Thinking about media reform from depopulated areas: analysis of social perceptions about local journalism

Pensar la reforma mediática desde las zonas despobladas: análisis de las percepciones sociales sobre el periodismo local

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: This paper analyzes the perceptions of communities in depopulated territories and of a group of journalists regarding local media and identifies which journalistic functions and roles they consider most

1

valuable. The findings are an opportunity to reflect on the connection between media deserts, community expectations about journalism and the future of local media in the context of a potential media reform. **Methodology:** Five focus groups have been conducted: four of them held in two towns located in the province of Cuenca, Ledaña (1,563 inhabitants) and Priego (885 inhabitants) and a fifth focus group was held online with journalists and professionals selected for their specialization in depopulated territories and rural areas. **Results:** The analysis shows that professionals and citizens are committed to "militant journalism" when working in depopulated areas; they value an attentive and caring approach to communities, constructive criticism, the generation of interaction networks and depth when addressing their problems. Three roles are identified for media: instrumental, recognition and mediation. **Discussion and conclusions:** In the current context there is a space of opportunity to explore formulas that incorporate the media as strategic actors in public policies facing the demographic challenge, at the same time this opportunity could catalyze the implementation of some media reform proposals.

Keywords: Depopulation; Public problem; News deserts; Media reform; Journalism; Local media; Roles.

RESUMEN

Introducción: Este trabajo analiza las percepciones de las comunidades en territorios despoblados y de un grupo de periodistas respecto a los medios locales e identifica qué funciones y roles periodísticos consideran más valiosos. Los hallazgos son una oportunidad para reflexionar sobre la conexión entre los desiertos mediáticos, las expectativas de las comunidades sobre los medios locales y el futuro de estos últimos en el marco de una potencial reforma mediática. **Metodología:** Se realiza el análisis del discurso de cinco grupos de discusión: cuatro de ellos celebrados en dos poblaciones situadas en la provincia de Cuenca, Ledaña (1.563 habitantes) y Priego (885 habitantes), y un quinto grupo online de comunicadores seleccionados por su especialización profesional en territorios despoblados y en el medio rural. **Resultados:** El análisis refleja que profesionales y ciudadanía apuestan por un "periodismo militante" a la hora de trabajar en zonas despobladas, valoran un enfoque atento y de cuidado hacia las comunidades, la crítica constructiva, la generación de redes de interacción y la profundidad a la hora de abordar sus problemas. En particular, se identifican tres funciones para los medios: instrumental, de reconocimiento y de mediación. **Discusión y conclusiones:** En el contexto actual hay un espacio de oportunidad para explorar fórmulas que incorporen a los medios como actores estratégicos en las políticas públicas frente al reto demográfico, lo que puede catalizar al mismo tiempo la implantación de algunas propuestas de reforma mediática.

Palabras clave: Despoblación; Problema público; Desiertos informativos; Reforma mediática; Periodismo; Medios locales; Funciones.

1. Introduction

Depopulation is a democratic and demographic challenge that is on the Spanish political agenda, more prominently since the creation of the Ministry for Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge (Sáez, 2021). Depopulation processes impact the governance of these territories because the low population density in these areas opens up the possibility of external political and economic entities managing these places without informed and participatory debate, as there are fewer and fewer tools available to facilitate communal life. As noted by Koning et al. (2021), rural depopulation raises new political challenges and research areas, including questions such as: "Who governs a depopulated space that remains significant for the people who left? If the state or a community withdraws from a place, which groups step in to give the space new meaning, making it their place again?" (Koning et al., 2021, p. 277).

Communities in depopulated areas have the right to participate in the public debate to define the relationship they want to maintain with their environment. Recent concerns about renewable energies and their expansion into rural territories, speculative land movements without the knowledge or consent of the inhabitants, extractive industries, or the reintroduction of endangered animal species or rewilding are just examples of complex relationships between citizenship and territory that are affecting sparsely populated areas (Rodríguez-Rejas and

"The discourse of the groups highlights how individuals have to interpret and negotiate with the representations that inscribe and condense their life experiences, a process that influences the shaping of depopulated identity."

Díaz-Gutiérrez, 2021). The inhabitants have the right to be heard and should intervene in determining land use and the way of life they desire, but this requires having spaces for this deliberative process, including high-quality local media capable of informing, overseeing, and promoting discussion.

To ensure that the population in depopulated areas receives local information that contributes to their participation in the public sphere, we need to focus on proximity communication. Proximity communication combines two dimensions of the local context: the physical space and its boundaries, and the relationships between senders and receivers, characterized by commitment, involvement, participation, and complicity (De Moragas, 2015, p. 25). Local communication in Spain has been sustained for decades through local radios and provincial newspapers (Guillamet, 2002). However, this structure has evolved with the emergence of local digital media, especially hyperlocal media dedicated to the specific current affairs of a very particular geographic area (Shaw, 2007; Negrerira-Rey et al., 2020).

Proximity communication operates on a triadic structure involving public, private, and Third Sector ownership of media. If we focus on the model of commercial local media, it's evident that depopulated areas are less attractive and run the risk of becoming what has been characterized in other contexts as "news deserts" (Abernathy, 2018), often located in areas with lower population and economic activity, and less connected to major cities. The absence and loss of commercial media can be seen as a negative indicator for the exercise of the right to information in affected territories. However, this situation creates room for promoting publicly owned media or alternative and community communication proposals that actively involve citizenship.

