Transparent information and access to citizen participation on municipal websites

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Abstract

This study analyses the information and tools for citizen participation on the institutional websites of local bodies to improve participation in the management of local resources in a context following the introduction of Spain's Transparency Law. The method is based on applying 14 indicators to analyse the institutional websites of 605 municipalities that have over 10,000 residents, located in 9 autonomous communities of the Spanish state. The main results show how the institutional information offered on the websites of the councils analysed does not follow journalistic criteria in terms of accountability, meaning that citizens' decisions regarding their local governments cannot be based on precise, reliable information. In this regard, in this study we have confirmed that council websites publish very little information on the activity of the opposition or on the plenary sessions, debates and agreements, but do publish information on the activity of the government. Furthermore, they do not make use of web resources for citizen participation, which impedes the transparent, collaborative management of political processes between leaders and citizens. Nonetheless, the results show how political and technical managers are not averse to change if they have access to guidance and incentives to improve the management of information and participation on municipal websites.

Keywords

Public communication; Citizen participation; Transparency; Municipal websites; Internet; Political information; Indicators; Accountability.

1. Introduction

The first goal of this article is to analyse whether local governments take advantage of the potentials of web 2.0 and social media to provide high-quality information and encourage e-participation, bearing in mind the requirements established by *Spanish Law no. 19/2013 of 9 December on Transparency, access to public information and good government*. It is believed that information offered by public and government institutions is a basic right in democratic societies and that the internet provides instruments to facilitate new forms of governance and citizen participation (**Bertot**; **Jaeger**; **Grimes**, 2010) at a time of international expansion of legislation on transparency and greater awareness about citizenship in this field.

The information that the public administration offers is a basic right that should come from transparency and good government (**Batista**, 2010) and

> "transparency has come to be a key instrument in the disclosure of public information and in enhancing the accountability of public administrations" (**Garrido-Rodríguez**; **Zafra-Gómez**; **López-Hernández**, 2017, p. 913).

The concept of *transparency* is defined as the possibility that citizens have to access any type of information in any format that is generated by organisations in the course of their work (**Giménez-Chornet**, 2012). Furthermore, it must provide accountability to citizens and also the responsibility of the leaders themselves, as a basic element of democratic societies where it should be possible to evaluate the actions and decisions of politicians to avoid misuse of power (**Cameron**, 2004). Public communication and journalistic information should therefore be basic instruments for building a participatory democracy with equal opportunities.

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With regard to transparency and freedom of information in the legal framework, there are some countries that are pioneers in enacting laws on these concepts, such as the United States and France (1966 and 1978, respectively) but also countries with a long democratic record that have taken much longer to do so. Examples include Belgium, which has not passed a transparency law since 1994; the United Kingdom, since 2000; and Switzerland, since 2004 (**Ackerman**; **Sandoval**, 2005). This has also coincided with the fact that several international organisations have promoted transparency in recent years, connecting it with benefits regarding the expansion of democracy and good government (*United Nations*, 2000; *European Commission*, 2001; 2010) with different levels of transparency between each other (**Navarro-Galera** *et al.*, 2017).

In Spain, transparency and accountability was regulated by the national government in Law 19/2013 of 9 December, which came into force throughout the country two years later. As has happened in other countries that have hesitated to apply these freedom of information laws (**Grassler**, 2018), the law in Spain has included important limitations, mostly regarding who is considered able to request information, and does not include the right to access public information as part of the fundamental right to freedom of information. Moreover, the first studies regarding analysis of public information on municipal websites after the transparency law was passed in Spain show that neither a qualitative nor quantitative improvement has been seen in comparison with analyses from before the adoption of the law (**Moreno-Sardà**; **Molina-Rodríguez-Navas**; **Simelio-Solà**, 2017).

Nevertheless, the Spanish transparency law has undoubtedly made an important step forward and is a response to demands for legislation to help safeguard the right to access information (**Simelio-Solà** *et al.*, 2017) and drive a change in behaviour and attitudes among municipal governments. Also, the law's wording places particular emphasis on citizen political participation (**Molina-Rodríguez-Navas**, 2018).

