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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.

¹ This research forms part of a larger project financed by different funding bodies. These include a project examining models for institutional communication financed by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science (Ref. CSO2009-09948); the empirical research was conducted as part of a city reputation research project financed by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science (Ref. CSO2009-08599); the initial theoretical work was financed as part of a government communication study project financed by the *Fundación Universidad San Pablo CEU* (Ref.USPPC06/09), Madrid. The authors wish to express their thanks to the funding agencies for their support.

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.

However, even in Scammell's excellent study little attention is paid to understanding communication management during the ordinary business of running a country, a region or a city. Here again, marketing, public relations and organizational communication scholars have produced studies examining the role of communication in enhancing reputation at the city, regional or country level (Canel, 2009; Passow, Fehlmann, & Grahlow, 2005; Villafaña, 2008; Wæraas, 2015). They have used the concept of "reputation" to move the research focus from a purely marketing perspective - centered on the creation of an image based on the generation of specific perceptions - to one that draws on the insights of branding research. City and country branding is conceptualized as including the "promise"—the services and real resources—that cities and countries offer their stakeholders (Castells, 1994; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Kavaratzis, 2004, 2005; Villafaña, 2008). In this understanding, place reputation is considered as related to the attributes that make one place distinctive from another and to the capacity of that place to identify its strengths and communicate them to its stakeholders so that the latter recognize them as such (Villafaña, 2008).

However, reputation is only partly in the hands of those who run cities and countries. Research shows that there can be gaps between local governments' achievements, for example, and how these achievements are perceived by citizens. These gaps may indicate a problem of communication (Luoma-aho, 2008; Sanders, Díaz, & Canel, 2010) which, as some literature suggests, is associated with a problem of expectations management.

Stakeholders' expectations are crucial to how people assess public managers and politicians and thus, managing stakeholder expectations with the appropriate communication strategies and understanding stakeholders' needs are becoming central for public sector organizations (Luoma-aho, 2011; Luoma-aho et al., 2013). Expectations act as reference points for future assessments (Creyer & Ross, 1997 cited in Luoma-aho et al., 2013). Bringing into the analysis the notion of expectations helps researchers explore the complex dynamic of indirect causal relationships between public managers' achievements, communication performance, citizens' satisfaction, trust (James, 2009) and, the authors argue here, reputation. A literature review reveals a close connection between expectations management and reputation (Carmeli & Tishler, 2005; Coombs, 2007; Fombrun & Van Riel, 2014; Luoma-aho, 2011; Luoma-aho et al., 2013): what people expect from public sector organizations might act as a mediating factor of reputation and researchers could assume that identifying the content of stakeholders' expectations would provide clues for reputation formation in the future.

This study is not a specific analysis of expectations. It explores whether there is a gap between what the local government does and says about the city and what citizens perceive. It suggests that understanding the role of expectations will be helpful for understanding existing gaps between citizens and city managers. The authors' assumption is that how people worded their wishes, frustrations and assessments of their city might give us clues about what they had expected and thus, of how reputation should be managed in the future.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. The city of Malaga

Malaga is the second largest city of the southern autonomous community of Andalusia with a highly developed health, education, transport, cultural and leisure infrastructure. The city's economy relies principally on the service and building sectors and has been particularly badly affected by the economic crisis with unemployment reaching 34% in 2011 and a reduction of the local economy by 1.1% (Fundación CIEDES, 2012).

City managers outlined three main themes and action areas around which they hoped to build the city's reputation: technology ("Knowledge City"), culture ("Cultural City") and the port facilities for tourism ("Port City"). Communication strategy was described as being focussed on two main policy objectives, both aimed at improving Malaga's economic situation. The first is oriented to attracting and developing technological capacity and expertise to the city and region. Investment and the development of alliances to support the Technological Park of Andalusia together with the promotion of the "Malaga Valley" brand aimed at attracting companies, investment and specialized labor to the region are part of a strategy to position Malaga as a "Knowledge City." As part of this strategic focus, the city also has embarked, in alliance with the energy company ENDESA, on the "Smart City Challenge Program" run by the IBM Foundation. The aim is to convert Malaga into an "intelligent city," using technology to provide more efficient services for residents and, at the same time, enhancing the city's image as a forward-looking, attractive place for investors.