It will be necessary to consider a media reform based on post-commercial models (Fenton, 2022; Pickard, 2020) that are more diverse and hybrid in all aspects: from funding to content production methods, the conception of the media, or professional culture. Moreover, exploring communication policies to encourage proximity media and journalism is crucial. This perspective advocates for communication and information as common goods that, by definition, must be sustainable.

For Latin America as a whole, the OBSERVACOM project (2022) has analyzed the requirements for a media reform that ensures community media through multidimensional sustainability strategies: organizational sustainability through the creation of networks, alliances, and collaborations; regulatory sustainability based not only on regulations that protect and recognize their existence but also on the absence of obstacles in their application, such as changes in government or excessively complex and bureaucratic procedures that make them unattainable for many of these groups; and financial sustainability ensured by public policies that include, among other measures, the creation of public funds, tax exemptions, or access to preferential credits, as revenues from public and private advertising, in countries that allow it, are generally low.

Similar to the European perspective, this implies that media reform should be based on cooperation and values of justice and equality. In practical terms, as proposed by Fenton and Freedman (2022), if we consider media as part of the public utility resources necessary for the proper functioning of democracy, we should stop privileging their conception as competitive corporate entities. Their notion as common goods will involve promoting plurality through diverse ownership structures and significant changes in decision-making processes, avoiding extractivist logics and promoting instead the circulation of wealth and values, for example, through co-ownership of community media (cooperatives, associations, etc.).

Therefore, along with questioning the logics of media ownership concentration and exploring improvements in the definition and management of publicly owned media, in depopulated territories with a fragile media structure, there is ample space to explore a communication model that reduces commercial pressure and dependence on government interests and enables collective modes of expression. Up to this point, scientific literature has not extensively addressed the relationship between depopulation and communication.

Nevertheless, in Spain, there have been some analyses regarding the treatment of this issue in the media (Moyano-Estrada, 2022; Sanz-Hernández, 2016; Sánchez-Aguilera, 2020), its emergence in public opinion as a media issue, and the evolution in its framings (Saiz-Echezarreta et al., 2022), the political dimension of demographic discourses (Cuenca et al., 2023), and the perspective of the profession in these territories (De Sola, 2021). However, no study has delved into the contributions of journalism to rural communities facing this sociodemographic process.

This article contrasts research traditions around information deserts and news geographies (Chang, 1998) with discussions about the roles that literature attributes to local media and journalism in the context of conditions for democratic participation. This exploration serves as a theoretical framework to approach the specific case of rural communities in Cuenca, Castilla la Mancha (Spain), and to address the perceptions and emerging visions of five discussion groups of citizens and communication professionals. The article analyzes the role attributed to local media from three fronts: 1) empirical, identifying the voices of citizens and their ways of understanding local journalism; 2) analytical, proposing a model that identifies three functions for proximity journalism: informative, recognition, and mediation; and 3) conceptual, contributing to the academic and political discussion on communicative governance and news deserts with broader debates about local media and the public sphere in a media reform scenario.

2.   Theoretical Framework

The scope of local media can be defined by considering the geographical and sociopolitical context, position within the media ecosystem, and relationships with the community (Gulyas and Baines, 2020). Thus, "local" is not restricted to its geographical condition but operates as a sociocultural, political, economic, and affective framework through which a nearby territory is defined, delineating proximity, everyday life, and a connection through a sense of belonging. Returning to the sense of proximity, despite a dominant trend towards the delocalization of social life, as Arturo Escobar alerts, it cannot be denied that the territory is a key source of culture and identity. Hence, a place can be understood as a mode of relationship, a "commitment to, and experience of, a particular location, with some measure of rooting (though unstable), boundaries (though permeable), and connections to everyday life, even when its identity is constructed and never fixed" (Escobar, 2018, p. 50).

Precisely from this recognition of the political and cultural importance of the local, the interest in researching news deserts (Abernathy, 2018) emerges. This approach originally sought to highlight and understand the impact of the reduction of local news media, their circulation, and reach, particularly in the United States. News deserts are defined as "rural or urban communities with limited access to the kind of credible and comprehensive news and information that nourishes democracy at its most fundamental (grassroots) level" (Abernathy, 2020, p. 18). While the concept's starting point is rooted in the techno-demographic and financial framework of American local media industries, research has extended beyond the structural idiosyncrasies of different media systems, exploring cases in the United Kingdom (Gulyas, 2021), Australia (Barnes et al., 2022), Sweden (Nygren et al., 2018), or Portugal (Jerónimo et al., 2022). In Latin America, mapping exercises have been carried out with varying degrees of comprehensiveness and update in Argentina (FOPEA, 2021), Colombia (FLIP, 2016), and Brazil (Atlas da notícia, PROJOR, 2022). The study of news deserts has focused on changes in the ownership structure of local media (Gulyas and Baines, 2020), their relationship with the reduction of media pluralism (Finneman et al., 2022), or the consequences these transformations can have on communities (Mathews, 2020).

Other studies have explored the issue of news coverage considering journalists as symbolic workers who shape the geographies of news (Chang, 1998; Gasher, 2015; Madrid-Morales et al., 2023) and construct an imaginary power of place (Gutsche Jr. and Hess, 2018). These spatial inequalities are also identified in the contexts of the global South. For example, Silva and Pimenta (2020) refer to "information deserts" when studying how the digital revolution, combined with the economic crisis, has reduced the presence of local press in Brazil, leaving half of the municipalities without their own news outlets. Other scholars are exploring the possibilities of extending the notion of information deserts beyond the regressive economic structure of the media to broaden the geographical framework of studying communicative deserts, seeking regions where the media not

only disappear but never existed.