2. Public information for participation and ICT

In the debate on democratic public communication, as well as aspects regarding the need to transparently provide information on management, another key concept is finding mechanisms for citizen participation. The internet and related platforms combined with e-government, social media, new technologies, transparency policies and citizens' desire for a transparent government have created new opportunities that have the potential to establish a new form of government and citizen participation in building democratic policies (**Bertot**; **Jaeger**; **Grimes**, 2010). Nonetheless, at the municipal level, although most local governments are using web 2.0 and social media tools to increase transparency and dialogue between governments and citizens, the potential of using web 2.0 to boost e-participation by local governments is not being fully harnessed (**Bonsón** *et al.*, 2012; **Rollnert-Liern**, 2015).

Several studies mention the use of social media by municipal organisations, dealing with the contexts of Catalonia (**Simelio-Solà**; **Molina-Rodríguez-Navas**, 2014), Castilla y León (**Herrero-Gutiérrez** *et al.*, 2017) and Portugal (**Cardoso-de-Miranda**; **Muñoz-Cañavate**, 2015). These show that the advantages of digital participation have

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not been used, and instead a one-directional model has been adopted in which managers of the organisations' networks simply publish links to government news stories and do not encourage dialogue with citizens.

A study by **Gandía**, **Marrahí** and **Huguet** (2016) measuring the use of web 2.0 by Spanish municipal councils discovered similar results when analysing whether the use of 2.0 tools and social media has improved in comparison with previous web 1.0 use of digital transparency. These authors come to the conclusion that the use of web 2.0 and information about transparency by Spanish local authorities has been fundamentally ornamental and concentrates on promotional features, conclusions that were initially reached in the previous decade (**Gandía**; **Archidona**, 2008).

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The conclusions were similar to those arrived at by a study authored by **Pina**, **Torres** and **Royo** (2010) on how the websites of European Union local governments are implementing ICT initiatives to bring citizens and administrations closer together. Other authors also remarked the importance of technology in this field:

> "This technology can help to increase transparency, financial information and citizen participation" (**Moreno-Enguix**; **Gras-Gil**; **Hernández-Fernández**, 2019, p. 178).

The authors state that the internet's greater capacity for spreading information to improve accountability and facilitate participation has not been harnessed by local governments in the European Union. Even in 2017, **Bearfield** and **Bowman** (2017) show how, on the municipal council websites analysed, it is easier to find budget and financial data than truly accessible information.

3. Method design

The method used was designed in 2012 based on a web platform created by the research team of which the authors of this article are part:

https://www.mapainfoparticipa.com/index/home

The aim is to evaluate the information offered by Spanish municipal councils on their institutional websites and diagnose the main difficulties arising to generate transparent, high-quality public information and make proposals to improve the websites, as this is a determining factor in this type of study (**Fernández-Falero**, 2017).

The evaluation is made based on 52 indicators formulated as questions and organised into two large groups centred on the information offered by municipal councils' websites about the institution and about citizen participation. In this article, we present the results of an analysis performed in 2019 on the "Information for participation" group of indicators. These indicators can be found in the results section of this article.

When interpreting the results, we need to distinguish between transparency itself –which in Spain has its own law (*Law 19/2013, of December 9, on transparency, access to public information and good governance*) in addition to another set of laws established by the Autonomous Communities– and, on the other hand, citizen participation and guidelines for providing good information, which do not have specific legislation as such, although certain references may be found in the existing legislation. The concept of quality information is multifaceted, although it usually refers to the fulfilment of indicators (**Herrera-Viedma** *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, it should be taken into account that this study focuses especially on this participation and on how to focus information so that citizens can participate in the democratic public debate. In this regard, we need to be aware when interpreting these results that the indicators addressed and gathered in the *Infoparticipa Map* are broader than the national and regional legislation itself.

The analysis presented was carried out in June 2018. Its validity was ensured by performing the analysis using a single coding guide and a person on the team carrying out quality control. Once the analysis was complete, the results were distributed among the technical and political decision-makers of the municipalities analysed so they could compare data, and the results in each case could be revised in accordance with their feedback, if necessary. This ensures the method is valid and reliable.

