association for Contemporary European Studies), UK.
2. On this topic, see also Chapter 9 in this volume.
3. This term has been used to refer to non-expert generated data such as citizen groups through participatory and crowdsourcing platforms like Ushahidi.
5. ALAC – Advocacy and Legal Advice Centre was implemented as a project in 2003. The ALAC Centre provides free legal advice to victims and witnesses of corruption while also seeking to ‘translate the experiences of citizens into structural changes through evidence-based advocacy’ (Neos, 2021, p. 110). Further details about the function and history of the ALAC related to Transparency Watch can be found in the interview article by Neos (2013).
6. For both the Global Corruption Barometer and the UNODC Report on bribery in 2011, the use of North Macedonia’s previous name – the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (fYR of Macedonia) is used in these reports as this was in use prior to 2019.
7. This was completed with funding from the European Commission.
8. Grand corruption generally thought of as an abuse of high-level power and influence that benefits an individual or the few at the expense of the many. Petty corruption is typically considered the more everyday abuse of entrusted power.
Involving citizens through multi-platform strategies

by those with limited authority in their positions (for example, low-to mid-level public officials) who use this position/authority for personal gain. It frequently involves the exchange of favours or small sums of money.

9. Interview with Interviewee Z, conducted on 14/12/21, online.
10. National Endowment for Democracy (NED) is an independent, non-profit foundation dedicated to growth and strengthening of democratic institutions around the world. Further details about its work can be found at: www.ned.org.

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11. Artificial intelligence as a weapon to fight corruption: Civil society actors on the benefits and risks of existing bottom-up approaches

Julia Forjan, Nils Köbis, and Christopher Starke

INTRODUCTION

Corruption is a global, timeless, multifaceted phenomenon with severe consequences for society, politics, and the economy (Mungiu-Pippidi & Heywood, 2020; Rothstein, 2011). Against the backdrop of an increasingly digital society and the associated availability of big data, information and communication technologies (ICTs) to fight corruption are surging. These tools can provide new opportunities to hold public officials accountable for their actions (Mattoni, 2021). Consequently, a growing number of studies are investigating the potential of ICTs to combat corruption (Adam & Fazekas, 2021; Kossow & Dykes, 2018).

While classical ICTs are static, more recently, the use of the more dynamic and autonomous technologies summarised under the umbrella term Artificial Intelligence (AI) has garnered interest within anti-corruption communities. AI is defined here as ‘systems that display intelligent behaviour by analysing their environment and taking actions (with some degree of autonomy) to achieve specific goals’ (Ala-Pietilä et al., 2019). Such technologies are increasingly coming to the forefront of corruption research (Aarvik, 2019; Adam & Fazekas, 2021; Köbis et al., 2022).

Recently, Microsoft announced its AI Technology Solutions project aiming to employ technology to counter corruption. Shortly after, it announced a cooperation with the Nigerian government ‘to apply technologies like artificial intelligence and machine learning to help identify potential risks, highlight them, and reduce corruption’ (Microsoft, 2021). Not only have governments in liaison with private companies recognised AI as a promising tool to fight
corruption, also, non-governmental organisations (NGO) and donor organisations, like the World Bank, have begun to draw on AI technology for this purpose (Global Witness, 2021; World Bank, 2020). Consultancies are already heralding the technology as ‘the next frontier in anti-corruption’ (Petheram, 2018).

But what makes AI a promising anti-corruption technology? The most crucial advantage of AI-based anti-corruption technologies (AI-ACTs) lies in how they function. First, AI-ACTs differ from classical ICTs in that they can autonomously execute tasks previously solely performed by humans (Domingos, 2012; Rahwan et al., 2019). Second, due to their large computing capacity, AI-ACTs are able to analyse large volumes of data, including Big Data and large-scale datasets, in the shortest possible time and thereby uncover suspicious patterns (Ponti et al., 2021). One example is Arachne, a fraud risk-scoring tool launched by the European Commission, which aims to ‘detect and prevent potential irregularities in projects or contracts’ (European Commission, 2021). Third, AI-ACTs operate independently of external factors that would influence their effectiveness and impartiality. Unlike humans, they can neither be pressured by time constraints nor supervisors.

Moreover, Big Data becomes increasingly available (Petheram et al., 2019). With ever more data available for analysis purposes, there has been a surge of research interest in AI for anti-corruption in recent years. However, empirical studies on the use of AI-ACTs are still scarce. To this point, they have been mainly applied in related areas, such as crime (Li & Juhola, 2015), credit risk assessment (Swiderski et al., 2012; Mhlanga, 2021), and financial fraud detection (Olszewski, 2014; Choi & Lee, 2018).

In one of the first empirical studies, López-Iturriaga and Pastor Sanz (2018) developed a model of neural networks to predict public corruption in Spanish provinces. The authors identified multiple economic and political factors that increase public corruption, such as taxation of real estate, economic growth, or the same political party remaining in power for a long period. Furthermore, the results demonstrate that the model could forecast corruption in some provinces up to three years before corruption cases were observed (López-Iturriaga & Sanz, 2018).

Another study, which aimed at determining predictors of corruption, was conducted by Lima and Delen (2019). In their cross-sectional study, the authors applied diverse machine learning techniques to identify predictors for Corruption Perception Indices across 132 countries. Based on their models, the authors identify factors such as government integrity, judicial effectiveness, and education index to influence perceptions of corruption.

On a more local level, Ash et al. (2020) and de Blasio et al. (2020) employed machine learning techniques to predict local-government corruption in Brazilian and Italian municipalities, respectively. Another study by Colliri
and Zhao (2019) applied a network-based approach to analyse bills-voting data comprising the votes of Brazilian members of Congress. They argue that bills-voting networks can be used to identify politicians who are involved in corruption or other financial crimes. Mazrekaj et al. (2021) focused on identifying political connections that could represent significant conflicts of interest. They used machine learning techniques to predict politically connected firms by constructing a novel firm population dataset in the Czech Republic.

The abovementioned studies illustrate that AI-ACTs, mainly machine learning techniques, can recognise and predict patterns indicative of various types of corruption in datasets. This autonomous ability makes it possible to take preventive rather than reactive anti-corruption measures. Besides overview articles summarising AI as an anti-corruption tool (Aarvik, 2019), there are theoretical works that have started to discuss the implications of these tools from a socio-technical perspective (Köbis et al., 2022). Building on this theoretical groundwork, this study adds empirical flesh to the bones by assessing the benefits and risks of AI to curb corruption. This is made through the lens of civil society actors, who lead existing pilot projects using such technologies. The assessment of civil society actors seems particularly relevant, considering that state bodies are often unwilling or unable to take action against corruption themselves. Especially in countries where corruption is systemic, civil society actors play a crucial role as watchdogs (Mattoni, 2021). Hence, we conduct qualitative interviews with relevant stakeholders who employ AI-ACTs in the fight against corruption.

METHODOLOGY

Since this study aims to explore the benefits and risks of using AI to fight corruption, we use a qualitative approach to shed light on this complex topic. While the application of AI systems in anti-corruption efforts is surging, empirical research on its benefits and risks is lagging behind (for an exception, see Odilla, 2023). In particular, a systematic investigation of stakeholders directly involved in the implementation of AI-ACTs is lacking. To fill this gap, we conducted interviews with civil society actors as a method of inquiry.

Sampling

The selection of civil society actors followed a successive strategy using the method of purposeful sampling. This approach selects specific cases based on relevant characteristics (Palinkas et al., 2015). Thus, the experts were not selected under aspects of representativeness, but on the basis of their professional expertise and experience within the field of research interest (Littig, 2009). Since this study investigates bottom-up initiatives that use AI-ACTs,
the internal expertise of the civil society actors is of particular interest. Consequently, those stakeholders were selected for the interviews with sufficient operational knowledge. They acquired this either by developing and/or participating in an AI-ACT project.

In addition, we further used snowball sampling. This method is a mixture of deliberate and random selection (Palinkas et al., 2015). At the end of the interview, the expert is asked to name other experts in the field. This procedure is particularly suitable for the exploration of novel subjects of investigation in which the population of experts is either unknown or difficult to access (Wroblewski & Leitner, 2009). At the time of data collection (August 2019–July 2020), only a few research projects and pilot studies existed that employed AI systems with the concrete goal of fighting corruption. In addition, we balanced the experts according to their field of activity in order to realistically depict the potentials and limitations of cutting-edge AI technologies. In this way, we could obtain diverse opinions on the use of AI in anti-corruption. Applying this strategy also means that our sample of experts is not representative but rather based on the experts’ professional predisposition and experience (Littig, 2009). Therefore, this study includes experts who have been or are still actively involved in the development and implementation of AI-ACTs.

Since we assured anonymity to the interviewees, neither their names nor their projects’ names are mentioned in this chapter. However, to make the expertise of the civil society actors comprehensible, information about their academic and professional background and their function within the project is disclosed. All of the interviewed experts are employed by civil society organisations, except for one expert who worked for a civil society organisation until they transferred to a governmental agency. The interviewees had diverse academic backgrounds, including software engineering, computer science, political science, economics and econometrics. One expert is the co-founder of a South American technology project which employs AI to track public expenditures. Three other experts were involved in public procurement projects which use AI-based tools to uncover corruption. One of them is the co-founder and director of a think tank based in Eastern Europe. They were directly involved in developing and maintaining a tool that scans and pre-filters risky public procurements. Another interviewee works for another international NGO, also based in Eastern Europe, where they monitor and coordinate public procurement tools. The other interviewee works for a think tank where they conduct research and develop tools to detect corruption in public procurement. Another expert works for a governmental agency in South America where they develop and implement an AI-based tool that assesses the corruption risk of individual government officials.
Interview Guideline

We designed an interview guide to ensure the comparability of the data on the one hand and to maintain the necessary openness for individual narratives on the other. The guide starts off with a short briefing that explains the research project and its objectives to the interviewee. In a subsequent step, the interviewee provided informed consent to record the interview.

