# Management of local public radio: values and challenges in the current soundscape

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**ABSTRACT**

**Introduction:** This paper aims to assess the presence of public service values in municipal radio in Catalonia, as well as the challenges it faces. **Methodology:** The research is based on a mixed methodology articulated in two phases. In the first phase of a qualitative nature, a focus group of eight informants linked to the management of local radio stations was carried out. In a second phase, the findings are subjected to a quantitative analysis (a survey of 130 radio stations) to provide representative data that reflects the reality of the sector. **Results:** The detected challenges faced by local public radio are: 1) Lack of budget; 2) Lack of advertising resources; 3) Need to create audiovisual and/or crossmedia content; 4) Difficulty in updating technology; 5) Competition from social networks; 6) Lack of audience; 7) Loss of influence of FM; 8) Institutional independence; 9) Lack of professionalization of staff. **Discussion:** The need to reinforce the value of proximity as one of the main banners of its public service mission is evident. **Conclusions:** Local governments need to be aware of the important role that local public radio stations play as engines of municipal revitalization and as the backbone of the social, cultural, sporting and political fabric of small communities.

**Keywords:** local communication; radio; public radio; public service; proximity; revitalization; engagement; funding.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Technological advances that have improved accessibility to both the production and consumption of audio products have led to a significant transformation in the audio field. The explosion of audio content, spearheaded by *podcasts* and the consolidation of acoustic formats, is forcing radio stations to incorporate a growing range of offerings to meet the communication needs of new audiences. This creates a scenario of coexistence between radio and audio products, fostering their development in the current digital sonosphere (Barrios, 2020; Fajula Payet et al., 2021), characterized by the integration and interaction of different electronic-digital devices, the diversification of formats, and the consolidation of consumption patterns and habits very different from those that prevailed in the analog era. In this context, the architecture of this sonosphere explains the paradigm shift we are witnessing in the field of radio communication.

> The transformation of radio, its expansion to new channels and consumption devices, coupled with the rise of *podcasts* and music streaming platforms, have led to the transfiguration of the sound ecosystem. The transition from sound media to sound media has entailed a complete change in content, but also in its production and reception processes. (Piñeiro-Otero & Pedrero-Esteban, 2022, p. 1)

Radio's adaptability throughout its first hundred years in Spain has been a driving force behind its renewal and its ability to compete with emerging media and platforms. This has continued to the present day, where, faced with the challenge of digitization and its resulting advancements, radio has found ways to reach an increasingly fragmented and diverse audience. Traditional programming schedules are now complemented by the possibilities offered by the web and the production of other textual and audiovisual content, the incorporation of cross-media narratives, the development of applications with complementary functionalities, the distribution of audio clips through social networks (Gutiérrez et al., 2014), and the simultaneous broadcast of radio programs in video format. These are increasingly widespread practices that, as in the main stations in our country, are making significant inroads in the local radio sector and can be accessed through any device, from anywhere, at any time.

Although radio penetration in Spain has been gradually declining since the beginning of this decade, falling from 55.5% in 2020 to 54.3% in 2023, the evolution of radio itself appears to have slightly boosted advertising

investment. According to data from Infoadex, this investment stood at 7.8% in 2023, representing an increase of 0.3 percentage points compared to 2021. However, compared to 2022, when it reached 7.9%, the volume had decreased by 0.1 percentage points (Infoadex, 2024).

While technology has significantly shaped this century-long transformation of radio, direct and close contact with listeners has been, and continues to be, the driving force behind its survival. For this reason, major networks still make time to connect with their regional stations, because it is through them that citizens access what is happening in their immediate surroundings. From their beginnings, the local stations that would later become part of these major networks "were not mere repeaters, but always had their own programming, aimed at their broadcasting environment" (Martí, 2024, p. 70).

In the context of local communication, the regional stations that make up the networks of large media corporations coexist with other radio operators (García Castillejo, 2016; Chaparro, 2005; Barbeito & Perona, 2000), such as independent private radio stations. These are joined by others that, born in the 1970s thanks to the liberalization of radio broadcasting in Spain after the end of the Franco dictatorship, constitute what is known as the third sector of communication. Therefore, when talking about local radio and the coexistence of its different models, we are faced with a "heterogeneous set of stations with diverse management, structure and content" (Piñeiro-Otero, 2015, p. 36) and with a complex broadcasting system in constant evolution in which, along with those already mentioned, there are also other local stations of great importance: those of public ownership dependent on the municipalities, also known as municipal radio stations.

Following the emergence of the first municipal radio station in Arenys de Mar (Barcelona) in 1979, this type of station spread rapidly throughout Spain, forming a network of publicly owned media outlets that would join the impoverished Spanish Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) of the time, which was then reduced to a monopoly of RTVE. This expansion had a particular impact in the autonomous communities of Andalusia, Catalonia, Castile and León, Galicia, and the Basque Country. So much so that in 1986, just seven years after the birth of the first municipal station in Spain, Catalonia, for example, had 126 stations, while in Andalusia, the other area where they grew most strongly, there were 40 (Farré et al., 1986). In 1999, 20 years later, the figure had risen to 189 in the Catalan community (Coromines et al., 1999). In 2008, when the Llibre blanc de la ràdio local pública (White Paper on Local Public Radio) was published, there were 254 stations, meaning that 22.4% of Catalan municipalities had local public radio (Federació de Ràdios Locals de Catalunya, 2008, p. 23).

Throughout their history, publicly owned local radio stations, the sector of interest to this study, have followed a winding and difficult path that, for various reasons, has hampered the development of initiatives or, in the worst cases, led to their demise: from the problems stemming from the legal limbo in which they were immersed for years to the impact of the 2008 economic crisis, as well as limited budgets, obsolete infrastructure, loss of audience, and the lack of support and funding from local councils. In this regard, Crespo (2016) highlights two aspects that have shaped the trajectory of these stations. Firstly, the fact that local stations emerged without a specific legal framework meant they could be shut down at any time by the government authorities. Furthermore, the fact that the financial allocation has become one of the main factors influencing the development of its staff, largely composed of altruistic collaborators, has resulted in a loss of effectiveness as a public service.

