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## DE LA CRISIS DEL PEPINO A LA CRISIS DEL HUEVO. ACIERTOS Y ERRORES EN LA GESTIÓN DE COMUNICACIÓN DE CRISIS ALIMENTARIAS

### *From the Cucumber Crisis to the Egg Crisis. Succeeded and Errors in Food Crisis Communication Management*

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### Resumen

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**Resumen:** Esta investigación nace con la voluntad de estudiar y comparar las distintas políticas de comunicación que se llevaron a cabo como parte de la gestión de dos crisis enmarcadas en el ámbito de la seguridad alimentaria: la crisis de los pepinos acontecida en 2011 como consecuencia de la bacteria E.coli y la crisis del huevo, originada en 2017 debido al uso del insecticida Fipronil. En ambos casos la estrategia comunicativa para informar de una crisis alimentaria diseñada por las diferentes instituciones, de acuerdo a los sistemas europeos y nacionales de control, fue determinante para su control, un proceso en el que los medios de comunicación tienen un papel protagonista. Se pondrán de manifiesto los errores y debilidades de las

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instituciones públicas, así como la efectividad de las diferentes acciones comunicativas, enmarcadas en estrategias de comunicación globales para informar sobre crisis, escándalos y alertas alimentarias. A través de un análisis de contenido, en el que prima lo cualitativo frente a lo cuantitativo, se concluye que la crisis del pepino marcó un antes y un después en la manera de gestionar la comunicación ante una crisis alimentaria, ya que se reforzaron los controles y el sistema de alertas. La gestión comunicativa de la crisis del huevo muestra las bondades de una política de comunicación proactiva, aunque revela que la falta de comunicación entre Estados sigue siendo un hecho con graves consecuencias para la salud y para la economía de los países afectados.

**Palabras clave:** Políticas de comunicación, crisis, pepino, huevo, E. coli, fipronil.

### Abstract

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This research is born with the will to study and compare the different communication policies that were carried out as part of the management of two crises framed in the field of food safety: the cucumber crisis that occurred in 2011 as a consequence of the E.coli bacterium and the egg crisis, originated in 2017 due to the use of the insecticide Fipronil. In both cases, the communication strategy to inform about a food crisis designed by the different institutions, according to the European and national control systems, was decisive for its control, a process in which the media have a leading role. The errors and weaknesses of the public institutions will be highlighted, as well as the effectiveness of the different communication actions, framed in global communication strategies to report on crises, scandals and food alerts. Through an analysis of content, in which the qualitative aspects prevail over the quantitative, it is concluded that the cucumber crisis marked a milestone in the way of managing communication to face a food crisis, since controls and the warning system were reinforced. The communication management of the egg crisis shows the benefits of a proactive communication policy, although it reveals that the lack of communication between States continues to be a fact with serious consequences for health and for the economy of the affected countries.

**Key words:** Communication policies, crisis, cucumber, egg, E. coli, Fipronil.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

On 9 August 2017, the Spanish media reported a crisis caused by eggs contaminated with the insecticide fipronil, a product banned for disinsecting poultry, but permitted for

cats and dogs. This crisis affected production in 17 European countries, mainly the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany.

Although only two batches were withdrawn in Spain (20,000 units of liquid egg in Bizkaia and 50 kilos of powdered egg in Catalonia), the scandal caused millions in losses for the poultry farmers affected, as well as causing a crisis of confidence among producers and consumers in a large part of Europe. In fact, it led to a new food crisis, accentuated by miscommunication between partners and the desire on the part of all to avoid a repetition of such cases. This desire prompted a meeting of EU ministers involved in the food crisis promoted by the European Commission on 26 September 2017.

The meeting recalled another food crisis with similar protagonists, the one caused on 24 May 2011 by the E.coli bacteria, in which 4,321 people were affected and 50 died. Although there were no fatalities in the egg crisis, it does seem appropriate to analyse the role played in the management of each of the crises by the corresponding European authorities, as well as the media, since in both cases the communicative actions directly influenced the image of the EU as a guarantor of control of the management of food crises, which includes communication policies (Aranceta, 2016, p.12).