The actual interview commenced by asking the opening question to establish a narrative conversation: ‘To start off, I would like you to briefly describe how you came to work on AI and anti-corruption in general and specifically on your project’. The main part of the interview was structured in four blocks:

1. definition of the key terms, AI and corruption,
2. description of the interviewee’s project,
3. potentials & limitations of using AI for anti-corruption,
4. outlook of additional fields in which AI could be applied.

The block sequence served as a broad guideline instead of a strict rule to avoid abrupt topic changes that interrupted the interview’s flow (Miles & Gilbert, 2005). For this chapter, we focus on the third block which we further divided into four sub-dimensions: (a) technological, (b) human resources, (c) legal and (d) social/ethical. Finally, we asked the experts, according to the snowball procedure, to refer to other projects or experts.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The interviews were conducted via online video tools, such as Skype or Google Hangout. In total, we interviewed five experts working on projects in four different countries in Europe and South America. The average length of the interviews was 78.5 minutes, with 127 minutes being the longest and 58 minutes being the shortest. All of the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in order to analyse the text transcripts afterward. For the analysis of the qualitative data, we used the software Atlas.ti.

We performed a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015) of the data. Accordingly, the expert interviews were evaluated in three steps: (1) summary, (2) explication, and (3) structuring. First, we summarised relevant information that contributed to answering the research question to reduce the text material. Second, we added explanatory information to ensure the comprehensibility of the respective passage. Third, we derived seven categories from the text and assigned them to the previously selected text passages.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The semi-structured interviews revealed that civil society actors see three key potentials (efficient use of human and financial resources, enhancing civic engagement, increasing transparency) and three fundamental limitations (insufficient quality and quantity of data, legal restrictions, technological challenges) of using AI in anti-corruption efforts.

Key Potentials

Efficient use of human and financial resources
All interviewees reported the time- and cost-saving function of AI-ACTs. One civil society actor reported that the government in their country does not have the human resources to control all expenditures by the members of parliament:

The department of the congress is receiving about 2000 receipts per day. They don’t have time to check all of them. Not because they don’t know the law. They don’t have people [for doing this], only technology can do that.¹

Furthermore, according to the same expert, the national government does not focus on uncovering petty corruption because it is too costly:

They are not looking for the small expenses or small corruption because it is expensive to develop this work. They prefer to focus on something that is going to represent billions of dollars because it is going to pay for the investment of putting a few people working on this.²

Anti-corruption efforts require resource-intensive tasks such as researching information, investigating suspicious patterns in datasets, or communicating corruption suspicions to the public (Adam & Fazekas, 2021). According to the interviewees, by taking over many of those tasks, AI can help governments and civil society organisations to allocate human and financial resources for anti-corruption efforts more efficiently, contributing to better corruption prevention, detection and/or prosecution. The interviewees’ statements, resulting from practical work, are in line with previous theoretical research considerations. Sanchez-Graells (2024) confirms that AI-ACTs can support public officials in finding or aggregating information previously inaccessible or too costly to gather. In particular, AI-ACTs enable quick and continuous cross-checking of information. Without the use of AI-ACTs, such a profound analysis of large data sets would be nearly impossible to carry out manually (Köbis et al., 2022).
Along similar lines, another civil society actor added that AI could help to focus human resources. Since AI analyses all data, auditors can use their time more effectively and conduct targeted investigations:

The [country] government is gigantic, it’s impossible to audit everything. The main opportunity I see is to focus the eyes of the auditors, like “this is what you should focus on.” If you look into everything, you look into nothing at the same time, because you cannot properly investigate everything that’s on your table. That’s the main opportunity I see.

The interviewees agreed on the time- and cost-saving character of AI-ACTs. However, realising these positive contributions of AI can be challenging as AI-ACTs involve highly complex systems. Literature emphasises that not only the development of these tools, but also the application of them requires special expertise (Aarvik, 2019). A useful distinction draws on three categories of AI-driven jobs that are necessary for a successful implementation of AI-based technologies, namely (1) Human-AI Trainers, (2) Explainers, and (3) Sustainers (Wilson et al., 2017). In the first category, humans train AI-ACTs on how they should perform. They do this by programming algorithms on which the AI-based system should classify cases. The second category aims to close knowledge gaps and to provide clarity among non-technicians (Wilson et al., 2017). Explainers need to provide information on how the respective AI-ACTs arrive at a distinct classification. For instance, if an AI-based ACT flags a public procurement as risky, the explainer needs to be able to identify the indicators that led to this decision (for example, single bidding, no call for tender published, or a too-short advertisement period) (Fazekas & Kocsis, 2020). In the third category, humans as sustainers ensure that AI-based technologies operate as planned (Wilson et al., 2017). Sustainers address ethical as well as fairness issues. For instance, they are responsible for detecting and mitigating unintended obstacles, such as algorithmic bias.

Expert3 argues that AI offers innovative data analysis tools capable of reliably analysing large volumes of data to detect suspicious patterns. They compare the use of AI with traditional investigative journalism. Still, they point out a critical difference:

The difference: We can analyse things on a much bigger scale than the usual investigative journalism that is looking into one case only. This is also very important, but with big data, we can look at the large patterns, over time and over a lot of countries, institutions and so on.

All the above statements illustrate that AI-ACTs can facilitate more efficient use of scarce resources. At the same time, developing, implementing and maintaining such AI projects is expensive as they require investments of
hardware, software, data storage and Human-AI experts. Thus, while AI-ACTs have great potential to improve the fight against corruption, such projects need to be carefully analysed, planned, and executed.

**Increasing transparency**

The interviews revealed that AI-ACTs have great potential to increase transparency. Expert1 ranked transparency as a top priority at every stage of the project:

> We wanted to start showing the population what the politicians were doing. It’s more about accountability rather than judging.\(^5\)

They further highlighted that commitment to transparency drove the team’s decision about the technological design of the AI system. Instead of using complex neural networks, they opted for simpler machine learning models:

> We didn’t want to create any “Black-Box”. If we decided from the beginning to use artificial neural networks, we would probably be able to create something more powerful in a machine learning definition. It would be capable to get more cases to get less false positives. In some ways, it would be a better tool. But in the end, we wouldn’t be able to explain what made a specific case suspicious. Of course, it would have been possible to do, but it would take some work to make this work transparent. So, we didn’t want to focus on this technique.\(^6\)

To further foster transparency, some projects publicised all of their data and code on platforms such as GitHub. They also provided technical documentation in English to encourage the government and civil society organisations to further develop the project or to undertake similar projects:

> We publish everything we do. So, we publish our codes on GitHub and we try to make everything replicable. So, you can download the raw datasets and you can download the codes that we used. Also, for example for the open tender portals, you can download the whole code that is behind the website. I think in that sense, we try to be accountable. Just as researchers try to be transparent.\(^7\)

By publishing all codes publicly on GitHub, it becomes easier for potential collaborators to participate, to replicate the project in their own country, or to adapt the codes to their country’s unique legal, political, and social circumstances (Savaget et al., 2019). Along similar lines, Expert4 added:

> The whole documentation of the [project name] tool is public, so there is not a single line of code that is not accessible meaning that if we would have working indicators or indicators that are working with algorithms, machine learning and so on, that would be public as well. Everyone could check themselves, what is processed and
why a decision by the tool is made in that way. This is, what I think, one of the safeguards that needs to be ensured if you do anything based on AI in this sector.8

However, the high commitment to transparency also fulfilled the deliberate strategy of safeguarding the project against legal backlash:

The whole project was about transparency. We wanted to be 100 per cent transparent rather than start being 10 per cent transparent and then work on improving. This was also a way of protecting ourselves because if we were sued by a politician, we would be able to go in front of a judge at any time and explain what happened.9

Using AI-ACTs helps to create transparency on multiple levels. First and foremost, they can detect corruption cases or suspicions that would otherwise remain hidden. Disclosing such cases to investigators and/or the public can result in reputational losses and trigger investigations or prosecutions, thereby increasing transparency. Furthermore, successful flagship AI-based projects might push other governments to publish more open data, which can then be used for anti-corruption efforts. Overall, AI-based projects show a big commitment to transparency by publicly making all data and code available. This openness is essential for building trust in such projects since they are by definition highly complex and challenging to grasp for lay people. The transparency commitment of those projects also has great potential to create ripple effects as they inform and hopefully motivate other projects and thereby advance technology-based anti-corruption efforts.

Enhancing civic engagement
The experts emphasised the importance of actively involving citizens in the political process. Expert1 highlighted that they strive to enable citizens to form their own opinion about the government’s actions. Aspiring to an AI design that is understandable for lay people further reflects this pursuit of citizen involvement. Motivating citizens to participate in politics was the project’s top priority. The project does not merely provide information to citizens, but invites them to act on it, such as further investigating by contacting members of parliament directly. Expert1 views citizens not as passive receivers but as active participants. Other experts similarly mentioned involving citizens in the political process as a key objective in their AI-ACT projects.

For me, civic engagement, this is the most important part. Data and transparency without users are not worth anything. And this is why we are doing this. Because actually the intention of [project name] was to show people what their governments are doing, so you can go and check what happened in my city.10

The idea came up that it would be an interesting tool to do some prefiltering and scanning of procurements to help ourselves and help journalists and other civil
Digital media and grassroots anti-corruption watchdogs to monitor procurement by pre-selecting those that are worth looking at.\textsuperscript{11}

While some experts believe in the mobilisation potential of AI-ACTs, the way citizens currently make use of them does not live up to that potential. Expert\textsuperscript{3} explained that AI-ACTs efforts fail to mobilise citizens because they focus too much on data analysis and too little on usability.