As well as the main goal of checking how municipal corporate websites provide information regarding participation, other goals included determining whether there are differences in information connected to the number of residents in the municipality, the sex of the mayor, the autonomous community, and the political party that governs the municipality.

The results presented in this article were processed using the *IBM SPSS Statistics 23.0* programme.

The sample for this article is composed of 605 municipalities with more than 10,000 residents from a selection of autonomous communities in Spain, distributed in 9 different Spanish regions: Andalusia (154 municipalities); Catalonia (121); Valencia Community (97); Galicia (54); Community of Madrid (51); Canaries (42); Basque Country (42); Region of Murcia (31) and Aragon (13).

Before the analysis, the sample was re-coded by different variables to create a total of 3 groups by population: 10,000-50,000 residents, 50,001-100,000 residents and more than 100,000 residents (Table 3). It is clear that the number of municipalities in each group increases in step with the number of residents.

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For demographic and historical reasons, there are communities that have a large number of municipalities and others that have a smaller number. There are therefore differences between autonomous communities in which a large number of municipalities have been analysed (for example, Andalusia, with 154), and others with a small number (for example, Aragon, with only 12 municipalities). The municipalities with 10,000-50,0000 residents were about 80% of the sample (489). Only about 8% of the sample had more than 100,000 residents (50).

The autonomous communities in the sample were chosen on the basis of a representativeness that took into account various aspects of Spain's particular nature. Thus, we selected the most populated communities (Madrid, Andalusia and Catalonia) and others with a low population density such as Aragon, communities with the largest cities in Spain, including those hosting the capital, historical communities with their own co-official language (Catalonia, The Basque Country, Galicia, Valencia) and others with Spanish as the only language, Mediterranean, Atlantic, Cantabrian peninsular communities and one island community (The Canary Islands), and finally, communities with cities governed by national parties and others by regional or nationalist parties.

4. Results

Considering the indicators on citizen information and participation, the following data (Table 1) deal with the extent to which indicators regarding information provided on the municipality and the management of collective resources are fulfilled. We can see that, while news stories on government actions and its management are very common, with a high level of information on news related to the government (93.1%), there is a small amount of information on news related to the opposition (18%).

Therefore, one of the most significant results of our research, referring to good information and citizen participation, is that local governments' communications offices act as spokespeople for government teams and not as communications managers for the institution or municipality itself. This, as well as making the opposition invisible, also stops citizens from being able to join the public debate on the management of resources and impedes their participation in a context of real knowledge, since they do not have all the information relating to the local government. Moreover, news stories related to the government itself are mostly based on information regarding positive aspects and statements by political leaders. In a context where local media mostly use institutional sources for their information, this means that the information received by citizens is even more opaque, removing the accountability needed in a democratic society.

Table 1. Indicators on information provided about the municipality and management of collective resources

Descriptor indicator	10,000-50,000 residents		50,001-100,000 residents		More than 100,000 residents		Total
	Number of cases	%	Number of cases	%	Number of cases	%	%
The website publishes news stories, information and/or opinions on the actions of members of the government related to the government's management	422	86.3	64	97.0	48	96	93.1
The website publishes news stories, information and/or opinions on the actions of members of the opposition and/or political groups related to the government's management	38	7.8	16	24.2	11	22	18.0
The website publishes news stories on proceedings in the plenary, motions submitted by different political groups, debates and agreements	107	21.9	23	34.8	22	44	33.5
The website publishes historical information on the municipality	383	78.3	49	74.2	39	78	76.8
Information is given on the current status of the municipality: data on the municipal district, the registered population, social diversity, economic and cultural activities	247	50.5	38	57.6	34	68	58.7
A calendar of municipal and citizen events is offered on the website	381	77.9	61	92.4	49	98	89.4
The website publishes contact information for the person in charge of press, information and/or communication at the organisation	170	34.8	34	51.5	33	66.0	50.7

Following this line, the levels of information on news stories relating to proceedings in plenaries is low (33.5%). Although it is true that many municipal councils upload videos of their plenaries, what transparency is really about is informing citizens clearly, simply, precisely, briefly and intelligibly, and watching a long video does not appear to achieve that goal.

