Local governments Facebook pages: do they provide a public-service?

Mafalda Eiró-Gomes (agomes@escs.ipl.pt)
Escola Superior de Comunicação Social, LIACOM-IPL
Maria de Jesus Rodrigues (mjvrs@iscte-iul.pt)
Iscte – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

Abstract

Purpose
The research aimed at a better understanding of how municipalities in Portugal (with between 20 and 30 thousand inhabitants), used their official Facebook pages, between the 1st January and the 30th April, 2024. Are they being used as a public service belonging to the realm of Public Communication?

Methodology /Research design
In the frame of a pragmatist world view and in order to answer the research questions both quantitative and qualitative methods have been developed. A software programme has been used to recollect and analyse the structural facebook quantitative metrics followed by a two level content analysis process (qualitative content analysis to analyse the manifest messages).

Findings
The data showed that the research questions (derived from an international literature review) were not even the most relevant ones as, in general, the 31 facebook pages analysed could not be considered as providing a service or belonging to either public communication nor political communication categories. They seem to be used as the old placards outside the town halls where different associations, or even private companies, could display information concerning their cultural or sporting events.

Research limitations/implications
The research being presented here is just a small part of a bigger project that hopes to understand, in general, how municipalities use their facebook pages in Portugal as well as promoting a better understanding of Public Communication in general and the interest in seeing it as a service.

Originality/Value
None is known about the way local governments use social media, as a service, in Portugal, in the framework of public communication studies.

Keywords
Public Communication, Political Communication, Services, Local Governments, Facebook pages.

Paper type
Research article

1. Introduction

"*(...)* l'intérêt théorique pour la
communication n'est à la hauteur ni des enjeux intellectuels,
culturels et politiques qu'elle pose, ni des défis causés par les stéréotypes,
clichés ou caricatures qui en constituent souvent le substitut."
(Wolton, 2020, 12)

The overabundance of information, misinformation and disinformation configure a context where distrust in politicians and governments have grown. Citizens don't seem to know where to get valid information, or what to do in order to be able to construct an informed opinion about relevant issues for the public and political life of their local communities. Of course we are not excluding global concerns here. In reality it is quite difficult to speak of local versus global in the actual world, but due to the object of the research being presented the questions relevant for local governments are a priority. In a moment, as authors as Claudine Tiercelin (2023) speak about a disgust with truth how shall municipalities promote a well informed participation of their citizens in public life? Sharing her idea that it is central to "demonstrate that the ideals of truth and knowledge (...) are the best allies of our liberty, of our exigence of equity and of social justice" (p.90) the authors understand Public Communication both as a public service and an instrument for the excellency of public services.

Departing from Zèmor (1995, 2008) in a certain sense grounded theory derived proposal of Public Communication definition, authors consider that the field of Public Communication might be seen as being legitimated by the public interest. For Zèmor it goes beyond the concept of public domain in its strict juridic sense. In his own words, and acknowledging its notorious insufficiencies "(...) public communication contributes to identifying public utility, to feed civic knowledge and to facilitate public action. Public Communication tends to assure public debate" (p.6). From reception in its most diverse forms and platforms, to the capacity to listen, from dialogue (Zémor considers it as the public service attitude) to the understanding of communication as constitutive of relationships, Public Communication keeps struggling not only for its theoretical relevance but also for its empirical excellency where it can be seen as a "public service mission" to use, once again, Zèmor words (p.42).

In a country where Public Communication in local governments seems a forgotten item in Communication Sciences fields the researchers - and in a context of a larger project - questioned the reality of the proliferation of use of social networks by municipalities, even those that couldn't be said to be big cities from the point of view of the number of citizens. Municipalities are in general organised by groups according to the number of citizens by the Portuguese Institute of Statistics. It is the first of those groups- in ascendant order - where all municipalities had official Facebook active accounts that have been under scrutiny here. Does the use of those mediational platforms shape what can be seen as a robust understanding of the role and importance of Public Communication?

2. Public Communication: in search of a model

The nineteenth article of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights has consecrated the right of citizens not only to be informed but to be able to get and express opinions about public interest issues. Since then governments and other public institutions felt both the obligation and the need to enable their citizens to be able to access information and moreover to be able to make informed decisions and participate in the exchange of opinions. These ideas can be seen as configuring the emergence and understanding of Public Communication as a public service. In more recent days authors such as Campilho-Alhama (2016) or Ládron de Guevara

(2023) have defended the need for a real autonomy of Public Communication from any kind of Political (in the sense of the communication of political parties or ideologies) Communication. They are doing no more than what has been proposed by the Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation in its report on "Public Communication" (OECD, 2022). This will be the understanding of the concept of Public Communication in this paper. An essential element of public services that enables a participative citizenship, that promotes citizens empowerment and enables, at more or less local or global levels, the involvement of all in the decision taken processes.

