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INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATION IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS: THE CASE OF MÁLAGA CITY COUNCIL

LA COMUNICACIÓN INSTITUCIONAL EN LA CRISIS DE LA COVID-19: EL CASO DEL AYUNTAMIENTO DE MÁLAGA

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 modified, overnight, the routine of citizens, and therefore that of journalists and communication offices. The great health and social impact of the pandemic have forced public administrations to accept an ongoing crisis management procedure that remains open, which is unprecedented for institutional communication in the 21st century. Political communication professionals have had to innovate to maintain the information flow and meet the demands of the population and the organizations they work for at the same time. The purpose of this mixed methods research is to analyze the changes that the administration strategies, techniques, and procedures have undergone as a consequence of the coronavirus crisis during its first two years. The frame of reference to do this is the City Council of Malaga, the sixth most populous city in Spain, to determine the methods and the resources used by the local government to maintain the lines of communication active despite the confinement and the restrictions posed by the state of alarm declared on March 14th, 2020. Though many of the implemented changes have disappeared with the restoration of physical events and past routines, the tendency to bypass media has prevailed. The centralization of all information, the organization of telematic media conferences, the fact that almost half of the official communications issued in 2020 by the City Council were related to the health crisis, the commitment to verified social networks to deal with fake news, and the institutional advertising campaigns aimed to raise awareness have been the main resources used by the Malaga city press office, which essential public service as a guide has made a great contribution to both the general conversation and the reduction of uncertainty.

Keywords: Crisis Management; COVID-19; Pandemic; Coronavirus; Political Communication; Institutional Communication; Politics; Public Opinion; Málaga City Council.

RESUMEN

La COVID-19 alteró, de un día para otro, la rutina de los ciudadanos, y por tanto la de los periodistas y los gabinetes de comunicación. El gran impacto sanitario y social de la pandemia ha obligado a las administraciones públicas a instalarse en una gestión de crisis continua aún abierta, sin precedentes para la comunicación institucional del siglo XXI. Los profesionales de la comunicación política han tenido que innovar para mantener el flujo informativo y atender las demandas de la población y de las organizaciones para las que trabajan. La presente investigación analiza, mediante metodología mixta, los cambios producidos en las estrategias, técnicas y procedimientos de las administraciones como consecuencia de la crisis del coronavirus durante sus dos primeros años de recorrido. Para ello, toma como referencia el caso del Ayuntamiento de Málaga, la sexta capital de España, y pretende determinar cómo siguió activa la comunicación del Gobierno de esta ciudad pese al confinamiento y las restricciones que supuso el estado de alarma declarado el 14 de marzo de 2020. Aunque muchas de las adaptaciones llevadas a cabo no han permanecido al recuperarse la actividad presencial y las rutinas previas, sí se ha pronunciado la tendencia de circunvalar a los medios de comunicación. La centralización total de los mensajes, la incorporación de las conferencias de prensa telemáticas, el hecho de que casi la mitad de los comunicados oficiales emitidos en 2020 por el municipio se dedicaron a la crisis sanitaria y la apuesta por las redes sociales verificadas para enfrentarse a las noticias falsas han sido los principales recursos del gabinete de comunicación municipal malagueño, cuyo servicio público esencial como guía ha contribuido a la conversación pública y a la reducción de la incertidumbre.

Palabras clave: Gestión de Crisis; COVID-19; Pandemia; Coronavirus; Comunicación Política; Comunicación Institucional; Política; Opinión Pública; Ayuntamiento de Málaga.

COMUNICAÇÃO INSTITUCIONAL NA CRISE COVID-19: O CASO DO CONSELHO MUNICIPAL DE MÁLAGA

RESUMO

A covid-19 alterou, de um dia para o outro, a rotina dos cidadãos e, portanto, dos jornalistas e dos gabinetes de comunicação. O grande impacto sanitário e social da pandemia obrigou as administrações públicas a instalarem uma gestão de crise contínua e ainda aberta, inédita para a comunicação institucional no século XXI. Os profissionais da comunicação política tiveram que inovar para manter o fluxo de informações e atender às demandas da população e das organizações em que trabalham. Esta pesquisa analisa, por meio de uma metodologia mista, as mudanças produzidas nas estratégias, técnicas e procedimentos das administrações como consequência da crise do coronavírus durante seus dois primeiros anos de percurso. Para isso, toma como referência o caso da Câmara Municipal de Málaga, sexta capital da Espanha, e visa determinar como a comunicação do Governo desta cidade

continuou ativa apesar do confinamento e restrições causadas pelo estado de alarme declarado em 14 de março de 2020. Embora muitas das adaptações realizadas não tenham durado como a atividade presencial e as rotinas anteriores tenham se recuperado, a tendência de burlar a mídia tem se acentuado. A centralização total das mensagens, a incorporação de conferências de imprensa telemáticas, o fato de quase metade das comunicações oficiais emitidas em 2020 pelo município terem sido dedicadas à crise sanitária e a aposta nas redes sociais verificadas para enfrentar as Fake news tem sido o principal recurso do Gabinete Municipal de Comunicação de Málaga, cujo serviço público essencial como guia tem contribuído para a conversação pública e a redução da incerteza.

Palavras-chave: gestão de crises; covid19; pandemia; coronavírus; comunicação política; comunicação institucional; política; opinião pública; Câmara Municipal de Málaga.