Although the Internet has expanded the reach of these stations, since their content can be heard anywhere in the world, it has also meant entering a stage of adaptation to the possibilities of interaction and management of content of all kinds that, as already mentioned, the web and social networks make possible.

> Radio faces new experiences and challenges every day. Now, stations also offer images, and listeners can access content stored in platform repositories. This possibility is a very important qualitative leap because it completely changes the conditions of programming, which were based primarily on time-limited content and single broadcasts. (Balsebre -Torroja et al., 2023, p. 19)

In addition to the circumstances described above, which could explain the vulnerability that has historically characterized the local public radio sector, there is also the difficulty of obtaining an accurate census that truly reflects the scale of the phenomenon:

> The problems surrounding the development of municipal radio stations, as well as the legal vacuum that has characterized them for many years, explain the difficulty in controlling this phenomenon and the constant fluctuations in figures. Municipal stations could be established, close due to technical or legal problems, reopen, have the equipment or premises, but not broadcast, etc. (Martí et al., 1996, p. 51)

The ups and downs experienced by these radio stations have not, however, prevented them from fulfilling, to a greater or lesser degree, the public service function that has marked their trajectory and establishing themselves as platforms linked to "the social and cultural revitalization of towns, villages, and cities, with an open and participatory character" (Tresserras, 2008, p. 9). This goal is intrinsic to the historical moment in which both the municipal stations and those that make up the third sector came into being a moment in which Spanish society needed accessible, participatory communication tools that acted as social and cultural catalysts.

> Engagement, understood in a broad and diverse sense, has traditionally been presented as one of the major challenges for the media, especially for those involved in promoting democratic culture and communication rights. In this sense, engagement has become a fundamental pillar for public media in recent years. (Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2022, p. 17)

Although Cañedo et al. (2022) acknowledge the difficulty of proposing a homogeneous definition of values in the field of public media due to the sociopolitical diversity of the spaces in which they operate, in the field of local public communication, proximity, engagement, and dynamism, as previously mentioned, could be established as key values. These values, along with other emerging ones —such as transparency and social responsibility— are, in fact, what legitimize and give meaning to the public service (Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2021) provided by local broadcasters to the entire citizenry they serve.

In media outlets like municipal radio stations, these values are best expressed in the programming, especially in local news segments or those featuring local social, cultural, or sports organizations. But they are also strengthened by the contributions of civil society to the dynamics of these stations:

> (…) municipal radio stations have great potential to bring together the associative and collaborative fabric of municipalities through creative and varied formulas. This is evidenced by the fact that groups participate on a daily basis, not only as sources of information, but also as active collaborators in the production of autonomous programs at home or recorded in the studio. A whole repertoire of cooperation on the airwaves for the enjoyment of citizens. However, this social cohesion, perhaps the main achievement of this public service, may be receiving little visibility and appreciation. Radio stations depend on their network of volunteer collaborators and synergies between the station and the population. (Peralta García et al., 2022, p. 386)

In Catalonia, the focus of this research, local public radio continues to show signs of strength, as evidenced by the 198 active stations detected at the end of 2023. These stations are part of a radio sector that, according to data from the Catalan Audiovisual Council (2024), comprises 217 public stations, which coexist with 186 privately owned stations, most of them belonging to the major networks (SER, COPE, and Onda Cero). Of the 403 stations operating in this autonomous community at the time of this study, 235 were local (58.3%), which clearly demonstrates the magnitude and importance of this phenomenon in Catalonia. Of these, as already mentioned, 198 are public, in addition to 21 private and 16 belong to the non-profit sector. By province, and according to the data collected by the authors of this contribution, Barcelona accounts for 52.9% of the stations, Girona 19.8%, Tarragona 18.1%, and Lleida 9.2%. In the case of public radio stations, the highest concentration, considering the 130 stations that make up the sample for this study (see section on methodology), is found in towns with populations between 5,001 and 10,000 inhabitants, which account for 23.9% of the stations. These are followed by municipalities with populations between 20,001 and 50,000 inhabitants (21.3%), those between 10,001 and 20,000 inhabitants (18.7%), and those between 2,001 and 5,000 inhabitants (15.5%). Towns with populations between 501 and 2,000 inhabitants account for 5.8% of radio stations, while in large cities the distribution is as follows: from 50,001 to 100,000 inhabitants, 4.5%; from 100,001 to 500,000 inhabitants, 7.1% and over 500,000 inhabitants, 3.2%.

If the 198 active local public radio stations are compared with the figure given in the aforementioned 2008 White Paper on Local Public Radio, the number has fallen by 56. This downward trend is also reflected in the latest Report on Communication in Catalonia, covering the two-year period 2021-2022. This report mentions 216 Catalan local public radio stations, while estimating that:

> (…) for four decades, some 277 local public radio stations have operated; therefore, nearly 30% of Catalan municipalities have managed one at some point. In the 2021-22 period, Ràdio Sant Fost was reactivated, and Castellet Ràdio and Ràdio Castellterçol began broadcasting. On the contrary, Calders Ràdio, Montcada Ràdio, Ràdio stopped broadcasting Alp i Ràdio Menàrguens. (Niqui Espinosa & Segarrra Moreno, 2023, p. 89)

The data presented highlights the difficulty of establishing, as already mentioned, an accurate census of the number of stations in operation and demonstrates the instability of a sector dependent on the willingness of local governments to continue supporting their stations or, instead, to opt for other strategic lines in communication.

