

The platformization of institutional political communication. The use of WhatsApp by local administrations

La plataformización de la comunicación política institucional. El uso de WhatsApp por parte de las administraciones locales

Silvia Marcos García. Universitat Jaume I de Castelló. Spain.

smarcos@uji.es



Hugo Doménech-Fabregat. Universitat Jaume I de Castelló. España.

hdomenech@uji.es



Andreu Casero-Ripollés. Universitat Jaume I de Castelló. España.

casero@uji.es



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: In recent years, digital platforms, especially mobile instant messaging services such as WhatsApp, have become essential tools for local administrations. Changes in the habits of the population, more likely to carry out their procedures through mobile devices, but also the possibility that these platforms offer to promote direct and immediate communication have made city councils see in them a way to improve relations with the citizens. Our objective is to analyze the characteristics, uses, and functions that local institutions confer on their mobile instant messaging services to communicate with citizens. **Methodology:** A qualitative analysis has been carried out through in-depth interviews with eighteen municipalities, selected based on their number of inhabitants. **Results:** The results show an overview of the uses of WhatsApp by local administrations. This makes it possible to identify the motivations and objectives in its implementation, its characteristics concerning its contents and planning, and its future challenges. **Conclusion and discussion:** The findings of this research show that WhatsApp is established in the local administrations. However, its use is not capable of taking advantage of all the potentialities of the digital environment, especially due to the lack of dialogue with citizens and solid strategic planning.

KEYWORDS: political communication; institutional communication; city councils; mobile instant messaging services; WhatsApp; platformization

RESUMEN

Introducción: En los últimos años, las plataformas digitales, especialmente los servicios móviles de mensajería instantánea como WhatsApp, se han convertido en instrumentos esenciales para las administraciones locales. Los cambios de hábitos de la población, más propensos a realizar sus gestiones a través de los dispositivos móviles, pero también la posibilidad que estas plataformas ofrecen para promover una comunicación directa e inmediata, han hecho que los ayuntamientos vean en ellas una vía para mejorar las relaciones con la ciudadanía. Nuestro objetivo es analizar las características, usos y funciones que las instituciones locales confieren a sus servicios móviles de mensajería instantánea para comunicarse con la ciudadanía. **Metodología:** Se ha realizado un análisis cualitativo mediante entrevistas en profundidad a dieciocho ayuntamientos, seleccionados en base a su número de habitantes. **Resultados:** Los resultados muestran una panorámica de los usos de WhatsApp por parte de las administraciones locales. Esto permite identificar las motivaciones y objetivos en su implantación, sus características en relación a sus contenidos y planificación y sus retos futuros. **Conclusión y discusión:** Los hallazgos de esta investigación demuestran que WhatsApp está asentado en los ayuntamientos. No obstante, su uso no es capaz de aprovechar todas las potencialidades del entorno digital, especialmente, debido a la falta de diálogo con la ciudadanía y de una planificación estratégica sólida.

PALABRAS CLAVE: comunicación política; comunicación institucional; ayuntamientos; servicios móviles de mensajería instantánea; WhatsApp; plataformaización

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Translation by **Paula González** (Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Venezuela)

1. Introduction

In recent years, the unstoppable emergence of different social media has changed our communication habits in an accelerated way. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or Instagram, among others, or the most recent mobile instant messaging services such as WhatsApp or Telegram, have not only settled in our daily lives but have also become indispensable elements in many social areas (Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019). The ability to directly provide information, encourage citizen participation and engagement, or favor the image of transparency of the institutions, has led local public administrations to incorporate these platforms as permanent political communication instruments (Criado, et al. 2017; Bimber, 2014).

Among all these mobile apps, WhatsApp and Telegram have taken on a special relevance due to the popularity they have acquired in recent years among users and the ease with which they allow addressing social problems that directly affect the daily life of citizens (Casero -Ripollés, 2020a). In this context, the use of this type of tool represents an opportunity for public administrations to enhance citizens' right to information, promote the transparency of public information and their political activity, and improve citizens' levels of civic engagement and political participation in a context marked by strong disaffection and a legitimacy crisis of representative democracy (Castells, 2017; Feenstra et al. 2017).

Until now, much of the previous research has focused on knowing, on the one hand, the general use that public administrations have made of these platforms and, on the other hand, the perception and effects that they have had on citizens. (Gil de Zúñiga, et al., 2021; Castro Martínez, et al., 2021; Castillo-Esparcia, et al., 2020; López-Tárraga, 2020; Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2015). However, little has been done about the functional characteristics that make it possible to define these types of mobile instant messaging services in public administrations and to know what the objectives of the city councils are when using them. To fill this gap in the literature, this research proposes an analysis of the uses and functions assigned to mobile instant messaging services by local public institutions, as well as the identification of their motivations and objectives when adopting and launching these types of communication channels with citizens.

2. The platformization of political communication

In recent years, mobile devices have become an indispensable tool in the daily life of citizens. In Spain, 99.5% of households have at least one mobile phone (INE, 2020). Of these, 93.1% consider this device as the preferred one to access the Internet, and 85.8% as a way to consult their social networks (AIMC, 2020). Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, or mobile instant messaging services such as WhatsApp or Telegram, have grown significantly, becoming an essential element for multiple sectors (Plantin & Punathambekar, 2019). Despite the social origin of these platforms, created mainly for users to share interests and personal information, the connectivity, immediacy, portability, personalization, and ubiquity of these technologies are helping to redefine the communicative and social scene in a broad sense (Aguado & Martínez, 2008).

These social media have positioned themselves as distributors and issuers of information, coming to condition the very core of democratic or political processes (Gillespie, 2018; Van Dijck, et al., 2018). In this way, these platforms are occupying a central role, not only in social interactions but also in information consumption habits and even in the political participation of citizens (Gil de Zúñiga; et al., 2021). A phenomenon that authors such as Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018: 5) or Nieborg and Poell (2018: 2) define as “platformization”. This concept refers to the consolidation of digital platforms in our daily lives, an aspect that gives them a central role in social dynamics. More and more aspects related to the functioning of politics and society depend on these platforms. These are configured as key infrastructures for social transformation that offer new potentialities, and also establish new limits for political communication. In this context, they assume a strong role in social and political practices and acquire the ability to decisively condition them.

