

# Crisis communication and thematic transfer by the Spanish government during COVID-19

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## Abstract

*The results of this study show that the government's communication strategy has certain shortcomings, such as the high presence of assumptions and contradictions. Likewise, themes like the constant update of deaths and hospitalisations are prioritised, as well as news related to the State Security Forces and Corps. In order to analyse the general features of the government's communication strategy, the press conferences of the Technical Management Committee for the coronavirus and the president of the Spanish Executive during the first few weeks of the state of alarm were watched with the goal of studying to what extent they follow the recommendations of crisis communication and to determine the main themes that appear.*

## Keywords

*Crisis Communication, Institutional Communication, COVID-19, State of Alarm, Health Crisis.*

## Resum

*Els resultats d'aquesta recerca assenyalen que l'estratègia de comunicació del Govern pateix certes mancances, com l'alta presència de suposicions o contradiccions. Així mateix, es van prioritzar temes com l'actualització constant de morts, hospitalitzats, etc. o aquells relacionats amb les Forces i Cossos de Seguretat de l'Estat. Per dur a terme l'anàlisi de les característiques generals de l'estratègia comunicativa del Govern, es realitza un visionament de les compareixences protagonitzades pel Comitè Tècnic de Gestió contra el coronavirus i el president de l'Executiu espanyol durant les primeres setmanes de l'estat d'alarma amb l'objectiu d'estudiar-ne l'adequació a les recomanacions de la comunicació de crisi i els temes principals que apareixen.*

## Paraules clau

*Comunicació de crisi, comunicació institucional, Covid-19, estat d'alarma, crisi sanitària.*

## 1. Introduction

On 1 February 2020, the director of the Health Alerts and Emergencies Coordination Centre (CCAES), Dr Fernando Simón, appeared at a press conference to explain the characteristics of the first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Spain: a German tourist had tested positive for the coronavirus on the Canary Island of La Gomera after having been in contact with a Chinese citizen in his home country.

From that moment on, given the incessant news of positive cases on the ensuing days, Fernando Simón's press conferences became constant as he attempted to tell citizens how the pandemic was evolving. Thus, the director of the CCAES became a reference figure in finding out about the development of the coronavirus in Spain, although until that time he had remained outside the media spotlight with the exception of the handful of times he had appeared during the 2014 Ebola crisis.

However, this formula of a single spokesperson disappeared as of 17 March, when the press conferences in which Fernando Simón had spoken alone turned into a choral exposition.

These press conferences complemented the appearances that the president of the government, Pedro Sánchez, held to report on the health situation and make an array of official announcements.

In this way, the reports by Technical Management Committee and the appearances of Pedro Sánchez are the cornerstones of the Executive's communication strategy during the early stages of the state of alarm in Spain. The attention of both the media and the public at large focused on televised press conferences, which reported on the advance of the pandemic in the country on a daily basis.

## 2. Theoretical framework. Crisis communication

Political communication has expanded its limits beyond traditional electoral campaigns. Voting periods no longer exclusively capture politicians' efforts, as they did in the past, and now they require specialisation in a variety of areas like governmental communication and crisis communication (Beck,

1992). According to the definition set forth by Pauchant and Mitroff (1992), a crisis is a situation which physically affects the entire system and threatens its fundamental values and even its very existence. Saura (2005), in turn, equates the concept of 'crisis' with a dire situation that affects a company or institution and damages or hinders some of its functions. Furthermore, crises are attributed a series of features which can complement each other to aggravate the situation, such as the potential to escalate in intensity and the possibility of harming key audiences, having a negative media impact or creating or shaping a negative image in public opinion.

Crises, conceived in this case as a public health alert, fundamentally affect two generally interconnected areas. First, they have health repercussions with an impact on the health of the population and the measures that the institution put into motion. Secondly, the space of social perception has to be taken into account, that is, how citizens may interpret the problem and react to it (Mestre-Ortega et al., 2018).

In this sense, Coombs (2014) has divided periods of risks or crises into different phases:

- 1) Pre-crisis phase, related to all aspects of prevention and preparations to deal with the danger.
- 2) Crisis phase, related to decision-making and managing the threat.
- 3) Post-crisis phase, the stage in which the measures taken are assessed after the danger has passed.