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

1. INTRODUCTON

During the last two years, the communication of public administrations has adapted to a pattern of continuous crisis management as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. To find antecedents of such a disturbance, one would have to resort to periods of war or, analogously, to the so-called Spanish flu –it did not arise in Spain– of 1918, the largest epidemic since the medieval Black Death and the cause of the greatest mortality in the 20th century. As Spinney (2017, p. 14) recalls, “it infected one in three people on the planet, 500 million human beings”, and killed, between the first and the last recorded case, – from March 1918 to March 1920–between 50 and 100 million people. That is to say, “it surpassed the First World War -17 million dead-, the Second World War -60 million dead-, and possibly both together”. At the time of writing this article, we are going through the sixth wave of the flu of 2020 and it is completely impossible to determine the full scope of COVID-19 yet.

Since March 2020, even before the declaration of the state of alarm on Saturday 14th, public administrations, including city councils, have subordinated all the supports within their reach to COVID-19, which has also conditioned government decisions at the local level, although health competencies reside in the autonomous regions and the management of the first section of this journey corresponded to the Government of Spain, establishing a single command for the entire national territory for 99 days, just over three months: As of Royal Decree 463/2020, of March 14th, there were six extensions, the last of which expired on June 21st.

The confinement, from one day to the next, radically changed the information consumption pattern of citizens and, therefore, the routines of informants. As a consequence, the communication offices -unlike the old press offices- had to adapt quickly, give priority to the digital commitment, and modify their role: from mediators, they became suppliers, offering a finished product to the media and also directly to citizens through their own official media; From facilitators, they became generators, transferring information to journalists in anticipation of their demand and even replacing it.

While short-term crises last for days or weeks, the COVID-19 crisis has engulfed everything structurally and continuously for months, in turn causing an extended economic and social crisis that has forced administrations to take measures along the way in a context of confusion, even in European level, with the Next Generation recovery plan as a lever. Each of these measures implies a response that seeks to reduce uncertainty. As Burson (Carrizo, 2012) said, "you are what you do, and not what you say; if you say something, your actions have to support your words and reinforce your communication". In line with what Burson calls "grassroots behavior", equivalent to credibility, these responses materialize in proposed communication actions, especially in the first part of the pandemic, in a different way than usual, extraordinary both in form and content, in an unprecedented setting for politics, and, therefore, for institutional and corporate communication in the 21st century.

The contribution of this research is an early contribution to the analysis of the crisis management of the pandemic, still incipient because it is a recent and live topic, with a panoptic examination of local institutional communication, essential to inform and guide the citizens of any municipality. For this reason, its approach is novel and its scope, despite focusing on a specific city, is global.

The present work addresses, in this introduction, the changes in information habits as a consequence of COVID-19, the relationship between crisis management and public opinion, the changes that have operated in institutional communication to the point of transforming press cabinets into communication cabinets, and the Malaga City Council and its Communication Area, subject of the studied case. After the introduction, the objectives and methodology will be considered. The results will be presented in 5 blocks: telematic press conferences, press releases, and video releases, social networks of the mayor, containment of hoaxes as a mission of institutional social networks, and institutional advertising campaigns. Next, the discussion and conclusions will come. And, finally, the bibliographical references will be offered.

1.1. Changes in information habits as a result of COVID-19

The declaration of the state of alarm, the consequent mobility restrictions, and the displacement of non-essential activities to the teleworking modality, when it was possible to carry them out from home, completely changed the way of informing and reporting. 83.2% of the Spanish population used television in 2020 to keep up to date on the scope of the virus, which places this medium as the most consumed one. 49.8% used the digital press; 41.8%, the Internet –understood as search engines, webpages, and blogs, among others–; 35.5%, social networks –Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and others–; 29%, the radio; 22%, conversations with family, friends, or acquaintances; 9.5%, the printed press, the medium most damaged by the health crisis –subscriptions plummeted and newspapers had to face the precaution, later disproved by scientific evidence, that the virus was transmitted by the contact with the paper. The percentages come from the survey by Montaña et al. (2020, pp. 159, 161), who state that:

Consumption habits and trends have been drastically modified due to the pandemic (...), so the consumption of television and digital media has

skyrocketed during confinement. Digital newspapers receive 45% more page views and have increased their traffic by 100%, the audience of online radio grows by 112% (...), and live online television adds 93% of unique users.

The most relevant aspect of the aforementioned survey for our study is that official source announcements became a reference only surpassed by television, obtaining more attention than the digital press, Internet, social networks, radio, conversations with like-minded people, or the printed press. And it's that more than half of the Spanish population (50.3%) directly resorted to the institutions to obtain information, bypassing the media. However, the media echoed, almost in real-time and often live, these institutional announcements and contributed decisively to their dissemination. Journalism, therefore, has lost the monopoly of mediation but maintains its influence as prescribed by the constitutions of the most advanced democracies.

Press releases –whose impact is usually indirect, as they are reported in the media– and official newsletters –whose public is usually specialized, from the legal-administrative field– attracted general interest, given that the binding measures announced by public administrations affected the entire population. In this sense, Belmonte (2017), author of *El BOE nuestro de cada día* in Civio, affirms that “until something does not reach the BOE and enters into force, it is only propaganda”.

1.2. Crisis management and public opinion

Looking at the COVID-19 crisis management, we still do not have an overview. We are before the study of an unfinished process: we can observe how the first three phases have been approached: pre-crisis (1), explosion (2), and expansion (3), but the analysis and reflection (4) are still incomplete since the pandemic continues. For this reason, it is impossible to extract conclusive learning (5): the virus is still among us and the assimilation of the teachings will require time and perspective. To complete these phases, which López-Casares (2020) lists, we are missing the last two.

However, given the duration and scope of the first three phases, it is not risky to anticipate that COVID-19 already constitutes "the case of crisis communication par excellence", as Canel (2020) points out, because "it meets all the conditions: the virus kills, breaks stability, radically transforms the routines of people and organizations, requires urgent solutions, exposes existing deficiencies, brings unknown results, and threatens to bring about serious consequences for life in all its aspects”.

