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Publication status: This preprint has been published elsewhere.
DOI of the published preprint: https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2026.2755870

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https://doi.org/10.1590/SciELOPreprints.15803

Submitted on: 2026-04-11
Posted on: 2026-05-05 (version 1)
(YYYY-MM-DD)

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Crises and Openness Strategies in Brazilian Intelligence (1990-2025)

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Abstract

In this article we investigate the relationship between institutional crises and the evolution of openness strategies within the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (ABIN) from 1990 to 2025. Utilizing an original dataset of 62 public engagement initiatives, our study shows that intelligence democratization is not a linear trajectory, but a reactive phenomenon mediated by punctuated equilibrium. By contrasting two major institutional punctuations, our analysis reveals a trajectory in agency communication characterized by two distinct cycles. Following the 2008 crisis, a prevailing cultural diagnosis prompted bureaucratic insulation and defensive, pedagogical strategies of awareness designed to mitigate the authoritarian stigma of the agency's predecessor. Conversely, the existential crisis of 2022–2023 prompted a structural diagnosis. Incapable of retreating into secrecy, the agency adopted an innovative model of co-production, heavily prioritizing partnerships with academia aimed at reconstructing democratic legitimacy through epistemic authority. Ultimately, we argue that openness functions as a strategic survival repertoire, shifting in the analyzed case from unilateral demystification to dialogical engagement in response to acute institutional vulnerability.

Keywords: intelligence studies; intelligence reform; openness strategies; intelligence culture; Brazil.

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Introduction

The relationship between intelligence services and democratic publicity constitutes one of the most persistent paradoxes of modern governance. While intelligence agencies require a degree of secrecy to function effectively, democratic institutions — intelligence systems included— depend on transparency to sustain legitimacy.[1] It is an open question whether this balance will endure in an unfolding era of great power competition and power politics. But at least during the last decade, as Omand argues, intelligence services had to adapt to the transformation of the cold war "Secret State" into a "Protecting State",[2] what included establishing a more open and responsible relationship with the societies they serve.[3]

Amid this overall trend, in transitional or newer democracies, intelligence services frequently struggle not only against lack of knowledge or simple misconceptions, but also face a deteriorated identity born of authoritarian legacies,[4] where secrecy is frequently interpreted not as a functional necessity but as a cover for impunity.[5] In such contexts, at the same time intelligence agencies seek to improve their effectiveness in a changing threat environment, they also strive to build democratic legitimacy in the eyes of the public. In relation to this main problem, in this article we examine how intelligence agencies in such fragile contexts utilize public engagement strategically to deal with legitimacy challenges.

Brazil offers an illustrative case for investigating this phenomenon for the following reasons. First, as an emerging power that dismantled a military dictatorship's intelligence apparatus —the *Serviço Nacional de Informações* (SNI)— in 1990, Brazil experienced a "long, drawn-out process"[6] during which intelligence reform has been a low-priority issue for the Brazilian political system.[7] Second, this process was marked by the creation of the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (ABIN) in 1999 and a slow,

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subsequent institutionalization that culminated in the reform of the intelligence system in 2023. Throughout its existence, ABIN has labored both under a low external threat perception by decisionmakers and the public, which translated into insufficient legal framework and lack of resources to improve effectiveness,[8] and under the "stigma" of its repressive predecessor (SNI),[9] struggling to convince political elites and civil society that it serves the democratic state rather than the regime in power. Moreover, recent analyses argued that currently the central challenge to the institutionalization of civilian intelligence is neither stigma nor internal militarization, but rather ABIN's struggle to "become the leading civilian institution for the coordination of state intelligence".[10] Third, the tension reached a breaking point between 2022 and 2023, creating a unique opportunity to analyze the relationship between crisis and strategic external engagement.

The period from 2015 to 2022 witnessed institutional erosion in the intelligence sector, including re-militarization after a short period under civil rule, autonomous management and reduced oversight,[11] as well as the spread of "informal" procedures not only in ABIN but in the Brazilian intelligence system as a whole.[12] Such backsliding clearly characterizes a setback in intelligence democratization according to the terms defined by Peter Gill.[13] This trajectory culminated in a dual crisis at the end of the far-right Bolsonaro administration (2019–2022), defined by acute collapse in both perceived operational effectiveness —highlighted by the January 8, 2023, coup attempt—[14] and institutional legitimacy, following allegations of illicit political monitoring using the First Mile Israeli surveillance system. These events did not merely damage the agency's reputation; they threatened its institutional survival, triggering calls for its extinction or total absorption by other state structures during the transition to the center-left Lula da Silva administration (2023-2026).

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To understand the agency's reaction to this liminal experience, we use institutional punctuation as a heuristic framework, adapting insights by Cepik and Ambros. They argue that intelligence systems typically operate in a state of stasis, controlled by a policy subsystem of experts, until a crisis disrupts the equilibrium and forces the issue onto the macro-political agenda. Because of high access cost of information for external actors, intelligence subsystems tend to be dominated by a small number of participants, resulting in a higher tension threshold. This means "one should expect crises in intelligence to be more intense" and "to recur more than in other policy domains".[15] This is why critical bursts in intelligence are so interesting: they create windows of opportunity for policy change and institutional redesign.

Such punctuations have been highly relevant to understand the democratization of intelligence in post-authoritarian Latin American countries, as demonstrated by Estévez: the restoration of democracy is not a sufficient condition leading to the democratization of intelligence. Effective democratization is subject to path dependence mechanisms and political factors such as continuing reliance on the military to lead the intelligence sector, reluctance to implement profound changes, lack of political commitment to sustain reform over time,[16] and the prevailing values, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors towards intelligence, which change slowly and amount to the concept of "intelligence culture."[17]

This article posits that the 2022–2023 intelligence crisis in Brazil functions as a distinct type of punctuation compared to previous ruptures. An historical counterexample is the *Satiagraha* operation scandal of 2008, triggered by allegations of wiretapping and irregular participation of intelligence agents in a police investigation.[18] Although the *Satiagraha* crisis constituted a significant "institutional punctuation" that paralyzed the agency, it notably failed to trigger a deepening of democratic controls or

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transparency.[19] In fact, our data suggests that the 2008 crisis aborted a promising cycle of openness initiatives that had begun in 2005, forcing the agency back into a defensive posture. This counterexample is especially telling. According to Cepik and Ambros, "[i]f emerging issues like institutional reform remain unattended and return to the bottom of the list of priorities after the crisis ends, transforming forces come back faster to the same previous level, which is close to exceeding the tension threshold again,"[20] prompting a more intense burst in the future.

Drawing from this insight, we hypothesize that the existential nature of the 2022–2023 punctuation —occurring in the wake of a period of "democratic recession"—[21] served as a catalyst for the new administration to adopt a strategy of radical openness as a mechanism of re-legitimation. Official documents from 2024 explicitly frame this response as "strategic repositioning," shifting the agency's focus toward the notion of "intelligence in democracy."[22] This divergence suggests that under specific conditions of high institutional threat and low legitimacy, intelligence agencies may bypass bureaucratic insulation and appeal directly to civil society to secure their mandate. If it is true that "crises and scandals, which are endemic within intelligence, may be benign and creative in enabling systems to react to overdue changes," whether they do so "in a productive manner depends on the lessons learned, if any."[23] Do the response to the recent crisis demonstrate growing capabilities for learning and innovativeness to overcome persistent challenges?

To operationalize this analysis, we adopt the framework of "openness strategies" developed by Díaz-Fernández and Arcos. They define openness not as transparency for transparency's sake, but as an instrumental set of "activities and actions that are directed toward citizens and stakeholders, encompassing in a generic way reputation management, public and institutional relations."[24] By viewing openness initiatives as

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strategic tools designed to generate either "reputation" (competence/effectiveness) or "legitimacy," we can map how ABIN has attempted to renegotiate its social contract over the last three decades.

This article proceeds in five parts. Following this introduction, the second section, "From Demystification to Repositioning: An ongoing Shift in Intelligence Culture?" offers a brief qualitative analysis of the agency's shifting strategic discourse, contrasting the "cultural" diagnosis of the 2000s with the "structural" interpretation of the post-2023 era. The third section outlines the methodology used to compile an original dataset of 62 openness initiatives spanning from 1990 to 2025. The fourth section presents the results, demonstrating a trajectory characterized by two distinct cycles where the current Reform phase represents a historic surge in activity driven by engagement with academia. Finally, the discussion and conclusion interpret these findings through the lens of institutional punctuation, arguing that the recent shift from Awareness to Co-production in communication represents an innovative attempt to replace the culture of secrecy with a culture of shared democratic responsibility.

