MECHANISMS FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN ECUADOR'S MUNICIPAL PUBLIC RADIO STATIONS
The Role of Municipal Public Media

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Ecuadorian municipal public radio promotes citizen participation. Out of the twenty-two identified stations, eighteen voluntarily participated in surveys, providing insights into their adherence to national laws, internal regulations, and other efforts to engage citizens. It was found that these stations predominantly relied on public funding, which lacked specific legal backing and made them vulnerable to the prevailing political climate. Compliance with operational regulations was inconsistent, and there was a general lack of awareness among the stations, resulting in low levels of citizen involvement in content design. These findings underscore the need to strengthen relevant legislation and encourage more active community participation in these stations.

1. Introduction

Radio, due to its wide coverage, affordability, economy and immediacy, has established itself as the most popular means of communication (Herrera, 2003). It has reached areas where other technologies, such as the internet or television, struggle to penetrate, providing access to information and entertainment for geographically remote populations. It is no coincidence that the emergence of public media historically occurred through local radio broadcasters in Europe and that this medium is often highlighted as the most effective communication channel for fostering citizen engagement.

This accessibility has prompted several Decentralised Autonomous Municipal Governments in Ecuador to establish public radio stations as part of their management initiatives, following the guidelines of the Organic Law on Communication (OLC). The enactment of this legislation in June 2013 marked the first official classification of Ecuadorian media into private, community, and public categories, defining the roles and scope of each. Article 78 states that one of the objectives of public media is to "facilitate and promote the exercise of the free expression of thought, as well as the right to democratic communication for the members of the citizenry" (Organic Law of Communication, 2013).

At a global level, public media emerged as an alternative to reclaim the concept of participatory communication. This form of communication is not limited to citizens expressing themselves through media, such as phone calls or street interviews, but encompasses a more comprehensive and inclusive approach. In this model, citizens are involved in the planning, development, and decision-making regarding content and its representation. It represents a circular communication model where the roles of sender and receiver continuously interchange in the pursuit of social consensus. As stated in the research *Community and Communication: Communicative Practices and Community Media in Europe and Latin America*, "All participants involved in the communicative process contribute approaches and solutions in such a way that, by addressing a common interest, they form a collective subject that transcends individual concerns" (Hernández et al., 2012).

These elements contribute to the construction of territory, identity, and citizenship. According to journalism professor Luis Chaparro (2013), "The quality of the media impacts the quality of democracy, acting as an entity for the expression of information from the people" (p. 4).

1. The challenge of public media

Despite the democratic ideals with which public media were conceived, their actions and continued existence have been subject to ongoing scrutiny. In this context, the scholar and researcher Guillermo Mastrini (2013) highlights a significant social issue, particularly in Latin America: the lack of understanding of what constitutes "public." He notes that, in this region, mistrust in media management since the end of the dictatorships in the 1980s led social organisations to take the lead in alternative communication processes. This shift led to the creation of community media, particularly radio stations, which often replaced public entities in this role. According to Rincón (2013), it was not until the 21st century that left-wing Latin American governments began to establish substantial communication networks to promote their ideologies. This was achieved through regulatory bodies and the implementation of public media.

The research titled El Mapa de los Medios Públicos de Ecuador: Entre el Auge y la Ambigüedad (The Landscape of Public Media in Ecuador: Between Rise and Ambiguity) discusses the polarisation of the media system in Ecuador. On one hand, state-run media was perceived as government mouthpieces during Rafael Correa's presidency, while private media was seen as critical of the regime (Panchana & Iturralde, 2020). Since the introduction of the Organic Law on Communication, several articles have evaluated the management of public media in relation to power, although this debate primarily focuses on those directly controlled by the central government. Media administered by other public entities, including municipal radio stations, face a situation characterised by limited information, with discrepancies in determining their number and locations.

Moreover, there has been no comprehensive study of the regulatory, administrative, and management frameworks established to fulfil the role of promoting citizen participation. Evaluations of these frameworks are generally confined to economic aspects. This issue is not unique to Ecuador, as international reference documents have been created to assess public media's social impact on democracy. Notable examples include the Index of Social Profitability in Communication developed in

2012 by the Laboratorio de Comunicación y Cultura at the University of Malaga, and UNESCO's Principles and Good Practices for Public Media in Latin America (Becerra & Waisbord, 2015).

