



Article

Council Press Offices as Sources of Political Information: between Journalism for Accountability and Propaganda

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Abstract: This study uses a qualitative approach to examine what political and technical leaders of municipalities understand transparency and public information to mean, and what role they believe the different subjects involved (government, opposition, and the public) should have. The websites of 605 Spanish councils with more than 100,000 inhabitants were analysed and three focus groups were held with political and technical leaders from a selection of sample councils. The results show that the technical and political leaders of the councils do not have a clear awareness of their function of management accountability or of the need to apply journalistic criteria to the information they publish, defending with nuances the use of propaganda criteria to focus on the actions of the local government, its information, the lack of space dedicated to public debate and the opposition's actions. In relation to accountability and citizen participation, they have a negative view of citizens, who they describe as being disengaged. However, they emphasize that internally it is essential to continue improving in terms of the culture of transparency and the public information they provide citizens.

Keywords: public communication; the Internet; transparency; press offices; councils; participation



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1. Political Information, Press Offices and Democracy

The dissemination of information is an essential requirement for the development of democracy, since only citizens with political knowledge can evaluate the management of leaders in power and make electoral decisions in a reasoned and rational manner [1]. However, to fulfil that role, that information must include all voices and compare diverse sources so that people can form their opinion by contrasting multiple points of view [2]. This plurality of sources is essential in order to construct the story and to have credibility, both in the facts that are told and in the process that was carried out to obtain the information [3].

However, despite the relevance of political information, it does not always meet sufficient quality conditions to fulfil its functions and frequently it limits itself to summarizing the opinions of leaders about events and other statements. Moreover, priority is often given to issues related to partisan confrontation over others of greater public interest, such as territorial organization, the budget, employment, or justice. In the public media, the opinions of opposition parties are not published, prioritizing government information, and defending the interests of those who currently exercise power [4]. However, considering the aim of our research, city council webpages are not the property of the local government; they are public media that must respond to the general interest and, therefore, must show political plurality with representation of all the parties in the institution. This means that elected members of the government and the opposition must be held accountable for their actions. In Spain, the major organ of the city councils is the plenary, the deliberative body

composed by all the elected councillors (from all the different political parties) and presided by the Mayor that is not directly elected as he is invested by the councillors. Furthermore, in Spain, city council technicians are civil servants who work for the institution and not for the ruling party. Relying on complete information on the actions of all the elected representatives, citizens can make political participation decisions, such as their vote in electoral processes. In Spain, some local administrations already publish information on the decisions of the municipal government bodies, informing the public via news of the proposals of all the groups represented and the results of the votes, and even broadcasting the municipal plenary sessions in streaming, videos, or podcasts, so that all citizens can see how the proposals are presented and debated. In addition, some city council websites have specific spaces where political groups can post opinions or links to their sites and social networks [5].

The media's own agenda items are in the minority, while the majority is marked by the institutional agenda, which is fundamentally political [6]. The content of the messages disseminated mainly comes from or is related to press offices [7]. The economic crisis that seriously affected media outlets, together with a greater availability of the documents provided by these offices thanks to the Internet, has led to an increase in dependence on this institutional information. In local and regional media, with little advertising investment and few workers, it is even more noticeable [8]. It is therefore vital for the reconstruction of political journalism at the local level that public administrations provide complete information of good quality that can be used as a primary source [9]. It is also necessary to consider that in Spain, for example, there are 8131 city councils. Although many of them administer localities with a small population and scarce economic resources, it is not possible for the media to constantly report on local politics, keeping up with this broad complex situation, with a variety of sources and good quality information. Generally, the media focus their attention on the larger national or regional localities, depending on their scope, while also dealing with supralocal institutions. The lack of resources and the size of the problem are factors that contribute to the fact that information on local politics is, if it exists, a mere exercise in copying press releases with or without modifications. This plagiarism has been studied in Spain [10] but also in other countries such as Colombia [11]. Hence, the importance of having quality institutional information as a source for independent journalism.

Local councils began to carry out communicative actions, mainly aimed at meeting the information needs of the media, at the end of the 1970s. From 1983 onwards, communication offices were created in numerous local administrations and this trend became widespread to a large extent, although not entirely, over the next decade [7].

During this consolidation of the offices, important transformations took place that were encompassed in the term "professionalization of political communication" and consisted of adapting the political discourse to the forms established by the media, assuming an increasing number of elements of a show, dynamism and impact, and nurturing the techniques of advertising, marketing, and public relations [12].

