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Analysis of tools for citizens’ monitoring of public authorities: Municipal transparency in Castile and León

Francisco Cabezuelo-Lorenzo [] [] Professor and researcher / University of Valladolid (Spain). / H-index: 6 / cabezuelo@hmca.uva.es

Pablo Rey-García [] [] Professor and researcher / Pontifical University of Salamanca (Spain) / H-index: 2 / preyga@upsa.es

Alejandro Tapia-Frade [[CV](#)] [] [] Professor and researcher / Loyola Andalucía University (Spain) / H-index: 5 / ajtapia@uloyola.es

Abstract

Introduction. The information content provided by municipal websites must be complete and intelligible in order for citizens to be able to exercise their right to participation and for the media to have access to reliable sources and data to generate news content of public interest. **Methods.** This study evaluates the municipal transparency of the Autonomous Community of Castile and León (Spain), based on the analysis of the tools for government accountability that are provided to citizens by the websites of the municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants. **Results.** The websites are

transparent in general, especially those of the most populated municipalities. The level of transparency decreases in the lower populated cities. These information gaps make the public debate turbid and generate distrust among citizens. **Conclusions.** Media professionals and municipal press officers must update their work routines and take advantage of web technologies to provide information that is easy intelligible to anyone in the interest of transparency.

Keywords

Political communication; institutional communication; transparency, Castile and León; local government.

Contents

1. Introduction, justification and context. 2. Methods: hypotheses, objectives, variables and sample. 3. Results. 3.1. Public representatives. 3.2. Citizen tools for the monitoring of public authorities. 4. Conclusions. 5. Notes. 6. Acknowledgements. 7. References.

Translation by **CA Martínez-Arcos**
(PhD in Communication from the University of London, UK)

1. Introduction, justification and context

Spain is territorially divided in 17 autonomous communities and two autonomous cities: Ceuta and Melilla. The autonomous communities are composed of provinces, which together add up to 50. In turn, these Spanish provinces are integrated by municipalities. Currently, Spain has a total of 8,125 local governments, according to the Local Governing Entity Registry of the State Secretariat for Public Administrations (seap.minhap.gob.es). Local governments are in good part “responsible for solving the problems of the local population as they arise, frequently without receiving enough resources from the national and regional autonomous authorities” (Moreno-Sardà, Molina Rodríguez-Navas & Corcoy-Rius, 2013: 504).

The governing councils of the Spanish towns and cities are the closest administrations. In this context, it is important for local councils, especially in the case of large cities, where direct access to municipal authorities is more complicated, to use the Internet properly to stay in contact with the citizenry. Today, cities are the main laboratory of human creativity and decentralisation. The 21st century is, undoubtedly, the century of the cities. In addition, worldwide, people are moving to cities because, despite the drawbacks of large cities, urban agglomerations continue to be the main hub of economic and social dynamism (Cabezuelo-Lorenzo, Bonete-Vizcaíno, and Sánchez-Martínez, 2016: 105).

It can be argued that since the instauration of democracy in Spain, with the development of the autonomous communities and closer local administrations (Corcoy-Rius *et al.*, 2011), municipalities have made a great effort in matters of communications through the creation of press cabinets and other communication channels, which makes it possible for us to speak today of the professionalisation and specialisation of communications in public institutions (Canel, 2007). The

essential role of the State is also noticeable in our days, during the last and intense period of technological development (Murciano, 2006). During these years, the institutional initiatives of the local councils have pursued the establishment of communication channels with the citizenry to favour the formation of a local public opinion that serves as a basis for a democratic political participation that brings citizens closer to their local institutions, their closest form of government. This need has become more urgent than never in the last years due to the numerous cases of political corruption (Jiménez and Villoria, 2012: 109-134), which have been reported by the media, especially those that genuinely perform their watchdog role in the monitoring of the conduct of the government (Labio-Bernal, 2006). In this scenario of development of municipal communication policies, journalism does not disappear, but becomes stronger. In fact, today's citizens demand more plural and independent information content than ever (Paniagua-Rojano, Gómez-Aguilar and González-Cortes, 2014: 550).

