

Verification of the Public Discourse and Accountability of Mayors on Local TV: The Case of Ecuador

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Abstract

The purpose of the research is to determine the veracity and contexts of the statements of Ecuador's mayors using fact-checking methodology. The research questions are: Are the public testimonies of mayors presented in local television news programmes true? What are the circumstances in which mayors present their speeches? To what extent does local journalism contextualize the mayors' statements? The research is descriptive and relational, using qualitative methodology based on the Ecuador Chequea protocol, focus groups and semi-structured interviews. A sample of audiovisual pieces broadcast between February 2020 and March 2022 was obtained. The statements are grouped in 10 axes, showing correspondence with the functions determined in the law. The statements of the governors are true, the proximity helps direct accountability, but weaknesses such as excessive prominence, publicity and short-term interests can be appreciated. Analyses of the quality of the declarations are needed, in broad pieces and with the corresponding cultural and political contexts. Efforts to make public administration transparent is a key aspect of open and e-government that will be achieved as long as citizens' information literacy is achieved.

Keywords: accountability, discourse verification, governance, journalism, local government, news, public management, television

1. Introduction

The media operate as mediators between society and power, play an important role in the monitoring and accountability of those in power, inform citizens and are a means of expression for political organizations. Of all the traditional and digital media, television has a direct impact on public opinion and shapes behavioral patterns, which is why efforts are made to monitor the quality of programming in order to meet the interests of viewers, and consequently maintain high audiences (Cumbe, 2010). For audiences, television remains relevant, even if its programming has been impacted "by the disruptive alteration of the media ecosystem brought about by over-the-top platforms" (Izquierdo-Castillo & Latorre-Lázaro, 2022, p. 2).

Among the characteristics of television that have allowed it to become the medium with the greatest global presence and reach are its domestic, educational, advertising and political uses (Cajal, 2021), which is why it is claimed that it has a powerful capacity to offer seductive languages that invite viewers to ideal worlds. Other attributes are proximity and instantaneity (Baba, 2013) to bring closer events that happen thousands of kilometers away, qualities that define local television and show it to be conducive to creating mechanisms for social participation.

A local medium seeks out the citizen, gives him or her value and the right to his or her own representation, which means inscribing television in society through strategies for acting and thinking together (Ordóñez, Rodríguez & Suing, 2020). Concretely, the pluricultural expression of local television should "enable mobile, multiple and diverse identities" (Rincón & Estrella, 2008, p. 36). The ordinary citizen lives surrounded by traditions and customs. This coexistence allows the construction of mutant, diverse and hybrid identities.

The relevance of studying local television is justified by its capacity to offer opportunities to audiences and to promote a development aspect that involves the participation of various social actors, who generate and implement actions motivated by their broadcasts (Herrera & Saladrigas, 2019). On the other hand, as local television stations are present in social networks, and given the increase in online consumption, it becomes prominent and central to inhabit the

information ecosystem, optimize content and take advantage of interactions with the public (Guo & Sun, 2020), as a way for community between citizens and editors (Lysak, Cremedas & Wolf, 2012).

For this reason, it is of permanent interest to investigate the contents, narratives, forms of programming and, particularly, local television news in order to know what, who and how the data, facts, and criteria that contribute to the quality of democracy are presented. As mentioned, the local perspective is justified by proximity, but also by the practices of transparency and accountability through the Internet, which are appropriate in the face of emerging phenomena such as disinformation, however, it is also necessary to mention that there are precedents of accountability through television supported with digital tools to favour citizen participation in decision-making (Añon, 2021; Rodríguez & Rosique, 2022).

In democracy, accountability is a vertical relationship between society and the vigilance of the media (Bertot, Jaeger & Grimes, 2012; Fox, 2015). Accountability is referred to as an instance by virtue of being a direct channel for dialogue between rulers and citizens, thus contributing to better coexistence thanks to the quality of information and the construction of a diverse public opinion.

