

A CONCEPTUAL FRAME AND TOOLS FOR COMMUNICATION ON ROAD SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

Our proposal, set within the communication in the road field, consists of guidelines for the public authorities which would enhance the effectiveness of their communication tools. The work has the following objectives:

- to describe the state of the art in the road field communication, distinguishing objectives, contents, tools and organization;
- to assess the adaptation between the contents and the tools used to communicate them;
- to analyze the impact of the information and communication new technologies in the road field;
- to propose improvements in the communication, specifying organizational needs, contents preparation and new tools developments.

Communication at last must reach people. The paper would propose the way of adaptation for Administration and its staff so as to communicate better with the citizens. But we do not make specific proposals about campaigns aiming the citizens. We make proposals about organization and spreading within the Public Administration so they can improve its communication with citizens. The suggested slogan is "A thousand ways to communicate".

The paper could then serve as the starting point for an internal campaign regarding communication within the staff of a Road Administration.

1. OBJECT

The object of this report is to make a proposal for a Public Administration responsible for the road field and whose intention is to improve the effectiveness of its communication. The Report would be then a starting document for high-level managers in charge of deciding about these changes. Nevertheless, it is also considered that a good part of the report content could be appropriated as an spreading document among the Administration top professional groups, provided that the project had been consolidated and was launched for its establishment.

These proposals are formulated without specifying towards which Public Administration they are directed, because they are adaptable to all of them with a responsibility area not too small. For these small area Administrations (we could establish the threshold in a road net length below 200 km) could be useful the principles in broad outline, but the practical application would require deep cuts.

The content of this document includes the following points:

- road field communication study (paying attention to objectives, contents, tools and organization);

- development of a conceptual framework the road field communication;
- presentation of improvement proposals.

2. ROAD FIELD COMMUNICATION STUDY

Nowadays the road field communication is articulated in two clearly separated circuits, the communication produced in the Public Administrations interior and the one which runs between the Administration and the citizens. This division seems reasonable because Administration needs internal communication specially to achieve the coordination and effectiveness of the resources at its disposal, whereas communication with the citizens is only required when Administration must consult their opinion (most of the times in public information processes demanded for law) or, in the other direction, must give them either any coercive rules (traffic regulation), educational message (road safety) or inform them of any activity that affects them (opening of a new section).

All these processes serve for the road Administration objectives, which basically consist in providing a road infrastructure net wide, safe, comfortable and helpful to the citizen. Although it is the primary objective of roads, other effects are caused over the citizens owing to the technical characteristics of roads, and a carefully environmental integration is needed and the users awareness (particularly drivers, since they condition the road safety for themselves and the rest of users and the infrastructure quality itself) to promote their right behaviour.

Public Administrations also communicate with citizens when politician heads want to inform them about some carried out performances outcome, increasing their visibility in case of projects already noticeable for the users (opening of a new section) or giving them visibility in case of projects that would go unnoticed any other way.

The internal communication tools are not object of analysis in this document, since they are incumbent on the work management within a organization. It is worth mentioning that in some cases internal communication could condition communication with citizens, and consequently it would be required to reconcile the internal effectiveness demands with the citizens communication needs.

In a similar way, the communication organization (organs and staff in charge of executing it) is not analysed in this document as involvements in their internal organization. In this regard it must be highlighted that the election of the internal communication actors entails some inertia in the way that the external communication actors would be the same or be strongly conditioned by them.

The tools and organization of external communication are very different depending on the predominant direction of information flow. The citizens' consultation is usually executed by technical experts in roads through very regulated processes (for instance, a process of public information and statements). Nevertheless, in educational campaigns communication experts take part, besides the road experts, because the formats used are nearer to marketing ones (for instance television advertisements).

In any case, the Spanish Public Administrations have not reached a high standard of public participation in road field yet, and hardly in any other area, owing to a lack of tools and awareness to beat the traditional prevention or fear to talk with 42 million potential interlocutors. However, there is a declared will of increasing this participation since it is thought as very helpful to improve the road field policy adaptation to people needs.

Nevertheless, participation and openness policy in Spanish Administrations have certainly grown spectacularly although participation is insufficiently developed. This achievement should not be attributed only to the increasing possibilities contributed by information and communication technologies but, moreover, the clear will of using them that Spanish Public Administration have kept.

