

WhatsApp as a government communication tool: the case of the Spanish government's new official channel

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Abstract

Messaging applications have increasingly been incorporated into government communication, allowing institutions to reach citizens directly. In March 2025, the Spanish Government launched an official WhatsApp channel. This article analyses its initial stage in order to identify usage patterns, types of communication, predominant formats and user reactions. The methodology used is based on a content analysis applied to all the channel's posts during its first five months of activity (N=281). Variables related to frequency and posting times, types of communication, formats, areas of government involved, multimedia resources, current affairs, presence of political leaders and volume of reactions were coded. The results show an average rate of almost two posts per day, with peaks during times of crisis such as the power outage in April. Service messages and public policy messages predominate, followed by crisis messages and legitimacy messages. The most frequent formats are bulletins, reminders and explanatory messages, supported by creative content and videos linked to official sources. Presidency accounts for more than a third of posts, followed by social and ecological transition ministries, while some areas, such as Industry and Tourism, do not appear. 21% of posts include references to political leaders, with President Pedro Sánchez featuring prominently. Emoji-based engagement signals focus on issues of humanitarian aid, equality and accountability. In conclusion, the channel is configured as an institutional instrument geared towards public service and policy explanation, with crisis response capacity and a moderate degree of personalisation. Its consolidation requires maintaining standards of neutrality, transparency and traceability that reinforce citizen confidence.

Keywords: government communication, WhatsApp channels, Spanish government, public institutions, public service, instant messaging

1. Introduction

WhatsApp channels are a feature introduced by Meta in 2023 that allows one-way messaging from an entity (organisation, media outlet, institution or public figure) to a large number of subscribers, privately and without interaction between them. Unlike traditional groups, in channels only the administrator (e.g., the institution) can send content, which guarantees control of the message and the privacy of followers (subscribers cannot see each other's data or respond in the channel) (Marcos-García et al., 2021). This non-invasive feature—users receive information as an informative broadcast rather than a personal chat—has been highlighted as an effective way to reach the public without overwhelming them.

On 20 March 2025, the Spanish Government created its own channel on WhatsApp, although it was not until the 28th of that same month that it released its first post, in the form of a sticker. Just three months later, in June 2025, the channel already had more than 100,000 subscribers, quickly establishing itself as one of the most popular institutional profiles on the platform (El Confidencial Digital, 2025). At the time of writing, the channel has more than 280.000 subscribers.

The importance of WhatsApp as an institutional channel is underpinned by its high social penetration in Spain. According to the Spanish National Commission for Markets and Competition (CNMC, 2025), in the

second quarter of 2024, 93.8% of online messaging service users in Spain used WhatsApp, compared to 25.6% on Instagram and 17.6% on Telegram. Similarly, the *2024 Annual Social Media Study* conducted by IAB Spain and Elogia confirms that WhatsApp continues to be the most widely used social platform in the country, surpassing YouTube, Instagram and Facebook in frequency of use (IAB Spain & Elogia, 2024). Added to this data is the 27th edition of the *AIMC's Navegantes en la Red* survey (2024-2025), which shows how mobile phones continue to be the central device for Spaniards' digital lives, consolidating the context in which public administrations use WhatsApp as the primary means of disseminating institutional information (AIMC, 2025).

Its ease of use and familiarity reduce barriers to access, while the ability to send multimedia content enriches informative narratives and allows for audience segmentation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Bayer et al., 2016). Furthermore, the immediacy and ubiquity of the application have proven essential in crisis situations, such as during COVID-19, by disseminating verified information and combating misinformation (Casero-Ripollés, 2020a).

The government's use of WhatsApp channels can be framed within the News-Finds-Me (NFM) perception, a concept describing the belief that relevant news will reach individuals through their social and digital environments without the need for active information seeking (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). Under this logic, users rely on the ambient flow of content circulating through platforms and interpersonal networks, assuming that important events will surface organically. Push-based communication systems such as official WhatsApp channels may reinforce this perception by delivering institutional updates directly to subscribers' mobile devices, embedding public information within everyday messaging environments. This dynamic aligns with patterns of incidental news exposure identified in digital media research (Van Damme et al., 2015), potentially lowering barriers to access for less politically engaged audiences. However, the integration of institutional content into personal communication flows may also increase dependence on official narratives and reduce incentives for active and pluralistic news seeking (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018).

Overall, WhatsApp's reach, simplicity and immediacy make it a unique opportunity for connection between government and citizens (Bertot et al., 2010). However, its one-way design limits citizen participation and turns communication into a top-down flow, reducing the democratic potential of these tools if dialogue mechanisms are not incorporated (Criado & Villodre, 2021; Fuchs, 2014; Marcos-García et al., 2021). Even so, they represent a complementary channel of growing importance in institutional communication (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2017).

Based on this initial context, the main objective of this study is to determine the primary uses and applications that the Spanish Government offers for its new WhatsApp information channel. Based on this general purpose, the following specific objectives are also proposed:

SO1: To identify the content production routines of the Government of Spain's WhatsApp channel, including the use of multimedia resources and hyperlinking strategies to provide additional information.

SO2: To analyse the predominant message types and thematic areas present in the channel's institutional communication.

SO3: To assess the relative prominence of government departments and institutional actors featured in the publications disseminated through this channel.

To address these objectives, the study formulates three research questions, each corresponding to one of the analytical dimensions defined above and guiding the structure of the results section:

RQ1: What content production routines, multimedia resources, and hyperlinking strategies characterize the Government of Spain's use of its WhatsApp channel?

RQ2: What message types and thematic areas predominate in the channel's institutional communication?

RQ3: Which government departments and institutional actors receive greater or lesser prominence in the publications, and what patterns of emoji-based user reaction are associated with these messages?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Use of WhatsApp by other governments around the world: topics and trends

Globally, numerous governments and public bodies have begun to explore WhatsApp as an official channel of communication with citizens, taking advantage of the app's enormous user base. The topics addressed through these channels are varied, although it is possible to identify certain common trends in their use: dissemination of public service information, emergency alerts, health education, government campaigns, and the fight against misinformation.

One of the first landmark experiences was in Singapore, a country that implemented an official citizen update service via WhatsApp during the COVID-19 pandemic. This channel, available in four languages, sent several messages a day to hundreds of thousands of subscribers, demonstrating WhatsApp's effectiveness for real-time mass communications during a crisis (Ibtekr, 2023). Precisely, during the pandemic, several governments and the World Health Organisation (WHO) used chatbots on WhatsApp to provide verified information and automated citizen services. The most notable case was that of India, whose MyGov Corona Helpdesk served millions of users, demonstrating the platform's potential for providing 24/7 public services and combating misinformation (IndiaAI, 2021; Casero-Ripollés, 2020b).