Therefore, the field known as crisis communication is in charge of dealing with a crisis situation which meets the aforementioned features. On the one hand, according to González Herrero (1997), crisis communication is an organisation's capacity to reduce or predict future risk and uncertainty factors so it can prepare itself to quickly and effectively take on the communication operations needed to contribute to lowering or eliminating the negative effects that a crisis can have on its image and reputation. On the other hand, Moreno-Castro and Luján López (2009) view crisis communication differently: as the transmission of information to the public about the conclusions reached after assessing the risk and the decisions to be taken regarding the risk in question.

The ultimate goal of crisis communication can be established from different perspectives, which may be complementary but focus on different aspects. On the one hand, given the need to inform the population about important matters related to the risk, the end goal of crisis communication should be to 'provide certainty and eliminate conflict' (Riorda, 2011).

On the other hand, the communication strategy can focus on minimising what is known as reputational risk, that is, avoiding the erosion of the public image of the company or institution managing the crisis. However, having reputation management as the main goal can end up turning into managing the company's or institution's popularity, an effort which tends to be inappropriate, superficial and potentially frustrating, because

while risk is manageable, the reputation or image projected to citizens is not (Xifra, 2020).

One of the most prominent issues in crisis communication is when to convey a possible health risk to the public at large, as well as the intensity of the messages, which aim to inform public opinion without causing unnecessary or alarming fear (Rodríguez Andrés, 2011). In this sense, different studies uphold the need to be faithful to the events and not hide the truth in risk situations, as the first step in dealing with a risk is first letting it be known (Acinas, 2007).

Therefore, it can be determined that the Spanish administration did not act in accordance with what is recommended for situations like this one, as it overprotected the population during the early stages of the pandemic, which led to a reality shock in the more advanced phases, when it could have instead chosen a more gradual preparation or transition to the more acute phases of the pandemic (Costa-Sánchez & López-García, 2020).

The population's perception of risk is a substantial factor that plays a key role in institutional communication (Costa-Sánchez & López-García, 2020). In this vein, we should distinguish between objective risk and perceived risk. First, objective risk is the real, certain or authentic danger that a society is facing. On the other hand, perceived risk is defined as the sum of this real danger plus everything surrounding the danger, which Peter Sandman (2012) defines as *threat plus indignation*.

The perception of risk is a purely subjective matter. Furthermore, the perception of risk increases when the danger (in this case, a danger to people's health) meets the following requirements (Sandman, 2012):

- It spreads unevenly among the population.
- Precaution does not avoid exposure to risk.
- Its influence is visible among acquaintances, even among family members.
- It comes from unfamiliar or novel sources.
- It is scientifically unknown and subject to contradictory statements from official sources.
- It causes irreversible and hidden damage.
- It causes death.

In consequence, given that the characteristics of the COVID-19 pandemic fit the majority of these requirements, we can determine that the coronavirus crisis generated a notably high perception of risk among the Spanish population.

During periods of crisis or alarm like the current one, the media have wield power and importance (Masip et al., 2020). Under these circumstances, citizens need and demand more information while also calling for higher quality standards in the news they consume (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003). In situations like the COVID-19 pandemic, in which crisis communication emerges as a fundamental factor, elements like transparency, clarity, honesty and empathy become predictors of trust in this crisis communication (MacKay et al., 2021).

However, the level of information that Spanish society received after March, which was described as excessive by the audience itself (Villena-Alarcón & Caballero-Galeote, 2020), had counterproductive effects in citizens. For example, some studies claim that the greater the media exposure, the higher citizens' anxiety (Thompson et al., 2017), a phenomenon which was observed during the early months of the pandemic (Garfin, Silver, Holman & 2020). In fact, citizens' perception of the quality of the information, as well as the Spanish executive's handling of the communication strategy, was negative, and this mistrust spread across society as a whole (Arcila-Calderón, Blanco-Herrero & Oller-Alonso, 2021).

All of this directly affects the reputational factor as a critical element for the management of the political communication of the crisis (Solanilla, 2020), even further magnifying—if possible—the total mistrust in institutions and the political class that characterises today's societies (Edelman, 2019, 2020).

One of the consequences of this reputational crisis is that it creates the ideal breeding ground for the proliferation of fake news (Solanilla, 2020). For example, on 18 March and 18 April, a telephone number was set up to receive hoaxes spread in Spain via the messaging app WhatsApp. A total of 2,353 messages was received, in which 584 different hoaxes were identified, most of them chains of text and video (Moreno-Castro et al., 2020).

In this sense, the nature of the Spanish media system must also be taken into account, as a clear example of the polarised pluralism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) that is common in southern European countries, where there is a high degree of political parallelism and the audiences have historically been partisan (Humanes, 2014; Valera-Ordaz, 2018).