According to Losada (2010, pp. 102-103, 112-113), in crisis management we must communicate briefly and clearly; spread basic, elementary messages; be positive and objective, applying a strategic philosophy based on transparency, openness, and responsibility: “The institutions must be clear, sharp. They have to make an effort to be understood. They are required more than the rest of society precisely because of their political and representative character”.

When approaching crisis management from the point of view of institutional communication, basic errors should be avoided (Arroyo and Yus, 2011, pp. 77-135)

such as going overboard with press calls without having anything to say, working alone – in the studied case, without coordination with other administrations that have health competencies–, not communicating risks so as not to scare or assume that the crisis is already over, a temptation in which one can fall in the de-escalation following the reduction of the curve of accumulated incidence due to the consequent relaxation of restrictions, which can be perceived as a misleading end to the pandemic.

Errors in completed crisis management such as the Prestige accident (Costa, 2006, p. 211; Vicente, 2006, p. 349; Ruano, 2006, p. 377; Rodríguez, 2006, p. 381) in 2002 or the attacks Al Qaeda terrorists on 11-M (Costa, 2006, p. 211; Salido, 2006, p. 271) in 2004, paradigmatic cases, represent a valuable lesson on the consequences of not correctly approaching the communication of a disaster taking into account the penalty that this entails in terms of public opinion, both in terms of reputation and, ultimately, electoral terms.

It is precisely in the course of crisis management that citizens behave more like a thermostat and politicians like an air conditioning system (Wlezien, 1995, p. 981). The public reacts to a decision that affects them; the media and social networks – often in the opposite order– act as sensors registering a temperature rise; and politicians, if the temperature reaches a certain level, adjust their initial statement or decision once it has been processed by the media and turned into a trending topic. This thermostatic model, which Soroka and Wlezien (2010) described when explaining the influence of public opinion in the public policy construction process, makes it clear that in a solid democracy, decision-makers respond to the preferences expressed by voters even before they vote, which comes to justify the *permanent campaign* dynamics in which political communication has been installed.

Therefore, in the development of crisis management, administrations cannot lose sight at any time that “citizens demand information about what is happening, what has caused the crisis; what are we doing to fix it; and how do we ensure that this does not happen again.” For this, the construction of the messages has to respond to five guidelines: “admission of the facts, communication of the real situation, identification of the causes, location of the scope of the problem, and information on the solution and plans to prevent a new similar crisis in the future” (Losada, 2010, p. 112).

For this strategy to be successful, it is necessary to base communication planning on centralization, conciseness, transparency, responsibility, and anticipation. Centralization because several voices only contribute to running unnecessary risks, and to avoid them, a single message must be launched; if possible, through a single spokesperson and bearing in mind that managing silence is as important as managing the word. Concision because the message must be clear, simple, and precise. Transparency because to generate trust, the information necessary to reduce uncertainty must be made available to the public, openly and continuously, with no reservations other than those strictly necessary. Responsibility because administrations must contribute to the quality of the public conversation by offering verified information through official announcements and verified profiles that allow hoaxes to be quickly disproved, a key task to contain the proliferation of fake news,

and raise public awareness. And, finally, anticipation because if the explanations arrive too late, they won't work and someone else's story will prevail. Ignatieff (2014, p. 98), a political scientist and former politician, summarizes the challenge of political communication in this way: "The important thing is not what you want to say but what people understand."

1.3. Institutional communication: from press offices to communication offices

As we have pointed out, the media have lost their monopoly on mediation. This means that the mediatization of politics is not exercised today exclusively by journalism through information and opinion (Gomis, 1974, pp. 255, 317): with the imposition of the new paradigm -all to all, no longer one to all-, language, rituals, symbolism, rhetoric, and coverage (Mazzoleni, 2010, pp. 117, 120, 132, 208) are adapted to social networks. In fact, the pandemic has accelerated the tendency for acts of political and institutional communication to be designed with these media in mind: creating short videos -no more than 2 minutes and 20 seconds to fit in a tweet-, streaming, sharing links that often lead to additional material to that offered at the press conference. Because the recipient is no longer just the journalist who covers the act and edits but rather any citizen can access the raw message, without any filter, and it is them who select.

The "political communication of institutions" (Canel, 1999, pp. 77-109) comprises a series of techniques, from the assignment and selection of information, to the organization of events, institutional advertising, and the articulation of messages by professionals through a spokesperson; a communications infrastructure, whose management is integrated at the top of the organizational chart and advises, in the studied case, the mayor of Malaga and the councilors of the government team; and strategies to enhance and reinforce the presidential image, as is the case with heads of state and heads of government, albeit at a local level.

Faced with a volatile public opinion, prone to sudden displacements, institutional communication has a civic obligation to transmit stability and generate trust, as indicated by Toral and Santiago (2006, p. 429):

Trust is the cornerstone of communication, as well as an essential credit to reducing uncertainty and rebuilding crises. Public opinion studies show that threatened societies (...) tend to close ranks around their rulers. They absorb insecurity and comfort citizens, but not always: when the social body feels cheated, it immediately changes its loyalty in search of another more reliable and secure leadership.

The paradigm shift in communication - from one to all to all to all, as we said - means the extinction of press offices because the emergence of social networks has taken away the monopoly of intermediation from the media. Journalists are now the preferred receivers, fundamental but no longer the only ones, of what cabinets issue (Espino, 2020, pp. 71-76).