The vulnerability of this group of broadcasters is not unique to Catalonia. Research in other autonomous communities reveals similar situations. For example, in Castilla-La Mancha (Peralta García et al., 2022), of the 108 licenses granted for use as municipal broadcasters, only 40 (37%) were operational in 2019; 30 (27.8%) were closed; 23 (21.3%) were never activated; and 15 (13.9%) were outsourced. Regarding Andalusia, the most recent study analyzing the sector's behavior in depth described a scenario as "complex and with many gaps or irregularities" (Gabilondo García del Barco, 2013, p. 258). In this region, of the 311 licenses granted by the Regional Government, only 116 (37%) were operating as municipal radio stations in 2013, while 34 had been privatized or their management outsourced (11%). Furthermore, 93 stations were closed (30%), while 68 granted licenses had not been activated (22%). Finally, in the Canary Islands, where approximately 35% of municipalities hold a license, of the 31 concessions for municipal FM radio stations, at the beginning of this decade (Cañedo, 2020), 21 remained active (67.85%), while five of the remaining ten showed no record of broadcasting at any time since the concession was granted.

Whatever the case, it's clear that local public radio stations have to deal with technological changes, shifts in the media landscape, and audience demands, and in this context, they need to hold on to what makes them special. The promotion of proximity, engagement, sociocultural revitalization, and even, in the case of communities such as Catalonia, the promotion of their own language, are the main pillars on which their raison d'être is based. Furthermore, as members of the Spanish Public Service Media (PSM) together with the RTVE group and regional radio and television operators, these broadcasters are called upon to "focus their efforts on demonstrating that their existence is what guarantees accessible, truthful, verified, pluralistic, and universal information" (Valencia Bermúdez, 2022, p. 249). With regard to audiences, it seems necessary that the mission of PSM should continue to be:

> serving citizens in all the ways that their public interest activities seek to meet social, cultural, and democratic needs. The main challenge lies, to a large extent, in achieving the mental transition from a supply-oriented approach to public media to a demand-oriented approach to public media. (Bardoel & Ferrell Lowe, 2007, p. 22)

## 2. OBJECTIVES

Given the circumstances described, it is both interesting and necessary to understand the challenges that municipal radio stations, approaching their 50th anniversary, must overcome to maintain their public service mission. Therefore, this work aims to analyze the current values and challenges of this group of stations. To this end, this article presents an overview of local public radio in Catalonia in order to answer the following research questions:

1. How are the values of proximity, engagement, and dynamism manifested in local public radio?
2. What are the main challenges of local public radio and what factors explain them?

## 3. METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research questions posed, we first compiled a list of local radio stations that were operational in September 2023 in Catalonia. To do this, the database of the Catalonian Federation of Local Media (FMCMLCat), the directory of the Catalan Audiovisual Council (CAC), the Catalan Audiovisual Media Corporation (CCMA), and the Association of Information and Communication Media (AMIC). This allowed us to create a starting database that identified 314 local stations. After compiling this database, the research team contacted all of them to update their contact details and verify their activity. Of the 314 stations located, 235 were active. In terms of ownership, as mentioned above, 198 were identified as public local stations, 21 as private stations, and 16 as other types of stations.

In order to identify the main challenges faced by local public radio, a mixed methodology was chosen that involved "the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data, as well as their integration and joint discussion, in order to make inferences based on all the information gathered" (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018, p. 10), combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. The research was thus divided into two main phases.

Phase 1. It was deemed appropriate to set up a focus group with some of the heads of the stations to explore and gather clues about the main challenges currently affecting local public radio. To this end, a total of twelve people were deliberately selected (Báez & Pérez de Tudela, 2007) on the basis of three criteria: 1) to ensure territorial representation of the four Catalan provinces; 2) to achieve gender equality in terms of the presence of female and male managers in the focus group; and 3) to select certain individuals considered to be privileged observers (Corbetta, 2007) or key informants (Biagi, 2010), either because of the position they held or because

of their extensive and/or proven professional experience. The initial list of twelve people invited to participate in the focus group was finally reduced to eight, as four of them were unable to take part in the research due to scheduling conflicts. The session took place on November 3, 2023, and to facilitate group dynamics, it was decided to hold it online. One of the research team members acted as moderator and facilitator of the conversation, which lasted approximately 120 minutes. Four women and four men participated in the conversation, which focused on five major topics (the most significant changes in the sector over the last 15 years, the mission of local public broadcasters, financing, formats and programs, and future challenges): two station directors, two directors, a coordinator, a managing director, and two representatives from the Catalonian Federation of Local Media (FMCLcat), one of whom is also the director of a municipal radio station.

Once the focus group had been conducted, the research team proceeded to transcribe and analyze it. Examination of the information obtained in the discussion group revealed key issues in five main areas: public service, funding, formats and programming, future changes and trends, and degree of independence. These macro issues served as the starting point for the design of the questionnaire.
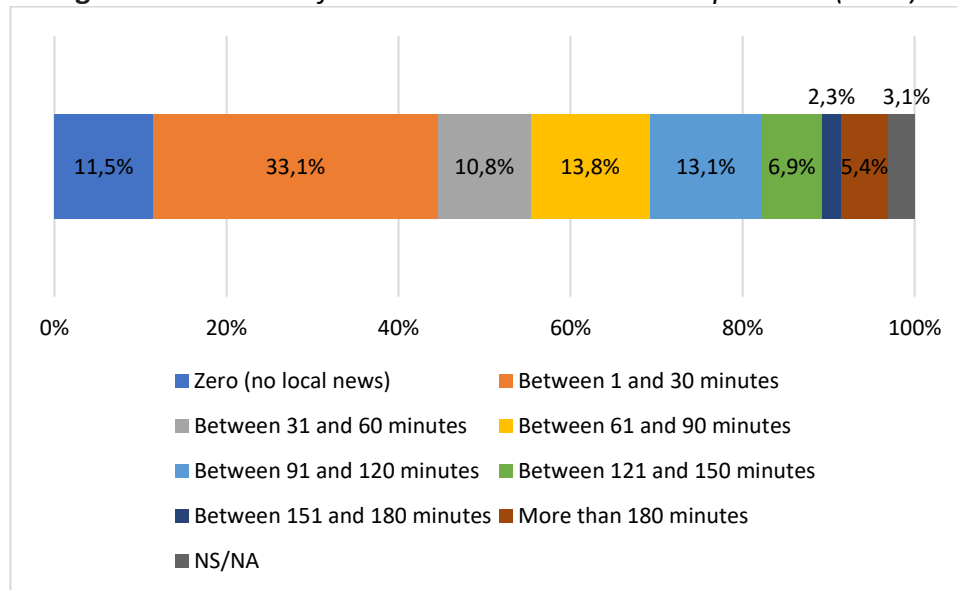
Phase 2. Questionnaire. The focus group proved very effective in identifying some challenges and future trends that were considered very interesting. However, this data needed to be verified and validated by the other Catalan local public broadcasters. This first part of the research is particularly valuable for identifying key issues, but its lack of representativeness means that the findings must be subjected to quantitative analysis in order to provide data that reflects the reality of the sector. A questionnaire was therefore drawn up, divided into six sections: 1) identification data; 2) personnel; 3) programming and content; 4) financing and advertising; 5) organization, audience, and communication; 6) challenges and future. The questionnaire ultimately contained 58 questions, combining closed and open-ended questions.