Pasquier (2017) proposed what seems one of the most complete but at the same time operative definitions of Public Communication: "the group of activities of public institutions and organisations that intend to transmit and exchange informations having as the principal aim to present and explain the public decisions and actions as well as to promote the legitimacy of those entities, theirs accepted values and to enable the maintenance of social links" (p. 35). By proposing this kind of definition Pasquier, but also Bessières (2009) or Campanilho-Alama (2016), tend to see two different groups of functions in public communication, one that has been seen as central and other complementary. Even if it has been well clarified by the author that this dichotomy is no more than a tentative to distinguish between what is mandatory from the point of view of the legal obligations of the institutions - keep the public informed, explanation of the decisions taken, defend the values and promote responsible behaviours and the already referred dialogue between institutions and the citizens, or as we would prefer among all the actors in the process - and what is not, it tends to be misunderstood. From a practical point of view such dichotomy is commonly understood as a no need to fulfil the complementary functions, those already quoted from Zèmor (2005): the capacities to welcome, listen, promote social links or the good reputation of the public institutions or governments. Moreover the concept of complementarity is a hierarchy concept that, maybe, should be challenged. This is not the moment, however, to discuss it.

Government agencies are directed to communicate objective and scientific information to the public, but studies show that political ideology may play a role in how much information governments provide (de Paula, 2023). In a quite loose way and due to the purpose of this article by "political ideology" it must be understood the ways beliefs or attitudes offer a certain frame where a certain party or person is promoted. Due to the type of research being presented the notion or person might be understood also as the mayor and other members of the leading party of the municipalities whose Facebook pages are being studied.

2.1. Public Communication *vs*. Political Communication

If at the former pages researchers have endorsed the definition of Public Communication as proposed by Zèmor now is the moment to depart from the second part of his ideas. In accordance with Pasquier (2012), Campillo-Alhama (2016) or Ládron de Guevara (2023) the way Zèmor sees the political communication as being part of the public communication - and even if we might understand his argumentation - does not seem the best way to go in a moment of distrust and lack of confidence on governments. Minutela (2010) using in a certain sense another conceptual framework tends, with the concept of "governmental communication" as autonomous from what she designates as "electoral campaigns", to make some of the same points even if it seems a very instrumental and restricted conception of what she calls "governmental communication". The researchers endorse the vision proposed by Pasquier (2017) that sees the need for a clear clarification and autonomous field for Public Communication. Two major arguments are advanced by the Swiss author: public communication must avoid "serving personal and partisan interests likely to distort the democratic process" and "public money should be used to finance activities of general interest, but not those of particular interest".

We may say that in the communication sciences field the discussion between what must be understood as "public communication" and what falls under the concept of "political communication" might be, from a theoretical point of view, quite clear, or at least should be (Bessières, 2009; Pasquier, 2012; Pasquier, 2017; Campillo-Alhama, 2016; Ládron de Guevara, 2023; Zumofen et. al., 2023). Despite this, when theoretical definitions are confronted with the reality of what happens in the communication services / departments in the local governments, or in other kind of public institutions, things turn out to be quite blurred. Moreover if we understand the concept of a public-service in its material sense, that is, as providing fundamental activities in the public interest, questions about the quality of the Facebook pages of local governments emerge; do these pages provide a public-service? How do they interact with the communities they serve? Do they belong to the realm of Public Communication? How is Public Communication understood?

3. Research Design

To make sense of some of the issues referred to in the previous section, an exploratory study aiming to figure out how Facebook pages are being used by local-governments, in a group of Portuguese municipalities, has been developed. The research was centred on the 31 municipalities having between 20 and 30 thousand inhabitants between the first January to the 30th April 2024. The group was chosen due to the fact that this was the first group - organised by number of citizens (from less to more) - where all municipalities had official Facebook accounts active all along the 2024 first semester. The period under analysis covered the Portuguese parliamentary elections of the 20th march 2024 due to the fact that the existence of "political communication" was more probable to appear at this moment. Three main research questions were formulated:

RQ 1: How can the Facebook pages be described in promoting the municipalities-citizen relationship concerning elements as intensity and engagement?

RQ 2: What kind of contents are published in the different posts all along the 4 months under analysis? Could we say that they belong to the realm of Public Communication?

RQ 3: Do the Facebook posts considered as belonging to Public Communication express a desire to fulfil the higher standards of a public service? Do they conform with an idea of municipalities-citizens co-construction or co-participation?

3.1. Research paradigms and methods

The reflection upon questions as if the research is qualitative or quantitative in character are no more than questions concerning what do the researchers expect from their work. Do researchers want to explain or to understand the object under investigation? Do researchers want to have a more personal intervention or do they seek to be as impersonal as possible? And as Stake (2009) has put it, what kind of knowledge are we dealing with; are we in the realm of discovery or dealing with constructed knowledge? Maybe that the simplest way to clarify these dichotomies would be to ask if the research will have as its main focus the control and the explanation or the deep understanding of interrelations among the societal structures. Quantitative research seeks explanations in a sense of cause-effect relation aiming at generalisation and, as Patton e Appelbaum (2003) have stated, singularities are seen as errors. Qualitative research promotes comprehension and sees the uniqueness of certain cases and contexts as key elements for all the research being developed (Stake, 2009).