In terms of content trends, many governments focus their channels on practical and useful information. For example, announcements about new government services, reminders of deadlines (taxes, censuses, vaccinations), information about available social assistance or programmes, and educational or awareness-raising materials are often shared via WhatsApp (UNICEF, 2020). During elections or public health campaigns, official WhatsApp channels have been used to amplify key messages and counter misinformation; a notable case was that of Brazil in 2018, where although the use of WhatsApp in 2018 was marked by unofficial disinformation campaigns, authorities and fact-checkers subsequently implemented broadcast lists to send refutations and clarifications directly to users (Evangelista & Bruno, 2019; Ozawa et al., 2023). Thus, the global trend is for governments to use WhatsApp primarily to inform and provide services, reinforcing transparency and the reach of public communication, especially in contexts where conventional channels may be less effective.

It should be noted, however, that the degree to which WhatsApp has been adopted as an official channel varies from country to country, influenced by factors such as the app's penetration, trust in institutions, and privacy considerations. In some regimes, WhatsApp has been used intensively for political propaganda and

narrative control (e.g., sharing government achievements in mass groups), while in consolidated democracies its institutional use is often accompanied by ethical guidelines to ensure that it is an informative and non-partisan service (Bertot et al., 2010; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2017). Nevertheless, on a global scale, the convergence of governments towards messaging platforms is a growing phenomenon, signalling the increasing platformisation of institutional political communication (Marcos-García et al., 2021).

At the European level, the European Union (EU) has adopted WhatsApp as one of its institutional communication channels, particularly through the 'WhatsApp Channels' feature. Through this channel, institutions such as the European Commission share updates and relevant information in a one-way, opt-in manner. The launch has been promoted as a private and modern way to reach citizens through a verified and secure channel (European Commission, 2024).

In another notable case, the United Kingdom launched its official WhatsApp channel in January 2024 with the aim of providing verified public information directly to citizens. This channel is used to disseminate alerts and practical advice, such as reminders about cost-of-living support payments, health recommendations and tax deadlines. This service seeks to broaden the reach of government communication in an accessible and secure format (UK Government, 2024).

Subsequently, other European countries have also opened their institutional channels on WhatsApp. In April 2024, the governments of France (Gouvernement français, 2024) and Germany (Spiegel, 2024) took the plunge. In the case of Italy, this country has currently opted to open official channels for some of its ministries, such as the Ministry of Defence (Ministero della Difesa, 2024) and the Ministry of Tourism (Ministero del Turismo, 2025). Since March 2025, as detailed above, the Spanish Government's official WhatsApp channel has been added to these cases.

2.2. Institutional communication by the Spanish Government

The Spanish Government, like other contemporary administrations, has undergone a process of digitisation of its institutional communication over the last decade. This process has resulted in the adoption of various platforms and tools to bring official information to citizens in a more direct, transparent and participatory manner (Feenstra et al., 2017). Before the introduction of the WhatsApp channel in 2025, the Spanish Government already had a notable track record of using new communication technologies in its relationship with the public.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, in April 2020, the Spanish Government launched the Hispabot-Covid19 conversational assistant on WhatsApp, managed by the Secretary of State for Digitalisation and Artificial Intelligence. This chatbot, based on artificial intelligence and natural language, provided verified information from the Ministry of Health on symptoms, prevention and infection figures, with the aim of alleviating the saturation of telephone lines and guaranteeing official and direct access to citizens (Government of Spain, 2020). The initiative was positively evaluated as an example of the integration of instant messaging into crisis communication (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2020).

Beyond WhatsApp, the Spanish Government has developed various digital initiatives in recent years. Among these, the use of social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube to disseminate communications, broadcast press conferences and maintain a constant flow of information to citizenship (Rodríguez-Andrés, 2017). This adoption followed the trend of other Western governments, recognising the

potential of networks for more segmented communication (Bimber, 2014). By the early 2010s, the Spanish administration had already incorporated digital strategies to improve transparency and encourage interaction, albeit with limited and one-way interactions (Bonsón et al., 2012).

Another pillar is the *Institutional Advertising and Communication Plan*, required by Law 29/2005, which organises annual campaigns on rights, services or social awareness (Government of Spain, n.d.). This plan has recently promoted important multi-channel campaigns such as 'España Puede' (Spain Can) and 'Plan de Recuperación' (Recovery Plan), with a strong presence in digital environments, adapting messages to short, visual formats (García-Santamaría et al., 2020). Likewise, the reinforcement of its own channels, such as the La Moncloa website, the institutional newsletter and mobile applications, responds to the need to diversify the channels of contact, understanding that citizens consume information through different platforms and with heterogeneous habits (Medina-Molina et al., 2017). In this regard, the importance of using multiple digital channels to reach diverse audiences has also been demonstrated in the communication management of the COVID-19 crisis, where a presence on social and digital platforms made it possible to broaden the reach and improve the effectiveness of public messages (Baraybar-Fernández, 2021).

Finally, the creation of the official WhatsApp channel (El Confidencial Digital, 2025) is part of a broader trend towards immediacy and proximity in government communication. During the COVID-19 crisis, as discussed above, the government had already adopted centralised yet innovative strategies to combat misinformation (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2020). On this line, first Hispabot and now the WhatsApp channel reflect a logic of incremental innovation: leveraging popular digital tools to expand the reach of public communication while maintaining institutional coherence.

2.3. Use of WhatsApp in regional and local governments in Spain

Not only the central government, but also regional and local administrations in Spain have ventured into using WhatsApp as a channel of communication with citizens. For example, the study by Marcos-García et al. (2021) points out that instant messaging is fully established in many Spanish town councils as part of their communication strategies. This platformisation of institutional political communication at the local level is driven by similar motivations: the need to bring municipal information closer to residents through more direct, immediate and convenient channels, as well as enabling emergencies to be notified much more agile and quickly than with traditional methods.

Likewise, during the pandemic, numerous Spanish local councils opened WhatsApp and Telegram channels to disseminate daily reports on the local health situation, lockdown rules and prevention advice (López-Tárraga, 2020). This research also adds that these crisis channels proved to be effective in keeping the local population informed in an uncertain environment, taking advantage of the immediacy of messaging.

