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CASOS Y SISTEMAS COMPARADOS

Transparency of local governments in Colombia: the case of the historical districts

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ABSTRACT: The transparency of public administrations plays a fundamental role in democratic governance as it provides intangible values such as credibility and reputation. In order to evaluate information published on the websites of the mayoral offices of the districts of Colombia —the most important municipalities and with special conditions— the Infoparticipa method, which was previously developed to assess transparency and quality of information, was adapted to the Colombian legislation and the characteristics of its local governments. The results, which showed a very low level of compliance, were compared with those obtained previously in the analysis of municipality websites in Spain and Ecuador using the same methodology. They demonstrate that there is a lack of proactive attitude in the three cases, which undermines democracy and its institutions. We conclude by stating that transparency laws are used as a political artifice, since their obligations

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and principles are not put into practice, thus undermining the right of citizens to have access to public information.

KEYWORDS: transparency, participation, public administration, governance, local government.

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La transparencia de las administraciones locales colombianas: el caso de los distritos históricos

RESUMEN: La transparencia de las administraciones públicas juega un papel fundamental en la gobernanza democrática ya que aporta valores intangibles como la credibilidad y la reputación. Para evaluar la información publicada en los sitios web de las alcaldías de los distritos de Colombia, los municipios más importantes y con condiciones especiales, se adaptó a la legislación colombiana el método Infoparticipa, previamente desarrollado para evaluar la transparencia y calidad de la información, así como las características de sus administraciones locales. Los resultados, que mostraron un nivel de cumplimiento muy bajo, se compararon con los obtenidos previamente en el análisis de los sitios web de los municipios de España y Ecuador utilizando la misma metodología. Lo que demuestra que hay una falta de actitud proactiva en los tres casos, lo que atenta contra la democracia y sus instituciones. Concluimos señalando que las leyes de transparencia se utilizan como un artificio político, ya que sus obligaciones y principios no se ponen en práctica, atentando contra el derecho de los ciudadanos al acceso a la información pública.

PALABRAS CLAVE: transparencia, participación, administración pública, gobernanza, administraciones locales.

1. **Introduction**

The analysis of public administrations' transparency is an interdisciplinary field in which specialists in political science, law, public administration, archives, etc. can intervene. However, in practice, each study approaches problems from a preferred discipline and therefore emphasizes on certain aspects to the detriment of others. Thus, studies that consider transparency's main objective is the prevention of corruption tend to focus on economic or political sciences.

In this study we approach transparency from the communication sciences and the communication tradition of organizations, more specifically of institutions. From this perspective, the study does not only intend to measure the amount of adequate information that is published. Our research also considers other essential parameters for transparency to be useful to citizens, promoting effective accountability and enabling informed political participation with this knowledge. For this reason, it is considered essential for the information to be delivered in an understandable and easily accessible manner, among other characteristics. Likewise, the evaluation procedure applied has been designed taking into account that it must be equally intelligible for the different agents involved, such as elected politicians, communication sciences' professionals and other citizens (Molina, Simelio y Corcoy, 2017).

This perspective, added to the influence of digital technologies (Ohme, 2019), means that the emphasis is placed on the use of public administration's webpages to comply with transparency laws in various countries. Moreover, the increase in the number of such laws has given rise to debate on the type of information published, since transparency is not simply about the provision of information but also its quality. Thus, information should be published in a way that citizens can compare its contents with their experience and gives them the opportunity to participate. Special attention is being given to this problem because the way in which citizens use digital communication systems can have a great influence on their political decisions (Hänska y Bauchowitz, 2019), and political actors' loss of credibility must be compensated with greater transparency to generate trust. Although it is clear that transparency does not solve any problems (Pozen, 2020) if it is not accompanied by responsible management and at the service of the community.

Such reflections bring with them an interest in creating methods that determine levels of transparency. The Infoparticipa method, previously applied in Spain and Ecuador, makes it possible to quantitatively evaluate not just the information provided by public administrations but also its quality. For this study, the Infoparticipa method was adapted by considering the characteristics of the Colombian local government and the country's legislation on transparency. In doing so, a tool was created to analyse mayoral websites of the five districts of Colombia, designated as

such under Law 1617 of February 5, 2013, by which the regime for special districts was issued, which include Barranquilla, Santa Marta, Cartagena, Bogotá and Buenaventura. This consideration confers special powers to the administrations of the mentioned cities, which is why they constitute a specific and very important sample in Colombia.