From Demystification to Repositioning: An Ongoing Shift in Intelligence Culture?

"Intelligence culture" is defined by Irena Chiru as the composite of "information, values, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors related to intelligence from within both intelligence insiders and outsiders […]."[25] As a symbolic dimension of social life, intelligence culture functions as a cognitive and normative filter, mediating perceptions and calibrating institutional conduct within specific socio-political contexts.[26] Parallel to structural and political variables, intelligence culture serves as a fundamental determinant in the trajectories of intelligence reform and democratization. Over the preceding decades, numerous services have endeavored to cultivate more

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favorable intellectual and professional environments, frequently formalizing these efforts as explicit "intelligence culture" initiatives to align operational realities with democratic expectations.[27] Consequently, an analysis of intelligence culture elucidates the dialectical relationship between societal imaginaries and the internal normative frameworks that guide practitioners. While external perceptions delineate the parameters of an agency's social acceptance, the internal professional schemas remain the primary drivers in formulating strategic postures and navigating the inherent tensions of democratic governance.

To understand why the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (ABIN) dramatically altered its openness strategy in the post-2023 period, it is necessary to examine how the agency's leadership diagnosed the causes of its legitimacy deficits in different historical moments. We contend that the quantitative surge in openness initiatives observed in our dataset corresponds to a qualitative mutation in the agency's strategic thought. Since a systematic or exhaustive discourse analysis exceeds this article's goals, we proceed to a qualitative illustration aimed at complementing our hypothesis. By contrasting the writings of ABIN officials and intelligence scholars close to the agency right after the *Satiagraha* crisis and the official discourse post-2023, we identify a shift from a cultural diagnosis —which prescribed pedagogical demystification— to a structural diagnosis, which prescribes strategic repositioning.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, a phase of consolidation following ABIN's creation, the agency's intelligentsia framed its legitimacy problem primarily as a cultural phenomenon rather than an institutional shortcoming. An early illustration can be found in the editorial article to the first issue of the Brazilian Journal of Intelligence (*Revista Brasileira de Inteligência* – RBI), published in 2005. In it, the author explicitly states the journal would be a "channel for ABIN to present its real

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image to society, functioning as an important tool to demystify intelligence and the institution."[28] During that phase, the journal had a dual institutional-academic nature and its editorials were one of the vehicles for the agency's leadership to convey its viewpoints.

Insider actors, writing in a 2009 volume organized by Swenson and Lemozy in the wake of the 2008 *Satiagraha* crisis, espoused this view. Joanisval Brito Gonçalves, then a legislative consultant for the Congress oversight committee on intelligence and former intelligence officer at ABIN, argued in 2009 that the shadow of the past had created a situation where intelligence was still viewed with prejudice, often confused with the repression and rights violations of the military regime.[29] This defensive posture stood in contrast to critical scholars of the period (outsiders) who emphasized the agency's mixed responses to democratic expectations[30] and the urgent challenge to improve effectiveness and relevance.[31] Nevertheless, the prevailing insider view, exemplified by then Director-General Márcio Paulo Buzanelli, maintained that the primary hurdle was for the agency to "become known by society and recognized by the importance it has and must have."[32]

Complementing this diagnostic, ABIN officer Glauco Moraes identified a lack of strategic culture as the root of institutional isolation, positing that because society lacked technical knowledge, it defaulted to viewing the activity as a mere "game of spies" where ethics were secondary.[33] This framing prompted a pedagogical solution focused on "demystifying" the agency through opening channels of communication and expanding academic courses to generate a "more friendly" mentality.[34] A critical reading reveals a unidirectional logic where the goal was to disseminate technical knowledge to ensure public acceptance without necessarily altering operational behavior or decision-making structures. Ultimately, such initiatives would function as

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an awareness strategy[35] designed to sanitize the agency's image through a model where the agency speaks, and society learns, prioritizing the dissipation of historical stigma over substantive reform.

The crisis of 2022–2023 shattered this pedagogical view. The January 8th coup attempt and the First Mile scandal exposed an agency that was lacking effectiveness, dangerously isolated from democratic controls, and potentially captured by partisan interests. But unlike the 2008 *Satiagraha* crisis —which led to paralysis because the agency retreated to shield itself from criticism— the depth of the 2023 crisis rendered the defensive posture obsolete. In a significant shift from the previous pedagogical model, the official discourse regarding the relationship between the state and society started evolving from "demystification" toward a strategy of "repositioning."[36]

As articulated by Director-General Luiz Fernando Corrêa in the 2024 institutional volume *Inteligência na Democracia*, the agency has moved beyond grievances regarding a perceived lack of intelligence culture to focus on the structural necessity of delivering results that foster the security of people and democratic institutions.[37] This existential diagnosis posits that for the agency to survive, it must demonstrate its utility to the broader democratic state through a strategic repositioning within the public administration ("situating and communicating the Agency's products and services within the market of ideas and public solutions of the Brazilian government") and in face of society ("opening ABIN for dialogue with specific sectors —such as universities and specialist communities— and with the general public").[38]

This new diagnosis prescribes a different form of engagement: co-production, emphasized in the same official volume by Marco Cepik and Anna Cruz, respectively former and current Director of the School of Intelligence.[39] The focus shifts from teaching society to learning with it. The School of Intelligence (Esint), previously the

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engine of the pedagogical model, was repurposed to function as a hub for scientific knowledge and social demands.[40] The logic is that the complexity of contemporary threats —such as environmental crimes in the Amazon or digital sovereignty— exceeds the cognitive capacity of a closed bureaucracy. The agency officially states it seeks to bring the university in, acknowledging that academic and civil society expertise is a constituent element of effective intelligence.

Based on this contrast, we formulate the following hypothesis: the crisis of 2022–2023 acted as a catalyst leading ABIN to shift away from the cultural/pedagogical model of openness (dominant in the 2000s, aimed at demystification) in favor of a structural/participatory model (aimed at collaboration). While the 2008 crisis occurred when the cultural diagnosis was hegemonic —leading the agency to interpret the scandal as a confirmation of societal prejudice and thus retreat into secrecy— the 2023 crisis made such a retreat impossible. Faced with the threat of extinction, the agency strategically opted to bypass bureaucratic insulation and seek a new source of legitimacy (and even effectiveness) in the epistemic authority of its critics. This qualitative shift in strategic logic offers a plausible explanation for the sharp increase in recorded academic partnerships observed in our quantitative results.

Methodology

Research Design and Case Selection

In this article we employ a qualitative, longitudinal single-case study[41] to analyze the evolution of openness strategies adopted by the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (ABIN). The choice of a single-case design is justified by Brazil's status as a relevant example of a "transitional" intelligence system.[42] As an emerging power that dismantled a military dictatorship's intelligence apparatus (the *Serviço Nacional de Informações* – SNI), in

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1990, only to struggle with the institutionalization of a democratic successor, established only in 1999, Brazil offers a rich context for observing how intelligence agencies use public communication to negotiate their survival and relevance.

The analysis is grounded in an original dataset of ABIN's public engagement initiatives spanning from 1990 to 2025 (n=62). This longitudinal scope allows for the identification of structural trends and strategic shifts that a cross-sectional or comparative analysis would miss. We premise that broader institutional strategies — often unwritten or kept in secret— can be inferred and better understood from the systematic aggregation and analysis of individual "openness initiatives," which serve as the primary unit of analysis for this study. By treating these initiatives as observable proxies for the agency's strategic intent, we map the trajectory of ABIN's intentional relationship with Brazilian society during its 26-year existence.

Conceptual Framework and Inclusion Criteria

To define the boundaries of the dataset, we adopt the framework proposed by Díaz-Fernández and Arcos, who define openness initiatives as "activities and actions that are directed toward citizens and stakeholders, encompassing in a generic way reputation management, public and institutional relations."[43] In sum, those initiatives are a means for intelligence services to establish a purposeful relationship with their environment, aiming two possible goals: to "improve the image and the reputation of the intelligence service in society or among some stakeholders" or to "increase and strengthen the legitimacy that the service has within the State apparatus."[44] Therefore, openness is a critical factor of both reform and democratization, as well as an aspect of intelligence culture. Regular core intelligence functions[45] —such as collection, analysis and dissemination, counterintelligence operations, and interagency coordination— are excluded from this study, even when they become public.