This media management of political messages used strategies such as the programming of events adjusted to the criteria of newsworthiness, the adaptation of the activities and declarations to the rhythm of news output, the promotion of leaders for their good looks or their ability to produce good headlines [13], and the extension of the techniques used in electoral campaigns to all circumstances, always using communication in order to hold onto power. This last characteristic turns the communication of public institutions into a "rival communication, attack (or defense) communication of the opposition, with an eminently adversarial aspect" [4] (p. 235). This circumstance conditions journalists' access to political information, provides them a more propagandistic than informative vision and limits their range of action [1].

On the other hand, press offices have an intrinsic duality that conditions the persuasive nature of their message: they are created to manage the information generated by councils and also to influence the opinion of society through the construction of a positive

public image of that organization. The press offices of political institutions and of the public administration share this premise because, although their end goal is the management of public affairs, they need to obtain the trust of the people through their vote first. Therefore, they must also plan a communication strategy that creates an image that inspires credibility for the public. They have to model the profile of the leader and the organization, building a consistent image and creating a consensus around their management [14].

The head of the press or media relations knows the product and the journalistic message like any editor but must not lose sight of the fact that s/he is not exercising the work of a journalist, but of a manager of self-serving information. Therefore, all other journalists become instruments at the service of the client and their function goes beyond administrative and aseptic, designing communication strategies that are most effective for political leaders [12]. In this way, the messages that attempt to account for public management become a tool that allows government teams to explain, justify and legitimize the political decisions taken in each legislative period in order to create a positive perception in the public mind [15].

Therefore, although one of the functions of a press office of a political institution of the public administration is to regularly publish information on the activities carried out by the institution [14], the journalistic activity within the press offices has been diluted. Moreover, the lack of processing and editing of accountability data makes it unintelligible, the sources are not individualized or identified, and the news focuses on institutions and mayors, ignoring other opinions that are also relevant in municipal life, namely the opposition and the public. Nor is information regarding the strategic plans or public policies of the council contextualized [16].

In this way, the press offices of the official bodies become the new communication gatekeepers. Their teams defend the discourse of transparency but produce news using self-serving criteria [17]. Therefore, relations between journalists and press offices are conflictive from a journalistic point of view, since the former must inform their audiences and the latter are perceived by them as self-serving sources whose function is to make the media publish what they want [18].

All this does not exclude the fact that one of the main obligations of any municipal government in a democratic context is to inform the public of the decisions taken or the agreements reached that may influence or affect it, the reason for such actions, and the planning of public spending. What precisely differentiates a public press office from a private one is the obligation to be transparent. When managing the information produced by those who have been elected to represent voters, their work must be accessible to all citizens without hiding information [19].

Transparency is a basic democratic ideal and in local public administrations it entails an obligation to disseminate basic information to citizens, who have the right to know how public money is used. Transparency, therefore, is a value in the fight against corruption and is linked to accountability, both in decision-making processes and in the transfer of information of political content to the public and in the communication of management results [20].

The lack of opacity is the antidote that the communication of political institutions should apply in order to help improve the state of disaffection, lack of confidence and distancing of voters towards representative democratic entities [21] and to encourage their participation in public life. All this in a context of a general crisis of credibility of the media and politics, as in Spain, where most citizens evaluate the country's political situation as "Bad" (37.3%) or "Very Bad" (29.8%), or acknowledge a distrust in politics (56.3%) [22].

In this regard, information and communication technologies (ICTs) provide clear opportunities to promote the efficiency and transparency of governments, since they greatly reduce the cost of gathering, distributing, and accessing information [23]. Anderson [24] presents the results of a study focused on recording the changes experienced in terms of corruption through the analysis of e-government initiatives based on ICTs and concludes that these significantly reduce the incidence of acts of corruption.

However, the Internet alone is not enough to achieve these goals because technology can, on the contrary, reflect and reinforce pre-existing policies and trajectories. It can, for example, be used as an additional channel for propaganda and political control, rather than for accountability and transparency [25]. Communication strategies must overcome the ornamental function with an information policy that is based on transparency and service to the public [26].

Moreover, technology alone does not increase the democratic participation of citizens. It is the contents and relationships that are established that give meaning to that participation [27]. For ICTs to contribute to building a deliberative democracy, they need to have more institutional, and even mediatic, momentum. It is not enough to make electronic tools available to citizens or implement certain specific communication experiences between them and politicians [28].

And most importantly: in order for technologies to be a factor in improving public management, citizens need to be able to access information on how public authorities act and to be able to form from it an opinion because as Bertot, Jaeger, and Grimes [29] point out, it is social attitudes that can reduce the effectiveness of ICTs as a tool in the fight against corruption.

The communication of press offices with citizens and with the media, in a democratic context in which ICTs have been applied for the development of electronic government, have been studied in Spain from various perspectives and approaches.