In this context, new digital and telematics technologies have been developed to facilitate the management of communication between administrations and citizens, because in any democratic society the right to information access is necessary and essential for the formation of public opinion (Rollnert-Liern, 2014: 105-114). Social networks, digital platforms, mobile devices, tablets, instant messaging and digital newspapers have created a new ecosystem of informative, political and citizen relations (Castells, 2008: 13-14). Internet is also a tool for the integration of personal contributions to collective knowledge and for citizen participation. Its use reveals new challenges in the production and management of knowledge and demands new forms of humanistic and social knowledge, of journalism and public opinion, that facilitate the creation of a fairer and more equitable organisation that takes into account the participation of a plural citizenry in a democratic debate on political administration (Moreno-Sardà, Molina Rodríguez-Navas & Corcoy-Rius, 2013: 504). In fact, participatory democracy, which is critical autonomy, is based on the idea of participation as a set of relational procedures and processes in which agents engage in a symmetrical and reciprocal relation of communication, cooperation, and shared responsibility (Alguacil-Gómez, 2006: 24-25).

In the new digital environment, the new technologies of the information society have resulted in the birth of a more open, jointly-responsible, collaborative, transparent and responsive form of government, on the basis of a more democratic and less hierarchical society (Curran, 2011), which has made many authors to speak of a diluted management of power (Álvarez, 2005). This evolution departs from the principle of unilateral government and demands alternative forms to manage relations and/or responsibility and in this sense transparency is seen as the ideal mechanism to replace the unique and exclusive control of centralised institutions, which have become ineffective by themselves (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2014: 9).

The establishment of a direct relationship between journalism, public communication and democracy demonstrates that one of the risks to which the integrity of a government is exposed is closely linked to the greater or lesser media coverage it receives. It is not a speculative proposition to point out that corruption tends to flourish when those in power have less fear to media exposure (Starr, 2009: 28). Along the same lines, from a classical Anglo-Saxon perspective, it is considered that the media have a positive impact on democratic governance and sustainable human development if they perform their role of “watchdog” over those in power and contribute to the establishment of a civic forum for the discussion of public issues (Norris 2000). If we apply these principles to the municipal sphere,

we will find what some have called “proximity cyber-journalism” (López-García, 2008), which highlights the reinforced value of interactivity (Molina Rodríguez-Navas, 2008).

For this reason, transparency has become one of the recurrent themes in research in information and communication sciences. As far as the interests of the actors participating in public communication are known and as far as their results can be evaluated, the conditions of the democratic system will improve. The new media have accelerated the possibility of government accountability in almost real time and at any scale (Villoria-Mendieta, 2011: 32-34). In the case of this work, one of the objectives is to know more in depth the role of the intensive use of new technologies in the ability to control, monitor, supervise, and therefore influence local institutions. In other words, in the ability to put citizen and political actors in front of the mirror to modify their behaviours. The design of communication policies (including policies at the municipal level) is the result of the combination of economic, political, social and, lately, technological elements, since our present is characterised by the primacy of the digital realm (contents, and applications) to the detriment of the analogue structure (paper), according to Manfredi-Sánchez, Rojas-Torrijos and Herranz-de-la-Casa (2015: 69). The technological revolution has also prompted a deep debate on the question of transparency and the right of access to information (Moretón-Toquero, 2014: 1-24 and Piñar Mañas, 2015: 1-19) as well as on the new law on transparency (Guichot-Reina, 2014; Sánchez-de-Diego, 2014: 1-27) and the use and reuse of public “big data” (Arcila-Calderón, Barbosa-Caro and Cabezuelo-Lorenzo, 2016: 623, and Beltrán-Orenes and Martínez-Pastor, 2016: 557).