This is actually the crucial part that we sometimes forget because we are so stuck in data analysis. But this is what it’s for in the end. It’s quite difficult to see who is looking at this [e-procurement system]. Mostly it’s only a few NGOs and the greater public is barely aware of public procurement and what is happening there, what kinds of corruption there are.\textsuperscript{12}

They went on to say that harnessing the full mobilisation potential requires more media exposure for such tools. Furthermore, citizens’ education about new technologies is lagging.

Expert\textsuperscript{5} emphasised the importance of the ‘golden triangle of partnership’ between the government, businesses, and the civil society for successfully monitoring public procurement. The project’s platform calls upon all stakeholders in public procurement (citizens, companies, control and law enforcement authorities) to give feedback on public tenders. Expert\textsuperscript{5}, therefore, repeatedly referred to the emergence of a ‘monitoring community’ as a result of the project.

From the statements of the experts, it emerges that AI-ACTs further contribute to mobilising citizens for anti-corruption efforts by balancing information asymmetry. That is, AI can provide information about corruption cases and motivate citizens to sign a petition, contact accused officials, or publicly speak out against corruption. Such tools, thus, give new ways to hold officeholders accountable and play a relevant watchdog role. However, previous research found digital anti-corruption tools are often used by very few people, particularly young and tech-savvy citizens (Martínez & Kukutschka, 2016). Often, citizens are neither aware that such tools exist, nor do they know how to use them. Thus, the development of AI-ACTs that are built to engage citizens should be accompanied by communication efforts such as marketing and public relations, aimed at raising public awareness, political efficacy, and ultimately public participation. Establishing civil society organisations in the anti-corruption community can play a vital role in this process. Moreover, developers need to take usability and user experience into account when designing such AI technologies. Thus, collaborations between computer scientists, social scientists and practitioners are vital for AI-ACTs to come to fruition.
Key Limitations

Insufficient quality and quantity of data
All interviewees agreed that accessing and obtaining relevant data presents a big problem for developing efficient AI-ACTs. Expert1 argued that, even though open government data initiatives and access to information laws publicise large datasets, they are usually not curated.

I am a software engineer for some time and even for myself and for other people in the team, it was pretty hard to read the data from this file [...] it was a file of 6GB. Your computer must have much more memory than the file to read it. You couldn’t even open the file without having 16GB or more of that of RAM. So, you need a very expensive computer to even open the file.13

This quote suggests data availability cannot be equated to data accessibility as the latter requires sufficient hardware and software, and expert knowledge of how they work. However, Expert1 added that in their case the government swiftly responded to complaints and improved the datasets in terms of readability.

Nowadays, and I could say that we were responsible for this change, the data is accessible. Because we met the people writing the software for releasing this file in the congress website. We showed them the needs of data scientists, of journalists like the format that they usually open, how they are going to open this file, what they are going to do with this file. Nowadays you don’t even have to download the file for these expenses anymore.14

Other experts also addressed the issue of data accessibility. Expert3 and Expert4 both mentioned that the lack of sufficient data hindered their AI-ACT systems to realise their full potential. Another challenge consists of diverging standards in publicising data across countries. Some countries publish data in the CSV or JSON format, while others only publish data in PDF format. The latter required additional technical efforts by engineers.

We quite soon understood that the data publication in TED [Tenders Electronic Daily] is also not perfect, so let’s say if you take Germany, it’s quite a mess how procurements are uploaded there and maintained. So, in this sense, Hungarian procurement in the TED are relatively well published I would say, surprisingly well published.15

Expert3 argued that the issue with data available in Germany is based on its federal structure.

The difficulty about Germany is that it has a federal structure [...] it depends on which Bundesland is doing what. There are definitely other countries in the EU
that publish more and better than Germany. For example, in Slovakia, you have to publish everything, even if it’s a contract of five euros. Portugal as well, I think. Also, in Germany, you don’t have downloadable datasets as I remember. There is a lot more that needs to be done in Germany.16

Furthermore, two experts stressed that data from commercial registries bear great potential for AI-ACTs, but are often inaccessible.

We were hoping that we would be able to connect the data with company registry data, but we were unable to. In Hungary, company registry data is not public as a database. You can individually look up companies for free, but you cannot scrape or not easily scrape the database, the companies consider it as stealing […] So, this is why we needed to give up on that very important element of the approach to have company data involved.17

Expert3 also emphasised that only a few countries publish commercial registry data and even if they do, integration of such data into internal data standards presents a challenge. However, they highlighted using such data to analyse ownership structures and filter out possible conflicts of interest as a fruitful addition. Expert2 also believes that adding additional data would lead to more accurate results by AI systems.

Yes, there is. A person’s assets. Do they have houses, apartments, boats etc. We would like to have information on that but that [data] is protected by fiscal laws and everything. Even though we work for the [country] government, we cannot just go there and grab the data we want. There are very strict privacy laws when it comes to that.18

Expert3 and Expert5 addressed another problem associated with data availability. Missing or incomplete data also represents a risk as data gaps can be used by officials to cover up corrupt transactions.

Another disadvantage is that because we don’t have some information in machine readable format, so some risks you can only see if you read documentations manually. If the procurement entity knows the risk indicators, he can try to make this tender look like good but hide all the information in the [manual] tender documentation. And we still don’t have all fields that we need to analyse in electronic format. Therefore, someone can hide the information in the tender documentation and these indicators will show that the procedure is okay.19

According to the interviewees, the success of AI-ACTs hinges on data availability and data quality. Hence, to unleash their full potential, more access to and curation of data is needed. The interviews suggest that countries differ widely in terms of data availability and quality. This is consistent with the Global Open Data Index that is published by the Open Knowledge Foundation
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(2016). Those countries, with high levels of corruption and high levels of open data, will benefit the most from AI-ACTs (Petheram, 2019). According to Petheram, those countries include Argentina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay, Romania, Slovakia, Russia, and Ukraine. Interestingly, all countries, mentioned in the report, are located in South America and Eastern Europe. These were also the two geographic areas in which our interviewees’ AI-ACT projects were developed and executed. This shows that open data initiatives provide fertile ground for bottom-up AI-ACTs to emerge. This finding could encourage other countries to publish useful data instead of merely publishing unnecessarily large files of unreadable data. Large amounts of high-quality data are needed for AI-ACTs to make accurate decisions (Sanchez-Graells, 2024). In contrast, biased input data may produce wrongful accusations or simply useless results, true to the motto ‘garbage in, garbage out’. This problem is particularly pronounced when AI agents act autonomously without much human oversight. Since suspicions or accusations of corruption come with a strong negative stigma for the accused, it is imperative for AI-ACTs to produce accurate decisions. Distributed ledger technologies, such as blockchain, have great potential to provide an immutable, transparent, and privacy-preserving data infrastructure (Aggarwal & Floridi, 2018). Thus, DLTs can complement existing and future AI-ACTs.

Legal restrictions
All respondents agreed that the legal framework is essential for the successful use of AI. They criticised that existing regulations are an obstacle for the most efficient rollout of their project. When asked what regulatory aspects would need to change for their project to have a greater impact, Expert2 replied that entirely new legal conditions would have to be created.

I think that everything would have to change. For instance, instead of measuring the risk of corruption, after you enter the government, why not do that before you enter the government? Some features capture aspects of your life, that proceed your entrance in the government, such as how much money you’ve made so far, and what types of jobs did you have so far. And why not use that information before you employ someone into a public position? But right now, that’s impossible, because that’s prejudging the person.\textsuperscript{20}

Expert3 also emphasised that their AI-ACT project would benefit from receiving data at an earlier stage.

I wish we could do these analyses before or simultaneously. And I think that would be ideal. If there would be some automatic checks on the website, before a contract is actually signed. But usually we work after the fact, because this is when the data gets published. You might see a call for tender and you might see who’s bidding for
it obviously, but usually we get the information later because that’s when governments upload it.21

Along these lines, Expert5 mentioned that their team is trying to work even more closely with the public authorities and ministries to ensure that public institutions follow up on the suspicions the project reveals.

We have the same problems, that there are no implications of our project, due to existing law. That’s why we try to work more closely with our controlling authorities and our ministry to help that if we find something, then we can ensure that this finding will make some changes or that someone will be punished or their controlling authority will take actions and go to court and the procurement authority will be punished for what it did. Or if there is a collusion between the bidders, then the bidders will get punished and therefore won’t violate the law in the future.22

Expert1 expressed the need for changes in the legal framework to make AI systems more effective against corruption. They mentioned three necessary steps: first, governments need to be obliged to actively publish the relevant data. This right must have constitutional status in the respective country. Second, it should be possible to process all data through algorithms without having to fear legal ramifications. Here, they referred to the risk of being exposed to justiciable accusations of defamation by politicians. Third, the infrastructure for sufficient funding for AI-ACT projects needs to be extended. According to Expert1, if reliable government bodies pursued AI-ACT projects, the problem of insufficient funding could be somewhat alleviated. They emphasised that the decision to start a crowdfunding campaign was the only way to get their project off the ground. However, Expert2 rejects the third assertion, arguing that governments could abuse their power if entrusted with AI-ACTs.

In terms of risk, I think the government is the main risk. The risk is, a government steps in and decides to control things like you know, I’m the regulator, I’m going to tell you, what you can do, what you can automate, what sorts of models you can build, and which ones, you cannot build. Because it’s very tempting for the government.23

Similarly, Expert3 had some ideas for improving the legal framework. They emphasised the importance of the data availability and argued that governments should be required to proactively publish data. In particular, they noted that such open government data must be disclosed in a structured and machine-readable form.