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Instead, an action was included in the dataset only if it met three rigorous criteria: (1) it was a deliberate, publicly discernible action or program promoted by ABIN or its immediate transitional predecessors; (2) its primary audience was external to the agency, targeting either the general public or specific stakeholders such as academia, the press, the private sector, or state institutions; and (3) its primary purpose was public engagement rather than the dissemination of classified intelligence. The objective of such initiatives, as posited by the theoretical framework, is twofold: to enhance *reputation* (communicating effectiveness and efficiency to secure resources) or to strengthen *legitimacy* (securing the moral and legal right to exist within a given regime, in our case democracy). These goals often overlap, but distinguishing sharply between them is not central to our collection and coding process.

Data Collection and Sources

The dataset was populated through a review of public records. Primary sources included ABIN's official digital repositories, government publications, press releases, and official reports. To mitigate the volatility of digital records we utilized the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine to recover data from ABIN's original website (www.abin.gov.br) dating back to 1998. This "digital archaeology" was supplemented by secondary sources, including scholarship on Brazilian intelligence history and news media archives.

Although ABIN was legally established in 1999, our data collection begins in 1990, and the first initiative found dates to 1994. This decision is methodologically necessary to capture the transition phase.[46] Following the dissolution of the SNI in 1990, residual intelligence structures (such as the *Secretaria de Assuntos Estratégicos* – SAE) engaged in seminal openness initiatives —specifically the creation of the Intelligence Memorial (1994) and the National Program for the Protection of Sensitive

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Knowledge (1997)— which may have established a path-dependent logic for ABIN's early communication strategies. Excluding these pre-1999 initiatives would sever the link between the agency's authoritarian legacy and its initial communication posture. Yet we acknowledge the grouping of distinct organizational entities as residual structures limits strict comparability with post-1999 ABIN.

Operationalization and Coding

Each identified initiative was coded according to a multi-dimensional categorical framework designed to capture both the descriptive characteristics and the strategic logic of the action.

To capture the descriptive characteristics, following Arcos and Díaz Fernández framework,[47] we coded for three primary dimensions: the responsible internal unit, the tangible product, and the targeted stakeholder. Regarding the responsible unit — categorized into the Director's Office, the School of Intelligence, the Press Office, or specialized Departments, including the Cybersecurity Unit —inference was occasionally necessary. In the absence of explicit attribution in the source material, authorship was deduced from the initiative's scope; for instance, agency-wide structural changes or commemorations were attributed to the Director's Office, whereas technical seminars were ascribed to the relevant Department. Concurrently, we classified the material output of each initiative (e.g., publications, training events, or access to unclassified information) and the primary external audience, distinguishing between Political and institutional actors, Academia, Business/Private sector, and the General public. To maintain analytical clarity in cases where initiatives targeted multiple audiences, the primary stakeholder was selected based on the initiative's stated or inferred priority objectives.

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Moving beyond a mere inventory of actions, the core of our analysis rests on Karen Lund Petersen's typology of intelligence communication, which discerns the underlying strategic logic of engagement.[48] The first category, *Awareness*, denotes a one-way flow of information designed to explain the agency's history, role, or legal mandate, serving the strategic goals of democratic accountability and trust-building. The second category, *Advice*, also involves a unidirectional flow but aims to direct recipient behavior through expert knowledge —such as security warnings or risk assessments— thereby demonstrating the agency's utility and efficiency. Finally, *Co-production* represents a bidirectional interaction where organizational boundaries become permeable; this logic seeks the shared construction of security knowledge through mechanisms like joint research networks or participatory forums, treating the external actor as a partner rather than a passive recipient. Following qualitative coding standards,[49] the codebook presented in Table 1 was utilized to mitigate retrospective bias and establish clear conceptual boundaries.

Table 1. Codebook for types of communication.

Category	**Definition**	**Inclusion criteria**	**Exclusion criteria**	**Examples**
Awareness	One-way explanation of agency history, role, or mandate.	Apply when the agency unilaterally broadcasts information to foster understanding of its existence and legal boundaries.	Do not use if the agency is delivering specialized, actionable security instructions or if external actors participate in generating the information.	Intelligence Museum exhibitions; social media profiles; educational materials for children; events presenting institutional activities without collaborative elements.
Advice	Unidirectional delivery of expert, actionable knowledge.	Apply when the agency acts as an exclusive epistemic authority delivering technical guidelines, risk assessments, or capacity-building courses.	Do not use for broad public relations or historical demystification. Do not use if the targeted stakeholder co-creates the assessment or guidelines.	Technical briefings and seminars; corporate security guidelines; virtual courses and learning environments.
Co-production	Bidirectional interaction for	Apply only when there is empirical evidence	Do not use if the external actor is	Co-authored public analytical

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	shared knowledge construction.	of shared knowledge creation, such as joint problem definition, co-authorship of outputs, or collaborative research networks.	solely receiving agency expertise without structured, reciprocal input.	reports; joint academic degrees; participatory academic research forums.

Periodization Strategy

To structure the longitudinal analysis, we segmented the 1990–2025 timeline into four distinct political-institutional phases, derived from the intersection of the dataset's density clusters and the established historiography of Brazilian intelligence. Regarding the latter, we followed Marco Cepik's periodization with minor adjustments.[50] The first phase, Transition (1990–1999), bridges the post-dictatorship vacuum and the legal creation of ABIN; following Priscila Antunes' analysis of the persistent "stigma" legacy (or "SNI sydrome"),[51] initiatives in this period are interpreted as defensive measures by residual structures attempting to sanitize their institutional image prior to formal establishment. This is succeeded by the Consolidation & Expansion phase (2000–2014), which corresponds to the agency's stabilization under the 1999 legislation and its subsequent development during the Lula and Rousseff administrations —a process Bruneau characterizes as "drawn-out" and driven by the agency's need to demonstrate technical competence.[52]

The latter half of the timeline reflects a period of institutional turbulence and reaction. The Democratic Recession phase (2015–2022) aligns with the political crises spanning the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff through the end of the Bolsonaro administration. We preferred to name it after the *Latinobarómetro* insight about the political tides in Latin America instead of using "deterioration" as Cepik does.[53] But we follow Cepik's diagnosis of increasing militarization, bypassing of formal structures and processes, and contradictory stance of the Bolsonaro government (2019-2022) towards

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intelligence.[54] We isolate this period to examine whether openness strategies retracted or shifted toward more state-centric "Advice" models during a time of acute democratic stress. Finally, the *Reform* phase (2023–2025) captures the current Lula da Silva administration's efforts to "reposition" the agency, a goal explicitly stated in the 2024 official book *Intelligence in Democracy*.[55] This distinct period allows us to test the recent emergence of "Co-production" strategies as a mechanism designed to rebuild shattered public trust. It is also important to highlight that the periodization is primarily related to changes within the intelligence community and, in many cases, is not driven by changes in the presidential administration, rather by the most relevant institutional changes.

Limitations

In addition to the caveats in the coding of initiatives discussed above, various limitations characterize this methodology. First is the bias of durability. Our dataset records the launch year of initiatives but does not track their duration. A seminar series launched in 2010 and continuing for a decade appears as a single data point. While this limits our ability to measure the volume of activity in any given year, it effectively highlights the emergence of new strategies and the intent of the agency leadership at specific historical junctures, characterizing cycles of innovation in openness. Second is the bias of secrecy. This dataset represents ABIN's public posture and is not an exhaustive catalog of all external interactions. Third, the bias of the source. By relying on open sources, we are analyzing the agency's performative openness —what it wants to be seen doing. However, in the study of strategic communication, this performance is exactly the phenomenon of interest; the discrepancy between the agency's stated openness and its actual operational secrecy is not a flaw in the data, but a central tension in intelligence governance. This limitation also means the research measures

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communication outputs and strategic intentions, not outcomes and actual impacts in public perception or effectiveness. Forth, the bias of proximity. More recent initiatives tend to be better documented and communicated, more detailed, and easier to find. We believe the qualitative analysis procedures described above help mitigate the sole reliance on initiative count when characterizing historical changes and continuities.