Likewise, the spread of unproven information is particularly harmful during a health crisis, as it can lead to excessive fear, an unreal perception of risk of the gravity of the situation, mistrust in health guidelines and/or the use of treatments that are harmful to our health (Rosenberg, Syed & Rezaie, 2020). In fact, the study conducted by Moreno-Castro et al. (2020) on the fake news received on WhatsApp found that one out of every five news items was on preventing or curing the coronavirus, most of them argued based on the principle of medical authority and promoting the consumption of natural substances.

### 2.1. The figure of the spokesperson

The figure of the spokesperson is extraordinarily important when deploying a crisis communication strategy. The choice of spokesperson cannot be left to the mercy of improvisation, as their action may condition the public's perception of the management of crisis communication (Crespo, Garrido & Medina, 2017) and their role is essential in building and maintaining the reputation of the image of any institution or company (García-Santamaría, Pérez-Serrano & Rodríguez-Pallarés, 2020).

Different studies show that the best course of action is to appoint a single spokesperson (Mestre-Ortega et al., 2018; Calleja-Reina & Becerra, 2017), although other possibilities

are also considered. When this cannot happen due to the complexity and type of the crisis at hand, it is recommended that the spokesperson be the coordinator and director of the crisis committee (Crespo, Garrido & Medina, 2017) to avoid duplicated messages.

One of the most common controversies in the study of crisis communication is what criteria should govern the choice of the spokesperson according to their particular characteristics and skills. This is the usual dichotomy between technical or political profiles.

However, the recent literature seems to have arrived at a kind of consensus on the need to have a technical spokesperson who is credible to the public in these situations, with the goal of reinforcing the organisation's message (Rodríguez Andrés, 2017). That is, the fact that the spokesperson is an expert (an epidemiologist, in this case) gives the communication process much more credibility than if they were a political spokesperson (Peytibi, 2020). However, in other countries where the main spokesperson came from the political sphere, trust was not significantly diminished because a strategy based on science and backed by medicine was employed (Bernard et al., 2021).

## 3. Objectives

The main objective of this study is to analyse the communication strategy implemented by the Government of Spain regarding the COVID-19 crisis during the lockdown in March and April 2020. Its purpose is to examine the different features of the daily press conferences, the thematic transfer and their suitability given the recommendations of crisis communication. Therefore, the objectives of this study can be summarised in three points:

- 0.1.** To analyse the characteristics of the press conferences of the Technical Management Committee and the president of the Government during the state of alarm (length, speaking time, number of questions, etc.).
- 0.2.** To analyse the different themes addressed in the press conferences (news updates, measures taken, etc.).
- 0.3.** To examine to what extent the general characteristics of the press conferences reflect the recommendations of crisis communication.

## 4. Research design and methodological questions

The study population of this research is comprised of the successive press conferences held by the Technical Management Committee and the press conferences and institutional statements by the president of the Government, Pedro Sánchez.

It is important to note that the daily press conferences of the Technical Management Committee for the coronavirus were being held before the state of alarm was declared. However, after that time the conferences started to feature five members instead of Dr Fernando Simón appearing alone, as he had until then.

Thus, after the state of alarm was declared, the participants included Dr Fernando Simón, María José Rallo (secretary general of Transports), Miguel Ángel Villarroya (Chief of Defence Staff, JEMAD), Laurentino Ceña (Lieutenant General of the Civil Guard) and José Ángel González (Chief of the National Police).

Regarding the timeframe, we bore in mind press conferences held from 13 March 2020, one day before the state of alarm was declared in Spain, until 25 April 2020, the last day that the press conferences of the Technical Management Committee were held with the presence of the aforementioned members (after that, Dr Fernando Simón once again appeared alone in the press conferences).

Thus, this research took into account a total of 24 press conferences of the Technical Management Committee, as well as 10 of the head of the Spanish Executive. In terms of the press conferences of the Technical Management Committee, those in which Dr Fernando Simón appeared were chosen, as he had become the main spokesperson during the early stages of the health crisis. Therefore, we excluded the 14 days when he was convalescing from COVID-19. With regard to the press conferences of Pedro Sánchez, the sample chosen encompasses all of those held by the president of the Government during the timeframe chosen.

With the objective of analysing the communication strategy used by the Government of Spain after the declaration of the state of alarm, we use a quantitative methodological approach based on content analysis.