The more and more complex phenomena under the radar of the behaviour sciences scholars enabled those studying in communication sciences, health sciences or sociology, for instance, to question the quantitative vision of the facts. What is at the centre of all the questions envisaged by quantitative methods is precision, objectivity, inferences and generalisations. Will this be the better approach to take? Will it not reduce complexity to triviality or disable the possibility of a real understanding of reality in its contradictions and conflicts? In the last

decades of the XX century an immense interest in qualitative methodologies has emerged trying to understand the way people see the world or act on it. Statistics seems to have lost some space in the communication sciences as representative samples or statistics inferences don't seem to be quite often the best way to study society, or even better, the constructions of our social reality to use Searle's expression (Searle,1996) and all the intentional phenomena (Lessard et al., 2005; Alasuutari et al., 2009; Bell, 2010).

It seems quite common to find research papers on applied communication that are still centred on questions, following the Mathematical Model of Communication, of emission or reception. It may be interesting to remind ourselves that the quoted model was about engineering systems but we keep working under its influence taking also great attention to one of the other elements defined by Shannon and Weaver (1948), the channel. During the last half of the twentieth century, and we might say even today, research on communication sciences has had as its main concern the referred questions. In a very interesting synthesis T and D presented however sixty areas that may help visualising the main research domains of interest in communication sciences taken from the major international research associations as ICA or well known national associations. They have worked in and with english definitions but, for instance, the portuguese association SOPCOM also recovers some of them. The authors call the field "information and communication sciences" what seems the best way to express this disciplinary and complex area of research, even if much more common in the French literature than in the English one, where it tends to appear only as "communication sciences". All these areas show however in themselves and on their definitions the difficulties of a field where the theoretical corpus is not sound and where the interconnections between theoretical paradigms and professional practices seem quite relevant. From areas that have a theoretical corpus represented in their designations, theories of communication, philosophy of communication, to those that express social and linguistic theoretical paradigms, critical theories (feminism for instance), rhetoric and argumentation theories, from areas that assume the object of research as their main designation (media studies or reception studies) to those that seem to privilege the junction of their professional and theoretical approaches, as in Journalism or Public Relations areas of interest, the proliferation of designations tend to offer a fragmented field of research without a robust methodological framework.

Qualitative studies, which are characterised as predominantly interpretive, are usually small-scale, using small samples, as they do not seek to extrapolate or generalise, but rather to carry out approaches that allow a comprehensive view of a wide range of activities, experiences and beliefs, in a multitude of dimensions within a given context (Daymon and Holloway, 2011; Stake, 2009). In this sense, qualitative research moves away from cause-and-effect explanations and towards personal interpretation, with the emphasis being placed on the holistic treatment of phenomena (Schwandt, 1994 in Stake, 2009). It is possible to find scientifically relevant situations that do not include representative samples and where generalisations are not sought, in which the context and the moment are fundamental elements.

3.2. A bird's eye view over 31 Facebook pages

Tashakkori, Johnson e Teddlie (2021) have affirmed in a very pragmatist worldview so common in those working in mixed methods approaches or - as in this case - those that have as their beliefs and philosophical assumptions about research very much in the realm of a pragmatist approach to knowledge (Creswell, 2015), that the aim of research is to answer the research questions, that is, methods must follow the questions. As it is common in the pragmatist worldview the research questions tend to "follow" the problem, that is to understand what is at stake or even offer contributions to its solution. This is a statement that advances the reason for the type of approach being developed in the research being presented here. In the first moment a quantitative framework will be used in order to collect and analyse the data with the support of the CrowdTangle programme. This programme enables access both to the

Facebook pages content history as well as to an immense array of metrics that will provide reliable data to get a general overview of intensity and engagement with the pages all along the first four months of 2024. It will also enable an overview of the activity of followers in commenting or sharing the "texts or images" being posted.

After this first moment where the posts have also been collected, researchers turned to content analysis. Content analysis is a method to collect, organise and analyse the data. In order to organise the data a first level of thematization has been elaborated using three major categories that were defined as concept driven categories in accordance to the literature review and researchers interests: "public communication", "political communication" and "events".

Due to a major interest in the public/political communication dichotomy a second level of analysis was developed. This would also enable some corrections when needed, as the two levels of codification have been operationalised by different researchers. Three subcategories under each of the two referred main categories, or dimensions, were also proposed in a concept driven way. Some authors (Schreier, 2012) consider that this may not be the best option. It is normal while doing the categorization process to, by the exigencies of the content under analysis to have also data driven subcategories. However, due to the difficulty in defining some of the subcategories and in order to avoid bias researchers opted for using also exclusively concept driven subcategories.

- Public Communication - under this category are considered all the posts that in their texts had reference to information/communication of public interest as well as those expressing an interest in public participation. Using verbs appealing to some kind of citizen participation or involvement in the city public life and in the discussion of relevant issues for the community are also a relevant aspect that enables the classification of the posts under this dimension.