In the same way that the press, radio, and television have become continuous to serve active audiences (Díaz Nosty, 2013, pp. 17, 115), cabinets are adapting to instantaneous and permanent multidirectional communication. The process of forming a public opinion is enriched and complicated in the sense of becoming more complex, as corporate and institutional communication reaches new audiences with a different language and tools, accessing the great conversation that takes place on Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram.

Following a natural evolution, surviving the vertiginous changes in their ecosystem (Darwin 2008, pp. 119-199), analog press offices have mutated to become digital communication offices, which require more resources, dedication, effort, and attention. The mutation has been completed rapidly, pushed by the confinement of the state of alarm when personal screens monopolized the attention of the recipients.

Communication offices "today are the body that manages communication in a global, centralized, and unitary way, having to deal with all the needs in this matter and not just a few", as Almansa (2011, pp. 7-8) argues, for whom the tasks of public relations have opened up the range of services provided beyond "satisfying the information needs of the media".

1.4. Malaga City Council and its Communication Area

The pandemic has broken out when the Spanish municipalities are governed by the eleventh local corporations. The first municipal elections of the current democratic period were held in 1979, the year after the Constitution entered into force. The current mandate began in 2019, from the elections held on May 26th, and will end in 2023.

Malaga is the only Spanish city with more than half a million inhabitants that is not the capital of an autonomous community. According to the official census, the last revision of the register published by the INE (23/12/2021), its legal population amounts to 577,405 inhabitants. Therefore, it is the sixth municipality in the country, only behind Madrid, 3,305,408; Barcelona, 1,636,732; Valencia, 789,744; Seville, 884,234; and Zaragoza, 675,301.

Of the 31 councilors that make up the Plenary of Malaga, constituted on June 15th, 2019, the Partido Popular (PP) obtained 14; the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), 12; Adelante Málaga (Podemos-IU), 3; and Ciudadanos (Cs), 2. The municipal government in office is the result of a coalition agreement between the PP and Cs that added, at the beginning of the mandate, the 16 aediles necessary to invest the mayor, Francisco de la Torre, who governs the city of Malaga from May 4th, 2000, and revalidated the position in successive elections: in 2003, 2007, and 2011, achieving an absolute majority; in 2015, with a relative majority (13 votes), although invested thanks to the three votes that Cs added.

The resolution that established the municipal structure (Málaga City Council, 17/06/2019) places the Communication Area, specifically, within the Government Area of the Presidency, that is, it reports directly to the mayor and subordinates to

the General Coordination of the Townhall. In the aforementioned resolution, the Communication Area is assigned the following powers, which are maintained at the time of writing this article:

- Management, planning, and development of institutional communication.
- Coordination of the information policy of the Government team.
- Relationship with the communication media.
- Establishment of the lines of the corporate image strategy.
- Management of municipal social networks.

The Communication Area of the Malaga City Council is organically constituted as a General Directorate and has its own staff –advisors, civil servants, and public employees– organized through Press Service Headquarters, Economic-Administrative Section Headquarters, and Social Media Business Headquarters. Furthermore, certain services are contracted with external companies: media center –institutional advertising–, social networks, photography and video, sound, and press summaries –clipping–, among others.

2. OBJECTIVES

This research, as a general objective, aims to conclude how the routine of institutional communication offices has been altered when addressing the pandemic crisis, taking the case of the Malaga City Council as a reference, and analyzing the changes that have occurred in its strategies, techniques, and procedures. For this, the following specific objectives are established:

1. Know the evolution experienced, as a consequence of confinement and restrictions on mobility and non-essential activities, in the work of the chosen communication office.
2. Identify the resources used by the Malaga City Council in its communication to adapt to the management of the COVID-19 crisis.
3. Specify which of these resources have been maintained despite the relaxation of sanitary measures after successive waves.
4. Analyze the audiovisual messages about the coronavirus of the mayor, as head of the institution, broadcast through his personal social networks.

For the compilation of conclusive information that leads us to fulfill the aforementioned objectives, we start from several hypotheses:

1. The communication office of the Malaga City Council has rapidly modified its strategies, techniques, and procedures to adequately provide its service, which is essential, during the period of the pandemic.
2. The conversation of the health crisis in social, and the fact that it has dragged on indefinitely – two years, so far – has subordinated all municipal institutional communication in Malaga to the COVID-19 framework.
3. The modification of the citizens' consumption habits, and the consequent modification of the journalists' routines, has pushed the communication office of the Malaga City Council to complete its digitization and has pronounced the tendency to address the citizens directly, bypassing the media.

4. The conversion of press offices into communication offices to adapt to the new public conversation generated by social networks, especially the creation of verified official profiles, has facilitated the proper management of the pandemic crisis by the Malaga City Council.

Thus, we intend to analyze how the activity of communication offices has evolved through the case of the Malaga City Council, determine the trends that the pandemic has brought to political and institutional communication, and verify, at the local level, how the presidential image is projected. And for this we will study what the municipal communication office of Malaga has done – telematic press conferences, press releases, and video releases, containment of hoaxes through verified social networks, institutional advertising campaigns – since the emergence of the crisis and throughout its management, during 2020 and 2021, besides examining the videos of the mayor on his personal social networks throughout the same period.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research, of an exploratory nature, is pertinent as it constitutes an analysis of crisis management and institutional communication in the municipal sphere, where interactions with citizens occur more frequently and directly. And it does so in an extraordinary, unprecedented period, in which the uncertainty derived from the pandemic generates communication needs that did not exist before March 2020. As it is an unfinished crisis, not yet reviewed, this study may be continued and finished when reflection and learning can proceed.

To meet the objectives developed in the previous point, we will apply research techniques with which to obtain data to support or refute the hypotheses raised above.