Content analysis is one of the most widely used procedures in the field of communication, as well as in many other social science disciplines. According to Berelson, content analysis is 'a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication' (1952: 18).

In this sense, a series of themes was established in order to determine to what extent related issues appeared during the implementation of the communication strategies. Specifically, the following variables were analysed:

- **V1.** Data updates. Part of the speaking time is spent reporting on new figures, totals or the evolution in the number of: a) deaths, b) infections, c) hospitalisations, d) people arrested, e) frontier activity, f) mobility (AVE, airports, motorways, etc.) and g) others.
- **V2.** Institution of new measures. The decisions or new rules which were just implemented or are going to enter into force soon are explained.

- **V3.** Reminders of measures in place. Reminders are provided of the measures in force at the time of the press conference.
- **V4.** Positive effects of the health measures taken. The effectiveness of the restrictions imposed are discussed or highlighted with figures that confirm their appropriateness.
- **V5.** Health recommendations. A series of tips or suggestions are given to citizens, although they are not compulsory.
- **V6.** Calls to citizens. A series of requests or warnings are given to citizens, usually regarding the negative consequences of failing to comply with the rules.
- **V7.** Irresponsible behaviours. Illegal or antisocial actions carried out (or suspected of being carried out) by part of the population are condemned.
- **V8.** Acknowledgement of effort. The efforts and sacrifices being made by a) healthcare workers, b) State Security Forces and Corps (SSFC) and c) population at large are highlighted.
- **V9.** Actions of the State Security Forces and Corps. The actions underway and planned by the Army (within what was known as Operación Balmis), the National Police and the Civil Guard are summarised.
- **V10.** Specific actions of the State Security Forces and Corps. Specific actions that illustrate the efforts of the FCSE are showcased.
- **V11.** Praise of the virtues of the State Security Forces and Corps. The virtues and capacities of the SSFC are showcased.
- **V12.** Fake news. The fake news, hoaxes and other risks of online disinformation related to the health emergency are mentioned and identified as a serious problem within the current situation.

In order to analyse whether or not the press conferences met the recommendations of crisis communication, we used the following variables:

- **V13.** Use of data. Facts and figures are repeatedly used which help complement the speech and lend accuracy to the spokesperson's words.
- **V14.** Empathy. The speaker tries to put themselves into the audience's shoes. Communication experts recommend beginning with a reminder of the victims (in this case, the deceased and ill) and their families' grief.

**Table 1. Composition of the sample**

Body	Number of press conferences
Technical Management Committee against the Coronavirus	24
President of the Spanish Government (Pedro Sánchez)	10
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>34</b>

Source: Author.

**Table 2. Duration of the press conferences**

Variable	Body	Average time	Exposure time	% Exposure	Questions time	% Questions
Duration of the appearances	Committee	48:44	29:01	59%	19:43	41%
	President	50:33	23:42	47%	26:51	53%
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>49:39</b>	<b>26:21</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>23:17</b>	<b>47%</b>

Source: Author.

- o **V16.** Confusion. There are contradictions within the same press conferences among the statements of the different speakers participating in it.
- o **V17.** Support materials. Additional materials like figures, maps or infographics are used to help clarify the speech.
- o **V18.** Assumptions. The content of the press conferences includes data that have not been scientifically endorsed or about which there is not total certainty.
- o **V19.** Opacity. The journalists' questions are not answered completely and satisfactorily. Unproven data is shared, or the reality of the situation is not explained transparently.

**6. Results**

It is essential to highlight the fact that the tables show data from both the Technical Management Committee and the president of the Government in different formats. Both results also appear combined in both tables, which should be interpreted as the overall communication strategy used by the Government.

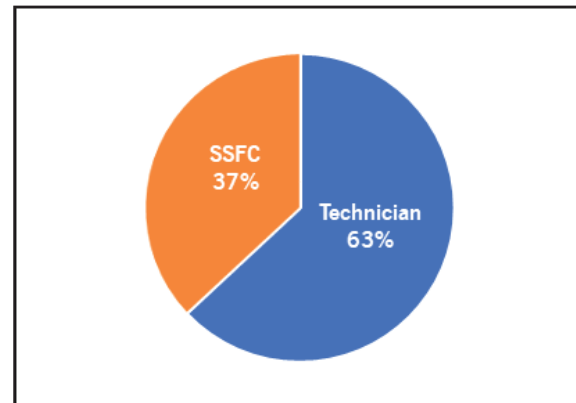
**6.1. Characteristics of the press conferences**

Given the general characteristics of the press conferences of the Technical Management Committee and the president of the Government, Pedro Sánchez, we first find that both last a similar length of time (Table 2). However, this figure is influenced by the brief length of the first conference by the president of the Government (on 13 March), which only lasted 6 minutes and 11 seconds. Without taking this press conference into account, the mean length of his appearances is 55 minutes and 6 seconds, a mean of almost 7 minutes longer than those of the Technical Management Committee (48 minutes and 39 seconds).