2. Methods: hypotheses, objectives, variables and sample

In this scenario, the general objective of this work is to analyse and evaluate how digital technologies are implemented by the websites of the local governments of the Spanish Autonomous Community of Castile and León, which has 2,248 local governments. The study is guided by two general hypotheses. The first one (H1) proposes that the websites of the Spanish municipalities present deficiencies when it comes to account for their actions, decisions and policies, which affects the role they play as sources of information for the media, which sometimes hinders and contaminates the public debate and generates citizen distrust. The second hypothesis (H2) proposes that digital technologies can contribute to the reduction of these deficiencies and, thus, to awakening the interest of citizens in the evaluation of the political activity and in democratic control. However, to this end, it is necessary for journalists and the people responsible for the communication and information of the public administrations to modify their current routines so that they can take advantage of digital technologies to develop information content that is easily intelligible for the diverse and plural citizenry (Picard, 2001: 65-70).

The final objective is to promote good communication e information practices in municipal institutions, and to increase their use among the municipal authorities, technical staff and journalists and, finally, to facilitate two key issues: citizen participation in the monitoring of the conduct of the government (J Mayne, 2000: 197-218) and accountability (Guerrero, 2006; 165-178, and Rivero-Menéndez, Mora-Agudo and Flores-Ureba, 2007).

The specific objective is to determine the level of municipal transparency and identify the tools for local government accountability the websites offer to citizens, based on the analysis of the municipal

websites of Castile y León, the largest autonomous community of Spain. The chosen technique to carry out this study is content analysis and direct observation. The analysis focuses on 19 variables that structure and illustrate the elements and possibilities present in the websites. We decided to confirm the presence or absence of basic contact information that enable bidirectional communication channels with all the municipal representatives (names, surnames, emails, photographs, biographies, curriculum vitae), the existence of tools for local government accountability; historical, social, economic and cultural information of the municipality; the calendar of activities, the directory of municipal entities, mechanisms to participation in the design and monitoring of the governance plan and budgeting, the existence of suggestion boxes, the possibility to get in touch with the press cabinet, etc. This research follows the method and indicators of the Infoparticip@ project (Moreno-Sardà *et al.* 2013b) of the Laboratory of Journalism and Communication for Plural Citizenry (LPCCP, according to its initials in Spanish) of the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), which in recent years has carried out numerous research projects of impact in this line of work (see Molina Rodríguez-Navas, 2015).

The following table presents the 19 variables of analysis, divided in two large blocks. One block studies the presence in municipal websites of data about the political representatives of the government and the opposition. The second set analyses the tools offered to citizens to hold their local government accountable.

| Variables of analysis |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Block 1: Presence of data on the political representatives of the government and the opposition on municipal websites. |
| 1. Does the website provide basic information about the mayor: name and surname, photo and political party? |
| 2. Does the website provide information about the mayor: biography and/or curriculum vitae? |
| 3. Does the website provide basic information about the representatives of the government: names and surnames, photos and political party? |
| 4. Does the website provide information about the representatives of the government: biography and/or curriculum vitae? |
| 5. Does the website provide basic information about the representatives who are not part of the government: names and surnames, photos and political party? |
| 6. Does the website provide information about the representatives who are not part of the government: biography and/or curriculum vitae? |
| Block 2: Presence of tools for local government accountability on websites (I). |
| 1. Does the website provide the email addresses of the members of the government? |

2. Does the website provide the email addresses of the members of the opposition?
3. Does the website provide information about the situation of the municipality: the municipal term, the registered population and the social diversity, economic and cultural activities?
4. Does the website provide historical information about the municipality?
5. Does the website provide access to the social networks of the government?

Block 3: Presence of tools for local government accountability on websites (II).

1. Does the website provide information about the regulatory framework of local citizen participation?
2. Does the website provide information about other mechanisms of participation: territorial councils, city councils, sectorial councils, etc.?
3. Does the website provide a calendar of municipal and citizen activities?
4. Does the website provide a directory of municipal entities?
5. Does the website provide tools for citizen participation in the development and/or monitoring of the governance plan, the municipal action plan and/or strategic plan?
6. Does the website provide tools for citizen participation in the development and/or monitoring of other municipal plans?
7. Does the website provide tools for citizens to report incidents in the public spaces, or to make complaints and suggestions?
8. Does the website provide the contact information of the spokesperson or press officer of the local government?

