

## **Journalism, transparency and citizen participation. A methodological tool to evaluate information published on municipal websites.**

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This article analyses the transparency of the websites of Spanish municipals of more than 20,000 inhabitants in 2015 with the aim of verifying whether these sites provide the information necessary so that citizens can be informed, can hold their governments to account and can participate in the democratic process. The methodology is based on 39 indicators grouped into questions about who the political representatives are, how they manage collective resources, how they inform about the management of these resources and what instruments they provide for participation. This study presents answers to the last two questions. The results reveal that city councils are not transparent and act mainly to promote the actions of the government when communicating with the public, that they provide few mechanisms for citizen participation, and that social networks are a unidirectional communication tool little used for accountability. The methodological tool presented here has been shown to be effective and to have had an impact on the municipals analysed here—which improved their information during the various phases of evaluation—and therefore may be of use when applied to other countries and other national and international governmental websites.

Key words: Transparency, public administration, local governments, public communication, web 2.0, citizen participation.

### **Introduction**

According to the Spanish Centre for Sociological Research (CIS, 2016, p. 4), “corruption and fraud” are, as of April 2016, the second biggest problem for the Spanish public (47.8%), only surpassed by unemployment (78.4%). This study is framed in a context in which, in Spain as in many other countries in the European Union, indifference towards the political class has substantially increased. In fact, this same barometer notes that Spanish citizens consider the political situation of their country to

be “extremely bad” (42.5%) and does not forecast an improvement in this perception (CIS, 2016, p. 2).

Faced with this scenario, Law 19/2013, of 9 December, on Transparency, Access to Public Information and Good Governance was published in Spain. In its prologue, this document extols transparency, access to public information and the rules of good governance as “the fundamental axes for all political action” (España, 2013, p. 97924). And it specifies:

Only when the action of public officials are subjected to scrutiny, when citizens can find out how the decisions affecting them are taken, how public funds are managed and under what criteria our institutions act will we be able to talk of the start of a process in which authorities start to represent a society that is critical, exacting and demands participation from the authorities” (España, 2013, p. 97924).

This law has already been transposed to nearly every Spanish autonomous community, such as Catalonia, which after a year approved its own autonomous law – Law 19/2014 (Generalitat of Catalonia, 2014).

Set up in 2012, the Mapa Infoparticipa (Infoparticipate Map) is an online platform developed with the aim of collaborating in rectifying the lack of Spanish legislation on transparency. The main aim of this project—which was extended in a preliminary phase to the autonomous communities of Catalonia, The Canary Islands, Madrid, Andalusia, Aragon and Galicia and currently to all other autonomous communities in Spain— was to assess the information using certain indicators so that

public administrations could improve their communicative practices and provide transparent, complete and comprehensible information so that the public can exercise its legitimate right to democratic control and the evaluation of the institutions.

In this article, we present the results of the application of two of the main groups of indicators used in this Map to assess how city councils inform of their management and to evaluate the citizen participation tools they provide their fellow citizens. The results relate to the 233 municipals with more than 20,000 inhabitants from the 6 autonomous communities analysed in the Map until April 7 2015 prior to the municipal elections that took place in May and the coming into force of the Law of Transparency.

Starting from the basis that in Spain the regulations on transparency and good governance are new, the main objective of the research project on which this article is based is for public administrations to improve their communications practices so that citizens can monitor and evaluate actions taken by governments. This is due to the fact that in order to have solid and informed political participation it is necessary to have high-quality information, that is, information which is uncontaminated, complete and comprehensible. The analysis was carried out using 39 indicators derived from the following 4 research questions: 1) Who are the political representatives in this case? 2) How do they manage public resources? 3) How do they inform citizens about management practices? and, finally, 4) What information and procedures do they offer to encourage political and citizen participation? In this article, we present the results of the last two research questions.

We take as a starting point the belief that research in Social Sciences must provide innovative solutions to new social problems. In this sense, the Infoparticipa methodology is conceived as a civic audit on the transparency of public administrations.

### **Municipal communication. The Approaches Taken**

City councils represent the most direct route in the relationship between citizens and public administrations. They are the gateway for the majority of petitions from a municipal's citizens to their political representatives, who in turn are obliged to deal with, manage and process them, whether within the same local government or by turning to other institutions. In this regard, as noted by Campillo-Alhama (2012, p. 1036), "the citizen should be informed of all those administrative actions and initiatives that may affect their condition as a citizen". In this regard:

Transparency is a basic democratic ideal and its role in the public setting involves public administrations having the obligation to disclose general interest information to the citizenship, who pay for the resources needed by the administration and thus have the right to know how these resources are employed (Gandía, Marrahí & Huguet, 2016, p. 29).