However, the mere existence of a local media outlet does not necessarily imply that there is original or informatively relevant content for the community. Hence, authors like Gulyas and Baines (2020) prefer to refer to "local media gaps" to more broadly identify what it means to lack access to informative content linked to the territory and committed to its inhabitants. Similarly, Ferrucci and Alaimo (2020) prefer the concept of a "media desert" defined as "geographic locations that lack access to fresh local news and information" (p. 490); or what Howells (2015, pp. 81-82) terms "news black holes": gaps in local news that result from "newspaper closures," a "withdrawal of local journalism," and a "decrease in local media ownership".

Although some studies point out that service information in these environments is reaching people through alternative media repertoires such as social networks (Collier and Graham, 2022), the media also operate at a symbolic and recognition level. When spatial inequalities and a lack of territorial cohesion hinder the articulation of imagined communities (Andersson, 2019), the media can participate in their construction by functioning as "social glue" that promotes cohesion and integration (Lowrey et al., 2008, p. 284). On the other hand, if populations in less populated areas disappear from the news as protagonists, they tend to distance themselves from the media, which no longer reflect their interests, risking becoming irrelevant in terms of information (Lanzas-Pellico, 2021). The narrative of their current situation, visibility, and discussion of their needs and projects in the public sphere are subject to specific coverage and the perspectives of journalists from national media. This situation can impact individuals, their emotions, and ways of life in that territory, both in their self-perception and how others perceive them, affecting power relations, including those related to the rural-urban relationship and, in general, the configuration of the public sphere (Brantner et al., 2021).

From another theoretical perspective, the approach initiated by the Latin American school of alternative and community communication (Barranquero and Treré, 2021; Rincón and Marroquín, 2019) sheds light on local communication by focusing on mediations, that is, on the conception of the media as processes, producers of meanings and connections (Martín-Barbero, 2004; Verón, 2015), "because meanings are produced in connections, and meanings connect us" (Kaplún, 2019). The body of research on alternative media has highlighted how communities develop media practices to narrate, recognize, and advocate for themselves, resisting irrelevance through praxis (Barranquero, 2019).

Depopulation cultures in Spain have traditionally been linked to marginalization and silencing, promoting imaginaries associated with melancholy and sadness, shaping ways of life even when actual material conditions or socio-economic and cultural contexts have transformed (Raymond et al., 2015). The shadow landscapes that form in territories marked by the depopulation culture are both historical and fluid, rooted in the local and yet multiscalar. Often, the media structure - in line with other political and institutional dimensions - solidifies these cultures, hindering social change in favor of the urban status quo. Dominant mediated narratives and representations make it difficult to break the rural-urban dichotomy, not allowing space for alternative visions that highlight other ways of understanding places, for example, through the idea of "rurbanity," the hybridization where the rural urbanizes, and the rural finds a place within the urban (Cimadevilla, 2010; Galimberti and Cimadevilla, 2016).

Locally relevant content enables awareness and debate about local events and issues, reinforcing the role of the media in energizing community life and its ability to intervene in decision-making processes (Fisher et al., 2022; Kaplún, 2019). This perspective suggests that, conversely, in a context of media absence where information deserts have emerged (Abernathy, 2020), modes of deliberation and democratic participation are significantly affected. Therefore, the absence of local media can impact the quality of the democratic process and influence social and political engagement within the territory. Additionally, this approach allows us to consider "the loss represented by the depletion of media ecosystems in a holistic sense, as a decrease in opportunities for socializing, face-to-face encounters, affective interactions, and community itself" (Gulyas and Baines, 2020, p. 15).

In this article, we start from the conception that journalism is defined through its practices (Stephansen and

Treré, 2019). That is to say, as Deuze and Witschge (2017) explain, rather than offering a universal notion of the journalistic institution, its functions, and values, journalism is best understood as a situated practice (Mellado, 2021). Similarly, conceptions of journalistic functions and roles are not static; they are subject to a continuous state of "(re)creation, (re)interpretation, appropriation, and contestation" that depends on different contexts (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2018, p. 151).

Research indicates that the repertoire of journalistic functions has expanded, transitioning from classical views of informer, watchdog, or scrutinizer towards others connected with intervention, energizing, care, or participation (Mellado, 2021; Moon and Lawrence, 2021; Poindexter et al., 2006). Case studies highlight the value of proximity, reciprocity, responsiveness, in essence, journalism's connection with local communities (Fisher et al., 2022; Gulyas and Baines, 2020) and its ability to reinforce a sense of community (Mathews and Ali, 2022; Wenzel, 2020). In this context, Costera-Meijer (2020) argues that local media should question the uncritical application of mainstream professional values, which tend to homogenize agendas. Journalists should pay more attention to the principles that define valuable journalism for communities, experimenting with new roles such as the figure of a good neighbor (Poindexter et al., 2006), where communities feel better represented and recognized.

2.1. Governance and local media

The visibility of information deserts and the recognition of the expectations of the audience regarding local media provide an appropriate framework for reflecting on the possibilities of a media reform linked to the innovations being developed in the field of territorial cohesion and eco-social transition, both in Spain and the European Union (Molina-Ibáñez et al., 2022).

As Barranquero (2019) recalls, media reform is structured around three main lines of action that would imply, in the studied context: firstly, the deconstruction of the ideological position of the media, not only as a support for the neoliberal capitalist system but as a foundation for the "urbanization of consciousness" (Jansson, 2013), linked to a mythological conception of the city as a "mediatized center." The second line is the implementation of media as a process (Hepp, 2020, p. 69-112; Kaplún, 2019), promoting communication projects not oriented towards commercial benefit but aimed at ensuring the articulation of subregional identities and communities, thus contributing to preventing isolation, disconnection from other areas, and ultimately depopulation. To achieve this, the third dimension should be implemented: innovation in communication policies and experimentation in forms of collaboration among journalists, institutions, and citizens, sustained by, for example, public subsidies (Davis et al., 2020; Fenton and Freedman, 2022; Pickard, 2020) or through community and citizen experiences (RICCAPP, 2023).

