



## FROM ABATIÁ TO XAMBRÊ: THE ACTIVITY OF THE MUNICIPAL LEGISLATIVE HOUSES ON FACEBOOK AND THE PRESENCE OF THE CONCEPTS OF PROXIMITY, TRANSPARENCY, AND ACCOUNTABILITY IN PUBLIC COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract:** This article discusses how the Municipal Parliaments of Paraná integrates practices of accountability, proximity and transparency with dynamics established by Facebook. This is a tool used to expand the relationship between politicians and citizenships through digital public communication. The research monitored the legislative fanpages from three stages: mapping the existence of parliamentary pages on Facebook, scraping posts for 60 days and analyzing of the contents. The research made a systematic observation of 3,832 posts publicized by 130 municipal parliaments in their fanpages. The results indicate different uses by institutions, focus on politicians, prevalence of session transmissions and low level of dialogue.

**Keywords:** Parliaments; Public Communication; City Council; Facebook; Paraná.

### 1 Introduction

The use of the online environment by public institutions offers democratic gains, primarily because the technology allows an amplified participation of society in the decision-making, enabling palpable changes (LESTON-BANDEIRA, 2012; MITOZO, 2018). Additionally, it helps with visibility and the construction of the public image (BARROS; BERNARDES; RODRIGUES, 2015), especially when such institutions have a negative image before the citizens. Silva and Christopoulos (2013) highlighted that City Councils face discredit for being institutions thought of as the place of clientelistic negotiations for maintaining strongholds. This observation shows an institution with no credibility, with communication being an even more important agent within the municipal scope.

Although the analysis of the use of digital technologies by the institutions may be backed by different theoretical discussions, be it from the viewpoint of political participation or the representation processes - or even observing different spaces that are not necessarily the digital social networks -, in this article, the proposed articulation is between the practice of online public communication enabled by social networks and the way the parliament members introduce elements that denote proximity to the citizens, transparency of the management, and

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accountability relative to the developed actions<sup>3</sup>. This is an empirical observation of how public communication is practiced, focusing, in this case, on the municipal legislative houses.

The unfolding of this article is a way to complement the literature that dwells on understanding the practices and concepts of public communication. If, on the one hand, there is a vast network of reflections on public communication that take place from the theoretical viewpoint (DUARTE, 2012), on the other hand, there is also a group of studies that verifies in practice how such a concept is applied in the day-to-day of the communication produced by the various institutions (MATOS, 2012). With this article, the intention is to verify how the concept is materialized within the scope of legislative institutions, but not just that. It is also sought to reflect on how the combination with the proposals of proximity, transparency, and accountability allows perceiving the applicability of the concept by the agencies - in the case of the public sector - and facilitates the understanding of how communication may, indeed, be public when carried out by institutions such as the legislative houses. For this reason, the focus of the text falls upon the three previously mentioned axes. The text not only analyzes how they are developed and appropriated by the communication teams of the City Councils but shows how they contribute and associate with the discussions on public communication.

Additionally, the focus on social networks is a reflection of the changes perceived in recent years both in the behavior of the institutions (SOARES; CARLOMAGNO, 2018), which migrated to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and in the public itself, which started to aggregate functionalities to such tools. According to data from CETIC (2019), 134 million Brazilians are connected, which represents 74% of Brazilians over ten years old. The data also show that people spend a significant part of their time on social networks, which lose only to the message exchange applications (CETIC, 2019), rendering the use of such spaces by the institutions effective if the goal is to improve the relationship with the representatives. Another important datum is that the search for information in the digital environment (PEW RESEARCH CENTER, 2020) and the trust deposited on the contents (VALORES EM CRISE, 2020) have increased.

Hence, the fan pages of the City Councils were analyzed from three empirical steps. The first step considered the survey of the fan pages of the 399 municipalities in Paraná, Brazil. This mapping of the existence or not of pages was carried out from June to September 2019. From this, data were obtained that 130 City Councils had available fan pages. In this sense, the delimitation of the corpus considered the extraction of the contents published on these 130 active pages and with publications during sixty days (in October and November of the same year). It is important to mention that we opted for a "neutral" period in which it would be possible to apprehend the

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<sup>3</sup> The broader research, which is in its finalization phase, monitors various characteristics of how City Councils act on *Facebook*. However, the objective herein is to relate the concept of public communication with the main practices displayed by the legislative houses, excluding the discussion on engagement and interaction and also on the professionalization of the contents.

communication routine of the legislative institutions. As a result of this data collection, the analysis of 3,832 posts made during the two months was carried out in sequence, from a book of codes previously elaborated based on Content Analysis (KRIPPENDORFF, 2018; BAUER, 2018; SAMPAIO; LICARIÃO, 2018).

## **2 Public communication applied to legislative institutions**

Public Communication may be understood as the communication practiced in the democratic public space (MATOS, 2011; DUARTE, 2011), which includes the Legislative Branch. However, according to the literature, due to various aspects and meanings, the concept, which is broad, holds varied conceptions, some simpler and others more complex (MATOS, 2011). According to Oliveira (2004), the term has already been used as a synonym of government communication, being a counterpoint to the precepts of private media; however, one must not detain oneself on the sender of the message (MIOLA; MARQUES, 2018). Zémor (1995) defines the concept by the legitimacy of general interest. Hence, communication takes place in the public space, under the eyes of the citizen. In a synthesis attempt, Brandão (2007) maintained that the production of information predicts constructing citizenship, far beyond the communication of government agencies, precisely that which corroborates for there not to be a focus on the sender to define what is or is not public communication.