Based on the analysis and synthesis of these contributions and the theoretical considerations of other authors, five criteria can be identified to guide the functioning of public media:

1.1. Universal Coverage

One cannot speak of inclusive public media if it does not reach the entire population it is intended to serve. The state must "guarantee the provision of technical and technological equipment to ensure that the transmission or distribution system of the media reaches all regions, cultures, and linguistic groups" (Roncagliolo, 1996).

1.2. Guaranteed Funding

State institutions must provide for the needs of the radio stations. While some funding may come from private sources or non-governmental organisations, public media should not be entirely dependent on these funds. This ensures that the media can fulfil citizens' interests and prevents them from competing with private media.

1.3. Regulatory Framework

Independence in operation and editorial stance is crucial not only for autonomy from market interests but also from political power. Therefore, it is recommended that regulatory frameworks be established to specify mechanisms for protecting freedom of expression, plurality, and democracy.

1.4. Transparent Management

Citizen participation should be evident not only in the direction of content but also in overseeing the proper use of public funds and ensuring that the media's mission is fulfilled. This fosters access to information and social control of the media.

1.5. Social Articulation

The development of an ecosystem in which public media engage in dialogue with civil society organisations should be pursued. This can be achieved in various ways: by monitoring programming, interacting with media professionals and policymakers, and ensuring that the media address societal information needs and are inclusive in their content.

In this context, this study aims to map Ecuador's municipal public radio stations and assess their administrative status. The goal is to gather their experiences regarding the implementation of mechanisms to involve society in their management and content. This includes compliance with national laws, the development of internal regulations, and other actions that foster citizen engagement and participation in communication activities.

2. Methodology

The research is both descriptive and exploratory. It aims to clarify the situation of municipal public radio stations using information from their representatives, regulatory entities, and existing documentary reviews at both national and international levels.

The selected population is universal and includes all municipal public radio stations listed in the Public Media Register 2021, issued by the Council for the Regulation of Information and Communication (known as the Communication Council). This differs from the list in the research titled The Landscape of Public Media in Ecuador: Between Rise and Ambiguity, published in 2020. The Communication Council issues its list based on information submitted by each media outlet during the first quarter of each year (with a deadline in March), which is mandatory. The other publication relies on data from the 2019 Public Register, the Association of Municipalities of Ecuador, and the authors' own sources.

According to the Communication Council, there are 12 municipal public radio stations. In contrast, the Media Map lists 23 stations (initially 24, but one was duplicated). Of these 23, four are marked as inactive. By comparing the information from both sources and verifying details between January and June 2021, it was established that there are 22 active municipal public radio stations across the country in 2021.

The techniques used in this analysis have been structured around the indicators related to the research objectives. This was achieved through two surveys administered to the representatives of municipal public radio stations in Ecuador. The design of these surveys was informed by an examination of national regulations, including the Constitution of the Republic, the Organic Law of Communication, the Law of Citizen Participation and Social Control, and the Organic Law of Transparency and Access to Public Information. Additionally, international frameworks for assessing the social contribution of public media were also considered.

The first survey administered was "The Situation of Municipal Public Radio Stations." Eighteen out of the twenty-two identified radio stations participated voluntarily. This survey collected information on each station's administrative status, compliance with external regulations, development of internal legal frameworks, and other mechanisms implemented to promote citizen participation.

The second survey was the "Content Sheet," in which respondents detailed the current programming of each radio station, specifying the total number of hours of weekly broadcasting. This form also assessed the frequency of citizen participation in content through various actions, opinions, or advocacy. Sixteen radio stations participated voluntarily in this survey.

The information was processed using Excel, which facilitated the recording of data in tables. These tables were then analysed to determine results and formulate conclusions.

2.2. Results

By comparing data from the Communication Council and the study *The Landscape of Public Media in Ecuador: Between Rise and Ambiguity*, and following telephone consultations with various municipalities, it was confirmed that 22 municipal public radio stations are active in Ecuador. These stations are distributed across 20 provinces: 14 in the Andes region, 3 on the Coast, 2 in the Amazon, and 1 on the Galápagos Islands. Of these, 18 voluntarily participated in the research, while 4 did not complete the surveys despite their initial commitment. The non-participating stations were Radio Ciudad de Cuenca (Azuay), Excelencia Radio Pública La Maná (Cotopaxi), Radio Pública Municipal de Guamote 90.1 FM (Chimborazo), and Radio Cañaveral 96.5 de Catamayo (Loja).

2.3. Administrative Situation

The information obtained from the first survey, "The Situation of Municipal Public Radio Stations," reveals that the creation of the 18 participating radio stations was initiated by the Decentralised Autonomous Municipal Government. However, during their legal formation, some were registered as public companies. Specifically, six radio stations were established as public companies, and one more was set up as a business unit of another public company, while the remaining nine were created through municipal decrees, ordinances, or resolutions.