However, the starting point of the analysis of local government communication is not always the same. Ramió (1999) and Campillo-Alhama (2012) present two different theoretical orientations to understand the corporate culture of public organisations. On the one hand,

We are faced with neo-corporate tendencies, based on the economy, effectiveness and efficiency of public apparatuses, which propose the clientization of citizens and, on the other, with neo-public tendencies, which

place special emphasis on issues such as the repoliticization of public offices, the rationalization and control of services outsourcing, citizen participation and ethics in public administration (Campillo-Alhama, 2012: 1037).

In relation to the second perspective, in the current context of the knowledge and information society (Castells, 2009), the combination of e-government, opportunities arising from web 2.0 and mobiles technologies, initiatives that favour better governmental practices and the desire of the public to have greater transparency open new opportunities to create more open, transparent, effective and efficient communication between administrations and citizens (Bertot, Jaeger & Grimes, 2010).

Although Ramió (1999) highlights the unequal weight of the two perspectives, in which until the early 2000s the neo-corporate trends represented the majority of the existing literature and were the source of inspiration for many governmental units, it is also true that the growing public awareness against corruption and in favour of governmental transparency (Lizcano, 2010; Villoria & Jiménez, 2012) contributes to valuing other public administration management models that are much more in line with neo-public proposals that defend a participative democracy and equal opportunities (Pina, Torres & Royo, 2007; Pina, Torres & Royo, 2010). Therefore, “citizens no longer have to be passive consumers of political propaganda, government spin or mass media news, but are instead actually enabled to challenge discourses, share alternative perspectives and publish their own opinions” (Loader & Mercea, 2011, p. 759).

It is this perspective of the analysis of local communication that forms the basis of this investigation. The digital revolution, which has given rise to the Internet society,

should be seen as a new relational space between governments and citizens in which the accountability processes and the encouragement of citizens as an integral part of governments' decision-making processes should form the basis for forging relationships of trust and cooperation between public administrations and the public. Moreover, in a democratic context, public representatives are obliged to foster an equal opportunity society and information that makes it easy for the plural public —men and women of any age, condition, origin, capacity, and need— to exercise their rights in a fully democratic society.

### ***Communication, transparency and technology***

“The adoption of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has become a global trend in public administration” (Pina, et al., 2010, p.3). This means that organisations —including administrations— can easily provide more resources (content syndication, widgets, mashups) and new platforms (blogs, wiki pages or social networks) to communicate with those around them (Cameron, 2004; Loader & Mercea, 2011; Bonsón, Torres, Royo & Flores, 2012; Bertot, Jaeger & Grimes, 2012).

In a society increasingly preoccupied by corruption and transparency, the implementation of ICTs in public administrations has entailed a redefinition of their activities on two fronts: on the one hand, as noted by Bonsón, et al. (2012, p. 126), they enable the redistribution of contents to increase its visibility even though this is done through unidirectional channels (for example, via content syndication); on the other, social networks have enabled social dialogue to be opened with citizens in order to seek their collaboration and commitment. (Pina, et al., 2007, p. 450).



Greater social dialogue is directly proportional to greater transparency. In recent years, e-government has been associated with a greater access to information, the fostering of transparency, accountability and the fight against corruption (Bertot, et al., 2010 and 2012; Pina, et al., 2007 and 2010). Cameron (2004, p. 59) states: “Accountability is an important element of good governance. It involves being answerable for decisions or actions, often to prevent the misuse of power and other forms of inappropriate behaviour”. Various studies associate the lack of transparency with an increased risk of corruption, bad governmental practice, the benefit of lobby groups and the peddling of political favours, political opportunism, the manipulation of public bidding processes and mistrust regarding the management of public resources (Stiglitz, 2002; Piotrowski & Van Ryzin, 2007; Anderson, 2009; Cuillier & Piotrowski, 2009; Dawes, 2010; Kolstad & Wiig, 2009; Bertot, et al., 2012). For example, Bertot, et. al. (2012, p. 78) adopt an iterative strategy that involves the content analysis of official documents and website analysis of US federal agencies to offer a multiple perspective “on government transparency efforts, the role of ICTs and social media in these efforts and the ability of e-government initiatives to foster collaborative transparency through embedded ICTs and social media”. Although the authors identify several roles that social media can play to promote transparency and fight corruption, they also suggest that more research is needed in this field in the future (Bertot, et. al., 2012, p. 86-87).