Even though, for a period, the communication connected to government agencies was directly related to propaganda, in the perspective of Brandão (2012), nowadays, the common point that all approaches have is that it is a process that pervades the State, the government, and society (MATOS, 2007) - thus much more connected to the nature of the message than to the type of sender - and is of general interest (ZÉMOR, 2005). In the case of this thesis, a government agency, the municipal legislative branch, is considered as the agent - even though this is not indeed the defining feature. It is fundamental to reinforce that the legislative houses place themselves agencies that, due to their functionality, must cherish public communication. And, since the focus is on the communication carried out through the fan page, we seek to verify only one face of this concept since it may materialize in other messages that use other media - other than the digital - to reach the citizens.

In an attempt to materialize such a broad concept that may be applied to different institutions, Zémor (2005) highlighted how it is possible to establish public communication, which directly converses with the concepts of transparency, accountability, and proximity that are fundamental to government agencies. To Zémor (2005), there must be the establishment of dialogue, the provision of services, the presentation and promotion of services rendered by the administration, the disclosure of the institution, making it known, the disclosure of civic actions of general interest, and the communication about decision-making processes.

Duarte (2011; 2012) followed with the concept anchored on public interest. According to

the author, the fundamental idea of Public Communication adds itself to the role of improving the lives of people through communication, which goes beyond the only sense of providing data. In other words, the goal is to allow the citizen to get to know even the pieces of information they do not deem to know, and, from that, to be able to "express their positions with the certainty that they will be heard with interest", in a perspective of actively participating in the dialogue (DUARTE, 2012, p. 64). Considering legislative institutions, receiving public interest information is fundamental for it to be possible indeed to exist participation of the citizens in a subsequent step.

The assumption is reiterated by Matos (2011), but the author defends not reducing public communication to a unilateral process of mere transmission. Therefore, public communication must take place as a political process of interaction. That is to say that the value of dialogue is added to the public interest of the contents. Considering the legislative branch, according to Howlett (1995), the communication of the citizen with their representative may reduce the asymmetry that exists between the demand and the satisfaction upon the deployment of the public policies, involving the State and society. To Leston-Bandeira (2012), legislative communication is efficient when it provokes new political behaviors, particularly in the narrowing of the relationship of the representatives with the public opinion and civil society. A practical example is polls created on profiles of institutions on digital networks, with the City Councils of Curitiba and São Paulo using such a mechanism frequently, seeking to create spaces for interaction. However, the dialogical relationships are far from being an everyday practice of public communication, even more so within a local scope, which will be discussed in the data analysis.

Another fundamental matter that traverses the discussion on public communication refers to the private, personalist, and strategic interests of image formation that may outweigh the public interest. Miola and Marques (2017) sought to define public communication thinking of presenting criteria to classify and differentiate the strategic and democratic-normative bias of the term. On the one hand, there are initiatives aiming to contribute with practices that approximate the citizens to the institutions, besides increasing the transparency and accounting, while, on the other, there is a strategic dimension of institutional communication with the use of personalized image policy.

The parliaments are also inserted in this clash. The publicized contents contribute to form the image of the institutions since, according to Weber (2004, p. 262), "information and signals are strategically constructed as the actions of public institutions and subjects (information, propaganda, events, attitudes)". In other words, public communication is capable of improving the image of the institutions, with the decline in trust being a result of little-responsive communication practices (FAIRBANKS et al., 2017), which fits the reality of legislative houses. On the other hand, the contents may be used to build personalized images of the actors that belong - temporarily - to such institutions.

Relative to digital public communication, upon observing the communication carried out

by the government of the state of Bahia, Amaral (2014) noticed that such images linked to propaganda and distant from the public dimension were frequent. For this research, the example would be of the focus on the city councilors and not on the institutional actions. Barros and Miola (2015) verified that, in the case of the government of Sergipe, the coexistence between a public dimension of communication via Twitter and a strategic dimension focused on propaganda and not on transparency was perceptible. In the case of municipal governments, Graham and Avery (2013) noticed that, in the USA, the focus was on Twitter and Facebook, but with a limited use focused on events, thus being underused. A similar result was brought by Zeng and Zeng (2014), indicating that, in China, the governments used microblogs to distribute contents that emphasized personal promotion and not services or interaction with the citizens. Hence, it becomes fundamental to understand to what extent the municipal legislative houses in Brazil carry out public communication and what type of information is offered to the citizens.

### **2.1 The interface with the concepts of proximity, transparency, and accountability**

The crisis in representation is a finding of the current political scenario. And the parliaments are not left out. To Faria and Rehbein (2016), a way to mitigate this panorama is to use tools that promote transparency, accountability, and participation. In the case of this research, the term proximity was used to account for elements that denote more timid initiatives of relationship with the public, even if effectively there is no participation of the citizens in the decisions made by the parliament members. The three concepts compose the tripod to support effective public communication in the case of legislative institutions.

In the case of transparency, Margetts (2011) reinforced that it is linked to the concepts of openness and vigilance and may both strengthen democracy and cause uncertainty in governance and less trust in the institutions. Despite the existence of other transparency mechanisms, the Internet - and social networks especially - has led to important changes in the relationship between citizens and government (MARGETTS, 2011). Authors such as Filgueiras (2011) and Gomes, Amorim, and Almada (2018) have highlighted the importance of resuming the principle of publicity since transparency would be only part of this broader concept, which would have a greater capacity to improve the democratic processes.

