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THE SPEAKER FIGURE IN THE COMMUNICATION OF A HEALTH CRISIS: THE CASE OF THE SPANISH GOVERNMENT DURING THE COVID-19

La figura del portavoz en la comunicación de una crisis sanitaria: el caso del Gobierno español durante la COVID-19

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Abstract

Throughout this paper, the exercise of the speaker role in the Government of Spain during the health crisis caused by COVID-19 is analyzed in perspective with the available theory and taking the case study as fundamental methodology. The classic variables on crisis speaker (profile, number of speakers, relation to the media and decision-making capacity or not of who should carry out this work) are evaluated in the light of the strategy followed by the Spanish Executive, concluding that a coordinated and mixed multi-voice system has been chosen. This format has raised some dysfunctions and in it highlights include Doctor Fernando Simón, the Minister of Health, Salvador Illa and the President of the Government, Pedro Sánchez. In order to be able to discuss the previous theoretical evidence, indicators are provided on the communication of this crisis and some conflicting points are collected that could serve for a future improvement of messages transmission in this type of situation. If until now it has been proven that there cannot be good crisis management without proper communication planning, in the future, the new health and ecological scenarios will generate highly mediated massive threat contexts for which the correct choice of the crisis speaker will be decisive.

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Keywords: Speaker; Crisis communication; Crisis management; Risk communication; Spain; Health crisis; COVID-19.

Resumen

A lo largo del presente artículo se analiza, en perspectiva con la teoría disponible y tomando el estudio de caso como metodología fundamental, el ejercicio de la función de portavocía en el Gobierno de España durante la crisis sanitaria provocada por la COVID-19. Las clásicas variables sobre portavocía de crisis (perfil del elegido, número de portavoces, relación con los medios y capacidad decisoria o no de quien debe desarrollar esta labor) son evaluadas a la luz de la estrategia seguida por el Ejecutivo español, concluyendo que se ha optado por un sistema de portavocía múltiple, coordinada y mixta. Este formato ha planteado algunas disfuncionalidades y en él sobresalen como personajes destacados el doctor Fernando Simón, el ministro de Sanidad, Salvador Illa y el propio presidente del Gobierno, Pedro Sánchez. A los efectos de poder discutir las evidencias teóricas previas, se aportan indicadores sobre la comunicación de esta crisis y se recogen ciertos puntos conflictivos que podrían servir para una mejora futura de la transmisión de mensajes en este tipo de situaciones. Si hasta ahora ha quedado acreditado que no puede haber una buena gestión de crisis sin una correcta planificación de la comunicación, en el futuro, los nuevos escenarios sanitarios y ecológicos generarán contextos de amenaza masiva muy mediatizados para los que la correcta elección del portavoz de la crisis resultará determinante.

Palabras clave: Portavoz; Comunicación de crisis; Gestión de crisis; Comunicación de riesgo; España; Crisis sanitaria; COVID-19.

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1. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Academic research has long been highlighting the importance of the communicative dimension in a crisis process. Its orientation towards the generation of certainties (Riorda, 2012) contributes to a positive final public perception of the government's management and minimizes the damage suffered by the institution. The political interest in this type of communication, therefore, is evident: a crisis can bring down the most popular leader.

The "testing grounds" for crisis communication have covered the most diverse fields, from natural disasters or financial collapses to strikes in key economic sectors or political scandals. In Spain, and within the health sector, there have been many crises that political officials have had to face. From rapeseed oil (1981) to "mad cow disease"

(2000) to the Ebola outbreak (2014) or the recent cases of listeriosis due to spoiled larded meat (2019), health crises have been some of the main stress situations for Moncloa and the Autonomous Communities. None of these cases, however, is as important as the one we are dealing with now. Due to its unprecedented magnitude, the situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic becomes a crucial moment for research on crisis communication, putting to the test all the manuals on the discipline.

Within this framework, our interest lies in a specific point which, among the various *issues* that comprise crisis communication, has not yet received an in-depth theoretical development: the role of the spokesperson. In this research, we start from the existing bibliography on the subject with the aim of complementing and expanding it by analyzing the case of the spokespersons of the Spanish Government during this crisis. Thus, we compare the performance of the various spokespersons in the crisis with existing theoretical postulates through the construction of indicators and the analysis of the communication carried out, and we observe various additional failures that occur during the process and that may contribute to the generation of new debates on this issue. In short, the aim is to apply theory to concrete performance in order to generate expanded scientific knowledge based on relevant evidence.

1.1. Crisis communication and risk communication as two forms of political communication: a brief review.

Political communication is not limited to the traditional sphere of electoral campaigns. The main needs of politicians are now concentrated outside the voting period and require increasing specialization in areas such as governmental communication or crisis communication, within the framework of a society of growing risks (Beck, 1992).