Sub-categories: **a)** Informative posts essentially describing legal or administrative aspects about the functioning of the local government or offering mandatory information to the citizens. It will also be included under this sub-category all what might be called emergency or risks announcements. Some examples might include health or road security promotion, environmental emergencies, or just the public announcement of the need to close a road, for instance. Some of the words considered as relevant for this category are "alert, notice or warning" as well as "prevention, risk or emergency". Some phrases such as "institutional information" will also make the posts fall here. Other groups of expressions that will be taken in account here, and exclusively as an example, are: "tendering procedures or competitive tendering" as well as "vacancies open for, or vacancies for a position of Y". **b)** Even if we still navigate the zone of the top-down communication in this sub-category, all the posts that even if in a very simple way tend to promote some kind of involvement or participation of the citizens will appear here. All the posts that express any kind of tentative ways to build some kind of relationship with the public even if in a passive way can be found here. The post promoting the listening to municipality councils assemblies or other events of this kind are good examples of what have been understood as belonging to this subcategory. **c)** We may say that all the posts that express a desire for the citizens participation in public life or promote in any form an active participation of the community will be considered here. All the appeals to action, or any kind of active participation, as for instance the answering of questionnaires considering the needs of the population, or the votation at the participative budget, will be categorised here. It goes without saying that all the "posts" that appeal to the participation of the citizens in processes of decision are included in this category.

- Political Communication - all the posts that will be considered here must make reference in an explicit way to activities that go beyond the public policies, their discussion or implementation.

Subcategories: **a)** In general we can consider what some authors have called governmental communication as belonging to this subcategory. As it is well known this is always a very fluid zone. Some might even consider these kind of posts as belonging to "public" communication but as already defended, the understanding of public communication must become a very transparent, and trustworthy one. These are some of the reasons for this kind of categorisation as already discussed. All posts that refer, show or mention in a very explicit way the mayor or other elements of the winning party, will be categorised here. Even if in some cases some ambiguities could prevail, the autonomous categorisation by the two codifiers will enable more consistent findings. Some typical posts will be those of openings or other public events promoted by the municipality. **b)** This is the space for all those posts that show in a visual, but essentially in a textual way, some kind of ideological bias. All the ceremonies, manifestations, or any other kind of events that quote explicitly the winning party, or express the support to some ideological actions must be categorised in this sub-category. All events, local, national or supra-national that are in accordance with express political in the sense of partisanship will appear here. **c)** Negative mentions to elements of the local government belonging to the opposition, or to any political or associative forces or individuals that diverge from the local government in ideological aspects will be presented under this sub-category.

- Events - In this category will be included all the promotion or report of cultural, sportive or social events, as well as humanitarian actions that have diverse promoters or where these are omitted. In general all posters or similar forms of publicity, as the traditional advertisement posts for mass or digital media (with no more explanation) will be considered here. Promotion or report of cultural, sportive or social events as well as humanitarian actions with no explicit connection with the municipality. It will also be considered here the case of private companies publicity. Beyond the visual construction of the post some textual phrases will be tiggers for the codification under this category as: "event at X", "free event", "ticket price", "we leave you with the registers of", "we leave you the records", "festival of", "concerts not to loose", "the best programme ever", "winter programme" or "spring programme".

4. Findings

No one, as Berger, has put it in a better way: "There is no "perfect" research project; every kind of research has strong points and weak points, and there are almost methodological problems that affect what we do and find. And then there is interpreting what we have found; different people may read the same data differently" (2013, Loc.5589).

All along the analysis work researchers tried to check on each other's work and all the detected problems have been discussed and decisions taken by consensus, but as Berger has put it, this kind of research relies always even if in a very small part, in the way people interpret data. In accordance with the research questions the summary of the organised and analysed data will be presented in three different moments.

4.1. FB pages: 31 performances

The Meta programme, CrowdTangle, has been used. It is a programme made accessible by Meta to enable professionals or researchers to track, and to improve, their performances on Meta platforms. At the moment of presenting this paper it will already be phasing out as new products for data-sharing will be released. The data being presented on table No1 are a summary of the metrics spreadsheet that monitors performance metrics. The data collected are from the first 4 months of 2024. A special interest has been put in metrics such as number of followers, number of posts, likes and the times the posts had been shared. This kind of metrics offers a sense of how the pages are managed, as they offer an insight not only on how many posts do the administrators publish, which may be considered as an indicator for the presence

of municipalities on FB, but they also show the level of "engagement" of the communities with those pages.

As it has already been mentioned by different authors and is evident in Table No 1, the more posts the more the responses (in any of its possibilities). In general, the months of March and April seem to have more posts than the two previous months. Even if a strict quantitative analysis based on the metrics used cannot tell the motives or reasons for such a difference, researchers - while doing the second phase of the project realised that an already mentioned fact, the national elections, and two others that had not been under their radar, Carnaval and the commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the 25th April (the moment of the restoration of democracy in Portugal) might be able to explain those differences. Those are moments where local schools, in the first case, and all the local governments, in the second had promoted parades or other festivities which (Zumofen et al. 2023) which photographies or videos were then posted by the municipality.