Easy access and the unlimited possibility of creating and disseminating content, make these platforms a preferred place to generate new forms of interaction and promote social connectivity, which is essential for the emergence of a new participatory culture (Ling, 2017; Bayer, et al., 2016). Some authors show that the use of mobile phones and these platforms is one of the key factors in the involvement of citizens in political activities and makes more active users reinforce their knowledge and their ability to intervene in public life (Lee, et al., 2014). One of the most significant examples of synergies between online and offline participation through the use of mobile phones is in the mobilizations experienced in the last decade, such as the Arab Spring, the 15M in Spain, or the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York (Fuchs, 2014; Willnat et al., 2013; Rojas & Puig-Abril, 2009). At the same time that citizens complained on the streets, they used digital platforms to share messages and images, demonstrating how the virality of Facebook, Twitter, or WhatsApp, among others, can transform a localized protest into a broader movement. In these contexts, social media enables people to speak out for shared causes and connect on an unprecedented scale to pursue democratic goals (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

The need for local administrations to offer official information, quickly and directly to their citizens, has meant that, in recent years, city councils have actively promoted these types of technological resources. By interacting with citizen groups, local governments not only grant them the possibility to access public information for the exercise of their political rights, but also enhance an image of transparent, functional, and effective institutions (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2017; Bertot, et al., 2010).

2.1. The use of social media by public administrations

The incorporation of social media as a communicative tool in the political sphere has been extensive, so that, from 2009 to today, numerous city councils have made increasingly widespread use of social platforms (Mickoleit, 2014). As various studies affirm, there are many public administrations at the local or national level, but also at the international level in other parts of Europe or the United States, which already have one or more profiles on social networks to provide institutional information, promote interactions with citizens, and improve their transparency (Criado & Villodre, 2021; Solito & Materassi, 2020; Guillamón, et al., 2016; Graham & Avery, 2013, Bonsón, et al., 2012). Thus, city councils and other public institutions have found in these technologies a way to improve the relationship with citizens and transform their internal management, becoming much more open and transparent entities (Bretschneider & Parker, 2016). As the main representatives of the cities, the communication carried out by these institutions is a powerful instrument to explain, justify, and legitimize the political decisions taken (Campillo Alhama, 2010).

Although studies such as that of Criado, Rojas-Martin, and Gil-García (2017) suggest that the government at the local level is still in an early stage of development of its communication strategy in social networks, previous literature shows that these are a useful information tool (Solito & Materassi, 2020). Providing information, encouraging citizen participation and engagement, or increasing the transparency of the institution are some of the most significant motivations that determine the use of these platforms by city councils (Criado, et al., 2017; Spilotopoulou, et al., 2014). Social media allow administrations to autonomously disseminate initiatives and important data that until now were relegated to the mediation of the media (Salvador & Ramírez, 2016), thus enhancing relationships of proximity and exchange of information between citizens. This especially occurs in the smaller city councils with a smaller population volume (Zurutuza-Muñoz & García-Herrer, 2021). Consequently, the content of the information can activate the population, involving them in actions and services related to their daily life and increasing their civic engagement (Lev-On & Steinfeld, 2015). At the same time, the possibility of disseminating information on their management makes social platforms become essential instruments to favor the accountability of public administrations, comply with the standards of transparency and responsibility, and, therefore, recover the trust of citizens (Van Dijck, et al., 2018; Simelio-Solà & Rodríguez Navas, 2014; Pintado Pérez & Paniagua Rojano, 2018).

However, these potentialities are limited in many cases by some significant factors internal to the public institutions themselves. The limited availability of resources for the maintenance, control, and evaluation of these platforms, the lack of a management model that involves the entire organization, or the ignorance of some issues related to the security and privacy of these technologies, are some of the main concerns of city councils when planning a communication strategy in these media (Criado, et al., 2017). Although the ease of access that digital platforms allow can be an advantage, especially for the consultation and dissemination of a large number of contents, it also represents a challenge for public administrations due to the increase in the circulation of hoaxes and deceptions, and the presence of false profiles, which are very difficult to identify and control (Casero-Ripollés, 2020a).

Until now, most of the previous literature indicates that the most popular social media in the communication strategies of public administrations are, mainly, Facebook and Twitter (Solito & Materassi, 2020; Simelio-Solà & Rodríguez Navas, 2014). On the one hand, Facebook has positioned itself as a practical platform to create a community and increase the levels of engagement of citizens with the local government, especially when it promotes actions and publications launched by citizens (Reddick, et al., 2017; Bonsón, et al., 2015). In this sense, Facebook has become an important platform in the local political information infrastructure since, thanks to its mediation, local governments are directly reaching the public, avoiding dependence on local media (Thorson, et al., 2020). On the other hand, Twitter is a useful space to immediately disseminate and update information and even to extract the public's sentiment and reaction to political events and decisions (Thelwall et al. 2011, Waters & Williams 2011).

In recent years, the use of mobile instant messaging services, such as WhatsApp or Telegram, has spread. The use of these digital platforms in public administration, however, continues without being explored or making the most of the potential that derives from this digital media (Vázquez Sande, 2016). Although public institutions attach great importance to these media, their characteristics as spaces for participation and dialogue with citizens are still not being used. On the contrary, they are used from a merely informative perspective, adopting a unidirectional dynamic (Solito & Materassi, 2020; De Widt & Panagiotopoulos, 2018; Criado, et al., 2017).

2.2. Mobile instant messaging services in city councils

Mobile instant messaging services such as WhatsApp or Telegram have become a new opportunity to connect public administrations, mainly local ones, with citizens. In a context with limited interaction between both actors, these digital platforms allow reaching a larger segment of the population, as well as being able to provide information in a much more agile and direct way (Newman et al., 2019).