Web 2.0 has become, from an administrative point of view, a legitimizer of government action by associating it with an improvement in its transparency (Gandía, et al., 2016). From a point of view of citizens, it has become an ideal environment to establish bidirectional communication with their local governments in the understanding

that accountability and citizen empowerment are indisputable signs of a society's democratic quality (Cameron, 2004). Bertot, et al. (2012, p. 86) explain that ICTs provide three basic opportunities to revolutionize forms of governance: encouraging citizen participation and commitment, fostering the co-production of contents between local governments and their citizens and, finally, crowdsourcing in the search for solutions and innovations to social challenges. As Bonsón, et al. (2012, p. 131) conclude, "the introduction of ICTs without the corresponding changes in the systems of leadership, public policy and model of governance do not result in a more consultative, participative, transparent government". Between February and March 2010, these same authors analysed 75 websites of the most representative cities in the EU-15. Specifically in Spain, they focused on Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Seville and Zaragoza.

In the European context, Pina, et al. (2007) assessed the level of local e-government developments based on four different dimensions: transparency, interactivity, usability and website maturity. They worked with a research sample made up of "the websites of the regions or other sub-national level administrations and the five biggest cities of the 15 EU countries" (Pina, et al., 2007, p. 454). In total, 319 local and regional European websites were analysed. They concluded:

E-government has huge potential to contribute to the modernization of government. In order to increase the contribution of websites to increasing transparency, accountability and openness, and to alter the bureaucratic relationship between government and citizens, governments and policy-makers would do well to strengthen the interactivity of their web sites (Pina, et al., 2007, p. 467).

These same authors, in another analysis of 75 websites of European cities carried out in 2006 and published in 2010, ratified their position:

Citizens expect ICTs to increase transparency, empowering them to monitor government performance more closely, and bring about a broader interaction between citizens and governments. However, the websites analysed are predominantly non-interactive, which is limiting e-government potential to transform the relationship between citizens and public administration (Pina, et al., 2010, p. 16-17).

Specifically, in Norway Liste & Sorensen (2015) demonstrated that “domestication efforts vary a lot across local governments”. However, all 430 Norwegian local government websites mapped and analysed engage in domestication. In this sense, the authors “identify as potential domestication outcomes three ideal types of website assemblages: information, client and citizen assemblages” (Liste & Sorensen, 2015, p. 733). In their research, “domestication may be seen as the process through which an artefact becomes associated with practices, meanings and other artefacts in the construction of intersecting large and small networks” (Sorensen, 2006, p. 47).

In the US, Garret & Jensen (2011, p. 177) examine “how US elected officials’ interactions with neighborhood groups, business interests and other stakeholders are shaped by their use of the Internet and by characteristics of local e-government infrastructure”. This study, carried out on a random sample of 316 North-American cities with populations of over 10,000, highlights that “Internet use is associated with a significant increase in contact with stakeholders and with increasingly diverse types of

communication patterns” (Garret & Jensen, 2011, p. 177). However, Garret & Jensen (2011, p. 192-193) conclude:

Citizens and other groups are finding ways to use Internet technologies to make themselves heard in the policy process, and there is no evidence that political elites are benefiting at the expense of those with less power. But for proponents of a strong democracy, in which citizens can play a more profound role in the execution of government power, it is still too early to tell whether these technologies are a blessing or a curse.

Equally, in 2012 Ganapati and Reddick (2014) conducted another survey and 14 in-depth interviews with chief administrative officers in US municipalities (110) with populations of over 100,000 to assess their perceptions of adopting open government along three dimensions: transparency, participation and collaboration. These authors concluded the following (Ganapati and Reddick, 2014, p. 383):

In terms of the three pillars of open government, transparency efforts have largely focused on fiscal transparency and providing other local government information online [...]. As participatory tools, social media and GIS are used extensively by local governments, but mainly for outreach purposes [...]. In the area of collaboration, most of the respondents reported a high degree of local government interaction with citizens and business.

### ***Transparency in the Spanish Administration. A growing area of investigation***

Local communication in Spain, pre and post Web 2.0, has been widely analysed from a perspective centred on the issuer (Moragas, 2002; Canel, 2007; Rubio & Iriso, 2010; Sanders, Canel & Holtz-Bacha, 2011; Serrat, Roma, San Eugenia, Ginesta & Roura ,

2013). Of these, the study carried out by Salvador (2004) is the most interesting. They present a comparative report on the state of the websites of Catalan city councils between 2000 and 2003—which increased from 61.73% to 77.91%—, distinguishing between *city council* webpages when these contained only institutional and administrative information, and *municipal* websites when the information was of a more sociocultural character (geography, history, population etc.).

