ABSTRACT
During the last few decades, there has been a very important change within Public Administrations, fundamentally in countries with a liberal economy. Since the end of the 20th century, the need to reduce costs while improving services has led to a new concept of a more open and transparent Administration, which has undoubtedly been helped with the arrival of information and communications technologies. Administrations are made up of two spheres that work inseparably – the political and the administrative – both of which have been affected by this new culture of transparency and accountability. Thus, it is the World Wide Web together with legislation that has appeared over the last two decades which have lain the foundations of the new relationship that citizens and firms have with the Administrations, creating a new paradigm in Public Administration. This work presents the results of a study carried out on a sample of the town councils of Spanish municipalities with populations ranging from 5001 to 10,000 – in total 82 town councils. The study used questionnaires from two of the six areas already applied by Transparency International Spain to large Spanish municipalities. The results show a disparity between municipalities, since, while some meet all or almost all the indicators, others barely meet any. The implication is that political willingness or its absence is the main cause for the differences between otherwise similar municipalities. However, some indicators are met by the majority as they are those of obligatory fulfilment, being required by law.

KEYWORDS
World Wide Web, Transparency, Local Administration, Town Hall, Spain

1. INTRODUCTION
Public Administrations around the world, and especially in Western countries with a liberal economy, have seen a substantive change over recent decades aimed at always offering better services to citizens and firms (in short, improving every aspect of quality), introducing accountability (such as the obligation to report on economic-financial activities) or making information generated by the public bodies themselves more transparent. In particular, the goal pursued is a results-oriented Public Administration, where evaluation processes must measure what is done, how it is done, and what the result is.

In this way, Transparency emerges as a star concept that seeks to leave behind the more opaque moments in the history of Administrations. And Transparency laws emerge as one of the pillars of political action, seeking to make known the action of public officials, the criteria under which decisions are made, the management of public funds, and the very information generated by the Administrations themselves.

Transparency policies in Administrations and Governments are closely linked to attempts to fight corruption (Bertot et al., 2010; Schlager & Wang, 2017; Nam, 2018). This has led to many studies and methods being used to measure Transparency in Administrations, by using ICTs and even exclusively social networks (Bosón, et al. 2012; DePaula et al. 2018), or in the case of Twitter to reach more citizens and interact with them (Faber et al., 2020). Jiménez & Albalate (2018), who researched the causal relationship between local government transparency and political corruption in a sample of the 110 largest municipalities
in Spain, reached the conclusion that the lack of transparency hides corrupt activities and that the absence of a willingness to provide information is a good indicator of the probability of corruption.

Studies about Transparency have had a notable growth in local governments (Krah & Mertens, 2020). As indicated by Rodriguez-Navas & Breijo (2021), the methods used to assess the Transparency of local administrations present notable differences that are influenced by the national legislation and the administrative characteristics, so there is no international procedure that is valid for every countries.

Transparency International has conducted studies in different countries to measure corruption and transparency. In the case of Spain and its local Administrations (the subject of this study), Transparency International Spain (TIE, its Spanish acronym) has established a questionnaire of 80 indicators, structured into six blocks. They include the requirements of Spanish legislation in this regard, the last law having been applied in 2017 to the 110 largest municipalities in Spain (Transparencia Internacional España, 2017). For Spain, Garrido-Rodríguez et al. (2019) have carried out studies on town councils in municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants, and Cañizares-Espada et al. have designed a model to measure the transparency of social services in municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants (Cañizares-Espada, et al. 2021).

In other countries, studies have also been carried out to determine the levels of transparency at local level through ICTs, and from many parameters, as is the case of Korea (Park, 2001), the United States of America (Feeney & Brown, 2017), Chile (Piña & Avellaned, 2019), Italy (Pernagallo & Torrisi, 2020) Indonesia (Yuniarta & Gustí, 2020), Philippines (Gabriel & Castillo, 2020), and even in several European countries (Alcaraz-Quiles et al., 2020).

1.1 Spanish Legislation

As is evident, Public Administrations are governed by laws that define their legal framework and functions. The processes of modernization of the Spanish Public Administrations began in the 1980s, although it was the Law of the Legal Regime of Public Administrations and the Common Administrative Procedure of 1992 (BOE, 1992) that laid the foundations for the introduction of information and communication technologies in administrative procedures. The said Law, now repealed, was the beginning of a rapid introduction of regulations to which many others would later be added, such as those referring to electronic signatures (BOE, 1999; BOE, 2003; BOE, 2020a), the Law 11/2007 of electronic access of citizens to Public Services (BOE, 2007a), or Law 37/2007 of November 16 on the Reuse of Public Sector information (BOE, 2007b).

