

Transparency and Quality of Information on Local Administration Websites. Study of the Spanish Case

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Abstract

This article analyses the information and content of Spanish local administration websites following the application of the Law of Transparency. The aim is to analyze in depth issues related to the information available on political representatives, the management of economic resources, information on the municipality and the tools citizens have at their disposal for their participation. The quantitative method analyses the transparency of the city councils individually from a table of widely compared 52 variables (indicators), validating their compliance or not with each during the period February to November 2018. The sample analyzed in this study consists of 605 Spanish municipalities. Although within academic literature debate already exists that focuses primarily on theoretical abstractions, this study allows us to empirically determine whether after the national approval of transparency regulation there really has been an improvement in public information for citizens to be able to hold their local governments accountable. The results indicate that, based on regional and national transparency policies, the situation is better than in the years prior to the law, although there is still much room for improvement, especially in issues related to information regarding the management of economic resources such as budgets, salaries, hiring and subsidies.

Keywords: public communication; citizen participation; internet, transparency, city councils

Introduction

On April 3, 1979, following a long dictatorship the first democratic municipal elections were held in Spain. In this context, both the newly elected political representatives and journalists —communicators of the incipient municipal and academic press offices— advocated the importance of information transparency as a key element in making local public communication an instrument in favor of democracy, cohesion and the promotion of citizen participation in public affairs.

However, it would take another 34 years before the Law of Transparency (2013) was approved. And it was not so much driven by a positive political will as by a defensive reaction in a context of protests against the enormous economic crisis and the innumerable cases of corruption that affected all types of public institutions and that were exposed on a daily basis in the media.

Thus, Spain finally joined, albeit very late, the global trend in favor of government transparency that had begun in the 1950s and that was reinforced between the late 20th century and the first decade of the 21st century, driven by international organizations that spread its benefits, with it eventually being proposed as a human right (Kaufmann & Bellver, 2005). Countries that were pioneering in enacting laws related to transparency included Finland (1951), the United States (1966), Denmark and Norway (1970), and France and the Netherlands (1978). Others took much longer to enact such laws. For example, Belgium did not have a transparency law until 1994, the United Kingdom until 2000, and Switzerland until 2004.

At the time of the application of the Law in Spain, the debate on transparency had already acquired new nuances — as evidenced by President Obama's Memorandum on Transparency and Open Government (2009) —, since digital and online technologies had already facilitated the provision of information and its

reuse for all kinds of purposes. Thus, debates on the possibilities of the Internet in the transparency of local public administrations multiplied (Simelio & Molina, 2014).

In Spain, as in other countries that have been slow to apply this type of legislation (Grassler, 2018), the Law has shown significant limitations in relation to who can request information and also because it fails to consider the right of access to public information as part of the fundamental right to freedom of information (Manfredi, 2014). Moreover, the first analyses of public information on municipal websites following the approval of the Law of Transparency in Spain did not observe either a quantitative or qualitative improvement with respect to the analyses carried out prior to the Law being enacted (Moreno, Molina & Simelio, 2017). However, undoubtedly the Spanish Law of Transparency represents an important advance and is a response to the demand for the right of access to information to promote a change in the behavior and attitudes of local governments.

Furthermore, in drafting the Law considerable importance was given to the political participation of citizens. In this regard, the Internet and associated platforms, combined with e-government, social media and new technologies, have the potential to create a new form of governance and participation of citizens in the construction of democratic policies (Bertot, Jaeger & Grimes, 2010).

Thus, authors such as Garriga (2011), Calvo (2013) and Pina, Torres and Royo (2010) stress the importance of new technologies for the publication of information since they allow the use of appropriate formats to facilitate public understanding. Others have studied how well-used interactivity should be an ally in bringing government closer to citizens and making it accountable (Gandía, Marrahí & Huguet, 2016; Bertot, et. al., 2012). However, it has also been pointed out that not all administrations have the technical and human resources to efficiently implement these new practices (Beltrán & Martínez, 2016; Gértrudix, Gertrudis & Álvarez, 2016).