This trend has also spread to regional governments in different parts of Spain. The first to take advantage of this functionality were the Government of Catalonia (2023), the Government of Castile-La Mancha (2023) and the Region of Murcia (2023). Subsequently, in 2024, the Balearic Islands Government (2025) joined, and more recently, the Andalusian Regional Government (2025). In the case of Catalonia, before the official channel was opened, some councillors during the pandemic sent voice notes via WhatsApp to specific groups (e.g., primary care doctors) to convey urgent instructions. This reflects that the application has also been used for internal coordination at certain administrative levels (García-Santamaría et al., 2020).

However, the challenge remains to evolve from one-way informational use to more participatory or two-way approaches that close the communication loop with citizen feedback. The work of Marcos-García et al. (2021) suggests that most subnational administrations use WhatsApp primarily as a 'megaphone' for official announcements, but not yet as a forum for dialogue. In other words, these channels are often used from an informative and one-way perspective, prioritising direct dissemination over two-way interaction. Even so, this incorporation of instant messaging at the local level reinforces the idea that the digital transformation of government communication is transversal to all administrative levels in Spain.

2.4. Institutional channels or digital propaganda tools?

Some viewpoints question whether official channels managed by governments function as legitimate tools for institutional communication, or whether they run the risk of becoming instruments of propaganda. The central issue is the boundary between objectively reporting on public management and promoting government achievements in a partisan manner (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2017).

Those who defend them argue that they reinforce transparency and citizens' right to accurate and useful information by disseminating policies, services and alerts more effectively, especially in times of crisis (Bertot et al., 2010; Casero-Ripollés, 2020a). By 'eliminating intermediaries', messaging would offer direct access to the official version and reduce distortions (Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2020). In this way, institutional messaging channels (such as WhatsApp) can be considered a modern extension of official communication, aligned with the phenomenon of information disintermediation (Chadwick, 2006), i.e., with those digital mechanisms that eliminate intermediaries and allow the government to disseminate information directly to citizens. Furthermore, e-government is understood to function as a direct communication channel, particularly effective with younger sectors, by facilitating rapid, accurate and transparent access to public information (Akimov & Kadyshcheva, 2023). Its everyday nature would also bring the administration closer to audiences less attentive to public affairs, promoting participation and engagement (Chen et al., 2020; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021).

As for criticism, it warns about the one-sidedness of the message: by proceeding without media or opposition mediation, the channel could highlight the favourable aspects and minimise mistakes, intensifying a pro-government bias (Woolley, 2020). In Spain, the aforementioned Law 29/2005 seeks to prevent institutional propaganda during election periods, but when it was drafted, digital formats such as social media and WhatsApp channels were not taken into account. Added to this is the lack of deliberation inherent in the channel under analysis in this study: unlike open networks, there is no visible response or contrast of opinions, with less public scrutiny of the message and a risk of official narratives without contradiction (Fuchs, 2014).

Another concern is the exploitation of WhatsApp's intimate nature: this medium is perceived as a more personal and controlled, intimate environment, where communication can be particularly persuasive (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021). Given that encrypted apps facilitate targeted and opaque campaigns that are difficult to audit, there are calls for greater accountability (e.g., archiving and publishing messages) for analysis by third parties, in line with institutional advertising practices (Woolley, 2020).

To mitigate risks, clear limits are proposed: stick to useful facts and data, avoid propagandistic adjectives or electoral messages (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2017), and simultaneously publish content on the official website or other media to facilitate verification and contextualisation by the press and civil society. Ultimately, as

Canel and Sanders (2013) point out, government communication always navigates between informing and persuading; messaging channels do not alter this tension, but they do require a redoubling of principles of ethics, truthfulness and public service.

3. Methodology

This study is based on a methodology that combines different quantitative techniques. These are based, on the one hand, on content analysis of the Spanish Government's posts on its new WhatsApp channel during its first months of activity. On the other hand, they are based on statistical analysis of the messages.

An analysis sheet has been designed for the coding of these messages. Each of its analysis categories and variables is specified below:

-Temporal data: date, day of the week, and time of publication.

-Subject or theme of the publication: the most prominent keywords related to the topic of dissemination have been noted.

-Type of government communication: policy communication, service communication, legitimacy communication, crisis communication, and international communication (explained in detail in Table 1). This classification proposal is based on the work of Canel & Sanders (2013), who opt for a quadrant model that measures government systems according to their strategic capacity (tactical–strategic) and institutional orientation (party-centred–citizen-centred).

Table 1: Classification of government communication

Types of Government Communication	Functions
Policy communication	-Inform, explain and persuade about policies and measures. -Dissemination of laws, reforms, government programmes.
Service communication	-Practical information for citizens on accessing procedures and services (e.g. calls for applications, grants, road safety, health campaigns, etc.).
Legitimacy communication	-Strengthen trust in institutions and those who represent them. -Emphasise achievements, accountability, transparency.
Crisis communication	-Information management in emergencies, disasters, pandemics, etc. -Prevention of rumours and misinformation.
International communication	-External projection of government action. -Public diplomacy, country image, positioning in international forums.

Source: Own elaboration.

-Formats and types of dissemination: There are nine different types, explained in detail in Table 2: official communiqués, information notes/bulletins, reminders/notices, urgent alerts/warnings, explanatory/educational messages, messages of denial or clarification, commemorative messages/special days and dates, promotional or campaign messages, and interaction/call-to-action messages.

Table 2: Classification of government communication

Message type / Content genre	Functions and examples
Official statement	-Institutional statement with normative or protocolary value. -Example: 'The Prime Minister will appear at 12 noon in the Press Room to report on...'
Information note/newsletter	-Short, descriptive, factual text. -Example: 'Tomorrow, the new regulations on...' come into force.
Reminder/notice	-Short message indicating deadlines, schedules, or expiry dates. -Example: 'Remember that tomorrow is the deadline to apply for the scholarship for...'
Alert/urgent warning	-Immediate and preventive in nature. -Example: 'Urgent: a red alert has been issued due to heavy rainfall in the west of the country...'
Explanatory/educational message	-Break down a policy, measure, or procedure for educational purposes. -Example: 'How to apply for the minimum living wage? We'll tell you in three steps.'
Denial or clarification message	-Official response to rumours or misinformation. -Example: 'It is false that... Check the verified information here.'
Commemorative message/special days and dates	-Linked to anniversaries, official celebrations or values. -Example: 'Today we commemorate Spanish Constitution Day.'
Promotional or campaign message	-Dissemination of awareness campaigns or public services. -Example: 'Zero alcohol behind the wheel. And remember: #WeCan'tDriveForYou'
Interactive message/call to action	-Invites citizen participation or consultation. -Example: 'Take part in the survey on the digitisation of the Administration...'