It would be great if countries would have automated checks themselves on procurement. So, they could use this kind of method that we use to check themselves and
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To monitor continuously and to have it built in the system instead of us taking the information, analysing it and telling them what looks fishy. It would be great if it would be built into their system and if the authorities in the countries would actually use these methods. But, in most countries, it’s not even mandatory to publish everything. So, we are a long way away from that.24

The interviewees emphasised that unclear regulatory frameworks do affect not only the access to data, but also the subsequent implications of corruption allegations exposed by AI-ACTs. The experts in our sample criticised that law enforcement agencies often fail to act on corruption suspicions. Thus, in many cases, AI-ACT efforts do not have tangible consequences for corrupt officials. Therefore, more collaborations between AI-ACT projects and public institutions are needed. For instance, public administrations could organise hackathons and issue seed-funding grants for promising bottom-up AI-ACTs. Such an approach could help create a collaborative environment between civil society actors, public officials, and researchers.

Technological challenges
Besides the immense potential of AI for anti-corruption, the experts also acknowledged the technological challenges associated with using machine learning to identify corruption. For instance, Expert2 mentioned the risk of wrongful accusations due to biased input data.

Of course, any model has its biases. Usually, the public servants that have been expelled before, they’re low rank. It’s not the fat cats on the top of the pyramid. We don’t have any ministers there. That introduces a bias in the model because the model hasn’t seen a lot of ministers that have been expelled before. So, the model kind of learns incorrectly that if the salary is low, the probability of corruption is higher. That’s a problem for us.25

Creating unbiased databases is challenging, especially in the context of anti-corruption efforts. For instance, it often takes a very long time from an accusation of corruption to a legally binding conviction. This may lead to the problem that a corruption case, that is only classified as corrupt at a later point in time, is still marked as non-corrupt in the data set (Sanchez-Graells, 2024). Moreover, corruption is difficult to assess and to quantify by its very nature as it happens in secret. In a high corruption context, data might further be biased due to manipulation by corrupt actors, tinkering with the database to hide suspicious activities. Expert2 further stresses that AI is never used to make final decisions without human oversight.

We don’t worry too much about that because there is an investigation afterwards and if there is no corruption, then the person will be exonerated. Nothing bad will happen to them. It’s not like people get fired because of the model. It’s not
something we are too concerned about right now, maybe in the future, if the model becomes automatically enforceable. Like if you have a probability of corruption, higher than point 7, then you are fired. Then, this will become a problem and it will become something we have to worry about. But right now, if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear.26

Another challenge addressed by Expert4 and Expert5 refers to training algorithms with labelled data, hence using supervised machine learning. Both mentioned that creating and updating training databases is a challenge.

We did some machine learning but rather in an experimental way. Because the difficulty we were facing in terms of machine learning is building test databases and teaching databases in order to clearly identify corrupt procurements […] the teaching database that we have done could not become as big that we could rely on the patterns it produced. So, we stopped this approach some time ago.27

The problem is that we need a lot of comparisons for us to teach the system. But we don’t have so many experts that can decide which tender is more risky, based on the parameters. So, we don’t have enough training examples to make it run smoothly and we don’t know how to get enough training examples […] It’s multiple problems. In the future, [project] will add new and new parameters and every time we need to reteach this system and we always need these people to provide their time to teach the system. The idea behind ML is good but we need a lot of human resources and training examples. That’s why we are currently on pause with this ML.28

Expert3 also touched on another aspect related to the complexity of AI-ACTs, namely that such projects are too technical and difficult to apply:

What we hear a lot is that it is too technical and that it is hard for people to understand and to use […] I think this is one huge challenge. Maybe we need more media and more civil engagement to make it understandable for people. I think that is one big criticism. We are academics and researchers and I think that is where we usually fail, to convey a message to the general public.29

Opacity, resulting from the complexity of AI-ACTs, is a well-acknowledged risk among scholars (Ponti et al., 2021). The statement of Expert3 indicates that interdisciplinarity within AI-ACT projects seems of great importance.

CONCLUSION

Based on five semi-structured interviews with experts involved in projects using AI in anti-corruption efforts, this study explores the benefits and risks of such AI-based technologies. The results reveal that civil society actors see both potential and limitations of AI in the fight against corruption. Some aspects prominently mentioned in the interviews also apply to designing and implementing AI in other societal areas. This includes the hope to allocate human
and financial resources efficiently. Also, the limitations of an unclear and often insufficient regulatory framework do not exclusively relate to AI-ACTs but other AI systems as well.

However, the interviews also carved out some corruption-specific insights. For instance, anti-corruption efforts require an active civil society holding political elites accountable.

A fruitful approach might be to combine expertise from different fields, such as computer science, communication science or psychology, to develop more effective methods to convey complex knowledge to the public. To tackle opacity, it is essential to educate the public about which algorithms are used, how they function and which data they are based on. Such transparency could be a major step towards establishing trust. A successful example for an interdisciplinary AI-ACT is the Brazilian project *Operation Serenata de Amor*.\(^3\)

It uses an automatic algorithm to analyse financial expenditures of Brazilian members of parliament. The project was founded by a team with expertise in computer science, business and sociology. In addition, government and civil society organisations could jointly offer courses in which citizens are taught programming languages (Ponti et al., 2021). By reducing opacity and at the same time providing practical knowledge, the barriers to civic participation would be lowered.

Consequently, bottom-up AI-ACTs often face an intricate two-step challenge: first, the need to disclose corruption and second, the need to engage citizens to act on the disclosed information. This makes AI-ACTs arguably particularly complex to design and implement. Moreover, as corrupt acts are per definition hidden from plain sight, aggregating useful data and establishing a ground truth is likely to be more difficult with regard to corruption.

To conclude, we hope that the insights gained in this chapter can inform developers and anti-corruption practitioners, to team up to leverage AI in the fight against corruption.

**NOTES**

1. Interview with Expert1 conducted on 06.09.19, online.
2. Interview with Expert1 conducted on 19.09.19, online.
3. Interview with Expert2 conducted on 06.09.19, online.
4. Interview with Expert3 conducted on 17.07.20, online.
5. Interview with Expert1 conducted on 19.09.19, online.
6. Interview with Expert1 conducted on 19.09.19, online.
7. Interview with Expert3 conducted on 17.07.20, online.
8. Interview with Expert4 conducted on 21.07.20, online.
9. Interview with Expert1 conducted on 19.09.19, online.
10. Interview with Expert3 conducted on 17.07.20, online.
11. Interview with Expert4 conducted on 21.07.20, online.
12. Interview with Expert3 conducted on 17.07.20, online.
13. Interview with Expert1 conducted on 19.09.19, online.
14. Interview with Expert1 conducted on 19.09.19, online.
15. Interview with Expert4 conducted on 21.07.20, online.
16. Interview with Expert3 conducted on 17.07.20, online.
17. Interview with Expert4 conducted on 21.07.20, online.
18. Interview with Expert2 conducted on 06.09.19, online.
19. Interview with Expert5 conducted on 27.11.19, online.
20. Interview with Expert2 conducted on 06.09.19, online.
21. Interview with Expert3 conducted on 17.07.20, online.
22. Interview with Expert5 conducted on 27.11.19, online.
23. Interview with Expert2 conducted on 06.09.19, online.
24. Interview with Expert3 conducted on 17.07.20, online.
25. Interview with Expert2 conducted on 06.09.19, online.
26. Interview with Expert2 conducted on 06.09.19, online.
27. Interview with Expert4 conducted on 21.07.20, online.
28. Interview with Expert5 conducted on 27.11.19, online.
29. Interview with Expert3 conducted on 17.07.20, online.
30. See Chapter 2 in this volume for further applications of digital technologies, including AI, in Brazilian anti-corruption and pro-accountability civil society initiatives.

REFERENCES


Artificial intelligence as a weapon to fight corruption


Digital media and grassroots anti-corruption


INTRODUCTION

The chapters in this volume investigate several examples of citizens, activists, civil society organisations, and social movements in which digital media have been used to counter corruption. All these examples might be grouped, as I argued in Chapter 1 of this volume, under the umbrella concept of anti-corruption technologies (ACTs), a heuristic that allows us to appreciate the various elements that come into play when anti-corruption from the grassroots digitalise. Taking into account these elements and their configurations, the chapters presented in this volume show why ACTs come to have the shape they have, evolving across time in unforeseen directions, and having to take into account also the sometimes troubled interactions among the digital technologies, the expectations of anti-corruption activists and other social actors, and the actual usages of digital technologies that happen when an ACT is brought into the world and becomes fully operative. Through the investigation of different cases of ACTs across the world, the chapters in this volume also suggest that it is necessary to go beyond a universalistic understanding of digital media and their use in anti-corruption activism. Indeed, digital media might have distinct roles for anti-corruption from the grassroots depending on the country in which activists use them and for the scopes that activists want to fulfil when employing them. Deciding to use digital media in a hybrid regime to fight grand political corruption schemes requires activists have a different strategy than the one necessary to support citizens voicing their anger as a reaction to yet another corruption scandal in their democratic country. This means that the symbolic, material, and social elements that come together in ACTs might also be extremely varied according to the situation and context in which anti-corruption activists use them. They combine in different ways and it is by taking into account such a process of combination and the resulting socio-technical assemblages, with their peculiar configuration of material, symbolic, and social elements, that we can eventually also appreciate the chal-
The challenges of anti-corruption technologies from the grassroots challenges that ACTs pose. In the first chapter of this volume, I talked about some of these challenges and the impact they might have on the struggle against corruption.