Having carried out this step, we then analysed the results based on those previously obtained for the evaluations of Spanish and Ecuadorean local government websites. The use of a common methodological architecture is essential because, compared to the methods designed for a national case, it shows the possibility of obtaining comparable results. Thus, we have established the following research question: is the transparency legislation in Colombia being applied in favor of citizens and the democratic system compared with the Ecuadorian and Spanish legislation or, on the contrary, is such legislation being used as an instrument for politicians to legitimize opaque behaviors?

Next, we establish the theoretical framework of the work, in which we especially show the importance of transparency for the consolidation and development of democracy. Then, we establish the objectives and hypotheses considering the characteristics of the Colombian case that we studied and the preceding studies. In section 4, we explain the construction of the analysis methodology of the websites of the districts of Colombia and in 5, the results of the analysis. The last two sections are dedicated to the discussion and conclusions of the work in which we solve the research question.

2. Theoretical Foundation: democracy, transparency and communication

Recent research on democracy has been taxonomic (Maleki y Hendriks, 2016), defining (Muñoz, 2016), reflections on the concept itself (Sim y Krishnasamy, 2016; Tebaldi y Calaresu, 2015) or reviews of specific political contexts (Christensen, 2019; Fuchs y Roller, 2018; Repak, 2016; Calvo y Campos, 2016). However, all of these studies identify the need for an accompanying citizen of public administration. This implies educating citizens in democratic values because "civic education is at the very foundation of democracy. Democracy lacks completeness without citizens educated civically" (Rodríguez, 2017: 15).

It is also important that leaders show interest in citizens being actively linked to the exercise of political power in order to legitimize their governance, which is why they must facilitate different forms of active political involvement for citizens (Sanyal y Rao, 2018). Citizens have understood that "political-administrative institutions do not respond to the challenges of a context plagued by uncertainty" (Pardo y Abellán, 2016: 69) and therefore a greater civic commitment and greater participation in public institutions is required.

Political power is now conceived horizontally, with rulers and those they govern being on the same level. Hence, research regarding citizen participation focuses on linking citizens to the public domain of political deliberation (Hänska y Bauchowitz, 2019; Ohme, 2019; Báez, 2016; Delamaza y Thayer, 2016), on recognizing implicit cultural differences (Stoycheff, Burgess y Martucci, 2020; Porlezza, 2019; Laurent, 2016), and on taking advantage of new technologies for this purpose (Allcot, Gentzkow y Yu, 2019; Parmelee y Roman, 2019; Sabag Ben-Porat y Lehman-Wilzig, 2019; Kelm, Dohle y Bernhard, 2019; Mossberger, Tolbert y Anderson, 2017; Calvo, 2016; Grabe y Myrick, 2016; Koc-Michalska, Lilleker y Vedel, 2016).

Reflections on democracy emphasize open, transparent public administration in order that citizens can participate in public administration. Debate is based on the idea that a more transparent government is a government that efficiently meets the needs of citizens and therefore it has been assumed that transparency "is largely seen as essential to public sector accountability" (Liston-Heyes y Julliet, 2020: 1) and "helps to prevent and reduce illegitimate forms of power" (Flyverbom, Christensen y Hansen, 2015: 403). Therefore, transparency, as a fundamental principle of a responsible government (Veljković & Bog-danović-Dinić y Stoimenov, 2014), materializes in the creation of laws whose aim is for citizens to have access to public information. Although it has already been stated previously that "the existence of an adequate law is an unavoidable but never sufficient step" (Chamorro, 2016: 28) in the drive to political participation, in this study we ask ourselves whether these laws are being used as a legitimating argument that covers up insufficient, if not conflicting, practices in relation to the principles and objectives that are said to be pursued in said legislation.

Making transparency the fundamental quality of a democratic government must bring about at least three changes in public administration. The first of these is that administrative transparency favours citizen participation in a better way, since a citizen informed of what his/her government does is more likely to participate. In other words, "the public authorities answer to the citizens, who, when informed, make the appropriate decisions. Administrators are accountable for their management and their capacities in accordance with the mandate they have been granted" (Manfredi, Herranz y Calvo, 2017: 841).