In a study on how the heads of the political sections of 16 Spanish media outlets evaluate the press offices of political parties and government institutions, Francescutti and Saperas [30] showed that most journalists consider that the press offices are centres of persuasive strategies that focus strongly on improving the image of politicians in power, for whom they act as intermediaries, limiting and restricting access to them.

For his part, Aira Fox [18] conducted interviews with campaign leaders of the parties with representation in the Catalan chamber and the heads of politics section of the main newspapers of this autonomous community. His results indicated that journalists' perceptions were that communication and strategy advisors greatly influenced issues that appear in the news and that government heads of communication increasingly adapt to the language and logistics needs of the media, increasing in turn its influence in the media sphere. These results were also corroborated by the investigation carried out by Catalina García [8], who compared the press releases issued by the Fuenlabrada town council with the news published by local digital media and demonstrated that for them the municipal press office is the main source of information.

On the other hand, the study carried out by Sanders, Canel Crespo, and Holtz-Bacha [31] focused on the professionalization of central government communication in Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom. In the case of Spain, the information they provide every day regarding public management is characterized by lack of planning, problems with coordination, improvised action, poor evaluation of public perceptions, and the selecting of profiles that are more political than professional for public management communication.

In the area of local administration communication, Gandía, Marrahí, and Huguet [32] investigated the 2.0 tools of Spanish city council websites to determine whether or not they contributed to the transparency of local governments. Their results indicate that there is an ornamental use of these tools, with information that is too promotional and that does not reveal important data on the management carried out by the entities.

Manfredi-Sánchez et al. [16] analysed the news generated by press offices and published on council websites between 2011 and 2016 and reached the conclusion that these are generated using political control criteria and not journalistic criteria.

Simelio, Ginesta, San Eugenio and Corcoy [33] analysed the transparency of the websites of Spanish municipalities of more than 20,000 inhabitants in 2015. The results show that the degree of transparency of these websites is not very high and that city

councils generally act by exclusively communicating their government action, offer few tools for citizen participation and make a unidirectional use of their social networks.

Finally, García-Orosa and Vázquez-Sande [34] studied the activity of the press offices of the local administration in order to determine whether they combine their own tasks with those of the party. Their findings indicate a total absence of content issued by groups that do not form part of the party that head the government; the overexposure of the mayor in the information issued; the use of public media outlets to make claims against administrations of other parties; and the mixing of institutional statements with political statements either to answer the opposition or to reproach previous governments.

2. Method

The general aim of this study is to determine what the political and technical directors of local administrations understand by transparency and public communication and, in relation to this issue, what role they believe the various political subjects involved (government, opposition and the public) should have in municipal communication so that it is transparent.

To achieve this aim, a content analysis was first carried out of the websites of 605 Spanish municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants of the following autonomous communities: Andalusia (n = 154), Aragon (n = 13), The Canary Islands (n = 42), Catalonia (n = 121), The Community of Valencia (n = 97), Galicia (n = 54), The Community of Madrid (n = 51), Murcia (n = 31), and the Basque Country (n = 42). The analysis was carried out in June 2018. The indicators and analysis criteria were as follows:

1. Is news, information and/or opinions published on the actions of government members related to government management? We confirmed this indicator when news of this nature was published with a minimum frequency of two months.
2. Is news, information and/or opinions published on the actions of opposition members and/or political groups related to the control of government management? In this case, we considered the publication of press releases issued by opposition groups, information on press conferences, actions or statements about the management, or news about motions presented at municipal plenary sessions. We also confirmed this indicator when there is an opinion space on the website reserved for the opposition.
3. Is news published about the activities of the plenary session, the motions presented by the various political groups, the debate and the agreements? This indicator was confirmed when information was published on the municipal plenary sessions, the motions presented or a report with statements made by the groups.

For the definition of these indicators, we start from the framework of the Infoparticipa Project that has, since 2012, studied the public communication of Spanish councils through the use of transparency and information quality indicators. The results of this project, which are published in a geo-referenced format on the Infoparticipa Map, showed that the information published on council websites is insufficient according to what is established by Law 19/2013 on Transparency, Access to Public Information, and Good Governance and that the objective of favouring the democratic participation of citizens has not been fulfilled [21,35,36].

The second method designed to achieve our objective was the discussion group, which allowed the experiences and opinions of a group of individuals on the issues raised to be compared. In this case, the discussion group participants were selected for their relevant political or technical position in different local administrations so that they could provide proven knowledge in government and management experience.

Three discussion groups were held with political and technical leaders of the councils of the autonomous communities (regions with their own government and parliament) of Madrid, the Basque Country, and the Canary Islands. This sample allowed different perspectives to be compared, considering both the geographical location and the socio-political characteristics of each territory: The Community of Madrid, located in the geographical centre of Spain, is home to the capital and has a high population density; the Basque

Country, located on the Cantabrian coast, is a community that has a strong identity in which the Basque nationalist political parties have great weight at all levels of the administration and which enjoys an economic and fiscal regime that is different from other Spanish autonomous communities; The Canary Islands form an ultra-peripheral archipelago community, which confers on it socio-political characteristics that distinguish it from the Iberian peninsular communities.