Table number 1: Quantitative analysis organised in accordance with main CrowdTangle programme metrics

Municipalities	January				February				March				April			
	Followers	No. Posts	No. Reactions	Repost (shares)	Followers	No. Posts	No. Reactions	Repost (shares)	Followers	No. Posts	No. Reactions	Repost (shares)	Followers	No. Posts	No. Reactions	Repost (shares)
Albergaria a Velha	18216-18289	85	1345	357	18291-18338	103	1332	493	18342-18407	120	1868	809	18409-18525	186	3402	1013
Almeirim	7013-7021	18	113	36	7021-7070	12	89	49	7097-7243	11	95	25	7254-7310	14	127	58
Anadia	21220-21345	106	931	330	21346-21410	110	1200	189	21412-21546	172	2911	578	21550-21647	222	2205	739
Arcos de Valdevez	38279-38298	42	806	216	38297-38383	82	4235	761	38367-38457	95	9282	1632	38460-38555	71	1931	276
Arouca	31383-31403	43	2129	694	31403-31415	43	2084	725	3146-31483	77	4593	1730	31488-31489	69	2583	700
Azambuja	13638-13646	40	145	63	13647-13647	45	313	195	13647-13667	101	1264	476	13668-13704	126	2315	591
Cartaxo	6166-6221	15	263	61	6222-6290	45	1595	497	6291-6311	34	911	236	6315-6416	155	5596	840
Elvas	20902-20923	63	2495	337	20924-21035	91	4383	963	21036-21048	119	3366	608	21049-21071	145	4521	801
Entoroncamento	14546-14612	42	460	123	14615-14717	84	861	528	14724-14798	122	1800	738	14804-14893	123	1471	459
Estarreja	21257-21272	20	1116	263	21271-21351	42	3184	790	21351-21348	73	1582	387	21346-21350	46	1252	212
Fundão	36701-36956	114	3035	802	36959-37123	132	3407	556	40175-40468	186	6784	1374	37428-37768	233	9065	1442
Lagoa	24196-24251	64	719	204	24251-24271	89	1133	229	24278-24328	100	1458	598	24331-24356	37	1035	256
Lamego	-	40	734	326	-	37	916	503	-	54	1141	380	-	42	1281	374
Lourinhã	19482-19530	68	1595	508	19530-19554	60	1682	516	19554-19594	86	2107	517	19596-19642	105	2291	863
Mirandela	30700-30891	25	3486	598	30905-31075	26	3438	794	31075-31110	48	6165	909	31122-31137	45	3941	466
Montemor-o-Velho	28664-28694	78	1925	687	28694-28719	93	2649	814	28719-28790	165	5339	1407	28790-28812	141	3354	1074
Oliveira do Bairro	16662-16720	66	1282	262	16726-16828	73	1617	427	16831-16855	100	2217	409	16857-16880	114	2169	381
Peniche	25370-25433	31	1108	209	25435-25891	57	2165	580	25894-26071	71	5521	724	26085-26252	67	3434	675
Portalegre	21580-21682	34	836	149	21682-21729	38	1178	132	21732-21899	74	4203	935	21910-22121	132	7119	1291
Porto de Mós	19820-19819	29	660	135	19819-19859	76	1633	597	19859-19957	125	3587	1055	19957-1992	141	2645	886
Póvoa de Lanhoso	18460-18574	48	2104	510	18573-18694	72	2716	625	18711-19259	135	9120	2350	19262-19380	97	3853	702
Rio Maior	22555-22649	35	1196	725	19833-19865	53	1116	282	22769-22880	76	1116	282	19903-19912	76	3232	1036
S.João da Madeira	27769-27790	41	886	140	27794-27864	34	1114	324	27864-27909	59	1299	194	27909-27978	59	3064	612
Salvaterra de Magos	8217-8274	34	519	187	8275-8341	50	937	433	8343-8447	108	1863	685	8447-8546	82	1642	710
Santiago do Cacém	22336-22369	82	2617	1077	22370-22378	122	2927	1253	22378-22399	133	5041	1761	22400-22471	240	9654	3593
Seia	24237-24356	40	1894	732	24361-24668	81	5373	982	24671-24745	56	2975	630	24758-24803	51	1678	339
Tavira	28515-28597	72	3849	452	28597-28626	71	3107	438	28626-28658	144	2844	515	28659-28693	163	3895	740
Tondela	15035-15635	30	1407	234	15656-15665	24	1076	210	15665-15706	58	8607	1486	15708-15747	59	3539	572
Vagos	22364-22364	42	446	58	22365-22356	50	437	119	25731-25730	90	863	215	22355-22369	91	1630	483
Vale de Cambra	18675-18784	31	752	141	18786-18918	46	1947	501	18924-18994	58	2559	441	18999-19067	57	1589	401
Vizela	22913-22990	36	1214	162	22998-23121	40	1781	198	23122-23412	81	5888	555	23429-23557	63	3591	534