The search for transparency in democratic public administrations forces governments to communicate their actions as this not only informs "about reforms and legitimizes their political decisions, but also serves to generate acceptance of policies and overcome public resistance to them" (König, 2016: 539).

The second change involves the inclusion of websites by public administrations to provide information about their administration to citizens (Taylor-Smith y Smith, 2019; Clabo y Ramos-Vielba, 2015; Yu y Robinson, 2012). However, it is also questionable whether making such information public through the websites contributes or not to

transparency, since it must be considered whether the information is understandable and whether it is easily accessible (Molina, Simelio y Corcoy, 2017), whether administrations provide on their websites all the information that by law they must (Pacios y La Torre, 2018), or whether providing the relevant information guarantees that a government is democratic (Ingrams, 2018).

Official websites are set up for public administrations in spaces conducive to complying with transparency laws for their accessibility, for the permanent use by citizens of digital media and because it facilitates a greater proximity of citizens to public administrations by including mechanisms that favour the consultation of public information and the reuse of it (Caridad y Martínez, 2016).

The third change is that the opening up of information produced by public administrations through websites — also known as open data — tied with the concept of open government makes to bridges the gap between citizens and the state (Eckhard, 2020: 3) and allows citizens to have "open access to certain data without copyright restrictions. In this movement, it is assumed that government information is the patrimony of all citizens, and therefore should be returned" (Ferrer-Sapena, Peset y Aleixandre-Benavent, 2011: 262).

Research on the concept of open data has led to debate about how much information governments should or should be able to provide (Alon-Barkat, 2020; Washington, 2014; Kitchin, 2014) or how complicated it is to make this data visible by opening up "governmental data repositories to citizens in an accessible, organized and neutral way without affecting the privacy of the information or disclosing data that is too sensitive and that may damage the function of the State" (Sandoval-Almazán, 2015: 216).

One of the most important initiatives is executed by the Transparency for Colombia Corporation, a "National chapter of Transparency International. It was born in 1998 as a response by Colombian civil society to a complex political scenario, due to the incidence of corruption in public institutions and the weakening of democracy"[3]. In Colombia there is a growing interest in addressing the principles of transparency and integrating them into an efficient public administration, which has generated studies that have led to initiatives such as the *Índice de Desempeño Integral* [Integral Performance Index] to confront the regulatory provisions regarding public information and the way in which public administrations integrate them (Ortíz and Ordónez, 2019). Also of note is the Transparenci@ tool developed to connect "institutions with citizens and putting at the service of the latter, suitable and very easy mechanisms to make their requests and exercise control over public administration" (Becerra et al., 2018), thus promoting administrative transparency.

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[3] Transparencia por Colombia. Capítulo Transparencia Internacional. https://transparenciacolombia.org.co/nosotros/sobre-nosotros/

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3. Objectives and hypothesis

3.1. Objectives

The first objective was to determine whether mayoral websites of Colombian districts provide quality transparent information about the government and the management of the institution itself. The mayoralties of these districts were chosen since they are territorial entities that have special conditions in the design of the Colombian State.

This general objective required two operational aims:

- To adapt the Infoparticipa method —previously applied in Spain and Ecuador— for the evaluation of the transparency of Colombian district mayoralties by considering the Colombian legislation and the characteristics of these local government.

- To evaluate Colombian district mayoral websites using the Infoparticipa method adapted to this case.

The second objective was to compare the results obtained in the analysis of Colombian district mayoral websites with those obtained previously in Spain and Ecuador using the same method. These are three countries with current legislation on transparency and therefore a comparison of results will allow us to determine to what extent the existence of these legal obligations results in the implementation of transparency practices.

3.2. Hypothesis

The first evaluation using the Infoparticipa method was carried out in Catalonia (Spain) between 2012 and 2013 with the first set of 41 indicators. The websites of the 947 Catalonian city councils were evaluated, of which barely 7% exceeded 50% compliance. Although the 10 municipalities with greater than 100,000 inhabitants of that sample surpassed 50%, only Barcelona, the capital of the region, and Sabadell, another important Catalonian city, reached 80 and 83% respectively, while the rest obtained between 56 and 68% (Moreno, Molina y Corcoy 2013).