It is worth remembering that if there is one element capable of breaking the harmony between European partners, it is food, specifically, spoiled food sold to a neighbour. When this happens, countries are outraged as if they were customers returning to the restaurant where they have suffered food poisoning. In such situations, the politicians' tripadvisor is the media, a stage on which European ministers unceremoniously turn on each other. This is what happened in 2011 when Germany accused Spain of selling spoiled cucumbers, an accusation it retracted a few days later. In the case of contaminated eggs, the accusations have focused on poor communication in the form of delays in warning about the presence of contaminated eggs in Central European farms. The reproaches have been manifold: Germany against Belgium, Belgium against the Netherlands and France against the entire European control system.

It should be borne in mind that the European food control system is governed by a rapid alert tool shared by the Member States, the RASFF (Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed) created in 1979, so that when a member of the network has information concerning the existence of a serious risk to human health deriving from food or feed, it must immediately notify this information to the Commission via the rapid alert system.

In addition to the RASFF, the heads of the EU's national food agencies produced a report in 2014 which stated that one of the basic priorities in the management of a food crisis was to have protocols in place to take action and ensure good management. While experts say that no one can guarantee zero risk in food, there are many factors that are controlled through food regulations. Regulation (EC) 178/2002 of 28 January 2002 lays down the general principles and requirements of food law, establishing the European Food Safety Authority and laying down procedures relating to food safety. It also

highlights the role of the EFSA (European Food Safety Authority), and in the case of Spain, the AECOSAN (Spanish Agency for Consumer Affairs, Food Safety and Nutrition), established by Royal Decree 19/2014 of 17 January, which has various communication tools at its disposal.

## 1. OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES

### 1.1. Objectives

The aim of this research is to analyse and compare the communication policies carried out in the management of two food crises that occurred in 2011 and 2017 with numerous similarities. These include the international projection of each of them, the responsibility of health and political authorities in managing both crises, the poisoning originating in commonly used products such as eggs and cucumbers/soybean sprouts, as well as the implementation of food alert systems. Six years apart, the aim is to identify what improvements and what still needs to be done in this area.

### 1.2. Hypotheses

H1.- The errors detected in the treatment and management of communication in the E.coli crisis have served to strengthen the European food control system and improve the warning system between member countries.

H2.- Despite this improvement, the failure of an administration, government or institution to take responsibility is inherent to the crisis itself and is repeated in each of them, a strategy linked to the transfer of responsibilities, an option that is rarely recognised by public opinion and which is punished.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This text analyses the type of information related to the egg crisis offered throughout 2017 by five digital newspapers: elpais.com, abc.es, lavanguardia.com, elconfidencial.com and eldiario.es. According to ComScore data (Table 1), these five publications were among the top 10 cyber-dailies with the highest readership in Spain in November 2017. Three of these publications are the online version of print newspapers - El País, La Vanguardia and Abc, while elconfidencial.com and eldiario.es fall into what are known as "digital natives", i.e. products created specifically for the Internet.

**Table 1.** *Top 10 cyberdailies with the highest readership in November 2017*

News daily	Unique users (in thousands)
elpais.com	18.928
elmundo.es	17.918
lavanguardia.com	16.471
abc.es	14.235
elconfidencial.com	12.246

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20minutos.com	9.516
okdiario.com	8.857
elperiodico.com	8.320
eldiario.es	7.657
elespanol.com	6.830

**Source:** *ComScore*

The method chosen to develop this research has been Content Analysis, and as part of it we have found answers to most of the considerations formulated at the beginning of this study through qualitative analysis, for which we have followed the guidelines set out by Bardin (1996).

For the study of the sample, a double examination has been carried out - quantitative and non-quantitative - based on the proposals made on content analysis by authors such as Walitzer and Wienir (1978), Krippendorff (1990) and the aforementioned Bardin (1996), who explains that "the quantitative approach is based on the frequency of appearance of certain elements of the message", while "the non-quantitative approach resorts to non-frequential indicators which allow inference" (Bardin, 1996: 87).

On the one hand, information related to the egg crisis and fipronil - from 2 August to 22 August 2017 - published in the five media mentioned above, as well as those related to the E.coli bacteria - from 22 May to 31 May 2011 - were collected. In the latter case, the conclusions of other studies on the cucumber crisis have also been studied, such as those of Pujol and Gallemí (2012), Vázquez Gestal and Fernández Souto (2014), and López Villafranca (2013). The media investigated by the latter were El País, El Mundo and ABC.