4.2. Public vs Political Communication

According to the research design and in an attempt to get some insight into the type of posts being published a content analysis of the manifest message (essentially a textual analysis) has been developed. In a first moment, and in accordance with the concept driven categories (or dimensions), a first level of analysis has taken place. All the posts were divided (by the researchers) under the three major labels. If for the first category were privileged phrases as "" or "" , for the second the presence, the reference or the promotion of the local government or some of the elected elements by the winning party were important elements for the posts falling under the Political Communication area. The third category received all the posts that could not be considered in any other of the other two categories; they were posters in their immense varieties; signs, photos of billboards or just advertisements of events. It must be said that the references to sportive, cultural or social events that had already been realised fell under this category too. In many cases both aspects were present for the same event.

4.2.1. The winner is: "events"

Against the best of researchers expectatives, even if in a previous exploratory viewing of different posts it was already a constant, the great majority of "posts" are informative ones, unidirectional top-down, but do not fall in the realms of public or political communication. It is true that as they had not been considered as relevant, all along the research design, it has not been possible - due to a lack of time and organisation - to offer an in depth insight of this category. It could have been interesting to analyse if those "events" that go from school events to private companies ones, or from music festivals to a football game from a local team have, at least, the local government participation or a defined criteria to be able to be posted. All the manifestations (and that we could also understand as events) that had the local government as the main promoter and or had more information than a poster were not categorised under the "events" category.

Table number 2: Detailed Data of the 31 FB pages content analysis (three major categories)

Municipalities	Month	Posts	Pub. Com.	Pol Com.	Events
Albergaria-a-Velha	January	85	13	1	71
	February	103	12	1	90
	March	120	16	2	102
	April	186	57	2	165
	Total	**492**	**98**	**6**	**428**
Almeirim	January	18	1	0	17
	February	12	1	0	11
	March	11	1	0	10
	April	14	0	0	14
	Total	**55**	**3**	**0**	**52**
Anadia	January	106	27	0	79
	February	110	13	4	93
	March	172	39	4	129
	April	222	21	2	199
	Total	**610**	**100**	**10**	**500**
Arcos de Valdevez	January	42	23	1	18
	February	82	39	2	41
	March	95	34	0	61
	April	71	27	2	42
	Total	**290**	**123**	**5**	**162**
Arouca	January	43	19	1	23
	February	43	14	2	27
	March	77	19	0	58
	April	69	13	0	56
	Total	**232**	**65**	**3**	**164**
Azambuja	January	40	9	0	31
	February	45	10	1	34
	March	101	43	0	58
	April	126	36	5	84
	Total	**312**	**99**	**6**	**207**
Cartaxo	January	15	6	1	8
	February	45	16	3	26
	March	34	5	3	26
	April	155	2	6	147
	Total	**249**	**29**	**13**	**207**
Elvas	January	63	13	6	44
	February	91	13	7	71
	March	119	18	7	94
	April	145	16	5	124
	Total	**418**	**60**	**25**	**333**
Entroncamento	January	42	18	0	24
	February	84	33	0	51
	March	122	45	8	69
	April	123	45	2	76
	Total	**371**	**141**	**10**	**220**
Estarreja	January	20	4	0	16
	February	42	7	0	35
	March	73	38	0	35
	April	46	11	0	35
	Total	**181**	**108**	**0**	**121**

Municipalities	Month	Posts	Pub. Com.	Pol Com.	Events
Fundão	January	112	53	0	59
	February	131	25	0	106
	March	186	43	1	164
	April	233	21	1	211
	Total	**662**	**138**	**2**	**540**
Lagoa	January	64	8	1	55
	February	89	16	1	72
	March	100	24	2	74
	April	37	23	4	10
	Total	**290**	**71**	**8**	**211**
Lamego	January	40	8	8	32
	February	37	9	2	26
	March	54	9	8	37
	April	42	11	8	23
	Total	**173**	**37**	**26**	**118**
Lourinhã	January	68	14	2	52
	February	60	13	3	47
	March	86	19	3	64
	April	105	19	3	83
	Total	**319**	**65**	**11**	**246**
Mirandela	January	25	6	2	17
	February	26	8	2	16
	March	48	6		42
	April	45	8	1	36
	Total	**144**	**28**	**5**	**111**
Montemor-o-Velho	January	78	43	1	34
	February	93	42	1	50
	March	165	36	0	129
	April	141	44	5	92
	Total	**477**	**165**	**7**	**305**
Oliveira do Bairro	January	66	40	0	28
	February	73	36	1	36
	March	100	50	7	43
	April	114	41	2	71
	Total	**353**	**167**	**10**	**176**
Peniche	January	31	18	1	12
	February	57	35	2	22
	March	71	20	2	51
	April	67	22	2	43
	Total	**226**	**95**	**7**	**128**
Portalegre	January	34	15	0	19
	February	38	10	0	28
	March	74	20	3	51
	April	132	30	7	95
	Total	**278**	**75**	**10**	**193**
Porto de Mós	January	29	12	0	17
	February	76	13	1	62
	March	125	18	0	107
	April	141	24	2	115
	Total	**371**	**67**	**3**	**301**