In 2021, WhatsApp is the app with the highest number of users in Spain (89.5%), ahead of YouTube (89.3%), Facebook (79.2%), Instagram (69%), or Twitter (52.6%) (Digital, 2021). Its nature allows users to instantly exchange messages through the mobile without paying for their sending, and for them to decide what information they disseminate and to which contact or group (Bossetta, 2018). According to some authors, its potential lies in the fact that it enhances the empowerment of citizens, who can join in collective action, solely through the use of the smartphone (Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2015). WhatsApp groups are a good example, since, from the individual initiative of a person (who creates and manages the group), other users join in the same communicative space shared with people with common characteristics, tastes, or interests (Malka, et al., 2015). By generating a closed and controllable environment, with greater security and privacy than other social media, it offers greater incentives for political participation, even in cases of ideologically extreme political opinions (López-Tárraga, 2020; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2017). For its part, Telegram has become the second most used instant messaging app in Spain. In a similar way to WhatsApp, it allows users to send and receive direct text and multimedia messages without necessarily having a high-speed Internet connection (Fernández, 2018).

Although the use of both platforms is recent in the political sphere, previous literature shows how both mobile instant messaging services have been configured as an ally for local administrations, especially in times of crisis such as that experienced due to COVID-19 (Casero-Ripollés, 2020a; Pérez-Curiel & Velasco-Molpeceres, 2020). Both WhatsApp and Telegram have allowed city councils to disseminate official and verified information, a key factor in combating hoaxes and fake

news (López-Tárraga, 2020). In this sense, it offers local institutions a way to become a main source of information for citizens and to generate credibility.

In this context, most of the previous studies have focused on evaluating the perceptions of citizens regarding the set of social media or the general use that public administrations make of them (Castro Martínez, et al., 2021; Castillo-Esparcia et al., 2020; García-Santamaría et al., 2020; Criado, et al., 2017; Gutiérrez-Rubí, 2015). However, there is still little specific research on mobile instant messaging services and, specifically, on what are the motivations and objectives of the city councils for their use. For this reason, this work is proposed from an exploratory approach to deepen the use that local public administrations make of these platforms in their communication strategy.

3. Objectives

The general objective of this research is to explore the characteristics, uses, and functions that local institutions confer to their mobile instant messaging services to communicate with citizens. Specifically, three specific objectives are proposed:

- O1. Identify the mode of implementation of mobile instant messaging services by local public administrations, as well as their planning strategy regarding the type of content, publication frequency, and type of messages.
- O2. Analyze the forms of interaction established between city councils and citizens in these mobile instant messaging services.
- O3. Know the limitations and future challenges that local public administrations face when adopting and launching these types of mobile instant messaging channels.

4. Methodology

To know the use that local public administrations make of mobile instant messaging services in their communication strategies, a qualitative analysis through in-depth interviews has been chosen. The use of this technique is especially suitable for study objects that are little explored and linked to a context of intense transformations (Karpf, et al., 2015). Taking the Valencian Community as a case study, the sample of this research includes 18 interviews with political leaders and communication technicians from city councils of different municipalities. Specifically, the selection of municipalities aims to represent the characteristics in the use of these platforms by municipalities with different numbers of inhabitants. Thus, the sample has been stratified into three types of cities according to their number of inhabitants: large city councils -LCC- (with a population greater than 50,000 inhabitants), medium city councils -MCC- (between 50,000 and 10,000 inhabitants), and small city councils -SCC- (with less than 10,000 inhabitants). In total, three local institutions of the first type, seven of the second, and eight of the third have been included to have an adequate representation of the studied territory (Table 1). Specifically, the choice of the studied municipalities responds to the criteria of a non-random strategic sample based on three rules: first, the existence and active use of the WhatsApp service by the city councils; second, the number of inhabitants of the municipality to respond to the three established categories; and, third, the accessibility offered by the institutions themselves when conducting the interviews. To maintain the confidentiality of the responses, in the exploitation of the results, their anonymity has been maintained using a random number for each of them and indicating the group to which they belong.

The in-depth interviews are based on an open questionnaire, based on an initial script of 30 questions structured in four blocks. The first includes issues related to perception and motivation in the use of social networks, in general, and of mobile instant messaging services, in particular, as instruments of institutional political communication of the city council. The second focuses on the functionality and

content disseminated through these services. The third includes questions about the use of these digital platforms as a means of direct interaction with citizens. Finally, the fourth is oriented towards the future challenges of local institutions regarding the use of these mobile apps. The interviews were conducted in person and electronically, through video calls or telephone calls, between September 2020 and February 2021, with an approximate duration of 45 to 60 minutes. From a literal transcription of the content of the interviews (verbatim) by two researchers, inductive thematic analysis was carried out, manually examining the data and categorizing the responses in different thematic units to draw conclusions. To improve the quality and rigor of the research, the results were contrasted by a third researcher through a new analysis of the set of interviews.

Table 1. *Analysis sample*

Number of inhabitants	Municipality	Province
Large city councils (LCC) More than 50,000 inhabitants	Castellón	Castellón
	Elche	Alicante
	Valencia	Valencia
Medium city councils (MCC) Between 50,000 and 10,000 inhabitants	Alcora	Castellón
	Catarroja	Valencia
	Manises	Valencia
	Nules	Castellón
	Onda	Castellón
	Puzol	Valencia
	Sedaví	Valencia
Small city councils (SCC) Less than 10,000 inhabitants	Benejama	Alicante
	Bechí	Castellón
	Chelva	Valencia
	El Puig	Valencia
	Foios	Valencia
	Morella	Castellón
	Sueras	Castellón
	Jijona	Alicante

Source: self-made

5. Results

5.1. Adaptation of institutional political communication to digital platforms

The results indicate how social media and, particularly, WhatsApp, are becoming increasingly established tools in the communication strategies of local administrations. As can be seen in Table 2, currently 35.05% of Valencian municipalities already make active and continuous use of WhatsApp within their institutional communication strategies.

