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Mind the gap: Local government communication strategies and Spanish citizens' perceptions of their cities



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ABSTRACT

Cities have become the chief place of residence and work of the majority of the world's citizens and engines of regions' prosperity. Understanding how city reputation – a key intangible good- is constructed is an important challenge for academics and a range of other stakeholders. Politicians and officials seek to position and manage their cities in ways that win legitimacy and trust for themselves and prosperity for their citizens and other stakeholders. This study develops understanding of the concept of city reputation through a multi-methods empirical study of two medium-sized Spanish cities where earlier research has shown there are gaps between government performance (as attested to by performance data on a series of city services), city communicators' accounts of their communication strategies and policy priorities and citizens' perceptions of their cities' reputation and performance. Based on semi-structured interviews and focus groups, the reasons for these gaps are explored. The paradox of a less wealthy Malaga more content with the information it receives from its government and a more wealthy Vitoria critical of what citizens consider the government's self-congratulatory messages, suggests that more research should be carried out to understand both how government communication can achieve a better balance between information and persuasion and the importance of expectations and perceptions in citizens' satisfaction with government communication and governments themselves.

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1. Introduction

Reputation has emerged as a central concept for public sector public relations, raising issues related to governments' responsibility and legitimacy and citizens' trust in their local governments. While corporate reputation has been extensively studied by public relations scholars, more limited attention has been paid to the concept and construction of reputation as applied to cities and public sector organizations (Canel, 2009; Canel & Sanders, 2013). Furthermore, the reputation of public sector organizations is not formed in the same way as the reputation of corporations (Luoma-aho, 2007). Publics' expectations of their public services and their public officials appear to impact in particular ways on the content of public sector reputation, although it should be noted that the research underlying these findings has been exclusively conducted in the Nordic cultural context characterized by high levels of trust in authorities and a strong welfare state (Luoma-aho, 2007, 2008; Luoma-aho, Oikkonen, & Lähteenmäki, 2013).

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This study explores the concept of city reputation by examining the relationship between three possible drivers of reputation namely, government performance, the communication strategies implemented by local governments and citizens' perceptions and expectations regarding their city. The research aims both to advance theory development in the field of reputation studies as well as to enhance the understanding of the dynamics of reputation and expectation management in the specific context of Spanish cities.

2. Research design

This study formed part of an ongoing larger research project that uses a multi-methods research design. It drew on data generated by *Merco Ciudad*, a city reputation barometer that explores various dimensions of city reputation.¹ Four different data sources were used to explore the reputation of 78 of Spain's largest and mid-sized cities: a macro survey (9000 citizens assessing the social, economic, functional and physical dimensions of cities), benchmarking data (analyzing more than 100 secondary sources providing information on environment, housing, safety, mobility, cultural services, social services, quality of life and infrastructures), direct sources (analysis of information provided by local governments) and the opinion of experts (100 experts were surveyed online with regard to key issues for city management).

Based upon experiential measures—the hard facts of delivery of public policies—together with perceptual measures from the citizens' survey data, a typology of cities was elaborated according to gaps between performance and citizens' perceptions (Canel & Seisdedos, 2013). In addition, an analysis of citizens' survey data examined the relationship between citizens' assessments of their cities and three variables defined according to the degree of control politicians could exercise over them: perceptions of physical reality (location, climate: no political control); political reality (leadership, public performance: high degree of control) and mixed reality (people, manageability, attractiveness: where there is some degree of control by public managers) (Canel & Sanders, 2013). This analysis found that mixed realities weighed most heavily in citizens' assessments of their cities and government performance mattered more than perceived leadership excellence in the positive evaluation of cities.

On the one hand, the results showed that local governments' actions do matter and can influence assessments of cities. On the other hand, there were clear gaps in some cities between public service performance results and citizens' perceptions of how their cities were doing. How could such gaps be explained? Findings from these studies provide the starting point for the research reported in this article.

The authors decided that a qualitative research strategy should be adopted in order to probe more deeply the possible reasons for these gaps. From the city typology showing gaps between performance and citizens' perceptions, two mid-sized cities were selected for analysis. In-depth interviews with local government communicators were carried out as well as focus groups with citizens from the cities of Vitoria (population 242,147) and Malaga (population 568,202) over several months in 2012. Government communicators were asked about what they thought drove the reputation of their cities, their policy priorities for their cities, their chief communication strategies and messages, and their perception of their achievements and failures. Citizens were also asked about their perceptions of their cities, what they believed drove their reputation, their weaknesses and strengths, their views of their town halls' or municipal (*ayuntamiento*) management of the city as well as their communication and policy priorities.²

3. City reputation and citizens' expectations

The corpus of work on “reputation” produced by marketing and PR scholars provides researchers working within the political marketing and communication tradition a useful perspective for examining communication practice in the political party, government and public sectors (Canel & Sanders, 2013; Lilleker & Jackson, 2011; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011). Within this tradition there is some work on political parties' brands and reputation (Bale, 2006; Smith, 2009; Scammell, 2014) and also the government (Canel & Sanders, 2012; Sanders & Canel, 2013) and the public sector and public administration (Carpenter & Krause, 2012; Da Silva & Batista, 2007; Gelders & Ihlen, 2010; Luoma-aho & Makikangas, 2014; Luoma-aho, 2008, 2011; Valentini, 2013; Waeraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012; Wæraas, 2015). Two recent studies, however, make strong arguments for the need for further theoretical and empirical development of concepts such as reputation, brands, relationships and key publics in the context of political actors and organizations. Strömbäck and Kioussis' (2013) groundbreaking volume explores political public relations in a variety of contexts including government communication, while Scammell (2014) demonstrates the marketing perspective's theoretical and empirical contributions to understanding political actors and organizations.

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² Spain is divided into 17 autonomous communities, 50 provinces and 8117 municipalities (*ayuntamientos*). The latter are run by elected councilors and mayors and are responsible for local police, traffic enforcement, urban planning and development, collecting local taxes and social services such as waste collection and park maintenance.

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