Source: Own elaboration.

-Link to different government departments: each publication has been classified according to its link to one of the ministries, or whether it is related to the government in general. This category allowed multiple coding when a single post referenced both the Government/Presidency and a specific ministry.

-Connection to current affairs: it has been specified whether each publication is related to current affairs or not. It was coded as current affairs when the post: (a) referred to a datable news event (crisis, political event, recent decision) that occurred within a week; or (b) responded to a current situation (alerts, power cuts, fires), identifiable by time markers ('today', 'yesterday', 'this week') or explicit reference to the event.

-Multimedia resources: the type of multimedia resource included in each publication has been specified, distinguishing between the following types: video, photography, graphic creativity and hyperlink with thumbnail image.

-External links: the destination of the hyperlinks included in each publication has been detailed for further information, including the following types: government corporate website, press release on the government website, ministry website, government social media, specific policy or service website, and other links (specifying their destination).

-Mention or appearance of public figures: the political leaders or public figures who appear in the text or multimedia resource of the publications have been specified.

-Community engagement: data on the total number of reactions to each publication has been collected. The results in this category are those corresponding to 31 August 2025. Specific data on the type of reaction has also been collected, distinguishing between the six emojis that can be seen in the example in Figure 1, and are the following:

👍 Thumbs up = approval/endorsement.

❤️ Heart = liking/support.

😂 Face with tears of joy = amusement/positive affect.

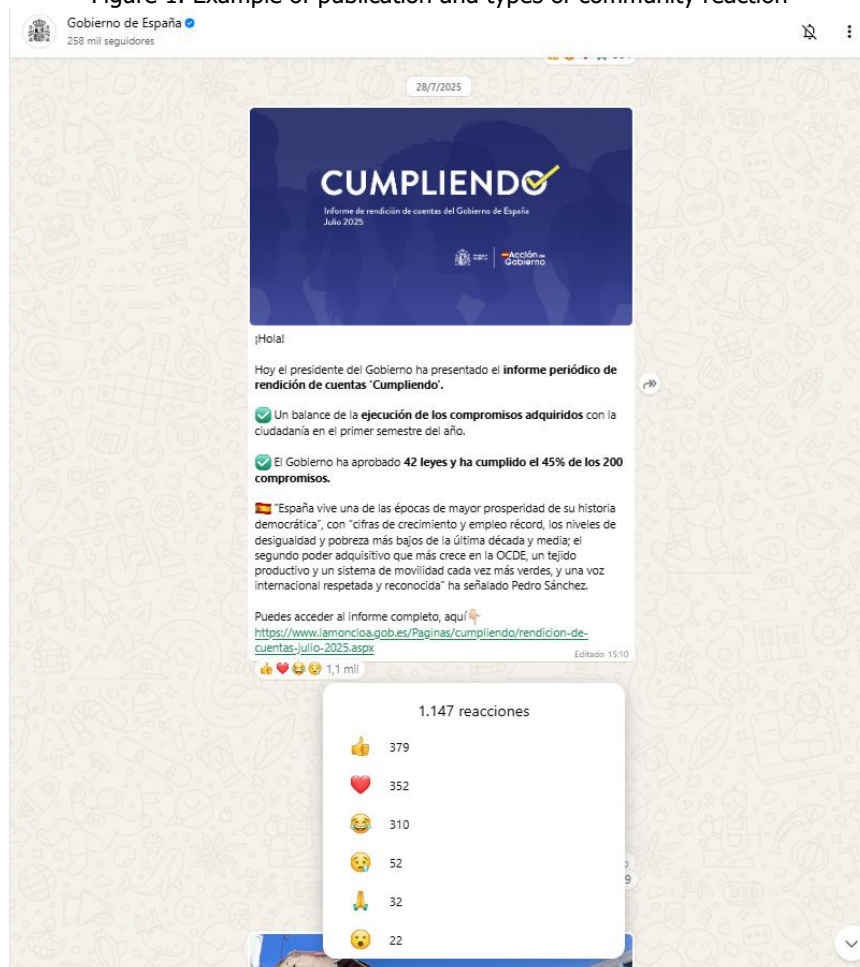
😮 Surprised face = surprise/attention.

😭 Crying face = sadness/concern.

🙏 Folded hands = gratitude/hope/solidarity.

It should be noted that the meaning is interpretative (analytical), as WhatsApp does not provide official semantics for each reaction.

Figure 1. Example of publication and types of community reaction



Source: Official channel of the Government of Spain on WhatsApp.

With regard to the sample, all posts made by the Spanish Government on its official WhatsApp channel over a full five-month period from the first post, i.e. from 28 March to 28 August 2025, have been analysed. Thus, a total of 298 pieces of content were counted. However, given that 17 posts are in the form of stickers, which do not contain text or other multimedia resources, only the data from the complete posts (281 units of analysis) have been taken into account for this research.

3.1. Coding procedure and reliability

All posts were coded by a single researcher with prior experience in content analysis of institutional communication. To ensure consistency and methodological rigor, a detailed codebook was developed prior to full coding, including operational definitions, decision rules, and illustrative examples for each variable.

A pilot coding phase was conducted on a subsample of the dataset to refine category definitions and clarify ambiguous cases before proceeding with the complete corpus. Additionally, a subset of posts (approximately 10% of the sample) was re-coded after a time interval to assess intra-coder consistency. Any discrepancies were reviewed and resolved in accordance with the established coding criteria.

These procedures were implemented to enhance transparency, internal consistency, and replicability of the analysis, despite the use of a single primary coder.

4. Results

4.1. Content production routines

Firstly, when looking at the content publication statistics, it can be seen that, of the 281 publications analysed, most are concentrated in the month of April (72). The months of May, June, and August each have 53 publications—considering that in the case of August, publications up to the 28th have been included—while July has 50 messages. No publications were recorded in March because, as specified in the introduction to this paper, only one publication in the form of a sticker was made. By day of the week, the 281 posts are distributed as follows: 16.4% on Mondays, 22.4% on Tuesdays, 14.9% on Wednesdays, 12.5% on Thursdays, 13.2% on Fridays, 10.7% on Saturdays and 10% on Sundays.