Although ICTs are generally considered powerful tools for transparency (Cullier & Piotrowski, 2009; Jaeger & Bertot, 2010), a number of studies point out specific issues, such as their role in improving trust in transparent institutions (Kim & Lee, 2012; Welch, Hinnant & Moon, 2005; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006) or as instruments in favor of political participation (da Cruz & Marques, 2014; Stivers, 2008; Bauhr & Grimes 2014; Piotrowski & Bertelli 2010).

Some authors point especially to the benefits of transparency as a barrier against corruption (Anderson, 2009), although as Lindstedt and Naurin (2010) state, for this to happen, the necessary conditions must be met. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that corruption results in disengagement from politics and that it should be avoided as a priority —as King, Feltey and Susel warned in 1998 and something which has been continually repeated by many other authors such as Innes and Booher (2004) or Piotrowski and Bertelli (2010)—, something for which transparency is a necessary element.

However, not all citizens in other countries view transparency with the same interest. Grimmelikhuijsen, Porumbescu, Hong and Im (2013) suggest that in countries where transparency is a recent practice, it is better valued, which explains why Spain is paying close attention to this issue. It is in these contexts where the evaluations of the transparency of public administrations have, therefore, greater value, since this accountability (Cameron, 2004; Giménez, 2012) is perceived as part of this appreciated process.

Other debates address the content that must be published in order for a local government to be considered transparent. Studies that start from the political or legal sciences and from the idea of transparency fundamentally as a preventive element of corruption attach great importance to economic information, such

as budgets and audits. This is the case of studies such as those of da Cruz and others (2015) in Portugal. However, when the purposes are broadened and it is considered that transparency should favor participation, the field of observation changes. At the same time, qualitative aspects gain greater weight because if the information is to be useful to the general public it must be understandable and presented in appropriate formats (Molina, Simelio & Corcoy, 2017).

Although transparency laws often include principles intended to facilitate their use by any public, they are ultimately applied inadequately, since more importance is generally given to the information to be published without concrete specifications with regard to its nature. Consequently, transparency spaces or portals end up being repositories of documents, often too extensive and complex, prepared by experts from different areas of administration without additional information that facilitates their appropriation by affected or interested groups of people. The use of graphical, audiovisual, and cartographic elements etc. is generally insufficient and the proactive activity of reporting on the proceedings of the local government leads to publication routines that are not very useful but easy to carry out, as all that needs to be done is to upload to the web pages official documents that have already been approved.

This does not reduce the problem of information deficit in relation to government management nor, especially, in the activities of the political opposition. Information spaces are suited to the governments of the day who do not easily give voice to other political and social actors (Manfredi, Corcoy & Herranz, 2017). In this article we set out by considering that the information provided by local governments is a basic right that must be based on transparency and good governance. In this regard, citizens must be able to access any type of information that is generated by public entities while carrying out their duties (Giménez, 2012). In relation to political communication studies, we take a "neo-public" perspective that focuses on improving local governmental communication, placing the public at the center and understanding that in democratic societies political representatives must be at the service of citizens by providing them all the information available regarding their management of public resources so that the public can hold them to account. Thus, we believe that research in this field should focus on aspects such as transparency, rationalization, and the control of services and of policy makers, citizen participation and ethics in public management (Campillo, 2012, p. 1037). This perspective runs counter to the predominant theoretical tendencies (Ramíó, 1999), which we could call "neo-corporate" and which focus mainly on research based on the efficiency and effectiveness of public authorities, where citizens are considered "clients" and local governments need to "know how to sell" the information to them, and to the public representative him/herself (Campillo, 2012). Research that focuses on the consideration of politics as a public service currently finds itself in a favorable moment thanks to the possibilities derived from the new transparency laws, mobile technologies, e-government, big data, and open data. Added to this is the aforementioned, namely the demand and awareness of citizens towards greater transparency of administrations and a greater fight against political corruption, fostered by social networks that have allowed citizens to express themselves and to have access to new sources of information not controlled by corporations or large media outlets (Lizcano, 2010; Villoria & Jiménez, 2012). To this can be added the basic right of citizens to know the objectives of local governments and the strategies they follow to achieve them (Rivero, Mora & Flores, 2007).