Following the approval (2013) and bringing into effect (2015) of the Spanish transparency law and the amplification of the set of indicators to 52 to adapt them to the new legal obligations, in 2016 only 13.82% of Catalonian municipalities exceeded 50% compliance in the evaluation. Considering again only those municipalities with over 100,000 inhabitants, 9 obtained between 88 and 100% and only one obtained a lower score (Badalona, 65.38%). Although these results (Moreno, Molina y Simelio, 2017) showed a slight improvement in the set of websites analysed between 2012

and 2016, it is necessary to consider that the validity of the law obliges all municipalities to comply with both the publication of the information and the principles of intelligibility and ease of access.

On the other hand, the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) awards each year in Catalonia the Infoparticipa Seal to those municipalities that obtain the best scores in the Infoparticipa project's annual evaluation waves, a stimulus that brings about changes that the mere validity of the law does not achieve. This effect has also been observed in other countries using other methods. One such example is Transparência e Integridade, Associação Cívica, which compiles transparency rankings of Portuguese municipalities with the same aim of encouraging transparency[4], a strategy that is shared with other branches of Transparency International in various countries.

Similarly, in the evaluation of the transparency of the 105 Ecuadorian municipalities of over 25,000 inhabitants (Molina y Medranda 2018), only one (Guayaquil, the largest in the country by number of inhabitants) exceeded 50% of positive indicators. 56 municipalities yielded results between 25 and 50% and the remaining 48 did not reach 25%. If we consider only those 6 municipalities with more than 250,000 inhabitants (in order to facilitate comparison with the Colombian case), 5 do not reach 50% and only Guayaquil exceeds that percentage with a meagre 60.38%. It should be noted that this country has had a transparency law in place since 2004.

The comparison of the results of these two cases has led us to propose the hypothesis that transparency legislation is used as an artifice which is intended to show a political will to fight against corruption and for democratic regeneration. However, in reality there is no willingness on the part of officials to put their obligations and principles into practice.

To verify this hypothesis, we assessed the information published on the websites of the most important local government of a third Ibero-American country, namely Colombia. Colombia is a country that has had specific legislation on transparency in force since 2014. Therefore, all local government should be complying with both the information obligations and the principles contained in the law to ensure that the information is useful to citizens to promote their informed political participation and to guarantee accountability.

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[4] Transparência e integridade associação cívica - TIAC. 2017. Índice de transparência municipal. Apresentação e indicadores. Ed. Transparência e integridade, Associação cívica.

4. Methodology

4.1. Local Government in Colombia and analysis sample

Colombia consists of 32 departments divided into 1,101 municipalities. 10 of these municipalities have been designated as districts. The first 5 – Bogotá, Buenaventura, Barranquilla, Cartagena and Santa Marta – make up the study sample. Article 286 of the Political Constitution of 1991 notes that "departments, districts, municipalities and indigenous territories are territorial entities". Territorial entities "are the entities whose field of action is the respective territory, understood as a municipality, district or department" (Glossary of Administrative Department of Public Function). The mayors and governors chosen by popular election are the highest authorities, as noted in the legislative act of January 9, 1986. On March 13, 1988, the first popular vote of mayors was recorded and since 2004 the mandates of mayors and governors have lasted four years.

In accordance with article 287 of the Political Constitution of Colombia:

> Territorial entities enjoy autonomy to manage their interests, and within the limits of the Constitution and the Law. In such virtue they will have the following rights:
>
> 1. Be governed by their own authorities.
>
> 2. Exercise the powers that correspond to them.
>
> 3. Manage the resources and establish the necessary taxes for the fulfillment of its functions.
>
> 4. Participate in national income.

The districts are, according to the second article of Law 1617 of February 5, 2013, territorial entities subject to a special regime that authorizes its authorities and bodies "special powers different from those contemplated under the ordinary regime applicable to other municipalities of the country, as well as that which governs the other territorial entities established within the political and administrative structure of the Colombian State".

A territorial entity is a district as long as it has at least 600,000 inhabitants according to the DANE (National Administrative Department of Statistics), or that it is located in a coastal area with potential for port practices or tourism and culture, or that it is a municipality capital of the department or border district (Law 1617 of February 5, 2013).