Today, there are three laws that are fundamental to the relationships that citizens and firms have with the Public Administrations through telematic means. These are: Law 19/2013, of December 9, on Transparency, Access to Public Information and Good Governance (BOE, 2013), which obliges Administrations to have a transparency portal on the Internet (although regional governments have also published transparency and good governance laws, which complement the State Law); Law 39/2015, of October 1, on the Common Administrative Procedure of Public Administrations (BOE, 2015a); and Law 40/2015, of October 1, on the Public Sector Legal Regime (BOE, 2015b), which regulates the electronic headquarters within the website of each Administration that can be accessed through secure certificates.

2. OBJECTIVE

The general objective of this study was to determine the level of transparency and relationships with their citizens of the Spanish town councils of municipalities with a population ranging from 5,001 to 10,000. The type of information involved is very broad, and therefore transparency can be applied to a multitude of aspects in which the information that these institutions deal with is externalized. This work therefore focuses on just two of the six blocks applied by Transparency International Spain to the 110 largest town councils in Spain regarding the active transparency and information about the municipal corporation, its website, its relationships with citizens and society, and citizen participation.
3. METHODS

To carry out this descriptive study, a series of stages were established: a) the selection of the study units, in this case the Spanish town councils in the aforementioned population range; b) the definition of the items from the studies applied by Transparency International Spain to this study; c) the design of the Excel tool, to upload the data obtained; d) the procedure for obtaining and scoring the information obtained; d) and the analysis of the results. Below we explain the different phases.

3.1 The Selection of the Municipalities

For this study, the data from the 2020 Municipal Register were collected. The study was carried out on town councils corresponding to municipalities with populations ranging from 5,001 to 10,000. The municipal registers of 1 January 2020 total 8131 municipalities in Spain, of which 545 are municipalities within this range, representing 6.7% of all Spanish municipalities.

Royal Decree 1147/2020 of December 15 (BOE, 2020b), by which the population figures resulting from the revision of the Municipal Register referring to 1 January 2020 are declared official, establishes the official Spanish population at 47,450,795. The 545 municipalities that are the object of this study have 3,844,677 inhabitants, and represent 8.1% of the Spanish population.

To select the sample from the total population of 545 municipalities with populations ranging from 5,001 to 10,000, a sample calculator1, available on the Internet from the firm Agencia Estadística de Mercados S.C., also identified as AEM Research (http://www.aemresearch.com), was used. Thus, for this population of 545 municipalities, with a margin of error of 10% and a confidence level of 95%, a sample of 82 municipalities was established.

The list of Spanish municipalities with their updated number of inhabitants from the latest available Register was obtained from the website of the National Institute of Statistics through an Excel file with the national data ordered by province2. Later, the municipalities were ordered by number of inhabitants, from highest to lowest. From the final file, the populations corresponding to the studied range, 5,001 to 10,000 inhabitants, were extracted and ordered in rows from the first municipality (row 1) to the last (row 545). For the selection of the 82 municipalities, simple random sampling was used. Through the application that Excel offers, 82 numbers were randomly obtained between 1 and 545. In this way, the final sample was obtained.

3.2 The Questionnaire

As indicated in the Objective section, two of the six blocks applied by Transparency International Spain to the 110 largest town councils in Spain were used. Table 1 presents these two blocks, together with the sections and the indicators assigned to each of them. It has to be noted that the authors of the present work have included a new section in Block B of Transparency International, with Indicator 33 of the TIE referring to the existence on the Web of discussion forums, or the existence of active profiles of the town council on social networks, but without specifying either of them. Thus, we have included this new section (B.3) with 7 indicators (online forum for citizen participation, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, town council blog, YouTube channel, and Instagram profile).

The data was collected in the months of March and April 2021, obtaining 3524 indicators for all 82 municipalities of the sample.

For each municipality, as can be seen in Table 1, 43 indicators were obtained, and the score was determined as follows: 1 if it contains updated information; 0.5 if it contains information but it is not updated; and 0 if no information was found.

The data was collected in an Excel file. They were placed individually for each municipality, and the aggregated data of all the units studied were obtained through the Excel sheets, that served for the corresponding statistical treatment.