Regardless, it is interesting to ascertain how these issues discussed today, such as transparency, participation, the organization of municipal offices, and the usefulness and effectiveness of the media so that communication contributes to strengthening democracy at the local level, have been priority issues in

the agenda of municipal organizations over the past 30 years but which remain unresolved. In this regard, despite the fact that transparency and accountability in the governmental sphere are a priority objective in different administrations, these mechanisms and practices often focus on resolving crisis situations (Martínez & Rosende, 2011; Jessop, 2003; Peters, 2000).

This study focuses on municipal councils since it starts from the premise that local governments are the most direct and closest source of relations between citizens and public organizations. Thus, the starting objective is to analyze whether local governments make maximum use of the potential of web 2.0 and social networks to provide quality transparent information and to encourage e-participation, taking into account the requirements established by Spanish Law 19/2013, of December 9, of Transparency, Access to Public Information and Good Government.

Authors such as Bonsón et al. (2012) warn that despite the fact that most local governments are using the possibilities and tools of web 2.0 to foster transparency and participation, they are not being used to their full potential. Nor, in the field of public information, as we have already warned, has digital transformation been made use of at the local level. A study by Manfredi et al. (2017) on the news published on Spanish municipal websites between 2011 and 2016 revealed that the Internet has allowed an increase in the publication and dissemination of information without an improvement in its quality in the sense of interest public.

In relation to the use of social networks by local governments, other studies on Catalonia (Simelio & Molina 2014), Castile and León (Herrero et al., 2017) and Portugal (Cardoso & Muñoz, 2015) show how a model has been imposed based on the unidirectionality of communication and in which those responsible for corporate websites limit themselves to publishing links to government news without encouraging dialogue with citizens or increasing transparency. Gandía et al. (2016) obtained similar results when analyzing local governments throughout Spain, explaining how the use of web 2.0 tools and information on digital transparency has been mainly ornamental and focused on promotional aspects.

These results are validated at the European level with a study by Pina, Torres and Royo (2010) on the web pages of the local governments of the European Union. Thus, the authors explain how the implementation of ICT initiatives to bring citizens closer to administrations has not been exploited to its full potential.

Materials and Methods

This article starts from the main hypothesis that the Law of Transparency, enacted in Spain in 2013, has had a positive effect in improving the information provided by Spanish local government websites, but that these still do not provide sufficiently transparent quality information.

The main objectives of this study were to answer the two following questions:

- (1) What information do the institutional websites of Spanish local governments provide regarding government and council administration?
- (2) What tools and mechanisms do they provide for citizen participation and for social agents to obtain information?

To answer these questions, 52 indicators were formulated and adapted to the Spanish Law of Transparency (2013) and the various subsequent regional laws. These indicators were then organized into two large groups: transparency for the council and information for participation. These indicators can be found in the results section of this article.

The validation of the indicators is binary (yes/no). An indicator is positively scored if the information is found on the website or if there is information regarding the participation procedure about which the indicator asks. In addition, a coding guide establishes the characteristics that the information must have in order for the indicator to be validated, taking into account aspects such as its updating, accessibility, references, approval by the corresponding bodies, etc.

The evaluation of the web pages that we present in this article was carried out between February and November 2018 by a team of researchers throughout the Spanish territory. One of the research team members was responsible for quality control in order to ensure that all the indicators were analyzed according to the same criteria.

Once the analysis was completed, the results were sent to the technical and political leaders of the municipalities analyzed so that they could compare the data and, based on their feedback, the results were revised where necessary. This guaranteed the validity and reliability of the method and the results obtained. In addition, in order to perform a multivariate analysis information regarding the number of inhabitants of the municipality, the gender of the mayor, the autonomous community to which the municipality belongs and the political party that governed the municipality was also gathered from each website analyzed. The results presented in this article were processed with the IBM SPSS Statistics 23.0 program. These are presented in the form of tables showing the number of references and percentages to optimize the space of this article.