As for the times at which posts were made, during the early hours of the morning (0–6 a.m.) only 1.07% were recorded. The highest concentration of messages appeared in the morning (6 a.m.–12 p.m.), accounting for 38.08% of the total. This is followed by midday (12–15 h) with 19.93%, while the afternoon (15–20 h) accounts for 28.47% of the records. Finally, the evening (20–24 h) accounts for 12.46%.

It can be seen that regular publication began on 8 April 2025. Taking this date as a reference, the average number of daily publications on the Spanish Government's official WhatsApp channel is 1.97. Since then, except in one case (4 May 2025), at least one piece of content has been published every day. The dates with the highest number of posts were 28 and 29 April 2025, with 11 and 13 posts respectively. These corresponded to the day on which there was a widespread power cut throughout Spain and the following day. Next, with five messages, is the day when regular posts began (8 April). After that, we find days with a smaller number of posts: six days with four posts per day, 16 with three posts, 63 with two posts and 54 with one post.

Regarding the multimedia resources accompanying the text of publications, the Government's preferred choice for this channel is the use of graphic creativity (43.4%), which includes infographics, key messages, and visual compositions, among others. Next, the most popular resource for this channel is video (29.2%), followed by hyperlinks with a thumbnail (20.3%), photographs (4.3%) and, finally, no resources at all (4.3%).

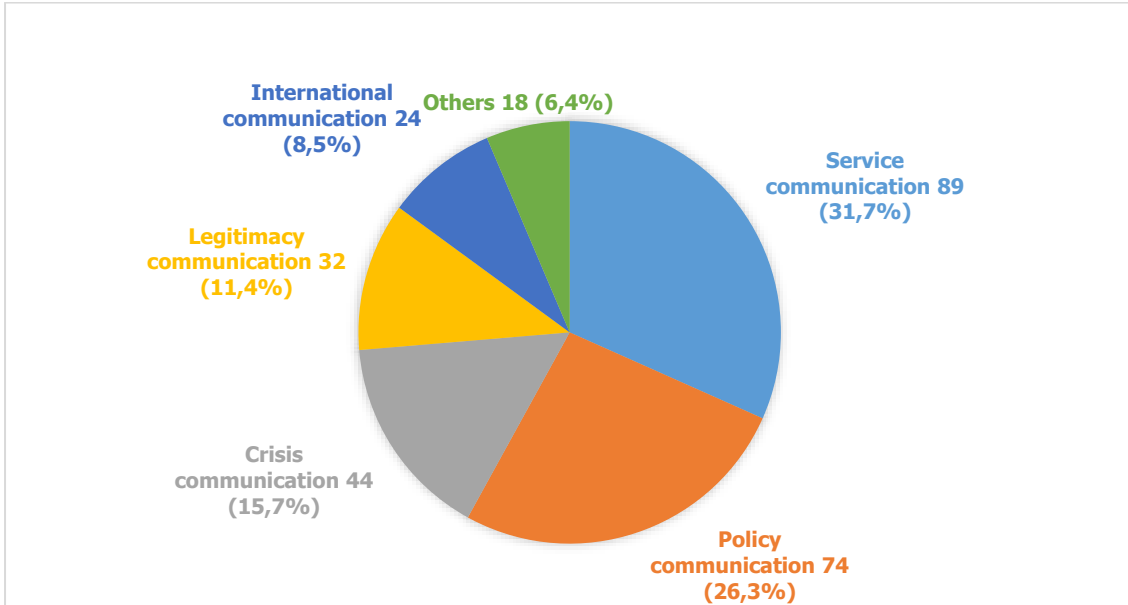
Finally, with regard to the links used to provide further information, most of the cases analysed (33.1%) redirect to press releases that the Government publishes on its official website, 15.7% to the website of one of the ministries and 13.2% to the official website of La Moncloa or one of its sections. In 7.5% of cases, the links lead to a specific website for the policy, initiative or service being promoted. In a smaller percentage of cases (6.4%), they lead to websites and/or social media profiles of dependent bodies such as the Boletín Oficial del Estado (BOE, Official State Gazette), the Dirección General de Tráfico (DGT, Directorate-General for Traffic), the Agencia Estatal de Meteorología (AEMET, State Meteorological Agency), the Instituto Nacional de Ciberseguridad (INCIBE, National Cybersecurity Institute), Red Eléctrica Española (REE, Spanish Electricity Network) or the Red Nacional de los Ferrocarriles Españoles (RENFE, Spanish National Railway Network); 5.3% correspond to links to different government profiles on the networks where it has a presence (X, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube); and, finally, two posts (0.7%) direct users to download smartphone applications and one post (0.4%) directs users to the official Instagram profile of the current Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez.

4.2. Areas of institutional communication and message types

In institutional communication, governments use different approaches depending on the objectives they pursue in each message. Figure 2 shows the different perspectives of the publications analysed, taking as a reference the different types of government communication. The one that appears in most messages is service communication, focused on offering useful and practical information to citizens, such as procedures, services or announcements; it is the most frequent on the Spanish Government's WhatsApp channel, with 31.7% of publications (89 messages). Policy communication, aimed at disseminating public policies, explaining measures and justifying government decisions, ranks second, with 26.3% (74 messages). Crisis communication, which is activated in emergency or risk situations, accounts for 15.7% (44 messages). Legitimacy communication, focused on reinforcing institutional trust and credibility by highlighting government achievements or milestones, accounts for 11.4% (32 messages). International communication, linked to external projection and cooperation with other countries or international organisations, accounts for 8.5% (24 messages). Finally, the 'other' section includes publications with diverse content that could not be classified in the previous categories, accounting for 6.4% (18 messages). Examples of this last category include the official statement decreeing three days of official mourning for the death of Pope Francis, the weekly publication compiling the five most important government news items, and various messages defining disinformation, hate speech and fake news, among others.