The positioning of Malaga as a "Knowledge City" takes up much of the communication and marketing effort of the Town Hall and is chiefly directed to home and overseas investors and entrepreneurs. However, Town Hall staff also point out its indirect benefits for the citizens of Malaga as the aim is to generate increased economic activity and jobs in the city.

The second policy priority is related to the positioning of Malaga as a "Cultural City" in order to attract higher numbers of visitors. Museum and exhibition space has been expanded and the city has sought to exploit more successfully its links to the painter Pablo Picasso. In relation to increasing tourists' visits, the Town Hall communicators also mentioned - although not as part of the communication strategy - their communication efforts in relation to calling Malaga a "Port City," a venue and stop off point for cruise ships.

City communicators and residents coincide in identifying the "quality of life" as the first reputation driver: "Malaga is the best city to live in." They both recognize improvements to their city with regards to transport infrastructure (expansion of the international airport, high speed train network, road building, port extensions) and in the development and expansion of the city's historical and cultural resources. City residents, however, have the sense that they are left out of the Town

Hall's communication strategy and policy priorities. They see the development of Malaga's technological profile as aimed at attracting investors but without positive results for local citizens as unemployment is still very high in the city. On the other hand, the actions aimed at improving the city's cultural offer and esthetic are seen as being principally directed toward the tourist population, although residents recognize that they indirectly benefit from the improvements made. Not much reference was made by citizens to the project of creating "a port city", the third driver of reputation stated by city managers.

Both communicators and residents associate a series of positive values with Malaga, many of which are not directly attributable to the management of the city but to the people and to physical realities (the climate and location). They consider it to be open, hospitable, cosmopolitan, lively, safe and enjoying a pleasant climate and location next to the sea. At the same time, residents feel that "Malaga lacks identity. . .it's multicultural, many people passing through" and they compare themselves unfavorably to cities like Seville and Barcelona where they feel citizens have a strong sense of pride and identity in their city. They consider that Malaga "is not sufficiently exploited because of a lack of leadership. . .at the level of the administration, the Town Hall."

With regards to service provision, residents point to a number of deficiencies that require improvement in order to enhance the city's reputation. Waste collection, cleaning services and maintenance work on beaches, parks and gardens are seen as the Achilles' heels of the city, partly because of citizens' own neglect. As one citizen put it, "let's not talk about politicians or other organizations but let's talk about us. I think it's our major unresolved issue." Another resident considers, too, that "we enjoy complaining but don't do anything." However, they also believe that the municipal authorities have failed to invest sufficiently in cleaning services. Residents also consider city transport to be inadequate because it is not available in all areas and operates on restricted timetables. These perceptions are in stark contrast to those of the communication team which considers that the Town Hall's work in public services, including park maintenance, transport and cleaning services, is recognized and valued by Malaga's citizens.

The two groups also diverge in their perceptions of the cultural and leisure offering of the city. The Town Hall considers that it has done a good job in carrying out and communicating the expansion of cultural activities and spaces. However, while citizens accept that there is now more "quantity" of cultural offerings they are critical of their "quality," criticizing the content of what is offered and the lack of communication about what is available. According to one resident, "there are a lack of emblematic buildings in the city, there are a lack of places to show off the city's historical and cultural resources. "And another citizen states, "I've been waiting 12 years for a proper opera season in Malaga. Why isn't there one? Other smaller cities have opera seasons. Why not Malaga?"

A third point of divergence between the communicators and the citizens is the Town Hall's technological project and in particular the "Malaga Valley" brand. Residents have the perception that the project is paralyzed and even in crisis, hampered by a lack of public funding and adequate human resources. For residents, Malaga is not a "technology" city and won't be in the near future. They have heard the news that Malaga will be installing charging points across the city for electric cars as part of the "Smart City" project but do not believe it will happen. As one citizen puts it, "they plan and sell you many actions that in the end don't come to anything, like the Malaga Valley project." The Town Hall, on the other hand, argues that the technology plan is a long-term project that does not sit well with residents' immediate expectations: the need to find a job in the short-term. They consider that the project will begin to be accepted by citizens as it begins to generate economic activity and jobs in the mid-term. However, they too acknowledge that the project is better known "outside Malaga than inside Malaga."