Sample

The sample that comprises this study is shown in Tables 1 and 2:

Table 1: Municipalities comprising the sample

	Municipal	% of total
Andalusia	154	25.5%
Aragon	13	2.1%
Canary Islands	42	6.9%
Catalonia	121	20.0%
Valencian Community	97	16.0%
Galicia	54	8.9%
Madrid	51	8.4%
Murcia	31	5.1%
Basque Country	42	6.9%
Total	605	100.0%

Source: Authors

Table 2: Sample according to size of municipalities.

	Frequency	Percentage
10,000 to 50,000 inhabitants	489	80.8%
50,001 to 100,000 inhabitants	66	10.9%
More than 100,000 inhabitants	50	8.3%
Total	605	100.0%

Source: Authors

The sample was selected based on the data on Spanish municipalities available in the municipal register of the Spanish Institute of Statistics (INE). Municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants were considered sufficiently large samples; in addition, their good practices could serve as a reference and information guideline for the smaller municipalities since the latter have fewer human or budgetary resources. For the selection of autonomous communities, the following aspects were taken into account:

- The most populated communities (Madrid, Andalusia, and Catalonia) and others with low population density such as Aragon.
- The communities with the largest cities in Spain, including the Community of Madrid, the home of the capital Madrid.
- The historical communities with their own co-official language (Catalonia, the Basque Country, Galicia, and Valencia) and other communities where Spanish is the only official language.
- The representativeness of Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Cantabrian peninsular communities and one island community (The Canary Islands).

Results

Following the analysis of the results by groups of indicators (Table 3), it was observed that none of the 5 groups exceeded 56%, indicating a medium-low level of global transparency. The group of indicators that analyze the management of collective resources yielded the best-weighted percentage result, while the group that analyzes the management of economic resources yielded the lowest.

Table 3: Average of indicators met, by sub-group

Subgroup	Average	%
Who are the political representatives?	5.53 (of 11)	50.27%
How are collective resources managed?	4.97 (of 9)	55.23%
How are economic resources managed: budgets, salaries, hiring, subsidies etc.?	6.65 (of 18)	36.95%
What information is provided about the municipality and the management of collective resources?	3.75 (of 7)	53.57%
What tools are provided for citizen participation?	2.61 (of 7)	37.29%

Source: Authors

Once contextualized, the first result that can be highlighted is that most of the leaders are men, who significantly outnumber women. In this regard, of the 605 cases (case = municipality) that comprise the sample, 73.3% are headed by a man, while 26.3% are headed by a woman.

In addition, municipalities run by women show a higher level of transparency; this is mainly observed in the group of indicators whose compliance ranges between 76% and 100%. Taking this range as a reference, of all the municipalities run by women mayors, 19.5% fall within that range, while only 9.2% of all city councils run by a man do so. Moreover, in the overall result the municipalities led by women yield better results, with 50.68% compliance of indicators compared to 38.13% for those municipalities where the mayor is a man. Regarding the analysis, the first group of indicators evaluates the transparency of the council and within this, the first subgroup (Table 4) analyzes the political representatives. In general terms, it is one of the three subgroups of indicators that exceed, on average, 50% of validations, although this is due to the fact that basic information about the mayor or mayoress is provided in almost all cases (indicator 1: 91.4%). However, less information is provided about the rest of the governmental representatives (indicator 3) and in particular, members of the opposition (indicator 5), with a difference of more than 20%; therefore, the opposition suffers greater invisibility than those who govern. When the publication of the CVs of the policy makers is analyzed (indicators 2, 4 and 6), the same correlation is observed but with much lower percentages.

This first subgroup shows a lower percentage of compliance of indicators that analyze economic issues such as the publication of the salaries of political representatives, as well as the publication of statements of activities and assets of elected officials.

Table 4: Transparency of the council: The political representatives.