The form was created using Google Forms and sent by email to the 198 stations identified in the database as active local public radio stations. The questionnaire was available for just over a month (from March 19 to April 28) for station managers to complete. At the end of the period scheduled for receiving responses, 130 local public stations had sent their responses (65.6%). For the processing of qualitative data, the focus group session was transcribed and subsequently assessed and evaluated by the researchers. Jamovi statistical software was used to analyze the data derived from the survey of the 130 participating stations. Out of a total of 198 local public radio stations, having a sample of 130 implies a high degree of reliability in the results derived from the questionnaire, since, with a confidence level of 95% and a population variance of p=0.5, the margin of error would be 5.06%.

## 4. RESULTS

Despite their mission to serve the community they broadcast to, the data revealed by the research shows that the value of proximity has notable limitations, as only 22 of the 130 municipal radio stations in Catalonia, or 16.9% of those that responded to the questionnaire, have a completely local programming schedule. This data is complemented by other equally significant findings, such as the fact that in 27.7% of the radio stations studied, this type of programming does not exceed 50% of broadcasts, and in 16.2% it does not reach 25%. When it comes to local news, which is seen as the flagship content of local public radio, 11.5% of stations don't have local news programs (Figure 1), while most radio stations (43.9%) broadcast 60 minutes or less per day, Monday through Friday. Only seven stations (5.4%) exceed three hours of local news per day.

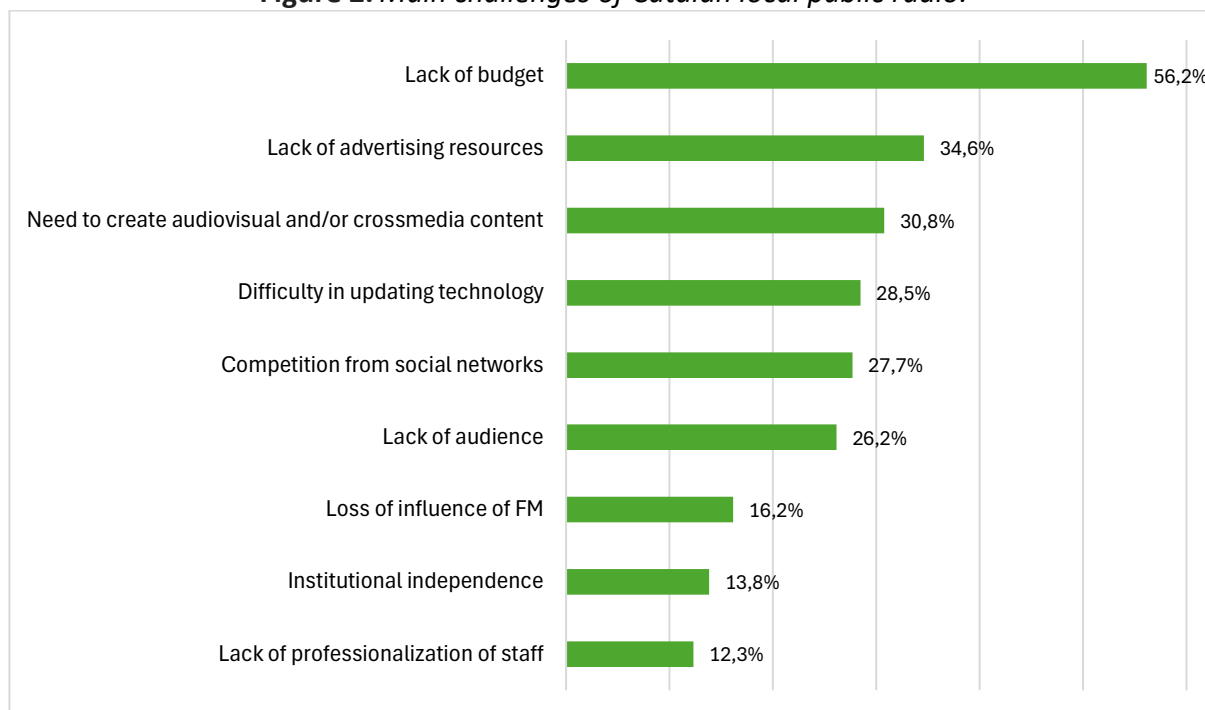**Figure 1.** *Presence of local news on Catalan municipal radio (2024).*



**Source:** Elaborated by the authors.

With regard to engagement, although it could be achieved, on the one hand, by involving civil society in the management and control mechanisms of local public radio stations, such as boards of directors or trustees, according to the research carried out, 60% of stations do not have a board of directors and, in cases where they do, 31.8% are made up of elected members of the local council, with the politicization that this entails. On the other hand, engagement would also refer to the forms of interaction that citizens have with broadcasters. In this sense, social networks are, according to 32.2% of stations, the audience's preferred means of contacting broadcasters, although closely followed by telephone (24.7%) and email (24.6%). Further behind are WhatsApp (8.5%) and the online contact form (3.8%), as well as other unspecified methods (6.1%). These tools are mainly used, in this order, to request information, give opinions on aspects related to the station, participate in contests, or request songs.