The fields with high fulfilment deal with both appropriate historical information about the municipality (76.8%) and data on the calendar of municipal and citizen activities (almost 90%). In contrast, the status of the population and its socio-demographic variables is only moderately represented (58.7%).

The data broken down by demographic weight of the municipalities reveals that the contact person for press is mentioned insufficiently in low-population settlements (34.8%) but sufficiently in municipalities of more than 100,000 (68%).

The indicators relating to tools offered for citizen participation are presented below (Table 2). What stands out the most is that the larger the municipality's population, the more indicators are fulfilled. For example, the indicator "Information is given on the website on the regulations for citizen participation or other related rules" has a fulfilment rate of less than 50% in municipalities of fewer than 50,000 residents, but 96% in those with more than 100,000. This is related to the amount of economic, human and logistic resources available to municipalities.

This situation is similar to what happens with other indicators, specifically information regarding participation mechanisms (territorial councils, town councils, sector-based councils), with a 44-point difference between the least and most populated municipalities and, consequently, this is also the case for the minutes of the meetings held by these councils or mechanisms. Furthermore, fulfilment increases in all fields in step with population. Only the indicator for information on associations and local bodies is fulfilled slightly more often in settlements of 50,000-100,000 residents (62.8%) then larger ones (60%).

Overall, the areas that are weakest are those regarding participation mechanisms and their operations and services offered by the body. It is notable that less than half of municipalities of less than 50,000 residents do not include information about citizen participation regulations on their websites, so we can deduce that this aspect is not regulated in their municipalities. This contrasts with municipalities of more than 100,000 residents, which in 96% of cases have rules and regulations regarding participation.

In general, we can see from the indicators in Table 2 that despite the provisions of Spain's 2013 Transparency Law, the new mechanisms for participation in local governments that can be provided by the internet and web 2.0 are still not widely used, and the most fulfilled indicator deals with old open administration models allowing citizens to make suggestions or complaints via forms –something other authors alluded to at the time (**Cárcaba-García**; **García-García**, 2010)– but do not have a real level of participation that the new legislation and technology available could allow.

> Among municipalities where all the indicators related to information for participation on municipalities' websites are fulfilled (14), there is triple the number of municipalities where the mayor is a woman than those where the mayor is a man, 6.9% and 2.2%, respectively

Table 2. Indicators of the tools on offer for citizen participation

Descriptor indicator	Up to 50,000 residents		50,001-100,000 residents		More than 100,000 residents	
	Number of cases	%	Number of cases	%	Number of cases	%
Information is given on the website on the regulations for citizen participation or other related rules	226	46.2	49	74.2	46	96.0
Information is given on the website about other participation mechanisms or bodies: territorial councils, town councils, sector-based councils, etc.	165	33.7	33	50.0	39	78.0
The minutes of meetings held by the other participation mechanisms or bodies mentioned in indicator 47 are published	46	9.4	15	22.7	17	34.0
The website includes a directory of bodies and associations in the municipality and/or a register of interest groups, if applicable	208	42.5	45	68.2	31	62.0
The website offers instruments for consultation and/or participation on current matters of local interest	160	32.7	36	54.5	37	74.0
The website offers a list of the services rendered and commitments to citizens	26	5.3	9	13.6	18	36.0
The website provides instruments to evaluate services and to submit complaints or suggestions on how they are run	284	58.1	49	74.2	43	86.0

Taking into account the results by profile of the municipality (autonomous community, sex of the mayor and political party), firstly, regarding gender differences, the municipalities whose mayor is a man have an indicator fulfilment percentage of 44.3% and those whose mayor is a woman have an indicator fulfilment percentage of 48.7%.

This slightly more positive result among women mayors is more significant if we break it down into percentages by number of indicators fulfilled (Table 3). In this regard, the most interesting information for establishing future hypotheses is that among municipalities where all the indicators related to information for participation on municipalities' websites are fulfilled (14), there is triple the number of municipalities where the mayor is a woman than those where the mayor is a man, 6.9% and 2.2%, respectively.