Indicator		Degree of compliance
1	Is basic information about the mayor or mayoress provided: name and surname, photo, and political party?	91.4%
2	Is basic information provided about the mayor or mayoress: biography and/or cv?	58.7%
3	Is basic information provided about the representatives that form part of the government: name and surname, photo, and political party?	73.6%
4	Is basic information provided about the representatives that are part of the government: biography and/or cv?	44.1%
5	Is basic information provided about the representatives who do not form part of the government: name and surnames, photo, and political party?	52.5%
6	Is basic information provided about the representatives who do not form part of the government: biography and/or cv?	28.6%
7	Are the salaries (monthly and/or annual) of the political representatives published?	33.2%
8	Are statements of activities and assets of elected officials published?	34.7%
9	Is the mayor's institutional agenda published?	34.5%
10	Are the contact details of government members published on the website (email and/or Twitter account and/or Facebook and/or website and/or phone number etc.)?	62.6%
11	Are the contact details of members of the opposition published on the website (email and/or Twitter account and/or Facebook and/or website and/or phone number etc.)?	38.5%

Source: Authors

In the second subgroup of variables (Transparency of the council: management of collective resources), the degree of transparency varies considerably according to the indicator analyzed (Table 5). This subgroup includes one of the indicators that shows a higher degree of compliance: the publication of municipal ordinances (20: 93.2%). The publication of urban plans (19: 90.1%) also shows a high level of compliance. In contrast, this same group includes one of the indicators that, in global terms, yields the least compliance despite its importance, namely information about accountability (18: 24%).

Table 5: Transparency of the council: How collective resources are managed

Indicator		Degree of compliance
12	Is information provided on the composition of the governing bodies: plenary session, government board and/or informative commissions?	75.5%
13	Is information provided on the competences and work schedule of these governing bodies?	28.8%
14	Is the complete organization chart published with the names and surnames of the officials and their functions?	23.6%
15	Are the announcements of the municipal plenary sessions published with the day's orders prior to the assembly?	62.6%
16	Are the minutes of the municipal plenary sessions published?	59.2%
17	Are the full agreements of the governing board and/or the full minutes published when the governing board acts in full delegation?	41%
18	Is information provided about accountability?	23.3%
19	Is information provided on the Municipal Urban Development Plan (MUDP), General Plan (GP) or other urban planning regulations as well as their specific modifications?	90.1%
20	Are municipal ordinances published?	93.2%

Source: Authors

Regarding the subgroup of indicators that analyze the management of economic resources (Table 6), on the positive side we can highlight the publication of job offers and follow-up of public tenders (28: 70.9%) or the publication of the budget for the current year (21: 69.3%), although without high compliance scores. However, more than half of the indicators in this analysis subgroup show less than 30% compliance and some of them of considerably less so. Foremost among the very low percentages are: the cost of institutional advertising campaigns (38: 13.9%); the publication of the complete list of suppliers, bidders and/or contractors and the economic amount (34: 15%); or the publication of the list of jobs of the council and the salaries of the workforce and city council staff according to the categories (26: 16.2%).

Table 6: Transparency of the council: How economic resources are managed.

Indicator		Degree of compliance
21	Is the budget published by the municipal for the current year and of the autonomous bodies and dependent entities, if any?	69.3%
22	Is information published on the quarterly execution of the current year's budget?	23.1%
23	Are the budgetary modifications carried out published?	31.4%
24	Is information published on compliance with the objectives of budgetary stability and financial sustainability and/or level of indebtedness?	24.6%
25	Is the settlement of the budgets of previous years and/or the general account published?	57.4%
26	Is the list of jobs of the municipal and the salaries of the city council workforce and officials published according to the categories?	16.2%
27	Is the list and the salaries of the directors and the positions of trust published, their functions and their cv?	18.3%
28	Are municipal job vacancies and the development and results of public tenders published?	70.9%
29	Is the general inventory of the municipal's assets published?	45.1%
30	Are all formalized contracts, major and minor, published?	37.3%
31	Are the bids in progress and the composition of the contract awarding committees published?	60.2%
32	Are the minutes of the contract awarding committees published?	45.6%
33	Are the amendments to the formalized contracts and their extensions, cancelled bids and advanced resolutions published?	29.1%
34	Is the complete list of suppliers, bidders and/or contractors and the financial amount published?	15%
35	Is the average payment period to suppliers published?	41.7%
36	Are the subsidies granted, the respective tenders and resolutions published?	29.1%
37	Are the signed agreements published, specifying the parties, their purpose and the economic obligations that may arise, if any?	36.4%
38	Are the costs and characteristics of institutional advertising campaigns published in the media?	13.9%