This greater visibility allows, in consequence, that citizens (or groups who represent them) are able to form a more accurate opinion in the matters which concern them, although on occasions when they are asked, they stand basically equal, qualitatively and quantitatively. Anyway, this option of being better informed is only used by a few, and Administrations sometimes lose sight that most of citizens are only a little bit more informed than a decade ago.

Finally, Public Administrations communicate among them. These relations have elements taken from the internal communication processes as well as processes of consultation to the citizens.

In fact, a parallel development is frequent, executing at the same time a direct negotiation more dynamic (as in internal communication although without a hierarchy principle) with the respect to a regulated processes where the agreements are reached finally.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this section a brief theoretical conceptual framework is presented. It will support the practical development of the improving proposals to do, in order to assess their effectiveness.

As it was said before, the fundamental aim for any road sector policy is to provide citizens of useful infrastructures. To achieve this, it is necessary to contact with them and collect information (essentially about the impact on the environment) or to give them information. However, we add now a new intrinsic requirement in the communication processes, the trust between administrators and administered. This trust is always present as a value in the democratic system but it is important that it evolve to a first level.

3.1. Confidence

Without confidence, communication remains devoid of value and causes tensions, and even conflicts. Confidence is indispensable for communication and it is in general a value that makes great satisfaction to the citizens as they realize that Administration devotes to social aims, which encourages for the ideal itself, but also because it ends up by being included in more projects than if their needs were not known.

Three factors are needed to achieve confidence. First, detailed information, so that opinions can be based on it. Without this, there would only be a fiction of confidence, whose effects can be similar to those of the confidence itself but, nevertheless, it is much more volatile so it is not trustworthy enough for the public policies to rely on it. The Public Administration is it that must veil for the importance of the information.

Secondly, it is necessary to preserve a reputation. The Administration must provide trustful information since confidence always continues fortifying when reputation is kept, but besides it is damaged rapidly when reputation is missing. It also exists a reputation of the

side of the citizens, but it is only possible to rely on it when they are organized groups. Nevertheless, the Administration must try that citizens find incentive to offer trustful information; it does not mean that they should conceal their personal interests but they need to trust that they will be bear in mind.

Thirdly, an increase of empathy between Administrations and citizens must be tried. For it, there must exist a common base of identity of beginning (principles). Though every part can demonstrate a few opposite interests (since the Administration must establish priorities to satisfy the needs of the whole group with a few limited resources) they have to be able to understand the motivations and they also need to agree with the more transparent and effective procedure of communication.

3.2. Functions of communication

It is important to consider the communication with a unitary approach. In the same way as when someone talks to another person it is needed to support a few similar levels of conscience or attention between what is said and what is listened, asymmetries between Administrations and administered must be reduced.

It does not mean that it is possible to obviate the fundamental determining of this communication, which is that there are many citizens who might speak only to one Administration, and it neither means that it is necessary to multiply the resources to be able to attend individually to each one. Nevertheless, it is important that, in spite of these limitations, Administrations use the communication as a permanent dialogue.

"Dialogue" because sometimes the information goes in one way and others in other one, "permanent" because it will be necessary to contact with those who are listened in many occasions throughout the years to deal with the same questions or other ones. So the different elements of communication must not be treated as independent matters but it is necessary be aware of their unitary character.

Now we are going to make a classification of the functions of communication, assigning to them some contents (vectors of execution of policies and aims of the road field). It is necessary to indicate that the innovative point of view, of which Administrations might use to improve their communication with the citizens, fits to the differentiation of functions and not to the enumeration of contents (since these fit with the existing ones):

- Banner: there are some contents whose communication serves to generate collective conscience on values of the road field. They work as vocatives, that is to say, to call the attention of the citizens so they become interested in the infrastructures and acquire a unitary vision of its reality and function. Examples: to transmit to the citizens the admiration for the aesthetics of the infrastructure (the French Administration presented Millau bridge as one more prop of international pre-eminence); to give to know the social function of the highways to relate the cities and to improve any interchange, but even to bring the citizen over to the natural patrimony.

- Consultations: the Administration requests information from some particular citizens, or submits one of its offers to general knowledge, requesting commentaries. Examples: integration of the highway in the environment, study of the mobility.

- Education: the Administration transmits to the citizen values or precise information, which will serve for a better utilization of the infrastructures (essentially because they are destined to multiple users that must be respected) or which will be directly usable as one

more option for the user. Examples: traffic law, road safety, new sections joined to the network, promotion of intermodality.

4. IMPROVEMENT PROPOSALS

In this last point we present the offers, which try to spread between the Administration and the citizens the rules of a good communication, as well to introduce certain organizational changes or concrete actions with which improve the tools of communication.