Along with the aforementioned methods, another form of engagement is the inclusion of programming dedicated to cultural and sports organizations, associations, and educational centers located in towns with municipal radio stations. Implementing this approach fosters community engagement, a value further reinforced by the fact that, in some cases, these organizations are given access to manage the entire production and broadcasting process themselves. The local public radio's commitment to this approach is evident, as 85.4% of the stations in the sample have programming dedicated to these organizations. The same is true for programs aimed at educational centers, which are present on 78.5% of the stations. Furthermore, 53.8% of the stations surveyed, schools participate in program production, demonstrating a close relationship between municipal radio and schools, and the resulting media literacy work carried out by the latter. In this regard, one of the participants in the focus group pointed out that "for many young people, radio is the primary channel for media literacy".

Along with the analysis of the values defined in this work, the research also identified up to nine challenges affecting Catalan local public radio in the current context. These are: 1) lack of budget; 2) lack of advertising resources; 3) need to create audiovisual and/or cross-media content; 4) difficulty of technological updating; 5) competition from social networks; 6) lack of audience; 7) loss of influence of FM radio; 8) institutional independence; 9) low professionalization of staff (Figure 2).

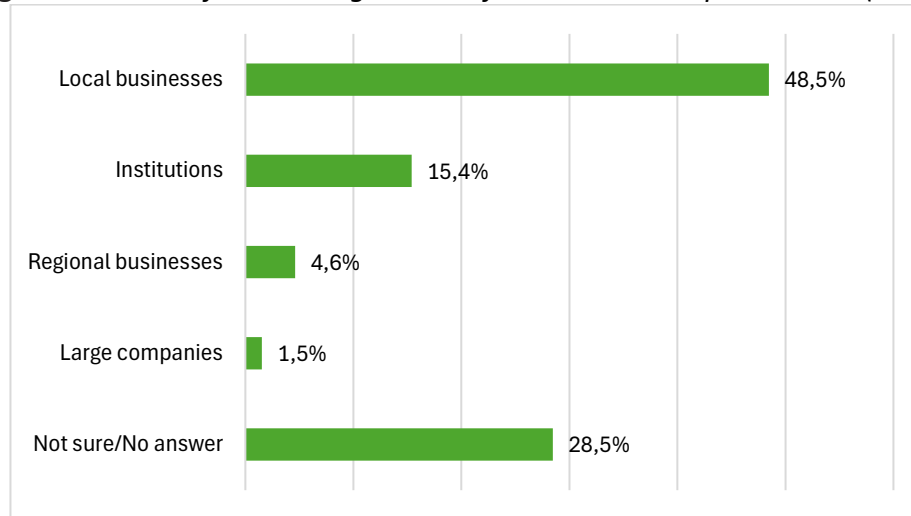**Figure 2.** *Main challenges of Catalan local public radio.*



**Source:** Elaborated by the authors.

In line with the contributions of the focus group participants, for more than half of the stations, the lack of budget is the main challenge they face. The vast majority of local public radio stations (76%) indicate that between 75% and 100% of their funding comes from public budgets. When distributing this budget, for 58% of municipal radio stations, the allocation for hiring staff accounts for more than 60% of the station's overall budget, while less than 20% is spent on purchasing technological equipment. These data confirm the difficulty of technological upgrading and the need for staff professionalization as challenges that require further work.

34% of the sample stated that they are partly financed through advertising, reinforcing the inclusion of a lack of advertising resources as a challenge. The main advertising sector is local businesses, representing the primary source of income for half of the municipal radio stations. This means that advertising revenue depends on small and medium-sized local businesses, which are often comprised of micro-enterprises with limited budgets. It is worth noting that, although nearly 30% of the stations are unaware of their main source of advertising funding, the rest identify local businesses and institutional advertising as their two main sources (Figure 3). One factor that could contribute to this lack of awareness is that 55% of the stations do not have a department responsible for the commercial aspects of public radio. This reality was already pointed out by participants in the qualitative phase, who highlighted the reduction in advertising revenue over the last decade due to the decline in advertising spots.

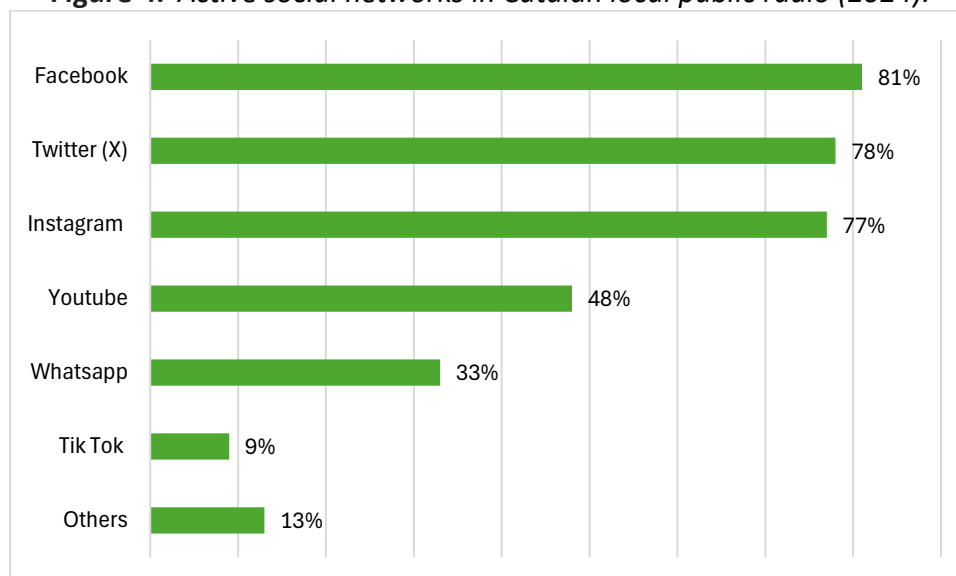**Figure 3.** *Source of advertising revenue for Catalan local public radio (2024).*

To delve deeper into this issue, the radio stations were asked to specify how they could address the shortage of advertising resources. A total of 58% of the municipal radio stations surveyed responded to this question, outlining some solutions. Among the proposals highlighted were: a) greater professionalization of advertising management, such as having in-house staff to attract local and major advertisers; b) increased advertising from public service institutions or entities; c) increased advertising on websites; and d) offering innovative and effective formats so that the stations are perceived as allies and key players for local businesses.