From this information, all the statements collected by the reference media were studied and classified according to the different sources: institutional, political, international, health, environmental, etc. A categorisation sheet was also drawn up to classify the different communicative actions according to the sources.

Based on their analysis, 141 statements published in the media were studied, obtained through the following communicative actions: press releases, press conferences, interviews, public appearances in the governing bodies of the different countries affected by the crisis and television programmes. These statements are mainly present in elpais.com, lavanguardia.com and abc.es.

Finally, the communication policies carried out in each of the cases have been specified and evaluated to determine the effectiveness of each one of them.

The recommendations of experts such as Westphalen and Piñuel (1992), Ogrizek and Guillery (1996), Piñuel, (1997), González Herrero (1998), Rodríguez and Sádaba (1999), Fita (1999), Bell Mallen (2004), Fearn-Banks (2007), Alcat (2008), Quesada (2016) and Fink (2013), among others, we have ordered (Figure 2) what we consider to

be the most successful communication strategies and, therefore, recommended when managing a food crisis.

**Table 2.** *Recommended and non-recommended crisis communication strategies*

<b>RECOMMENDED STRATEGY</b>	<b>STRATEGY NOT RECOMMENDED</b>
Work on prevention/preventing scenarios and risks.	Improvisation as a protagonist
Manage time correctly. Key to crisis resolution.	The longer it takes to react, the less effective the response.
Transparency of information	Official information in dribs and drabs
Assuming responsibility	Transferring responsibility to others
Apologising	Pointing names and surnames at other culprits
Confession	Letting the "storm" pass without taking the blame.
Not lying	Conscious or unconscious lying
Proactivity	Reactivity

**Source:** *Westphalen y Piñuel (1992), Ogrizek y Guillery (1996), Piñuel, (1997), González Herrero (1998), Rodríguez y Sádaba (1999), Fita (1999), Bell Mallen (2004), Fearn-Banks (2007), Alcat (2008), Quesada (2016) o Fink (2013). Elaboración propia.*

### **3. DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1. Public perception of a crisis**

Communication about the recall of a food that causes food poisoning or contains a deadly bacterium, as in the cases under study, involves the collaboration of all the institutions concerned in accordance with a 360 degree communication policy (Martín, 1999: 60).

When communicating the state of risk, we are faced with a unidirectional situation in which an individual or collective communicator sends a message to others or even to the organisation to which he or she belongs (Tiozzo et al., 2017: 112). The problem is that this communication does not always achieve the intended objective, as success is considered to be determined by the experts' ability to enlighten or persuade the receiver who is assumed to be passive and uninformed (Cámara, 2009: 10). This is compounded by another drawback, over-information. This is aggravated in the field of food safety, as it can lead to alarmist and unfounded generalisations that generate a loss of credibility in the institution (Gil, 2009: 9).

The magnitude of a crisis, therefore, cannot be explained without the perception of risk, since risk implies the uncertainty that something bad will happen and endanger the well-being or lives of the people affected (Armentia, Marín, Olabarri, 2016: 2). But also without the intervention of the media, which also acquires the power to manipulate the public agenda by creating false social problems or magnifying minor problems to make them a priority (Ueland, 2012: 69). It is therefore necessary to create protocols for action

marked by multilateralism (social, political, legal and media actors). (Lukes, 1985: 34) in which communication is essential to define the methods to be followed in the resolution of the crisis (Moreno, 2009: 7).

### **3.2. Food security crises**

The concept of food security does not have a single meaning. On the one hand, it refers to food security in quantitative terms and may correspond to the internationally established political notion of food security. On the other hand, it can refer to food safety in sanitary terms (food safety), also referred to as sanitary quality or sanitary safety of food (King, Cole, Farber, 2017: 161).

In order to ensure that these conditions are met, in recent years a legal framework has been created at Community level, which not only highlights article 43 of the Spanish Constitution, which recognises the right to health protection, but also the Green Paper and later the White Paper on Food Safety and the Precautionary Principle, which were born out of the Treaty of Amsterdam and the Treaty of Lisbon.