Regarding the specific features of the press conferences of the Technical Management Committee, namely the multiple voices participating in them, the results show that Fernando Simón, the director of the Health Alerts and Emergencies Coordination Centre, played a core role in them. The distribution of speaking time according to the profile of the spokespersons participating in the conferences (Figure 1) indicates that technical speakers were more important than those from the State Security Forces and Corps, even though the latter had more spokespersons (three representatives from the SSFC versus two technical spokespersons).

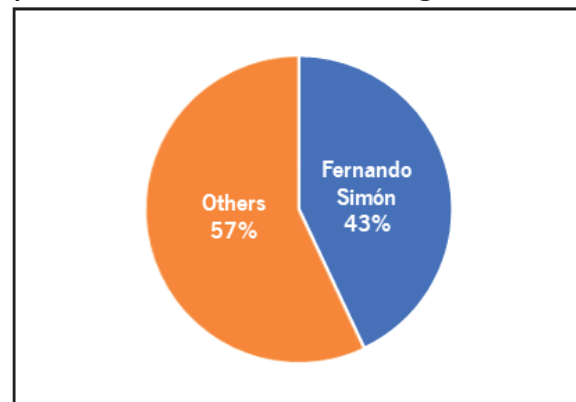
In fact, Dr Fernando Simón was the spokesperson with the most speaking time during the press conferences of the Technical Management Committee, with 43% of the total time

**Figure 1. Profile distribution (Technical Management Committee)**



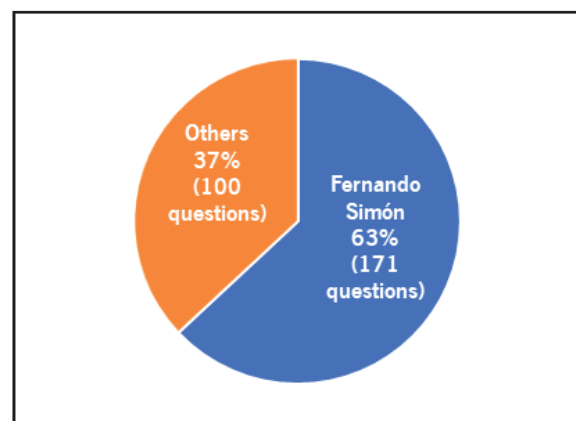
Source: Author.

**Figure 2. Time spent by Fernando Simón during the press conferences (Technical Management Committee)**



Source: Author.

**Figure 3. Distribution of the questions based on to whom the questions were addressed (T. M. Committee)**



Source: Author.



**Table 3. Themes in the appearances**

Variable	Body	Absolute frequency	Average per press conference	Rang de variació
Data updates	Committee	613	26	22-31
	President	19	2	0-6
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>632</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>0-31</b>
Planned actions of the SSFC	Committee	396	17	11-20
	President	0	0	0
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>396</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>0-20</b>
Acknowledgement of effort	Committee	219	9	4-15
	President	123	12	4-19
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>342</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>4-19</b>
Appeals to the population	Committee	168	7	1-12
	President	110	11	6-15
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>278</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1-15</b>
Anecdotal actions by the SSFC	Committee	184	8	4-13
	President	0	0	0
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0-13</b>
Reminder of measures in place	Committee	110	5	1-11
	President	50	5	0-10
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>156</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0-11</b>
Institution of new measures	Committee	61	3	0-7
	President	93	9	3-26
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>154</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0-26</b>
Praise to the virtues of the SSFC	Committee	139	6	1-15
	President	10	1	0-4
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0-15</b>
Health recommendations	Committee	90	4	0-10
	President	35	4	0-10
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0-10</b>
Positive effects of the measures taken	Committee	25	1	0-3
	President	33	3	0-10
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0-10</b>
Irresponsible behaviours	Committee	52	2	0-5
	President	5	1	0-2
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0-5</b>
Fake news risks	Committee	27	1	0-4
	President	10	1	0-3
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0-4</b>

Source: Author.