The selected research method is suitable because it allows us to evaluate the municipal information content that the local governments disclose objectively, without the potential human errors that could derive from the use of other types of techniques such as the survey.

Currently, Spain has a total of 8,125 councils [1], of which 2,248 belong to Castile and León, an autonomous community of 2,472,052 inhabitants, according to the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE, 2015), which represents only 5.7% of the Spanish population [2]. Despite the large size of the territory, a fifth of the total surface of the country, Castile and León has a very low demographic density (26.6 inhabitants by square kilometre), which is three times lower than the national average [3]. The autonomous community is composed of nine provinces: Ávila, Burgos, León, Palencia, Salamanca, Segovia, Soria, Valladolid and Zamora. The region is sparsely populated and in demographic decline, especially in rural areas. The region has an ageing population with a low birth rate and a mortality rate that is close to the national average. Here is where the first

methodological challenge arises: the region has tiny municipalities and some of them do not even have a website. For this reason, the analysis will be based on the municipal websites of a limited sample of municipalities from Castile and León: the 24 most populated localities, i.e., those with more than 10,000 inhabitants, as shown in the following table:

Table 1. Sample of municipalities [04]

| Municipality | Population |
|------------------------------|-------------------|
| Valladolid | 306,830 |
| Burgos | 177,776 |
| Salamanca | 148,042 |
| León | 129,551 |
| Palencia | 80,178 |
| Ponferrada (LE) | 67,367 |
| Zamora | 64,423 |
| Avila | 58,933 |
| Segovia | 53,260 |
| Soria | 39,516 |
| Miranda de Ebro (BU) | 36,724 |
| Aranda de Duero (BU) | 33,065 |
| San Andrés del Rabanedo (LE) | 31,741 |
| Laguna de Duero (VA) | 22,555 |
| Medina of the Campo (VA) | 21,274 |
| Benavente (ZA) | 18,879 |
| Villaquilambre (LE) | 18,456 |
| Arroyo de la Encomienda (VA) | 17,572 |
| Santa Marta de Tormes (SA) | 15,011 |
| Ciudad Rodrigo (SA) | 13,975 |
| Béjar (SA) | 13,951 |
| Astorga (LE) | 12,039 |
| La Bañeza (LE) | 10,700 |
| Villablino (LE) | 10,003 |
| Total = | 1,401,821 |

Source: Authors' own creation based on data of INE (2015).

Data collection was carried out during 2015 and their analysis was performed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

3. Results

For the presentation of results is stratified by groups of municipalities, depending on their population size, because it seems reasonable to consider that the more populated municipalities have more human and material resources than the less populated ones, although the complexity in the treatment of information is also greater in the former group. Thus, the municipalities were divided in the following groups: less than 20,000 inhabitants; between 20,001 and 50,000 inhabitants; between 50,001 and 100,000 inhabitants; and more than 100,000 inhabitants.

3.1. Public representatives

This work firstly evaluated the presence of the name, surname, photo, biography and CV of the mayor. The same elements were also considered for the other political representatives who are part of the government, and finally for those who are part of the opposition.

The results show a minority presence of data about the mayor in the less populated municipalities, especially in the case of the biography and CV (there is a presence of the mayor's biography and CV in 11% of the municipalities of up to 20,000 inhabitants, and 16.67% of the municipalities of 20,001-50,000 inhabitants). The results are shown in table 2.