While the methodological constraints for collection and coding are acknowledged, they are weighed against the analytical value of constructing an original empirical dataset concerning institutional activities traditionally characterized by sparse systematic documentation.

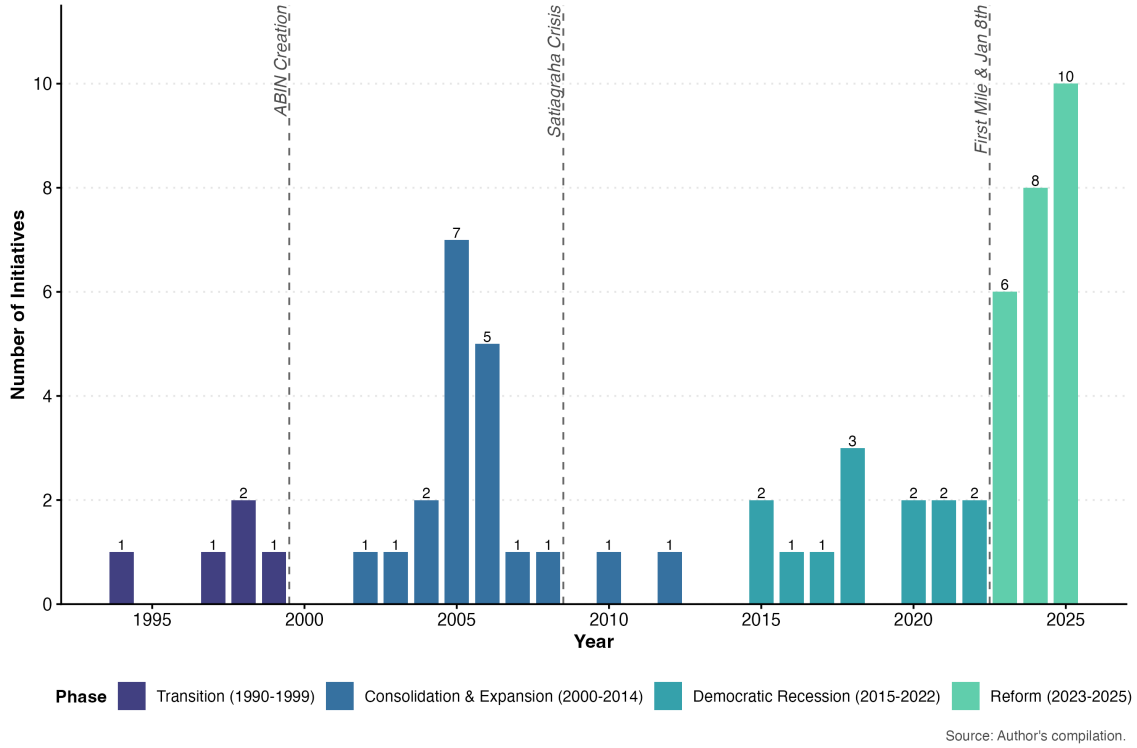
Results and discussion

Contrasting responses to crisis: retraction vs. visibility

The analysis of the 62 openness initiatives mapped between 1990 and 2025 reveals a non-linear trajectory of institutional engagement, characterized by long periods of low-intensity activity interposed by sharp bursts of strategic innovation. Data trends indicate that ABIN's transparency initiatives do not follow a linear evolutionary trajectory, as teleological interpretations of democratization might suggest; rather, they function as a contingent, reactive mechanism modulated by the agency's political stability and the prevailing democratic quality of the state. Empirically, the temporal distribution (Figure 1) demonstrates alternating periods of engagement and retraction: a curve defined by a cycle of engagement during the institutional Consolidation phase (2000–2014) interrupted right before the 2008 crisis and a new surge following the latest crisis of 2023, marking the Reform phase (2023–2025).

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Figure 1. Frequency of initiatives by year and phase (1990-2025) and institutional milestones.



The Transition Phase (1990-1999) is discernible by sparse communication initiatives, registering only 8% (n=5/62) of the total. This scarcity aligns with the institutional instability and the "defensive" posture of residual intelligence structures (*Secretaria/Subsecretaria de Inteligência* – SI/SSI) grappling with the SNI stigma. The few initiatives from this period —such as the creation of the Intelligence Memorial (1994), the agency's first website (1998) and the publication of a short book about the history of intelligence in Brazil (1999)— were foundational but sporadic, serving the cultural/pedagogical goal of sanitizing the past rather than engaging the present, except maybe for the website. This signals an early embracing of the diagnostic that prevailed in the subsequent years. According to Antunes, who reviewed in more detail these initiatives, the Executive branch has tried, "in many ways, to attract the sympathy of civil society and the politicians in the hope they recognize the importance of intelligence as essential to the state security," following a strategy of "giving more

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visibility to the discussion about intelligence, allowing its access also to the public."[56] One of the most relevant events during the period was the 1994 seminar "Intelligence Activities in a Democratic State," organized by the National Defense Commission of National Congress, not directly by the SI/SSI.[57]

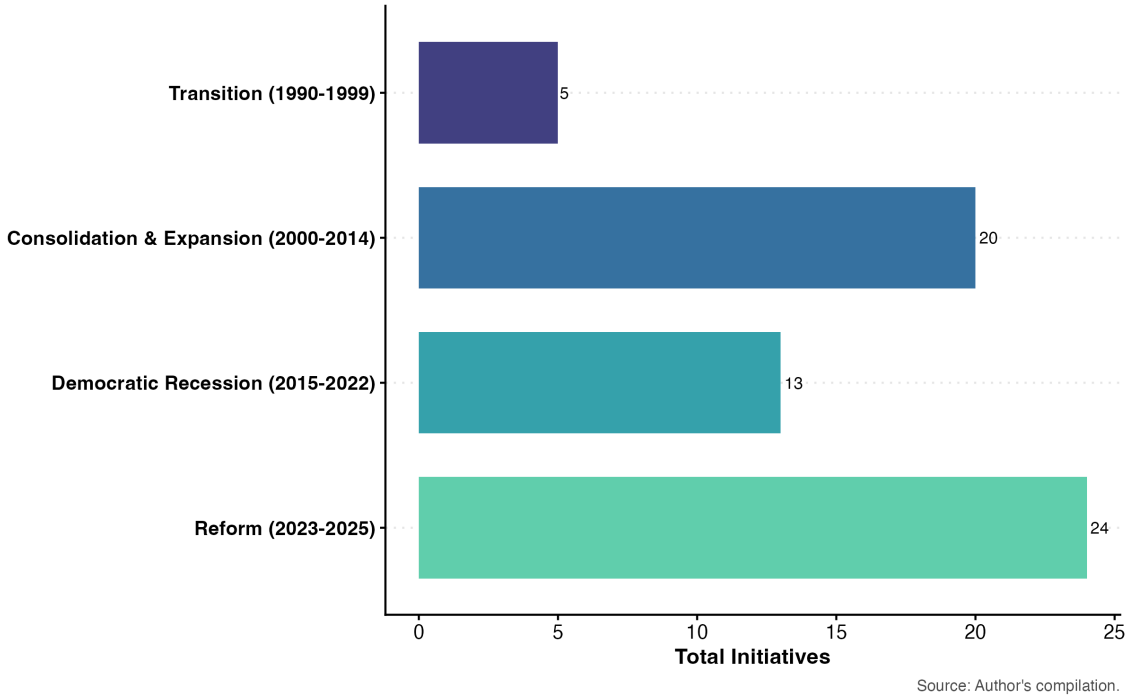
After a decade of low-intensity activity during the Transition phase, the agency launched its first significant cycle of openness in 2005 (during the Consolidation and Expansion Phase, 2000–2014, n=20/62). While arguably driven institutionally by the structuring of the Brazilian Intelligence System (SISBIN) via Decree no. 4,376 (September 2002), this period's activity is concentrated in two years (2005 and 2006) and its average of 1.3 initiatives per year reflects the overall "drawn-out" process of institutionalization described by Bruneau.[58] Consistent with the cultural diagnosis prevalent at the time, openness was treated as a regularized but secondary function designed to normalize the agency's existence within the bureaucracy without attracting undue controversy.