In this context, the objective of crisis communication is to "provide certainty and eliminate conflict" (Riorda, 2011, p. 30). For Olsson (2014, p. 9), the purpose of this type of communication is to "maintain reputation and foster resilience". The absence of strategic planning in the communicative dimension of crises can end up "transmitting alarmist messages to the population" and thus "contribute to administrations being seen as suspicious or untrustworthy" (Granda Revilla, 2015, p. 69). The reputational damage that operates on leaders and institutions as a consequence of a non-strategic crisis management without foresight has driven a wide scientific production on recommended actions in these cases. We could summarize in two main items the guidelines that are repeatedly pointed out to achieve a virtuous communicative management of crises: a) "in crisis communication the only option is the truth, even if it is painful or harmful" and b) "it is always preferable to err on the side of alarm rather than underestimate the damage or consequences" (Riorda, 2012, pp. 39-40).

Along with crisis communication, risk communication appears as "a process that involves the dissemination of information on the risks faced by a community". Risk communication is an eminently preventive and educational action that pursues, equally, to prevent the occurrence of certain damages and to accurately inform citizens in order to guide their behavior towards safe dynamics (Rosas Rodríguez and Barrios Puga,

The speaker figure in the communication of a health crisis: the case of the Spanish Government during the COVID-19

2017, p. 183). Riorda (2011, pp. 21, 33) distinguishes risk communication from crisis communication according to whether the aim is to "close a process" (in the case of the latter), or "modify perceptions and generate a change in behaviors" (for the former). The Pan American Health Organization [PAHO] defines the purpose of risk communication as "that every person exposed to a risk is able to make informed decisions to mitigate the effects of the threat, such as a disease outbreak, and to take protective and preventive measures and actions".

Table 1. *Distinction between crisis communication and risk communication.*

	Objectives	Shares	Example
Crisis communication	Closing the crisis ("exiting"). Avoid reputational damage. Provide certainty.	Creation of a crisis committee, appearances of political leaders.	Press conference of the President of the Spanish Government after the 11-M attacks (2:40 p.m. on March 11, 2004 at the Moncloa Palace).
Risk communication	Modify behaviors. To inform. Raise awareness.	Public prevention campaigns.	Institutional advertising to prevent HIV infection.

Source: own elaboration based on Riorda (2011).

1.2. The spokesperson: decisive role in the communication of a crisis.

Among the "strategic steps necessary to control the crisis as soon as possible", March Cerdá (2011, p. 65) points out the obligation to "select a spokesperson with training in public communication and who uses the arguments previously prepared by the anti-crisis management team in an appropriate, clear and precise manner". Going deeper into the importance of the spokesperson within the communication strategy to deal with a crisis, the same author identifies as one of the "most common errors in risk communication in health crises" that the organization is not able to clearly define "a person who will be a spokesperson" or that "the person who acts as spokesperson does so unprepared, without thinking about the consequences of his or her interventions" (Cerdá, 2011, p. 62).

Many crisis communication manuals from different organizations are already beginning to integrate and recognize the spokesperson as a key element to ensure the successful management of this type of situation. For example, that of the Spanish Nuclear Safety Council (CSN) postulates the need to have, as an indispensable part of the communication process, a reliable and unique spokesperson with a deep understanding of the technical aspects of the crisis (CSN, 2012, p. 25).

Among all possible crises (nuclear, natural, security...), we cannot forget that crises related to vital risk "have moved from purely health scenarios to social and political environments where the media factor becomes more relevant" (Moreno, 2008, p. 118).

The speaker figure in the communication of a health crisis: the case of the Spanish Government during the COVID-19

Because of the impact of a health crisis on the collective imagination and on the future of institutions, Crespo and Garrido (2020, p. 15) insist on the idea that "it is necessary to choose the spokespersons of the crisis carefully". They also recall the existing consensus in the protocols on the convenience that "there should be a single spokesperson to avoid contradictions in public appearances", a view in which Medina (2017, p. 64) agrees, highlighting the role of spokespersons as "face of the organization and those who humanize the message". Moreover, if the spokesperson is an "expert", it is easier for this author that "communication during a crisis is much more efficient and effective" (Medina, 2017, p. 65).

Paniagua Gallart (2012, pp. 12-13) argues that, although there is an unconscious idea that the spokesperson of the crisis should be the top leader of the organization, it is convenient to separate the usual spokesperson and leadership function from the spokesperson of a crisis, avoiding the mortgage that being forever associated with a negative crisis situation entails for the image of the leader. If we review some of the health crises in contemporary Spain (bovine spongiform encephalopathy at the beginning of the century, the influenzavirus A outbreak in 2009 or the Ebola virus in 2014), in all of them it has been the Ministers of Health of the time, Celia Villalobos, Trinidad Jiménez and Ana Mato, respectively, who have acted as spokespersons and main protagonists of crisis communication.