Table 2. Presence of data about the political representatives of the government and the opposition on websites

| Presence (%) on websites of | Municipalities by population size groups | | | | Total |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------|----------------|--------------|--------|
| | Up to 20,000 | 20,001-50,000 | 50,001-100,000 | Over 100,000 | |
| Basic information about the mayor: name and surname, photo and political party? | 77.78 | 100.00 | 100.00 | 100.00 | 91.67% |
| Information about the mayor: biography and/or curriculum vitae? | 11.11 | 16.67 | 100.00 | 100.00 | 45.83% |
| basic information about the representatives of the government: names and surnames, photos and political party? | 66.67 | 100.00 | 80.00 | 100.00 | 83.33% |

| | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|
| information about the representatives of the government: biography and/or curriculum vitae? | | 16.67 | 100.00 | 100.00 | 41.67% |
| Basic information about the representatives who are not part of the government: names and surnames, photos and political party? | 77.78 | 66.67 | 60.00 | 100.00 | 75.00% |
| Information about the representatives who are not part of the government: biography and/or curriculum vitae? | 11.11 | 50.00 | 60.00 | 100.00 | 45.83% |

Source: Authors' own creation.

A similar trend can be detected in the disclosure of data on political representatives in general, whether they are part or not of the government: the smaller the municipality, the lower the presence of these types of data.

In order to determine whether this tendency has statistical significance, we performed an ANOVA to find differences in means. The results, presented in tables 3 and 4, indicate that indeed there is a significant statistical difference in relation to the information provided by the municipal websites depending on their population size.

Table 3. One-factor ANOVA of data on municipal representatives

| ANOVA | Sum of squares | DF | Root mean square | F | Sig. |
|--------------|----------------|--------|------------------|--------|-------|
| Inter-groups | 43.611 | 3.000 | 14.537 | 12.256 | 0.000 |
| Intra-groups | 23.722 | 20.000 | 1.186 | | |
| Total | 67.333 | 23.000 | | | |

Source: Authors' own creation

Table 4. Tukey's HSD test for data on municipal representatives

| (I) Population size groups | (J) Population size groups | Mean Difference (I-J) | Standard error | Sig. | Confidence interval of 95% | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | | Upper limit | Lower limit |
| Up to 20,000 | 20,001 - 50,000 | -1.056 | 0.574 | 0.285 | -2.662 | 0.551 |
| | 50,001 - 100,000 | -2.556 | 0.607 | 0.002 | -4.256 | -0.855 |

| | | | | | | |
|------------------|------------------|--------|-------|-------|--------|--------|
| | Over 100,000 | -3.556 | 0.654 | 0,000 | -5.387 | -1.724 |
| 20,001 - 50,000 | Up to 20,000 | 1.056 | 0.574 | 0.285 | -0.551 | 2.662 |
| | 50.001 - 100,000 | -1.500 | 0.659 | 0.138 | -3.346 | 0.346 |
| | Over 100,000 | -2.500 | 0.703 | 0.010 | -4.468 | -0.532 |
| 50.001 - 100,000 | Up to 20,000 | 2.556 | 0.607 | 0.002 | 0.855 | 4.256 |
| | 20,001 - 50,000 | 1.500 | 0.659 | 0.138 | -0.346 | 3.346 |
| | Over 100,000 | -1.000 | 0.731 | 0.532 | -3.045 | 1.045 |
| Over 100,000 | Up to 20,000 | 3.556 | 0.654 | 0.000 | 1.724 | 5.387 |
| | 20,001 - 50,000 | 2.500 | 0.703 | 0.010 | 0.532 | 4.468 |
| | 50.001 - 100,000 | 1.000 | 0.731 | 0.532 | -1.045 | 3.045 |

Source: Authors' own creation. The mean difference is significant at the 05 level.

Thus, it can be concluded, in statistically significant terms, that in the case of the websites of the municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants in Castile and León, the percentage of information provided about the political representatives decreases as the population size of the municipality decreases.

3.2. Citizen tools for the monitoring of public authorities

With regards to the tools that the political parties put at the disposal of citizens to hold the local governments accountable, this study considered the presence of the email addresses of the representatives of the government and of the opposition, as they constitute direct communication channels with such representatives. In the same vein, the analysis took into account the presence of the administration in social networks.