Table 2. *Use of WhatsApp in the municipalities of the Valencian Community*

	Total municipalities	Municipalities with WhatsApp
Castellón	135	47 (34.81%)
Valencia	266	110 (41.35%)
Alicante	141	33 (23.40%)
TOTAL	542	190 (35,05%)

Source: self-made

In detail, the city councils of small municipalities are those that have seen the greatest opportunity in the use of WhatsApp, since it is present in an average of 72.31% of this type of municipality, exceeding 50% in the three studied provinces (Table 3). On the contrary, the medium municipalities (M=24.66%) and, especially the large ones (M=3.03%), are still in an adaptation phase (Table 3). However, it should be noted that the interviewed municipalities, regardless of their number of inhabitants, coincide in valuing these platforms as a key element for communication between the public institution and citizens. From a positive point of view, the local communication managers interviewed point to the transformation they have undergone in recent years, not only due to the incorporation of these tools in their organization but also due to the change in their productive routines.

Table 3. *Use of WhatsApp in the municipalities of the Valencian Community according to the number of inhabitants of the municipality (in%)*

	Small (<10.000 habs.)	Medium (Between 10.000 and 50.000 habs.)	Large (>50.000 habs.)
Castellón	82.98	14.89	2.13
Valencia	76.36	22.73	0.91
Alicante	57.58	36.36	6.06
TOTAL	72.31	24.66	3.03

Source: self-made

Specifically, the results show two significant ideas. On the one hand, the adaptation to the new demands of citizens and, on the other hand, the substitution of the institutional communication formulas established until now. In the first place, regarding the adaptation of local administrations to digital platforms, we detect that more than by their own decision, this has occurred as a response to the demands of citizens. In this sense, the interviewees indicate that the use of these platforms as part of their political communication strategy has derived from changes in the consumption habits of citizens, who are now more predisposed to make inquiries through their mobile devices and to use these types of apps.

"We have changed our strategy. Before, the website of the city council was the reference for information. Now, it is only used for specific issues. Today, citizens mostly use social networks" (MCC9).

"We have adapted to the current way of communicating to reach all audiences" (MCC80).

In this same sense, we find a relevant difference in the interpretations of the different types of municipalities based on their population. While the municipalities with the largest number of inhabitants show a very positive balance of their current role in the management of digital platforms, the smallest still observe this adaptation with caution. Although they are the types of municipalities that most use WhatsApp, most of them claim not to feel fully settled in the digital environment.

"We are fully adapted to the digital environment. We began with the website. Then, we continued with Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram, and, recently, we have incorporated Telegram. We have everything covered quite well" (MCC3).

"Currently we are very much on social networks, but our adaptation to this environment has been very little by little" (SCC21).

"The adaptation of the city council to social networks takes a long time, it gives vertigo" (SCC27).

Second, the incorporation of digital platforms has meant a relevant modification in the communication practices of local institutions. According to the interviewees, many city councils have seen how the formulas and resources traditionally used in institutional political communication have been displaced by the use of digital platforms. These are perceived as much more effective in contacting citizens. One of the substituted tools has been the traditional proclamation. Before, thanks to the public address system, city councils orally transmitted any notice or official statement. Now, in many cases, that information is disseminated through mobile instant messaging services.

"Before, the press release was the most important thing. Now we dedicate much more time to social networks" (MCC9).

"Years ago, a city council worker went through the streets with a megaphone and informed the population. Today, this function is replaced by social networks, and in a very positive way" (SCC40).

"WhatsApp has replaced as a means of communication the proclamation that worked through loudspeakers, which is now only maintained in a testimonial way" (SCC45).

5.2. Objectives and motivations of public administrations in the use of mobile instant messaging services

Although all the interviewed city councils claim to have widely adapted to the digital context and have open profiles on various platforms, one of the most important in institutional political communication in recent years is mobile instant messaging services, especially WhatsApp. According to those interviewed, this digital platform has become the most effective way for public institutions to reach a large part of their population, regardless of their age or interests.

"We started with Facebook, then Twitter, but we realized that only 10% of the content we want reaches [users]. That is why we thought about opening a WhatsApp channel" (MCC90).

"WhatsApp is the most powerful tool, the best communication channel, the most useful, the most comfortable for citizens. The people have never been better informed" (MCC9).

More specifically, the results of the interviews determine that the use of this mobile instant messaging service by city councils is determined by three main motivations.

In the first place, most public administrations indicate that the main reason why they have launched a WhatsApp channel is the possibility of being able to directly and immediately communicate with citizens. The fact of being able to personally write and spread the messages in the app without intermediaries, besides the fact that these automatically reach the mobile devices of their neighbors, is one of the main attractions for the use of WhatsApp by city councils. In a context traditionally marked by the mediation of journalists, this mobile instant messaging service eliminates any intermediary or barrier between the institution and users. This app allows us to offer useful information of interest to citizens practically at the same time it is produced. For example, emergencies, accidents, or last-minute information.

In the same way, citizens have the possibility of expressing their doubts, warning local administrations about any incident, or even carrying out some of their procedures without the need to

go to the city council in person. The information that has the greatest value for citizens is the one that most directly affects their daily lives. Consequently, they usually refer to aspects that are municipal competence. For this reason, and to be able to convey these issues in an agile way, WhatsApp is becoming a very useful channel for local administrations.

"Citizens are very satisfied with the service because it allows them to be informed of municipal activity and, at the same time, they can contact the city council very easily" (SCC17).

"The main advantage is the possibility of being able to have a quick and instantaneous way of communication with neighbors, reaching a much wider audience" (SCC11).

"Social networks foster useful and very effective communication. You can immediately be connected with your administration" (MCC80).

Unlike other digital platforms, WhatsApp reaches users' devices directly without the need for them to open the app to receive the information. Furthermore, the advantage that the content is sent from device to device and that it is not published in an open environment where messages launched by other users also appear, allows that the messages of local institutions reach their recipients immediately and effectively.

"If the use of social networks was a step forward, we think that WhatsApp is even better. In social networks you have to access, on the other hand, WhatsApp reaches you and you use it continuously" (MCC9).

"Our slogan when launching the WhatsApp service has been 'Receive first of all the information from the city council'" (MCC10).

"WhatsApp lets us know that the message reaches users and that they open it" (MCC90).