Possibly as a result of the limited success of crisis management strategies led by politicians, as happened with the aforementioned ministers, the current literature coincides in favor of a technical spokesperson over a political spokesperson. In the recent book *Comunicación política en tiempos de coronavirus*, the consultant Xavier Peytibi (2020, p. 13) considers it an unavoidable necessity to face a crisis "to have a good spokesperson" and that he/she "should be an expert, that is, an epidemiologist in this case, and that he/she should report on a daily basis. He has much more credibility than a political spokesman. It is a matter of being a notary and not a protagonist". Verónica Fumanal (2020, pp. 23-27) expressly reflects on the dichotomy between "expert spokesperson" and "political spokesperson" in the same book and does so on the basis of three decisive variables: "credibility, attractiveness and power". Fumanal postulates a greater suitability of the technical spokesperson to the credibility criterion, while the political spokesperson inherently has greater attractiveness and power. Underlying this dichotomy is the choice of the preferred attributes of leadership, which will be influenced by the needs of the context, depending on whether the aim is to build legitimacy via technical-scientific rationality or by the more decisive and ideological-discursive component.

In any case, the spokesperson of a crisis, whether technical or political, will be the socially recognized face of the decisions taken and will have the delicate task of transmitting all the messages that the institution constructs in this respect. Saló Lloveras (2008, p. 23) points out that "the spokesperson is not only responsible for the messages that are transmitted, but must also be involved in their elaboration in order to make them his own". There can be no successful crisis management without good communication, but neither can there be good crisis communication without a correct exercise of the

The speaker figure in the communication of a health crisis: the case of the Spanish Government during the COVID-19

spokesperson function, because "the spokesperson's performance can condition the public's perception of crisis communication management" (Crespo et al., 2017, p. 126), which is why it is increasingly necessary to focus the attention of studies on this figure.

2. OBJECTIVES

This research is based on the general objective of analyzing the crisis spokesperson function in the case of the Government of Spain during the pandemic caused by COVID-19, considering the theoretical aspects already present in studies on the subject. In order to achieve this, it will be necessary to reach and develop a series of specific objectives:

- a) To identify the spokesperson model chosen by the Spanish Government, taking into account variables such as the profile of the spokespersons, the number of spokespersons, the decision-making capacity of the spokesperson or the relationship with the media.
- b) Elaborate a series of indicators that allow us to quantify the most relevant issues of a crisis spokesperson.
- c) To know the communicative strategies of message transmission elaborated by the Government of Spain and to evaluate their implementation by the elected spokespersons, concluding those aspects that could be improved.

Achieving our catalog of objectives will allow us to answer the two research questions posed:

- I. Q1. What crisis spokesperson model has the Spanish government implemented?
- II. Q2. Has the Spanish government adjusted to the classic parameters and theoretical recommendations on the spokesperson function in a crisis?

METHODOLOGY

The methodology we will follow is the single case study, which will allow us to conduct an intensive and in-depth analysis of the selected unit (the Spanish government). Specifically, and following Lijphart (1971), our case study is of the "deviant" type. It is a descriptive investigation of a crucial case that tests the most frequent theoretical recommendations due to its extraordinary nature with respect to the rest of the typical cases usually dealt with in this field of research. In this sense, our exercise could also be considered a "theory-weakening" case study. By choosing a case study as a research methodology, it is not necessary to formulate hypotheses, there is no possibility of contrast, but it is pertinent to put forward a theoretical proposition, which is as follows: *the Spanish government has moved away from the recommended theoretical model of crisis spokespersonship. And this has happened because of the exceptional nature of this crisis, which is different from any situation previously studied and which, because of its devastating effects and transversal impact, constitutes in itself a challenge to the accumulation of previous academic evidence.*

Along with a general description of the method followed, the research techniques applied with their corresponding sources of information were: in-depth theoretical review

The speaker figure in the communication of a health crisis: the case of the Spanish Government during the COVID-19

of the available bibliography; daily analysis by the research team of the press conferences during a selected time period (from March 12 to April 26, the peak of the crisis); systematization of the content of the videos available on the YouTube platform or on Moncloa's network profiles involving the transmission of messages; monitoring of media reports on the spokesperson's actions during the crisis; construction of indicators based on the analysis carried out and by treating data provided by the Secretariat of State for Communication in different reports.

4. DISCUSSION. RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

4.1. The election of the spokesperson

One of the most important decisions to correctly manage crisis communication is the choice of spokesperson. This decision involves, first of all, the question of whether it is more appropriate for the work to be carried out by a single person or, on the contrary, by several (choral spokesperson). Secondly, the other big question to ask when it comes to appointing our crisis spokesperson is whether he or she should have a technical or political profile, giving priority to political leadership or professional *expertise*.

This double debate is one of the main threads of this section, applied to a specific context, the Spanish government's management of the Covid-19 crisis.