The discussion groups were held in 2018 in a single 5-h session per community, in the capital of each autonomous community. The one held in Madrid took place on 16 January 2018, the one in the Canary Islands on 15 March 2018, and the one in Bilbao on 19 October 2018.

Finally, the discussion groups were made up as follows:

The Basque Country, 7 participants:

- 1 Technical Director of Modernization and Quality, woman.
- 1 Mayoress.
- 1 Director of the Quality and Evaluation Office, woman.
- 1 Head of the Transparency and Content Unit, woman.
- 1 Technical Director of Communication, man.
- 1 Head of Records Management and Transparency, woman.
- 1 Director of the Society of Information and Citizen Participation, man.

The Canary Islands, 6 participants:

- Communications Manager, man.
- Political Secretary, woman.
- 1 Director of the Technical Unit of Modernization Projects, man.
- 1 Head of Quality and Planning Service, man.
- 1 Head of Technology and Data Protection Services, woman.
- 1 Commissioner of Transparency of the Canary Islands, man. Although he does not represent a local administration, he was included in the group because of the relevance of the institution he runs to the municipalities.

Madrid, 4 participants:

- 1 Head of Communication and Press, woman.
- 1 Director of Modernization and Quality, man.
- 1 Head of Innovation and Transparency, woman.
- 1 Deputy Director General of Transparency, man.

The discussion groups addressed these three issues relevant to this study:

1. How is the public informed about the government and opposition?
2. What information is published so that the public can monitor compliance with the government plan or strategic plan?
3. What tools are provided for citizen participation and accountability?

3. Results

3.1. Analysis of the Information Published on Council Websites

The content analysis of the websites showed that a very high percentage of municipalities publish news about the council's actions: over 86% in all the population segments studied and reaching up to 97%. However, the percentage falls drastically for the second indicator, which concerns the publication of news about the opposition, to below 25% in all segments.

Regarding the percentage of councils that publish information on the council plenary session, given the importance of this organ it is much lower than would be expected, not reaching 45% in any single case. These data are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Information for participation.

Indicator	From 10,000 to 50,000 Inhabitants		From 50,001 to 100,000 Inhabitants		More than 100,000 Inhabitants		Indicator	From 10,000 to 50,000 Inhabitants
	Number of Cases	%	Number of Cases	%	Number of Cases	%		
News, information and/or opinions on the actions of government members related to government management are published.	422	86.3%	64	97%	48	96%	News, information and/or opinions on the actions of government members related to government management are published.	422
News, information and/or opinions on the actions of opposition members and/or political groups related to the control of government management are published.	38	7.8%	16	24.2%	11	22%	News, information and/or opinions on the actions of opposition members and/or political groups related to the control of government management are published.	38
News about the activities of the plenary sessions, the motions presented by the various political groups, the debate and the agreements are published.	107	21.9%	23	34.8%	22	44%	News about the activities of the plenary sessions, the motions presented by the various political groups, the debate and the agreements are published.	107

3.2. Concept of Communication and Public Information

Once we had presented them with these results, most of the political and technical leaders who participated in the discussion groups started from the perspective that they report on who holds the government of the mayor's office without initially considering that their objective is to inform the public. Nevertheless, in all three discussion groups, a number of participants began to question these initial ideas.

Firstly, some participants stressed that as officials they are neutral and that, although they work for the government, their neutrality is based on the fact that it does not matter which political party or person holds the mayor's office because they in all cases would be the same as professionals: *"I am a manager, I am a civil servant, but I work for the municipal government, I do not work for the party that is in the government or for the parties that are in the opposition"* (Technical Director of Communication).

Therefore, this perspective reinforces the idea that the public function is related to who holds government and does not consider public information as a social democratic good that should be reported to the public. On this subject, a number of participants started the information that a public institution must provide is a matter of values only and that they are not legally obliged to create information aimed at citizens:

“The thing is, in addition to the internal work, which is very important, in the change of culture, including the incorporation of these values, they are not legal requirements but of values”.

(Technical Director of Communication)

“It’s clear that there are many things related to the public, services and how the procedures are provided. This is information about the administration as such and then there’s another line of information, which is related to government action, which doesn’t always coincide”.

(Director of Modernization and Quality).

Secondly, the participants most favourable towards the idea that information should be aimed at citizens point out, however, that it is an aspect that continues to create reluctance among policy makers:

“First of all, with experience and with total honesty, we have a mayor who believes it, who favours transparency, but not all the government team is on his level in terms of accepting transparency as a way of working. Not even the technical managers. There are also differences in their way of understanding things”.