However, the initial surge was followed by a long period of retraction and stagnation (2007–2022), which covers the second half of the Consolidation phase and the Democratic Recession. This timeframe is critical for testing our hypothesis regarding crisis response. The period was framed by two acute crises: the *Satiagraha* scandal (2008) and the dual First Mile/January 8th crisis (2022–2023). The data reveals a stark divergence in outcomes. The 2008 *Satiagraha* scandal failed to trigger deep institutional reform or increased openness;[59] instead, it coincided with the cessation of the 2005–2006 openness cycle, which in 2007 had already shown signs of losing traction. No new openness cycle was inaugurated following *Satiagraha*. This confirms that not all punctuations lead to openness; under the "cultural" paradigm, the agency may have interpreted the scandal in part as "misunderstanding" and retreated.

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In sharp contrast, the trajectory is abruptly reversed in the Reform Phase (2023–2025). As shown in Figure 2, this period exhibits a marked increase in openness activity, generating nearly as many initiatives in just three years (n=24/62, average 8 new initiatives per year) as the entire 2000–2022 period combined (n=33/62, average 1.4 new initiatives per year). This data strongly supports the hypothesis that the existential nature of the 2022–2023 punctuation coincided with a shift in strategic logic. No longer able to retreat in face of a combined legitimacy and effectiveness crisis,[60] the current administration (2023–) employed a shock of openness —defined in official documents as "repositioning"— to attempt to rapidly rebuild social capital through visibility.[61]

Figure 2. Total initiatives by phase.



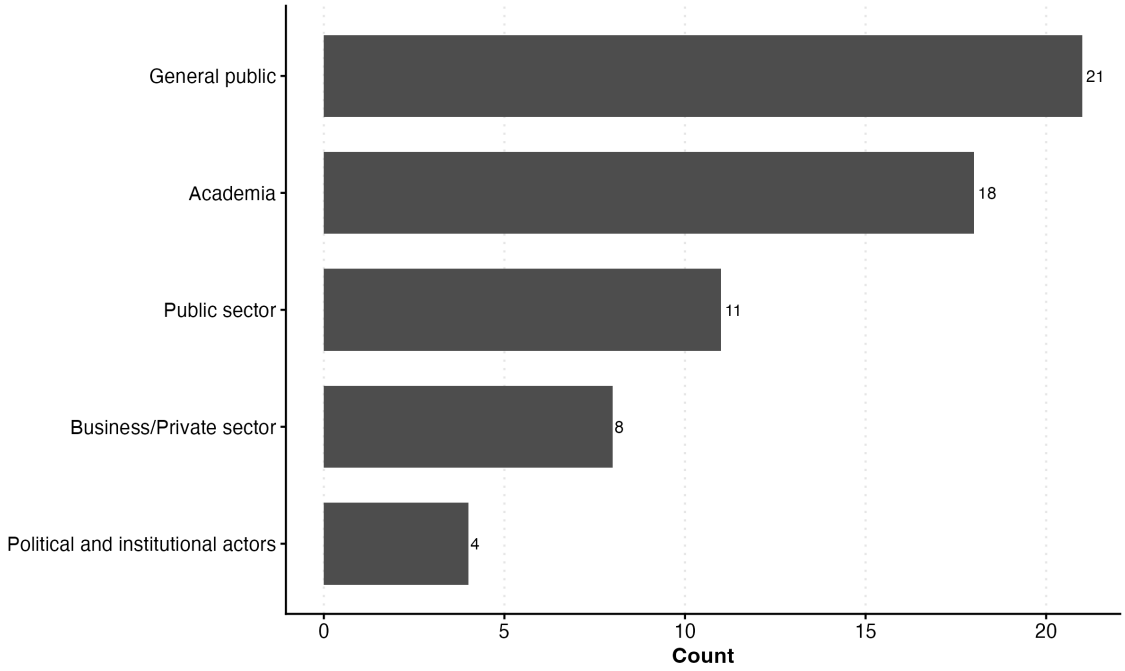
A more dialogical engagement: products and stakeholders

While the volume of initiatives explains when ABIN opened, the analysis of targeted stakeholders (Figure 3) reveals how the shift from demystification to repositioning was

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operationalized. Across the entire longitudinal dataset, the General public remains the most frequently targeted group with 33.9% (n=21/62) of all initiatives, reflecting a persistent baseline effort to secure legitimacy through Awareness products such as the Intelligence Museum (which evolved in 2006 from the Intelligence Memorial), publications directed for children and the creation of various social media accounts. Interestingly, Academia (n=18/62 across all phases) has remained an important stakeholder since the Consolidation phase, engaged mainly through seminars and, more recently, research projects and joint academic courses and degrees.

Figure 3. Top stakeholders.



Source: Author's compilation.

However, a disaggregated analysis of these target audiences reveals a sensible strategic shift, as illustrated in Figure 4. While the General Public has been a constant focus —accounting for 40% (n=8/20) of initiatives during the Consolidation phase (2000–2014) and 29.2% (n=7/24) during the current Reform phase— the secondary targets have oscillated in ways that mirror the agency's political vulnerability.

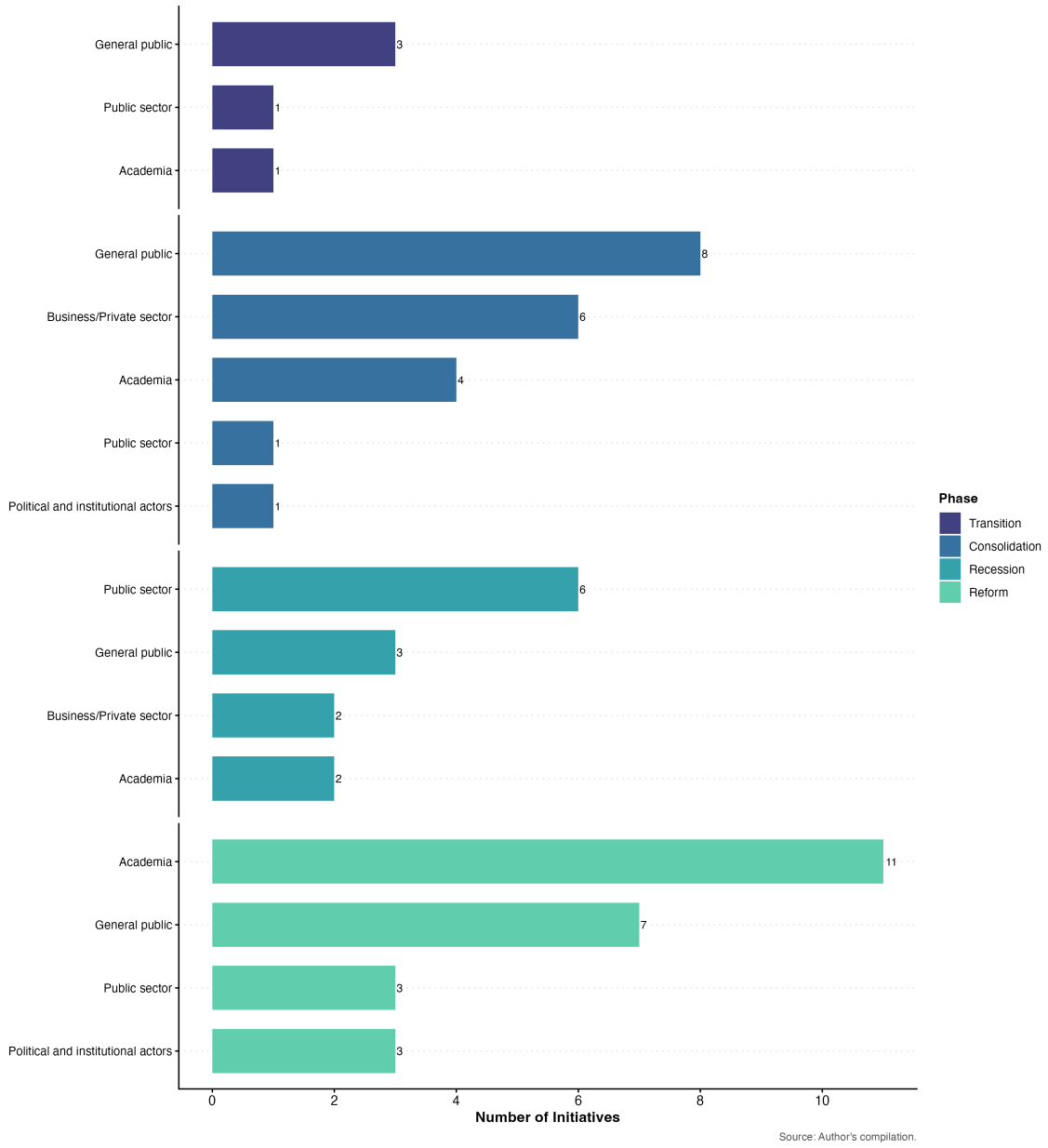
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During the Consolidation phase, the agency maintained a relatively balanced portfolio, with significant engagement with the Business/Private sector (30%, n=6/20), suggesting a focus on industrial and infrastructure protection. This balance collapsed during the Democratic Recession (2015–2022). In this period of institutional instability, while the Public sector emerged as the dominant stakeholder (46.1%, n=6/13), followed by the General public (23.1%, n=3/13), both the Private sector and Academia withered to 15.4% each (n=2/13). This correlates with the dynamic of autonomous management and reduced oversight described by Cepik,[62] amounting to bureaucratic insulation, where the agency prioritized demonstrating its technical utility to other state agencies (through sectorial training and events and specialized support). Nonetheless, two relevant initiatives driven towards the General public have been taken: the creation of official Instagram (2020) and YouTube (2021) accounts.