The first rule is the confidence which, as it has been seen, it does not depend only on the citizen or on Administration, but on the wills of both. Nevertheless, the behaviour of the Administration influences decisively the citizen. This turns its role in doubly important since the construction of a confidence environment is not only a contribution itself but also, it gives example to the other part, encouraging it to add to their efforts.

Another rule or value, whose importance is born from the dissociation that exists among the three functions enunciated in the previous point, is that it is necessary to take advantage of any communication that is kept with the citizens to transmit them as much content as possible from any of three functions. The reasons are not based only on the cost saving, but on the efficiency that has to make the citizens see that they are considered real participants of the decision (sometimes as issuers of information, sometimes as recipients, but always as addressees) and, in addition, the interference which is for any communication the fact that nearby in the time or in the content others exist. Especially, this is the way to achieve in order to contribute in the overcoming of the dialectics between social function and with regard to the environment.

It is also necessary to take advantage of the communications of political content, which in general are planned with an important diffusion, to transmit information that Administrations want to spread. For example, when a new road section is opened, an important advertising is given to this fact, but usually the functionality of the road does not remain completely clear, and almost never takes advantage to promote civic values.

This unitary vision does not mean that a programming content does not exist according to the needs of the Administration or of the citizens, depending on the circumstances. For example, the road safety campaigns will continue needing an almost exclusive format and, certainly, they can be more effective if they are thrown in the moments of more traffic of the year.

Any return of information from the citizen is useful for the Administration. Precisely it is specially useful the information given when he is not consulted (for example in case of a massive campaign that is designed like unidirectional) since it can be a question of a misinformed and insufficiently prepared opinion, but at least it will be less submitted to the search of palpable purposes. Because of it, there must be created a centralized mailbox for suggestions (not associated only with the processes that generate claims or allegations).

But an Administration in charge of the road field must try not only to clarify its priorities, but also to distinguish among different levels of detail in its definition, from the general thing to the particular one. These management criteria must guide the communication to the citizens. Then, the rules to transmit to them will always be of general nature and will not create confusion but the possibility of having a suitable perception of the evolution of the road field. There are only two situations in which it is worth using more detailed levels of

information: when consults to citizens need to be done or when the citizen should be educated about road safety.

It is necessary to bear in mind the great exhibition to sources of information to which we are exposed, which implies two serious problems for the Administration: the insufficient quota of any channel and the possible lack of attention of the interlocutor.

Since all the staff of the Administration executes communication workings, and since a total control of contents is impossible (it is evident that not for the oral ones but it would not even be achieved for the writings), it is necessary that the assimilation of the importance of the communication and its main contents extends considerably.

As it has been indicated at the beginning of the document, one of the proposals is to design an internal campaign through a Report that is distributed to the professionals of higher level. As support, an Information Booklet similar to the one which is included annexed would be distributed to all the personnel with the motto: "A thousand ways to communicate". The volume of information is important because the more reduced it is, the more it will be read and assimilated. In fact, it is as uncomfortable to work for that one who does not know something as for the one who is not sure if it is been understood.

This campaign, besides describing the importance of the communication and giving examples, must enunciate around seven general aims for the Administration in charge of the road field. In addition, it would be possible to make complementary actions, adapting to the needs of the staff, or explaining skills and instruments of communication, or penetrating in the rules that govern the policy of the Administration. If both educations are mixed, it is necessary to make it clear for the receivers so they can get better sensibility of the difference between having information and managing its communication.

The mission of the Administrations consists of making decisions for the citizens but also of presenting the results of these decisions, so that citizens must participate in the processes of internal management. Therefore, the last proposal that we want to make, refers to the organization of the responsibilities of the communication within the Administration.

Communication does not have to be centralized through a single channel since the content would be lost in the cases that specialization is needed (also because they give rise to an additional cost). In addition, it would not be considering that that centralization would only correspond to the formal processes whereas many informal communications would remain and its importance would be underestimated.

For this reason, our opinion is that a coordination agency must exist. This agency must be located hierarchically where other transverse capacities reside (for example the budgetary or human resources). Its function would consist of developing and facilitating to the other agencies formation and adapted instruments of communication, and to make a pursuit of the contents. In this way, it will be easier to unify criteria, to assure the coherence with respect to the directives of the roads policy, and to rationalize the volume of transmitted information and its coherence, so that this information can be more easily assimilated by the Administration and citizens.

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