Most of these stations, 12 in total, were established before the Organic Law on Communication (OLC) came into force in June 2013, when the country officially recognised the division of media into public, private, and community categories. Among these, the oldest is Radio Municipal, created in Quito in 1954, which is still active. Since the OLC came into force, six additional municipal radio stations have been established.

Municipal radio stations generally have extensive coverage within their territories. 67% (12) reach the entire cantonal territory with their signal, while 22% (4) cover between 70% and 80%. Another 22% (4) have 40% coverage. This reach is further extended using digital channels, such as social networks, mobile applications, podcasts, and blogs. Each of the 18 stations broadcasts its content on at least one of these platforms.

Table 1. Municipal public radio stations

Form of incorporation	Name of the radio	Location	Year of creation	Online links
By municipal decree, ordinance, or resolution	Municipal Radio 720 AM	Quito-Pichincha	1954	www.radiomunicipal.gob.ec
	Radio Municipal 90.1 FM	Loja-Loja	2003	https://www.facebook.com/radiomunicipal90.1fm
	Municipal Radio System 89.9FM	Pastaza-Pastaza	2008	https://www.facebook.com/LaMuni899FM
	La Voz de Imbabura 89.9 FM 89.9 FM	Ibarra-Imbabura	2010	www.radiomunicipalibarra.gob.ec
	Pacha FM - Radio de la Ciudad 102.9 FM	Quito-Pichincha	2011	www.radiomunicipal.gob.ec
	Paraíso Insular, Public Television and Radio Company 90.7 Fm	Isabela-Galapagos	2011	https://www.facebook.com/Radio-Para%C3%ADso-Insular-907-fm-103097831310644
	El Guabo Public Radio 106.7 FM	El Guabo-El Oro	2012	https://www.facebook.com/RadioPublicaElGuabo
	Radio Ecos de Rumiñahui 88.9 FM	Rumiñahui-Pichincha	2014	https://ecosderuminahui.gob.ec/
	La Voz del Colambo Municipal Radio 93.3 FM	Gonzanamá-Loja	2015	www.lavozdelcolambo.com https://www.facebook.com/lavozdelcolambo
	Chaguarpamba Communication and Information Company 104.1 FM	Chaguarpamba-Loja	2015	www.chaguarpambaradio.com
	Empresa Municipal Latacunga 94.1 FM	Latacunga-Cotopaxi	2015	http://www.radiomunicipallatacunga.gob.ec
As a public company	Radio la Fábrica 92.3 FM	Antonio Ante-Imbabura	2007	www.epaa.gob.ec
	Radio Jubones 91.9 FM	Passage-El Oro	2011	https://www.facebook.com
	Radio Canaveral 96.1FM	Santa Ana-Manabí	2012	https://radiocanaveral.com/ https://www.facebook.com/radiocanaveral9
	Radio Guayacán 96.9 FM	Zapotillo-Loja	2013	https://www.facebook.com/EmincozaepGuayacan
	Radio Yasuní 97.9FM	Francisco de Orellana-Orellana	2015	https://www.facebook.com/yasunimedios
	Radio Pucará 101.7 FM	Celica-Loja	2018	www.radiopucara.com
As a business unit	Cotacachi Radio Corporation 93.5 FM	Cotacachi-Imbabura	2013	https://www.radiocotacachi.com/

Source(s): Autor(s) elaboration, 2023

The primary source of funding —for 17 of the 18 cantonal radio stations— is public resources, provided by the municipality or the public company to which they belong. For 17% (3) of these stations, public sources are their only source of income. For 78% (14), funding is mixed, combining public funds with private sources such as advertising sales, space rental, or service marketing to private parties. For one station (5%), what they refer to as self-management represents their entire income. None of the 18 stations receive budgetary support through donations from non-governmental organisations or other sources.

The continuity of public funding for the 17 stations that receive it is not regulated. In 3 cases (18%), it was reported that budgets depend on the annual allocation defined by the municipality. In 5 cases (29%), it was stated that self-management through the commercialisation of services to private parties has been implemented as a financing strategy, meaning that this funding is not considered a public resource. In 9 cases (53%), no mechanism for funding continuity was specified.

3. Compliance and Issuance of Regulations

Compliance with national regulations related to citizen participation varies among the 18 radio stations involved in the research. There is a high level of adherence to the mandatory submission of information required by national entities for social control and transparency. For instance, the Communication Council mandates that media outlets complete an annual registration for the Public Media Register, as stipulated in Article 88 of the Organic Law of Communication (OLC). Nearly all of the radio station heads (94%), with the exception of one, reported compliance with this requirement for 2020.