As Fenton (2022, p. 35) points out, "it is necessary to continue imagining media systems that prioritize public value over profit and collaboration over competitiveness." However, in the case of depopulation, as other studies have already indicated (Sáez et al., 2016), public policies tend to be defined either from an urban perspective or from the top down without the involvement of the territories themselves, which can affect their success. Instead, a bottom-up approach that focuses on inclusivity and participation could enhance communicative spaces (Brantner et al., 2021) that allow listening and promotion of deliberation and the multiple functions and roles associated with local media.

This research contributes to the diagnosis upon which future media reform can be designed by analyzing, through discussion groups, the types of practices, functions, and professional roles associated with local journalism in depopulated areas, i.e., what is understood as valuable journalism for the communities in these territories.

2.2. The Case of Castilla-La Mancha: Media and Policies in Rural Areas

In this work, we explore the situation of Castilla-La Mancha, an autonomous community that combines the

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[1] The province of Cuenca is part of the Southern Sparsely Populated Areas, along with Teruel and Soria.

duality of being heavily affected by the media crisis (Galletero-Campos, 2021) and because some of the most depopulated areas in Europe are located within it[1]. In the media landscape, it's important to note that 60% of provincial newspapers that were in operation before 2011 have closed down, and Castilla-La Mancha is also among the Spanish autonomous communities with the fewest number of online news outlets (Salaverría et al., 2019). In the radio sector, aside from stations located in provincial capitals and some larger towns, only 37% of municipal radio stations that obtained broadcasting licenses are functional, thus squandering their potential as vital elements for their immediate communities (Peralta-García et al., 2022). The public entity, Castilla-La Mancha Media, features provincial broadcasts on radio but not on television. Furthermore, unlike in other autonomous communities, there isn't a network of community media to address the communicative and informational needs of geographically dispersed populations.

This is the media ecosystem in which public policies outlined in the recently approved Law 2/2021, of May 7, on Economic, Social, and Tax Measures to Counter Depopulation and Promote Rural Development in Castilla-La Mancha, must be implemented. The law emphasizes the role of awareness and dissemination by the media in collaboration with institutions (Article 7) and also envisions the media dimension as one of the intervention lines (Article 67). The law commits the regional administration to promote "measures that facilitate access to accurate information for rural citizens and encourage human, cultural, and economic exchanges among the rural population." Additionally, it aims to facilitate "the broadcasting, television, and any other means of social communication in rural areas, collaborating with the different social communication media present in the regional territory." However, it's still unclear how these principles will be implemented and what journalists can contribute when thinking about new media models.

For the design of strategies and planning of public services, the law contemplates a new zoning model for the community based on demographic criteria, economic activity, land use, and accessibility or proximity to urban areas. According to this zoning, areas at risk of depopulation, intense depopulation, or extreme depopulation are defined, encompassing a total of 721 municipalities out of the existing 919. In these areas, according to the mapping being conducted within the framework of the project this work is part of, there are 16 media outlets, of which 75% (n=12) are radio stations: 7 public, 4 private, and only one community radio station. The remaining media outlets are four privately owned digital platforms. These figures underscore the need to promote a sustainable media system that caters to the 22% of the population residing in 73% of the regional territory.

3. Objectives

This research sets out to explore the general objective of investigating the relationship of local media in the construction of community and connection with the territory. Aligned with this, the specific objectives are defined as follows:

- Identify the demands and expectations that communities in depopulation-risk territories have regarding local media.

- Investigate the journalistic functions that both the public and professionals consider most relevant for these territories.

- Reflect on the orientation of journalism and local media within the framework of media reform as a cornerstone of innovation to address information deserts.

4. Methodology

This proposal adopts a methodological design consisting of conducting five focus groups (Conde Gutiérrez del Álamo, 2009; Ruiz Ruiz, 2015). Firstly, input was sought from the population in depopulated areas of Cuenca, the third Spanish province with the lowest population density, at 11.40 inhabitants per square kilometer. In this case, two groups of 8 residents each were selected from two municipalities with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants

located in different regions: Ledaña (1,563 inhabitants), a population that has never had a local media outlet and is categorized by regional law as an "intensely depopulated area"; and Priego (885 inhabitants), a population that had a printed and digital newspaper until 2016 and belongs to the "extremely depopulated" area. Participant recruitment aimed to achieve a variety of sociodemographic profiles (Table 1).

The requirement for discursive consensus inherent in the focus group technique (Gutiérrez Brito, 2008) sometimes complicates reflection and can lead to an oversimplified discourse. Additionally, individuals do not always have a conscious opinion on the proposed topics, in this case, informative media. To avoid methodological constraints that give excessive importance to consensus positions, it was decided to hold two successive meetings with the same groups. The first meetings were held on February 9 and 10, 2022, and focused on the information diet of these inhabitants, their needs, and demands. The goal was to direct their attention towards the object of study and invite them to a second meeting, held on May 4 and 5, 2022, where the discussion was oriented towards depopulation and the media, in relation to their own perspectives as inhabitants of the territories affected by the issue.