The analysis sample is composed of the websites of the five historic districts in Colombia because, although they are governed by municipal laws, they have special conditions that make them particularly significant local government and models for the others: Bogotá (capital district), Barranquilla (the capital of the department of Atlántico), Santa Marta (the capital of the department of Magdalena), Cartagena (the capital of the department of Bolívar), and Buenaventura (located in the department of Valle del Cauca). It is necessary to say that there are another territorial entities that have been designated as districts in Colombia, but these five that we analyzed here are the first district in Colombia and they should be a good sample of what happens with this kind of territorial entities in this country.

4.2. Adaptation of the Infoparticipa method to Colombia

The Infoparticipa method makes it possible to "examine what information is published on the websites of the municipalities from a set of questions or indicators on fun-damental issues formulated as any person would be able to do" (Moreno, Molina y Simelio, 2017: 373). It was conceptualized in Spain prior to the approval of the national transparency law[5] considering the right of citizens to have complete and comprehensible information that allows them to evaluate the action of local govern-ments and participate in the definition of public policies. Therefore, the evaluation includes both the availability of information on policymakers and their management, as well as other aspects related to information channels and citizen participation procedures.

The first set consisted of 41 indicators, but with the approval of the national transparency law and other autonomic ones, it was expanded to 52 evaluation indicators (see Tables 1 to 5) divided into sections and subsections. The first section, Transparency of the Local Authority, consists of the following subsections: Who are the political representatives? How do they manage collective resources? and, How do they manage economic re-sources: budgets, salaries, recruitment, subsidies etc.? The second section, Information for Participation, consists of the following subsections: What information do they provide regarding the municipal and the management of collective resources? and, What tools do they offer for citizen participation?

Infoparticipa was adapted to evaluate Ecuadorian municipal websites in 2016. This adaptation did not require significant changes since the legislation of the two countries on transparency is very similar and the characteristics of local public administrations do not show significant differences. Thus only one more indicator was included and some were modified so that the references were those required for the Ecuadorian case (Molina y Medranda, 2018).

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[5] Law 19/2013, of December 9, on Transparencia, acceso a la información pública y buen gobierno (2013).

To adapt the Infoparticipa method to Colombia it was necessary to review the Colombian transparency legislation[6] (Law 1712, 2014). Article 1 of this Law regulates "the right of access to public information, the procedures for the exercise and the exceptions to the disclosure of information". It mentions in its Article 5 that "all public entities, including those belonging to all branches of public power, at all levels of the state structure, whether central or decentralized by services or territorially, at the national, departmental, municipal and district levels" are considered bound subjects. Concept 439141 of 2020 by the Administrative Department of Public Function, gives the following definition to public entities:

> Every structure belonging to the organization of the public administration because it has been created or authorized by law (the ordinance or the agreement, in the territorial order) for the exercise of administrative functions, the provision of public services and the performance of industrial activities or commercial, or because it has been constituted with contributions of public origin.

The law establishes that public information is all that generated, obtained, acquired or controlled by the bound subject in its capacity as such. This information must be made available to the public through electronic means of communication. As noted in Article 7 "bound subjects must make available to interested persons such information on the Internet so that they can obtain the information directly or through printouts". Therefore, the five districts of Colombia reviewed must comply with the provisions of Law 1712 of 2014.

Infoparticipa Colombia maintained the categories that Infoparticipa originally evaluated on political representatives, the management of resources, the management of economic resources, the information published and the tools provided for citizen participation. These categories were preserved because they are contemplated in Law 1437 of 2011[7], specifically in the article 8, in which it is stated that the authorities must maintain "complete and updated information, on the service site and on the electronic page, and provide it through printed and electronic means at its disposal, and by telephone or by mail" (Law 1437 of 2011) regarding the dependencies and their functions, administrative acts, requests for complaints and claims, among others.

To adapt the indicators, it was also necessary to review the Law 1712 of March 6, 2014 on transparency and the right of access to national public information, but it was also necessary to review the laws of the municipal regime in Colombia such as Law 136 of 1994 (by which rules are issued aimed at modernizing the organization and

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[6] Law 1712, of March 6, on Transparencia y del derecho de acceso a la información pública (2014).