The Reform phase (2023–2025) marks a decisive pivot. The data shows an abandonment of corporate outreach (no new initiatives targeting the Private sector) in favor of a massive surge in academic engagement, which currently constitutes the primary target (46% of initiatives, n=11/24). This represents a historic high for the School/Academy vector. By redirecting its resources toward universities and research centers —through events like Intelligence Seminars (2023, 2024 and 2025), academic outreach initiatives, co-authored public reports, such as *Mercury in the Amazon* (co-authored with a civil society organization in 2025) and the formation of an intelligence research network (2025)— ABIN is moving beyond “teaching” the public (Awareness) towards an attempt to leverage the epistemic authority of experts (Co-production) to both validate its democratic credentials and improve the quality of its products.

Figure 4. Stakeholder engagement by phase.

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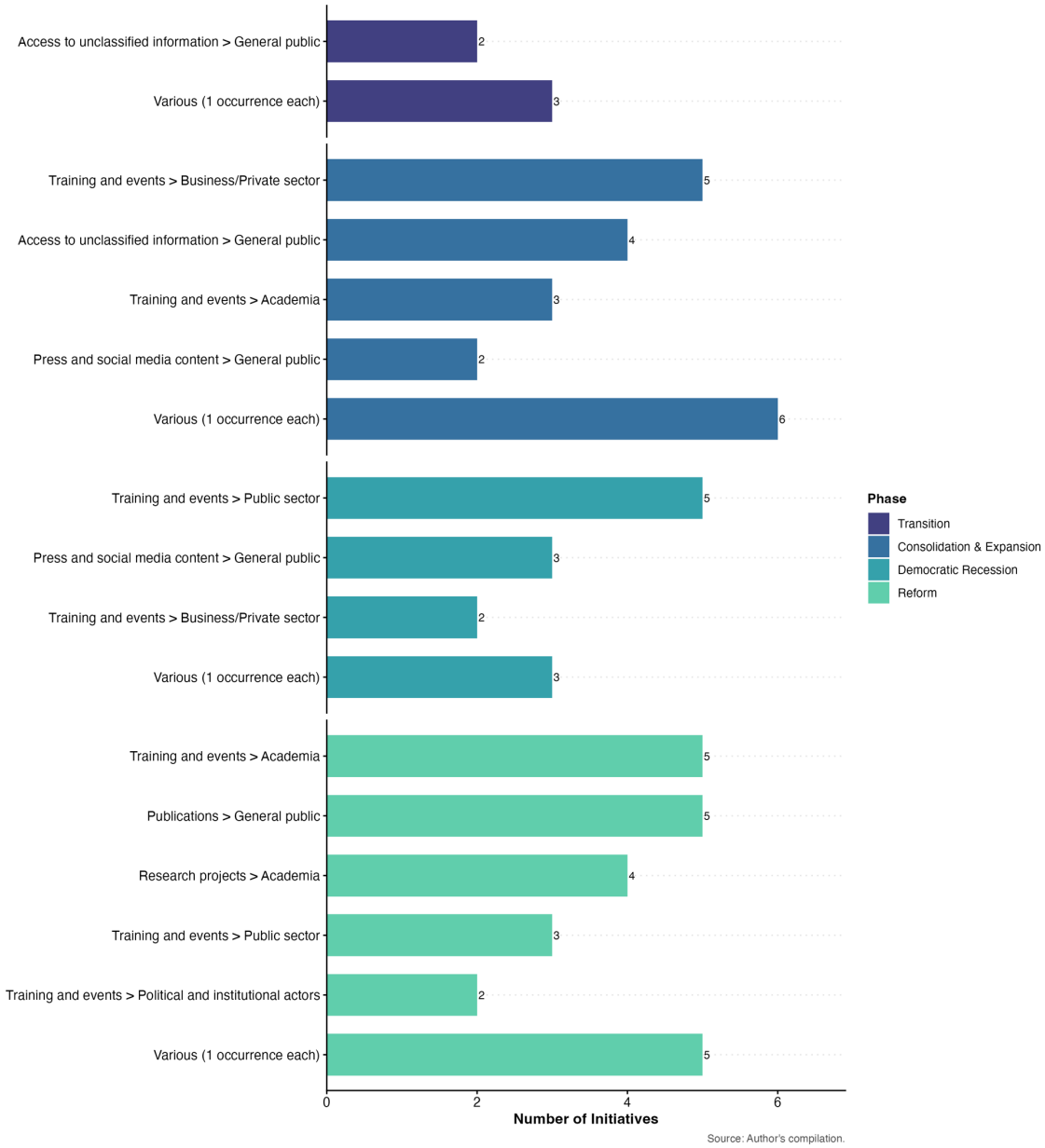


The analysis of products (Figure 5) further clarifies this functional differentiation. Across all phases, low-intensity products like Access to unclassified information and Press and social media content are directed mostly at the General public (respectively n=7/8 and n=6/6), serving the traditional Awareness function of the cultural model. In contrast, the Reform phase sees the rise of Research projects targeted at Academia (n=4/5 of all Research projects across phases) and a surge of Publications (n=7/10 of all Publications across phases), although most of the latter remained targeted

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primarily at the General public. Moreover, the shift from delivering content (Awareness and Advice) to producing joint reports like the *Mercury Report* or the *Intelligence Challenges* series, an annual analytical public report, underpins the transition to Co-production (Figure 7), signaling an effort to establish ABIN not just as a secret service, but also as a legitimate knowledge producer.

Figure 5. Main public-stakeholder pairs by phase.



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Internal specialization and communication logic

Just as the type of product varies according to the target audience, the internal authorship of these initiatives reveals a distinct division of labor within the agency. Although Arcos and Díaz Fernández note the emergence of "intelligence culture units" within intelligence organizations in recent years (it is not very clear which agencies created such units and how they operate),[63] in ABIN openness is currently a distributed function where different organizational units engage with specific sectors of society based on their functional competencies.