Subsequently, on November 25, 2022, a fifth, reduced-size focus group discussion (Ruiz Ruiz, 2015) was conducted remotely with professionals and communicators selected for their professional specialization in depopulated territories and rural areas, from various locations in Spain. The four participants were chosen for their experience and the variety of profiles they represent, ranging from traditional media such as press or television to corporate communication and social media outreach, with one participant being recognized in

Table 1. *Sociodemographic Composition of the Groups*

Ledaña	Priego	Communicators
Male, 23 years old, employed, Vocational Training.	Male, 21 years old, unemployed, basic studies.	Male, 26 years old, social media communicator (Soria) C1.
Female, 35 years old, unemployed, Vocational Training.	Female, 32 years old, unemployed, higher education.	Female, 41 years old, rural communication agency (Asturias) C2.
Female, 40 years old, employed, Vocational Training (FP in Spanish).	Male, 45 years old, employed, Vocational Training (FP in Spanish).	Female, 46 years old, journalist in a national public media, rural coverage (Madrid) C3.
Male, 49 years old, employed, basic studies.	Male, 56 years old, employed, basic studies.	Male, 52 years old, newspaper editor (Teruel) C4.
Female, 38 years old, employed, higher education.	Female, 47 years old, employed, basic studies.	
Female, 37 years old, employed, higher educations.	Female, 42 years old, employed, higher education.	
Female, 50 years old, employed, basic studies.	Female, 46 years old, employed, basic studies.	
Male, 71 years old, retired, basic studies.	Male, 68 years old, basic studies.	

Source: Author's own work.

various national and international media outlets.

All sessions lasted between 90 and 120 minutes, were video-recorded, and had flexible moderation based on open questions regarding information consumption and needs, presence/absence of local media, and the relationship of professionals with the audience. Subsequently, complete transcription was carried out for analysis. To respect the confidentiality of the informants, the group to which the quote belongs (G1 or G2 and

the location) or the profile in the case of communicators is indicated in parentheses.

In this case, the analysis of the groups is based on the notion of discourse as a social production in which the group configures its consensuses based on the social place it shares and represents (Conde-Gutiérrez-del-Álamo, 2009, p. 42), in this case, defined by their habitat or professional specialization.

5. Results

5.1. The relationship between journalism and the community

The issue of depopulation acts as a unifying phenomenon for the groups and a catalyst for their discourses. It is also the aspect that articulates a shared enunciative position as individuals linked to rural areas in both collectives, residents and professionals. This 'us,' those from within, is especially grounded in their commitment to their territories and is characterized by conditions of inequality, a sense of abandonment or marginalization compared to others (urban dwellers, national media, those from more populated areas, outsiders). This duality is perceived deeply rooted in the population, but it is also inferred in the group of journalists, even though two of them do not work in depopulated areas but in a provincial capital and in a national media covering rural areas. This enunciative position is expressed in different ways: referring to those from outside as those who do not recognize, and therefore, do not share or value the daily reality of these territories, and valuing a knowledge derived from living, experiencing the environment, involving the body, and forming affective bonds.

Expressions like "there are unwritten rules that if you are from there, you know perfectly" (C3) emphasize the idea that rural areas have their own codes, a unique culture, a way of being and existing in the world, reinforcing the distance it has from other habitats. There are narrative elements that refer to a strong identification with the territory: "I am here in heaven, my family is here, my friends too. It's a bit like the comfort zone" (G2 Ledaña); "It's a very simple thing: to know what the depopulated Spain is, you have to live in depopulated Spain" (G2 Priego).

If the inhabitants who participated in the groups recognize themselves within this 'us,' the villagers, it is worth asking how journalists can integrate into these communities or become their allies. The group of communicators makes a clear distinction between those who come to cover specific events and those who work on the ground continuously and have grown up there. The latter would be identified as local journalists, while the "outsiders" are located in national media: "In Madrid, they discover that there are people from Jaén, Soria, Lugo..."; "The major media outlets approached rural Spain at that time looking for anecdotes" (C4).

What characterizes the construction of the desirable professional profile that both publics present for a journalist working in these areas is that their expertise should be based on experience and emotions, i.e., it is experience and not specialization, knowledge, or efficiency that gives journalists the foundations and the ability to understand what happens in the depopulated rural areas. The communicators position themselves as activists ("I believe that journalists who work in these territories must somehow be activists for depopulation," C4), refer to their personal memories ("my father was born in an abandoned village in Soria called Velasco, near Burgo de Osma, and that has somehow reached me" (C3), and reinforce depopulation as an identifying feature ("from my province, Soria, the smallest province in terms of population in Spain," C1).

This inside-out axis reflects a way of feeling in which there is an expectation towards journalism that drives it to show a level of commitment stronger than the pursuit of the standard of objectivity or neutrality. It emphasizes the relationship between the media, journalists, and their communities, advocating the idea of

"activist journalism." According to their discourse, the connection with the territory is what makes it possible to understand a phenomenon and its effects.

They feel forgotten, passive, not generating enough interest for their own media, almost adopting a defeatist point of view: "We are not interesting, we cost a lot of money" (G2 Ledaña). On the other hand, when they are the subject of media coverage by the so-called "outsider" journalists, they recognize themselves in stereotyped and typically negative views, linked to events, extreme weather phenomena, disasters, or episodes of violence.

> "P4: Small towns, unfortunately, only appear in the media if something bad happens, like hailstorms, or if almond trees are affected... basically that".

> "P6: Basically, it's only about misfortunes."

> "P7: We don't have any good news that could be in the press" (G2 Ledaña).

> "P4: When we have catastrophes or when there's a fire."