[7] Law 1437, of January 8, by which the Código de Procedimiento Administrativo y de lo Contencioso Administrativo is issued (2011).

functioning of municipalities) and 617 of 2000 (which partially reforms Law 136 of 1994), as well as Law 1551 of 2012 (by which rules are issued to modernize the organization and functioning of municipalities). It was also essential to take into account Law 1617 of February 5, 2013 (by which the regime for the special districts is issued) and 768 of 2002, which adopts the political, administrative and fiscal regime of the port and industrial districts of Barranquilla, the touristic and cultural districts of Cartagena de Indias, and the touristic, cultural and historical districts of Santa Marta.

Following this review, the Infoparticipa Colombia was reduced to 39 indicators (Table 2). These were of the 52 used in Spain for the evaluation of municipal websites, i.e. 13 less. The decrease was due in large part to the differences in the political-administrative division of the two countries. The mayoralties in Colombia have less authority in comparison with city councils in Spain, since in Colombia municipal councils are distinct institutions that are independent of the mayoralties, with similar competences to municipal assemblies in Spain. Therefore, each institute (mayoral offices and councils) has a distinct website and those of the councils do not form part of this study.

5. Analysis of the webpages of the districts of Colombia

Using the Infoparticipa Colombia method, the transparency of the websites of the five historical districts —Barranquilla[8], Santa Marta[9], Cartagena[10], Bogotá[11] and Buenaventura[12]— was analysed. Cartagena´s website showed the lowest compliance (35,9%), while that of Bogotá showed the highest compliance (76,92%) and the other three obtained percentages between 53,85 and 64,10%. These results are obviously insufficient in any case, but even more so in the case of cities categorised as districts. Table 1 provides this data and Table 2 (annexes) shows the indicators met by each city.

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[8] Barranquilla website; https://www.barranquilla.gov.co/ The evaluation of the website was done on January 7, 2021.

[9] Santa Marta website; https://www.santamarta.gov.co/ The evaluation of the website was done on January 8, 2021.

[10] Cartagena website; https://www.cartagena.gov.co/ The evaluation of the website was done on January 8, 2021.

[11] Bogotá website; https://bogota.gov.co/ The evaluation of the website was done on January 7, 2021.

[12] Buenaventura website; https://www.buenaventura.gov.co/ The evaluation of the website was done on January 8, 2021.

Table 1. Compliance with indicators and percentage

Mayoralty	Indicators met	Percentage compliance
Bogotá	30	76.92 %
Santa Marta	25	64.10 %
Barranquilla	23	58.97 %
Buenaventura	21	53.85 %
Cartagena	14	35.90 %

Source: own elaboration.

In the political representatives' section, three of the five districts analyzed (Bogotá, Santa Marta and Cartagena), do not present any information on the mayors' salaries. On the webpages of the districts of Barranquilla, Cartagena and Buenaventura, the declaration of activities and assets of the mayors is not published, while in three districts (Barranquilla, Bogotá y Cartagena) the mayors' and the members of their cabinets contact in-formation does not appear (Table 2).

Regarding the information on collective resources management, in four of these webpages (Barranquilla, Santa Marta, Cartagena y Buenaventura) the complete organization chart with the names and surnames of those in charge is not published. In four of these webpages, the functions and duties of cabinet members are not disclosed either.

As it appears in Table 2, in the management of economic resources section, four districts do not publish the salaries of the district cabinet secretaries. In five of these webpages there is no information about the agreements signed, nor the costs of institutional campaigns in the media. Besides, in Barranquilla and Buenaventura job announcements are not published.

It is important to note that the *Sistema Electrónico para la Contratación Pública* SECOP [Electronic System for Public Hiring] is another source of public information regarding the management of State resources, but more oriented to the specific issue of State Contracting. Despite its more technical interface than that of the district's web pages, the SECOP also allows citizens to monitor the way in which the State's resources are invested, which is why usually on the municipalities' web pages there is a link to access this platform, since public procurement processes are, by legal provision, centralized in it. However, it was found that the access links were not easy to locate on the sample district's web pages. Therefore, the information on the contracts signed and executed is not easy to find, which goes against the principles of transparency.

The information section on the municipality/district and the management of collective resources also has deficiencies. In three of the five districts, information about the situation of the municipality/district such as demographic or statistical data of economic and cultural activities is absent. In Cartagena and Buenaventura townhalls' websites, the agenda of municipal and citizen activities is not published either, which implies that citizens cannot participate in the activities executed by the public administrations of these districts (Table 2).