If we carefully observe the level of transparency by autonomous communities analysed, the highest number of municipalities with an average of more than 70% fulfilment can be found in Catalonia, where nearly half of municipalities have a fulfilment rate of over 75%. At the other end of the scale, we find the Canaries, with only a 31.4% fulfilment of the indicators. For further context, the Catalan Transparency Law affecting institutions and the Canarian version of the law both date from 2014, so we cannot infer that it is a longer or shorter implementation time that makes a difference, but rather the will and effort to do so.

This, though, may be related to the fact that development in the research project of which this article is part began in Catalonia in 2012, and since 2013 a prize called the *Sello Infoparticipa* (the Info-participation Seal) has been awarded based on reports drawn up by the research team. After each evaluation, the results are sent to political and technical staff at municipal councils and these have the chance to be advised on how to improve the information on their municipal websites. This has shown itself to be a way of successfully moving forward and fulfilling the indicators and shows how both political decision-makers and technical staff are willing to improve their information if they receive guidance and support in these fields and if they receive incentives in the form of positive information about them in the media and from academia.

For the other regions, Murcia, Aragon, the Valencian Community and the Basque Country fulfilled an average of 46-41% of indicators, and only Galicia and Andalusia reduced this level to 35%.

Another aspect observed was a comparison by political party, also linking them to the level of fulfilment (Table 4). Once again, we have considered the importance of advice and incentives to improve transparency. The parties that, regardless of the number of municipalities they govern, achieve high levels of fulfilment (*PSC-CP*, *PDeCAT* and *Esquerra Republicana*) are parties that belong to the Catalonia autonomous community. If we observe it from a left-right

Table 3. Fulfilment of indicators by sex of the mayor

Number of the indicators fulfilled		Sex		Total
		Man	Woman	
0	n	1	1	2
	%	0.2%	0.6%	0.3%
1	n	6	2	8
	%	1.3%	1.3%	1.3%
2	n	26	11	37
	%	5.8%	6.9%	6.1%
3	n	44	15	59
	%	9.9%	9.4%	9.8%
4	n	59	9	68
	%	13.2%	5.7%	11.2%
5	n	57	33	90
	%	12.8%	20.8%	14.9%
6	n	79	17	96
	%	17.7%	10.7%	15.9%
7	n	57	18	75
	%	12.8%	11.3%	12.4%
8	n	31	10	41
	%	7.0%	6.3%	6.8%
9	n	26	10	36
	%	5.8%	6.3%	6.0%
10	n	20	3	23
	%	4.5%	1.9%	3.8%
11	n	11	4	15
	%	2.5%	2.5%	2.5%
12	n	7	7	14
	%	1.6%	4.4%	2.3%
13	n	12	8	20
	%	2.7%	5.0%	3.3%
14	n	10	11	21
	%	2.2%	6.9%	3.5%
Total	n	446	159	605
	%	100%	100%	100%

Table 4. Average number of indicators fulfilled by political party

Political party	Percentage of indicators fulfilled
PSC-CP (Socialist Party of Catalonia)	75.9%
PDeCAT (Catalan European Democratic Party)	72.0%
Esquerra Republicana (Republican Left of Catalonia)	68.8%
PNV (Basque Nationalist Party)	43.6%
Izquierda Unida (United Left)	42.9%
Compromís (Commitment Coalition)	42.5%
Bildu (Basque Counrty Unite)	41.3%
Partido Popular (People's Party)	39.1%
PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party)	39.1%
Coalición Canaria (Canarian Coalition)	33.8%
PSdeG-PSOE (Socialist Party of Galicia)	27.9%
Others	44.3%
Total average	43.5%

standpoint (conservative or progressive), there are no major differences, something that is particularly clear if we note that the two largest national parties have the same rate of fulfilment: 39.1%. Similarly, we find social democratic parties (*PSC-CP* and *Esquerra Republicana*) and a conservative party (*PDeCAT*) among the parties that have the best results.

> ❛ The websites of the Spanish municipal councils act as institutional agencies for the mayors, silencing opposition and exercising political control over the stories published ❜

5. Conclusions and discussion

One of the most notable features in the analysis of the results is how the information that Spanish municipal councils' institutional websites offer is not based on journalistic criteria. Instead, these websites act as institutional agencies for the mayors, silencing opposition and exercising political control over the stories published. The research therefore confirms the data in a study by **Manfredi-Sánchez**, **Corcoy-Rius** and **Herranz-de-la-Casa** (2017) on journalistic criteria in publishing news stories on Spanish municipal websites.