> "P5: Yes. The only time it appears is if there's some misfortune. If there is, then it does appear" (G1 Priego).

The discourse of the groups highlights how individuals have to interpret and negotiate with the representations that inscribe and condense their life experiences, a process that influences the shaping of depopulated identity (Bryant et al., 2011). This includes both the material and discursive aspects that have shaped a sense of social and cultural subordination over decades.

Contrary to the perception that these territories are only of interest for negative news values, there is an expressed desire for the media to come and learn about their populations for other reasons:

> "What is sad is seeing a village with two elderly people sitting in the sun on a bench, and it could be marketed differently. It's a village with a thousand inhabitants who have enough resources for families to live here very well. It's a luxury to have a school with the student body we have, where the teachers can easily handle a non-overcrowded class, unlike in other places. We have a daycare for ages 0 to 3, a playroom, and a library. You can see it, so market it differently".

However, they also ask themselves: 'But normally, why would anyone come here?' (G1 Ledaña). In this regard, a paradoxical position is observed: the condition of forgotten victims makes them depict themselves as not very newsworthy. Nevertheless, at the same time, a desire for recognition is explicit. As will be seen later, this opens up the possibility of strategic interventions to revalue and draw attention to everything that questions/contradicts stereotypes and prejudices about rural areas.

5.2. The functions attributed to journalism

Through the discourse of the groups and their expectations, an investigation is conducted into the functions that journalism should fulfill in depopulated areas, identifying three priority lines (Table 2) that have connections with certain roles categorized in academic literature (Humanes et al., 2021), and which we have termed instrumental function, recognition function, and mediation function.

Table 2. *Functions of demographic journalism inferred from the discourse of the groups*

Instrumental Function	Recognition Function	Mediation Function
- Provide public service information about the local environment. - Advertisement. - Stimulate the economy. - Attract resources, visitors, repopulation.	- Facilitate relationships with neighboring territories (cohesion). - Connect with those who maintain an emotional connection with the place. - Provide presence and visibility as a mode of public existence. - Promote a sense of belonging and pride. - Provide permanence, recording collective memory and acting as an anthropological archive.	**Political dimension:** - Facilitate and invigorate public debate. - Analyze and question the political measures adopted if they do not align with the detected needs. - Articulate collective demands. **Cultural dimension:** - Boost public and cultural life. - Promote media/digital literacy. - Empower rural communities through transformative communication.

Source: Own elaboration.

5.2.1. Instrumental function

It is possible to understand the role played by the media based on their absence (Abernathy, 2018). Precisely, the population groups point out the lack of local media as another symptom of their decline, as another service that ceases to be provided in their municipalities. In particular, in Priego, they lament the loss of a local newspaper that was published until 2016, using expressions like "for the one thing we had," "I think we have lost everything" (G1 Priego).

In the absence of local media in an area, the first thing to be affected is the daily information about services. Mathews (2022, p.11) points out that without media, "life is tougher," as "residents acted as reporters, scouring websites and social networks for essential information." Similarly, the groups held in Castilla-La Mancha mentioned communicative initiatives that seek to fill the gaps left by conventional media in these territories in their role of service journalism (Mellado, 2021).

> "P1: From the Bandomóvil. An app we have where you can find out things about the town. The town hall usually posts things so people can find out.
> P2: There's a water outage on some street, there's going to be a power cut, or carnival ends on such and such day...
> P1: And on the town hall's Facebook page.
> P3: Social media or WhatsApp groups" (G1 Ledaña).

> "P4: The town hall's website.
> P1: The Women's Center on Facebook" (G1 Priego).

If these alternative media repertoires (Collier and Graham, 2022) cover these informational needs, we investigate what it would mean for these communities to have a local media. Its importance is associated in their discourse, firstly, with a pragmatic function in which the media act as spaces for promotion to the outside world: 'Advertising is everything, the media... if the media want, they can promote a town' (G2 Ledaña); 'The newspaper [that closed] gave fame to the town' (G1 Priego). Thus, interviewees consider that the media are key to attracting resources, visitors, and/or even new residents. In response to the question of what it would mean for them to have more presence in the media, one of the answers was: 'More people for the town' (G1 Priego), that is, it is even related to a possible reversal of the depopulation process.

5.2.2. Recognition function

Providing information about the territories and the events that take place in them is not only a matter of public service; it is also one of the most effective ways to intervene in the sense of community. The study by Mathews and Ali (2022) reveals how the closure of local media not only affects the sense of community and the shared emotional connection with other inhabitants due to the lack of news, but it also eliminates the positive experience provided by event coverage. Events represent an opportunity to reaffirm appreciation and the connection to the place where they live. Regarding the newspaper that closed, the residents of Priego state:

> "P2: It made us feel closer to our neighbors."
> "P6: If they did an interview with you, then all the people from Priego who are in Barcelona or somewhere else would see it. All those people saw it." (G1 Priego).

In this sense, local media act as a kind of 'social glue' (Lowrey et al., 2008, p. 284), not only bringing together the inhabitants but connecting them with all those who maintain an emotional bond with the place.

On the other hand, the discourses suggest a search for recognition through the public inscription that media coverage represents: 'to have presence [in the media] is to exist' (C3). The desire expressed by these communities to be protagonists of the coverage suggests that local media, at least potentially, by paying attention to what happens in the nearby environment, have the ability to make their inhabitants feel special and proud of their villages, as opposed to the negative or stereotyped view that, according to them, national media present. This is how they express, for example, what they would like to be told:

> 'Keep in mind that, as this village relies on agriculture, many products go to the market, and we need to value these things. Yes, many people may have their own vegetable gardens, but they should know that these vegetables are from here' (G1 Ledaña).