Regarding the relationship with communication, such a concept may appear in various forms. One of them is when there is the transmission of the sessions, which is already common through legislative TV channels - which, even with a deficient transmission and few resources, allows citizens to monitor the day-to-day of the institution (BARRETO, 2019) - and stands out in other digital means such as the live feeds and other forms of content distribution that increment institutional transparency (BERTOT et al., 2010). At the same time, content production may offer information on budgets, disclose events and the calendar of the city council, use direct data, or mention the Transparency Portal. The explanation about the procedures or information on the

functioning of the legislative House also corroborates to render the institution more transparent and watched by the citizens, following the perspective of the key concepts posed by Margetts (2011).

Before treating it as a concept, Gomes, Amorim, and Almada (2017) described transparency as a metaphor for that which is allowed to be seen. "A transparent body is that which allows objects that, from the viewpoint of the observer, are behind this body, to be seen through it" (GOMES; AMORIM; ALMADA, 2017, p. 26). Hence, there is transparency as long as there is external control of the act beyond who practiced it. According to Amorim (2012), historically, Sweden was the pioneer country in the world in recognizing the right to access to information, doing so through a law on the right to information enacted in 1766. It provided for the right to access government documents through the press, which would bring the data to the public. Over 200 years later, governments have used more and more the resources of the Internet to cope with the demands to make public the investments, expenditures, and decisions, especially through electronic portals. More classically, in Brazil, the Law on Access to Information (Law No. 12527 of November 18, 2011) is an ally of the population concerned in making demands from those who hold power. The law compels government agencies to offer public information to the community, guaranteeing information on expenditures, budgets, and the names and salaries of the employees of various government agencies throughout the country (BRAZIL, 2016).

However, it is worth recalling that there are other analytical layers to be observed besides expenditures when considering the transparency of Legislative Houses. This justifies looking at social networks and seeing beyond a reinterpretation of the mandatory transparency of the institutions. It means that the transparency portals are not transparent in themselves but become transparent through the disclosure of previously comprised data. Moreover, publicity may also be analyzed as a disclosure instrument (SILVA, 2011), given that information, especially that of easy understanding by the public, is a step for more considerable participation in the parliaments (MARQUES, 2008). It is necessary to have information to participate effectively.

According to Gomes (2011), the presentation of actions and results of the initiatives to stimulate more participation using the available tools is also a form of transparency. To Schedler (1999) and Mitozo (2018), this process is called responsiveness, which is one of the aspects of accountability. This concept predicts the obligation of power to be exercised transparently and, consequently, justifying the actions. For responsiveness to occur, the legislative institutions must maintain some level of dialogue with their agents, bringing answers to the citizens. Therefore, the advances in information technology reconfigure the relationship of society with public data, given that they potentiated the possibility for the common citizen to monitor acts of corruption and hold the political agents liable, besides contributing to the decision-making processes. Hence, there are many ways to foster transparency, with digital public communication being just one of them.

Regarding accountability, Campos (1999) stated that there is no literal translation, but it

comprises the notion of liability of the State before the citizens. Schedler (1999) stated that the concept is comprehensive. In turn, Valente (2004) defended that the term accountability involves not only liability but also accounting. In other words, it is a way to create demand mechanisms and internal and external controls so the State may be demanded by civil society and regulating agencies. And transparency may, therefore, be an attribute for the processing of the information that will be observed and, posteriorly, will favor the control of the acts. To Schedler (1999), more than denoting a technique, it encompasses ways to prevent and correct the abuse of political power, which implying subjecting the power to the threat of sanctions, compelling it to be exercised transparently, and forcing it to justify its acts. However, Amorim (2012) drew attention that accountability does not guarantee the functioning of an efficient government.

For some authors such as Filgueiras (2011), the study of accountability, allied to the concepts of transparency and publicity, may provide an explanation for a model in which political agents and the various social groups establish a harmonious relationship in which public representatives would carry out their accounting based on the interests and demands of the different social layers of their constituents. Bringing it again to the legislative case, the chairs of the city councils, for example, may use this concept to render an account of their actions before the parliaments, from justifying expenditures with travel allowances - a factor widely criticized in the municipal sphere - until the savings carried out within the scope of the legislative houses. The important thing is to use the accounting for the community to be aware of the events and, in many cases, to change opinions from the information received. For this, social networks have a fundamental role.

On the other hand, besides transparency and accounting, so important for public communication to effectively take place in the parliaments, the proximity between the representatives and the constituents is another fundamental factor to be explored by the institutions when using the digital environment. For being representative, the parliaments are those that should, theoretically, have greater proximity to the citizens. But how does the proximity materialize and how may it collaborate with the routines of the City Councils?

Relative to the concept of proximity, it is connected to the discussion about representatives and constituents in democratic systems. To get out of the legitimacy crisis, the strategy is precisely an approximation between the political elite and the citizens. In this case, it is not discussed herein the concept of participation, for it is a third space (WRIGHT, 2012) - in this case, Facebook - but even more initial forms of relationship with calls to engagement on social networks, invitation to participate in other online and offline actions, more informal conversation and answers by the City Councils in the comments, initially a possible dialogue. In this sense, one does not effectively measure the participation in political decisions but how the institutions open up to show themselves as closer to the citizens.