The evaluation also considered the disclosure of updated data on the municipality's registered population, social diversity, and economic, cultural and historical data. The results in this regard are shown in table 5.

Thus, the trend seen in the presence of information about the public representatives can also be detected in the presence of the emails of the members of the government and the opposition: the smaller the population size of the municipality the lower the presence of emails in their websites. However, the trend is different with regards to the presence of links to social networks, since the presence is similar across municipalities of different sizes, except for the least-populated group of municipalities. On the other hand, the historical information provided on websites is similar across all municipalities. This finding is coherent insofar as such data have a statistical character, and do not

need updating or frequent reviews, and therefore they are accessible to all municipalities, regardless of their population size and available resources.

Table 5. Presence of tools for local government accountability on websites (I)

| Presence (%) on websites of | Municipalities by population size groups | | | | Total |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------|----------------|--------------|-------|
| | Up-20,000 | 20,001-50,000 | 50.001-100,000 | Over 100,000 | |
| The email addresses of the members of the government? | 37.50 | 66.67 | 100.00 | 100.00 | 69.57 |
| The email addresses of the members of the opposition? | | 33.33 | 80.00 | 100.00 | 41.67 |
| Information about the situation of the municipality: the registered population, social diversity, and economic and cultural activities? | 33.33 | 66.67 | 80.00 | 75.00 | 58.33 |
| Historical information about the municipality? | 66.67 | 66.67 | 100.00 | 75.00 | 75.00 |
| Access to the social networks of the government? | 22.22 | 50.00 | 60.00 | 50.00 | 41.67 |

Source: Authors' own creation.

However, the situation is different in the case of other types of non-statistical information such as data on the municipal term, the registered population, and the social, economic and cultural data, which do need constant reviewing and updating, and are made accessible when the municipality has the necessary resources. In this case, there is greater presence of these data in the websites of the more populated municipalities.

With regards to the presence of diverse forms of citizen participation, starting with the presence of the regulatory framework of local citizen participation, which standardises the access to these tools. To be precise, the tools that were analysed are the presence of mechanisms of participation in territorial councils, city councils, sectorial councils, governance plans, municipal action plans, strategic plans, budget monitoring, and municipal and citizen activities. The analysis also verified whether the websites provided a directory of the municipal entities, which constitutes a channel to make complaints and claims, and finally whether websites offered email addresses to communicate with municipal press officers and a calendar of municipal and citizen activities.

The results indicate that in the case of the regulatory framework of local citizen participation, the presence decreases as the size of the municipality decreases (see table 6).

Table 6. Presence of tools for local government accountability on websites (II)

| Presence (%) on websites of | Municipalities by population size groups | | | | Total |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------|----------------|--------------|-------|
| | Up to 20,000 | 20,001-50,000 | 50.001-100,000 | Over 100,000 | |
| Information about the regulatory framework of local citizen participation? | 33.33 | 50.00 | 100.00 | 100.00 | 62.50 |
| Information about other mechanisms of participation: territorial councils, city councils, sectoral councils, etc.? | | 33.33 | 80.00 | 100.00 | 41.67 |
| A calendar of municipal and citizen activities? | 77.78 | 50.00 | 100.00 | 75.00 | 75.00 |
| A directory of municipal entities? | 55.56 | 83.33 | 80.00 | 50.00 | 66.67 |
| Tools for citizen participation in the development and/or monitoring of the governance plan, municipal action plan and/or strategic plan? | 11.11 | 16.67 | 40.00 | | 16.67 |
| Tools for citizen participation in the development and/or monitoring of other municipal plans? | 11.11 | 16.67 | 40.00 | 25.00 | 20.83 |
| Tools for citizens to report incidents in the public space, or make complaints and suggestions? | 66.67 | 83.33 | 80.00 | 100.00 | 79.17 |
| Contact information of the spokesperson or press officer of the local government? | 11.11 | 33.33 | 20.00 | 25.00 | 20.83 |

Source: Authors' own creation.