> 'P4: Well, the culture of our village, things that are typical and atypical.
> P1: Yes, traditions' (G1 Priego).

In this way, the framework shaped by local news acts as a 'second order of reality' (Costera-Meijer, 2020). That is, inhabitants know and recognize others from the area, and others have news about them to the extent and in the way they appear in the news stories.

In addition to this articulation of a common sentiment, the media also hold value as an anthropological record of memory and activation of the sensation of relevance and permanence of what would otherwise be destined to disappear, as reflected in the following testimony:

> "She told me: 'You're recording things that are archive material for TV because they are the last ones of I don't know what...' and that, when that last person dies, that knowledge is lost. So, at least, it's documented" (C3).

> "There are people who feel revalued because you go, because you tell their story" (C1).

Therefore, it is a way to dignify the existence of the forgotten. Within this function, the media act as a vehicle to generate a pride of identity, a way to reinforce the collective awareness of the lived place that can act as a counterbalance to the position of subordination, often victimization, that conditions experiences that delve into the cultures of depopulation. This desire for attention connects with an empathetic attitude from journalists, linked to the emotional commitment of 'those from within,' to understand what has traditionally been undervalued or remained on the margins of media focus.

5.2.3. Mediation Function

With respect to the function of mediation, we have identified two dimensions. The first refers to what journalism can do to promote the dynamization of deliberation and democratic participation. In the group from Priego, whose inhabitants show a higher level of activism than in Ledaña, they consider that journalists practice 'soft journalism' where 'they don't take a stand on anything' (G2 Priego) and limit themselves to disseminating measures or projects in an uncritical manner:

> "P3: That news they recently shared about the protection of the Priego wicker area in Europe. This [came out] on Castilla La Mancha Media and so on, about a month ago... But the wicker is gone, when there's no more wicker!"

The citizens question an objectivist model of journalism, based on the reproduction of statements and often aligned with institutional interests and public powers, in which journalists focus on subsidies as mere transmitters:

> I think that news can be presented in a superficial manner or studied. Perhaps studying them requires more resources. A person who has to work a lot on the topic may not be convenient for the newspapers, the media, or whatever. But news from a depopulated area cannot be sold as it is being sold. I mean, we need to delve deeper, study what the possibilities are, and you need to talk to the politicians, and what's happening with this, with these aids" (G2 Priego).

There is a questioning in their discourse about the orientation of public policies that, for them, are defined without the involvement of the territories themselves. The journalists' trivial coverage of investments or proposals would make any initiative appear as an achievement or a benefit for the municipalities, even if it is not necessarily what their inhabitants need. In Table 3, two excerpts illustrating this perception are collected:

Table 3. *Excerpts from two moments of discussion in the second group held in Priego*

P3: They say to you, 'Look, we're going to give you a grant. If you want, we'll give you €400,000 to build a library.' We already had a library, but give me the €400,000 because we have other needs in the village that need investment. No, no. It's either the library or nothing. P6: So the journalists don't even address it. Because, how great, they've given a grant! All trumpets blaring. However, they don't say how badly that [is needed by the village].	P2: Because they also sell a wastewater treatment plant, they don't sell a green filter for a population like Priego, which a green filter is a gutter with poplars around that purifies you, and that is cheaper. P3: In the end, they don't give you that project. P2: They give it to you for what they give it to you, for the wastewater treatment plant.

Source: Author's own work.

From this perspective, which delves into the civic dimension of the media, they could contribute to improving the defense of citizens' interests by investigating what concerns the community, promoting public listening, generating debate spaces that facilitate deliberation, articulating citizen demands, and establishing mechanisms that allow understanding and assessing the decisions of public authorities.

Finally, the current digital landscape and the multitude of channels for receiving information demand that local journalism seek its legitimacy from a different perspective in which the medium, understood as a changing process (Hepp, 2020), is reaffirmed as a meeting place for community life. This notion is rooted in community communication, which "emphasizes the process more than the medium; it is also a face-to-face, personal, interpersonal, and group communication. In other words, it is a dialogue communication that favors the constitution of the common, the communitarian spirit, the 'we,' and the processes of coordinating actions" (Krohling-Peruzzo et al., 2019, p. 39).

> "What we do with this format [podcast] is a traveling theme. We go to different villages in Asturias once a month, interviewing different profiles of rural women and organizing a party. Suddenly, we set up the podcast in the library of a village with the librarian and all the women from the book club. You give them the headphones... they are delighted, and then they can listen to it on platforms they didn't know about, like Spotify" (C2).

Under this approach, they can also be agents to facilitate communication within and outside the populations, following a model oriented towards 'communicational empowerment' (Aguilar and Buraschi, 2018, p. 73) that can draw inspiration from dynamics of other areas such as social work (Saiz-Echezarreta and Galletero-Campos, 2017). This approach addresses aspects such as digital or media literacy, as well as imagination and the generation of alternative discourses about the collectives themselves:

> "What can people living in rural areas do to communicate? It's a bit of what we do, right? We try to place communication on a professional level in rural areas. We work with small municipalities that didn't have social media some time ago, and now suddenly they are delighted because the women find out when they have a yoga class because they saw it on Instagram. Or an entrepreneur who suddenly knows how to write a press release".