We approach this research as a case study, specifically on the institutional communication of the Malaga City Council from the days before the declaration of the state of alarm (14/03/2020) until December 31st, 2021. By collecting relevant examples, the quantification of the announcements –available on the municipal website and social networks, besides being sent to the media— and of the videos published on the social networks of the mayor, Francisco de la Torre. In all cases, we will take information about COVID-19 as a reference.

Following Beltrán (2015, pp. 17-39), we will use the comparative method, comparing the usual behavior of the Malaga City Council before the pandemic, with that of the years affected by the COVID-19 crisis; We will use the quantitative method to carry out the contrast, measuring the activity of the communication office of the institution under analysis in different periods; and, finally, as is typical of the social sciences, we will also use the qualitative method, specifically the ideological structures of Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (2011, p. 56), since the messages issued go beyond mere accounting and require stopping at a content analysis.

For all these reasons, as Beltrán (2015, p. 40) points out, we will combine methods because a study of this type requires “methodological diversity”, which is known as triangulation, “that allows access to the specific dimension of the object”.

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4. RESULTS

4.1. Telematic press conferences

The municipal information agenda was interrupted on March 13th, 2020, the last day on which it ran normally. From that moment on, the face-to-face conferences were replaced by telematic press conferences (see Table 1), open from the outset to questions and cross-examinations from previously accredited journalists, whose turn to ask questions was determined by the order of arrival of the accreditation request, received by email in the communication office.

The plenary sessions –since the urgent one that was held on April 20th, 2020– and the plenary committees became telematic until the restrictions were eased; even the hiring tables moved to the live broadcast of the municipal YouTube channel in an exercise of transparency -as of April 16th, 2020-. Regarding telematic press conferences, which are one of the resources that we are interested in measuring in this study, a total of 20 were held between March 17th, 2020, and February 12th, 2021, 8 of them by the mayor and the remaining 12, from different councilors of the municipal government team. Carrying out the comparison, in this case, is simple and revealing: never before had there been telematic calls; It is an unprecedented resource that was activated, exceptionally, for 11 months.

Table 1.

Telematic press conferences offered by the Malaga City Council during the pandemic

Number/Date	Summoner/s	Issue	Platform	Live broadcast
1.- 17/03/2020	Mayor	Reaction to the declaration of the state of alarm	YouTube	Yes (streaming on the municipal YouTube channel)
2.- 30/03/2020	Mayor	Announcement of tax measures to mitigate the effect of the crisis	Zoom	Yes (Canal Málaga, municipal RTV)
3.- 21/04/2020	Councilor for Social Rights	Social care provided by the City Council	Zoom	No
4.- 29/04/2020	Councilor for Security	Municipal security device	Zoom	No
5.- 04/05/2020	Councilor for Economy and Finance	The economic situation of the City Council	Zoom	No
6.- 07/05/2020	Councilor for Mobility	Extraordinary measures in the face of the pandemic	Zoom	No
7.- 15/05/2020	Regional Planning Councilor	Activity of the Urban Planning Department	Zoom	No
8.- 29/05/2020	Councilors for Operational Services and Tourism	Start of the beach season and tourist reactivation plan	Zoom	No
9.- 01/06/2020	Mayor	Presentation of the study on accesses to the Northwest area	Zoom	No
10.- 17/06/2020	Mayor	Malaga as a safe destination for urban investments	Zoom	No

11.- 05/11/2020	Mayor	XI Prize for Children's Literature City of Malaga	Zoom	No
12.- 11/11/2020	Mayor	Direct municipal aid plan for SMEs and the self-employed	Zoom	No
13.- 13/11/2020	Government Spokesperson and Councilor for Human Resources	Matters approved in the Local Government Board	Zoom	No
14.- 27/11/2020	Government Spokesperson and Councilor for Territorial Planning	Matters approved in the Local Government Board	Zoom	No
15.- 03/12/2020	Councilor for Security	Device for the Constitución-Inmaculada bridge	Zoom	No
16.- 15/01/2021	Mayor and advisor to the Presidency of the Board	International exhibition of 2027 in Malaga	Zoom	No
17.- 20/01/2021	Mayor and president of the CEA and the CEM	Financing for SMEs through Guarantee	Zoom	No
18.- 10/02/2021	Regional Planning Councilor	Processing of license files in 2020	Zoom	No
19.- 12/02/2021	Government Spokesperson and Councilor for Territorial Planning	Matters approved in the Local Government Board	Zoom	No
20.- 12/02/2021	Councilor for Mobility	New mobility regulations	Zoom	No

Source: YouTube channel of the Malaga City Council (own elaboration).

<https://www.youtube.com/user/aytodemalaga>.

4.2. Announcements and video announcements

The announcements of the Malaga City Council on COVID-19, always issued from the communication office, which since the beginning of the crisis centralized all the information and unified the messages, became reference documents for citizens, to the point that the press, when there was a great demand for verified official information –as was the case, for example, when phase changes occurred in the evolution of de-escalation–, referred to them as “guides” (Hinojosa, 15/05/2020).

Figure 1

The first statement from the Malaga City Council dedicated to COVID-19 (09/03/2020)



Source: Malaga City Council website. <https://www.malaga.eu/el-ayuntamiento/notas-de-prensa/notas-de-prensa-coronavirus/detalle-de-la-nota-de-prensa-de-coronavirus/?id=152540>.

Between March 2020 and December 2021, 660 announcements related to the pandemic were sent, 538 in 2020 (46% of the total) and 122 in 2021 (8.5% of the total). The first specific statement on coronavirus was released on March 9th, 2020 (see figure 1), five days before the state of alarm, because an employee of Gestrisam, an autonomous municipal body, tested positive and was isolated at home.