Finally, the five websites include protocols for submitting complaints and claims. However, only two (Bogotá and Cartagena) include mechanisms through which citizens can participate in the formulation of policies, while two do not publish any instruments for consultation and/or participation on current issues. All this results in a situation which should be observed carefully because administrative transparency main purpose is to promote citizen participation. Therefore, the analysis of these districts' websites shows the lack of citizen participation due to the deficient information provided to the public on these webpages (Table 2).

6. Discussion

The analysis procedure applied to the Colombian mayor offices' websites is novel. The analysis contemplated indicators based on legislation and information publishing, but also on the communication that these public institutions provide and on the participation alternatives offered to their citizens. Therefore, the results are not comparable with any previous transparency evaluation based on the measurement of the amount of information published by Colombian, Ecuadorian or Spanish public administrations.

In the case of Colombia, the results should be compared in future with all Colombian municipalities or with a significant sample. Although these five historic districts have been reviewed and although it can be assumed that the results of the rest will not improve them, a larger study is necessary to confirm this.

However, we intend to continue this work by analysing the websites of other countries in other geopolitical areas, which will allow us to draw conclusions regarding differences that may arise due to issues of tradition in public communication and transparency (Tejedo-Romero y Ferraz, 2020; Balaguer-Coll y Brun-Martos, 2019; Stohl, Stohl y Leonardi, 2016; Grimmelikhuijsen, Porumbescu, Hong y Im, 2013; Rodríguez, Caba y López, 2006). These analyses will allow us to observe both the influence of the legal framework in other contexts such as that of the stimuli and the influence of the work of different types of organizations in order to determine whether what we have termed the artifice of transparency occurs to the same extent and with similar characteristics.

7. Conclusions

The conclusions and contributions of this work are framed in the area of communication sciences and are of special interest for organizational studies or institutional communication.

7.1. Conclusions on the evaluation of Colombian district mayoralties

The adaptation of the Infoparticipa method to the case of the mayoralties of Colombia yields two conclusions. The first is that it was possible to start from the conceptualization made for the analysis in Spain, thereby demonstrating the method's validity. The second is that in spite of this, the characteristics of the government institutions of the Colombian municipalities are very different from those of Spain and Ecuador, where the Infoparticipa method had previously been applied. Although the results are positive, this study reveals the difficulty in applying a universal method to the analysis of the transparency of local governments. For the time being, it is necessary to continue considering the characteristics of the public administrations reviewed in each national case and the legislation on transparency to which they are subject based on a flexible model such as the method used here.

However, the evaluation of the transparency of the websites of Barranquilla, Santa Marta, Cartagena, Bogotá and Buenaventura yielded interesting results that lead to different reflections on how much transparency is promoted in the districts of Colombia, which is regulated for public administrations through Law 1712 of 2014. None of the reviewed webpages reached 80% compliance for any of the 39 indicators evaluated. The mayoral office website of Bogotá, with 77%, met the most indicators, while the Buenaventura mayoral office website only achieved 36% compliance.

Although these results reveal certain outstanding aspects in the transparency promoted by the public administrations of the districts through their webpages in compliance with some of the directives issued by the transparency law of 2014, it is worrying that although the law has been enacted and that Colombian public administrations are obliged to make available public information, the webpages do not represent real scenarios through which citizens can be informed of what their leaders do within the framework of public management.

There appears to be no conviction on the part of public administrations to provide the public information required within the framework of transparency to bring citizens closer to public management in order to combat problems such as corruption, to restore confidence in Colombian institutions and to strengthen the Colombian participatory democratic model.

7.2. Conclusions about the cases of Spain, Ecuador and Colombia

The results obtained in the analysis of the websites of the local public administrations of Spain, Ecuador and Colombia reveal that despite having in all three cases approved mandatory transparency laws, local public administrations do not sufficiently comply with them. The laws appear to be an artifice used by representatives of the public authorities to express interest in the matter, but they do not lead immediately to commitment nor is non-compliance penalized. Consequently, it is the political leaders of each municipality who decide the degree of application and, as we have seen, this is generally very low and only motivated by receiving some form of recognition such as certificates or high positions in good practice rankings. They are private or public organizations that in these cases supplant the driving role that corresponds to public powers and that barely promote, if at all, transparency as the foundation of democracy.

