


A Framework for Public eServices Transparency

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ABSTRACT

Different aspects of government transparency have been analyzed by the research community, but no structured framework was found concerning public eServices transparency. This article considers transparency from a service users' point of view and outlines a framework rooted in a systematic literature review, complemented by a selected literature analysis on the fields of eServices quality and public sector values. The framework defines the concept of 'public eServices transparency' and characterizes the information that should be made available, according to different service user profiles. The aim is to assist practitioners from public administration to develop eServices and scholars to assess existing eServices transparency.

KEYWORDS

eGovernment, Online Information, Public Digital Services, Public eServices, Transparency, Services

INTRODUCTION

It is possible to trace back the concept and practice of government transparency for more than 250 years (Meijer, 2015). Unsurprisingly, there is by now an extensive body of literature on the topic (Cucciniello et al., 2017) which include an abundance of transparency definitions (Bannister & Connolly, 2011), complemented by different dichotomies, categorizations, and varieties of transparency (Fung, 2013; Heald, 2006). A common characteristic of the many transparency definitions is that they encompass three elements: an observer, an object and a method for observation (Oliver, 2004).

Citizens are usually considered *the observer* seeking to access information about public administration organizations' internal workings. The goal is to "open up the working procedures not immediately visible to those not directly involved to demonstrate the good working of an institution" (Moser, 2001, p. 3) or, more specifically, to foster "the disclosure of information by an organization that enables external actors to monitor and assess its internal workings and performance" (Grimmelikhuijsen & Welch, 2012, p. 2).

The *object* of transparency may be an organization as a whole, a specific object or a specific activity (Cucciniello et al., 2017), such as policy-making processes and activities (Brunswick et al., 2019), budgetary information (Birskyte, 2019) or financial information (Puron-Cid et al., 2019). In this context, assessment studies usually adopt, adapt or create an analysis framework which establishes a set of (information) items that should be available online (Lourenço, 2015) and use the framework to assess the degree of online transparency.

Regarding the *means or method* to disclose information, information and communication technologies (ICTs) became an important driver of transparency (Bertot et al., 2012; Meijer, 2015). The

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Internet, in particular, has had such an impact on (traditional) transparency that the term e-transparency was coined (Bannister & Connolly, 2011), and government transparency often became “equaled to information on a government Web site” (Meijer, 2015). As a consequence, there has been a push for more open government data to be released (Nikiforova & McBride, 2020), with a positive impact on eGovernment services adoption (Mensah et al., 2021), alongside other factors influencing adoption (Alryalat et al., 2015; Mensah et al., 2022; Rana et al., 2012, 2015, 2017; Rana & Dwivedi, 2015).

This article addresses the transparency of public digital services (eServices) or e-government services. While eGovernment may be broadly defined as “the use and application of information technologies in public administration to streamline and integrate workflows and processes, to effectively manage data and information, enhance public service delivery, as well as expand communication channels for engagement and empowerment of people” (United Nations, 2014, p. 2), examples of such services include online income tax filing, goods and services tax filing, or passport application filing (Sharma et al., 2021). And while providing these online services usually relies on websites and portals, nowadays different technologies are being used, such as mobile technology (mGovernment) and social media (Al Najjar et al., 2019; Alryalat et al., 2017; Hebbbar & Kiran, 2019, 2022).

From a citizen (service user) perspective, digital services may become a kind of black box: once a service is initiated there may be no way to see what is happening inside it and all that remains is to wait for its completion (Sabucedo et al., 2009). In a nutshell, eServices transparency simply means citizens can look inside the service black box.

eGovernment research theories and constructs do not seem to explicitly include transparency (Rana et al., 2011). Nevertheless, this is a relevant research topic since transparency has been considered one of seven innovations in digital public services (J. Bertot et al., 2016a) and, by the “transparency by design” principle, systems should “ensure that data is disclosed to the public for creating transparency” (Janssen et al., 2017). More recently, an analysis of 100 research articles concluded transparency is a relevant design criterion for public e-services (Hübl & Šepeřová, 2022).

But, despite its importance, transparency is seldom considered in association with eServices assessment. The maturity assessment framework for (local) government Web Electronic Services (Panayiotou & Stavrou, 2019) considers 64 variables, organized into 5 top-level clusters including ‘e-Services’ and ‘Democracy,’ but does not take transparency into account. Pina and Torres (2019) analyzed the disclosure of 108 items on Spanish Central Government agencies’ websites but none was related to eServices transparency. Another assessment framework (Bearfield & Bowman, 2017) includes a ‘Digital government’ indicator but provides no further detail concerning the data expected to be disclosed about ‘City services, request for services.’ And the assessment model used in the Municipal Transparency Index (da Cruz et al., 2016) considers 76 indicators, including one ‘Online Citizen Request and Tracking system’ which simply assesses whether or not such a system is available.

The European eGovernment Benchmark (European Commission, 2018) does consider seven items to assess its ‘Transparency of service delivery’ sub-indicator, as part of the ‘Transparency’ top-level benchmark. However, some of these items cannot be considered as part of an effort to make eServices more transparent (e.g., ‘Save as draft’), while others are too generic e.g. ‘Service performance information available’. Finally, the E-Government Service Delivery Quality Framework (Corradini et al., 2009, 2010) proposes three levels of “e-service delivery transparency”, *No Transparency* (“citizens completely unaware of the process execution”), *Activity Aware* (“process tracking mechanisms”) and *Role Aware* (“specification of an activity responsible”), which are still somewhat generic. Other research efforts focus on assessing transparency concerning a particular dimension of digital public services, such as algorithmic systems and corresponding decisions (Saldanha et al., 2022).

In sum, despite these research efforts, there is no comprehensive framework concerning public eServices transparency, including a workable definition of the concept and a comprehensive description of the type of information that should be disclosed.

This conceptual article aims to fill this research gap. Specifically, the main goal is to develop and propose a comprehensive public eServices transparency framework answering two important

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