(Figure 2). The remaining 57% is divided among the other four spokespersons, who figured less prominently. Simón's leading role becomes even more evident if we observe the distribution of questions asked by journalists (Figure 3); 63% of the questions asked to the Technical Management Committee were directed at the director of the CCAES, while the remaining 37% were answered by other members of the Committee.

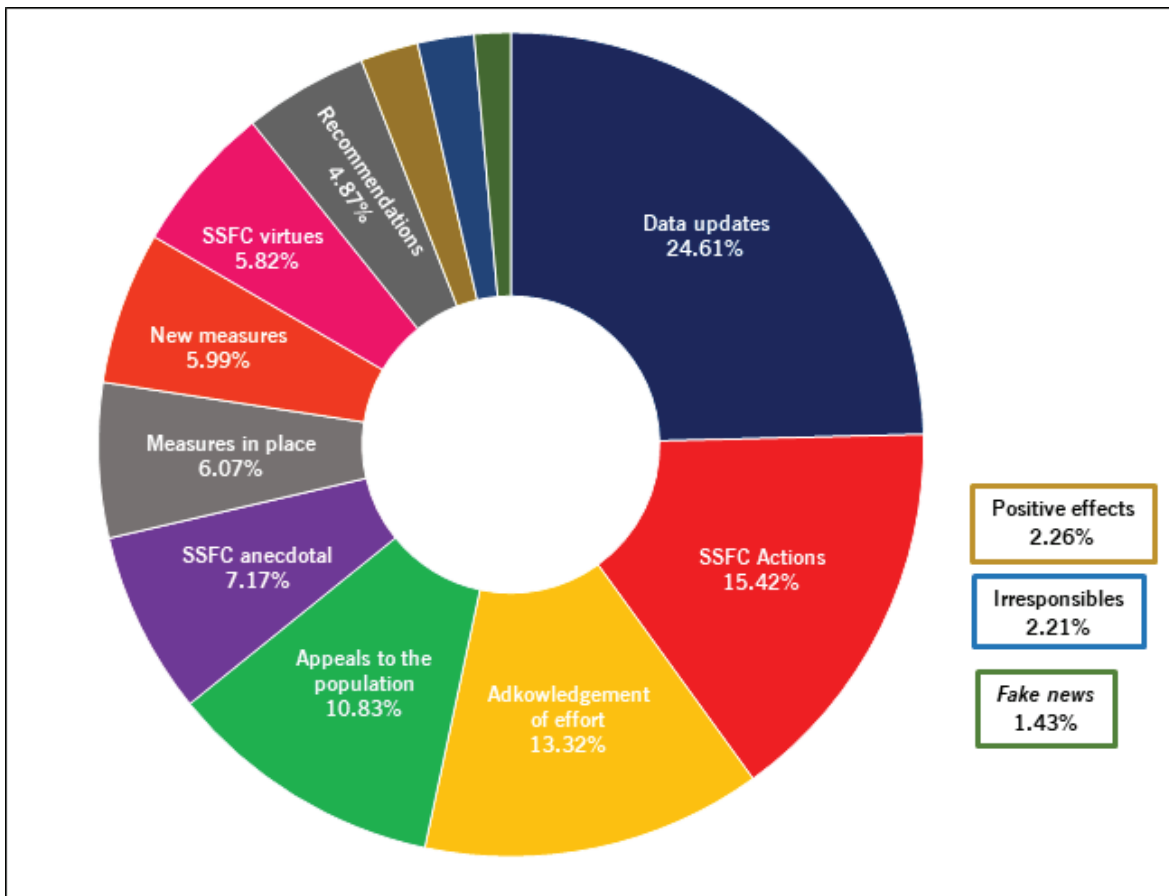
## 6.2. Themes in the press conferences

With regard to the analysis of the themes that stood out the most in the Government's communication strategy during the

early weeks of the state of alarm, Table 3 offers the results on their respective importance.

Some of the issues which they sought to highlight were the following. The first is the frequency with which the figures on deaths, infections, hospitalisations, etc. were updated, during several press conferences the results reveal that there is a vast gulf between the Technical Management Committee and the president of the Government. The difference in criteria between the two bodies is also visible in the minimum and maximum number of times the different figures were updated during the press conferences. While the Technical Management

**Figure 4. Distribution of the topics of the appearances of the Technical Management Committee and the President of the Government (%).**



Source: Author.

Committee never mentioned the evolution in these figures fewer than 22 times, the maximum number of updates provided by Pedro Sánchez was six.