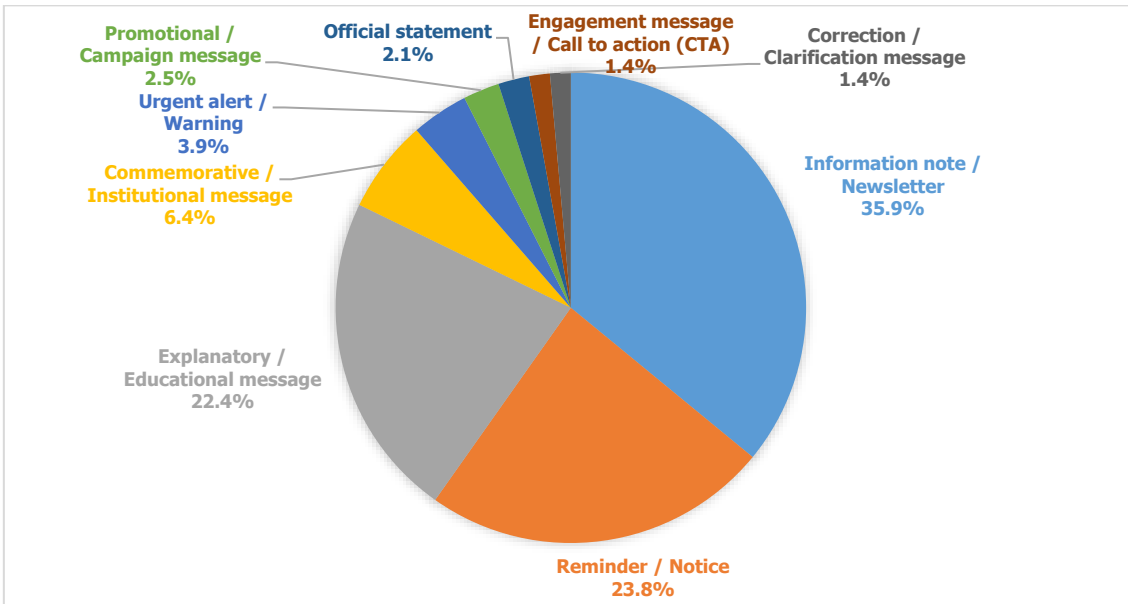
The analysis of the message types used on the Spanish Government's WhatsApp channel is summarised in the data shown in Figure 3. First, they reveal a clear predominance of information notes or bulletins, which total 101 publications, equivalent to 35.9% of the total (281). Secondly, reminders or notices stand out, with 67 messages (23.8%), followed by explanatory or educational messages, which total 63 (22.4%). These three formats account for more than 80% of the channel's activity, reflecting a fundamentally informative and service-oriented approach.

Figure 2. Distribution of publications according to types of government communication



Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 3. Distribution of publications according to message types



Source: Own elaboration.

At an intermediate level are commemorative or institutional messages, with 18 publications (6.4%), and urgent alerts or warnings, with 11 messages (3.9%). Their lower frequency indicates more occasional use, associated with specific events or emergency situations.

Finally, the least used formats are promotional or campaign messages, with 7 cases (2.5%), official communiqués, with 6 (2.1%), and both interaction or call-to-action messages and denial or clarification messages, with only 4 publications each (1.4%). This distribution highlights that the channel prioritises the function of informing and offering service messages over that of interacting or persuading, reserving the more strategic or reactive formats for very specific occasions.

4.3. Prominence of different areas of government

The distribution of posts on the Spanish Government's official WhatsApp channel according to different areas of government can be seen in Table 3. The data shows, on the one hand, a clear predominance of posts dealing with the Government in general or its President, accounting for 34.2% of the total (96 messages). On the other hand, messages referring to specific policies or initiatives of any of the 22 ministries of the Spanish Government account for 68.7%, or 193 publications.

Of the different areas of government, the one that plays the most prominent role is mainly the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration (10.3%), followed by other departments with an average weight of around 6%, such as Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge, Interior and Health. At a second level are ministries such as Transport and Sustainable Mobility (4.3%), Labour and Social Economy and Equality (both with 3.9%). Most portfolios range between 3.2% and 1.4%, with a relatively small presence, while some ministries have hardly any activity (Youth and Childhood and Science, Innovation and Universities, with 0.7% each; Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, with 0.4%). Finally, it is worth noting the total absence of publications related to the Ministry of Industry and Tourism.

Table 3. Distribution of publications according to areas of government

Organisation	Number of publications	Percentage
Government of Spain	96	34,2%
Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration	29	10,3%
Ministry for Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge	18	6,4%
Ministry of the Interior	18	6,4%
Ministry of Health	17	6%
Ministry of Transport and Sustainable Mobility	12	4,3%
Ministry of Labour and Social Economy	11	3,9%
Ministry of Equality	11	3,9%
Ministry of Housing and Urban Agenda	9	3,2%
Ministry of Finance	9	3,2%
Ministry of Culture	9	3,2%
Ministry of Education, Vocational Training and Sport	8	2,8%
Ministry of the Presidency, Justice and Relations with the Courts	7	2,5%
Ministry for Digital Transformation and the Civil Service	6	2,1%
Ministry of Defence	6	2,1%
Ministry of Social Rights, Consumer Affairs and the 2030 Agenda	6	2,1%
Ministry of Territorial Policy and Democratic Memory	4	1,4%
Ministry of Economy, Trade and Business	4	1,4%
Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	4	1,4%
Ministry of Youth and Childhood	2	0,7%
Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities	2	0,7%
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation	1	0,4%
Ministry of Industry and Tourism	0	0%

Source: Own elaboration.

4.4. Current affairs, leadership and interaction







Firstly, in relation to the link between publications and current events, the data reveals a practically balanced distribution between both types of content. However, there is a slight prevalence of messages that are not directly related to recent events, representing 52.7% of the total (148 publications), compared to 47.3% (133 messages) that do refer to current events. This finding suggests that the Spanish Government's official WhatsApp channel is not exclusively focused on immediacy or current circumstances, but rather strategically combines timeless content of an explanatory, informative or institutional nature with other content that seeks to respond to specific situations at the time.

Secondly, regarding the appearance of public figures, out of a total of 281 publications, 59 (21%) make explicit reference to or include photographs of political leaders and institutional representatives. The most prominent presence is Pedro Sánchez (Prime Minister of Spain; n=34), underscoring his central role as the political and institutional face of the Executive. Other members of the government appear with considerably lower frequency, including Sara Aagesen (Third Vice-President and Minister for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge; n=4), Carlos Cuerdo (Minister of Economy, Trade and Business; n=2), Elma Saiz (Minister of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration; n=2), and Pablo Bustinduy (Minister for Social Rights, Consumer Affairs and the 2030 Agenda; n=2). Additional ministers and senior officials are referenced only once: Yolanda Díaz (Second Vice-President of the Government and Minister of Labour and Social Economy; n=1), Diana Morant (Minister of Science, Innovation and Universities; n=1), Félix Bolaños (Minister of the Presidency, Justice and Relations with the Courts; n=1), María Jesús Montero (First Vice-President and Minister of Finance; n=1), and Pilar Alegría (Minister of Education and Government Spokesperson; n=1).