Similarly, access to other mechanisms of participation such as territorial councils, city councils and sectoral councils also decreases as the size of the municipality decreases.

Surprisingly, the presence of the calendar of municipal activities does not seem to be correlated to the population size of the municipality, even when this is a dynamic content that requires continuous updating, although the volume of information, and thus the resources necessary for its updating

decrease as the size of the municipality decreases. However, it should be noted that their presence is greater across all municipalities regardless of their population size.

A similar trend is observed in the presence of the directory of municipal entities, which is stronger in the main municipalities. Likewise, the presence of tools of participation for the development and/or monitoring of the governance plan, municipal action plan and strategic plan neither correlates with the size of the municipalities, although their presence is minor in all population size groups.

The presence of data on the behaviour of municipal institutions in relation to the mechanisms of participation and budget monitoring, and other plans is lower (11.11% and 16.67% respectively) in municipalities with small populations. Most tools to communicate incidents in the public space and make complaints and suggestions are present in all of the municipality groups, and are fully present in the last group (100%).

Finally, the contact information of the municipal press officers is not common on websites, regardless of the population size of the municipality. Like in the case of the data on municipal representatives, a statistical analysis was performed to measure whether these differences were statistically significant (see tables 7 and 8).

Table 7. One-factor ANOVA of data on tools for local government accountability

| ANOVA | Sum of squares | DF | Root mean square | F | Sig. |
|--------------|----------------|--------|------------------|--------|-------|
| Inter-groups | 109.508 | 3.000 | 36.503 | 10.218 | 0.000 |
| Intra-groups | 71.450 | 20.000 | 3.573 | | |
| Total | 180.958 | 23.000 | | | |

Source: Authors' own creation.

Table 8. Tukey's HSD test for data on tools for local government accountability

| (I) Population size groups | (J) Population size groups | Mean Difference (I-J) | Standard error | Sig. | Confidence interval of 95% | |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------|-------|----------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | | Upper limit | Lower limit |
| Up to 20,000 | 20,001 - 50,000 | -2.167 | 0.996 | 0.164 | -4.955 | 0.622 |
| | 50,001 - 100,000 | -5.267 | 1.054 | 0.000 | -8.217 | -2.316 |
| | Over 100,000 | -4.417 | 1.136 | 0.005 | -7.596 | -1.238 |
| 20,001 - 50,000 | Up to 20,000 | 2.167 | 0.996 | 0.164 | -0.622 | 4.955 |
| | 50,001 - 100,000 | -3.100 | 1.145 | 0.060 | -6.303 | 0.103 |

| | | | | | | |
|------------------|------------------|--------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| | Over 100,000 | -2.250 | 1.220 | 0.283 | -5.665 | 1.165 |
| 50,001 - 100,000 | Up to 20,000 | 5.267 | 1.054 | 0.000 | 2.316 | 8.217 |
| | 20,001 - 50,000 | 3.100 | 1.145 | 0.060 | -0.103 | 6.303 |
| | Over 100,000 | 0.850 | 1.268 | 0.907 | -2.699 | 4.399 |
| Over 100,000 | Up to 20,000 | 4.417 | 1.136 | 0.005 | 1.238 | 7.596 |
| | 20,001 - 50,000 | 2.250 | 1.220 | 0.283 | -1.165 | 5.665 |
| | 50.001 - 100,000 | -0.850 | 1.268 | 0.907 | -4.399 | 2.699 |

Source: Authors' own creation. The difference of mean is significant to the level. 05.

As in the case of the data on public representatives, the difference is statistically significant. In other words, the least-populated municipalities of Castile and León (with a population between 10,000 and 20,000) offer on average less mechanisms of participation than the more populated municipalities (over 50,001).