Regarding the publication of editorial and information policies and the code of ethics required by Article 16 of the OLC, 11 radio stations (61%) reported having fulfilled this obligation. Additionally, 16 stations (89%) indicated that they had completed the accountability process for 2020, which involves submitting reports to the Council for Citizen Participation and Social Control, in accordance with Article 90 of the Law on Citizen Participation.

However, the lowest level of compliance pertains to the creation of citizen councils as stipulated in the OLC. These councils are intended to oversee the management of public media, as outlined in Article 78 of the regulation. Only 4 of the 18 radio stations have established such councils, located in the cantons of Santa Ana, Pucará, Rumiñahui, and Chaguarpamba. Although these councils are designed for citizen participation, all four councils include the mayor and/or municipal delegates as members, and only three also have representatives from civil society.

Figure 1. Level of compliance with national regulations on participation
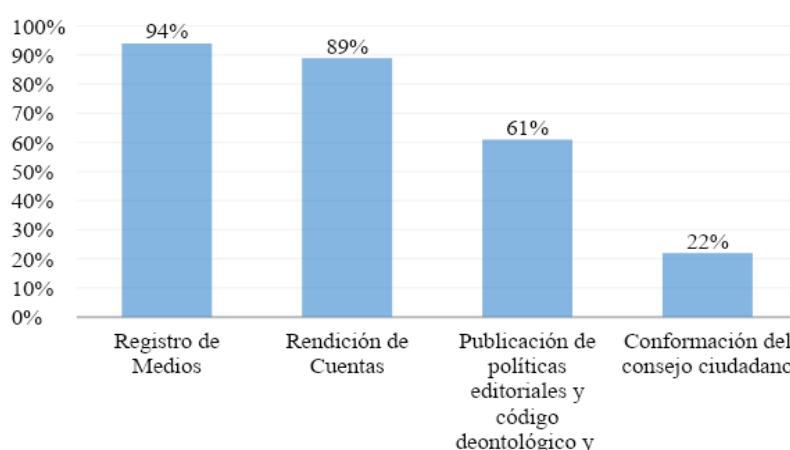
Source(s): Author(s) elaboration, 2023.

The development of internal regulations to guide the management of the medium is not widespread among municipal public radio stations. Only 8 (44%) have established such regulations to govern their operations. The majority, 10 radio stations (54%), lack any form of regulatory framework.

3.1. Citizen Advocacy for Content

Nine radio stations (50%) are not connected to any collectives for content development. Another eight stations (44%) involve citizens' assemblies, sectoral consultative councils, or other citizen collectives and networks in their management. Only one station (6%) coordinates with a media association or union.

For a detailed analysis of citizen participation in programming, the "Content Sheet" was used. This form, completed by 16 of the 22 identified municipal public radio stations, required each station to describe their weekly programming and specify the types of citizen involvement incorporated into each programme. In total, 1,536 hours and 40 minutes of weekly transmission were recorded among all 16 stations, and percentages were calculated to reflect the level of social participation.

One notable finding is the extent of participation by various actors in designing the content broadcast by the radio stations. It was found that 78% of the programming is determined by the station's direct collaborators, while municipal agencies influence 7% of the content. Social or citizen organisations and private entities each contribute to 6% of the programming design. Other public entities influence 3%.

Figure 1. Level of stakeholder participation in content design
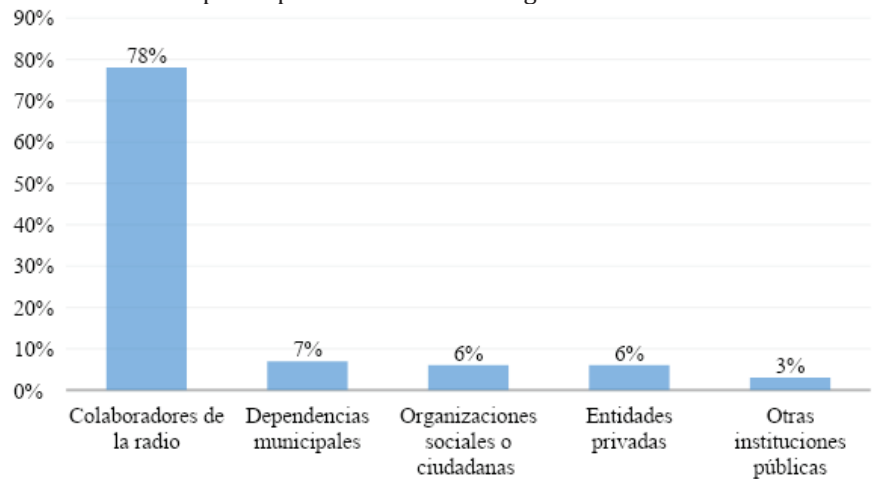
Source(s): Author(s) elaboration, 2023.