(Director of the Society of Information and Citizen Participation)

This difficulty in the internal organization and in journalistic and political routines is an aspect in which the discussion group participants coincide, namely demanding a change in the culture of the administration itself and in the profiles of the communication professionals:

“We come across many obstacles, at a technical level, from the administrations themselves. (. . .) We also think that we have a lot of work to do, firstly, as a culture of internal and external participation, and then as an administration. We believe that, in addition to the fact that staff haven’t been overhauled for many years, we have to incorporate new profiles, because in some way, this has also prevented us from moving forward in terms of the means of advancing the information itself. We lack data analysts, process engineers . . . So, with an eye on how the administration has to move forward . . . well, we think this is where it will be very important that all projects are supported by data and information helps you in that decision-making process”.

(Head of the Transparency and Content Unit)

Therefore, the technical and political leaders of the councils are of the opinion that a new learning and change of perspective in the political culture is necessary in order to be able to make information transparent and aimed at the public:

“There are certain types of people who experience everything as an interference and of putting the subject at the centre and saying (. . .). There are others that find it difficult, it scares them, they think it’s annoyance of some sort and that they are giving you information to know what you’re going to do next with that information or if you’re going to use that information in another way. It’s a learning path, of going further because paths aren’t made overnight. It’s that now you have begun to put it into shape, but you have to think: ‘What have you posted it for?’, ‘Have you posted in to comply with the law or for the public to understand our management?’ So that they understand. ‘Do you think that like this they’ll be able to understand?’ Then you are already changing, you are evolving”.

(Director of the Quality and Evaluation Office)

How new possibilities with the Internet and data processing can favour an improvement in the quality of information also came up:

“Now you say, ‘What about the quality of the information?’ Is it useful or not? If I have to include five PDFs, what use is it really? You have to have a PhD to understand that information, right? So, I think that new technologies now allow you to go to the source and they also allow you to carry out comparative studies in a simpler way. If you’re here

a few years you can plot the trends, you have to see the positive part, which is that we are working towards it”.

(Director of the Quality and Evaluation Office)

On this point, the need to know how to select quality information is also highlighted:

“Seeing and separating the important from the municipal ‘hello’. In other words, what interest does it have for the public? What will they demand, above all? Well, economic management, hiring, etc. Those aspects in which there may be something unclear or that may generate doubts, seeing if everyone is clean, if there is any corruption or not”.

(Director of the Society of Information and Citizen Participation)

Or, in some cases, they even propose that only information on services should be provided:

“I think that municipal magazines, I give them as an example because they can be transferred, should be for information on services. Nor of the information of the current government team, in other words, obviously if you have set up a new service, you’ll have to post it, but the focus is not on who sets up the service, the focus is on the service, its timetable, its benefits, etc”.

(Head of Innovation and Transparency)

This debate about what news should appear on council websites constantly came up during the discussion groups and a number of participants ended up deciding that, at the level of transparency, it should only be what the law requires:

“What should be posted and what shouldn’t? Here, the indicators that have been sent to us from the Transparency Commissioner, there are none, so if it’s not there I don’t post it. If the law doesn’t require it, I don’t post it”.

(Political Secretary)

In addition, they are aware that the data and information provided on council websites is used by the media as the basis for their reports:

“So, I suppose that it’s universities and journalists who consult, take aggregated data or whatever and go to a meeting and report something”.

(Director of the Quality and Evaluation)

Another aspect of the discussion group participants is that they emphasise the little co-ordination and relationship between the council press office services and those responsible for transparency in these same entities:

“This disconnection occurs in two senses: they don’t participate either in the creation of the transparency portals or their contents, and then the transparency portals, through the press offices, don’t get adequately promoted”.

(Commissioner of Transparency)

3.3. Information about the Opposition

In relation to the indicator on whether the heads of communication of the municipalities should also report on the opposition, the discussion group participants were clearly reticent. On this matter, for some of the participants their starting point is that they work to inform about the government and not about the council in general:

“When we work on municipal government information, we obviously provide information and also an assessment of the institutional figure. The institutional figure, in my case, is the mayor and then the council, and so on. Yes, we do make one small point. We provide a space in a weekly magazine that we have in which, once a month, the parties have a space to contribute what they think. That contribution is made by them”.

(Technical Director of Communication)

They also noted that, in addition, the public has all the information regarding the activity of the plenary sessions on the council website:

“We publish the complete minutes of all government bodies in which criticisms, questions, requests and the such like are included. (. . .) However, I’ve always refused to post the opposition news on the website. At the beginning what I told them is that you had to explain who the opposition is, to prove with a photo, a cv or email and direct them with a link to their website, since they have a website and a blog”.