The deployment of regulations and resources has not, however, prevented the emergence of food crises in recent decades (Marín, Armentia, Caminos, 2015: 30). Among the most relevant are rapeseed oil poisoning (1981), swine fever (2001), avian influenza (2003 in Asia and 2017 in Catalonia), contaminated powdered milk for children. (2008), E.coli contamination (2011) or listeriosis in larded meat (2019).

### **3.3. Managing a food crisis**

Food crises are those situations created by the questioning of the food chain and, in particular, the safety of a food, which are reported in the media, giving rise to a series of discursive actions on the part of the different actors involved. For this reason, many organisations have special teams that are coordinated to act quickly and effectively (Castillo, 2015: 16), although without ignoring the difficulty of systematising possible crises (Villafranca, 2012: 240).

Published manuals and bibliographies on crisis communication include crises related to food security in their typology, although each author uses a different nomenclature depending on whether they are small or low-level crisis situations or large-scale crisis situations, which would include health and food security crises (Losada, 2015: 27). The origin and duration of the crisis are also two aspects to be assessed in the classification of crises (Wesphalen and Piñuel, 1993: 89).

More specific is Ritter's (1996: 15) classification based on the visualisation of the problem detected. Thus, he distinguishes between crises originating from products centred on their misuse and those due to contamination, which would include food crises. For his part, González Herrero (1998) differentiates between avoidable crises, which include crises due to errors in food safety, and non-avoidable crises. Finally, there

is a typology based on families of crises, ranging from technical and economic crises (Saura, 2005: 229), to human and social crises, which would include food security crises (Mitroff and Pearson, 2002: 25).

#### **4.3.1. Communication strategies in the event of a food crisis**

Being ahead of the information, transparency in the dissemination of information, availability to attend to the media and, above all, the self-demand to always tell the truth are the hallmarks of a proactive communication policy that is part of a crisis prevention plan as part of an overall communication strategy (Fearn-Banks, 2011: 321). The first objective pursued by this strategy is to regain control of the situation, hence this option is based on leading the information offered at that moment about the crisis. (De la Cierva, 2015: 15).

On the contrary, a reactive communication policy, which arrives late in a degraded climate of opinion, with inconsistent and even contradictory messages, may not be effective because there is insufficient room for rehearsal (Rodríguez: 2004: 130).

Along these lines, Fita (1999: 162-163) recalls some considerations to bear in mind when designing the communication strategy to be followed:

- Strategy of silence. No reaction or as little as possible is said. Silence is synonymous with guilt (Bell Mallen, 2004, 2017).
- Strategy of denial. The organisation denies the incident and rejects any intervening interest or commitment.
- Strategy of shifting responsibility. Diverts blame to a third party to protect the organisation.
- Confession strategy. Assumption of responsibility and collaboration with the media.

## **4. ANALYSIS OF THE CASES**

In accordance with the objectives and hypotheses set out, we proceed to show the different results obtained.

### **4.1. Chronological and media contextualisation**

In order to put the main communication milestones of the two crises in chronological order so that a comparison can be made, the table in Table 3 has been drawn up.



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**Table 3.** Comparison of the chronological evolution of both food crises

<b>CUCUMBERS/SOYBEAN SPROUTS WITH E.COLI</b>		<b>FIPRONIL-CONTAMINATED EGGS</b>	
<b>PRE-CRISIS</b> 22 May 2011	The German government publicises through the media the existence of a significant number of patients with Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome (HUS), caused by the E.coli bacterium.		
<b>FIRST DAY OF CRISIS</b> 25 May 2011	The Hamburg Senator Cornelia Prüfer-Storcks blames Spanish cucumbers. The European Commission warns on its website about the origin of the outbreak and points to Spain as the main suspect.	<b>FIRST DAY OF CRISIS</b> 2 August 2017	The Dutch Food Safety Service advises against the consumption of eggs because they may be contaminated with fipronil.
25 May 2011	Spain's Minister for the Environment and Rural and Marine Affairs, Rosa Aguilar, denounces the lack of evidence. She sends a complaint to Germany and the EU.	2 August 2017	WHO describes the pesticide as "moderately hazardous".
25 May 2011	The Andalusian Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, Clara Aguilera, says the damage caused to the Andalusian fruit and vegetable sector is "incalculable" and "irrecoverable".		
<b>SECOND CRISIS DAY</b> 26th May 2011	No public or media activity	<b>SECOND DAY CRISIS</b> 3 August 2017	No public or media activity
<b>THIRD CRISIS DAY</b> 27th May 2011	The European Commission issues a	<b>THIRD CRISIS DAY</b> 4 August 2017	The Federal Agency for the safety of the