4.1.1. How many spokespersons?

In the decisions taken by the Government of Spain it is possible to identify, in addition to Fernando Simón (the director of the Emergency and Health Alert Coordination Center), the main image of the communication of this crisis, the President of the Government, Pedro Sánchez and the Minister of Health, Salvador Illa, up to four other regular spokespersons: Miguel Villarroya (Chief of Defence Staff), José Ángel González (Commissioner General of the National Police), Laurentino Ceña (Lieutenant General of the Civil Guard) and María José Rallo (Secretary General of Transport and Mobility). If in the first phase of the crisis (January-February 2020), the appearances were led exclusively by Fernando Simón, with Minister Illa reinforcing Simón's communication with media interviews, after the declaration of the state of alarm, Simón began to be accompanied by the members of the so-called "Technical Management Committee", second-level policy makers or officials with senior positions belonging to various relevant thematic areas. The members of the Technical Management Committee were joined by recurrent appearances of the different ministers (up to 53 between March 15 and April 26), especially of those members of the Government who made up the "Single Command", and two press conferences of the "health officials": María José Sierra, of the Center for the Coordination of Health Alerts and Emergencies (Sierra has come to replace Simón as the main spokesperson when he fell ill); Patricia Lacruz (director general of Basic Portfolio and Pharmacy of the Ministry of Health); María Jesús Lamas (director of the Spanish Medicines Agency); Raquel Yotti (director of the Carlos III Health Institute) and Rodrigo Gutiérrez (director general of Professional Management of the Ministry of Health).

The speaker figure in the communication of a health crisis: the case of the Spanish Government during the COVID-19

In total, nine people have acted as spokespersons at some point during the crisis, plus the President of the Government and the ministers. Not all the spokespersons have had the same relevance nor have their appearances been equally recurrent. Some have only appeared on a couple of occasions, and Fernando Simón has undoubtedly been the main spokesman of what could be identified as a system of coordinated, multiple and mixed spokespersons. The technical part has been led by Dr. Simón and the political part has fallen to the President himself and the Minister of Health.

Although it is advisable that the spokesperson be a single spokesperson (Cf. Costa-Sánchez and López-García, 2020: 5) to avoid duplication and chaotic discourse, the government strategy has opted to present multiple voices to society, although not all of them were on the same hierarchical level. It is important that the different actors managing (and suffering) the crisis know who the official government spokesperson is, "someone with prestige and recognition in society, not just any improvised politician" (Cf. Medina, 2017, p. 64). What it is about is that the receivers of communication know "to whom they should turn to demand information" (Cf. Medina, 2017, p. 64). In this sense, even with the presence of a wide distribution of specific spokespersons, the Government of Spain would have been right in the designation of Fernando Simón as the main spokesperson, as he has been recognized by the citizens as a whole, becoming the focus of both praise (in a process of generating personal branding worthy of analysis) and criticism from society and political groups.

The choral spokesperson model has generated moments of confusion, such as continuous derivations of the same question between different spokespersons, as a result of their lack of knowledge of each other's areas of competence. If the objective of crisis communication is to provide certainty to the people who listen to you, seeing ministers passing questions to each other is certainly not the best strategy. The more spokespersons appear at the same time and over time, the more likely it is that there will be errors. However, even if it goes against the theory, it is understandable that the Spanish Executive chose to have several spokespersons given the cross-cutting nature of this crisis, which affected many governmental tasks, not because of the health issue, but because of the consequences derived from it.

All of the above is based on the premise that communication (including crisis and risk communication) must be adapted to its context, and this context has been a true "total crisis" that has put the most established academic theories to the test. In general, it is advisable that the number of spokespersons be as few as possible and, if it is unique, the better. First, because it is easier to homogenize and prepare the message when there are few spokespersons; second, because, for the public, the coexistence of two or more transmitting voices makes communication more complicated as a general matter; third, because each person communicates in a different way and it is important that the receivers of the message (the citizens) adapt to the way a spokesperson communicates so that they can understand the message more easily; and, fourth, because the same thing happens with the media: not all politicians, spokespersons and experts relate in the same way with the media and it is essential that there is a certain synergy so that the "translation" of our message is as faithful as possible.