(Head of Communication and Press)

In this respect, they reinforce the idea that transparent information on management is provided on council websites but that the news section managed by press offices is based on government information and that the opposition already has their own sites to disseminate information:

“From the point of view of the public, I think that they must be provided information on all this, on the administration, of course, on what those who govern do and also on what those who don’t govern do, say or criticize. (. . .) The opposition participate in certain collegiate bodies and have an opinion, in the plenary, in the plenary commissions, present motions in the district boards, etcetera. (. . .) It doesn’t seem a bad idea to me to have a space on the website, but I also think that nowadays it’s not very relevant from the public’s point of view. The political parties themselves or the opposition itself already have more than enough means, much broader than the council website itself, to communicate these criticisms. They have their own press office, news, they have their own website, they have Facebook, Twitter”.

(Director of Modernization and Quality)

In addition, they state that the public is already clearly aware that news posted on municipal websites focuses on highlighting the good management of the government and that they act as communication offices of the mayor’s office:

“Because citizens who are interested already know how to get to the opposition’s critical news. What is understood by a further step to facilitate public knowledge from the council website itself? Well, you can’t say no. Maybe access is better for the public, but I don’t think it corresponds to a real need. That, in fact, I think, they already do that. There’s no need to even wait for the debate on the state of the town, there’s something similar to the state debate in the municipality. People look for those interviews that are already more in newspapers than on city council websites and they serve to find out the opinion of the opposition leader”.

(Director of Modernization and Quality)

They state that the public wants the information to be related more to the services provided by the city council than about the public debate between government and opposition:

“It would lose credibility in the face of the public (. . .) What the public wants is to be told that if their street is dirty it will be cleaned quickly, that who knows how much has been invested into improving the pavements and the trees or that to submit such paperwork you have to go there and do it this way. They aren’t looking for fights with the opposition or what they say to each other”.

(Head of Communication and Press)

However, they also ask themselves how the current institutional political culture should change in order to provide good, transparent information:

“I personally don’t like the way parties have to interact. And in a local area, even less so. (. . .) Because there’s a way of relating along the lines of ‘I won, you lost’ (. . .). In my opinion, that’s forgetting something very, very important, which is who we serve, and, in the case of a council, this is even closer. So, this talk of battles I think is a distortion and continues because it seems that it always has to be like this. In other words, does political activity always have to be like that? Is political activity always based on criticism and never, for example, that an opposition party can say, ‘you’ve done a good job?’”.

(Technical Director of Communication)

Several participants elaborated on this idea of the lack of transparency in the information due to the political routines of the parties and government and conflicts with the opposition:

“There was a time when the opposition wanted opposition news to be included in the agenda (. . .) There was big debate among the government team and in the end, they said no. All that also came at a time when the opposition had made some very biased and strangely interpreted public interventions (. . .) It was also related to participatory budgeting (. . .) I was on the information commission’s Board of Spokespersons opening a period to collect ideas. (. . .) And during that open period no ideas came forward and they went to the media saying that they hadn’t been allowed to say anything, that it was a farce . . . Well, at that time the council decided that they weren’t to be given top position on the homepage and each group were offered some opinion forums, which they didn’t accept at first but in the end, they did and are publishing. (. . .) There’s no absolute transfer in the public debate, no, but hey, step by step”.

(Technical Director of Communication)

Therefore, for the participants the lack of information about the opposition in the news section of council websites is related to the lack of interest of the entire political class, both government and opposition:

“In reality, the political party will never express its opinion within the framework of a council website of a political group that for them is the adversary or the opponent. They do it on their websites of their political groups. (. . .) Because first they turn it down, they even see it as strange, they say: ‘no, no, I have my website (. . .) and that’s where it doesn’t cost me, and I don’t have you having to authorize me to publish (that you do through a council content manager), if not, I do it the way I want, I post photos where I look better, not where I look worse”.

(Deputy Director General of Transparency)

Despite their reticence, participants showed a degree of openness to modifying these behaviours and they recognize the usefulness of current technologies and transparency laws to facilitate this improvement:

“We, as a complement, what we also publish is information related to the exercise, through councillors, of their right to access council information, which is some of the information that we, by ordinance, must publish: how many questions each opposition councillor presents and also the average response time to the questions. And there, we’ve seen amazing progress. For the moment we’ve convinced them that transparency and publicity do have a direct effect on process management. When this started to be made public, well, response times improved for the various areas of government”.