The second motivation for the use of WhatsApp by municipal corporations lies in the scope of this platform. This channel makes it possible to reach user groups far removed from the digital environment so far. Mainly, the interviewees indicate that the use of WhatsApp has significantly made it easier for them to communicate with citizens of different age groups who, for different reasons, they could not access through other forms of communication. For example, older users, who usually do not use digital platforms such as Facebook or Twitter, have found mobile instant messaging services such as WhatsApp to be an easier communication tool to use. On the other hand, most municipalities also indicate that this platform is very effective in reaching young people, another of the population sectors that usually stayed away from the communication traditionally issued by local administrations (Image 1).

"The main reason why we use WhatsApp is because of its accessibility, understood as the ability to reach people who, through other tools, we cannot reach" (LCC23).

"Nowadays it is very rare that there is someone who says that they do not have or do not know WhatsApp. It is something that we all have, regardless of age, but especially sectors further away from the administration, such as young people" (LCC15).



Image 1: Example of information aimed at young people

Finally, the third motivation for the adoption of WhatsApp by city councils is the possibility of promoting transparency. By disseminating information and their public activity, local administrations provide citizens with greater knowledge, not only of the actions promoted by the local government but of other issues that may influence them or improve their daily lives: financial aid, cultural events, new infrastructures, job offers, new fees, etc. This, according to the interviewees, has an impact on an increase in public trust towards the local administration.

"WhatsApp has allowed us to show that the city council works for the people and provides a service" (SCC37).

"The balance we make of WhatsApp is very positive since it has democratized information to the people. 'They said on the town's WhatsApp that...' is one of the phrases we hear the most now" (SCC21).

"If they ask you, it is because they trust you" (MCC9).

"If a citizen issues a request or a claim, they receive a response, and then see results, the feeling of trust multiplies" (LCC18).

The analysis of the interviews allows us to observe how the objectives of the city councils regarding the use of WhatsApp have citizens as their vertex and the constant improvement of communication as a priority service. However, it is noted that its use still has certain limitations to overcome concerning the organization, management, and planning of this mobile instant messaging service.

Table 2. Summary of the results of the motivations of public administrations in the use of WhatsApp

Main motivations detected	
1. Direct and immediate communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The city council sends the content without the need for intermediaries. • The messages arrive directly to the users' devices, without the need to open the app. • Administrations can check if the information has reached its recipients. • Citizens can present their doubts or questions without having to go in person to the administration or be attended by a natural person. • Especially useful in last-minute information or emergencies.
2. Greater reach of users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication with citizens of different age groups who, for different reasons, could not be accessed through other forms of communication (elderly and young people)
3. Transparency of the institution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By disseminating information and their public activity, they give citizens a greater knowledge of government actions and information that directly affects them. • It can generate greater citizen trust towards the local administration.

Source: self-made

5.3. Approach and use of WhatsApp by city councils: form, content, and interaction of messages

The results show that city councils usually tend to prioritize simplicity and agility when registering citizens on this digital platform. Most of the small and medium-sized city councils consulted indicate that they do not establish specific requirements when registering users who express their willingness to register through their mobile devices. Only some large city councils have a registration form (physical or electronic) in which the personal data of the potential user is requested to formalize their registration in the service.

In general, and to comply with the legislation on data protection, while facilitating access to the service, the procedure is carried out by the citizen sending an anonymous message with the word "register" from their mobile phone and without any personalized identification. With no other added control element, they are assigned an identification number. In this way, anyone can register, even if they are not registered in the corresponding municipality. Likewise, practically all city councils have different distribution lists. According to the interviewees, this tool facilitates the massive sending of the same message or file to several contacts at the same time – up to 256 as a limit per message sent – and allows users to receive the information as an individual message.

Unsubscribing from the service is generally just as easy. You just have to explicitly request it through a message sent to the city council. The interviewees point out that the cases in which the city councils have had to block or unsubscribe a user due to misuse are exceptional. None of the interviewees highlighted having received messages with inappropriate language or insults on this platform. If this type of situation occurs, they agree that these users must be unsubscribed or blocked, although never if the criticism is respectful.

“There are no requirements to register as it is like any other media, in this case, public and free. Sensitive information is not disseminated” (SCC27).

“There are no limits when registering for this service. The only request is the telephone number and the user's name” (SCC11).

“With the same ease that many people register in summer, they unsubscribe from this service at the end of the holidays” (SCC37).

Regarding the planning and organization of the department or the person in charge of this mobile instant messaging service, the interviews reveal that minimal and irregular strategic planning is carried out in small city councils. Sometimes, precarious planning points directly to a lack of a global strategy in the management of WhatsApp. In others, these limitations are due to the scarce staff dedicated to communication tasks in city councils or due to a lack of specific training in digital communication of those responsible for this service.

For example, it is interesting to observe how in some of the smaller local administrations, the person who fully manages this communication service is the mayor of the municipality (Zurutuza-Muñoz & García-Herrer, 2021), or it is derived from some ruler. In these cases, dedication to these tasks is voluntary and the training of the person in charge of this communication channel is based exclusively on their daily and particular experience as a WhatsApp user. Consequently, and according to the interviewees, in small city councils, the results are not analyzed or studied in-depth and only the data provided by the app itself are occasionally reviewed.

On the contrary, large city councils stand out for having at least one technician or a communication department or external company expert in social media, who is professionally dedicated to the management of this service. In these city councils, a more elaborate prior strategic planning is observed (content programming, publication strategy and calendars, weekly meetings, among others). They also carry out an analysis of the results to constantly improve this service.

Despite the different degrees of professionalization and regardless of the size of the city, all city councils agree on not saturating, not disturbing, and not being intrusive when publishing content on their institutional WhatsApp as a basic criterion.

“There is no set day for sending a message. The messages are launched according to the need and the current situation of the municipality. They are usually published during working hours, trying not to disturb the rest of the neighbors or be intrusive” (SCC11).

“WhatsApp is good technology if it is in good hands. That is why I [mayor] carry it, although the people do not know it. For our part, there is no strategic planning, we are governed by logic” (SCC45).