The third challenge, also highlighted by participants in the qualitative phase, concerns the need to create cross-media audiovisual content. This challenge is interesting because it relates to the use of different digital communication channels by local municipal radio stations to broaden the reach of their broadcasts. In fact, as one of the focus group participants said, "We realized that either we diversified or we would gradually lose audiences", and another pointed out, "We saw the need to multiply our channels (website, etc.) [...] we are now more than just a radio station". Data demonstrating this growth shows that 90% of the surveyed stations have their own website, and 72% of them update their content daily. It is also noteworthy that 92% of local public radio stations use social media to share content. Figure 4 shows that Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are the social networks where Catalan public radio stations are most active, used by more than three-quarters of them. YouTube follows, used by half of the stations. The use of these tools by municipal stations not only allows for the dissemination of content through less traditional channels but also facilitates dialogue between the stations and their audiences, thus fostering audience engagement.
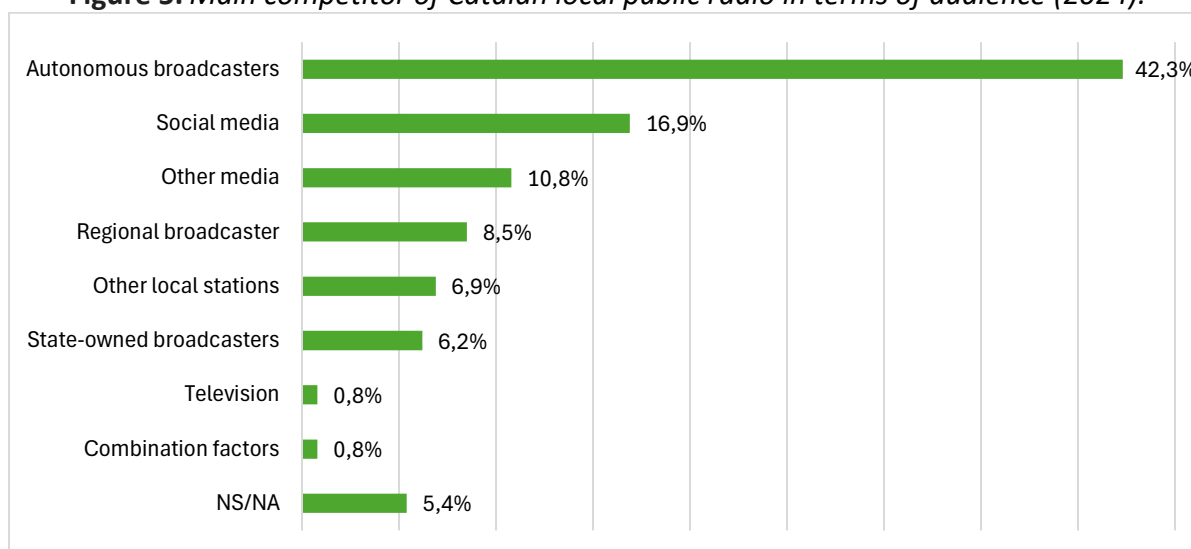
**Figure 4.** *Active social networks in Catalan local public radio (2024).*



Facebook 81%
Twitter (X) 78%
Instagram 77%
Youtube 48%
Whatsapp 33%
Tik Tok 9%
Others 13%

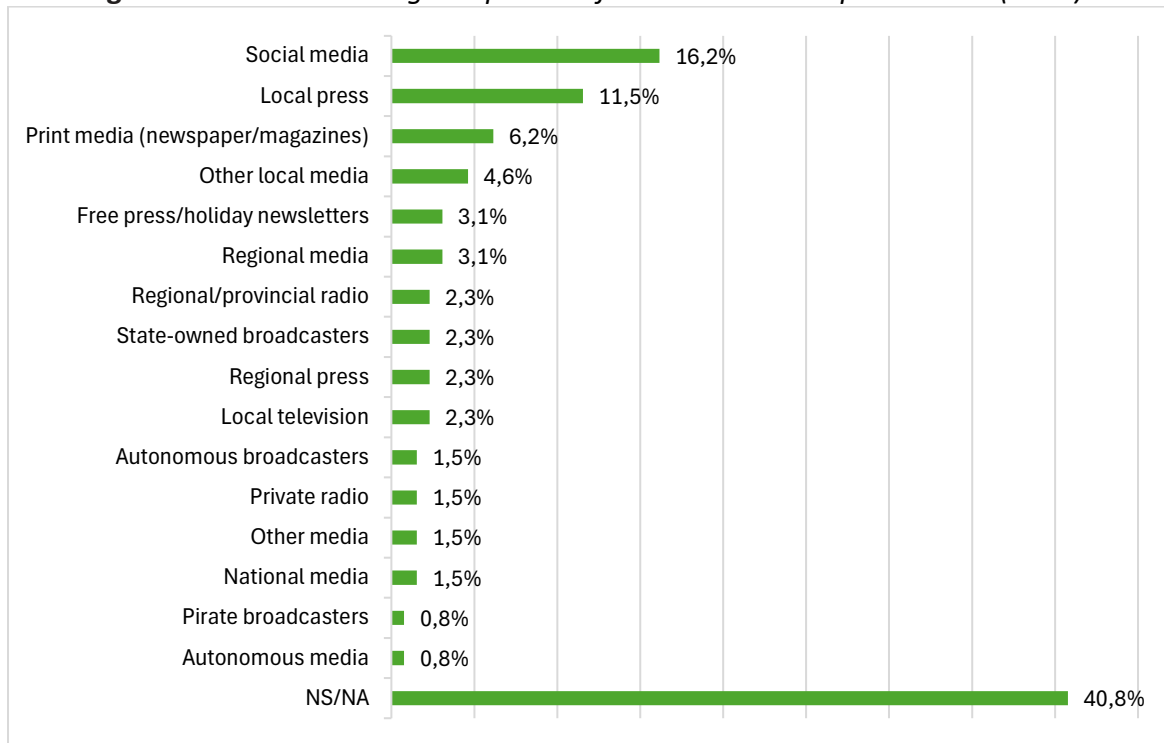**Source:** Elaborated by the authors.