These researchers structured their website analysis into four areas: contents, design, management and relational. With regard to this article, particular attention should be paid to the contents and relational areas. In three years, online application processes and communication spaces between administrations and their citizens (surveys, forums etc.) increased considerably, although waiting times for answers from local governments continued to be a problem. Moreover, at the relational level, there was an improvement in the relationship between city councils and local administrations through links to their websites, while the autonomy of municipal websites from supramunicipal entities also grew (33% of the websites had their own servers) (Salvador, 2004, p. 41).

However, as has been discussed in the previous section, transparency and public communication have been two associated areas of study, especially when citizens are the focus of the analysis of local communication. As Cameron (2004, p. 59) summarises: “Public accountability is an important characteristic of modern democratic governments”.

In Spain, a Web 2.0 Disclosure Index to measure the Web 2.0 presence of Spanish city councils and the information disclosed by them on these media, (Gandía, et al., 2016, p. 28) was published, which analysed 145 Spanish municipals that in 2012 had more than 50,000 inhabitants. This study concluded: “The use of the Web 2.0 tools has an essentially ornamental focus, and thus it is necessary to increase the content disclosed, especially at the information level” (Gandía, et al., 2016, p. 28). Moreover, they noted: “City councils which obtain better scores for the Web 1.0 Disclosure Indexes also have better scores in the Web 2.0 settings, but are more focused on promotional issues than on disclosing information about the entity’s management” (Gandía, et al., 2016, p. 37).

## **Methodology**

The methodology used in this investigation is based on that employed in studies carried out between 2007 and 2011 by the same research team as in this article. In said research, the criteria, methodologies and key tools were defined for encouraging participation of the citizens on democratic control, considering public administrations as essential sources of information.

The methodology consisted of a preliminary phase in which the institutional websites of city councils were analysed; the heads of communication were subsequently contacted and advised to improve their websites. In this first phase, 39 indicators were analysed that were derived from four questions we considered essential: Who are the political representatives? How do they manage collective resources? How do they inform about the management? And, what tools do they provide for participation?

The indicators are formulated in such a way that the answers can only be positive when information is available and negative when none is published or when it is incomplete or inadequate, taking into account factors such as accessibility. Both the indicators and the way in which they were evaluated have been published on the project website to allow for transparency and corroboration. The results are available on the website and are presented in georeferenced form in a map linked to a database that includes graphic resources such as the “infometer”, which automatically represents the results of the evaluation in the form of colours ranging from white (less than 25% positive indicators), through yellow (from 25% to 50%), bright red (from 50% to 75%) to dark red (greater than 75%).

This procedure is being applied in 6 regions of Spain thanks to the effort of an extended group of researchers from different universities. Each research team monitored the municipalities of their region during the first three months of 2015. Ensuring the reliability of data, the list of indicators and evaluation guidelines with criteria applied in the evaluation of each indicator can be consulted on the Map’s website. This document has been compiled considering that evaluators have homogeneous criteria; its aims are to inform politicians and the public officials responsible for the analysed websites of the criteria they are to be evaluated with and to allow all citizens to contrast evaluation data with their assessments. Thus, each indicator is developed with the following three sections: (a) information, theme and content; (b) location on the website; and (c) recommendations.

Evaluators analyse the websites and enter data on the platform using the content manager, the above documents being available as a resource. Another tool has also been

incorporated so that before data are published they can be contrasted by an expert responsible for quality control of the evaluation.

In the second phase, the research team sent the results of their evaluation — which were already published and freely consultable on the website— to the city councils. Contact was established and the results obtained were compared with city authorities to avoid any errors or omissions. Reports were then sent out and distributed to the media. This allowed the technical directors of the local governments to carry out improvements in the information contained on their websites, which were shown in later evaluations. The research team offered to help resolve errors detected; improvements carried out are periodically published on the project website.

In this article, we present the results of the application of group 3 and 4 indicators (how they inform about the management, and what tools they provide for participation) in 6 Spanish autonomous communities with a selection of 233 city councils with more than 20,000 inhabitants.

### ***Indicators***

The indicators established to evaluate websites are based on basic information and the way to validate them is unambiguous. To determine them, Spanish legislation in force at the start of the investigation was employed (*Local Government Regulatory Law 7/1985*).