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	communiqué acknowledging its haste, but other countries, such as Russia, prohibit the import of Spanish fruit and vegetable products.		food chain (Afsca) blocks the activity of several farms.  The Minister of Agriculture of Lower Saxony, one of the states most affected by the scandal, admits that 10 million contaminated eggs have been sold throughout the country and not three, as the Federal Ministry of Agriculture claimed.
<b>FOURTH CRISIS DAY</b> 28th May 2011	No public or media activity	<b>FOURTH CRISIS DAY</b> 5 August 2017	Three major Dutch supermarket chains announce the withdrawal of suspect goods.
		5 August 2017	The French Ministry of Agriculture announces that 13 batches of eggs from the Netherlands have entered France. The French Ministry publicly announces that although the delivery took place between 11 and 26 July, the European authorities only informed Paris between 5 and 6 August.
<b>FOURTH, FIFTH AND SIXTH CRISIS DAY</b> 28 to 30 May 2011	A succession of institutional declarations calling for calm and reiterating the irresponsibility of the German authorities.		
<b>SEVENTH CRISIS DAY</b> 31 May 2011	The European Commission issues a press release stating that Spanish cucumbers are no longer suspect.		
<b>EIGHTH DAY OF CRISIS</b> 31 May 2011		<b>EIGHTH CRISIS DAY</b>	Belgium announces the implementation

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		9 August 2017	of a series of measures to contain the crisis.
		9 August 2017	Aecosan issues a statement saying that there is no risk to consumers.
31 May 2011	Germany acknowledged that the outbreak had come from a small factory in Lower Saxony and that cucumbers from Spain had nothing to do with it.	9 August 2017	The British food agency reports that 700,000 contaminated eggs have been imported instead of the 21,000 announced. The figure represents 0.007% of annual egg consumption.
		<b>NINTH DAY OF CRISIS</b> 10 August 2017	The EC promotes a meeting of ministers involved in the food crisis for 26 September.
<b>TENTH DAY OF CRISIS</b>		<b>TENTH CRISIS DAY</b> 11 August 2017	The Ministry of Health warns the Basque Government of a possible consignment of contaminated liquid egg.  The consignment is immobilised before it enters the production chain.  Aecosan continues to inform the public via the web with the message: "Spain is still not affected by the distribution of contaminated eggs".
		<b>SIXTEENTH CRISIS DAY</b> 17 August 2017	Aecosan recalls in Catalonia a consignment of 50 kilos of powdered eggs contaminated with fipronil from Holland. The Catalan authorities are informed.

**Source:** *Own elaboration*

#### **4.2. Determining the role of RASFF in the management of both crises**

The RASFF, the international Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed, did not work properly in the case of fipronil and eggs. While Belgium accused the Netherlands of having detected the substance in November and of slowing down the management of the crisis, the EU tried to play referee with the maxim not to engage in a blame game. Even less so in the case of the bacterial outbreak, where the health and food crisis led to an institutional and international crisis that put aside the communication mechanisms or protocols created for the management of these crises. However, it should be noted that in Spain these protocols worked perfectly, since, as can be seen in Table 3, as soon as the existence of contaminated eggs is detected, both in the Basque Country and in Catalonia, they are immediately withdrawn and the population is informed that they are out of danger. This communication is carried out through the Ministry of Health via Aecosan and the specific communication protocols created between Brussels and Spain.

#### **4.3. Study of different communication actions and communication policies**

In the following, the communication policies derived from the different actions carried out will be specified and contrasted to determine the effectiveness of each one of them, according to the strategies reflected in Table 2.

##### **4.3.1. Prevention**

Prevention involves the development of a communication plan and the study of techniques and skills to deal with possible crises to which an organisation must respond (Rodríguez et al, 2019: 16). In these cases, it can be said that in neither of the two crises studied were the appropriate tools used to manage a crisis of international scope. Improvisation has been a tendency that can be observed in both crises, mainly in the cucumber crisis. Therefore, as far as prevention is concerned, the non-recommended strategy was followed (Table 2).