Source: Authors

Regarding the information available for participation and the information provided regarding the municipality and the management of collective resources (Table 7), the results on average are not bad, although there are significant contrasts. Thus, indicator 39 regarding the publication of news about the activities of the government team reaches 88.3%, which is in contrast to the lack of publications on the activities of the opposition (40: 10.7%). Similarly, the indicator that analyses the publication of news about the municipal

plenary (41: 25.1%) shows low compliance, mainly due to the fact that the city councils are not aware of the need to report on the plenary beyond uploading a video showing it in its entirety. The results are good in terms of publishing historical information about the municipality, its situation, or the activities agenda.

Table 7: Information for participation: What information is provided about the municipality and the management of collective resources?

Indicator	Degree of compliance	
39	Is news, information and/or opinions published on the activities of the members of the government related to the management of the government?	88.3%
40	Is news, information and/or opinions published on the activities of members of the opposition and/or political groups related to the control of government management?	10.7%
41	Is news published on the plenary sessions, the motions presented by the different political groups, debates, and agreements?	25.1%
42	Is historical information published about the municipal?	77.9%
43	Is information provided on the status of the municipal: data on the municipal area, the registered population and social diversity, and economic and cultural activities?	52.7%
44	Is an agenda of municipal and citizen activities provided on the website?	81.2%
45	Are the contact details of the person responsible for the press, information and/or communication of the municipal published?	39.2%

Source: Authors

The last block consists of indicators that analyze the procedures provided by city councils for citizen participation (Table 8). In addition to the poor results of this set of indicators, the most outstanding is a negative result, since indicator 51 (Is the list of services provided (Service Charter) and commitments to the public offered on the website?) yields the lowest compliance percentage among the 52, with only 8.8%.

Table 8: Information for participation: What tools are provided for citizen participation?

Indicator		
46	Is information provided on the website about the regulation of citizen participation or other regulations in this regard?	53.1%
47	Is information provided on the website about other mechanisms or participation entities: territorial councils, city councils, sectoral councils, etc.?	39.2%
48	Are the minutes of the meetings of the other mechanisms or participation entities mentioned in indicator 47 published?	12.9%
49	Is the directory of entities and associations of the municipal and/or the register of stakeholders, if any, available on the website?	46.9%
50	Are consultation and/or participation tools on current topics of local interest provided on the website?	38.5%
51	Is the list of services provided (Service Charter) and commitments to the public provided on the website?	8.8%
52	Are tools provided on the website to evaluate services and to present complaints or suggestions regarding their operation?	62.1%

Source: Authors

The analysis of the level of transparency according to autonomous communities (Table 9) yields a very significant result, namely that Catalonia is the region with greater transparency, since 47.9% of its municipalities show a level of compliance ranging between 76% and 100%. In contrast, Galicia's low level of compliance stands out: more than half of its municipalities show a percentage compliance rate of between 0% and 25%.

However, it is not the only community in which no municipality exceeds 75%, as the same is observed in Aragon, the Canary Islands, and the Basque Country. And in other communities, only one municipality in the Valencian Community, 2 in Andalusia and 4 in Madrid exceed this percentage.

The difference between Catalonia and the others is due to the fact that since 2013 annual incentives have been awarded in this community for compliance in the form of certifications and visibility of good practices.