With regard to the validation of the indicators, we chose to draft them in the form a question such that the answer is “yes” or “no” (this information is provided/this tool exists). In this way, neither the indicators nor the way of validating them was



questioned by the city councils' heads of communications. Table 1 shows the group of indicators relative to the third level:

**[Table 1 near here]**

Table 2 shows the indicators relating to the fourth level:

**[Table 2 near here]**

Each municipal represents one analysis unit. In addition to the indicators listed, the following variables of each city council were also collected: percentage indicator compliance, number of inhabitants region, gender and political affiliation of the Mayor.

### ***Sample***

The results sample presented in this article (Table 3) consists of 233 municipals of more than 20,000 inhabitants of 6 Spanish autonomous communities. Table 3 shows the distribution of these municipals:

**[Table 3 near here]**

The results presented in this article were obtained from the last evaluation carried out in April 7 2015. The results are organised according to the number of inhabitants (from 20,000 to 50,000; from 50,000 to 100,000; more than 100,000). As a result, the city councils with the largest populations have more technical and economic resources to comply with the indicators.

## **1. Results**

Table 4 shows the compliance with the first part of the indicators regarding information for participation shown in relation to how the management of collective resources is reported.

**[Table 4 near here]**

The results shown in the above table are widely divergent in relation to this group of indicators. Although the percentage of information available on local government websites is high, these figures decrease by 15% when referring to the actions of government members in terms of government management and accountability. In a more qualitative analysis, we observe that this information is mainly based on aspects related to the promotion of the government team and their more visible actions such as the inauguration of public works or the presence of representatives in various acts than on information to enable the public to establish control in government policies. There is therefore very little information that allows for public debate on government management and accountability.

However, the result that shows the lack of democratic culture of municipal website information managers is the percentage information compliance relating to the actions of the members of opposition, which in those municipals with 20,000 to 50,000 inhabitants does not even reach 10%, while the rest do not reach 30%. There is therefore a clear prioritisation on the part of the political and communication officers toward members of the government over other councillors, demonstrating a political opportunism that results in the contamination of public information and public mistrust.

The percentage is also extremely low (less than 50% in large municipals and less than 26% in those with between 20,000 and 50,000 inhabitants) for data that compares the information from members of the government, the opposition members and technicians, preventing the public from having information about the political debate

between governors and the opposition, and allowing politicians to avoid having to respond via the media to the decisions and actions they take. It should be taken into account that in the current journalistic context, in which statement journalism predominates and in which the most used media sources are official and institutional sources, this information is usually used by the mainstream press and television to report on the actions of city council governments, which results in even greater contamination of public debate and transparency.

In relation to indicator 5 concerning the profile of the contractor, despite the fact that this is obligatory information in accordance with Law 11/2017, of 22 June, governing citizens' electronic access to public services, in the case of municipalities of 20,000 to 50,000 inhabitants, this figure does not reach 100%, with 2 city councils failing to comply with this aspect.

Table 5 presents the results of the indicators relating to the procedures provided on municipal websites for citizens' participation in the democratic control process.

**[Table 5 near here]**

Some of the indicators from this group concern essential aspects for citizens to find out about their municipalities and to evaluate the actions of their representatives, such as data regarding the municipality and the registered population. The indicators always exceed 74% compliance, with higher percentages in municipalities with more than 50,000 inhabitants. Moreover, more than 85% of city councils provide historic data about their city.

With regard to the information concerning social and institutional activities, once again most of the websites provide an agenda of municipal and civic activities, reaching 100% in the case of municipals of more than 100,000 inhabitants, although the figures are lower for the publication of a directory of municipal entities.

In relation to the public participation indicators, these range from the provision of digital spaces with tools and services through to active participation, which implies that mechanisms for joint decision-making and shared management are already available, advancing the forms of plebiscitary democracy through to participative democracy that involve citizens in administrative decisions.

Thus, the results for the group of indicators relating to citizens using the Internet to contact members of the government or members of the opposition are very negative. In the case of municipals with less than 50,000 inhabitants, less than 50% of the municipals provide the email addresses of members of the government, while only 26.38% publish the email addresses of the opposition, figures that improve slightly with the size of the municipal but which remain unacceptably low.

In this regard, there are a large number of corporations in which citizens are unable to contact their public representatives, not even via email. Furthermore, approximately half the municipals do not provide any contact details of the corporation's head of communication, leaving citizens completely neglected and without any possibility of contacting and holding accountable municipal governors.

The result is more positive only in the case of social networks, where compliance is always greater than 72%, demonstrating that city councils are following a trend of fostering a relationship via social networks over more direct contact. However, a more detailed analysis of these social networks reveal that basically, and only in certain exceptions, this is limited to publishing links to news items on the website and on the whole do not interact with the public. Therefore, the possibility that Web 2.0 tools are being used for public participation is scant, neither for following municipal action and even less so for budgetary control. As can be seen in Table 5, these indicators yield more negative and low results.