The institutional dimension is expanded with the inclusion of other figures linked to the State, politics and administration. This is the case of King Felipe VI, on two occasions; Lehendakari Imanol Pradales, President of the Basque Government, who appears in a message; Virginia Barcones, Director General of Civil Protection, mentioned once; and the regional presidents, who also appear together in a publication. Historical figures such as Adolfo Suárez, Javier Solana and Josep Tarradellas, leading figures in the Spanish Transition, are also included, as are personalities linked to Spain's international profile and recent political history. The international sphere is also represented in these mentions, with the presence of global leaders such as Pope Francis and Chinese President Xi Jinping, each appearing once.

Thirdly and finally, regarding the results reflecting the interactivity of the messages, the 281 posts analysed received a total of 100.604 reactions from the WhatsApp channel's community of followers, with an average of approximately 358. The ten most popular posts are precisely the only ones that exceed a thousand reactions, and are presented in Table 4. As can be seen, they are concentrated around three major thematic areas: international cooperation and humanitarian aid, the defence of rights and the fight against discrimination, and accountability and institutional management.

Table 4. Top 10 most popular publications

Topic or subject	Publication date	Number of responses	Distribution of reactions					
								
Video showing the delivery of 12 tonnes of food to Gaza	01/08/2025	1894	311	1107	151	64	214	17
Hate speech data – racist incidents in Torre Pacheco (Murcia)	24/07/2025	1698	612	321	496	145	93	31
Presentation of the State Plan to Combat Corruption	09/07/2025	1537	423	258	758	19	60	19
13 Palestinian minors receive healthcare in Spain	31/07/2025	1431	246	844	69	91	159	22
International LGBT Pride Day	28/06/2025	1347	218	581	318	175	31	24
What is hate speech and what do different types of hate speech have in common?	14/07/2025	1339	435	376	373	38	91	26
Preview of the delivery of 12 tonnes of food to Gaza	31/07/2025	1253	220	760	75	26	151	21
Presentation of the periodic accountability report 'Cumpliendo'	28/07/2025	1148	380	352	310	52	32	22
Data on racist content on social media during June 2025	17/07/2025	1037	418	255	208	88	41	27
State resources mobilised to fight forest fires	16/08/2025	1006	427	340	57	43	128	11

Source: Own elaboration.

Content related to international cooperation and humanitarian aid stands out for its ability to generate a large volume of interactions. The video on the shipment of 12 tonnes of food to Gaza (1 August 2025) tops the ranking with 1894 reactions, followed by the preview of the same operation (31 July, 1253). Similarly, the post about healthcare in Spain for 13 Palestinian minors (31 July, 1431) also achieved a high level of response. Overall, these posts related to the international context and humanitarian aid received more than 4500 reactions, highlighting the strong emotional and solidarity impact of this type of message.

Next, posts related to the defence of rights, equality and the fight against hate speech stand out. These include the report on racist incidents in the municipality of Torre Pacheco in Murcia (24 July, 1698 reactions), International LGBT Pride Day (28 June, 1,347) and two posts focused on identifying and reporting hate speech (14 July, 1339 reactions; 17 July, data on racism on social media, 1037). These results suggest that the channel's audience actively responds to initiatives aimed at strengthening social cohesion, diversity and the fight against discrimination.

Also, although with a somewhat lower volume of reactions, there are publications related to institutional management and accountability. The presentation of the State Plan to Combat Corruption (9 July, 1537 reactions) stands out as well as the presentation of the periodic report 'Cumpliendo' (Complying, Fulfilling) (28 July, 1148). Added to these is the publication on the State resources mobilised to fight forest fires (16 August, 1006), which reflects the channel's ability to report on public management measures in areas of great social interest.

Finally, in some of these cases, the most popular posts overall also coincide with the most popular of the six emojis that the community can use to express a response to the Government's messages or their mood. Specifically, the post that corresponds to the most popular reaction (1107), the heart (synonymous with liking), coincides with the one that registers the most reactions: the video showing the launch of 12 tonnes of food in Gaza. The second most popular reaction is the face with tears of joy (758), which appears in the message related to the presentation of the State Plan to Fight Corruption in the Congress of Deputies. The third is the thumbs-up emoji (synonymous with approval or giving the go-ahead), which, with 612 reactions, appears prominently in the post related to hate speech following the racist events in Torre Pacheco. In fourth place is the icon of the face with tears of sadness (373), which we find in content that is not among the ten most popular, but is closely linked to some that is in the "top 10". This is a post warning that in July 2025, the Spanish Observatory on Racism and Xenophobia detected more messages containing hate speech on social media than in the entire previous quarter. In fifth place, the hands-together icon (373), closely related to gratitude, appears again in the aforementioned most popular post on the channel, the video showing the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip. In sixth place is the least popular reaction, the surprised face (98), which we find in a post that is not among the most popular, but rather a message from the end of August explaining that the heatwave that month was the most intense since records began in Spain.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study set out to examine the Government of Spain's use of WhatsApp as an institutional communication channel through three analytical dimensions: communicative resources and hyperlinking strategies (RQ1), message types and thematic distribution (RQ2), and the visibility of institutional actors and user reactions (RQ3). The findings reveal a predominantly informational and top-down communication model, characterised by limited interactivity and a strong emphasis on executive visibility.

The results of the analysis of the Spanish Government's official WhatsApp channel allow us to place this experience within a dual logic already described in the literature: as a public service and information dissemination tool that broadens the scope of government communication, and as a one-way device that, if not governed with safeguards, can reinforce the official narrative to the detriment of public debate (Bertot et al., 2010; Fuchs, 2014; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2017). Within this framework, the overall objective of the study—to determine the main uses and applications of the channel—is achieved by showing stable production patterns, a clear focus on service and policy content, and a thematic and ministerial distribution consistent with the existing institutional agenda during the period of analysis.

The sustained pace of publications (almost two per day since 8 April) and the modularity of the dispatches, with peaks linked to the crisis caused by the major power cut on 28–29 April, underpin the channel as a regular flow of information that reaches subscribers' mobile phones with little friction. This connects with the *news-finds-me* (NFM) perception, according to which a portion of the public trusts that relevant news will 'reach them' even without actively seeking it out (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). In terms of public policy, this logic reduces barriers to access and normalises the reception of institutional information in everyday contexts, but it also increases dependence on the official source if there are no mechanisms for verification and traceability (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018). Empirical evidence from the time series and the formats used

supports this interpretation. The distribution by communication type—service (31.7%), policy (26.3%), crisis (15.7%), legitimacy (11.4%) and international (8.5%)—places the channel in the information/service zone of the classic continuum of government communication (Canel & Sanders, 2013), where informing and facilitating procedures outweighs persuading or mobilising, without completely eliminating the dimension of legitimisation, as can be seen in accountability content such as ‘Cumpliendo’ campaign or the anti-corruption plan. This pattern supports the thesis that WhatsApp operates as a modern extension of institutional communication rather than as a campaign tool, although it does not eliminate the structural tension between informing and persuading that is inherent in the field (Canel & Sanders, 2013).