##### **4.3.2. Time management**

Experts in this field say that time management is key to crisis resolution; maintaining the necessary information flow in the midst of chaos and disorder are the first steps in managing a crisis. As can be seen from the chronological events outlined in the table above, in the case of cucumbers, the reaction of the Spanish health authorities and food safety controls came after the fact, after the accusations had been received from Germany. This has been the trend throughout the crisis, denial as a communication strategy immediately after Europe blamed Spain. Thus, between Germany's strategy of guilt and that of innocence, Spanish public institutions have opted for denial. The surprise, alarm and confusion generated by this crisis, in which institutional declarations are multiplying every day, leave Spain unable to anticipate these accusations. Nor is

Spain taking advantage of the crisis to actively campaign for one of the country's economic engines, horticulture, in line with the strategy of taking advantage of the crisis to reinforce the image of an organisation in real time. For all these reasons, it can be observed that Germany is the one who takes the communicative baton throughout the crisis and imposes its version (Vázquez and Fernández, 2014: 162). It can be said that there was poor time management and a reactive communication policy.

In the case of eggs, however, the Spanish institutions, unlike the Dutch and Belgian ones, showed absolute control of the crisis from the outset, in which, far from information gaps, there was continuous communication on each of the steps taken. Thus, the Aecosan informs as soon as it receives the alert from Brussels and on the same day the batch of contaminated eggs is withdrawn from the market and the media are called in to report it. In this case, we are witnessing good time management and a proactive communication policy.

#### **4.3.3. Transparency of information**

Rational crisis management requires that the causes of the crisis and the commercial channels that have spread it are known accurately and with some speed. This is precisely one of the mistakes that were made in the management of the E.coli crisis. The food alert should have been conveyed to the public through official channels, with the appropriate qualifications by the governments affected in the first instance, the German and Spanish governments in the case of cucumbers. But instead of reasoned information, Germany spread the message through the press that the causes of the infection came from a consignment of Spanish cucumbers. The problem with the fact that the complaint reached the public earlier through the press and not through official channels is that this initial confusion could not be corrected during the management of the crisis, with serious economic and image consequences for the Spanish production market. We are therefore faced with a situation of a lack of transparency.

With regard to the management of information in the egg crisis, which occurred six years after the cucumber crisis, there were also errors in communication and a lack of transparency, although there were also some successes. While Belgium knew about the presence of the pesticide as early as 2 June, it did not report it to the European Rapid Alert System until a month and a half later. The unusual initial lack of communication between Brussels and The Hague and the incomprehensible delay in finding solutions to a potentially serious poisoning damaged the credibility of EU food controls, damaging the flow of European agricultural trade. It was only when it became known that the consumption of these millions of eggs was harmful to children that alarm bells rang and the credibility of the Dutch and Belgian authorities was called into question. In addition to the lack of transparency, in this case, the errors have been made up.

However, the Spanish authorities stand out for their good performance in this area. Thus, with regard to the two batches of contaminated eggs found in the Basque Country and Catalonia, the Aecosan notified the Basque Government of the alert at 18:30 and

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within an hour all the liquefied eggs had been withdrawn, informing the media that same day of what had happened. The same happened in Catalonia; the inspection services proceeded to immobilise the 50 kilos of contaminated powdered eggs from the Netherlands that had not yet been marketed, through the Coordinated System for the Rapid Exchange of Information (SCIRI), and to immediately notify the Ministry of Health so that it could in turn notify the European authorities, thus closing the communication cycle. In no case was unnecessary alarm created.