Formally, rules regarding civic participation are published by all municipals with more than 100,000 inhabitants, but only in 61.22% of those with between 50,000 and 100,000 and in less than 50% in the rest; results are lower for information concerning the mechanisms for physical participation. Finally, all local councils with more than 100,000 inhabitants and most of the others provide applications to communicate incidents on public roads, complaints and suggestions, a tool that forms part of the requirements for e-Governance.

**[Table 6 near here]**

In relation to the sex of the mayor (table 6), no differences were noted between the indicator compliance in terms of whether a man or woman held the post. This demonstrates entrenched information management practices by municipal politicians that do not depend on raising awareness of gender and, as can be seen in table 7 or for aspects related to ideology or political tendency.

**[Table 7 near here]**

If we take into account the three national parties —United Left, Spanish Socialist Workers' Party and the Popular Party—, we observe no significant differences in terms of the political ideology, since the three have similar results.

If we observe the other parties, we see that those with higher scores are the territorial parties of the autonomous community of Catalonia (Republican Left of Catalonia, Convergence and Union, Catalonia Initiative, and Socialists' Party of Catalonia). This is related to the validity of the methodological tool we present in this article.

As of 2015, three phases of evaluations have been carried out in Catalonia. Publishing the results of the analysis has become an incentive to improve, an incentive that, moreover, has been fostered through the concession of seal of quality with the backing of the Generalitat of Catalonia, the Infoparticipa (Infoparticipate) Seal, awarded to those municipals that obtained the highest scores. To date, two have been awarded in Catalonia, for which technical advice of the city councils has been provided. Thus, in the three evaluations carried out of the 947 municipals in Catalonia in the periods 2012-2013, 2013-2014 and 2014-2015, there has been a significant increase in the number of city councils that exceed 50% of the indicators, rising from 64 in 2012 to 182 in 2015.

At the same time, the number of municipals that failed has dropped from 875 in the first evaluation (92.4%) to 815 in the second (86.06%) and 762 in the third (80.46%). Moreover, 25 Catalanian municipals currently comply with 100% of the indicators, rising from 3 in the first evaluation and 20 in the second.

## Discussion and conclusions

The project Infoparticipa (Infoparticipate) was established before the approval in Spain of the Law of Transparency of December 2013, to encourage public administrations to improve their communicative practices in the context of a lack of tradition of governmental transparency, which coincides with an increasing demand for greater democracy by citizens (Loader & Mercea, 2011; Villoria, 2014). As different studies referred to in the theoretical framework show (Liste & Sorensen, 2015; Gandía, et al., 2016), this is evidenced by the lack of information on municipal websites, which do not make the best use of the Web 2.0 resources available despite the fact that the proximity of local governments and the widespread concern regarding governance and municipal services at this level make communication between public administration and citizens even more necessary.

The results presented in this article reveal that local Spanish administrations still have a lot of work to do if they want to strengthen the bilateral relationship with their citizens, the accountability of their politicians and transparency. Although it appears evident that *citizens' participation* and *ethics in public management* (Campillo-Alhama, 2012) are increasingly important for city councils—especially in those communities, such as Catalonia, that have had more than one evaluation—, it is also certain that the communicative practice of the organisations analysed here still overemphasise government action, providing little space for the opposition or municipal technicians. In this regard, municipal websites could still be considered an informative platform of the government team rather than a space of journalistic practice and an area in which to create real social dialogue between the government, the opposition and the public (Bonsón, et al., 2012). In this sense, Spanish municipal websites can mostly be associated with the information assemblage established by Liste & Sorensen (2015, p.

744): the information assemblage reflects a configuration of users as information consumers, rather than e-clients or e-citizens.

Placing value on accountability is still a pending issue for most city councils. For example, although they have made efforts to strengthen the mechanisms for public participation, less than 50% of the municipals of fewer than 50,000 inhabitants analysed here provide the email addresses of the members of government. In this regard, we are able to confirm how, even within local administrations and with the supposed interactivity and immediacy of the Internet, there is still a clear distancing between administrations and their citizens. According to this, Gandía et. al. (2016, p. 37) state that the public administration faces a significant challenge if it is to improve the relationship between the two actors and both increase citizen participation and the level of trust these citizens have towards their politicians.

Nevertheless, social networks are attempting to correct this situation, even if their use by citizens is too passive, mainly limited to being administrative loudspeakers. The majority of local governments do not maximise the bidirectionality of social networks, leaving the public distanced from the social dialogue that fosters collaboration and the commitment of citizens in the decision-making process (Bertot, et al., 2012).