The most significant form of citizen participation is through incorporating actions that actively promote public opinion in live programmes. For example, telephone calls are received in 77% of the programming, citizens appear as interviewees in 76% of broadcasts, and text messages from citizens are read in 85% of the transmitted content.

4. Discussion

The article analyses the importance of municipal public radio in Ecuador as an accessible and relevant means of communication for local communities. It highlights that, due to its wide coverage and accessibility, radio has been crucial in reaching areas where other technologies, such as the internet or television, face difficulties. This has led several municipal governments in Ecuador to implement public radio as part of their communication initiatives, in line with the Organic Law on Communication (OLC).

However, despite their democratic and participatory potential, municipal public radio stations face challenges in their functioning and public perception. In Latin America, distrust of public media, stemming from experiences during dictatorships, led social organisations to take the lead in alternative communication after the democratic transition. Recently, left-wing governments in the region have strengthened public media to promote their agendas, generating controversy over their independence and social role.

In Ecuador, the polarisation of the media system between state and private media has sparked debates on the management of public media, especially those linked to the central government.

However, public municipal radio stations, despite their importance, have received less attention regarding the evaluation and monitoring of their management.

To address these challenges, a set of criteria is proposed to guide the operation of municipal public media. These criteria include universal coverage, guaranteed funding, a clear regulatory framework, transparent management, and articulation with civil society. They seek to ensure that municipal public media fulfil their role in promoting citizen participation and local democracy.

The research is based on a descriptive and exploratory study of municipal public radio stations in Ecuador, encompassing analyses of their administrative situation, compliance with regulations, citizen influence on content, and participation in media management. The results show that, although municipal public radio stations have wide coverage and public funding, their compliance with regulations and citizen participation are inconsistent. Many radio stations lack clear internal regulations and have limited societal participation in their content.

The study highlights the importance of strengthening municipal public media in Ecuador to promote citizen participation and local democracy. It suggests implementing clear regulations, promoting citizen participation in media management, and improving the coverage and quality of content to ensure its relevance and usefulness to local communities.

5. Conclusions and Acknowledgements

It is determined that the application, or lack thereof, of norms and mechanisms for citizen involvement by municipal radio stations, influences their effectiveness as promoters of participation in the localities they serve. These stations provide spaces for information, entertainment, social dialogue, and oversight of the authorities' management. Considering the indicators of universal coverage, guaranteed funding, transparent management, regulatory framework, and social articulation highlighted in the research framework, the following conclusions can be drawn.

Most of the radio stations have extensive territorial coverage, which underscores their importance, particularly for rural populations where television or internet technologies do not reach. The integration of digital platforms, such as social networks, has enhanced their reach and impact.

Despite receiving state funding, many radio stations face instability due to the absence of a regulatory framework governing these resources. This instability forces public media to compete with private media for commercial advertising, pushing their staff to engage in what they term "self-management" to meet budgetary needs.

Compliance with regulations concerning participation is inconsistent. While there is high adherence to national laws (OLC and the Law on Citizen Participation) regarding the submission and publication of information for social control and transparency, this compliance falters with the establishment of citizen councils. Only 4 of the 18 radio stations have formed such councils, and these councils are under municipal administration, with mayors or their officials participating, which undermines their intended "citizen" status. Additionally, media representatives showed a lack of knowledge about this issue, and no specific regulations dictate the formation of these councils.

There is also a lack of internal regulations, with low implementation levels observed. Radio station managers agree on the need for a more detailed debate on the public nature of media and the creation of management parameters, as the current setup is susceptible to political influence.

The lack of a consensual basis guiding the media's actions results in low levels of participation in both the engagement with citizen organisations and content design . Only 6% of all radio programming involves input from societal actors. Although there is substantial participation through live calls, text messages, and interviews, this is predominantly reactive. Citizens engage as recipients of content and through live interactions, but they do not play a major role in the design and creation of content. This limited involvement restricts the potential to "create opportunities for citizens to generate their own spaces for dialogue" (Organic Law of Communication, 2013).

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