In this case, the media would not only serve an instrumental function, classic informative in nature, but it could be configured as an opportunity, a place, and a practice to create public space, build community, and connect with others. It's not a product but an occasion to be together, to share and get to know each other. There is a whole legacy of practices and experiences in community media in Latin America that influence this model of transformative communication (Tornay-Márquez, 2021). In the current ecosystem, through the use of ICT and new narratives and formats, new ways of sharing stories open up for these audiences. They can leverage the potential of technology without the requirement of obtaining broadcasting licenses and without the bureaucratic and administrative difficulties required by conventional broadcasting.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The notion of news deserts is closely tied to spatial inequalities (Gulyas, 2021), relating to demographic imbalances among territories and the ability of communities to remain politically and socially cohesive. The case of the province of Cuenca in Castilla-La Mancha illustrates the phenomena of depopulation and the crisis of local journalism, particularly since 2011, highlighting the issues that can arise in areas with low population density and limited media presence, and the link between both processes. This scenario presents an opportunity to investigate what local journalism means for these communities and reflect, in a broader context, on innovative approaches that transform the media into strategic players in public policies addressing demographic challenges.

The analysis of focus groups has shown that both professionals and the public value the role of media in providing a perspective attentive to the needs of communities, engaging in constructive criticism, presenting news that drive and encourage public discourse and interactions. They acknowledge the media's ability to enhance cohesion and a sense of belonging, as well as to promote local pride. In line with findings from other research (Costera-Meijer, 2022; Fisher et al., 2022), expectations regarding the media emphasize not only their ability to listen but also to understand and care for the people residing in the area, demonstrating an active commitment and participation in seeking solutions to shared problems. This would be accomplished through

a form of "advocacy journalism," in which professionals become insiders capable of understanding everyday life, applying an attentive and respectful perspective to the environment, and delving deeper into the issues. It also requires shedding the sometimes urban, sometimes prejudiced perspective to "honor the complexity" of rural areas: "telling stories from within and taking a realistic but constructive, optimistic, and sometimes even humorous view. If you are close to or even part of the problem, you won't need exaggeration, simplification, or minimization (Costera-Meijer, 2020, p. 364)".

However, this practiced approach with little criticism can also pose certain risks. Committing to the democratic challenge of depopulation from a militant standpoint, depending on how it is interpreted, may not adequately address the fact that communities are not homogeneous but unequal, conflict-ridden, and shaped by power relations. This highlights the tension between mainstream journalistic values and its classic roles of oversight and investigation, and these other values related to care that emerge from the discourse of the groups (Moon and Lawrence, 2021). It appears important for both aspects to hybridize and complement each other with the aim of achieving a critical media approach that facilitates participation in the development of localities, helping to understand, value, and negotiate public policies that affect them.

The crisis in journalism is a social problem not only in Spain but also on an international scale, emphasizing the need for media reform tailored to the idiosyncrasies of different territories, communities, and media ecosystems. As argued by Pickard (2020, pp. 172-173), "the loss of journalism and rampant misinformation are structural problems that require structural solutions. Moreover, they are social problems that require political interventions." This fundamental social issue for the functioning of deliberative democracies demands the implementation of public policies in the field of communication, specifically as part of strategies addressing demographic challenges. Since depopulation is a multifactorial phenomenon, its approach requires the involvement and participation of all stakeholders, and the tools for this need to be cross-cutting, incorporating diverse areas such as economics—with fiscal, labor, and business-related measures—politics—with governance measures, among others—ecology—with measures aimed at energy transition and ecosocial aspects—and sociocultural, encompassing the media, especially public and third-sector media, in those areas abandoned by the private market. In this regard, García-García (2021, p. 496) reminds us that community media can "provide responses to structural problems that internet promises have not solved and have even complicated (traditional journalism crisis, concentration, misinformation, exclusion of sectors)." However, their survival requires a specific legislative framework and supportive policies, a scenario that has not fully materialized in the Law 13/2022, of July 7, General Audiovisual Communication Act, despite recognizing their role in media literacy and education (RICCAPP, 2023). In contrast to experiences in communities like Andalusia, where municipal and community radio stations have had a significant impact on the media ecosystem (Chaparro-Escudero, 2014), public and social initiatives in Castilla-La Mancha have been and remain scarce. Work within local action groups, strategic actors in rural development, could be a way to promote models of citizen communication with a focus on social and territorial cohesion.

In action documents addressing depopulation, the incorporation of media and the communicative dimension is still limited. The norms often grant the media a disseminative purpose for the programs developed or aimed at improving the image of rural areas. The Strategy to tackle depopulation 2021-2031 of the Junta de Castilla-La Mancha can be taken as a paradigmatic example: it recognizes that the media are perceived as allies for eliminating stereotypes and creating new representations but does not include measures that delve into a more profound media reform—in terms of structure, institutional collaboration, financing methods, etc. It also does not consider local media as an agent capable of energizing community life in these territories. An indication that the media sector is not viewed as a relevant actor to act as an intermediary in the discussion about the needs and demands of these populations is that out of the 51 entities and associations that participated in the design of the regional strategy, none were from the communication sector.

These limitations open up new avenues to investigate alternative models of local media and ways of practicing local journalism based on the paths outlined in this study, with a focus that prioritizes the rural population. Thus, it is necessary to expand

"The issue of depopulation acts as a unifying phenomenon for the groups and a catalyst for their discourses."

research to design a policy where, in the words of Fenton (2022, p.35), "citizens are at the center of democratic media governance." Proposing a media reform from this perspective goes beyond modifying laws or promoting a subsidy system; "it is about producing more solidary and democratic, loving and efficient bonds (inefficiency wears out change processes until they paralyze). It is also about producing clearer, shared, shareable, and creative meanings (cardboard revolutions die of sadness)" (Kaplún, 2019).

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