Like these authors, we start from the basis that good public information should follow journalistic criteria that are far removed from political control over the news. At the same time, it should also provide alternative sources such as those from the opposition and make the information intelligible to the public. Thus,

> "public communication must understand that the size of the populations does not matter, but rather the ability to provide concrete information of public interest that promotes the political, social and cultural objectives that journalism is committed to in open societies" (**Manfredi-Sánchez**; **Corcoy-Rius**; **Herranz-de-la-Casa**, 2017, p. 413).

This means that citizens' decisions regarding local governments cannot be based on precise, reliable information to allow for accountability and good government. It is therefore particularly relevant how the political parties that lead the municipal government publish news about the members that are part of the institution and "forget" to publish news stories about opposition parties. This allows these parties to gain notoriety and potentially try to increase that benefit by making the opposition invisible. That lack of balance also indicates partisan information with little pluralist, democratic tradition and goes against the deontological codes of journalism based on ethical principles shared by the journalism profession in that they present themselves as defenders of freedom of expression and citizens' right to information (**Cruz-Álvarez** and **Suárez-Villegas**, 2012).

In the group of results about information on participation tools and management, what stands out is that there are areas of information that should be improved, such as transcriptions of and information about plenary sessions, the location of the municipality or the publication of contact details for the people in charge of communication so that they can receive feedback from citizens.

As for participation, it is clear that fulfilment is higher the larger the population of the municipality, which shows how a lack of economic, technical and human resources in smaller municipalities stops them from improving transparency levels and implementing tools to encourage citizen participation. From this standpoint, the findings coincide with those of other researchers, such as **Torpe** and **Nielsen** (2004), who attributed differences observed in digital communications between authorities and citizens to population size rather than the political persuasion of the government. Several pieces of research reinforce the view that transparency in communication brings trust to institutions and improves their reputations, something that can curb detachment from politics and public life (**López-López** *et al.*, 2018; **Porumbescu**, 2015) at a time of disaffection with politics in many countries.

> ❛ The political parties that lead the municipal government publish news about the members that are part of the institution and "forget" to publish news stories about opposition parties ❜

The poor overall results regarding tools for citizen participation reflect how web resources are not being used to their full potential to encourage new relationship dynamics with citizens, as confirmed by other research in the field (**Bonsón** *et al.*, 2012). This means we can suggest that other strategies are needed for the use of web 2.0 and other digital tools in general that are not only based on their technological characteristics. They should allow for more active citizen initiatives involving the collective creation of public information and participation in the management of political processes with transparency and collaboration between government and citizens. As the study by **Panagiotopoulos**, **Bigdeli** and **Sams** (2014) shows, there have been successful experiments with collaboration between citizens and local governments using social media, where not only can citizens be mobilised by local authorities, but they can also actively encourage actions launched by citizens.

In the relationship between fulfilment of the indicators analysed and other variables, the first conclusion we should reflect upon is that the level of fulfilment was slightly higher in municipalities governed by mayors who are women. This data confirms the findings of **Ferraz-Esteves-Araujo** and **Tejedo-Romero** (2016) by observing a positive effect of female government on improving transparency.

Different results show how the community most engaged in transparently managing its websites is Catalonia, regardless of the political party governing each place. As previously indicated, Catalonia is the community where the overall project to improve municipal information transparency began, with the spread of a seal of quality and advice from researchers to fulfil the indicators.

> ‘ Spain still has a long way to go to achieve better transparency on municipal websites, and the new legislation on transparency does not seem to have helped improve it ’

These results also show us how political and technical decision-makers are not against improving their transparency if they are offered guidance. However, Spain still has a long way to go to achieve better transparency on municipal websites, and the new legislation on transparency does not seem to have helped improve it. Therefore, a change in routine and internal communication processes is needed to advance communication transparency and so that local governments can offer tools and resources for citizen participation.

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