Regarding efforts in communication, residents do acknowledge the work of the municipal authorities in helping improve Malaga's reputation and image compared to a few years back. They also praise the Town Hall's development of online services but this is immediately followed by complaints about the lack of investment in cleaning personnel, waste paper bins and benches. Asked about the Town Hall's communication targets and whether Town Hall communicates well, citizens claim that they don't know what the money is being invested in (which contrasts with the Town Hall claims that they are pioneers in transparency), and that they need more information since "there is no way of knowing what is being done or not in Malaga." This is despite the communication team's explanation that they are carrying out "ongoing and now more active and bidirectional communication. . .in which the aim is to explain the municipal activity, explain to the citizen what is being done with their money,"

4.2. *The city of Vitoria*

Capital of the Basque Country and the province of Alava, Vitoria has undergone significant industrial and urban growth in the last 50 years. It has a well-developed health and educational infrastructure and is considered a pioneer in its establishment of a network of civic centers where residents are offered a variety of cultural, sports, leisure and educational activities. Its economic strengths are based on its automobile sector (Mercedes and Michelin have factories in the area) and its service provision as the seat of the Basque Government. Although affected by the depression that began in 2008, Vitoria and its region have fared better than other parts of Spain, having one of the country's lowest unemployment rates.

Interviews with Vitoria's Town Hall city communicators showed a clear set of policy and communication priorities which they considered would provide a solid platform for the positioning and reputation of the city. First among them is the Mayor's Office's Strategic Plan to position Vitoria as a "Green Capital," reinforced by the awarding of a Green Capital prize to Vitoria by the European Commission in 2012. The plan includes practical improvements to the City's infrastructure (creation of a green belt, pedestrianization and green zones in the City) as well as a branding program aimed at residents to increase their

identification with the green brand and their sense of city pride, and at tourists to attract eco-tourism to the region and City. In the words of the head of the Mayor's Office, "in our communication we have a specific campaign for Vitoria within the communication of Green Capital. . . The slogan is "We are Green. . . to awaken that sense of pride, identity, belonging" The plan also seeks to attract companies and investors interested in environmental projects. In this regard, the communicators spoke with pride of Heineken's decision to provide one million euros sponsorship for the Green Capital projects.

The residents, however, saw matters differently. While happy to acknowledge that Vitoria has a high quality of life, they saw the Green Capital project as a promotional exercise where the "achievements" were not attributed to the Town Hall but to the sponsoring companies who use the project as an advertising tool. To one resident, ". . . they are marketing campaigns. Now it's the turn of Green. . . and so they [the politicians] sell us their management. . .to justify a little what they've done." They considered that the Town Hall's promotion of the Green Capital brand had resulted in the city neglecting other more pressing needs such as the development of better transport links for the region and outlying neighborhoods or the opening of a new bus station. Even though the communication team spoke of their development of a Mobility Plan to extend the tramline to periphery neighborhoods, the citizens appeared not to be aware of this. And the citizens' responses seemed to confirm to some extent a fear voiced by one of the communicators that, "Sometimes we are not sure whether we are making people a little tired of the Green [messages]."

The residents and communicators shared similar points of view in relation to Vitoria's quality of life, understood as the accessibility of city services, the ease of movement in the city, employment and income levels as compared to the rest of Spain, Vitoria's general levels of safety and cleanliness and ease of access to green spaces. However, the residents were very critical of local city management with very explicit negative assessments: they "don't have the knowledge," "they waste time with a lot of bureaucracy," and they work on "projects that never progress but waste money. "In the words of one of the participants, "The problem of this city is its politicians and their management of it." Overall, citizens consider local politicians to be more focused on partisan interests than on reaching cross-party agreements to improve city and regional services, particularly with regard to transport links.

According to residents, outlying city neighborhoods and certain areas at the historical heart of the city have been neglected by the Town Hall. The city's growth and the Town Hall's failure to invest in adequate transport links have, in the views of residents, led to traffic problems in the city center. A main focus of residents' dissatisfaction with the city is the lack of a permanent bus station, and the Town Hall's failure to complete this project is seen as symbolic of its inefficiency. As one citizen put it, "We've had a provisional bus station for 26 years. . .What more needs to be said?"