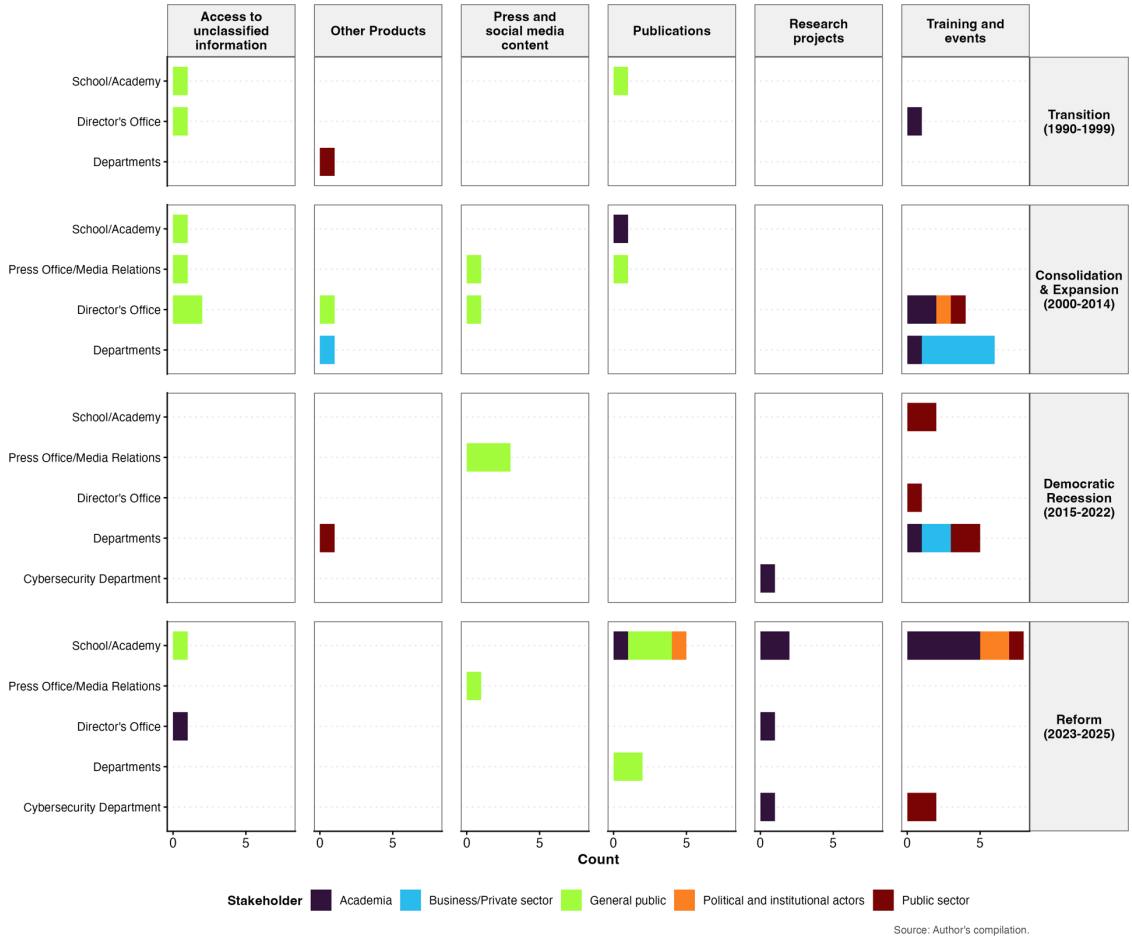
As demonstrated in Figure 6, the Press Office/Media Relations unit functions as the traditional gatekeeper of the agency's public image, directing its specific openness efforts exclusively toward the General Public (n=7/7). Its role is also strictly confined to Awareness activities, managing the agency's official website, press relations, and social media presence. In contrast, the specialized Departments —responsible for thematic areas such as cybersecurity, internal security and counterintelligence— operate as the agency's technical interface. Across all phases (n=20/62, 32.2%), their engagement has been heavily skewed toward the Business/Private sector (n=8/20, 40%) and the Public sector (n=6/20, 30%), comprising 70% of their total output. This distribution confirms that specialized departments have been an important piece of openness strategies and that when they engage externally, they do so to provide Advice and technical guidance to strategic partners or, in some cases, to collaborate with specialists, rather than to directly engage public opinion.

The most significant finding, however, is the central role played by the School of Intelligence (Esint). The School is the single most active unit in the dataset (n=22/62, 35.5%), surpassing even the specialized departments. Its profile is unique: it acts as a hybrid interface, bridging the agency's historical need for broad legitimacy (General public engagement, n=7/22, 32% across all phases) with its natural leaning toward

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Academia (n=9/22, 41%), which also means a way of improving professionalization. This dual capacity, potentialized during the current Reform phase (72% of the School's activity in the dataset relate to Reform, 2023–2025, n=16/22), positions the School as currently the primary engine of the agency's "soft power," capable of moving between the memory politics of the past (e.g.: publication of a book about the agency's work during the Covid-19 pandemic) and the intellectual co-production targeting the future (e.g.: *Intelligence Challenges* series). The Director's Office accounted for the remaining initiatives, directed mostly to the General public (n=5/13, 38% of the Director's Office activity across all phases) and Academia (n=5/13, 38%).

Figure 6. Strategic output matrix.



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The examination of communicative logic (Figure 7) provides the strongest empirical evidence for the article's main hypothesis. By applying Petersen's typology —distinguishing between Awareness (one-way explanation), Advice (one-way instruction), and Co-production (two-way collaboration)—,[64] we map the mutation of the agency's engagement logic. During the Transition phase, 60% (n=3/5) of initiatives followed the Awareness logic, consistent with the perceived need to "sanitize" the SNI legacy. The Consolidation phase was dominated by Advice (40%, n=8/20) followed by Awareness (35%, n=7/20) with Co-production accounting for the remaining activities (25%, n=5/20), reflecting the agency's effort to prove technical competence and "demystify" its image, fitting the cultural/pedagogical diagnosis of the era. This continuity is confirmed by Bruneau, to whom in both phases "emphasis has been on distancing the intelligence system from the stigma of the SNI and the dictatorship's other militarized intelligence organizations."[65]

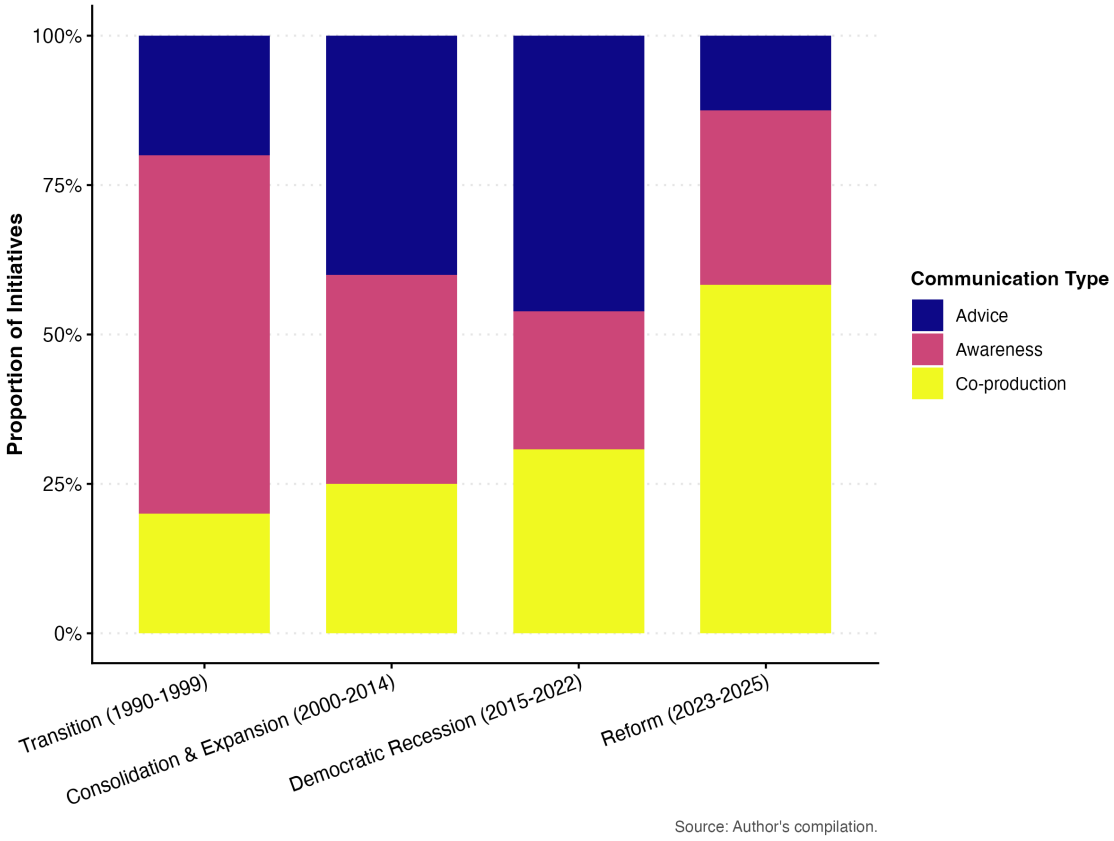
The Democratic Recession was defined by a retreat into bureaucratic insulation, evidenced by the surge in Advice (46.1%, n=6/13) and the decline of Awareness (23.1%, n=3/13) while Co-production accounted for 30.8% (n=4/13). Yet the resilience of Co-production initiatives during this period of insulation (Figures 7 and 8) challenges a purely linear narrative of decline. Their survival laid the groundwork for the 2023 restructuring, maintaining specific organizational capabilities —primarily in the School of Intelligence (responsible for half the Co-production initiatives of the Recession phase, n=2/4)— that would later enable the agency's rapid strategic repositioning.