4. Conclusions

The objective of this research work is not only scientific and academic. It is a research work that aims to be exposed and to be applied. It aims to facilitate innovation for the improvement of information and communication in local governments for the sake of transparency in the region under study. The transparency offered by the municipalities of Castile and León with more than 10,000 inhabitants is enough and positive, but not complete. In addition, transparency varies across the groups of municipalities depending on their population size (less than 20,000 inhabitants; between 20,001 and 50,000; between 50.001 and 100.000; and more than 100,000 inhabitants). A real effort has been made by the local councils to be more transparent. However, not all of them achieve 100% of transparency, as it would be desired. The incomplete access to certain basic data in the websites of the main municipalities of the region reveals deficiencies when it comes to government accountability, which affects the role these organisations play as sources of information for the media, which in turn hinders and sometimes contaminates the public debate, generating distrust among citizens.

This research also shows inequalities in two differentiated aspects. In the case of the data on the public representatives, the level of transparency is very high. The results on the data on public representatives indicate that their presence is total or almost total in the websites of the most-populated municipalities, and minor and diverse in the least populated municipalities (where the presence of biographies and CVs of the public authorities is very low, while their names, surnames and photos are more frequent). The research also confirmed that the difference between the more and less populated municipalities is statistically significant. The information provided about the political representatives in the websites decreases as the population size of the municipality decreases.

With regards to the mechanisms of citizen participation, starting with the regulatory framework, and the evaluation of its presence in very different considerations, the results are also uneven. Even more variable is the presence of the emails addresses of the public representatives, the profiles of the social networks of the municipal corporations, the contact data of the press officers, the calendar of municipal and citizen activities, the mechanisms to plan and monitor the budget, governance plans, municipal action plans, sectoral plans, and the tools to report incidents in the public spaces and make complaints and suggestions. These mechanisms are generally present in all the groups of municipalities in the cases of the historical information, the calendar of municipal and citizen activities, and the mechanisms to communicate incidents in the public spaces and to make complaints and suggestions. However, there were statistically significant differences also in this case, depending on the group of municipalities: the less-populated municipalities offer, on average, less mechanisms of citizen participation.

The more important limitations of this work refer to the generalisation of the results to the whole of Spain. The geographical area under studied, Castile and León, is a little populated region, so it is not representative of the whole of Spain. However, the study of this region is useful because it provides real data and will be presented to the competent authorities so that they can fulfil their main duty, which is the promotion of good practices in matters of communication and information in municipal corporations and to increase their use among municipal authorities, technical staff and journalists. All this work has been done with the ultimate goal of facilitating the participation of citizens in the monitoring of their governments and to improve our democratic system from within the closest public administrations: the municipal governments. In the same way, the work meets its specific objective of determining the level of transparency of the public authorities of Castile y León and to identify the tools for local government accountability that are offered in municipal websites.

Future studies on this issue should attempt to expand the scope of analysis. The region of Castile and León has more than 2,248 municipalities, many of which have less than twenty inhabitants and do not have a website. For this reason, it is impossible to cover the totality of the region. The local councils of Castile and León must make an effort in their digitisation of the government, because the digital technologies can contribute to the reduction of these deficiencies or gaps between governments and citizens. New initiatives in this field could generate a renewed interest on the public opinion in the evaluation of the political activity and the democratic control. In this context, journalists must perform their role of watchdog of the political power. It is necessary that both journalists and the people responsible for the communication and information of the public administrations modify their current routines and take advantage of digital technologies to produce information content that is easily intelligible to the diverse and plural citizenry. Future studies should try to delve on specific aspects like for example the presence and frequency of information content and feedback mechanisms in networks social.

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5. Notes

1. Data of the Local Governing Entity Registry of the State Secretariat for Public Administrations (seap.minhap.gob.es)

2. http://www.ine.es/FichasWeb/RegComunidades.do?fichas=49&busc_comu=&botonFichas=Ir+a+1a+tabla+de+resultados

3. <http://www.estadistica.jcyl.es/>

4. the acronyms used to refer to the provinces are as follows: BU (Burgos), LE (León), SA (Salamanca), VA (Valladolid) and ZA (Zamora).

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