(Deputy Director General of Transparency)

However, the existence of these same technologies also serves as justification for not publishing specific news about the opposition’s actions:

“Then, with an alert system that allows you to subscribe with words . . . to really keep track of what the government says and what the opposition says . . . there are other systems that are much more immediate, faster, more agile, than publishing on the council website or on the space that people aren’t actually going to go to in order look for it . . . The plenary sessions are already available, that’s where the management, the position of each one, can be seen, and, what’s more, openly”.

(Director of Modernization and Quality)

3.4. Information about the Opposition

In relation to the information on the plenary sessions and debates, the discussion group participants justified themselves by saying that they are streamed and that the data shows that very few people watch them:

“And anyway, how many people go to the plenary sessions? That’s another thing, the public in my town go to the plenary sessions like fan clubs of each political team. And although they’re re-broadcast . . . well, the number of reproductions . . . is a joke” (Head of Communication and Press, woman, Madrid). “It’s just that you need to be interested, really interested, to watch a five-hour plenary session . . . if you have a specific interest, but the public in general has other concerns”.

(Deputy Director General of Transparency)

In general, the discussion group participants’ perception is that, although the public is provided with data and information relating to the law of transparency, only a minority of the population is interested in holding the council accountable:

“We can’t let that condition us, both us and politicians. It conditions us, too much I think, because you then see on social networks the profiles that are critical of the council and the government team and you think ‘How many people are on this network?’. Because there are no more than 9 or 10 people, what happens is that we magnify it (. . .) The criticism is so harsh in absolute terms that it hurts and damages you, but then we have to analyse it in relative terms, how many people there are . . . Well, very few and the same ones. And then we have to work in order to be increasingly transparent and to work better and better for all members of the public”.

(Technical Director of Modernization and Quality)

Thus, the majority consider that they should continue along the lines of encouraging citizen participation and improving on this point:

“I think that, even if we had nothing, we have to keep sowing those seeds. For example, this year we’ve already carried out two participatory budget processes. In the second we included a video, which was recorded by a young girl and which explains what a budget is using very simple language. We took this to two schools where we got a good response, but we still did it at the public’s level and it’s a bit depressing in a way. If you evaluate it in terms of ‘35 people went to this workshop . . . ’ What does that mean? That we have to continue (. . .) Instead of ‘I’m going to give you a hard time’, it’s better to say why we’re not improving. This is one of a number of elements that have to change”.

(Technical Director of Communication)

In this regard, they argue that they must make advances in the use of the possibilities of the Internet in order to achieve true accountability:

“Accountability is done differently, I believe. For example, I have experience with social networks. Up until the moment the department took it over, it was about whoever was in power at the time blowing their own trumpet. (. . .) It was really hard but now they have credibility and legitimacy . . . Because we also took a further step to use them as a means of interaction, consultation and a town incident service, incredible. That would never have been achieved if we hadn’t completely withdrawn all the self-aggrandizing news and achievements with that approach”.

(Head of Innovation and Transparency)

Table 2 summarizes the contributions gathered during the focus groups that have been discussed in the previous three results sections.

Table 2. Summary of the contributions of the technical and political council leaders.

Contributions	Madrid	The Basque Country	The Canary Islands
Opinion on the need to publish news about the opposition.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The opposition’s criticisms are already in the minutes of the plenary sessions, which are published on the web. - Opposition parties have their own web page and social networks, and can publish their information there; therefore, there is no need to publish it on the council website. - The news should not be political, but about services to the public. - The public does not use council websites to find out about what the opposition thinks. They use the media or the parties’ websites. - The opposition parties do not want to express their opinion on the institutional website of a group that they consider to be an opponent either. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The plenary session is streamed and is posted on the website for a month. These include the opinions of all political groups. - The parties are confrontational and transmitting that to the public distorts what political life is like, which should be less conflictive and less critical. - Thought should be given to what interests the public, which is economic management, hiring and all issues in which corruption might be involved but not political gossip. - The public is not very interested in participating and there are some extremely critical profiles on social networks. - Not everyone on the council team shares the culture of transparency. Some people perceive it as an interference in their work. - The staff should include new, more technical, profiles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The heads of transparency have nothing to do with the publication of news from the opposition. That is a matter for the press office. - There is a certain disconnection between the heads of transparency and council press offices.
Concrete actions carried out to make the opposition visible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A space was dedicated to the opposition on the website but, because it did not publish anything, it was removed. - The opposition asked for their motions to be published on Facebook. At first, they did not, but after receiving complaints from that party they did. Now nobody sends them information to publish on Facebook. - There is a space where the results of the voting of the motions and the monitoring of their compliance is published. - They have included a link to the sites that the opposition uses to communicate their opinions. - They publish information access data of each of the councillors, with their average response times. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A small space is provided in a weekly magazine in which the parties have space to contribute. - The plenary sessions are transmitted via the website and local TV. - The opposition asked for their news to be included on the homepage of the council website but had just made “very biased” public interventions, and therefore they were denied that possibility. - Opinion forums were offered to each political group. At first, they did not accept them, but now they are publishing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They provide links to the social networks of the various political groups and also a space for the news of each one.