In this concluding chapter, I offer a more structured reflection on four main aspects that characterise ACTs. First, in the next section, I consider a feature that is strictly linked to the symbolic elements of ACTs: their ability to evoke and, in some cases, put into practice different imaginaries related to democracy. More specifically, I consider three types of imaginaries and show how each of them is connected to one of the three types of ACTs that I introduced in Chapter 1 of this volume: monitoring democracy, for ACTs that expose corruption; agonist democracy, for ACTs that support the organisation of mobilisations against corruption; and deliberative democracy, for ACTs that sustain citizens’ participation connected to anti-corruption. Second, I focus on the material elements that anti-corruption activists include in their ACTs, and how they often combine one with the other, bringing together different types of features that might be difficult to reconcile. At the same time, I also explain how the availability of certain material elements, like for instance a solid internet infrastructure in the country, is not a sufficient condition to see civil society organisations embrace digital media as an anti-corruption leverage. Third, I discuss the recombination of social elements that occurs in ACTs, in which a number of social actors need to find their ways to put together their different aspirations, capabilities, and understanding of anti-corruption efforts. Fourth, in the final section of this chapter, I summarise the main points that emerged in the previous sections and conclude with a reflection on a more complex issue, which touches upon the configuration of symbolic, material, and social elements in ACTs: the durability, over time, of anti-corruption initiatives from the grassroots that make use of digital media and technologies to sustain their efforts.

THREE IMAGINARIES OF DEMOCRACY THROUGH ANTI-CORRUPTION TECHNOLOGIES

As discussed in Chapter 1 and illustrated in many of the other chapters included in this volume, ACTs come with some relevant symbolic elements. Amongst other things that happen at the level of signification in ACTs, activists start from and render concrete specific interpretations of the causes of corruption and, consequently, of the type of actions that might be good to eradicate them. In other words, they envision how democracy should work so that the risk of corruption is also minimised thanks to the employment of digital media and technologies. In what follows I briefly discuss three imaginaries of democracy that ACTs might embed, which are also presented in Table 12.1, considering their main target of intervention in the political realm.
Exposing Corruption and Monitory Democracy

A relevant type of ACT is the one whose scope is to expose corruption in societies, hence augmenting citizens’ awareness of corruption and making its consequences more immediately visible. In this regard, anti-corruption from the grassroots occurs through the coordinated engagement of several activists, their allies, and those citizens who decide to participate in the activists’ initiatives with a more active role. It is a form of engagement that does not necessarily involve protests in the streets, but it rather goes in the direction of civic actions that increase knowledge on corruption to reduce the asymmetry of information between elected officials, public servants, and citizens that support corruption. Such initiatives are a relevant intervention at the level of policy because they seek to enhance the transparency of the implementation of public policies and the related acts, for instance concerning public spending, a factor that plays an important role in hindering corruption in societies.

From this perspective, ACTs are clearly related to an imaginary of monitory democracy (Rosanvallon, 2006; Keane, 2011) in which people actively monitor the conduct of those they entrusted with power to see if they are not betraying their confidence. ACTs to expose corruption indeed enable democratic practices that entail many forms of monitoring activities, putting at the centre of the democratic process people connected through digital media and technologies, like in the case of crowdsourcing platforms that allow citizens to come together to monitor the otherwise hidden corrupt behaviours. In the framework of such an imaginary, the harvesting, curation, and transformation of data about the practices through which public policies are implemented becomes crucial for activists and movement organisations. As it is also clear from the chapters presented in this volume, ACTs allow for this to happen in different ways. Some ACTs track instances of corruption and proof related to it by collecting information from concerned citizens thanks to specific digital technologies, such as secure whistleblowing platform, as is the case of ALAC-Allerta Anticorruzione discussed in Chapter 7, or crowdsourcing information platforms, as we can see through the example of I Paid a Bribe (IPAB) presented in Chapter 5. Other ACTs allow for the gathering of information related to potential corrupt behaviours thanks to specific software and algorithms, like Operação Serenata de Amor discussed in Chapter 2. Finally, there are some ACTs that make data about potential instances of corruption available to the broader public, making it accessible and intelligible through interactive websites that can arrange and visualise content about corruption in a user-friendly manner, like the wide array of initiatives promoted by Openpolis, discussed in Chapter 9.
Table 12.1  Types of anti-corruption technologies and imagined forms of democracy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of ACTs</th>
<th>Imagined Form of Democracy</th>
<th>Main Target of Interventions</th>
<th>Initiatives Discussed in the Volume</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACTs to expose corruption</td>
<td>Monitoring Democracy</td>
<td>Policy, through the monitoring of policy implementation</td>
<td>Observatório Social do Brasil (Chapter 2); Operação Serenata de Amor (Chapter 2); Operação Política Supervisionada (Chapter 2); Tá de Pé (Chapter 2); Financiamiento de campañas en Uruguay (Chapter 3); ¿Qué Sabés? (Chapter 3); I Paid a Bribe (Chapter 5); ALAC - Allerta Anticorruzione (Chapter 7); GlobaLeaks (Chapter 7); Misión de Observación Electoral (Chapter 8); Pilas con el Voto (Chapter 8); Openpolis (Chapter 9); Open PNRR (Chapter 9); Transparency Watch (Chapter 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTs to organise mobilisations</td>
<td>Agonist Democracy</td>
<td>Politics, through the emergence of new political actors</td>
<td>Movimento de Combate à Corrupção Eleitoral (Chapter 2); Movimento Contra Corrupção (Chapter 2); Movimento Brasil Livre (Chapter 2); Vem pra Rua (Chapter 2); Facebook group of Manish Msamah (Chapter 4); Facebook hashtag #WinouelPétrole (Chapter 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACTs to sustain participation</td>
<td>Participatory Democracy</td>
<td>Polity, through the restructuring of procedures and norms for participation</td>
<td>Facebook group 22 Février 2019 pour une Algérie Meilleure et une Démocratie Majeure (Chapter 4); Facebook group ‘écris ta constitution. Project citoyen pour un transition en Algérie’ (Chapter 4); Estonian Citizens’ Initiative Portal (ECIP) rahvaalgatus (Chapter 6); Ficha Limpa Campaign led by the Movimento de Combate à Corrupção Eleitoral (Chapter 2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Despite being different in some respects, all these ACTs work in the direction of increasing citizens’ ability to see at work an otherwise hidden phenomenon and to understand its magnitude. This is in line with what Pierre Rosanvallion (2006) notices about the more recent developments of democracy, as both
an ideal system and a concrete project, which has been characterised by the expansion of the power of oversight by the people, along with the development of institutions for electoral accountability. According to Rosanvallon, the elective place in which citizens exert the power of oversight today is the Internet, with its blogs and websites that render more common practices of evaluation, supervision and surveillance coming from the bottom-up (ibidem).

In this volume, it is clear that there are even more sophisticated ways to employ not just the Internet but more broadly digital media and technologies to exert the power of oversight for civil society organisations, social movements, and citizens: the many ACTs discussed in the previous chapters often point to a combination of different digital media, integrated usages of online and offline interactions, and technologies that allow multiple forms of engagement to make corruption visible. Furthermore, Chapter 11 also points to current and future development in monitoring democracies due to the employment of AI-based ACTs that might augment, in an exponential manner, civil society organisations’ capability of scrutinising wrongdoings related to corruption starting from the automated analysis of large quantities of data.

Organise Mobilisation and Agonist Democracies

The creation and employment of ACTs might also support demands for changes to happen in relation to situations of corruption by coordinating mobilisations directed at politicians, public administrators, business chief executives, and others involved in corruption scandals or suspected of being so. In this volume, examples are the employment of digital media to support massive protests that occurred in Tunisia, in 2010, and Algeria, in 2019, as well as the continued employment of digital media to counter corruption after these protests reached their peak, as discussed in Chapter 4. But also a number of social movements that developed in Brazil over the years, covered in Chapter 2, including the Movement to Combat Electoral Corruption, which emerged in 2010 and was one of the first to develop an online strategy and use social media to both mobilise supporters and put pressure on politicians, and the other movements that emerged between 2013 and 2014 and are heavily based on social media platforms, such as the Movimento Contra Corrupção, Movimento Brasil Livre, and Vem pra Rua. Indeed, thanks to the connecting affordances of social media platforms, online spaces that allow otherwise unrelated individuals to gather and vent their frustration, discontent, and anger concerning corruption, might be the starting point of online or offline mobilisations against corruption.

In all these cases, ACTs become crucial to support citizens’ engagement against corruption as political contention, in which grassroots conflicts are a relevant leverage to increase accountability in societies. The presence of protest disrupts the ordinary unfolding of events and is a strong expression of
disagreement according to which citizens demand answers and change from the power holders that are considered corrupt and hence unable to represent the general interests of the citizenry anymore. In such a context, ACTs might sustain contentious politics on corruption, allowing the convergence of multiple grievances that coalesce around the same contentious issue through different kinds of digital media and technologies. When this happens, ACTs are tied to an imaginary of democracy that considers the engagement with conflict and the experience of agonism in politics as a vital component of democracy (Scudder & White, 2023; Honig, 1993). In this regard, then, ACTs become crucial in aggregating discontent in societies, somehow ordering it into broader processes of mobilisations thanks to which conflicts against the corrupted are brought to the fore. Even more importantly, this is done seeking to unsettle, through collective or connective actions in the framework of contentious politics, the corruption settlements that frequently see the involvement of institutional political actors, as well as of state actors and their public administrations. Therefore, ACTs become relevant in that swing between ‘a politics of settlement and a politics of unsettlement’ that characterises the idea of agonism in democracy (Honig, 1993) so that those that are treated unequally due to the presence of a politics settled around corruption malpractices might become visible through their conflictual political agency, with the aim of disrupting the existing patterns of political corruption and of keeping those responsible for such patterns accountable. From this perspective, ACTs that evoke the imaginary of agonist democracy tend to make an intervention in the realm of politics, since they allow for the emergence of novel, conflictual political actors as interlocutors for those that are already present, who thus enter into different types of relationships with the new ones, either as allies, opponents, or even targets of protest.