**Table 4.** Relationship between the main sources, statements and communicative actions defining the transparency strategy

Case of contaminated eggs			Cucumber E.coli case		
Source	Statement	Communicative action	Source	Statement	Communicative action
German Minister for Agriculture, Christian Schmidt	"I am disappointed. Belgium knew about the presence of the pesticide and did not report it to the European Rapid Alert System until a month and a half later".	Parliamentary public hearing	The EU	"The EU has activated the alert system after identifying cucumbers from Almeria and Malaga as the source of the E.coli outbreak that had already killed 3 people".	Press conference
Belgian Minister for Agriculture, Denis Ducarme	"Amsterdam knew about the existence of the poison and did not warn its neighbours".	Press release	The Hamburg Institute of Hygiene	"We have informed the Spanish authorities through the EU Food Alert Network that the bacterium has been found in three cucumbers of Spanish origin".	Press release
Belgian Minister for Agriculture, Denis Ducarme	"When a country, like Amsterdam, does not communicate this kind of information, there is a real problem".	Before the parliamentary committee investigating the case	Senator for Health Hamburg, Cornelia Prüfer-Strocks	"Our scientists have found evidence of contamination in three Spanish cucumbers".	Public appearance in Parliament
French Agriculture Minister	"The delay in communication	Statements in Parliament	Spanish Government through the	"We do not rule out demanding	Public appearance in Parliament.

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Stéphane Travert	has prevented the problem from being tackled earlier, so I call for a speeding up of exchanges between EU countries".		Minister for the Environment Rosa Aguilar	responsibility for the tremendous damage caused by the speculation of the German authorities".	
European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, Vytenis Andriukaitis	"Blaming us and making fools of us is not going to get us anywhere, and I want to stop it".		Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Water, Josep Puxeu	He denounced the obstacles that some countries put in the way of exports because of "unverified" information.	Interview
			Federal Minister for Consumer Affairs, Bavarian Social Christian Ilse Aigner (CSU)	He defended the government's information policy.	Press conference
			Roberto Sabrido, Director of AESAN	"We have found out about it from the press".	

**Source:** *Own elaboration*

### 4.3.4. Assumption of liability

In the case of the E.coli bacteria, only the EU took responsibility for damaging Spanish producers. Germany preferred to blame journalists, as did the Hamburg health senator (El País, 1 June 2019).

In the case of the fipronil contamination, the scandal provokes an acrimonious debate about the failures in the management of the problem that calls into question the capacity for coordination between European partners in the face of a food crisis (Table 5).

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**Table 5.** List of the main sources, statements and communicative actions defining the strategy for taking ownership

Case of contaminated eggs			Cucumber E.coli case		
Source	Statement	Communicative action	Source	Statement	Communicative action
German Minister for Agriculture, Christian Schmidt	"Belgium knew about the presence of the pesticide and did not report it to the European Rapid Alert System until a month and a half later."	Public hearing Parliament	Roberto Sabrido, director of AECOSAN (30/05/2011)	Germany has committed a great irresponsibility by accusing without any proof".	Press conference
Belgian Minister for Agriculture, Denis Ducarme	"Amsterdam knew about the existence of the toxicant since mid-November 2016 and did not warn its neighbours about it."	Press release	Andrés Góngora. Provincial Secretary of COAG in Almeria	"Germany has committed a great irresponsibility (...) without having any proof".	Public appearance
Belgian Minister for Agriculture, Denis Ducarme	"When a country like the Netherlands does not communicate this kind of information, there really is a problem."	Appearance before the parliamentary committee investigating the case	Cornelia Prüfer-Storcks, Senator for Health in Hamburg (1/06/2011)	"We have not been hasty in announcing that the Spanish cucumbers were to blame. "We have not made any mistakes".	Press conference
French Minister for Agriculture, Stéphane Travert	"The delay in communication has prevented us from tackling the problem earlier".	Statements in Parliament			
European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, Vytenis Andriukaitis	"Blaming us and making fools of us is not going to get us anywhere, and I want to stop it".	Statements in Parliament			

**Source:** Own elaboration



#### 4.3.5. Estrategia del perdón

It is never too late to apologise (Jordan-Meier, 2011:193), although in the case of the E.coli outbreak this apology came late and with a small mouth in view of the serious consequences: 50 people died and more than 300 were injured, more than 1,000 jobs were lost in Spain. Nine days after the crisis began and in the face of the evidence of the scientific reports, the German government apologised to Spain for the accusations and their consequences on the economy and the credibility of European consumers regarding Spanish products (Elika, 2011: 6.). With regard to eggs, the British Food Agency, which lied about the number of contaminated eggs, finally acknowledged that there were three times more than the initial figure, but in no case did it apologise for the mistake made (Table 6).