The speaker figure in the communication of a health crisis: the case of the Spanish Government during the COVID-19

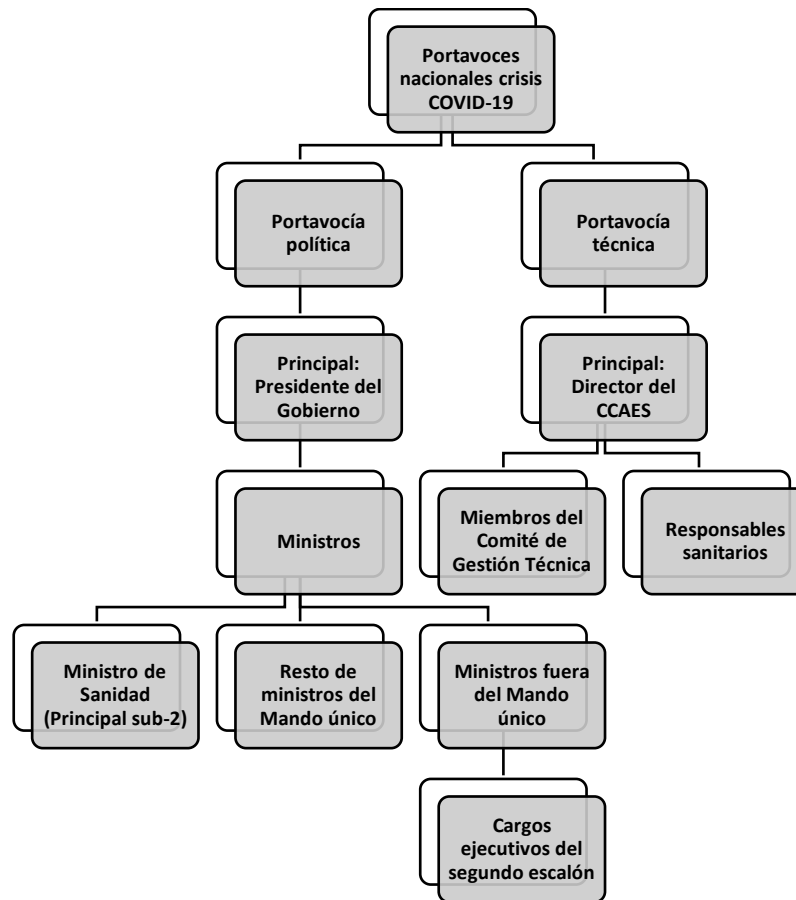


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the system of mixed coordinated multiple spokespersonship in the health crisis by COVID-19 at the level of the Government of Spain.

Source: own elaboration.

4.1.2. The profile of the spokesperson

Let's talk first about the choice of the technical spokesman. The person who perfectly represents this figure is none other than Fernando Simón. One of the most relevant reasons for the crisis spokesman to be an expert or a technician is that he brings legitimacy to the management process. As is evident, the fact that the person who speaks to the citizens is a professional in the field generates tranquility and certainty in the population, brings confidence and confidence is a very valuable asset for any organization in times of crisis.

The main problem of the technical spokesperson arises from his own virtue: he exposes the technical criterion (Aboud, 2020). If the spokesperson is one of the people who knows the most about the matter at the center of the crisis, it is logical that he/she has some kind of decision-making power. Appearing publicly exposes him/her and

The speaker figure in the communication of a health crisis: the case of the Spanish Government during the COVID-19

makes it easier for the media and public opinion in general to further question the decisions and actions taken. It puts a face on the main expert and this can affect good management due to a kind of media burnout syndrome. The technical spokesperson is the one who provides the necessary knowledge to come out of the crisis (and come out of it without damage) (Aboud, 2020). It is therefore too important a value to be exposed to public criticism.

There is one issue for which the technical spokesperson may be the best option: risk communication. As the person with the greatest knowledge of the subject, the protocols and the real risks, he/she is the one who can best convey to the population the recommendations, the prescribed behaviors and the awareness of the dangers. We cannot forget that the wear and tear generated by a crisis is exponentially greater than that of ordinary management, since the effects of the crisis have such an aggressive impact on the population that emotions are triggered. For a civil servant or expert, however, this is a much lesser danger, since not being elected by the population and not standing for future elections, his position does not depend on his good public assessment. However, the effects on a personal level must be taken into account.

Sometimes it happens that a technical spokesman, a scientist, can be a communicative phenomenon. Fernando Simón has been the figure of the technical spokesman in this crisis and also the most important spokesman of the crisis. Simón arrived as a non-ideologized and non-partisan person. He had been spokesman in the Ebola crisis, managed by a government of a different political color and this, moreover, made him well-known throughout the country. However, the evolution of Simon's spokespersonship has certainly been novel with respect to other crises analyzed in the literature: he has become a phenomenon in social networks, what some call a pop icon (Gil, 2020). Simón is not and is not expected to be a specialist in political communication, and this is something that has played in favor of his public image. His naturalness and spontaneity have been a key value that has led users to create thousands of memes on networks such as Twitter (usually positive) with the figure of the spokesman, as Gil pointed out (2020). In the end, the technician has managed to convey a naturalness and leadership that would be typical of the political sphere. However, although we may find Simon's "pop phenomenon" pleasant and likeable, it corresponds to a phenomenon of conflicting politicization that runs the risk of weakening his technical criteria.