Furthermore, ACTs employed to organise mobilisations bring with them the promise of increasing equality in the framework of contention politics, in at least two manners. On the one hand, thanks to the relative accessibility of many types of digital media and technologies, ACTs allow anti-corruption activists with scarce resources to mobilise a large number of citizens and, furthermore, they also permit individual concerned citizens to express their anger and seek out other equally concerned citizens who might join them in their struggles. In this regard, anti-corruption activists and concerned citizens are more equal to power holders considering their chances of becoming visible in the public space. On the other hand, ACTs contribute to the formation of novel political actors that enter the political scene in the name of demanding accountability through disruptive means, positioning themselves almost as equals vis-à-vis those political actors and institutions against whom they are lashing out. In this regard, the legitimacy gained through the logic of numbers and of bearing witness through the use of protest (della Porta & Diani, 2020)
supported through ACTs, makes the viewpoints (and demands) of these novel political actors worth the attention of the more established ones. Such a promise of increased equality that ACTs bring with them is also in line with a certain understanding of agonism in democracy, ultimately seen as a ‘political commitment to equality’ (Maxwell et al., 2019) in societies, so that those who are left behind can gain centre stage and have their voices heard.

**Sustain Participation and Deliberative Democracy**

In other cases, anti-corruption activists decide to develop ACTs that tackle corruption in a more indirect way, favouring citizens’ participation in the policy-making process so that they can have their voices heard also concerning issues like transparency, integrity and, of course, corruption. These are online platforms built to favour the equal participation of all those interested, promoting hopefully constructive dialogues about specific contentious issues with the aim of proposing new pieces of legislation after a process of online deliberation. For anti-corruption activists and their civil society organisations, then, it is a matter of encouraging people to participate in those decision-making processes that are normally delegated to elected representatives in parliaments and other local assemblies, such as regional or city councils.

The resulting ACTs seek to favour the direct participation of people in the political process and they undoubtedly evoke an imagery of deliberative democracy, which focuses on people’s ability to collaborate to find solutions to the problems they face as a collectivity. From this perspective, ACTs support knowledge sharing and informed debate, and provide tools to select the best proposals together. They are often platforms with a high level of sophistication that in some way reproduce (or flank) city assemblies aimed at making decisions together on relevant issues. While positioning citizens, and their collective interests, on the input side of politics, this type of ACT is a clear intervention at the level of polity and has a procedural effect in that they create from scratch, or expand, spaces where citizens can debate and make concrete proposals to the State and its agencies, through the use of digital media and technologies.

A telling example in this regard is the case of the Estonian Citizens’ Initiative Portal, discussed in Chapter 6, in which the employment of open-source code to create the e-petition platform was translated into the somewhat utopian idea of ‘open-source legislation’ according to which citizens could not only see the legislative process when it happens, hence increasing transparency, but also directly participate in it through the crowdsourced recombination of already existing pieces of legislation, so as to improve it also through deliberation. In this case, the creation of ACTs is linked to a rethinking of the social contract that would revolve around practices of political participation where citizens
have a highly active role, being deeply ingrained in the policy-making process not because policy-makers simply consult them on some topics but rather because citizens exert their agency along the whole policy-making process. This process evokes other recent experiences of so-called ‘crowdsourced constitutionalism’ according to which citizens participate in the development of their countries’ constitutions, like what happened in Iceland, between 2009 and 2012, and in Ireland where in 2012 citizens actively contributed to revising their constitutional chart (della Porta, 2020). Interestingly, especially in the case of Iceland, the crowdsourcing of the constitutional process was entrenched with the employment of digital media and was also triggered, at least in part, by a widespread perception of corruption in the country, especially concerning the private business sector (Bani, 2012; Vaiman et al., 2011).

THE DIVERSE MATERIALITY OF ANTI-CORRUPTION TECHNOLOGIES

The material elements are an important part of ACTs that, as seen in the chapters presented in this volume, might range from commercial social media platforms where critical communities against corruption forms to websites, crowdsourcing information about bribery occurrences, from global secure whistleblowing platforms to local online tools to monitor electoral corruption. In many cases, ACTs combine high-tech and low-tech solutions: even when AI-based applications are at the forefront of ACTs, they are seldom alone as exemplified by the case of the Operação Serenata de Amor in Brazil discussed in Chapter 2, where different technological layers combine into a multifaceted ACT (cfr. also Odilla & Mattoni, 2023). What seems to count, when considering the material elements of ACTs is not so much the employment of the latest, most innovative digital technology available to anti-corruption activists, but rather the latter’s ability to select the digital media which is more consistent with their needs, to appropriate it in the best way possible given the anti-corruption initiative at stake, and to combine the digital media effectively with other types of material elements. The development of an ACT that combines a wide array of digital media and technologies, some more high-tech while others more low-tech, is a complex and yet necessary strategy that allows civil society organisations to take care of the multiple challenges that the gathering, curation, and diffusion of data about corruption entails when crowdsourcing mechanisms are at stake.

For instance, Chapter 7 on the whistleblowing platform ALAC-Allerta Corruzione developed in Italy shows how important it is to combine highly sophisticated technological solutions with much more simple ones to enhance the security of potential whistleblowers. The presence of a basic online form to gather information about the context of the whistleblowing activity allows for
increasing the security of the whistleblower. At the same time, this arrangement gives more information to Transparency International Italy to decide on the best course of action to be followed. In this specific case, security is not granted just through high-tech material elements but rather thanks to the complementary use of low-tech material elements that allow for adding a layer of operational security to the whistleblowing platform. Similarly, Chapter 10 presents the case of Transparency Watch in North Macedonia and illustrates how a combination of digital technologies might be the way to go, instead of just relying on one specific digital media. The initiative and its multiple entry points for citizens to deliver their reports on corruption should be secure concerning the protection of citizens’ privacy. After the data verification and validation occurs, often through low-tech material elements, the initiative makes available the data in a curated manner on a website, but then also makes it accessible even beyond the online environment, through a television programme based on cases of corruption discovered thanks to Transparency Watch. In a similar vein, the civil society organisation Mission of Electoral Observation in Colombia, addressed in Chapter 8, also shows how digital devices are often not the only type of material element present in ACTs, that frequently exceed the digital realm and the most high-tech solutions. In this case, the Mission of Electoral Observation was able to successfully combine the offline contributions of its volunteers present at the ballot boxes at the moment of voting with the online reports that citizens who had first-hand information about electoral corruption filed through the platform. Finally, a further combination is possible of more established digital technologies with those that are emerging to quickly spread anti-corruption messages from the grassroots. In this regard, Chapter 11 suggests that some ACTs making use of AI-based applications can automatically transform the detected red flags on corruption into calls to action to be circulated through social media platforms. In this case, the information asymmetry that usually characterises the relationship between citizens and the public officials they elected can be lowered. At the same time, citizens are offered a way to activate themselves and counter corrupt behaviours, for instance by signing a petition.

Another relevant reflection that emerges in this volume is that the presence of a good Internet infrastructure and the widespread employment of digital media in a country, including social media platforms, might be an important condition for the development of ACTs that heavily revolve around digital media, but it certainly is not a sufficient one. Other elements should be there, one being the civil society actors’ willingness and capability to embed digital media in their anti-corruption initiatives. The case of Uruguay, discussed in Chapter 3, makes this point clear and shows that the material elements of ACTs are certainly important, but they are less so when considered in isolation from other elements, like the social ones. It is indeed the encounter between the
material elements and the social elements, between the technological devices and the activists who manage them, that seems to count more in determining the emergence of ACTs.

Finally, another relevant aspect that characterises ACTs is their capabilities, through specific material elements, to produce data related to corruption. It is not rare that, nowadays, anti-corruption activities revolve around the production, elaboration, and dissemination of data about corruption, and that activists use digital media to enhance people’s ability to capture information, aggregate and transform it in meaningful ways, and disseminate it beyond the inner circles of movement organisations that struggle against corruption. In this regard, data becomes a valuable resource for activists, who use digital technologies not only as sources of such data, but also as venues in which diverse data can convene, become homogeneous, and connectable, allowing activists to combine the dots into a meaningful, more understandable story about corruption. This was clear in Chapters 9, 10, and 11 in this volume which addressed the issue of data about corruption from different angles: the presence of data that can reveal the existence of corruption in societies becomes central, hence giving data a strong performative role in keeping democracy alive. The availability of good data able to make corruption visible, or the ability to produce it, seems to be vital for those ACTs that put the creation of information about corruption at their core. Indeed, when civil society actors interact with digital media and technologies (either to employ or create them) they need to have, or to develop over time, digital media literacy, and, even more importantly, digital data literacy. Knowing how to harvest data, work on them, and render them accessible is crucial for monitoring and participatory initiatives. This becomes increasingly more important when considering AI-based ACTs, as discussed in Chapter 11: for them to work the availability of data on which machine learning techniques should be used to prevent the possibility of corruption or to detect corrupt behaviour when it has already happened is vital. Beyond the fact that such data is often not available, another concern is that even when it is available, it is often not ready to be used by machines because it needs to be polished before being employed. A slight change in the way data is made available by the public administration might put at risk the proper function of the whole ACTs, as it happened for instance in the case of Operação Serenata de Amor (Odilla & Mattoni, 2023) also addressed in Chapter 2.