Table 9: Contingency table of the autonomous communities and degree of compliance with indicators

		Grouped percentages				Total
		From 0% to 25%	From 26% to 50%	From 51% to 75%	From 76% to 100%	
Andalusia	Count	48	88	16	2	154
	% of AC	31.2%	57.1%	10.4%	1.3%	100.0%
Aragon	Count	1	8	4	0	13
	% of AC	7.7%	61.5%	30.8%	0.0%	100.0%
Canary Islands	Count	16	23	3	0	42
	% of AC	38.1%	54.8%	7.1%	0.0%	100.0%
Catalonia	Count	0	24	39	58	121
	% of AC	0.0%	19.8%	32.2%	47.9%	100.0%
Valencian Community	Count	7	61	28	1	97
	% of AC	7.2%	62.9%	28.9%	1.0%	100.0%
Galicia	Count	28	21	5	0	54
	% of AC	51.9%	38.9%	9.3%	0.0%	100.0%
Madrid, Community of	Count	11	22	14	4	51
	% of AC	21.6%	43.1%	27.5%	7.8%	100.0%
Murcia, Region of	Count	5	13	6	7	31
	% of AC	16.1%	41.9%	19.4%	22.6%	100.0%
Basque Country	Count	11	23	8	0	42
	% of AC	26.2%	54.8%	19.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	127	283	123	72	605
	% of AC	21.0%	46.8%	20.3%	11.9%	100.0%

Source: Authors

When cross tabulating the variables of degree of compliance and number of inhabitants (Table 10), a greater level of transparency is observed in percentage terms in those municipalities with larger populations (more than 50,000 inhabitants) than those with populations between 10,001 and 50,000.

Table 10: Contingency table: grouped percentages vs grouped population

		Grouped populations		Total
		From 10,001 to 50,000 inhabitants	More than 50,000 inhabitants	
Percentage	From 0% to 25%	125	2	127
		25.6%	1.7%	21.0%
	From 26% to 50%	247	36	283
		50.5%	31.0%	46.8%
	From 51% to 75%	72	51	123
		14.7%	44.0%	20.3%
	From 76% to 100%	45	27	72
		9.2%	23.3%	11.9%
Total		489	116	605
		100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: Authors

Discussion

The main contribution of this article is the finding that neither the obligatory transparency laws at the national level, nor the expansion of the Internet, although representing an important contribution, do not in themselves imply greater quality of the information on the websites of local governments. Since we start from the premise that the quality of information and transparency are fundamental issues for good public management in a democratic society, we consider it important that political and technical managers of local governments, as well as scholars in the field, take into account the factors that influence the transparency of local governments.

First, it is necessary to analyze the sociodemographic characteristics of the political leaders. In this study, the results show that the majority of the city councils are led by male mayors (73.3%), in contrast to those led by a female mayor (26.3%). As we have seen in the results section, municipalities governed by women show a greater degree of transparency (50.68%) than those headed by men (38.13%). This is related to various factors such as the different forms of socialization of women, which makes them more inclined to follow the rules and laws, show less concern for issues such as party politics in relation to men (Norris, 1996) and have a greater ability to generate engagement with citizens (Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018).

Notable within the first subgroup of indicators, which refer to the information on the local political leaders themselves, is the high degree of compliance with indicators that focus on providing information on the members of the government team (91.4%) and the lack of progress in providing that same information regarding the members of the opposition (52.5%). Also notable are the indicators that assess information for participation: the indicator that evaluates the publication of news from the government team shows a high degree of compliance (88.3%), while very little information is available with regard to the opposition's functions (10.7%). This demonstrates that, despite the fact that Spanish legislation and the Law of Transparency have a bearing on the obligation to publish truthful and transparent information to improve public administrations, when municipal communication officers release information, they act as spokespersons for local governments and are not governed by journalistic criteria, maintaining political control over the nature of the news (Manfredi, et. al., 2017). Thus, we can surmise that political parties, when arriving in government, use incorrectly—or at least questionably—this section of information on the web pages of city councils because, in some way, they “appropriate” it to make partisan use both to positively highlight what the government team wishes to emphasize and negatively with regard to what the opposition wants to highlight when in fact they are required to use it in the most transparent way possible. Many government teams hide behind the notion that publishing links to the websites of political parties is enough. However, we do not consider this line of thought to be valid since city council websites bear no relationship to those of political parties. A simple link to a specific political party from the city council website is not enough to validate the level of transparency claimed. Citizens have the right to know the activities of all the political parties present on the council, whether or not they are at the head of the government. Therefore, to improve the level of transparency, it would also be necessary to change the performance routines of the political representatives themselves.