Although the real effect of such mechanisms on political decisions is unknown

(MARQUES, 2015) and considering that many political actors avoided interaction for a long time (STROMER-GALLEY, 2000), the proximity between representatives and constituents also contributes to improving the public image of and trust in the institutions. Many times, despite not effecting a dialogue, the organizations have shown paths to break down barriers, such as a more informal conversation. According to Mitozo (2018), in the cases studied by the literature about the Internet and parliaments, it is ever more frequent the existence of the concept of relationship and proximity because the institutions - especially legislative houses - begin to aggregate the citizen demands to the routines of the political institutions. Hence, when a dialogue is not effected, public communication through social networks at least serves as a thermometer of the interest of citizens on specific themes and matters inherent to the legislative house. The distinct forms of proximity with the citizen are opportunities to reconnect with the demands of the constituents (MITOZO, 2018).

According to Kunsch (2003), computer-mediated social media evoke an idea of approximating directed communication. Hence, as maintained by the author, social media allow almost face-to-face communication, enabling interactive actions with identified audiences, whose feedback may be immediate. To Henriques and Sant'ana (2015), thinking of the presence of institutions on social media creates paths to work the legitimacy not only from the discourse around the image itself but the dialogue and debate about the issues that structure it. Lastly, to Marques (2014), the possibilities offered by digital communication allow political representatives the use of online tools to render accounts, create approximations, and obtain public visibility. For such, the willingness of political actors is necessary for them to be used.

### **3 The digitalization of public communication: from websites to digital social networks**

The changes that the new dynamic of digital networks entails to parliaments may result in a reduction of the historical distance between representatives and constituents, from a better understanding that the citizens may have about the functioning of Legislative Houses (BRAGA; MITOZO; TADRA, 2016). For this reason, it is observed how the City Councils of Paraná have glimpsed the advantages of using the Internet, especially Facebook, to not only be closer to the public but also offer information of public interest. According to Romanelli (2005), the modernization of internal processes - in this case with the more effective use of digital communication - has a positive impact, especially relative to the amplification of public engagement and transparency. This has been seen throughout the pandemic, with the modification of various processes, such as remote deliberation and transmissions (MITOZO, 2020).

According to Gomes (2011), the presentation of actions and results of the initiatives to stimulate more participation using the available tools is a form of transparency. To Filgueiras (2011), despite the intersection between transparency and accountability, transparency would be merely a path. Within this conception, according to the author, the fundamental thing for the



institutionalization of accountability is to reduce the information deficit between State and the public and propitiate the opening of the secrets of the institutions through transparency. But all this is indeed effective when there is the creation of strategies to guarantee visibility that extrapolates the speeches in the tribunes and the partisan arrangements, and that aim at more direct contact with society and, additionally, through more accessible formats and languages. In this sense, even not being part of the obligations imposed by Supplementary Law No. 131/2009 or the Constitution, social networks present as a path that facilitates the format, language, and accessibility of society relative to public institutions.

Leston-Bandeira (2012) stated that the adhesion to online platforms by legislative houses might provide greater levels of knowledge about the parliament works, leading the community to higher levels of interest for the institution and, thus, according to Mitozo (2018), being an opportunity for them to reconnect with the demands of the constituents. This may improve the relationship of trust, which, as seen in the first chapter, is quite frail in the case of the Brazilian parliament (BERNARDES, 2013). In this sense, Canel and Sanders (2012) drew attention to the importance of investing in communication as a strategy of approximation and acceptance by the public. Thinking of the current technological scenario, this occurs especially through social networks.

With the migration of websites to social networks, this process of digitalization of legislative houses has been mapped by the national and international literature and indicates gains to the representation process and the image of the parliaments themselves. If during the first decade of the twenty-first century the focus would fall upon websites, in the last decade, works on the use of online social networks have emerged (SAMPAIO; MIZOTO; MASSUCHIN; FONTES; PENTEADO, 2018). Upon defining what differentiated social networks and websites on the Internet, Recuero (2009) and Boyd and Ellison (2007) theorized a scope of elements that comes to meet the use by public and political agents. In other words, although social networks serve various fields, they are much used for political purposes beyond elections.

In the Brazilian scenario, the study by Marques and Miola (2020) about public communication by the Ministry of Health on Facebook stands out when analyzing the campaigns against *Aedes aegypti*. The same was reinforced by Massuchin and Silva (2019), who examined the digital communication carried out in the fan page of the governor of Maranhão, Flávio Dino, considering public visibility outside the electoral period. In the same vein is the research by Klenk and Prudêncio (2016), who proposed to verify the use of Facebook by Brazilian city halls having as a basis the page of the City Hall of Curitiba and new forms of language for contact with the public. Focusing on the legislative branch, Bernardes (2020) analyzed the state legislative houses of the Brazilian southeast and concluded that the use of Twitter is resumed to the disclosure of parliamentary activities, with a focus on information and not dialogue. Upon observing the State Legislature of Santa Catarina (ALESC), Lucinda and Bertasso (2018) reinforced that social media

have two functions: to inform the citizens of the acts by the organization and inform the institution of what the citizen thinks.

In this bias, the international literature also signals that the institutions - even with the development of social media - have much to advance given that they are more concerned with informing than interacting, as Giraldo-Luque, Villegas-Simón, and Bugs (2017) pointed out. The study analyzed how parliaments use the networks, from the representative chambers of Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, United States, Spain, France, Italy, United Kingdom, and Sweden, from the evolution and use of media in each of the studied countries. Leston-Bandeira and Bender (2013) reinforced that the legislative houses have used networks primarily to report procedures, interacting little with the citizens. According to the text, five European parliaments were verified through Twitter and Facebook analyses and, despite the considerable advances of recent years, the legislative institutions are behind other spheres of power on social media. These issues will be observed in the local scenario of the City Councils from the methodological route that follows.