Moving on to the choice of the political spokesperson, it is important to emphasize that the objectives of his actions are essentially different from those of the technical spokesperson. The political spokesman of this crisis, without the figure of the president, has been the Minister of Health, Salvador Illa. He appeared practically every day and was the political support of Dr. Simon. Although it would be classic to call Minister Illa the only political spokesman, the truth is that President Pedro Sánchez has clearly acted as spokesman with extensive press conferences never seen before. And it is logical that this has been the case; the highest figure of the Executive had to appear to explain the highest-ranking measures such as, for example, the declaration of the state of alarm (press conference of March 13). What we can conclude is that, either because of the

The speaker figure in the communication of a health crisis: the case of the Spanish Government during the COVID-19

particularities of the crisis or because of Moncloa's strategy, the political spokespersonship has also been multiple and hierarchical. The main issuer of messages has been the President of the Government, followed by the Minister of Health, then the Ministers of the Single Command (Interior, Defense and Transport) and, finally, the rest of the members of the Executive.

Finally, the selection of a political spokesperson may be interesting considering the idea of crisis as an opportunity for leadership, as a moment of intensive public exposure and attention (2003, p. 140). Many politicians, says Canel (2010, p. 244), have improved and strengthened their leadership in the face of a tremendously complicated situation that they finally managed successfully. Perhaps the most recent case is that of the mayor of Madrid, José Luis Martínez Almeida, crisis spokesman of his institution and leader who has been able to make the most of the management of an a priori negative scenario.

Table 2. *The different profiles of the spokesperson.*

Type of spokesperson	Attributes	Examples
Political Spokesperson	Leadership, ideological dimension, authority. More communicative capacity.	Alfredo Pérez Rubalcaba, Vice President of the Government during the air traffic controllers' crisis (2010).
Technical spokesperson	Rational legitimacy, objectivity, scientific basis, trust.	Fernando Simón, in the second part of the Ebola crisis (2014) and in the COVID-19 crisis (2020).

Source: own elaboration.

The technical-political dichotomy also encompasses certain issues related to the communicative skills of each, but these will be dealt with in another section 3.3 of this paper.

4.2. The relationship between the spokesperson and the media

As in any political process, crisis communication must take into account the role played by the media. They are not only transmitters of information; politically, their actions can strengthen or weaken the government's position and, from a pedagogical point of view, the necessary action to raise social awareness of the crisis will require their active collaboration.

The speaker figure in the communication of a health crisis: the case of the Spanish Government during the COVID-19

How, then, should we understand the relationship between the media and the spokesperson? In line with the reviewed theory, any communication carried out by the government in these contexts should be oriented to the generation of certainties. This implies assuming that a crisis situation generates doubts in the citizenry, of which the media will be the spokespersons, a fact that forces the relationship with the media not to be unidirectional, but dialogic (Cf. Costa-Sánchez and López-García, 2020: 5), systematically responding to their questions. This listening and response on the part of the government must be guided by scrupulous transparency, which does not give rise to the feeling that the executive is trying to avoid accountability.

The availability and resolution of doubts on the part of the government to the media must have a certain depth and be intensive. The establishment of complex processes or filters to gain access to the spokesperson of the crisis is counterproductive. The media, therefore, should be facilitated in their work of control and consultation with the Executive, not only by avoiding the aforementioned filters, but also by adapting within reason to some of its dynamics (schedules of special informative relevance, favorable formats for press conferences, etc.) and providing security in dealing with them.

Our analysis in this section will start from the assumptions established in the previous paragraphs to show a series of indicators that will allow us to determine the suitability of the relationship between government spokespersons and the media during the coronavirus crisis in Spain. The existence of bidirectionality between spokesperson and media will be measured by counting the number of appearances in which questions were accepted over the total number of appearances; the intensity of the dynamic of questions and answers, through indicators such as the average number of questions accepted per appearance, the ratio between total time of appearance and duration of question time or the interviews granted to the media. Finally, we will consider the Government's adaptation to the guidelines of the media and the facilitation of its work by looking at the compliance with the announced time of appearance and the format established for the press conferences. The indicators will be applied, on the one hand, to the appearances of the technical committee and, on the other, to those of the President of the Government himself. As a source, we have used the report *Appearances on the COVID 19 coronavirus after the declaration of the state of alarm* prepared by the Secretariat of State for Communication, and the videos of the press conferences uploaded to the YouTube platform by various media.

In the case of the President of the Government (see Table 3), between March 12 and April 26, there have been eleven appearances in a total of forty-five days, of which ten had question time, with an average duration of approximately one hour and about half of the time dedicated to answering the questions posed by journalists, with around nine turns per appearance. It is undeniable that there has been reciprocity in the communication between Pedro Sánchez, in his role as political spokesman of the crisis, and the media, as well as a certain depth in it. The negative side of these figures is how the abundance of presidential appearances (one every four days on average) added to their long duration can cause an effect of information saturation, which makes citizens lose interest or increase their negative assessment of the administration.