In 2020, based on the case in Gestrisam, the City Council sent announcements related to COVID-19 a total of 298 days in a row, at a rate of 1.8 per day. The pace dropped significantly in 2021, the year in which, on average, communication about the coronavirus was sent every three days.

Almost half of the announcements generated by the communication office of the Malaga City Council during 2020 were devoted to the health and social crisis caused by the pandemic (see table 2).

Table 2.

Announcements issued by the Malaga City Council (2019-2021)

	2019	2020	2021
Total announcements generated by the Malaga City Council	1.235	1.170	1.434
Announcements related to COVID-19 generated by the Malaga City Council	–	538	122
% COVID-19 announcements compared to the total	–	46%	8,5%

Source: Malaga City Council website (own elaboration). <https://www.malaga.eu>

Besides telematic press conferences, capacity restrictions led the communication office to produce video announcements to inform citizens and meet the demand of the media, whose professionals were mostly confined, working telematically from home.

The first video announcement, dated March 13th, 2020 (see figure 2), was an institutional declaration by the mayor to announce a municipal decree that included measures to contain the coronavirus in coordination with the Government of Spain and the Andalusian Board. From that moment on, in conjunction with the telematic press conferences, the video announcements multiplied (see table 3) to keep citizens informed about what the City Council was doing daily through its Government areas, autonomous organizations, and businesses.

Table 3.

Video announcements produced by the communication office of the Malaga City Council during the first months of the pandemic

Date	Mayor's Pieces ¹	Councilmen's Pieces	Total Pieces
March 2020	1	10	11
April 2020	0 ²	35	35
May 2020	6	15	21
June 2020	21 ³	4	25
July 2020	5	0	5
The rest of the year (August-December)	5	8	13
2020 (all year)	38	72	110

Source: YouTube channel of the Malaga City Council (own elaboration).

<https://www.youtube.com/user/aytodemalaga>

As of May 22nd, the video announcements were not limited to messages from the mayor or councilors –many of them recorded with their own mobile phones–, but consisted of summaries of face-to-face events to which the press had not been summoned in compliance with the restrictions imposed by sanitary measures. Those of the mayor include, besides restricted public events, the 7 reactivation forum meetings held between May 27th and June 19th to collect the proposals that ended up forming the Reactivation Plan of the City of Malaga after the impact of COVID-19, publicly presented on July 20th at a face-to-face press conference.

The video announcements of public acts, those that went beyond a statement on camera, included resources and totals so that they could be used by the television stations. All of them, besides being sent to the media, were destined for the official repository – *aytodemalaga* YouTube channel – and the official verified municipal social networks – on Twitter, *@malaga*; on Facebook, *AyuntamientodeMalaga*; on Instagram, *AyuntamientoMalaga*–. Regarding the LinkedIn account - *ayuntamientodemalaga*- it was used selectively, only for publications that were connected to professional activities and, therefore, of interest to that target audience.

¹ The videos published by the mayor on his personal social networks are not included, called coronavideos in the jargon of the City Council's communication office, which we will deal with later (4.3.).

² The mayor was on leave, due to surgery, between April 14th and May 18th.

³ May and June include the forums that collected proposals to prepare the Reactivation Plan.

Finally, throughout 2020, 110 video announcements were produced, 38 from the mayor and 72 from the councilors of the government team. Like what has been pointed out regarding telematic press conferences, it is easy to compare: the formula for video announcements was unprecedented, the City Council had never before opted for this procedure to send material to the media. Until March 13th, 2020, videos of this type had been destined for municipal social networks; From then on, and continuously for 10 months, they were sent to the media for use without the need to cite a source, as if they were their own. Digital newspapers and radio and television stations recurrently used municipal video announcements.

Figure 2

First video announcement from the Malaga City Council on the occasion of the pandemic: institutional statement by the mayor before the state of alarm came into force, announcing the publication of a statement with measures to contain COVID-19 (March 13th, 2020, from the Hall plenary)



Source: YouTube channel of the Malaga City Council. <https://youtu.be/VZXOlesfK-0>

4.3. The mayor's social networks

The mayor of Malaga, Francisco de la Torre, opted to communicate directly with the public every week through a video shared on his verified social networks – *pacodelatorrep* on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram–. He began to generate coronavideos from the confinement, on March 22nd, 2020: during 2020 he published a total of 14, and in 2021 there were 51; that is, until December 2021 he had released 65 pieces, all of them lasting less than 2 minutes and 20 seconds to adapt to the limit allowed by Twitter.

The mayor – with more than 84,000 followers on Twitter, more than 15,000 on Facebook, and more than 11,300 on Instagram, data as of February 2022 – also launches a daily tweet with the data of the accumulated incidence as soon as it is published by the Ministry of Health of the Andalusian Board on its website, messages that include notes of awareness and encouragement to the population of Malaga.

The coronavideos, entitled "*Muchas gracias, Málaga*", take the path marked by the institutional declaration of March 13th, 2020 -to which we have already referred- and fit a mold that corresponds to the ideological structure of the discourse of Van Dijk (2011, pp. 56-59): belonging to the group, this being made up of people from Malaga; approach to a common challenge, to overcome the pandemic by taking preventive measures, what is expected of us collectively to protect health and resume or maintain economic activity that guarantees employment, our collaboration and solidarity with others and with health personnel; elementary rules repeated until exhaustion, synthesized in the mask-distance-hygiene triad; the presence of an invisible enemy, the virus, against which we have to fight; and, from the moment it became available, recourse to vaccines to defeat or, at least, minimize the effect of contagion. The other is the virus and, to a lesser extent, who does not behave civically; The theme is the appeal to the civility necessary for Malaga to leave the health and social crisis behind.