#### **4 Methodological route and definition of the analysis variables**

In this article, the analysis dwells on how public communication materializes from listed forms of proximity with the citizens, non-mandatory transparency developed on social networks, and the accounting of the actions practiced by the institution. Based on the literature, these three axes were defined to be analyzed in the empirical work with the City Councils of Paraná. There are 130 City Councils in total that - from October to November 2019 - were active with posts over the period on Facebook<sup>4</sup>. The content of such pages was manually extracted in the following period, reaching 3,832 published contents. In sequence, the posts were analyzed using a content analysis of quantitative nature (KRIPPENDORFF, 2018; BAUER, 2018; SAMPAIO; LICARIÃO, 2018), and this article will discuss the results regarding the axes that dialogue with the effectiveness of the concept of public communication.

For such, attention was given to the following variables: the number of posts, mentions to city councilors, image formation of city councilors, and a range of characteristics that delimit transparency, accountability, and proximity, totalizing seventeen items that may appear concomitantly. The *number of posts* generated an index of intensity of use of the social network, on a Likert scale from very high intensity (over 2 posts/day) to very low intensity (with less than 0.5 posts/day). The goal of this measurement is to verify to what extent the institutions make use of social networks as a mechanism to amplify the communication between representatives and constituents. Braga and Carlomagno (2018) identified the more considerable use of social networks in recent elections; hence, it is estimated that these are also widely used in the

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<sup>4</sup> In the first semester of 2019, of the 399 City Councils of Paraná, 113 had pages on *Facebook*. In the second semester, this number increased to 134. In 2020, it was at 178.

communication of the analyzed institutions, especially because, in smaller municipalities, there is no possibility of using the legislative TV channel and the ways to relate with the public through traditional press decrease, elements that have an important function in image formation (BARRETO, 2019; FUCKS; FIALHO, 2009).

Two other fundamental elements to understand the advances and limitations of public communication of legislative houses are the *mentions to city councilors* and the *image formation of city councilors*, elements that end up "confounded" in the process of using the media by the public institutions, as Miola and Marques (2019) pointed out. It was considered a mention to a city councilor when they appeared in the referenced text, regardless of there being any marking indicating their page or not. Relative to the *image formation of a city councilor*, it was taken at a starting point that, although any use of communications mechanisms is tied to the image formation process, there is a difference when the focus is on the institution and when it is on the city councilor, who a) is held liable for the publicized projects, b) receives the focus of the post instead of the institution (or the action itself), and c) is placed in the foreground from the issuance of an opinion about some fact or event involving the institution.

There are also the three central axes of the discussion - *transparency, accountability, and proximity* - that together add up to seventeen characteristics that may appear jointly in the same post, i.e., are not mutually exclusive. There may also be posts that do not present any of the elements. In the analysis, we opted for presenting the elements that denote transparency and accountability together for being interchangeable (FILGUEIRAS, 2011) and, in a separate table, the four elements that exemplify some type of proximity with the citizens, even if only a demonstration of an impersonality rupture initiative (HENRIQUES; SANT'ANA, 2015) and not necessarily an effective dialogue measured by the meeting of the demands by the citizens, but with greater informality (MITOZO, 2018).

Regarding transparency and accountability, thirteen elements were listed: *transmissions of sessions, requests/actions by city councilors, disclosure of the City Council calendar, reference to the Transparency Portal, actions promoted by the City Council, results of voting sessions, budgets, news of hearings, actions of Commissions, reference to presented projects, implemented actions, information on the legislative house, and reference to internal procedures*. We emphasize that the analysis of these items is a result of the theoretical discussion but also of a non-systemized observation by the authors, since the communication of a legislative house distinguishes itself, for example, from that carried out by other agencies that have other priorities to achieve the practice of public communication. Regarding proximity, four more aspects are observed: *conversation-style message, the incentive to the on/off actions, the incentive to online engagement/interaction (liking, sharing, and commenting), and the response of the City Councils in the comments*. From the next topic, the analysis is divided into four parts, discussing the intensity of use of Facebook, the relationship between intensity and image formation of the city

councilors, the level of transparency and accountability, and, lastly, the perspective of proximity.

## 5 Data analysis

### 5.1 Intensity of use of social networks as public communication mechanisms

The first datum observed in the analysis is about the frequency with which the City Councils made publications in their fan pages, which indicate the efforts of these parliaments in creating content accessible to the citizens. The production in the digital environment may offer information about budgets, disclose events and the calendar of the City Council, render the data in the Transparency Portal more understandable, or even carry out the transmission of the sessions. However, this depends, in good measure, on the activity of the communication teams that give a relevant role to communication (FAIRBANKS; PLOWNAN; RAWLINS, 2007).

Hence, we observed the five levels of intensity of daily publications by the parliaments. The highest one, considered of very high intensity, includes City Councils that made on average more than two communications per day during the period of two months; high intensity is when there was, in general, from 1.5 to 2 posts per day in the period; at the medium intensity are the fan pages with 1 to 1.5 publications per day; with low intensity of use are those that make between 0.5 and 1 posts per day, and the cases with less than 0.5 posts per day represent legislative houses with very low intensity of publications. Table 1 shows the distribution of the legislative houses according to the intensity of use of Facebook as a communication space.

**Table 1** – Number of municipalities per intensity level (N = 130)

Intensity level	Number of legislative houses
Very High	2
High	6
Average	9
Low	24
Very Low	89

**Source:** Devised by the authors, 2021.

Of the 130 municipalities observed, only two presented very high intensity, i.e., with a daily average of two or more publications in the observed period: Guaíra (140) and Foz do Iguaçu (134), municipalities located in the western region of the state. It is important to say that these were fairly elaborated posts (produced videos and cards), besides calls to news articles and live sessions, a fact that links the number of posts produced to the concepts of transparency and accountability. However, it is worth highlighting that a large number of publications not necessarily guarantees effective public communication.