“The city council established guidelines not to saturate and control the publications. For example, we have a calendar: on Mondays, we report on duty pharmacies, on Tuesdays, on cultural programming, on Thursdays, sports information, etc.” (MCC3).

“On Mondays, we meet with municipal managers to plan the weekly communication and specify what will be published on WhatsApp. We have a defined strategy: on Thursdays, we advance the weekend agenda and on Fridays, we send a press summary of the week” (MCC9).

One point on which all the interviewed city councils coincide is in the type of content published through this mobile instant messaging service. Thus, service information is the one that is disseminated through this platform. It is information with a direct utility for the subscribers and that

helps to promote the relationship between administration and citizens, as well as transparency in the management of the city council. This includes messages about municipal service hours, cultural, tourist, and leisure activities, job offers, subsidies, or citizen awareness campaigns, among others (Image 2).

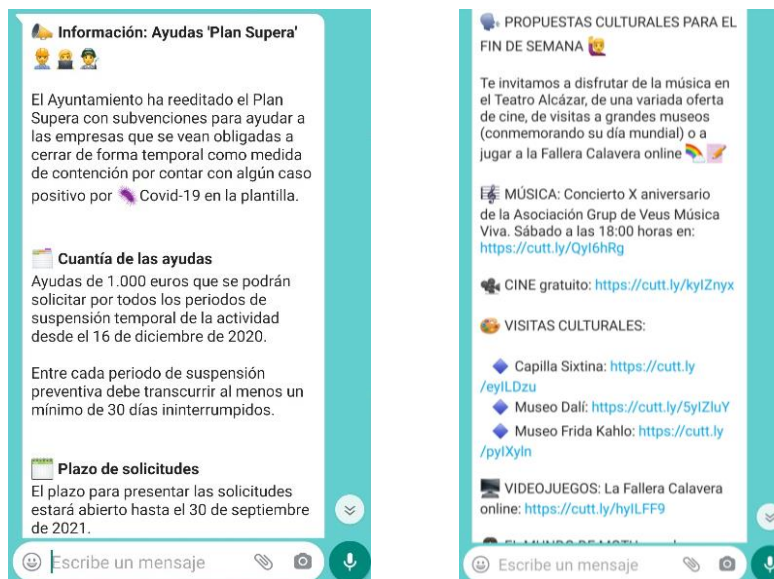


Image 2: Example of service information

All of the interviewees emphasize that partisan use is never made of the WhatsApp of the city council. No content directly related to any political party is disseminated. Neither the achievements of the party in government nor the mistakes of the opposition are reported. The position, in this sense, is unanimous, and it is noted that disseminating political propaganda content or partisan information would be a mistake they would pay dearly.

"We publish general information for the people, we never use it as a political tool" (SCC27).

"The objective of WhatsApp is not to sell the management or highlight political achievements" (MCC80).

Regarding the published content, it is also significant to highlight how during the State of Alarm established because of COVID-19, local administrations have not only published a greater number of daily messages on WhatsApp than in any ordinary period but these have been adapted to the information needs of the new situation. In this sense, the information regarding the new measures, hygienic-sanitary advice, or notices disseminated from official sources outside the municipality (Ministry of Health, Generalitat, etc.) has been prioritized. Only in very specific cases, and mainly in small city councils, WhatsApp has also been used as a channel to inform neighbors of deaths or the date of burials, among others (Image 2).

Furthermore, the interviewees coincide in pointing out that in this exceptional period more users have been registered than at any other time since the launch of this municipal communication channel. This shows the interest in the information generated by the Coronavirus pandemic (Casero-Ripollés, 2020b; Pérez-Curiel & Velasco-Molpeceres, 2020).

"COVID-19 disrupted our programming. We had to be faster and more rigorous in the information we published on WhatsApp and it forced us to coordinate with the police to disseminate information" (MCC3).

“During the pandemic, the phrase *the city council is the closest institution* was true. We adapted to the new habits of citizens. For example, besides informing, we try to send highly visual content with an optimistic tone” (MCC10).

"The adaptation was little by little, but during COVID-19 the most significant rebound in the number of contents came when we began to publish deaths, provided that the families authorized it" (SCC21).

Regarding the style of the messages that are disseminated through WhatsApp, most local administrations coincide in working to adapt the contents to the characteristics of mobile use and the formal possibilities offered by the app. Thus, a large part of the municipalities tends to disseminate short, simple messages with friendly language. To reinforce these characteristics, graphic resources such as emoticons or other tools typical of the digital environment are usually included, also privileging the links that redirect to municipal websites and allow the citizen to expand or deepen the information.

Most local administrations are committed to including different graphic resources in their messages (photo, video, poster, screenshot, *gif*, etc.) to prioritize consumption and understanding of their communications. However, some warn that using these resources poses a problem in the dissemination of their messages. The "weight" of the images when sending a message, slows down and makes it difficult for the user to correctly download the content. Something that is perceived as a limitation.

“In WhatsApp, we talk in the second person because it is important to create complicity [with users] and that it feels familiar” (MCC9).

“We try to adapt to the digital language. Sometimes, we broadcast the same topic on different social networks, but in each one of them, the message format is different, adapted to its own particularities” (SCC17).

"We realized that images saturated the mobile phone of citizens and that to have better reach, it was more interesting to publish in .pdf" (MCC3).

A key aspect of the WhatsApp channel of the city councils is the degree of interaction established with the citizens. Despite the potential of this tool to promote direct dialogue between administration and users, most of the councils agree in qualifying WhatsApp as an eminently informative and public service channel in which it is very difficult to achieve a real two-way and effective dialogue.

For the most part, its use is exclusively unidirectional, mainly due to two reasons. In the first place, city councils already have other more institutional tools to respond and dialogue with citizens. For example, through apps developed by the administration or through the website. Second, the shortage of human resources and communication equipment for the management of this digital platform cannot guarantee effective bidirectionality. Therefore, there are no guarantees that the complaint messages, questions, or doubts that are received on WhatsApp can be answered. At most, city councils that have a communication team usually reply with standard messages or redirect to other sources of information such as institutional websites.