The City's communicators emphasized their second strategic policy and communication focus as being related to the attraction of companies and investors and, in relation to this, the maintenance of a social welfare budget aimed at helping those most affected by the economic crisis. These policy priorities were barely noted by residents although some did acknowledge their appreciation for the work of the civic centers. They complained, however, about the lack of cultural and leisure activities offered by the city which they consider has "little atmosphere" and about the lack of information about what does take place in Vitoria. The Town Hall, on the other hand, emphasized the wide range of venues and activities on offer.

When citizens were asked about whether they felt that the Town Hall sought to communicate with them, the perception was generally negative (with categorizations like "propagandist," "a circus," "advertising communication") with statements like "There is a huge gulf. . . between politicians and citizens. They only think of themselves and their management . . . they're not doing this for me but for them; another said, "They live in their bubble of magazines and press conferences." When asked what communication they would like to hear from their Town Hall, the response of one was, "We don't want messages, we want deeds. I believe the citizens want projects to be completed."

Both city communicators and residents agreed that people from Vitoria are known for their "critical" and "modest" character. This self-perception was considered by both groups as unhelpful for contributing to the city's positive reputation. In the words of one resident, "We have these fashions. . .now we're green, then we're something else. I believe I am from Vitoria and I think we are eternal protestors and complainers. We're never happy with anything. When we were a small city, we lacked things of big cities. Now we're big, we have the disadvantages of the big cities." The Town Hall communicators considered that this partly explained residents' view of their city's management where "everything is always improvable" from the citizens' point of view and where city achievements are unlikely to be lauded. As one citizen put it, "We're never happy with what we have. I think we have a marvelous city and when you leave and compare it and see things that other places don't have, you realize that more and more."

4.3. *Explaining the gaps*

As Gelders and Ihlen argue (2010), gap analysis is useful to explore why producers (governments) and consumers (citizens) see quality (public services) in different ways. These authors explore, through gap analysis, citizens' satisfaction with information provided by governments on public policies in order to identify and correct gaps between desired and actual levels of communication performance. Their framework maps five gaps, the fifth being the one that can occur between what citizens expect from and what they perceive about communication of public policies. According to their framework, this central gap may be explained by four possible preceding gaps:

Table 1
Framework for exploring gaps.

| ACTION What the city does | MESSAGES What the city says of itself | CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS What stakeholders perceive |
|--|---|---|
| Gap 1 | | |
| Why? - How messages are linked to facts? | | |
| | Gap 2 | |
| | Why? - To what extent priorities of local authorities are set (in)dependently from citizens'? - To what extent interaction is pursued: inhabitants seen as message-receivers or involved in the communication process? | |

- Gap 1 refers to the difference between what citizens expect governments to communicate and what governments perceive citizens expect.
- Gap 2 refers to the difference between what governments perceive citizens expect from their communication and established quality criteria of communication.
- Gap 3 refers to the difference between established quality criteria and what is actually communicated.
- Gap 4 refers to the difference between actual communication and the external communication (authors understand external communication to be that “meta-communication” found in communication codes and interviews with ministers about their communication style).

They conclude that citizens' satisfaction with government communication is associated with the capacity of public managers to promote realistic expectations through communication and provide some communication guidelines.

The authors' framework takes into account two kinds of gaps: first, a gap between what local government does and what it says, and second, a gap between what local governments communicate (their messages) and what their citizens perceive (see Table 1). Earlier analysis suggested that these gaps might be explained by flawed processes of how governments define priorities, ineffective communication strategies that fail to correlate messages with actions and inadequate attempts by local governments to understand their citizens' needs and priorities (Canel & Seisdedos, 2013).

The interview and focus group data point to some agreement but also some important gaps between the municipal authorities' accounts and citizens' accounts of how they see the cities of Vitoria and Malaga and how those two parties understand the perceptions of the other.