Municipalities	Month	Posts	Pub. Com.	Pol Com.	Events
Póvoa do Lanhoso	January	48	11	**2**	37
	February	72	17	3	52
	March	136	20	6	109
	April	98	19	1	77
	Total	**354**	**67**	**12**	**275**
Rio Maior	January	35	6	11	18
	February	53	8	5	40
	March	76	10	5	61
	April	76	12	12	52
	Total	**240**	**36**	**33**	**171**
S. João da Madeira	January	41	11	2	28
	February	34	8	4	22
	March	59	19	4	36
	April	59	12	1	46
	Total	**193**	**50**	**11**	**132**
Salvaterra de Magos	January	34	3	1	30
	February	50	4	0	46
	March	108	5	2	101
	April	82	4	2	76
	Total	**274**	**16**	**5**	**253**
Santiago do Cacém	January	79	18	1	60
	February	108	18	0	90
	March	171	27	0	144
	April	234	73	0	161
	Total	**592**	**136**	**1**	**455**
Seia	January	40	2	0	38
	February	81	5	1	75
	March	56	8	1	47
	April	51	7	0	44
	Total	**228**	**22**	**2**	**204**
Tavira	January	72	10	1	61
	February	71	15	0	56
	March	144	17	0	127
	April	163	13	2	148
	Total	**450**	**55**	**3**	**392**
Tondela	January	30	3	1	26
	February	24	10	1	13
	March	58	9	1	48
	April	59	8	2	49
	Total	**171**	**30**	**5**	**136**
Vagos	January	42	21	0	21
	February	50	12	0	38
	March	90	17	0	73
	April	91	18	0	73
	Total	**273**	**68**	**0**	**205**
Vale de Cambra	January	31	5	1	25
	February	46	15	0	31
	March	58	13	1	44
	April	57	6	0	51
	Total	**192**	**39**	**2**	**151**
Vizela	January	36	8	2	26
	February	40	9	7	24
	March	81	8	13	60
	April	63	3	12	48
	Total	**220**	**28**	**34**	**158**

4.2.2. Public communication or just top-down information

Since Covid-19 everyone has been speaking about how important social media are for the dissemination and discussion of relevant themes for public life, as well as a means for the propagation of, at least, misinformation. Maybe this is one of the reasons that have driven so many municipalities with very restricted budgets to be in Facebook. It is also true that four or five years before the Portuguese Agency that deals with the administrative modernization focused essentially in the digitization of the public administration, has had some programmes that encouraged and promoted local governments to embrace the digital world. It can be said based on different research projects, that this one does corroborate, that the way different governmental institutions use social media is more or less the same way they've been using the mass media for many decades: they do not communicate but simply offer top down information concerning different themes of public interest. The quantity of posts that appear under the sub-category Public Communication - section a) - is expressive of what has been said. The great interest municipalities seem to have in Facebook is to offer information concerning everyday life constraints (closing of roads, or lack of water), reproduction of general national alerts as those concerning environmental problems, as well as giving space for major campaigns promoted by other public entities, as traffic security or healthier life-styles. Moreover in the present research - and the researchers have to say it - against all expectatives, there were almost no posts (except in very punctual cases as expressed in Table No 3) where the discussion Public / Political Communication could be understood as relevant. In the cases taken into account we could say that municipalities are nearer an understanding of the concept of "governmental communication" in the sense defende by the already referred Mutella (2010) has put it, a way to inform and get feedback in what concerns the transparency and the publicity of public policies. But even these cases (as expressed by the subcategory b) under the category Political Communication are not so relevant as what may have been expected. Concerning this issue an in depth research should have been developed as these pages seem to have some planification, and a much more formal approach, than the majority of the other FB pages. Does this seem to indicate that there might be a "professional" (as in a former journalist or a public communicator) behind them?

Table number 3: Posts under the Public and the Political Communication categories. (See point 3.1 for a definition of the subcategories)