“We use WhatsApp as a one-way tool. It would be very useful to have feedback with citizens, but the communication office would have to be strengthened” (MCC9).

“The use is one-way. To be able to answer questions, complaints, or reports, at least one person exclusively dedicated to this task would be needed. In a city council of this size, it is impossible” (SCC21).

“Communication is obviously one-way. Otherwise, it would be crazy. To answer we have other ways such as the *Buzón del Ciudadano* or the *Línea Verde App*” (SCC37).

“We started wanting to answer, but it was impossible. To find the answer to a question we could spend half the morning. Now we warn from the beginning that it is one-way, that it is not a discussion chat or a mailbox for complaints” (MCC3).

It should be noted that this one-way communication is, on some occasions, a problem for local administrations. According to the interviewees, although when users are registered, they are informed that it is exclusively a one-way information dissemination service, they receive daily messages from citizens with questions and doubts. Many of these messages also arrive during non-working hours and on weekends, a fact that makes it even more difficult to offer a response from city councils.

“The population does not quite understand that it is a one-way service. If we do not answer them, they insist, although we warn in the welcome” (MCC90).

“One of the main problems observed is that sometimes [WhatsApp] generates a lot of work during non-working hours and many users ask questions at times that cannot be answered” (SCC11).

Table 3. Summary of the results on the approach of messages on WhatsApp by local administrations

Main characteristics of the message	
1. Management to activate or deactivate the WhatsApp service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generally, users can register or unsubscribe from the WhatsApp service directly from the platform, without performing any face-to-face procedure. • Local administrations only request the name and surname as identifying data. • There are no limits to registering for the service, such as, for example, being registered in the municipality.
2. Periodicity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public administrations usually send their messages during working hours, except for last-minute information or emergencies. • A limited number of messages per day so as not to saturate users.
3. Disseminated content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainly, service information (municipal service schedules, cultural, tourist, and leisure activities, job offers, subsidies, or citizen awareness campaigns, etc.). • This service is never used as a partisan instrument in favor of the ruling party or against the opposition.
4. Message style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefness, simplicity, and language close to citizens. • Regular use of digital resources such as links. • Controlled use of visual resources such as photos, videos, or posters, among others.
5. Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainly one-way use of WhatsApp.

Source: self-made

5.4. Limitations and future challenges in the use of WhatsApp by public administrations

The use of WhatsApp by public administrations is, on some occasions, a practice that is not without its difficulties. For this reason, many of those in charge of the city councils interviewed indicate that they are at an intermediate point in the use of this platform and point out various challenges to be achieved in the medium or long term. Specifically, they highlight three pending challenges.

The first challenge posed is to get a greater number of registered users in the WhatsApp service. Even though in this last year marked by the health emergency of COVID-19 the number of subscribers has grown significantly, there are still sectors of the population that are difficult to reach. This is the case of the elderly population, who in general are unaware of the operating guidelines of mobile devices and apps such as WhatsApp. Another age group with reluctance to use this institutional political communication channel is young people. According to the interviewees, adolescents still see institutional information very far from their own interests and point out that there is still great ignorance about this municipal service and the content that is offered.

“We want to do more campaigns so that people sign up and the information can reach them directly to their mobile phones. The objective or challenge is that all the people are connected and receive the information” (MCC9).

“The challenge is to have 59-60% of the public on WhatsApp. Now we have a problem due to ignorance of our WhatsApp channel” (MCC3).

“The profile [of users] is very specific: people between 35 and 55 years old with children. Young people believe that it is very institutional and does not go with them. The elderly do not enter either. We have planned an initiative to go to retirement homes and have a person teach them to sign up and use it. Also, in the market and the institute” (MCC80).

A second challenge is to personalize the information that is disseminated through WhatsApp. Currently, all the interviewed city councils offer the same content through all their active distribution lists, regardless of the subject or the characteristics of the recipients. However, the segmentation of users through the creation of different distribution lists based on certain types of interests or demographic characteristics could be an incentive for the use of this service. Thus, citizens could subscribe to those lists that disseminate information about their likes or concerns.

“In the future, distribution lists could be created by interests of each person, sectorialize WhatsApp communication... but now it is complicated” (SCC45).

“The idea is to automate and create different WhatsApp mailboxes for the different councils” (MCC9).

Finally, one of the main challenges is improving the planning and coordination of this service. In this sense, although the balance in the use of this app is positive, most city councils recognize the difficulty of being able to maintain a constant rate of posts. It is also problematic to be able to motivate the other members of the council to get involved, propose ideas and content to share with the public. This mainly affects small city councils, where, in general, there are no communication professionals who manage the contents of this app and the relationship with users.

“Digital platforms require time, to have all the information updated, to be able to attend to all the messages that are received, and that is what we still do not have. Besides daily dedication, this type of service requires constant updating and that requires constantly generating news and information” (LCC15).

"One of the great future challenges is that the management of this type of service should be a strategy that involves the entire organization, not just a specific area" (LCC15).

"We could give a better service. We have to establish a strategy. We need to be calmer and sit down to think" (MCC3).

Table 4. Summary of the results of future challenges for public administrations in the use of WhatsApp

Main challenges posed	
1. Increase in registered users	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Local administrations seek to expand the number of registrants, especially within age groups further away from institutional information.
2. Personalization of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Segmentation of users in distribution lists by subject. Users can subscribe only to those of their interest.
3. Strategic planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Improved planning and coordination of the service: periodic publication of content, homogeneous style of the message, taking advantage of the potential of the digital environment, and higher response rate.Involvement of the entire local administration to increase human resources dedicated to the service and greater diversity of content that includes all areas of local government action.

Source: self-made

6. Discussion and conclusions

The results indicate that WhatsApp has become an essential tool for local administrations. In recent years, both large and small city councils have been adapting to the potential of this digital platform. Thus, they have incorporated it into their usual communication strategy, transforming their own productive routines and replacing other more traditional forms of institutional communication.