The predominance of notes and bulletins (35.9%), reminders (23.8%) and explanations (22.4%) confirms an editorial design that is educational and of public utility. The lower weight of alerts (3.9%), promotions (2.5%), press releases (2.1%) and interactions or calls to action (1.4%) reveals that the channel is not conceived as a space for dialogue, but rather as a board for verifiable notices, with few invitations to participate. Here, the findings dialogue with critical literature on the unidirectionality and reduction of the deliberative potential of these platforms if feedback routes are not enabled (Fuchs, 2014; Criado & Villodre, 2021; Marcos-García et al., 2021). The pattern found suggests room for improvement in listening mechanisms—surveys, mailboxes, links to participatory processes—without losing the informational clarity that characterises the channel. From a content governance perspective, the pattern of multimedia resources (creative content 43.4%, video 29.2%) and, above all, the systematic anchoring to official sources (33.1% to press releases on the government website, 15.7% to ministerial websites and 13.2% to La Moncloa) reinforces the standards of traceability and verifiability called for in the literature to avoid propaganda slippage (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2017). This practice of institutional *deep-linking* facilitates external auditing and journalistic contextualisation and is a strength to be preserved.

In relation to the specific objectives, SO1 is fulfilled by accurately characterising the frequency, peak times and publication schedule (with the morning as the dominant slot), as well as the preference for creative content and the intensive use of links to official domains. This allows us to describe a professionalised routine aligned with good digital public communication practices, based on regularity, visual consistency and documentary traceability. SO2 is addressed with the observation that the primacy of the service and policy categories and the bias towards informative formats support the hypothesis that WhatsApp is used primarily to provide services and explain policies, with crisis interventions when the situation demands it and with legitimacy as a complementary layer that provides rending accounts or highlights milestones. This pattern is consistent with the literature that describes government platformisation as a ‘megaphone for announcements’ rather than a deliberative forum (Marcos-García et al., 2021, p. 108). SO3 is fulfilled by showing the prominence of the Government/Presidency (34.2%) and the leadership of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration (10.3%), suggesting alignment with agenda priorities in social policies, migration and equality, with average weights in ecological transition, internal affairs and health. The absence of publications from Industry and Tourism is a relevant factor for future planning. This distribution demonstrates the channel's ability to balance ‘governmental’ and ‘ministerial’ matters, maintaining a focus on services and policies that impact citizens.

The research questions are addressed consistently with the analytical framework established in the objectives. In response to RQ1, the findings confirm the existence of stable content production routines, a sustained publication rhythm, a clear preference for creative multimedia resources and videos, and a systematic use of hyperlinks directing users to official domains. These patterns consolidate the channel as

a structured and traceable extension of institutional communication. Regarding RQ2, the predominance of service- and policy-oriented messages, together with the editorial preference for notes, reminders and explanatory formats, demonstrates that the channel operates primarily as an informational and public utility tool rather than as a mobilising or dialogic platform. The thematic distribution reflects alignment with the institutional agenda during the period analysed. In relation to RQ3, the prominence of the Government/Presidency and selected ministries, together with the moderate visibility of public figures—most notably the Prime Minister—indicates a model of institutional centrality with controlled personalisation. Emoji-based user reactions (100,604 in total; mean = 358 per post) reveal greater engagement in content associated with humanitarian crises, equality and accountability initiatives, suggesting that moral and socially salient issues generate stronger affective responses among subscribers.

The findings thus obtained support a predominantly informative and service-oriented use, with traceability and anchoring to sources that facilitate verification. To shield the channel from risks highlighted in the literature—unidirectionality, pro-government bias, excessive personalisation—it is advisable to publish each submission in parallel in open repositories and archive the history for scrutiny (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2017), reinforce trending accounts with thematic packages and downloadable primary data, introduce micro-listening mechanisms that maintain the unidirectionality of the channel but open up feedback loops, and maintain criteria of neutrality in sensitive periods, remembering the structural tension between informing and persuading (Canel & Sanders, 2013).

Regarding the limitations and future lines of research for this study, the period analysed—five months from the first publication—provides an accurate snapshot of the launch, but one that is still conditioned by the novelty of the channel and by specific crises such as the power outage or the summer forest fires that ravaged north-western Spain. Future research should extend the time series to observe the stabilisation of routines, triangulate metrics (e.g., correlate reactions with clicks on links or media coverage) to better understand effectiveness, and compare with other European channels to detect patterns of convergence or national characteristics. Also, regarding the results related to content interaction, it should be taken into account that the channel has been gradually gaining subscribers, so older posts on the channel may be less popular than more recent ones.

The Spanish Government's official WhatsApp channel, in its start-up phase, fulfils a clear public function: providing useful and verifiable information, explaining policies and responding to critical situations. WhatsApp is consolidating its position as a highly capillary institutional communication channel, aligned with the news-finds-me perception, offering clear benefits in terms of reach and accessibility while also presenting risks of narrative dependency. Service and policy explanation structure the agenda, crisis communication appears reactively, and legitimisation occupies a secondary but constant space, reflecting the structural tension between informing and persuading described by Canel and Sanders (2013). Informative formats and systematic links to official sources reinforce verifiability and transparency, while the ministerial distribution reflects institutional priorities and reveals areas that remain underrepresented. Personalisation is present but moderate, with executive leadership visible alongside other institutional actors, and user reactions concentrate on issues of high moral and social salience, as well as accountability initiatives. The strategic challenge lies in consolidating standards of neutrality, traceability and structured feedback mechanisms that preserve the institutional nature of the channel while strengthening public trust.

Acknowledgements / Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for this research.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the principles of scientific research and did not require additional ethics committee approval.

Declaration of AI usage

Generative AI tools were used solely to carry out a stylistic review of the text and to identify any errors or inconsistencies.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request.

Author contributions

The author is solely responsible for the conception, research, writing, and revision of this manuscript.

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