It should be mentioned, however, that Catalonia presents better indicators and, in this regard, is also the region in which city councils have undergone three evaluations since the beginning of this study thanks to the agreement with the Generalitat of Catalonia, which gave rise to the Infoparticipa (Infoparticipate) Seal. We can therefore



confirm that local administrations are not averse to change if the potential gained by a public administration by being transparent and cooperative and that encourages dialogue with citizens is put into context and explained to them pedagogically. The fear of change is always present in the corporative culture of public administrations. However, routines can be changed if it is understood that this change is positive for the growth of public administrations and the fostering of a cooperative relationship with their public.

The new 2013 law on transparency, which brings with it new obligations and challenges for public administrations, makes external evaluation even more necessary to assess how city councils have adapted to the new legal and civic pressures. The study presented here confirms that not only is it necessary that the documentation required by law be available on municipal websites, but also that this information should be understandable and easily accessible so that the public can control the actions of its public representatives and participate in the democratic process.

This study also presents opportunities for future investigations. The work carried out here has allowed us to confirm that politicians and technicians do not have the standardised criteria to improve the information on municipal websites. This situation may improve if those in charge of communication have the new criteria, procedures, methods and models available so that complex information is intelligible for the plural public. Future studies should therefore identify the good practices in the field of information to facilitate monitoring the actions of local governments and accountability in order to define work methods and design standardized models that facilitate the

modification of current practices and that foster a new culture aimed at encouraging an active role for citizens.

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## Tables

**Table 1: How do they inform about the management of collective resources?**

22. Is information available on their website?
23. Is information available about government members' actions relating to accountability?
24. Is information available about actions by the members of the opposition relating to the government's control of management?
25. Is information available in which the information from members of the government, the opposition and technicians, if any, is compared?
26. Are the profiles of the contractor and the contractees and the concessions signed by the corporation with other entities, businesses or individuals published?

**Table 2: What procedures are offered for the participation of citizens in the democratic control process?**

27. Is any information provided regarding the status of the municipal: information regarding the municipality itself, the registered population and social diversity, economic and cultural activities?
28. Is historic information about the municipal provided?
29. Are the email addresses of the members of government available on the municipal website?
30. Are the email addresses of the members of the opposition available on the website?
31. Is access to the corporation's social networks provided on the website?
32. Is information about the rules for citizen participation available?

33. Is information available on the website regarding other participatory mechanisms: regional councils, city councils, sectorial councils, etc.?
34. Is an agenda of municipal and civic activities available on the website?
35. Is a directory of the municipal entities available on the website?
36. Are participation tools for the drafting and/or monitoring of the Government Plan, Municipal Action Plan and/or the Strategic Plan available on the website?
37. Are participation tools for the drafting and/or monitoring of the budget or other municipal plans available?
38. Is the public provided with the tools to report incidences on public roads or to make complaints or suggestions?
39. Are the contact details of the corporation's Head of Press, Information and/or Communication provided?

**Table 3. Autonomous communities and municipals analysed**

| <b>Autonomous Communities</b> | <b>N° of local governments with more than 20,000 inhabitants</b> |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Andalusia                     | 82   |
| Aragon                        | 4  |
| The Canary Islands            | 27   |
| Catalonia                     | 64   |
| Galicia                       | 22   |
| Madrid                        | 34   |
| Total                         | 233  |

**Table 4: Indicator compliance of how the management of collective resources is reported according to the number of habitants**

| Indicator   | >20,000 inhabitants |        | >50,000 inhabitants |        | >100,000 inhabitants |       |
|---|---------------------|--------|---------------------|--------|----------------------|-------|
|   | 144 cases           | %      | 49 cases            | %      | 40 cases             | %     |
| 1. Is information available on their website?   | 139                 | 96.52% | 49                  | 100%   | 40                   | 100%  |
| 2 Is information available about government members' actions relating to government management (accountability)?                          | 98                  | 68%    | 42                  | 85.71% | 35                   | 87.5% |
| 3. Is information available about actions by the members of the opposition relating to the government's control of management?            | 13                  | 9.02%  | 12                  | 24.48% | 12                   | 30%   |
| 4. Is information available in which the information from members of the government, the opposition and technicians, if any, is compared? | 37                  | 25.69% | 20                  | 40.81% | 18                   | 45%   |
| 5. Are the profiles of the contractor and the contractees and the concessions signed by   | 142                 | 98.61% | 49                  | 100%   | 40                   | 100%  |

|   |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| the corporation with other entities, businesses or individuals published? |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|