In the case of Malaga, although there was a greater agreement than in Vitoria between citizens' perceptions and city managers' accounts of the improvement of the city, still a relevant gap is found. Looking at the first kind of gap (actions-messages), city managers showed some attempt to relate messages with real facts of public management (messages were connected to specific projects). Looking at the second type of gap (messages-citizens' perceptions), people did not feel that they were the principal targets of public policies but indirect beneficiaries of those actions that the local government is addressing to others. Communicators' attempts to interact with citizens were inconsistent and ineffective: citizens are not aware of such interaction and they feel they are not being well informed about what the government is doing. Unlike the citizens of Vitoria, they expect more communication from the government. How they worded their frustrations shows that citizens' expectations were focused on what the government is doing to create jobs: it seems that the level of unemployment pervades all assessments of the city's management. In sum, though they are happy with the development of the city, they think that authorities' priorities are not the same as theirs.

In the case of Victoria, there seems to be a large gap between what the city is and does, and what citizens perceive. The advances recorded by the city communicators are not so clearly perceived by citizens. Looking at the first type of gap (actions-messages), there seems to be a significant degree of communication activity (as reported by the communicators and also demonstrated by the materials they provided). However, while the “green message” has been consistently crafted and communicated, other important issues for citizens seem not to be as intensively addressed and there seems to be a “citizen fatigue” with the green message. Looking at the second type of gap (messages-citizens' perceptions), the local government pursued interaction with citizens but this was perceived by the latter as biased and self-interested (“communication to sell the Mayor”). Citizens saw the local government following its own partisan interest. On the whole, the perception that the local government is focused on getting votes means that citizens think citizen priorities are not the same as the Town Hall's and that they do not receive from the city what they expect. Their frustrations have more to do with the Town Hall's

communication and with what they believe the messages reveal about the government's priorities. Citizens of Vitoria expect public managers to focus more on citizen problems and less on branding messages.

5. Conclusions

This research suggests that there are gaps between citizens' perceptions and the city managers' accounts of their achievements, aims and priorities. The authors suggest that the explanations and causes of these gaps are multiple. Flawed processes for government's definitions of priorities, ineffective communication strategies that fail to correlate messages with actions and inadequate attempts by local governments to be in line with citizens' expectations (to understand their citizens' needs and priorities) may provide some of the explanation.

In the case of Vitoria, for example, the perception clearly exists that there is a lack of real interaction with citizens. There may also be cultural factors at play. In Vitoria, citizens are considered by themselves and city communicators as "eternal protestors and complainers" and "never happy with what [they] have," not easily recognizing improvements. In Malaga, citizens tend to blame themselves for the shortcomings of their city, attributing poor levels of city cleanliness to their fellow citizens lack of civic consciousness. They also tend to see themselves as the agents of the city's reputation, while in Vitoria this is seen as a task for the Vitoria local authorities.

Future research could include the role of the perception of city culture in affecting citizens' perceptions of their city. There may be, too, an interesting "neighbor" effect on city perceptions. Vitoria and Malaga have significant neighboring big cities – Bilbao in the first case and Seville in the second – both of which were cited by focus group participants as having stronger senses of identity and civic pride than their own cities. Comparisons with influential neighbors also may have an impact on citizens' assessments and expectations of their own cities.

Findings also suggest something about what kind of communication citizens expect from their governments. The paradox of a less wealthy Malaga more content with the information they receive from their 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 contribute to the practice of communication for a better balance between government information and persuasion, between the "duty to explain and mission to persuade" (Sanders, 2009, p. 84). On the other hand, findings also bear out the complexities of the analysis of the cause-effect relationship between provision of information and citizens' satisfaction with public services found by similar studies (James, 2014): the more citizens are aware of positive government achievements, the more they expect and thus, the lower they rate actual performance and the less satisfied they are.

These findings corroborate Gelders' and Ihlen's conclusion that gap analysis demonstrates the importance of expectations and perceptions in citizens' satisfaction with government communication (2010) but also with other public policies. The multicausality of gaps between the public's and city managers' perceptions suggests that local government communicators should monitor more closely the environment in which they operate to ensure that they have mechanisms to understand citizens' needs and expectations. Future research could, as Luoma-aho (2011) has pointed out, measure the end-user experiences and expectations of public goods and services and of communication. In general terms, the authors suggest that more research on public services expectations and citizen satisfaction should be developed in the public sector (James, 2014) in order to understand better the relationship between city communication efforts and citizens' assessments, so often at odds with the communicators' own expectations of their work's outcomes.

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