Regarding the quality of the information to help citizens hold their local governments to account, councils should be aware of the need to report on the plenary sessions and debates beyond the mere uploading of a video or live transmission, neither of which may be intelligible to citizens, who should be provided with this information in a clear and concise manner, which is one of the main elements of a mandate. The response of local governments in this regard is usually that, if citizens wished, they could watch the plenary session in full. However, we are of the opinion that in no case can a local government “demand” that citizens watch a plenary meeting in order to inform themselves about the most outstanding issue to arise during it. We believe that this is not the solution and that citizens have the right to be informed in a clear, intelligible, and concise manner about what took place during the plenary session.

Another notable concern is the need to improve transparency in relation to economic issues related to public representatives, such as the publication of their salaries. Thus, in the group of indicators that analyze the management of collective resources, the compliance of the fundamental indicator in terms of transparency, namely accountability, which is one of the 52 indicators with the lowest compliance percentage, is again notably low, reaching only 23.3%.

The third block of indicators also shows low compliance with several issues that pertain again to the economic sphere, such as the quarterly execution of the budget; budgetary stability; the list of municipal jobs and salaries of the official staff, as well as of managers and those in positions of trust; the list of suppliers and their economic amount; and the publication of the cost of institutional advertising campaigns in the media. This is probably one of the groups in which a lot of work remains to be done by local

governments vis-à-vis giving greater visibility to the spending of citizens' taxes. City councils find it difficult to be transparent about economic issues, often hiding from the fact that they violate certain issues of data protection. Thus, our results confirm the findings of Bearfield and Bowman (2016) which show how municipalities tend to publish information about budgets and general financing of the administration but appear reluctant to publish aspects related to the economic issues related to human resources and public representatives.

Moreover, low visibility appears to be given to the tools provided by local governments to encourage citizen participation, which hinders the involvement of citizens in political life. Thus, local governments should implement new clear and accessible formulas to promote these types of tools more effectively.

When analyzing the level of transparency according to autonomous community, the high percentage obtained by Catalonia stands out, a finding that is very likely due to the fact that this region has worked the most and more constantly on the issues addressed in this article. We can therefore conclude that for municipalities and local governments to improve their transparency, they need entities that control and demand their compliance and that provide them support and help on how transparency laws should be followed, thus ensuring good quality information.

An additional conclusion is that transparency is greater in municipalities of more than 50,000 inhabitants. This, to a large extent, may be due to the fact that these municipalities, which belong to the largest cities in Spain, invest a greater number of resources, especially economic and human, to adequately work on the transparency of the respective municipal councils. In this regard, it is evident that the availability of resources has a positive influence on the level of transparency of local governments.

One of the limitations of this study is the need to compare these results through qualitative analysis. In this regard, the research team has held discussion groups with technical and political officials that represent the municipalities and is currently analyzing this data. The initial hypotheses to have arisen from these discussion groups, and which will be expanded in future research, show that municipal councils, through their communication officers, are aware of the difficulties involved in providing all information openly due to aspects such as pressures from political leaders and the routines established within political parties by communication officials in public institutions. However, this difficulty is particularly notable in the smaller municipalities that lack the budgetary provisions to invest in human resources. Political and technical leaders also disagree with the different evaluation criteria because of the increasing number of organizations that measure transparency and the lack of homogeneity between them. Similarly, they occasionally disagree when an indicator is not positively valued due to the difficulty of finding the information even when published on the website.

In conclusion, it is necessary to study in greater depth how a higher level of transparency and good information in public administrations can be achieved in order to facilitate citizens in holding their local governments to account. Thus, we have seen that issues such as transparency laws and the possibilities of web 2.0 are essential elements. However, other aspects such as the routines and classic perspectives related to the nature of public and political management, as opposed to other laws such as those concerning data privacy, the availability of resources and the definition of specific methods that specify the nature of information, are also vital elements in achieving transparency in local governments.

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