With regard to the themes that involved the population the most directly, which are associated with the conduct of society as a whole, acknowledgement of both citizens’ and healthcare workers’ and the military’s efforts is the most prominent in the communication deployed by the Government. This is followed by the constant calls to citizens on the importance of behaving responsibly. One of the president of the Government’s common allusions was an appeal to unity, coordination and collaboration, not only among the population at large but also among government institutions. Pedro Sánchez attached greater importance to these two themes in his respective press conferences, although during the conference held on 18 March, Fernando Simón admitted that both acknowledgements of effort and calls to citizens were like ‘sections’ within the press conferences because of how frequently they appeared.

The results also indicate that an average of four health recommendations were given per press conference, which rose to ten during the times when the death and infection figures were the highest.

Topics related to the SSFC show the most disparity between the Technical Management Committee and the president of the Government. Pedro Sánchez never mentioned the actions planned by the SSFC at any time in any of his press conferences, nor did he mention the specific actions they were carrying out. However, these two topics were particularly prominent in the press conferences of the Technical Management Committee and its three spokespersons from the SSFC, as they appear 17 and 8 times, respectively.

Finally, both are identical in terms of how often they mentioned the risks of hoaxes and unproven information during the pandemic, which they situate in reference to the phenomenon of disinformation in the press conferences.

Therefore, overall the topics that appear the most frequently in the Government’s communication strategy are news updates, the actions of the SSFC and acknowledgement of the efforts of the population, healthcare workers and the military (Figure 4). However, the results reveal significant differences between the topics that appeared the most frequently in the press conferences of the Technical Management Committee and the president of the Government.

**Table 4. Recommendations affecting the perception of the truthfulness of the message**

Variable	Body	Absolute number	Average per appearance	Variation range
Use of facts and figures	Committee	298	12	9-19
	President	98	10	0-24
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>396</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>0-24</b>
Assumptions	Committee	67	3	0-6
	President	9	1	0-3
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0-6</b>

Source: Author.

**Table 5. Empathy, confusions and support material**

Variable	Body	Conferences where they appear	% appearances
Empathy	Committee	10	42%
	President	7	70%
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>50%</b>
Confusion and contradictions	Committee	5	21%
	President	3	30%
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>24%</b>
Support material	Committee	17	71%
	President	0	0
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>50%</b>

Source: Author.

**Table 6. Opacity in answers**

Variable	Body	Number of questions	Unclear answers
Opacity	Committee	271	20
	President	100	14
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>371</b>	<b>34</b>

Source: Author.

### 6.3. Recommendations of crisis communication

To perform the study on fulfilment of the recommendations of crisis communication for situations like the pandemic, we took into consideration eight variables whose objective is to evaluate to what extent the Government's communication matches these precepts.

According to the analysis on the use of data and figures in argumentation (Table 4), the results show that an average of 11 data points were used during the press conferences analysed.

Regarding statements without scientific confirmation, the members of the Technical Management Committee also made the most assumptions, with an average total of 3, versus Pedro Sánchez's one assumption per press conference. Having reached this point, it is worth noting that some of the assumptions made were accompanied by some caveats when they were stated, which at times softens the emphasis with which they were stated.

On the other hand, empathy (in this case, materialised in recollections of the victims or their family members) appears in half of the press conferences analysed (Table 5). However, the president of the Government showed a higher degree of empathy than the members of the Technical Management Committee. Some of the condolences expressed by the committee, specifically those uttered by members of the SSFC, were meant for the families of police or military officers over COVID-19, not the family members of all the victims.

With regard to the use of support materials like graphics or tables to support their appearances, the president of the Government used no supplementary materials, while the members of the Technical Management Committee used them in 71% of their appearances. In the press conference held on 15 April, seven different graphics were used, the highest figure in all the conferences.



Finally, with regard to the opacity of the answers to the questions asked by the journalists (Table 6), the figures show that 9% of the questions were answered in an unclear way or part of the question was ignored in the response. This means that of the 371 questions received by the Technical Management Committee (271) and Pedro Sánchez (100), 34 were answered incompletely.

## 7. Conclusions

Bearing in mind the distribution of Committee press conferences according to the profile of the spokesperson (technical vs military), the total time used by Simón and the distribution of questions according to spokesperson to whom they were asked, we can claim that despite the multiplicity of voices in the Government's communication strategy, Fernando Simón indisputably became the executive's main spokesperson during the early weeks of the state of alarm in Spain.