The municipalities signaled as those of high intensity, i.e., City Councils that presented on average 1.5 to 2 publications per day, also denote a significant mix of publication formats: Cascavel (118), União da Vitória (111), Campo Largo (103), Pato Branco (93), Mallet (92), and

Maringá (90). In turn, the parliaments that appear with an average intensity of publications, i.e., fan pages that published from 1 to 1.5 times each day, were nine of the observed municipalities, which may also be considered positive: Apucarana (89), Rio Azul (89), Curitiba (84), Rolândia (83), Francisco Beltrão (82), Araucária (78), Toledo (76), Medianeira (75), and Palotina (64). The parliaments with low or very low intensities are the absolute majority, which means that, besides only 130 of the 399 local legislative houses in Paraná maintaining functional pages on Facebook at the time, 113 of them published little or very little. That is to say that the digitalization of Legislative Houses, which, among other benefits, made it possible for the institutions to have a greater audience, as evinced by Norton (2013), still demands extensive improvements, especially within the municipal scope, as other studies have already demonstrated (COMEL, 2021; MASSUCHIN; OLIVEIRA, 2020; COSTA, 2021; BRAGA; WISSE, 2021).

## 5.2 The effectiveness of public communication: between the image of city councilors and transmissions

More content does not always necessarily mean more communication with citizens from the concept of Public Communication. It is just an indicator. In other words, a low number of publications does not necessarily indicate the absence of key concepts of this article, just as large amounts do not reveal effective public communication depending on the type of content made available. Since transmitting meetings of the legislative houses live became a frequent practice with the digitalization of parliaments, offering greater amplitude to the work of the City Councils, as occurs in television transmissions (BARRETO, 2019), this indicator is used to show that even municipalities with little online activity have the possibility of evincing public communication. For example, almost 74% of the posts of the municipalities deemed as having very low intensity are transmissions of the sessions.

**Table 2** – Transmissions of sessions in relation to the intensity of publications per municipality

Classification	Percentage of transmission of sessions
Very high intensity	12.9%
High intensity	35.0%
Average intensity	28.6%
Low intensity	48.4%
Very low intensity	73.9%

**Source:** Devised by the authors, 2021.

The fact attracts the residents and invites them to participate, demonstrating not only an example of transparency of legislative acts but also proximity, because it tends to be the type of post that most generates engagement. And, even if it is a deficient transmission with few resources, it allows the citizens to follow the routine and main discussions of the institution. Meanwhile, the large number of publications by City Councils alone does not guarantee an effective communication of the actions carried out because the focus often falls on the legislators

and not on the institutions themselves, escaping the concepts of transparency and accountability and being much more a communication of the elected public agents. An example of this is the posts that reference city councilors and appear in greater numbers among the municipalities with the highest activity intensity on the social network. Likewise, the image formation of the political actor repeats this same relationship.

**Table 3** – Transmissions of sessions in relation to the intensity of publications per municipality

Classification	Percentage of mentions to city councilors	Percentage of image formation
Very high intensity	56%	61%
High intensity	29%	29%
Average intensity	32%	43%
Low intensity	16%	28%
Very low intensity	8%	12%

**Source:** Devised by the authors, 2021.

The table above evinces that the more content the institutions make available, the more they tend to perform communication aimed at the legislators and not the institutions. Even though presenting projects is one of the functions of those elected, the communication should not mostly be directed to disclosing actions associated with them. Respectively 56% and 61% of the posts by City Councils classified as having a high intensity of use of Facebook had a reference to city councilors and the image formation of these agents as the central axis. The numbers remain considerable even for the municipalities that have a medium intensity of use of the analyzed social network. On the other hand, this type of content focused on the city councilors is negligible in the case of the City Councils with very low intensity.

In this sense, although the digitalization and information flow are fundamental, given that having information available on the institutions is a right of the citizen, as per the Federal Constitution (1988) itself, this does not mean that such organizations are following the assumptions of communication anchored on public interest. Miola and Marques (2020) noticed that the image formation of agents and institutions might result in the instrumentalization of communication and even reduce the interest of the citizens. Hence, it is necessary to not only enable agility in the digitalization of subnational parliaments but also ally this process to the concept of public communication.

### 5.3 Assessing public communication from transparency and accountability levels

In this survey, 3,832 publications by the 130 legislative houses were analyzed from the presence or absence of each category. Although they are considered distinct concepts, according to Filgueiras (2011), the terms have become interchangeable given that accountability is only carried out with the amplification of transparency. Hence, transparency maximizes accountability and guarantees a liability system derived from the opening of the State secrets. It is worth recalling

that looking at it from digital networks demonstrates other analytical layers to be observed besides the traditional transparency portals or the accountability and transparency only from public expenditures. The argument here is that public communication is wedged on the pillars of transparency and accounting and may be measured from these elements that characterize - although not in its totality - the used concept (OLIVEIRA, 2020). Hence, the following table lists thirteen variables that could appear concomitantly, exemplifying the two axes.