### Table 1. Areas of transparency and number of indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas of transparency</th>
<th>Nº of indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A) Active transparency and information about the municipal corporation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Active publicity about positions, staff, and remuneration of the Town Council</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Active publicity about the planning, organization, and heritage of the Town Council</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Active publicity about municipal government bodies, reports, and judicial decisions</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B) Website, relationships with citizens and society, and citizen participation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Website of the Town Council and municipal services</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Citizen participation and information of interest for the citizen</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Presence on social media</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>43</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4. RESULTS

Table 2 and Figure 1 present in percentage terms the results of the two areas of transparency evaluated for the 82 municipalities of the sample. Along with the data of the two blocks are those of the corresponding sections (three for each area). These results indicate that there is still a certain deficit regarding the information presented by the municipalities, although there is a predisposition to improve. It can also be observed that some municipalities (echoing the transparency indicators such as those of TIE) have created spaces with the titles of the indicators on their municipal websites that announce a future inclusion of the corresponding information. Although Table 2 and Figure 1 reflect the aggregate data of the 82 municipalities, it is necessary to emphasize that some (few) municipalities do comply with all or almost all of the indicators, while others barely comply with any. This disparity, for town councils with similar characteristics, indicates that economic problems are not responsible for the lack of information and data (which on the other hand are easy to obtain) but rather a willingness or absence of willingness of the political leaders to offer good information and communication systems for their citizens. It also indicates a resistance to change of some politicians, who only respond when the law requires them to do so.

Area A, which is dedicated to active transparency and information about the municipal corporation, has an importance of 36.1% in all of its 21 indicators, compared to 59.1% in area B which is dedicated to the website, the relationships with citizens and society, and citizen participation. In this second area, there are some indicators (of the 22 evaluated) that stand out from the rest. Thus, indicator number 22 makes explicit reference to the existence of a specific section about transparency: 77 of the 82 municipalities had this section which is required by the Spanish transparency law (BOE, 2013). The existence of the said section or website, however, does not imply that all the information desired is actually found, as many of the directories, of numerous municipalities, are empty. The electronic headquarters within the website of each Administration has also become a reality since the electronic administration law of 2007 (BOE 2007) and the subsequent Law of Juridical Regime of the Public Sector (BOE, 2015b), mentioned in the section on legislation require Spanish Administrations to have that secure relationship channel between the Administration and the administered. This circumstance has allowed some Spanish ICT firms to have started helping town councils manage these websites, within which transparency portals are included, with the same structure, but with content, obviously, that must be managed by each respective town hall. The most paradigmatic case, since it has been the commonest among the 82 municipalities evaluated, is that of the company Auloce SA, dedicated to offering services to local Administrations, that has created the same information and content model under the domain "sedeelectronica.es". Therefore the name of the municipality is a third level domain. This electronic headquarters includes the section dedicated to Transparency.
Table 2. Percentages obtained by areas of transparency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas of transparency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A) Active transparency and information about the municipal corporation</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Active publicity about positions, staff, and remuneration of the Town Council</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Active publicity about the planning, organization, and heritage of the Town Council</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Active publicity about municipal government bodies, reports, and judicial decisions</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B) Website, relationships with citizens and society, and citizen participation</td>
<td>59.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1) Website of the Town Council and municipal services</td>
<td>73.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Citizen participation and information of interest for the citizen</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Presence on social media</td>
<td>58.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Chart with the Percentages Obtained in the Six Sub-Areas of Transparency

5. CONCLUSIONS

In Spain, active policies to bring about a change in the strategies of Public Administrations, with the objective of creating services for citizens through websites, have been accelerated with the Electronic Administration law of 2007 (2007a), although subsequent legislative changes through specific transparency laws in the central government and regional governments are those actually driving the change, in addition to the existence of the Council for Transparency and Good Government (http://www.consejodetransparencia.es) whose function is to promote the transparency of public activity.

This study has shown an uneven development of municipalities within the same population range, which indicates that financial problems do not drive the lack of transparency of some municipalities, but rather the absence of political willingness in some cases. There also exists external technological support for transparency (as is contracted by many municipalities) that can help the municipalities to have the appropriate technological environment for their staff to only have to upload the information. In any case, there does seem to be a predisposition to comply with the transparency indicators on the websites. Although a transparency portal is mandatory in all town council websites, in many cases it appears to be hidden and is not accessible from the main page. This may be due to the fact that it often contains little information.
It is paradigmatic that, among the still inactive spaces, there are those destined to presenting the proposals of the political parties and neighbourhood associations, with contents that could make the governing political party uncomfortable. In this sense, the results are similar to the study carried out by Simelio-Solà et al. (2021) on a sample of Spanish town councils with more than 10,000 inhabitants where the authors point out that the websites of those town councils publish very little information about the activity of the political opposition.

REFERENCES