This reveals little conviction in the benefits of transparency on the part of public officials, which discredits both themselves and the institutions they represent. They thus miss the opportunity to generate trust and show themselves as responsible managers committed to fighting corruption and promoting participatory democratic forms based on the right to information.

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Annexes

Table 2. Evaluation results by indicator in each sample municipality

Indicator	Bogotá	Barranquilla	Santa Marta	Cartagena	Buenaventura
Who are the political representatives?					
1. Is basic information about the mayor or mayoress provided: name and surnames, photo and political party?	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes
2. Is basic information provided about the mayor or mayoress: biography and/or cv?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3. Is basic information provided about cabinet members: name, surnames and photo?	Yes		Yes		Yes
4. Is basic information provided about cabinet members: biography and/or cv?			Yes		Yes
5. Are the salaries (monthly and/or annual) of the mayor or mayoress published?		Yes			Yes
6. Are statements of activities and assets of elected officials published?	Yes		Yes		
7. Is the mayor's institutional agenda published?		Yes			
8. Are the contact details such as email and phone number of the mayor or mayoress and cabinet members published on the website?			Yes		Yes
How do they manage collective resources?					
9. Is information provided about the functions and duties of cabinet members?			Yes		
10. Is information provided about the mayor's functions and Plan of Action?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
11. Is the complete organisation chart published with the names and surnames of the persons responsible and their functions?	Yes				
12. Is information provided about the District Development Plan?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
13. Is information provided about the Territorial Ordering Plan?	Yes	Yes		Yes	
How do they manage economic resources: budgets, salaries, recruitment, subsidies etc.?					
14. Are the mayor's annual budget and public spending plans published?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
15. Are the budgetary modifications carried out published?	Yes			Yes	
16. Are management, evaluation and audit reports published?	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes
17. Is the budget management report of previous years published?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Question					
18. Are the salaries of the cabinet secretaries published?		Yes			
19. Are the tenders for employment of the Mayor's Office, the development of public tenders and the results published?	Yes		Yes	Yes	
20. Is information published about the contracts awarded by the Mayor's Office?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
21. Are the current contracts and information about the respective contractual process published?	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes
22. Are the processes, guidelines and policies in terms of acquisitions and purchases published?	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes
23. Are the modifications to the formalized contracts and their extensions published?	Yes	Yes			
24. Is the full list of suppliers and contractors and the economic amount published?	Yes	Yes			Yes
25. Is the term for the fulfilment of the contracts published?	Yes				Yes
26. Are the tenders for proposals or investment projects and grants awarded published?	Yes	Yes			
27. Are the signed agreements published, specifying the parties, their purpose and the economic obligations that may arise, if any?					
28. Are the costs and characteristics of institutional advertising campaigns published in the media?					
What information do they provide regarding the municipal and the management of collective resources?					
29. Is news and information published about the mayor's actions related to government management?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
30. Are the decrees of the Mayor's Office published?	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes
31. Is historical information published about the municipal?	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes
32. Is information provided about the status of the municipality: demographic or statistical data on economic and cultural activities that are being developed?			Yes		Yes
33. Is an agenda of municipal and citizen activities provided on the website?	Yes	Yes	Yes		
34. Are the contact details of the person in charge of news, information and/or communication of the Mayor's Office published?	Yes		Yes		Yes

What tools do they offer for citizen participation?					
35. Is information provided on the website about any mechanism through which citizens can participate in the formulation of policies?	Yes		Yes		
36. Is the directory of entities and associations of the municipal and/or the register of stakeholders, if any, available on the website?	Yes	Yes			
37. Are consultation and/or participation tools on current topics of local interest provided on the website?	Yes	Yes	Yes		
38. Is the list of services provided, forms and protocols of attention to the citizenship offered on the mayor's website?	Yes	Yes	Yes		
39. Is information provided on the website about mechanisms to present complaints and claims in relation to actions and omissions of the Mayor's Office?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Compliance total	30	23	25	14	21
Percentage of total	76.92%	58.97%	64.10%	35.90%	53.85%

Source: own elaboration.