**Table 5: Indicators relating to the procedures available for citizens' participation in democratic control process according to the number of inhabitants**

| Indicator   | >20,000<br>inhabitants |            | >50,000<br>inhabitants |            | >100,000<br>inhabitants |     |
|---|------------------------|------------|------------------------|------------|-------------------------|-----|
|   | 144 cases              | %          | 49 cases               | %          | 40 cases                | %   |
| Is any information provided regarding the status of the municipal: information regarding the municipality itself, the registered population and social diversity, | 107                    | 74.30<br>% | 41                     | 83.67<br>% | 36                      | 90% |

|  |     |         |    |         |    |        |
|--|-----|---------|----|---------|----|--------|
| economic and cultural activities?  |     |         |    |         |    |        |
| Is historic information about the municipal provided?                                    | 128 | 88.88 % | 47 | 95.91 % | 35 | 87.5 % |
| Are the email addresses of the members of government available on the municipal website? | 67  | 46.52 % | 28 | 57.14 % | 26 | 65%    |
| Are the email addresses of the members of the opposition available on the website?       | 38  | 26.38 % | 18 | 36.73 % | 21 | 52.5 % |
| Is access to the corporation's social networks   | 105 | 72.91 % | 44 | 89.79 % | 35 | 87.5 % |

|   |     |         |    |         |    |      |
|---|-----|---------|----|---------|----|------|
| provided on the website?  |     |         |    |         |    |      |
| Is information about the rules for citizen participation available?   | 66  | 45.83 % | 30 | 61.22 % | 40 | 100% |
| Is information available on the website regarding other participatory mechanisms: regional councils, city councils, sectorial councils, etc.? | 62  | 43.05 % | 33 | 67.34 % | 34 | 85%  |
| Is an agenda of municipal and civic activities available on the website?  | 113 | 78.47 % | 45 | 91.83 % | 40 | 100% |
| Is a directory of the   | 92  | 63.88 % | 37 | 75.51 % | 30 | 75%  |

|  |    |        |    |        |    |       |
|--|----|--------|----|--------|----|-------|
| municipal entities available on the website?   |    |        |    |        |    |       |
| Are participation tools for the drafting and/or monitoring of the Government Plan, Municipal Action Plan and/or the Strategic Plan available on the website? | 12 | 8.33%  | 14 | 28.57% | 15 | 37.5% |
| Are participation tools for the drafting and/or monitoring of the budget or other municipal  | 32 | 22.22% | 19 | 38.77% | 17 | 42.5% |

|  |     |         |    |         |    |      |
|--|-----|---------|----|---------|----|------|
| plans available?   |     |         |    |         |    |      |
| Is the public provided with the tools to report incidences on public roads or to make complaints or suggestions? | 121 | 84.02 % | 43 | 87.75 % | 40 | 100% |
| Are the contact details of the corporation's Head of Press, Information and/or Communication provided?           | 73  | 50.69 % | 29 | 59.18 % | 20 | 50%  |

**Table 6: Sex of mayor**

| <b>Sex of mayor</b> | <b>Number</b> | <b>Percentage</b> | <b>Percentage indicator compliance</b> |
|---------------------|---------------|-------------------|--|
| Woman               | 44            | 18.88%            | 57.18%                                 |



|       |     |        |        |
|-------|-----|--------|--------|
| Man   | 189 | 81.11% | 57.07% |
| Total | 233 | 100%   | 57.12% |

**Table 7: Indicator compliance by political party of mayor**

| <b>Political party of mayor</b>  | <b>Number</b> | <b>Percentage indicator compliance</b> |
|----------------------------------|---------------|--|
| Galician Nationalist Bloc        | 2             | 48.78%                                 |
| Canary Islands Coalition         | 10            | 45.83%                                 |
| Convergence and Union            | 29            | 75.69%                                 |
| Republican Left of Catalonia     | 1             | 92.68%                                 |
| Catalonia Initiative-Greens      | 3             | 86.58%                                 |
| United Left                      | 4             | 48.17%                                 |
| New Canarians                    | 2             | 36.59%                                 |
| Andalusian Party                 | 4             | 38.41%                                 |
| Popular Party                    | 105           | 51.38%                                 |
| Spanish Socialist Workers' Party | 40            | 42.43%                                 |
| Socialists' Party of Catalonia   | 26            | 85.92%                                 |
| Terra Galega (Galician Land)     | 1             | 39.45%                                 |
| Others                           | 6             | 69.51%                                 |
| Total                            | 233           | 57.08%                                 |