**Table 4** – General data on types of analyzed posts

Categories	Percentage
Transmissions of sessions	48.6%
Requests/Actions by City Councilors	19.3%
Disclosure of the City Council calendar	11.9%
Reference to the Transparency Portal	9.3%
Actions promoted by the City Council	7.3%
Results of voting sessions	7.3%
Budgets	6.2%
News on hearings	5.2%
Action of Commissions	5.0%
Reference to projects	4.7%
Implemented actions	2.5%
Information on the house	1.1%
Reference to Procedures	1.0%

**Source:** Devised by the authors, 2021.

As mentioned previously, most of the municipalities tend to support themselves on the live transmissions of the sessions. To Almada, Gomes, and Amorim (2018), being transparent means applying decision-making in the open to the routine of the organizations. The transmissions of sessions are, perhaps, the best example of this applied to parliaments. This mechanism appears in 48.6% of the contents, i.e., represents 1,223 of the 3,832 publications.

The second type of predominant content is represented by the requests and actions by city councilors, which occur in 19.3% of the overall posts. The category refers to the duties of the parliament members, i.e., reports about requests, agenda inclusions, meetings with organizations, and receiving people at the City Council, among others. However, this datum needs to be analyzed carefully. Almada (2017) pointed out that transparency has been signaled as a solution to the problems and a response to the demands. This occurs in the cases of the activity of city councilors that request that a given street be included in the asphalt paving program, that a lamp be changed on a certain street, among other requests that often occur due to public claim. In other words, when this is disclosed, it demonstrates to the citizen a demand that was met, reinforcing the link between representatives and constituents.

On the other hand, by focusing on those elected, it is possible to fall on a possible instrumentalization of public communication, demonstrating certain personalism of the communication by parliaments. In the studied cases, what draws attention is that this type of content is much more frequent in the municipalities with high intensity of use (25.3% of the cases)

than those with low intensity of use (4.5% of the Legislative Houses).

In turn, the disclosure of the City Council calendar, considering the aspect of service of the public communication (MIOLA; MARQUES, 2018), occurs in 11.9% of the overall cases and presents two important data. Besides anticipating to the public the future events of the institution, which is important to make it possible for the community to decide to participate in the events within the legislative scope, this category is considered a good example of professionalization by the parliaments. This occurs because they represent a differentiated organization by the legislative advisory, which, in many cases, publish the calendar through events, journalistic articles, or cards, presenting to the public a social media plan in favor of the provision of services to the community.

In the case of accounting - effectively considering the approval of projects, the budget spent, the result of the voting sessions, the actions effectively elaborated by the institution, and the actions implemented after approval by the legislative body, for example - the percentages are lower than those of the contents that come closer to transparency, demonstrating some difficulty of the respective City Councils to put into practice actions that dialogue more directly with the concept of accountability. As an example, the activities of commissions are the topic of only 5% of the posts, although they are a recurring activity of those elected. In reducing the work of the representatives to the transmitted sessions, one contributes to a restricted view of what the representatives do. The absence of even an accounting of what has been approved or implemented with the support of the legislative house is noticed.

In reference to the other elements, two appear to a smaller extent, namely "information on the legislative house" - when the post addresses changes in legislators, the entry of new employees or visitors in the parliament premises - in 1.1% of the posts and "references to procedures" - with a detailed didactic explanation of the legislative processes to the citizens -, which appears in 1% of the analyzed cases. In this sense, although there is a focus on the transmissions, on the other hand, there is not much concern - at least regarding communication through social networks - to clarify about the day-to-day and the processes of the institution.

To Romanelli (2015), more transparency demonstrates that the legislative houses have a view more and more sharp and concerned with the citizens, with this occurring also when the information necessary to allow the inspection and monitoring of the internal work of the institutions is made available to the public. However, in these two observed points, the City Councils have presented fewer efforts, especially regarding informing the public about the internal processes of the parliaments.

#### **5.4 Effective dialogue and attempts at proximity with citizens**

From its normative concept, Public Communication presumes that there is the participation of citizens (DUARTE, 2007), which is related to the dialogic perspective of the concept that must not be seen merely as unidirectional - from the institution to the citizen



(MATOS, 2012). In this sense, social networks place themselves as important agents to allow the effectiveness of the concept in its broader form, not restricted only to the requirements of public interest or emission by public institutions. However, this does not always occur in its totality, just as transparency and accountability do not always appear in the published contents, as already discussed.

For this reason, in this article, we work with the concept of proximity that refers to the initiatives that vary from the possibility of interaction, dialogue, or even rapport (HENRIQUES; SANT'ANA, 2015). These are strategies that extrapolate the speeches at the tribunes and the partisan arrangements, aiming at direct contact with society. It is worth recalling that this approach to relationships with citizens is observed from four indicators. Hence, we consider from the forms of incentive of parliaments with the goal of creating some approximation with the public to the effective dialogue, which would be a more advanced step for the manifestation of this aspect of public communication.

**Table 5 – Data on relationships**

Categories	Percentage
Conversation-style message	91.6%
Incentive to the on/off actions	16.6%
Incentive to online engagement/interaction	6.2%
Response of the City Councils	6.0%

**Source:** Devised by the authors, 2021.

The data show that the greater the demands are, the smaller the percentages, which reveals that the relationship between representatives and constituents is made effective more by the intention of becoming close than through dialogue. Conversation-style messages, for example, appeared in 91.6% of the publications; however, it means only a more friendly possibility of informal contact and assuming a possibility of a conversation. They occur when the post speaks directly to the reader, with the verb in the indicative or through rhetorical questions such as "want to know more?". An example is the publications by the City Council of Campo Largo "*Watch live, soon on our Facebook page! Policies of Affirmative Actions for Ethnic-Racial Promotion*" or of Cianorte "*Check out the main requirements and nominations of the city councilors this week [...]*". The language used escapes the traditional formality of government agencies, which, according to Mitozo (2013; 2018), is one of the necessary challenges to the Legislative Houses, which employ *préciosité* in the language of the parliaments, hindering the understanding of the internal dynamics by the citizens.