The weekly video of the mayor fits, from the point of view of Van Dijk's discourse analysis (2011, pp. 44-45), in three social dimensions that define the groupings: origin, objectives, and common norms. De la Torre speaks in a loop to the group that constitutes the population of the municipal term, whose ascription is the registration, a bond that turns the individual into a citizen; he states the objectives based on the incidence figures and economic expectations when the dates that involve the influx of tourists approach –holidays, long weekends, Christmas, Easter, summer–; and announces or recalls the rules in force, restrictions necessary to meet the aforementioned objectives. Resorting to origin, objectives, and norms, the issuer intends to generate identity and social construction.

4.4. The role of institutional social networks: containment of hoaxes

The verified municipal social networks –Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram– played a very important role in quickly debunking hoaxes. The most striking example occurred on March 16th, at the beginning of the health crisis, when a poster was spread through WhatsApp that went viral immediately at a time of maximum uncertainty, only two days after the state of alarm was declared: someone, posing as the National Police, made a meme with the logos of the Provincial Council and the Malaga City Council that warned of COVID-19 outbreaks in the neighborhoods of Puerta Blanca and Los Guindos – in the most populous district of the city, Carretera de Cádiz–, appealing to allow free entry of agents into the homes of citizens. The verified profiles immediately proceeded to point out the falsity of the information (see figure 3).

Another example, which occurred when vaccination had already begun, was denied by RTVE (13/04/2021): a false news story was spread through Telegram that attributed the death of Local Police officer Alberto Ferrer to a dose of AstraZeneca. The municipal communication office contributed to the verification by assuring that this was "impossible" because Ferrer, whose death was due to a brain aneurysm, had not been given any vaccine: when he was admitted to the hospital, they had not even begun to summon municipal agents to receive the first dose.

The City Council has tens of thousands of followers on its verified social networks

(data from February 2022): more than 160,000 on Twitter, more than 78,000 on Facebook, and more than 47,000 on Instagram. It is the fourth in Spain in scope, only behind Madrid, Barcelona, and Seville. The development of the analysis of the use and performance of the municipal social networks of Malaga during the pandemic is reserved for monographic research when the crisis has come to an end.

Figure 3

Denial of a hoax on the official account of the Malaga City Council on Twitter



Informamos a la ciudadanía de la localidad de Málaga que se han detectado importantes focos de infección del Coronavirus COVID - 19 en las zonas de Puerta Blanca y los Guindos, en el distrito de Carretera de Cádiz.

El protocolo de actuación será el siguiente: agentes del cuerpo de Policía Nacional tendrán a su disposición para intentar controlar la situación de la mejor manera posible, en aras de la protección ciudadana, incluyendo entrada libre en las casas y edificios.

Se están organizando servicios sanitarios especiales. El objetivo es identificar a los posibles infectados, los cuales deberán seguir a rajatabla las órdenes de los agentes de la ley.

Creemos que podría haber más de 30 contagiados en esta zona, y en aumento. Rogamos a los ciudadanos afectados mantengan la calma y colaboren con los cuerpos de seguridad. El protocolo de actuación se iniciará hoy 15 de Marzo a partir de las 17:00 horas.

Málaga, a 15 de Marzo de 2020

Santiago Peláez, coordinador regional de Policía Nacional



Source: Official Twitter of the Malaga City Council (16/03/2020).
<https://twitter.com/malaga/status/1239511891619262469>

4.5. Institutional advertising campaigns

On March 18th, 2020, the City Council launched radio spots and videos for the population to stay at home, a message followed by a video with the streets deserted thanking the responsibility of the people of Malaga published on the 20th. On the 28th, a third video appealed to buy in local stores. From these three pieces destined for social networks, institutional advertising was used in all general media – press, radio, and television – to reach citizens as a whole.

The second quarter of 2020 was the most active: it concentrated 8 campaigns, with special emphasis on the dissemination of prevention and public service measures, encouraging people to stay at home during confinement. National tourism promotion aimed at de-escalation was also carried out, there was advertising by Gestrisam to explain the extraordinary tax measures, and by Limasa to raise awareness of good practices in the treatment of domestic waste.

Table 4.

Institutional advertising campaigns in response to the COVID-19 crisis

Period	Advertiser	Topic	Investment
Second quarter of 2020	City Council	Stay at home	20.745,50€
Second quarter of 2020	City Council	Prevention measures and public service (1)	149.968,16€
Second quarter of 2020	City Council	Prevention measures and public service (2)	133.096,30€
Second quarter of 2020	City Council	Social attention (telephone directory and incorporation of free number)	83.049,92€
Second quarter of 2020	City Council	<i>Málaga, mejor que nunca</i> (national tourism reactivation)	182.719,28€
Second quarter of 2020	Limasa (cleaning company)	Household waste treatment	19.657,06€
Second quarter of 2020	Gestrisam (tax management)	Extraordinary fiscal measures	18.542,97€
Second quarter of 2020	Gestrisam (tax management)	Face-to-face service requires an appointment	14.585,34€
Third quarter of 2020	City Council	<i>Hazlo bien</i> (Radar Covid app)	11.815,34€
Third quarter of 2020	City Council	<i>Baja al centro</i>	17.902,85€
Third quarter of 2020	City Council	Mandatory use of masks	97.292,48€
Third quarter of 2020	Gestrisam (tax management)	New tax measures	18.542,97€
Third quarter of 2020	EMT (buses)	<i>Yo te llevo seguro</i>	32.698,40€
Fourth quarter of 2020	City Council	<i>Hazlo bien</i> (expansion)	45.006,63€
First quarter of 2021	City Council	Aid to the commerce sector	10.200,06€
First quarter of 2021	City Council	<i>Cuídate y vuelve</i> (safe restoration)	4.961€
Third quarter of 2021	City Council	<i>Málaga, idónde mejor?</i> (national tourism reactivation)	173.487,79€
Third quarter of 2021	EMT (buses)	<i>Yo te llevo seguro</i>	32.698,40€
Third quarter of 2021	IMV (Housing)	COVID-19 rental assistance plan	9.522€
Subtotal 2020			857.438,54€
Subtotal 2021			230.869,25€
Total (complete investment in institutional advertising due to the 2020-2021 pandemic)			1.088.307,79€