Table 2. Cont.

Contributions	Madrid	The Basque Country	The Canary Islands
Attitude towards change	- They are in favour of there being a space on the website for the opposition to publish their news, although they do not see it as being very necessary.	- There is no absolute transfer of what the opposition thinks to the public debate, but they are making progress. "It's a learning path."	No opinion was given.
entry 4	data data	data data	data data

4. Discussion

Municipal councils must report transparently through their websites, because knowing how public money is managed is a right of citizens, something which also acts favourably in the prevention of corruption. This need is more evident in the smaller municipalities of Spain, as the media focus on larger regions and do not report on them. To be able to evaluate the performance of the public function and to vote responsibly, it is essential that data on public management, decision-making processes and the debates between the various political groups be easily accessible. To be useful, this information must be impartial and plural and must not be limited to the actions of mayors but must also include the opposition and civil society.

The crisis of the media outlets, especially serious at the local level, has meant that this institutional information published by city council press offices is, on many occasions, the primary—and sometimes only—source regarding what happens in the municipality. On multiple occasions this news is published in the media without any modification, without any verification process or any extension of the sources [16]. Therefore, it is even more necessary that this information be impartial and plural, and written using journalistic criteria, as sometimes it will be the only information that reaches the public.

However, studies on the communication of Spanish councils have shown that their press offices frequently act as propaganda bodies of the parties in power, seeking more an improvement in the leaders' image than complete information on their management [30,32]. In this regard, in this study we have confirmed through a content analysis that council websites publish very little information on the activity of the opposition or on the plenary sessions, debates, and agreements, but do publish information on the activity of the government.

These quantitative results are complemented by the inclusion of a qualitative method, namely the focus group. Through the interventions of a number of heads of communication and quality and transparency managers, explanations have been provided regarding this absence of the opposition groups in the information published on the council websites.

The results demonstrate that there is no clear awareness in the people who participated in the focus groups on their function in terms of management accountability, or on the need to apply journalistic criteria to the news that is published, defining their obligation in some cases as informing about the mayor and the government.

Something similar is observed regarding the plurality of sources in the preparation of the news published on the council websites. None of the participants stated that they considered it essential to give voice to the opposition parties on the institutional website of the municipalities. In many cases, participants consider it sufficient to give access to the minutes of the plenary sessions on the council website, as they include the opposition's interventions. And several of them find it excessive to extract these opinions and reflect them on the home page because they believe that it provokes political confrontation and

gossip when what is really important, in their words, is to inform the public about services and about the use of public money.

Furthermore, they believe that if the opposition groups already have their own web-pages and social networks and publish their opinions in local media, it is not necessary for the council's website to also include that information. They also doubt whether these groups would like to use the space offered by an institution led by their political adversary and give examples of multiple cases in which space has been offered but not used. They review some initiatives they have had in this regard and most are classified as a failure, except those that offer links to the opposition's own websites. They complain, moreover, about the lack of citizen participation, which sometimes causes them to become demotivated, since only a few people access certain information available on the council websites.

In addition to these external difficulties, they also highlight that internally it is essential to continue improving the acceptance of the culture of transparency, as some officials are reluctant to publish information related to their work. They also point out that it is necessary to include more technical profiles in order to solve the problems of information management and that there should be a closer association between those responsible for transparency and the council's press office.

Regarding the use of technologies, they appreciate the advantages they provide for the processing and publication of information. However, in some cases, they also use them as an excuse not to process certain information, especially information related to the opposition.

This information collected in the focus groups reflects that the technical and political council leaders do not have a clear awareness of the need to publish complete and plural information on the websites of the city councils. This absence of a journalistic approach when publishing information on municipal websites limits and diminishes the information that citizens receive about the management of their local governments—even more so when in Spain the media do not have the capacity to report on small municipalities (which are the majority) and, when they do, they resort precisely to the information provided by the government on the municipality's website. These circumstances lead to a decline in the quality of the information that citizens receive and, therefore, in their ability to participate democratically, evaluating and monitoring the management of governments. If there is no clear awareness about the need for this information, it will be difficult for this situation to improve, since actions to change will not be considered necessary.

The limitations of this research are related to the qualitative analysis, which does not allow a generalization of the results at the national level, although they serve as guidance and a basis for future research with larger samples. Similarly, new questions should be included in future studies that would allow researchers to analyse in further depth the knowledge of the routines and processes related to the writing and publication of news on council websites and to the inclusion of the new requirements of the law on transparency.

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