Incentives to online and offline actions organized by the institution, making a call for mobilization, appear in only 16.6% of the publications. This category encompasses effective forms of stimulus so that followers may participate in events, in municipal councils, call the toll-free 159 phone service, make reports, among other cases. "Come here", "Call", "Make the report", "Visit our portal", and "Vote on the participatory budget" are recurring examples. The Campo

Largo parliament is one of those that most use this mechanism, as per the following example: *"We have the honor to invite you to participate in the Course/Training - Topics of Public Procurement, which will take place on November 7 at the City Council of Campo Largo, at 10:00 a.m."*. The City Council of Curitiba also stands out in this form of incentive: *"It's tomorrow! The meeting will debate the release of permits for temples in Curitiba. Participate!"*.

On the other hand, two categories had quite a negligible and, thus, a negative percentage in the sense that they put at risk the concept of public communication from the viewpoint of the importance of dialogue and interaction between the institutions and the public. The category of Incentive to online engagement appeared in 6.2% of the publications. It occurs when the City Council makes explicit in the text a request for the public to like, comment, and share the contents or follow it on the other social networks. The parliament that most uses the mechanism is that of Campo Largo. A pattern is noticeable at the end of each post from this legislative house, as per the following example: *"[...] Follow the day-to-day of this House of Law! Official website: [www.campolargo.pr.leg.br/](http://www.campolargo.pr.leg.br/) Official Instagram: @camaramunicipaldecampolargo"*. Pirai do Sul also resorts to this possibility by placing in the body of the message the links to the social network accounts of the City Council: *"#SigaCMPS [facebook.com/camarapirai](https://www.facebook.com/camarapirai) [twitter.com/camarapirai](https://twitter.com/camarapirai)"*. Albeit quite subtly, these initiatives were considered because there is interest in leading the public to engage with the digital communication initiatives of the respective institutions.

According to Henriques and Sant'ana (2015), there is a tendency for social media to modify the form of interaction between the subjects of the communication process, possibly rendering it more interactive and participative. There is, as reported, a search for a more creative language before the public. However, in the category "Response of the City Councils", an effective moment of direct contact between the parties, the legislative houses only commented on 6% of the posts. This equates to only 59 publications with feedback in the entire survey.

To Corrêa (2009), digital media provide the same communicative resources to all interacting parties, i.e., the characteristics of the networks in the online environment allow a natural process of approximation. However, what is determined is that, at least in this cutout, the local parliaments have effected the dialogue with the community little, even though there is a presence of the public with questions, inquiries, search for responsiveness, etc. The survey carried out by Massuchin and Oliveira (2021) showed that the transmission of sessions - which are the majority - are spaces of ample prominence for questions from citizens.

The data on proximity become even more interesting when there is a cutout from the intensity of publications per municipality. The City Councils with very high intensity of posts do not present any responses in publications. Here, the legislative houses with medium and very low intensities stood out, exemplified by Reserva do Iguaçu, Ribeirão Claro, and São Mateus do Sul. On the other hand, one may notice that the lack of dialogue by the City Councils does not mean there is no indication of conversation by the constituents. The contact by the public through

comments was found in 37% of the posts.

As per the example mentioned above, a case of response by the parliament occurred at the City Council of Quitandinha. Despite representing a small number of publications, the institution was engaged by a resident during a live transmission of a session. The resident inquires the city councilors about allegedly not collaborating with the population after a hail storm. Then, the City Council responds the following: "[...] *To discuss the problem and find solutions, a meeting was held among the city councilors, the Civil Defense, and the legal sector of the City Council. The city councilors decided unanimously to transfer R\$ 200,000.00 from the City Council's own funds to the Executive Branch so these funds may be destined to procure materials for the rebuilding of the affected houses [...]*". In this case, one may notice that the promotion of public communication guided by dialogue also collaborates to increase the accountability and transparency indices of the legislative institutions.

## **6 Final Considerations**

This article aimed to discuss the interfaces between public communication and the concepts of accountability, transparency, and proximity from the ever more intense use that institutions have made of the digital environment. We sought to understand the public communication practices applied by the subnational legislative houses, recognizing the limitations and possibilities of application of the concept in the way 130 City Councils of Paraná used their Facebook pages from monitoring carried out during sixty days (from October to November 2019). In total, 3,832 posts were analyzed.

In the theoretical portion of the text, we sought to show how the three concepts are connected to public communication, resorting to the literature in the fields of Communication, Political Science, and the like. At the same time, we showed how the possibilities of the digital environment might be exploited by institutions from both the dialogic viewpoint of the concept and that of the accounting and transparency required from the government agencies. In the analysis, the data indicated an effective approximation of transparency, followed by the accounting, but a still slow advancement toward the dialogic possibilities provided by social networks, at least for the cases analyzed in this article.

Lastly, we emphasize the limitation of this research for being restricted to a single federative unit - Paraná. It is also necessary to highlight that the data on the interaction of the public with the contents were not considered in this text, although there might be a relationship between the type of content and the engagement index, as demonstrated by Miola and Marques (2020). On the other hand, we stress the option for municipal coverage, which brings important distinctions about the process of digitalization compared to the national scenario and the effort to propose a dialog with distinct conceptual keys but that, jointly, corroborate for an analysis of how the legislative houses carry out (or try to carry out!) public communication.

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