In this sense, some authors claim that the formula of spokesperson applied in Spain during the month of March and April runs counter to the general recommendation of risk and crisis communication and also departed from previous similar situations due to the large number of official voices (Costa-Sánchez & López-García, 2020). Furthermore, the theory recommends that there be a single spokesperson to avoid duplications and contradictions in the messages (Mestre-Ortega et al., 2018; Calleja-Reina & Becerra, 2017).

However, due to the prominent role of Fernando Simón and his centrality as a spokesperson, we could also consider that the Government's communication strategy did follow the recommendations proposed by crisis communication, at least to a certain extent, as other authors claim that even if it contravenes the general theory, choosing several spokespersons is understandable given the transversal nature of a crisis of this kind, which affected many government efforts beyond healthcare (Rojo Martínez, Moreno Moreno & Soler Contreras, 2020).

Secondly, the results of the content analysis reveal that the Government's communication focused on certain themes. Specifically, constant news updates and figures on deaths, infections, hospitalisations, arrests, etc. were unquestionably the predominant themes in the press conferences. Likewise, the results show that significant importance was attached to affairs related to the State Security Forces and Corps, including the specific actions of the Army, the National Police and the Civil Guard. Acknowledgement of the efforts made by both society as a whole and different professionals (especially healthcare professionals) is the last of the essential thematic axes of the government's communication strategy.

In contrast, some topics that presumably could have had more importance in this strategy did not recur as often as one might expect. Themes like health recommendations for citizens or the positive effects of the measures adopted, for example, only

play a residual role in the Executive's communication, while this type of message appears the most commonly in the social media (Kwok, Lee & Han, 2021), where information related to prevention occupied many of the messages related to the coronavirus.

Furthermore, the results show that there were differences between the themes usually discussed by the Technical Management Committee and those that appeared more frequently in the press conferences of the president of the Government. While in the press conferences of the former, updates on figures or anything related to the FCSE were the predominant topics, Pedro Sánchez more often chose to mention the new measures implemented or to acknowledge citizens' efforts.

However, the State Security Forces and Corps played a dominant role in the communication strategy used by the government, beyond the press conferences of the Technical Management Committee. One of the cruxes of the story told by the Executive on the COVID-19 crisis in Spain was the regular appearance of the actions of the FCSE and positive news in relation to this group in the media (López-García, 2020). That is, not only were they particularly prominent during the daily press conferences, but the government also showed its concern with this matter by privileging its appearance in the media.

The results obtained indicate that generally speaking, the communication strategy during the early months of the state of alarm in Spain has certain shortcomings in relation to the basic tenets of crisis communication.

On the one hand, the Technical Management Committee has unequivocal shortcomings in its degree of empathy, which is very low, and in the worrisome number of assumptions it made. On the other hand, the president of the Government failed to fulfil the recommendations of crisis communication due to the repeated appearance of confusion and contradictions, the number of questions not answered transparently and the lack of supplementary materials during his appearances. In the sense, studies confirm the benefits of using different platforms and resources to increase understanding and improve communication management (Hattani & Jai, 2022).

For this reason, it is obvious that the Government's main aim was to frame the pandemic as a veritable war, with all the additional connotations that this entails. The prominence of certain themes enabled the Executive to reinforce a series of messages that at the same time brought it undeniable political benefits.

In this sense, the Government was able to highlight the severity of the pandemic with the presence of official spokespersons from the State Security Forces and Corps. Their participation in the Technical Management Committee, as well as their daily press conferences, highlighted the extraordinary nature of the situation. Consequently, the messages that appealed to citizen discipline were more legitimate, as they came from an authorised source. In fact, Wodak (2021) notes that the political leaders in charge of speaking to citizens in countries like Germany, France,

Austria, Hungary and Sweden deployed a variety of strategies to legitimise the restrictive measures adopted. For this reason, the appearance of military officers and members of the police force in the Spanish Government's communication promoted compliance with health norms inasmuch as the FCSE projects an image of greater formality, commitment and seriousness than the technical or political profiles.

Furthermore, at wartime, governments try to encourage a sense of unity and solidarity among the people, who generally tend to steadfastly support executives in situations which pose a major risk to the political community as a whole. The president of the Government's constant appeals in this sense could precisely have sought the objective of fostering citizen cohesion not only to deal with the pandemic but also to ensure that political differences were minimised, that is, evoking patriotism to achieve unanimous support of the government's management and avoid a political crisis.

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