

Backstage bureaucrat's dilemmas and the informality within the State

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Delivering public services requires many activities that take place backstage, through a considerable amount of paperwork. Some argue that paperwork enables regularity and transparency, ensuring both the rule of law upon which the State must act and each actor its role in the decision-making process. In fact, if we consider a continuum, administrative cases would apparently be placed in the most formal side of the State, as they contain records of demands and the whole path for analyzing a given policy until reaching the decision-making moment. In addition, for most of government's acts, the administrative case is what engenders the mandatoriness of their decision-making. They are present throughout the procedures for most of the information requested by citizens and they are also the documents required by controlling agencies in order to check the compliance of facts. But in an apparent contradiction, our ethnographic research within the State found several elements of informality in the ever formal scope of cases' processing. Furthermore, we discovered some informality elements to be a sine qua non condition for backstage bureaucrats to handle their two daily dilemmas: first one is brought by the cleavage between the political time and that of the State apparatus, while the second one comes from the mandatory character of the formal process involved, offering appropriate responses to the matter at hand, while under the constant risk of professional liability.

In view of the State transformations and the emergence of informatized governing tools, in which clerks are apparently being replaced by websites, and advanced information and expert systems are taking over the role of case managers and adjudicating officers, the current debate has been investigating the effects of technologies over the discretion of public agents. Senses differ on whether the discretion continues to operate in bureaucracies or whether it has been curtailed. Whatever the situation is, the current perceptions often have a functionalist nature and are little politicized. Substantive studies are still lacking in order to place the development and implementation of these technologies in a non-neutral fashion as a variable to be described and explained within government.

The question of how to choose instruments for public action and the way they operate is frequently presented in a functionalist manner, as if they accrued from merely technical decisions and inevitably led to a given result. Facing the introduction

of technological tools to handle the processing of files our article adopts the perspective of public action's instrumentation and analyzes the production and processing of a State artifact of critical importance, although little studied so far: the administrative cases.

The ethnographic research held inside a city-level Brazilian bureaucracy have identified two of the backstage bureaucrats' main dilemmas in understanding the introduction of new technological devices within the State, a confrontation that invariably comprises the mobilization of informal practices within the formal scope of administrative cases: first one is brought by the cleavage between the political time and that of the State apparatus, while the second one comes from the mandatory character of the formal process involved, offering appropriate responses to the matter at hand, while under the constant risk of professional liability.

We found that the introduction of rules determined by a new technological system does not eliminate informality. More than a simple means through which cases proceed, the system's business rules also constrain the decision-making process, reorganize the conditions under which it happens due to its potential to create new rules, modify current practices, and change the access and distribution of information in the context of municipal power.

By observing the situations of when the system changed to accommodate ongoing practices we argue that, on their turn, transparency and control – usually associated with technological devices - do not occur spontaneously, but are rather an institutional outcome – formal or informal arrangements, as well as new checks and balances created by the actors involved to handle the new tools and the ensuing constraints faced towards the dilemmas they confront in a given context. We also observe that the absence of technological devices might increase the asymmetry of information between agents, yet its introduction does not extinguish the possibility of omitting information.

Equipped with technological devices, administrative cases continue to be more than a simple record of the State's decision-making process. They are the self-narratives of the State, which consist of a formalization effort which presents the decision-making process as a move whose discretion ensues from the strict fulfillment of legal dispositions. Although, it is the assembly of this whole process that brings it to reality, a narrative about the vision the State wants to build for itself.

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