Source: Malaga City Council website. <https://www.malaga.eu/gobierno-abierto/transparencia-ayuntamiento/publicidad-activa/informacion-economica-financiera-y-presupuestaria/campanas-de-publicidad-institucional>

The third quarter of 2020 registered 5 campaigns, one of them, *Hazlo bien* (see figure 4), dedicated to promoting the Radar Covid mobile app – when the app was not being promoted through media advertising by any other public institution, not even the Government of Spain, who launched it–, which in the fourth quarter was expanded (see figure 5) to include six tips: use the aforementioned app, the mask-hygiene-distance triad, respect for established hours – curfew –, and not spread hoaxes. For its part, Gestrisam continued to promote its tax measures and the EMT continued trying to recruit passengers for municipal buses. In the year the health

crisis emerged, there were 14 municipal institutional advertising campaigns related to the pandemic, with an investment of more than 850,000 euros.

In 2021, institutional advertising diversified and recovered certain normality. However, there were 5 campaigns in the COVID-19 framework: aid to the commerce sector was promoted, the return to restaurants for the reactivation of the hospitality sector, Malaga as a national tourist destination in summer, the use of municipal buses, and the extraordinary rental assistance plan launched by the Municipal Housing Institute (IMV by its acronym in Spanish). The advertising investment in these actions exceeded 230,000 euros, a quarter of what was achieved the previous year.

The total investment in municipal institutional advertising due to the pandemic, made in 2020 and 2021, is above one million euros, as can be seen in detail in Table 4.

Figures 4 and 5

Municipal campaign 'Hazlo bien', disseminated during the second half of 2020.



Source: Malaga City Council website. <https://www.malaga.eu/el-ayuntamiento/notas-de-prensa/detalle-de-la-nota-de-prensa/index.html?id=156510>

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

After the results obtained from the research techniques used were exposed, we can reach various conclusions about the studied case. We have covered the objectives set: to know the evolution of the work of the studied communication office during the pandemic, identify the resources used by it to adapt to this crisis management, specify which of those resources have been maintained, and analyze the audiovisual messages of the maximum head of the observed institution.

The ongoing crisis management of the pandemic by the Malaga City Council consisted, as far as our analysis is concerned, of a unification of the messages exercised through a total centralization of the organization's communication. To quickly adapt to the situation, the communication cabinet resorted to telematic press conferences for 11 months, between March 2020 and February 2021, something unusual that it had never done before.

Almost half of the official announcements generated by the City Council in 2020 alluded to COVID-19, and in moments of confusion, they were received by the media as guides to guide the population. On the other hand, the capacity and mobility restrictions led the communication office to produce video announcements, 110 throughout 2020, to supply the media and keep the population informed about the municipal action, an unprecedented procedure that was continuously maintained for 11 months.

The official social networks were one of the resources used to instantly upload public service information, and their greatest use was in containing hoaxes, in which the communication office acted in coordination with verifiers. The publications in the municipal profiles also constituted official announcements, they were equivalent to that product. The awareness messages were complemented by the social networks of the mayor, Francisco de la Torre, who chose to publish a weekly video based on his institutional declaration of March 13th, 2020 to directly communicate with the people of Malaga.

Finally, the City Council invested hundreds of thousands of euros in institutional advertising, especially in 2020, to respond to the COVID-19 crisis: asking citizens to stay at home, raising awareness of prevention measures, disseminating phone directories to attend to the neediest people, explaining how to manage household waste, announcing extraordinary tax measures and aid to the commerce sector, informing about the mandatory nature of the mask, or promoting Malaga as a tourist destination when the de-escalation allowed the city to be visited, among others topics.

The communication office, as one more essential public service, adapted to the pandemic and used new resources to continue operating effectively and efficiently. Almost all of these resources were necessary, especially in 2020 and also in 2021, but have since gradually declined as face-to-face activity has recovered. Therefore, the modification of strategies, techniques, and procedures occurred, as we proposed in our hypothesis, although in a certain period when the emergency was greater and all communication was effectively subordinated to the COVID-19 framework.

The hypotheses that we formulate are fulfilled, also in terms of digitization and the usefulness of institutional social networks to neutralize fake news. Although it is evident, at least at this point in the unfinished pandemic, that many of the routines changed by the situation have returned to their initial state, given that journalists have resumed ordinary face-to-face activity.

Institutional communication, in the event of a continuous crisis, contributes to reducing uncertainty. The fact that different institutions coordinate and amplify their messages helps them to sink in and prevail in public opinion. Public administrations

must jointly contribute to the public conversation, even when they do not have direct competence in all aspects of full-scale health and social crisis.

Municipal proximity is an essential factor that gives value and effect to institutional communication, which creates trust. Municipalities have that comparative advantage. And it is that, as Canel (2020) pointed out in the middle of confinement:

The uncertainty and tension that reign in homes, hospitals, and the media these days underline one of the great truths of political communication: it is just as important to manage well (for example, guarantee the care and protection of health personnel) as it is to communicate properly (for example, giving the necessary messages so that the population acts as part of the solution).

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