Our findings allow us to identify the three main reasons that have led local administrations to adopt this type of digital platform. In the first place, the possibility of being able to open a channel of direct and immediate contact with citizens. The characteristics of WhatsApp cause local institutions to see this platform as one of the most effective in ensuring that their messages reach the public correctly. At the same time, the possibility that citizens have to express their doubts or questions without having to go to the city council in person is an incentive for the use of this app. Second, the possibility of broadening the public of institutional political communication, especially those traditionally removed from the digital environment, such as the elderly, or even from the public institution itself, such as young people. Lastly, the possibility of disseminating information about their management and daily activity has made city councils identify WhatsApp as an essential instrument to comply with the standards of transparency and institutional responsibility. These findings allow us to affirm that this digital platform is perceived by local administrations as a way to improve and favor the provision of their public service and image. This characteristic allows them to enhance citizen trust in municipal management, thus coinciding with what has been pointed out by previous literature (Van Dijck, et al., 2018; Simelio-Solà & Rodríguez Navas, 2014).

Another important finding regarding the use of WhatsApp by local administrations shows that, although all of them make a very positive balance of their experience on this platform, some express

deficiencies in the strategic planning of the service. These limitations occur mainly in the smallest city councils, those that do not have professionals or communication departments who are experts in social media (Criado, et al., 2017). This shortage of human resources prevents corporations from regularly scheduling their publications, presenting a variety of content compared to other social networks, or setting a message model adapted to the potential of each platform. Thus, while the large city councils propose a use based on predetermined strategic planning, the small ones do not. In the latter case, the knowledge and functions of this mobile instant messaging service are determined by the managers' own experience as users.

This difference in planning disappears in the content. All city councils focus on the use of WhatsApp as a way to transmit public service information, that is, issues that affect the daily life of citizens. In no case is this channel used with partisan logic. In other words, there is no information about activities directly related to any political party, nor of the ruling party's achievements or the mistakes of the opposition. Only messages related to the leisure activities agenda, municipal service schedules, job offers, or subsidies, among other issues, are conveyed.

Another relevant result is the lack of bidirectionality. Despite its technical possibilities, city councils do not use their WhatsApp channel to dialogue or interact with citizens. On the contrary, they are committed to configuring this digital platform from a unidirectional perspective as a means of sending information from top to bottom, from the administration to the citizens. The lack of personnel and resources to guarantee personalized attention in responses to citizens is the main reason provided by local administrations. This conception coincides with that detected by previous research in other social media of public institutions such as Facebook or Twitter (Solito & Materassi, 2020; De Widt & Panagiotopoulos, 2018; Criado, et al., 2017). With this, social connectivity is wasted, one of the main qualities of digital platforms.

Within this framework, mobile instant messaging services are helping to extend platformization in institutional political communication. City councils have not only adopted WhatsApp channels as a means of direct and immediate contact with citizens (Zurutuza-Muñoz & García Herrer, 2021) but have also incorporated them as an instrument to improve their public service. In this sense, apps such as WhatsApp are increasingly at the center of institutional political communication, as they allow administrations to begin to exercise government models that are better communicated, transparent, and closer to citizens. It will be necessary to analyze, in new research, if this causes a reorganization of the practices, routines, and dynamics of this field to gauge the extent to which platformization is capable of transforming the way local public institutions do political communication.

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AUTHOR/S:

Silvia Marcos-García

Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Sciences of the *Universitat Jaume I de Castelló* (UJI). She is a Doctor in Communication Sciences, graduated in Journalism, and has a Master's degree in New Trends and Innovation Processes in Communication from the UJI. Her lines of research focus on journalism, social networks, and political communication from different perspectives that take into account both the figure of the journalist and that of the politician and citizen. She teaches in the degrees of Journalism, Audiovisual Communication, and Advertising and Public Relations in subjects related to journalistic information on radio and television, as well as in the official Master's degree in New Trends and Innovation Processes in Communication.

smarcos@uji.es

Índice H: 6

Orcid ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1682-1009>

Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.es/citations?user=8-h8i38AAAAJ&hl=es>

ResearchGate: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Silvia-Marcos-Garcia>

Academia.edu: <https://uji.academia.edu/SilviaMarcos>

Hugo Doménech-Fabregat

Associate Professor of the Department of Communication Sciences of the *Universitat Jaume I* (UJI). He has a degree in Information Sciences from the *Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca* (UPSA). Furthermore, he is a University Specialist in Photography and Art from the *Universidad Politécnica de Valencia* (UPV). His lines of research focus on the study of Digital Journalism, Journalistic Genres, and Photojournalism from different perspectives. He has participated in different research projects obtained in competitive state and regional calls and national and international scientific congresses. He is co-director of the documentary feature *La sombra del iceberg. Autopsia a la mítica fotografía de Robert Capa* (2007), awarded in various national and international festivals.

hdomenec@uji.es

Índice H: 9

Orcid ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7609-8361>

Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.es/citations?user=JwMNnkQAAAAJ&hl=es&oi=ao>

ResearchGate: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Hugo-Fabregat>

Academia.edu: <https://independent.academia.edu/HugoDom%C3%A9nechFabregat>

Andreu Casero-Ripollés

Full University Professor of Journalism in the Department of Communication Sciences and Dean of the Faculty of Human and Social Sciences of the *Universitat Jaume I de Castelló*. He has a degree from the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona* and a Ph.D. from the *Universitat Pompeu Fabra*. He has directed, as chief researcher, a total of 10 R&D projects in competitive calls. He was the coordinator for the Communication field (CSO panel) of the Spanish Research Agency (AEI by its acronym in Spanish) of the Government of Spain between 2016 and 2019. Currently, he is president of the Social Sciences area of the Andalusian Knowledge Agency (AAC-DEVA) in the area of research evaluation. He has carried out research stays at Columbia University, the University of Westminster, or the *Università degli Studi de Firenze*, among others. His lines of research focus on political communication and the digital transformations of journalism.

casero@uji.es

Índice H: 35

Orcid ID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6986-4163>

Google Scholar: <https://scholar.google.es/citations?user=TuiVp7MAAAAJ&hl=es>

ResearchGate: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Andreu-Casero-Ripolles>

Academia.edu: <https://uji.academia.edu/AndreuCaseroRipolles>