Crucially, the Reform phase (2023–2025) supports the structural hypothesis about the strategic diagnostic shift. For the first time, Co-production emerges as the dominant logic (58.5%, n=14/24), while Awareness and Advice were kept active with a high number of new initiatives, but lower proportion of the total (Awareness, 29%,

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n=7/24, and Advice, 12.5%, n=3/24), respectively. This confirms that the post-2023 openness is qualitatively different from previous cycles. It is not merely about explaining the agency (Awareness) or serving the state or even private partners (Advice), although such actions remained a fundamental part of the openness strategy, but mostly about building shared responsibility together with academia. By inviting external actors to co-define threats (e.g., *Dialogues* speaker series, *Intelligence Challenges* annual analytical report), ABIN is attempting to overcome the culture of secrecy through partnership rather than pedagogy.

Figure 7. Evolution of posture.

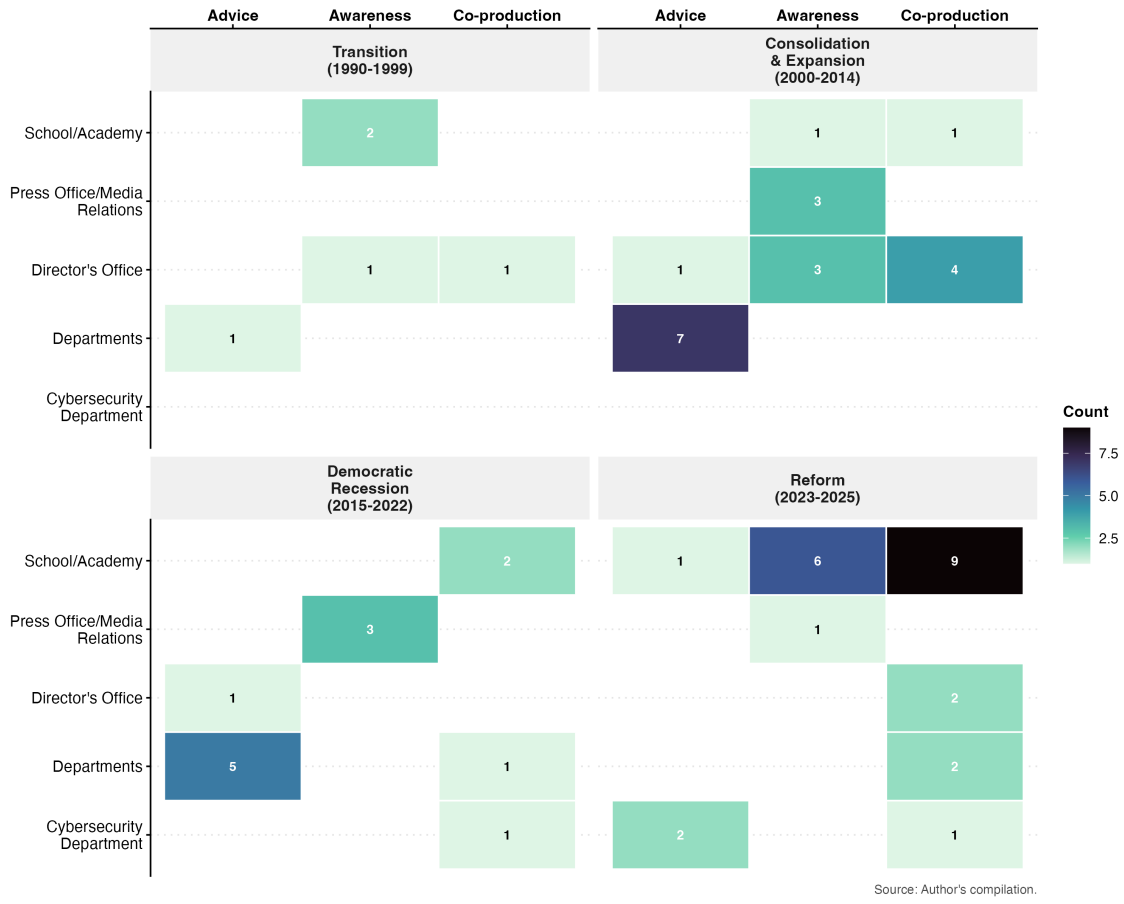


Finally, the cross-tabulation of unit responsibility (Figure 8) indicates growing specialization as the School of Intelligence (Esint) emerges as the engine of the new strategy. With a balanced portfolio of Co-production (56.3%, n=9/16) and Awareness (37.5%, n=6/16) with Advice making up the marginal remainder (6.2%, n=1/16), the

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School functions as a sort of intellectual bridge, translating the recent structural diagnosis into operational partnerships with civil society.

Figure 8. Communication heatmap.



The longitudinal analysis confirms that the institutional punctuation of 2022–2023 triggered a fundamental restructuring of ABIN's openness strategy, distinct from previous historical moments. Quantitatively, the agency moved from a pattern of stagnation in openness to a sharp increase in recorded activity, characterizing a cycle of innovation in openness. Qualitatively, the data supports the hypothesis of a shift from a cultural diagnostic/pedagogical response model (dominant in the 2000s, focusing on Awareness/Advice to cure "stigma") to a structural diagnostic/collaborative response model (dominant in the Reform phase, focusing on Co-production to ensure survival). Unlike the 2008 crisis, which resulted in insulation, the existential threat of 2023

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compelled the agency to bypass bureaucratic isolation and seek legitimacy through epistemic partnership with Academia and civil society.

Conclusion

The longitudinal analysis of the Brazilian Intelligence Agency's (ABIN) openness strategies from 1990 to 2025 shows a contingent, reactive process rather than a linear evolution. The existential crisis of 2022–2023 functioned as a critical catalyst, prompting the agency to transition away from a defensive, pedagogical model of Awareness toward a structural, participatory model of Co-production. Unlike earlier ruptures —such as the 2008 *Satiagraha* scandal— that resulted in bureaucratic insulation,[66] the recent threat to institutional survival drove ABIN to actively seek new sources of legitimacy through epistemic partnerships with academia and civil society.

Empirically, the data reveals a marked acceleration in collaborative initiatives during the Reform phase (2023–2025), driven largely by the School of Intelligence (Esint). Theoretically, this refines the application of punctuated equilibrium to intelligence reform:[67] crises do not automatically produce transparency. Instead, openness functions as a strategic repertoire whose deployment depends on how insiders diagnose their vulnerability. When the legitimacy deficit was viewed merely as a cultural misunderstanding by society, the agency retreated; when diagnosed as a structural threat to its democratic mandate, openness was deployed as a dialogical survival mechanism.

While the empirical data strongly correlates the 2022–2023 crisis with this recent surge in collaborative initiatives, this trajectory must be interpreted alongside alternative explanatory variables. The observed strategic reorientation coincided exactly with a broader regime transition and the appointment of a new leadership, suggesting that individual priorities and wider democratic restoration across state institutions may

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have also driven the agency's behavior. Furthermore, institutional maturation and international isomorphism toward intelligence transparency[68] offer parsimonious alternative explanations. Consequently, isolating the specific catalytic effects of the institutional crisis from these confounding political and structural factors remains a limitation of this single-case design, requiring future comparative research to fully disentangle these mechanisms.

Ultimately, this case underscores the limits of bureaucratic insulation for intelligence organizations in the twenty-first century. In polarized societies with authoritarian legacies, legitimacy must be actively and socially constructed. The qualitative shift from spying on society, to unilaterally explaining itself to society, and finally to thinking *with* society, represents a critical theoretical paradigm for understanding the modern governance and democratization of intelligence.

Data availability (Declaração de disponibilidade de dados de pesquisa)

The data related to this article was deposited with the preprint.

Conflicts of interest (Declaração de conflitos de interesse)

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to the research.

Authorship (Contribuição de autoria)

Christiano Ambros: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, validation, writing – original draft preparation, writing – review and editing.

Benno Alves: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation,

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methodology, project administration, validation, visualization, writing – original draft preparation, writing – review and editing.

Júlio César Cossio Rodriguez: investigation, methodology, supervision, validation, writing – review and editing.

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