The speaker figure in the communication of a health crisis: the case of the Spanish Government during the COVID-19

Indicators of the relationship between spokespersons and the media for Pedro Sánchez.

2

Number of appearances	11
Appearances with question time	10 / 11
Average length of appearances	00:54:28
Average duration of question time	00:29:19
Average % of time spent on questions during the hearing	53,78%
Average number of question turns per appearance	8,7

Source: own elaboration.

On the other hand, we do not include in the table the issues of the format of the question time in the appearances or the compliance with the announced time of appearance due to their difficult quantification, but they are also indicators of our study. First of all, the multiple delays in the presidential appearances before the press (in some cases they reached hours) should be highlighted. But perhaps the most notorious was the method of selecting questions at the press conferences. Criticized by various media and journalists³, this initially consisted of sending the questions via WhatsApp to a chat opened by the Secretary of State for Communication, whose head, Miguel Ángel Oliver, chose those he considered "representative of the most reiterated topics". Subsequently, these questions were formulated aloud by the Secretary of State himself at the presidential press conferences for response by Pedro Sánchez⁴ or the corresponding spokesperson. Prior knowledge of the questions allowed members of the government to plan answers and, implicitly, established an arbitrary filter through which the government could select only the most convenient questions. This system contrasted with those chosen by other opposition political leaders and governments in other countries. Following the controversy generated, the Government would modify the process of selecting questions⁵, allowing journalists to enter live via video call and thus be able to ask their questions to members of the Government, distributing the turns to speak randomly among the usual media.

² We exclude from the calculation of the percentage of time devoted to questions and the average duration of the appearance the television appearance of Pedro Sánchez on March 13, since no questions were allowed and it was atypical, with only seven minutes devoted exclusively to communicating the declaration of the state of alarm.

³ Palomera, E., & Castro, I. (2020). Press conferences in times of pandemic: Moncloa selects questions in writing and Arrimadas and Casado respond by video call. *Eldiario.es*. Retrieved from https://www.eldiario.es/politica/coronavirus-moncloa-videollamadas-casado-arrimadas_1_1009263.html

⁴ The journalists were not present in the room, given the obligation to stay at home and avoid crowds.

⁵ The Government rectifies and will allow direct questions from journalists. (2020). *El País*. Retrieved from <https://elpais.com/espana/2020-04-05/el-gobierno-rectifica-y-permitira-preguntas-directas-de-los-periodistas.html>.

The speaker figure in the communication of a health crisis: the case of the Spanish Government during the COVID-19

For the analysis of the appearances of the Technical Committee, the sources used are the same. The first appearance analyzed was held on March 16 and the last one on April 26.

When dealing with issues more related to the day-to-day management of the pandemic (less transcendental and solemn matters), the Technical Committee appears more frequently than the President of the Government. With the exception of one day in the period analyzed, the dynamics followed was the daily appearance, with forty-one press conferences in total during the period analyzed. The average duration was around three quarters of an hour, somewhat less than the presidential appearances, and both the average length of the question time and the percentage of the same over the total time of the appearance was less than in the case of the president's appearances. However, the average number of questions answered is practically the same.

Indicators of the relationship between spokespersons and the media for the Technical Committee.

Number of appearances	41
Appearances with question time	41 / 41
Average length of appearances	00:47:05
Average duration of question time	00:18:21
Average % of time spent on questions during the hearing	38,70%
Average number of question turns per appearance	8,87

Source: own elaboration.

Once again we observe that (Table 4), indeed, the aforementioned bidirectionality between technical spokespersons and the press is present, with an appreciable level of depth (extensive and daily press conferences). The stumbling blocks in the relationship between spokespersons and the media would be, once again, in the format of questions. Even though in the case of the Technical Committee the controversy that arose with the press conferences of the Head of Government was not generated, being of a less political nature, the initial format of questions read by the Secretary of State for Communication is repeated. In the case of the Committee, there have also been, on occasions, delays in the announced time of appearance.

Before concluding this section, it is important to point out that, for a correct relationship with the media, it is advisable for spokespersons to undergo *media* training, as it provides communication skills when addressing the media and citizens, which are fundamental in the training of a spokesperson.

The construction of the message appears as one of the most important factors that must be trained (Cf. Sánchez, 2016, p. 183). Arguments or compilations of replies can be used, as if it were an electoral communication, and some aspects such as clarity of

The speaker figure in the communication of a health crisis: the case of the Spanish Government during the COVID-19

language, non-divagation or moderation when providing figures must be taken care of (Cf. Sánchez, 2004, p. 95).