But there is more to that: the engagement with specific material elements within ACTs might also bring with it a performative aspect and has the potential of transforming the social actors engaged in anti-corruption initiatives. Such an aspect is discussed at length in Chapter 9 when presenting the experience of the civil society organisation Openpolis in Italy. This case study makes it clear that the technological skills to design and develop ACTs strongly revolving around the creation and diffusion of data about corruption might be
paired with the ability to engage with those social elements, and professional abilities, that are more immediately related to the realm of journalism. Overall, the chapter also illustrates how ACT initiatives might even shape the very collective identity of the civil society organisations that develop them. While this may not always be the way, in the case of Openpolis the design and development of a large number of ACTs led the civil society organisation to first try to change its relationship with journalists and other actors, by positioning itself as a reliable source of information (and data). Then, when realising that it did not have the visibility it had hoped for, Openpolis decided to reposition itself to protect its ACTs, becoming a storyteller rather than just a source of information.

THE RECOMBINATION OF THE SOCIAL ELEMENTS IN ANTI-CORRUPTION TECHNOLOGIES

As discussed in several chapters included in this volume, amongst the social elements in ACTs there are individual and collective actors that decide to engage in anti-corruption initiatives through the use of digital media and technologies. One aspect that stands out as particularly important in this regard is the creation of collaborative interactions between different types of social actors when engaging in the creation and adoption of ACTs in anti-corruption initiatives. Amongst others, Chapter 7 on whistleblowing platforms stands out as a relevant tale concerning the creation of alliances between different types of civil society organisations. In the whistleblowing platform ALAC-Allerta Anticorruzione, the material elements related to the digital technologies used in the platform are the outcome of the collaboration of two civil society organisations. One, Transparency International Italy, the Italian branch of the transnational civil society organisation Transparency International, which is more traditionally connected to the anti-corruption sector while not having the technological skills in-house to develop a whistleblowing platform by itself. The other one, Globaleaks, a civil society organisation that operates globally, but is strongly anchored in Italy where it took its first steps, precisely because of its ability to develop whistleblowing platforms characterised by the highest security standards. Another relevant example in this regard is the case of Uruguay Trasparente discussed in Chapter 3, a civil society organisation for which the use of digital media did was not the most immediate, and natural, choice, mainly due to the lack of resources and the reluctance of its members, also for generational reasons, to employ digital media to sustain their anti-corruption activities. Despite this, the civil society organisation at a certain point decided to embrace digital media thanks to a collaboration with a higher education institution, a news organisation, and a foreign non-profit
foundation when engaging in the campaign *Financiamiento de Campañas en Uruguay*.

The establishment of this kind of collaboration allows civil society organisations to acquire the necessary resources to employ digital media, although these experiments might be short-lived as in the case of Uruguay. In both cases, it seems quite clear that a necessary element was the expansion of the civil society organisations’ network through the inclusion of new social actors (sometimes even collective but not necessarily so) that brought with them the necessary technological skills to design and develop the ACTs. The decision to go digital, indeed, seems to be paired with the identification of potential partners that have the necessary skills to deliver the ACTs and make it appealing to its imagined end users. The enlargement of the civil society organisations’ network seems, therefore, a necessary condition that might, however, also create some frictions especially when it comes to translating the symbolic elements of the ACTs (for instance, the values of the civil society organisation and its understanding of political participation) into some material elements, like the technological affordances the ACTs come with. This is even more relevant, as Chapter 11 suggests, in those cases in which civil society organisations consider the employment of AI-based applications. Indeed, the designing, creation, and maintenance of AI-based applications and platforms require high-level technological skills that not all civil society organisations might have and that are difficult to acquire.

In this regard, a relevant skill to be developed for the creation of ACTs is the ability to combine in a fruitful manner the different understandings of the role(s) that data might have in anti-corruption initiatives. Anti-corruption practitioners, software developers, and the final users of these digital media platforms understand digital media technologies and what they can do in different ways. There is hence the need to develop listening skills so that these differences in comprehending data related to corruption become a richness and not an impediment. Even more so, there is the need to translate these different understandings into a common language of anti-corruption through ACTs that is able to keep together the technological affordances with the political agendas of activists, the software developers’ understanding of corruption and the expectations and needs of end users. The end users seem to be particularly important in ACTs that, most of the time, find their raison d’être precisely when actors other than the initial creators appropriate and utilise it. If this utilisation does not take place, ACTs risk remaining sophisticated empty boxes. For this reason, another relevant pattern of collaboration, mediated by the material elements in the ACTs, is the one between the ACTs’ designers and creators, that often are collective actors, and the citizens, hence individual actors, who decide to engage with the ACT, either to know more about corruption or to create data about corruption. In ACTs, indeed, a profound
tension is always present between collective and individual political participation against corruption, that ACTs somehow seek to recombine in a whole anti-corruption initiative in which there is a virtuous circle between collective and individual actions. However, the encounter between the collective and the individual actions that happen in ACTs is not without consequences for the ACTs themselves.

In some cases, such consequences are quite evident because ACTs transform, even at the level of their material elements, to accommodate the way in which individual actions happen. This is the case of the Estonian Rahvaalgalatuse platform discussed in Chapter 6, according to which the platform developers had to tweak it after they realised that using certain terms to label one specific function was diminishing individual actions within the platform. In other cases, individual actions are less impactful but, nonetheless, tell about citizens’ engagement with anti-corruption and their interpretation of what this means. For instance, in the case of the IPAB website developed in India and discussed in Chapter 5, it is clear how those who denounced a bribe through the platform also did it in a confessional way, to seek relief for something they did wrong, and not simply as an act of anger against the corrupt public officials. In yet other cases, like the development of the Transparency Watch initiative in North Macedonia, discussed in Chapter 10, there is careful planning at the level of platform designing. This allowed the civil society organization behind the initiative to think things through concerning the contribution of individual actions in the initiatives, hence engaging in some kind of predictive work about the target audience of Transparency Watch.

The recombination of the collective and the individual engagement in the struggle against corruption stands out as one of the relevant challenges that civil society organisations have to face when they decide to embrace digital media and technologies to include them in their anti-corruption initiatives. This is because most of the digital media and technologies employed in the framework of ACTs support individual acts of engagement often based on the logic of crowdsourcing: through multiple interactions between digital media and individuals, the necessary information is obtained to compose a mosaic concerning the perpetration of corruption-related behaviours. However, this myriad of information, data points on corruption, only acquires meaning when reassembled through the presence of a collective actor that is able to illuminate the patterns and qualities in simple terms, also through the help of digital visualisation experiments. In short, the very existence of ACTs seems to depend on the ability to balance and harmoniously combine the efforts of civil society organisations with those of citizens who interface with them through ACTs.
THE DURABILITY OF ANTI-CORRUPTION TECHNOLOGIES AND SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

So far in this chapter, I have discussed more at length aspects related to the symbolic, material, and social elements of ACTs in a separate manner. First, I explained how the creation and employment of ACTs are connected to certain ways of understanding democracy, the role of citizens in them, and the relationship between citizens and political institutions that they want to hold accountable in the attempt to decrease corruption and augment integrity in societies. Designing ACTs, hence, is also an exercise of imagination about the future rather than a simple technological effort and, at the same time, allows for the experimentation of such future in the present moment, when ACTs are eventually there in their concreteness, ready to be used to expose corruption, to organise mobilisations against it, and to expand citizens’ capabilities to counter corruption through grassroots participation. In other words, as already said above, ACTs might be rightly included amongst the many experimentations with prefigurative politics that are quite common in the framework of grassroots political engagement. And, as often happens when experimenting with something new while looking straight towards the future of societies, the imaginaries that ACTs at first let emerge might change also in unexpected ways. This happens when actual users start interacting with them, opening up unforeseen possibilities that exceed, or even go against sometimes, what their creators had imagined for them. In this regard, the struggle against corruption through digital media comes with a layer of indeterminacy in relation to the meanings of political action, participation, and democracy when these are connected to the desire and need to live in societies that are less corrupt, more integral, and ultimately more just.

Then, I considered how the inclusion of digital material elements in ACTs is not necessarily linked to the availability of an internet connection in a country. What seems to be needed, instead, is the capability and willingness of anti-corruption actors to embrace the opportunities that digital media and technologies would give to them if included in their initiatives to expose corruption, enhance mobilisations and contentious protests, and support citizens’ participation with regard to policy and politics. Sometimes, such capability and willingness are simply not there, for various reasons, including generational ones. Furthermore, it should be noted that the material elements that characterise digital media and technologies come with specific affordances because they allow those who interact with them to do some things and not others, to engage against corruption in one way and not in others. At the same time, the decision to engage with certain material elements, like for instance platforms generating data about the activities and expenses of elected
Members of Parliament, might also bring with it broader consequences for anti-corruption activities and hence reveal an even stronger performative function of digital media and technologies that often remains in the background. That is to say, the possibility of transformation for those social actors that employ certain types of digital media and technologies, which change their role and responsibilities in the framework of their anti-corruption efforts. That said, it is important to notice that not all digital media and technologies bring with them this broader transformative potential and, also, that their availability alone does not automatically means that civil society organisations decide to employ them to counter corruption. As a matter of fact, the material elements become alive, so to say, in their encounters with the social actors who decide to create and employ them.