Municipalities	Public. Com.			Pol. Com		
	a)	b)	C)	a)	b)	C)
Albergaria-a-Velha	74	21	3	6	0	0
Almeirim	3	0	0	0	0	0
Anadia	84	16	0	10	0	0
Arcos de Valdevez	120	0	3	5	0	0
Arouca	58	0	7	3	0	0
Azambuja	74	17	8	6	0	0
Cartaxo	19	6	4	13	0	0
Elvas	55	1	4	25	0	0
Entroncamento	141	0	0	8	0	2
Estarreja	48	0	18	0	0	0
Fundão	112	26	0	2	0	0
Lagoa	69	1	1	8	0	0
Lamego	35	1	1	26	0	0
Lourinhã	53	10	2	11	0	0
Mirandela	24	3	1	5	0	0
Montemor-o-Velho	145	12	8	7	0	0
Oliveira do Bairro	133	18	16	10	0	0
Peniche	42	45	8	7	0	0
Portalegre	44	30	1	10	0	0
Porto de Mós	58	7	2	3	0	0
Póvoa do Lanhoso	61	3	3	12	0	0
Rio Maior	35	1	0	33	0	0
S. João da Madeira	42	6	2	11	0	0
Salvaterra de Magos	16	0	0	5	0	0
Santiago do Cacém	136	0	0	1	0	0
Seia	18	4	0	2	0	0
Tavira	47	5	3	3	0	0
Tondela	28	2	0	5	0	0
Vagos	58	7	3	0	0	0
Vale de Cambra	35	4	0	2	0	0
Vizela	26	1	1	34	0	0

5. Conclusion / Final remarks

This research had no intention, at all, to discuss if local governments should or not use platforms that belong to a BUMMER machine, to use the famous expression ironically introduced by Lanier (2018). It was not the purpose of this paper to offer any comments on the different discussions that inform questions such as democracy in cyberspace or the need to realise that there might be other ways and specifically other platforms where to be present. Having said this, the obtained results show that the questions built by the researchers (derived from an international literature review) were not even the most relevant ones as, in general, the 31 Facebook pages analysed could not be considered as;

a) Promoting in a planned and consistent way the municipalities-citizens relationship, even if in a very embryonic form, as the researchers might have expected.

b) Considering the second research question, the idea of the Facebook pages belonging to the realm of Public Communication or being too intertwined with Political Communication the results were far from what could have been anticipated. The majority of posts cannot be categorised either as belonging to the realm of Public Communication nor to Political Communication. The 31 Facebook pages analysed seem to be used by local governments as - those that have lived last century may recall

- the placard outside the town hall where different associations or even private companies could display information concerning their cultural or sporting events. Of course that some might have private promoters or, in a very few cases, be promoted by the municipality itself, but in the great majority of cases they have as main promotors schools, clubs or other kinds of associations. A qualitative content analysis should have been envisaged for this category too. According to the findings it seems that we are far from what we may consider as an excellent service (Zumofen et al., 2023) from the 31 Portuguese local governments in serving their citizens when using official Facebook pages.

c) Being an expression of a real endeavour to citizen participation either passive, or active, does not seem to be a priority. The great majority of analysed posts may be understood as making public announcements concerning risks or other local pernicious events, such as water cuts or traffic problems. Some transmit information concerning calls for jobs or health/road security campaigns (developed by other entities). The very few posts that could be considered as inciting to some kind of participation where direct online links to municipal meetings (repeated several times), or to what is called the participative budgeting (a mandatory process by portuguese law, where a very small percentage of the municipality budget is allocated to a community project chosen by the citizens).

The 31 municipalities pages studied show a complete lack of professionalisation of the local governments Facebook pages administrators. The question of interaction is far from the centre of the preoccupations of the staff responsible for the Facebook pages. As Wukick (2021) has already noted, if it is true that not even the "best" Facebook page can guarantee citizens interaction or engagement, it goes without saying that the responsibility of the kick off for those interactive and co-creative processes is totally on the side of the local governments. Local administrators have the responsibility to be able to understand (and in our case they completely ignored) the value of Public Communication. Researchers are at this moment analysing the "events" category to figure out exactly the content of the pages that have been considered as belonging to the Facebook page "promotional" placard as it had not been considered as being relevant due to researchers misjudgment at the beginning of the research.

In a very recent book while discussing what humans can do (for good) with AI the authors (Borg. et al., 2024) consider civic participation as a way to go, on the identification of which kind of moral and social dilemma AI can bring. For the research being presented here what seems more relevant however is the possibility to use these kinds of instruments to improve civic participation. Local governments in some places are really promoting civic participation and assuming a robust understanding of Public Communication as in the cities of Austin (Texas) or Dublin (Ireland) with the "Your Dublin, Your Voice" platform". "Community members simply go to the platform to see descriptions of projects or policies their city is considering and are encouraged to provide anonymous feedback about them (p.224)".

One of the big limitations to this work is the non-inclusion of interviews with local administrators to understand both why they seem to be so far apart from Public Communication, in even its most restricted definition, and by being so, why do they feel the need, however, to be present at Facebook. This will be an ongoing project and maybe some contributions can be offered for a better understanding of the need to do more and better in the Public Communication field. "Changes are only realized when the structures, processes, and collective rules are also modified. The knowledge of a society is something more than the mere accumulation of existing knowledge, in the same way that an intelligent organization is intelligent because of the synergy that is produced in its systems of rules, institutions, and procedures, and not because of the mere addition of personal intelligences. The generation of knowledge is a consequence of communicative acts or, stated in another fashion, a relational good" (Innerarity, 2021, pp.21-22).

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