For the success of the messages, it is also important to choose correctly the channel to be used in their broadcasting, giving priority in crisis situations to "the most direct and quickest unipersonal channels", resorting to "multiple (wheel) or individual models (messages to each of the media, including agencies)" (Moreno, 2008, p. 121). Because of the need to inform in real time and with a certain degree of immediacy, it is necessary to make live appearances. Studying the performance in this field of the Spanish Government in the Covid-19 crisis, we find that the main model chosen to convey the messages has been the live telematic press conference, for all the media, also broadcast in streaming through networks, all from the Moncloa Palace. Also noteworthy was the planning of media interviews with the various political spokespersons of the crisis.

However, during this pandemic, the Government has made use of other forms of communication that overlapped crisis and risk communication with governmental communication. The Executive has carried out an important institutional communication campaign with spots, advertising and slogans⁶ that mixed awareness of the virus (risk communication) with the political narrative that it wanted to install in society.

4.3. Communication skills and decision-making power in the spokesperson's role

Among the multiple alternatives for the crisis spokesperson, one of the questions that arises is whether the spokesperson should have a markedly communicative profile or be one of the persons with authority when it comes to deciding how to manage the crisis. This dichotomy deepens the one that has been classically discussed on technical or political spokespersonship and which we have had the opportunity to address in section 3.1.2.

In the first case, we would be talking about communication or journalism professionals, personnel with specific training or experience in the media field. The advantages are obvious; the spokesperson will know how to communicate naturally and avoid mistakes in front of the media caused by lack of experience with them. However, it is clear that someone with the profile we have indicated does not necessarily have to be an expert in the subject matter of the crisis, besides giving the impression that, by choosing a person exclusively in charge of the spokesperson function, the Government avoids having to face the crisis personally.

Regarding the election of a person with decision-making authority in crisis management, we should consider that this may be expected by the public (the decision-maker is accountable for his or her decisions), and may also generate a certain sense of

⁶ With the use of a narrative and slogans in the style of government communication, the Government of Spain has defied the absence of slogans that, according to theory (Riorda, 2011, p. 38), characterizes crisis communication.

The speaker figure in the communication of a health crisis: the case of the Spanish Government during the COVID-19

security due to his or her position in the hierarchy. However, such a position will normally be political and, in contexts of democracies with high rates of disaffection, this will call into question the credibility of the spokesperson. Thus, for certain complicated situations, citizens may prefer less politically connected people, which, in addition, avoids the risk of the chosen political office "burning out". We must also distinguish political accountability from crisis spokespersonship.

In the Spanish case, the appearances made by ministers or the president himself correspond to the model of political spokesperson of the position with decision-making power ("the one who manages, explains and appears"). At the height of the crisis, the appearance of Pedro Sánchez was practically a mandatory requirement, given the magnitude of the crisis. More questionable is the appearance of different ministers beyond the Minister of Health because, although they dealt with issues related to their departments, this generated a multiplication of the number of spokespersons, which was not very efficient at a communicative level.

Regarding the appearances of Fernando Simón and other members of the Technical Committee without a political position in the Government, we must qualify the question of decision-making power. All the members of the Technical Committee occupy an important place in the hierarchy of crisis management, but the ultimate power of decision corresponds to the ministerial political level. Undoubtedly, the communication carried out by spokespersons of this profile removed (at least initially) the distrust, but there were cases of controversy caused by the lack of skill of some of the spokespersons in the relationship with the media (remember, for example, the allusion to the persecution of hoaxes against the Government by the representative of the Guardia Civil).

5. CONCLUSIONS

The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 can be understood as a "total crisis" that has put all existing communication manuals to the test. In this novel context, which has no parallel with any health threat situation in recent years, the figure of the spokesperson has emerged as a key element in the communication strategy of governments.

Spain has been one of the countries most affected by the coronavirus and also where the most restrictive decisions have been taken by the government. Transmitting the right messages, reporting on the evolution of the situation and transmitting recommendations and regulations to the population is a task as complicated as it is essential to control the spread of the virus and to be able to close the crisis in the shortest possible time. The Spanish Executive has defied the theory on crisis spokespersons and has opted for a model with multiple and mixed spokespersons, including at the same time and underhandedly both political and technical people, in an exercise of specialization that connects with the cross-cutting nature of the crisis. However, the choral system of spokespersons has too often generated information noise, saturation and contradictions. In addition, many of the spokespersons did not have excessive communication and

The speaker figure in the communication of a health crisis: the case of the Spanish Government during the COVID-19

media skills. All this leads us to reaffirm the need to transform and resignify, for the spokesperson function, the concept of expert from the current conception of a person who professionally masters the subject to a profile of expert in communication that effectively conveys the messages constructed, without prejudice to the fact that it is the scientists who make up the management and decision-making committees. The failures detected in the Spanish Government's communication could certainly have been minimized with a simpler spokesperson system (tending almost to a single spokesperson) and with primacy of the communicative aspect over the technical one, exclusively in the media field, not in management.

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The speaker figure in the communication of a health crisis: the case of the Spanish Government during the COVID-19

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