The difficulty of technological upgrades and competition from social media correspond to the fourth and fifth challenges, respectively. As mentioned earlier, more than half of the municipal radio stations dedicate less than 20% of their budget to acquiring or upgrading their technological equipment, meaning that a lack of funding prevents adequate technological modernization. Regarding social media, which in the qualitative phase was already identified as the main alternative for local businesses to gain visibility among residents, it has become a strong competitor for municipal radio stations, both in terms of audience and advertising (Figures 5 and 6). Although the most significant competitors of local public radio in terms of audience are regional broadcasters, cited by 42% of respondents, 16.9% of the stations also identify social media as competitors for attracting listeners. In terms of advertising, social media is once again taking center stage, being considered direct competition for 16.2% of local public radio stations, followed by the local press (11.5%).

**Figure 5.** *Main competitor of Catalan local public radio in terms of audience (2024).*



Autonomous broadcasters 42,3%
Social media 16,9%
Other media 10,8%
Regional broadcaster 8,5%
Other local stations 6,9%
State-owned broadcasters 6,2%
Television 0,8%
Combination factors 0,8%
NS/NA 5,4%

**Source:** Elaborated by the authors.

**Figure 6.** *Main advertising competitor of the Catalan local public radio (2024).*



| Category | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Social media | 16,2% |
| Local press | 11,5% |
| Print media (newspaper/magazines) | 6,2% |
| Other local media | 4,6% |
| Free press/holiday newsletters | 3,1% |
| Regional media | 3,1% |
| Regional/provincial radio | 2,3% |
| State-owned broadcasters | 2,3% |
| Regional press | 2,3% |
| Local television | 2,3% |
| Autonomous broadcasters | 1,5% |
| Private radio | 1,5% |
| Other media | 1,5% |
| National media | 1,5% |
| Pirate broadcasters | 0,8% |
| Autonomous media | 0,8% |
| NS/NA | 40,8% |

**Source:** Elaborated by the authors.

Lack of audience is the sixth challenge identified by radio stations. Regarding this, it is worth noting the lack of knowledge among local public radio stations about their audience profile, as 48.5% of them state they do not know who their audience is. The 67 stations that do know the type of listener who tunes in (51.5% of the sample) define it as adult, middle-aged, and without distinction of gender, although women appear to be slightly more represented. Young people are notably absent from the audience of municipal radio stations. As for the desired audience, 22.3% of local public radio stations highlight the need to increase the number of younger listeners, while 40% state they want a diverse audience, regardless of gender and age. The limited knowledge that local public radio has about its audience reveals a significant gap, as the sector lacks the necessary information to adequately represent all its listeners. From this perspective, we are therefore faced with a group of broadcasters that, for the most part, operate for a "hidden" audience, with the repercussions this can have on attention to diversity and minorities, given that this is one of the fundamental pillars of public service. Furthermore, this lack of awareness would prevent public media outlets from addressing the current need to align their programming policies and content with the demands of society (Bardoel & Ferrell Lowe, 2007).

In relation to the seventh challenge, the data from the quantitative phase confirm the trend pointed out in the focus group regarding the loss of influence of FM radio. The results show that more than 90% of stations allow programs to be listened to via the web, and 80% of these allow content to be downloaded. These data indicate an upward trend in listening to radio programs through channels other than FM, which coexist with traditional methods of listening.

The eighth challenge concerns the degree of dependence of radio stations on local councils, since, as noted in the first challenge, most of them receive funding solely from these councils. This fact was also highlighted during the qualitative phase, where participants emphasized their strong reliance on the municipal budget. However, when asked about their level of dependence regarding programming content, the results are surprising, as more than 80% of the stations consider themselves to have a high degree of independence. Even so, for 12% of Catalan local public radio stations, their independence from the local council is very low or

nonexistent, making it important for these stations to achieve greater autonomy. To this end, the stations in the sample offer proposals, among which the need for additional financial resources stands out, emphasizing the need to generate their own revenue and highlighting the need to increase financial income to expand the station's budget. Second and third, the following are mentioned as challenges that can consolidate the independence of municipal public radio stations: having their own staff and strengthening participatory governance.

Finally, the ninth challenge relates to the lack of professionalization among the station's staff. On a positive note, 70% of station managers have university degrees. While other variables have been analyzed that highlight the lack of professionalization in local public radio stations, the phenomenon that best illustrates this challenge is the small number of staff members at these stations. The data shows that most stations have no employees at all, or at most one or two (Table 1). Regarding employment contracts, in 26.1% of cases, no one is employed full-time, while in 31.9%, only one or two people are employed full-time. Furthermore, 70% of the stations report no new hires in the last 15 years (Table 1). Another noteworthy statistic is the number of volunteers collaborating with the stations. In 43.8% of local public radio stations, more than 20 people participate on a voluntary basis, and between 10 and 15 volunteers collaborate in 19.2% of them. Contrary to what has happened with hiring, volunteering has steadily increased over the last fifteen years (Table 1).