Finally, I reflected on the relevance of nurturing collaborative interactions amongst the different types of social actors involved in the designing and creation of ACTs. As complex, multi-layered socio-technical assemblages, ACTs are never, and cannot ever be, the result of one activist or one civil society organisation. Even in those initiatives in which this seems the case, for instance when a citizen concerned about corruption decides to open a social media profile to vent anger against corruption, there is always some other social actor involved: not only other concerned citizens that choose to express their frustration as well by interacting with the social media profile, but also the algorithms running it, which become of course yet another social actor to be taken into consideration. In other cases, such collaborative interactions are quite evident: civil society organisations partner to develop a highly sophisticated whistleblowing platform, whole groups of citizens come together in online critical communities, civil society organisations actively engage citizens to produce further information about corruption. In all these cases, collaboration is a necessary feature of ACTs: not only do they enable interactions based on mutual help amongst different social actors, but would not last long without such interactions. At the same time, such a coming together of different social actors is not without its problems and presents at least one challenge that I discussed above: the recombination, within ACTs and more in general in the framework of anti-corruption initiatives, of individual and collective actions. This is not a banal recombination, because it is connected to two forms of involvement in the fight against corruption, which have different viewpoints of what being active against corruption means. On the one hand, there are the motivations, beliefs, and acts of engagement of concerned citizens from their personal life experiences and specific situations. On the other hand, there are the motivations, beliefs, and acts of engagement of civil society organisations, activist groups, and grassroots collectives that fight corruption from a collective viewpoint. The ability to listen to each other and, through that, develop
a shared language about anti-corruption seems to be a viable strategy to face such a challenge.

These three aspects point to valuable lines of research that should be further explored to better understand the potential of ACTs and their consequences for anti-corruption activists, civil society organisations, and social movements alike. But also, these lines of research would allow for appreciating ACTs’ effects on the overall anti-corruption sector and the more general understanding that activists and citizens have of democracy, its institutions and the related practices of participation in the polity. However, there is yet another aspect to be considered, which emerges at the intersection of the symbolic, material, and social elements of ACTs. This is the challenge of becoming durable, in the medium and long term, of ACTs themselves. Across the world, indeed, there are a wide array of ACTs that continue to exist online although they are not really operative anymore: while at first sight it hence might seem that ACTs that counter corruption are numerous worldwide, as a matter of fact, those that are able to survive across the years number only a handful. The achievement of durability, in this context, touches upon three different aspects. A first relevant feature is the ability of ACTs to be used on an ongoing basis by the users for whom they are designed, often citizens who are asked to take action themselves to fight corruption, as well as to keep involved those social actors that should maintain the ACTs’ activity over time, like for instance its original creators. Moreover, durability also means the ability of ACTs to remain functioning, from a technological point of view, even beyond the moment immediately following their creation. Finally, by durability it is meant the ability of ACTs to continue to produce information and, ultimately, meaning in relation to corruption and anti-corruption through their use. These three aspects of durability, as can be guessed, are each related to one of the elements we find in ACTs. They are, in short, the ability to continue to do three basic things: to engage its creators and users, and here we refer to the social elements of ACTs; to function properly, and here we refer to the material elements of ACTs; and to produce knowledge and meaning in relation to corruption and anti-corruption, and here we refer to the symbolic elements of ACTs.

Interestingly, these three aspects are deeply tied to each other. For instance, when social actors decide not to invest any further in ACTs, usually there are also difficulties in keeping the ACTs up and running. At the same time, when an ACT stops working properly for technical reasons, users might distance themselves from it and stop contributing to it. This disengagement might also occur in those cases in which ACTs stop producing knowledge that resonates with concerned citizens and other types of social actors. Furthermore, the malfunctioning of the ACTs at the technical level can also create serious problems in their ability to continue to bring forward relevant, informative data about corruption. In a nutshell, these three aspects of durability often go hand in hand.
and, as such, ACTs’ designers and developers should curate the three of them in parallel, devoting the same attention to each. This is because, as I stressed in the introduction, ACTs are not mere digital technologies in the hands of activists, but more complex socio-technical assemblages in which different types of elements mutually shape each other.

A telling example of the relevance of such entanglements is the anti-corruption initiative IPAB, developed in India and discussed at length in Chapter 5 of this volume. Despite the fact that the online crowdsourcing platform was able to engage a number of citizens, obtained international recognition in the anti-corruption sector, and also started to be replicated in other countries across the world, a few years after its creation the civil society organisation that created it decided to focus its attention towards other initiatives, not linked to corruption in a direct manner. The web-based anti-corruption initiative was therefore somehow dismissed, despite still being online and apparently functioning. In other words, it did not prove to be durable. The trigger, in this case, seemed to be the disinvestment of the civil society organisation that initially invented the web-based crowdsourcing anti-corruption initiative: it decided to focus on other issues altogether, hence putting aside its initial project despite its recognition within and outside the country. Such a change at the level of the social elements involved in the ACTs brought with it the malfunctioning of the crowdsourcing website around which the initiative revolves: not being moderated anymore, it became full of messages unrelated to bribe payments in public offices. In short, the material elements in the ACTs are also creating some issues concerning durability, because the technological core of IPAB is not properly maintained. This also has repercussions at the level of the symbolic elements of the ACTs in question, since the contents published, again without moderation, in the website create a lot of noise and obfuscate the still present information about corruption, making the production of knowledge about the issue at stake difficult, to say the least. In short, there is an entanglement of the social, material, and symbolic elements in ACTs that undermines the very basis of the durability of IPAB.

That said, the case of IPAB also adds another relevant layer to understanding the issue of the durability of ACTs, which is more related to the country contexts in which they emerge. In this case, the overall context of India certainly did not help in keeping the civil society organisation’s focus on anti-corruption: indeed, the reason why the civil society organisation decided to dismiss IPAB is also to be found in the change of its political agenda in connections with more restrictive rules for the activities of civil society organisations, the shrinking of spaces for contentious grassroots participation, and the strong politicisation of the issue of corruption in the country. The civil society organisation hence decided to focus on the broader, and more politically neutral, issue of civic participation with the development of other
The challenges of anti-corruption technologies from the grassroots

types of digital platforms. ACTs, as socio-technical assemblages which make interventions in the realm of politics, might indeed be heavily affected by the overall political context in which they develop. And this is yet another reason why they cannot be considered as simple, and neutral, tools in the hands of anti-corruption activists. The relevance of the situations and contexts in which ACTs develop, is to be taken into serious consideration to assess not only their durability but their longer-term outcomes in the effective reduction of corruption.

Indeed, while the digitalisation of anti-corruption from the grassroots is a process that looks set to last, there are also some points of attention to consider. Some scholars suggest a more cautious approach to the role of digital media to fight corruption: instead of facilitating collective action against corruption, the presence of high transparency in highly corrupt countries might lead to a more widespread resignation among citizens, who will decide not to mobilise to address the social problem (Zinnbauer, 2015; Bauhr & Grimes, 2014). Furthermore, there is the risk of excluding the most vulnerable parts of the population who lack the access or the literacy to employ digital media, creating asymmetries in citizens’ participation in social accountability mechanisms (Grönlund, 2010). Additionally, the use of digital media alone might not be enough: desk research on digital media employed in top-down initiatives to curb corruption across the world shows that administrative reforms are also needed to render digital media effective (ibidem). Other works that deal with accountability mechanisms beyond social accountability, similarly suggest more cautious interpretations of the potential that digital media has in supporting social accountability. For instance, a study on water delivery supplies in rural Africa, Asia, and Latin America underlined the cultural aspects, like citizens’ lack of confidence that governments would respond to their demands, but also the way in which digital media platforms are conceived and designed and why this might be decisive (Welle et al., 2016). Another investigation on initiatives to improve health systems and services in Africa and Asia claims that digital media does not work in promoting accountability if not supported by other offline actions, like developing positive relationships with governmental institutions (Hrynick & Waldman, 2017).

Taken together, these studies hence suggest that the issue of durability should be connected with the broader social, cultural, and political context, also taking into consideration specific situations that some parts of the population might leave related to their ability to engage with digital media. Furthermore, Chapter 11 in this volume also suggests yet another crucial context that should be taken into serious consideration, especially considering AI-based ACTs: the legal one. Indeed, another relevant aspect that would be able to determine both the possibility of existence, and also the durability of ACTs which are heavily based on the use of AI-based applications, is the related legal framework at
the national and transnational level, which is often unclear when not lacking. This often prevents access to the relevant data in a timely manner, but also has consequences for how the detection of potential corrupt behaviours might then be exposed by AI-based ACTs and for what happens next, once corruption is exposed. Overall, such insights are in line and support further the idea that for ACTs to have an impact on corruption, there should be a proper match between the digital media and technologies used in ACTs and the context in which anti-corruption practitioners design, develop, and employ them (see Adam & Fazekas, 2021).

Beyond this general understanding of durability and the warnings that come with it, there are some more specific aspects that depend on the type of ACTs at stake. When ACTs support the organisation of mobilisation, the resulting protests might not be able to become more stable efforts and transform the dispersed and fragmented protest participants into more cohesive movement organisations, which can, hence, become recognised actors in the arena of institutional politics. When activists and civil society organisations instead employ ACTs to expose corruption, hence monitoring, the risk is not being able to curate the data over long stretches of time. Finally, when activists use ACTs to foster the active participation of people in the polity and towards the political process, there is always the risk that deliberation becomes a too long and time consuming process, where rational arguments are not able to prevail. Or, when the participatory process is successful, then no one in the arena of institutional politics is there to listen and embrace the changes that people asked for.

Finally, the feature of durability should be considered in connection with the passing of time: many of the chapters in this volume show that in ACTs the combination of material, symbolic, and social elements is not static and rather their configuration, and the way in which one type of element reshapes the other, might change as the ACTs evolve. Indeed, ACTs are constantly changing because they are developed to be used and when this actually happens, and social actors start interacting with the material elements of ACTs, they quite obviously transform themselves. When designing and then creating ACTs, such possibility of change should be taken into serious consideration as well as the fact that ACTs are always in a dynamic state. Their fate is not given once and for all, and it is up to their designers, developers, and users to take care of them in the medium and long term. This is a relevant challenge that civil society actors who are active in the anti-corruption sector should take into serious consideration so that ACTs might last across time despite their changed configurations of material, social, and symbolic elements.
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