**Table 6.** List of the main sources, statements and communicative actions defining the forgiveness strategy

Case of contaminated eggs			Cucumber E.coli case		
Organisati on	Statement	Communicati ve action	Organisatio n	Statement	Communica tive action
British Food Agency	"We are sorry. We recognise that the UK has imported around 700,000 contaminated eggs instead of the 21,000 we initially announced".	Public appearance	German government	Germany apologises to Spain for the free imputation.	Press release

**Source:** *Own elaboration*

#### 4.3.6. Confession strategy

In the case of the E.coli crisis, rather than a confession, we can speak of a rectification after the results of the German Ministry of Health's Institute for Hygiene and the Environment (Figures 3, 4 and 5) were published (Figures 3, 4 and 5). It was then that the headlines reported that Spain was not responsible for the bacterial poisoning. Although Germany apologises to Spain, it never admits the mistakes made in the management of this crisis.

Regarding the insecticide poisoning of the eggs, neither Belgium nor the Netherlands confessed to having delayed reporting the detection of the substance; one month in the case of Belgium and eight months in the case of the Netherlands, which contributed to

slowing down its management. The only strategy was to engage in a blame game in which the EU declared that it did not want to play its role as arbiter in the matter.

## **5. DETERMINATION OF THE COMMUNICATION POLICY**

After analysing the different strategies carried out by public institutions, governments, ministers, food safety agencies and other bodies such as the WHO, in accordance with the different communication actions, it can be concluded that in the case of the E.coli bacteria, Spain followed a reactive communication policy more focused on defending itself against accusations than on providing its own information that would attract the attention of the media and the general public. Germany, however, brought together in its proactive communication policy all the elements to make it successful: single spokesperson, Hamburg Senator Cornelia Prüfer-Storcks; single message, Spanish cucumbers are to blame; treatment of the media as allies; and headlines that were not negative for Germany.

With regard to the eggs, it could be said that from the statements of political and health officials analysed, it is clear that, with the exception of Spain, those involved followed a reactive communication policy based on keeping the population uninformed and on the confusion of messages focused on showing that everyone was innocent. Spain opted for transparency and information control as soon as the alarm was triggered, features of the proactive communication policy.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

1.- The succession of cascading crises experienced in the case of the E.coli bacteria: food and health at first, then political and institutional, and finally economic as a result of mismanagement, is not seen in the case of the fipronil pesticide poisoning of eggs. In the latter, the crisis is mainly a food crisis, although there are communication problems between the political representatives of the affected countries that could have led to another political/institutional crisis similar to the one that occurred in 2011 with the E.coli bacteria, as some of the most serious errors were repeated. Thus, the egg scandal once again shows that, both at EU and national level, the primary basis of the food safety system is the rapid exchange of information between the authorities of the different countries. However, this did not take place between Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, leaving the EU to manage the crisis, a responsibility it never acknowledged as such. From all this it can be deduced that the European warning system continues to be questioned, even though it worked in Spain.

2.- The role of the EU in the face of non-compliance with the communication on food alerts is poorly defined, since in the face of the poor management of the bacterial crisis, its participation was focused solely on convening a meeting of all the member countries to guarantee greater food safety in the future, with the commitment to carry out the protocols approved therein. In the case of cucumbers, the EU limited itself to opening an

investigation into whether the Belgian authorities were late in reporting, a report that was not made public.

The communication policy of the Spanish authorities in the bacteriological outbreak was based on a late reaction based on the denial of guilt and the defence of the Spanish product. To this end, the communication actions took the form of press releases and public appearances. This reactive communication policy succeeded in convincing the Spanish population and the political opposition in Spain, but not the international horticultural market. In the case of eggs, Spain opted for a proactive communication policy, anticipating any accusations and showing transparency, coherence in the message and control of the crisis. This was not the case with the European authorities, who showed a reactive strategy, centred on blaming each other, not taking responsibility and lying.

4.- For all these reasons, it can be stressed that since the cucumber crisis, controls and the warning system have been reinforced, but that this reinforcement is insufficient, as the lack of communication between states continues to be a fact with serious consequences for the health and economy of the countries affected. The article's main contribution is that the analysis focuses not on company communication, but on the communicative work of institutions. It is a new contribution to a field, that of institutional crisis communication, whose relevance and study are more relevant today than ever.

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