**Table 1.** *Current status and evolution of contracted and volunteer staff in municipal broadcasting stations (2024).*

| Current state | | | | Evolution over the last 15 years | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Hired people** | **% of broadcasters** | **Volunteer collaborators** | **% of broadcasters** | **Increase in hired personnel** | **% of broadcasters** | **Increase in volunteers** | **% of broadcasters** |
| No one | 23.1% | No one | 1.5% | 0% | 70.8% | 0% | 34.6% |
| 1 person | 22.3% | 1 person | 0.8% | 1% - 5% | 6.9% | 1 - 5% | 11.5% |
| 2 people | 13.1% | 2 people | 3.8% | 6% - 10% | 23% | 6% - 10% | 18.5% |
| 3 people | 10.0% | 3 people | 23% | 11% - 25% | 3.8% | 11% - 20% | 13.8% |
| 4 people | 9.2% | 4 people | 3.1% | 26% - 50% | 1.5% | 21% - 25% | 4.6% |
| 5 to 9 people | 13.8% | 5 to 9 people | 13.8% | 51% - 80% | 5.4% | More than 26% | 14.6% |
| 10 to 15 people | 0.8% | 10 to 15 people | 19.2% | 81% - 100% | 4.6% | ns / na | 2.4% |
| 16 to 20 people | 23% | 16 to 20 people | 10.8% | ns / na | 4.7% | | |
| More than 20 people | 3.1% | More than 20 people | 43.8% | | | | |
| ns / na | 23% | ns / na | 0.9% | | | | |

**Source:** Elaborated by the authors.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Regardless of the challenges faced by publicly owned local radio stations, the results of this research highlight the need to reinforce the value of local programming as one of the mainstays of their public service mission. While it is true that, 45 years after the birth of the first municipal radio station in Spain, the phenomenon remains very active —with at least 200 stations in Catalonia at the beginning of 2024— it is also true that in almost 30% of these stations, local content does not reach 50% of the programming, and in 16.2% of them, it does not reach 25%. If these figures are already significant on their own, they are even more so when compared to 2008, the year in which the *Llibre blanc de la ràdio local pública* (Federació de Ràdios Locals de Catalunya, 2008) was published in Catalonia, stations with exclusively local content have fallen from 22.6% to 16.9%, and

local news coverage is less than 30 minutes per day on 33.1% of radio stations. While the ideal scenario would be to make local content the top priority for all local public radio stations, failing that, it seems necessary that at least 25% of all broadcast content be local in nature.

With regard to social and cultural engagement and revitalization, these values are cultivated to a reasonable extent, given that, on the one hand, the vast majority of stations have established permanent channels of communication with their audience, which have increased significantly thanks to the consolidation of social media and the regular use made of them by a large part of the population. However, these forms of interaction have not prevented the telephone from still being used as a means of direct contact in 25% of cases. Furthermore, although the engagement of these entities is a given, which in turn ensures social and cultural dynamism since more than 80% of radio stations have programs about them, it is necessary that these media outlets be equipped with instruments that ensure democratic and plural access. Therefore, it would be necessary for the boards of directors, which 40% of radio stations have, not only to increase their presence as management and control mechanisms, but also to be made up of directors from the civil society of the places that have local public radio.

Regarding the challenges, the most significant for local public radio is the lack of funding. The study's results reveal a clear correlation between the difficulty of securing adequate budgets, limited advertising resources, and the difficulty of technological upgrades. The lack of sufficient resources leads to delays in modernizing local public radio stations, making them unattractive to both advertisers and listeners. This difficulty in attracting advertisers, in turn, results in smaller budgets. Thus, local public broadcasters find themselves in a cyclical, two-way street from which it is difficult to escape.

Local public radio relies heavily on funding from the city council. A total of 50.6% of stations report that this is their sole source of income, a figure that rises to almost 75% (74.3%) for stations with more than 75% of their revenue coming from the council. In this regard, the trend does not differ greatly from the data recorded 15 years ago, when the *Llibre blanc de la ràdio local pública* (2008) stated that "funding from municipal budgets is high (...) more than 60% of the country's radio stations rely almost exclusively on public funding" (Federació de Ràdios Locals de Catalunya, 2008, p. 42).

The third most frequently cited challenge by Catalan local public radio stations is the need to create cross-media audiovisual content. This is due to the increased use of multiple digital communication channels by these stations to disseminate information and share content, which completely transforms programming, no longer based on one-off events and single broadcasts (Balsebre -Torroja et al., 2023, p. 19). However, this cross-media opportunity for local public radio stations requires technological upgrades and greater professionalization of the stations' staff. Given the lack of funding, these two issues represent the fourth and ninth challenges for municipal stations. Despite the technological transformations that have led to the transfiguration of audio (Piñeiro-Otero & Pedrero-Esteban, 2022), the lack of funding makes it difficult to take advantage of these opportunities.

While local public radio has always coexisted with other large media corporations (García Castillejo, 2016; Chaparro, 2005; Barbeito & Perona, 2000) that have been its main competitors, social media has now emerged as a significant competitor, both in terms of audience and advertising. It is interesting to highlight this phenomenon within the context of the digital soundscape (Barrios, 2020; Fajula Payet et al., 2021), where, as a future challenge for these stations, social media could become an ally that helps position municipal radio stations in the current digital soundscape.

The lack of FM listeners is another challenge faced by local municipal radio stations, which must seek other channels to broadcast their content. In this regard, the results show that 90% of stations allow listeners to tune in to their programs via their websites.

Finally, despite their significant budgetary dependence on local councils, 80% of local public radio stations report feeling a high degree of independence when programming their content. However, for 12% of the stations, achieving greater autonomy from the council is an important objective, and they emphasize the need for their own independent source of income.

Although the number of stations in operation is clear evidence of the strength that characterizes the phenomenon of local public radio, the future survival of the sector necessarily depends on providing an effective response to the challenges outlined above. To this end, local governments must be aware of the important role these stations play as drivers of municipal revitalization and as the backbone of the social, cultural, sporting, and political fabric of small communities. Their survival therefore depends on the willingness of local councils, which have the power to continue to consider radio as one of the main means of information and expression of local content.

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