Accountability is a direct link between those who govern and those who are governed, making processes transparent, recognizing the demands of the community in order to achieve pluralism and contribute to public opinion. It is also "a matter of concern to both journalists and audiences" (Chaparro-Domínguez, Suárez-Villegas & Rodríguez-Martínez, 2019, p. 2) because it reflects their performance and is manifested through quality indicators (Eberwein, Fengler & Karmasin, 2018).

The quality of representative democracy is related to the dimension of control of politicians, known as accountability. In Hannah Pitkin's terms (1967), this is the obligation of representatives to answer for their actions to those they represent, and therefore the ability of voters to control the good work of their leaders. This dimension establishes the mechanisms to guarantee compliance with the exercise of representation.

According to Andreas Schedler (2013), there are three purposes of accountability: to inform, to justify and to sanction. The first refers to the obligation of representatives to be accountable for their actions and to submit to monitoring and supervision of their actions. Thus, representatives must report on their decisions, and provide explanations to justify them. From an individual perspective, accountability should be a guiding principle in the practice of professionals (Christians et al., 2009), it occurs when they "respond to their expectations and those of society at large" (McQuail, 2003, p. 19), "to be accountable is in fact to be responsible" (Plaisance, 2000 p. 260).

There are two dimensions of accountability: vertical and horizontal (O'Donnell, 1998). The horizontal one refers to the inspection between powers (system of checks and balances) and the vertical one involves external instances of accountability, such as elections, social mobilizations or the exercise of freedom of the press. In relation to the media, the objectives of accountability are "to protect and promote freedom of expression", "to prevent or limit the harm that the media may cause" and "to promote positive benefits for society" (McQuail, 1997, p. 525).

Accountability rests on three fundamental pillars: information transparency, self-regulation and public participation (Díez-Garrido, Campos-Domínguez & Calvo, 2019; Eberwein et al., 2018; Heikkilä et al., 2012; Ramon-Vegas, Mauri-Ríos & Alcalá-Anguiano, 2016). At the international level, accountability, and transparency articulate human rights (Gallhofer, Haslam & Van Der Walt, 2011), but it depends on infrastructure and robust information systems (Ahmad, 2015).

Unfortunately, direct communication between authorities and citizens is infrequent, channeled through the media and, in recent years, occurs on social media which, as well as presenting opportunities, also leads to speculation and so-called fake news.

Disinformation and fake news distort the role of the media, affect the dialogue between governments and citizens, and can neglect the needs of progress, have therefore "become a key problem for contemporary democratic societies. In a context of increasing exposure to information impacts, people have seen the messages they receive during the day multiply, but many of these messages turn out to be false" (Sádaba & Salaverría, 2023, p. 18).

The term fake news is an oxymoron, if it is fake news, it is not news because "in journalism, in principle, there is no such thing as fake news, so much so that one of the rules is verification" (Parreira, 2019, p. 92). Fake news (distorted, misleading, inconsistent) is incorrect information that pretends to be real (Harsin, 2018; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Samy-Tayie, Tejedor & Pulido, 2023; Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2017) and circulates particularly on social media.

The opposite of fake news is fact-checking journalism, a practice of checking published information after the fact (Mantzaris, 2018). Fact-checking arises in response to the crisis of trust in the media, its purpose is to diminish the effects of fake news (Gueham, 2017). It applies "techniques of data journalism to unmask the errors, ambiguities, lies, lack of rigour or inaccuracies of some content published in the media" (Ufarte-Ruiz, Anzera & Murcia-Verdú, 2020, p. 259).

In the present research, the statements that mayors make on local television in relation to the fulfilment of their functions as local government authorities are considered the object of study. According to Ecuador's administrative structure, the local government body is called the Decentralized Autonomous Government, whose purpose is to favour citizen participation and the active involvement of individuals in decision-making processes, as well as in their execution.

In Latin America, decentralization is understood as a means to deepen and perfect democracy, strengthen development "from below", contribute to citizen equity, reduce the state apparatus and make public management more efficient.

The Constitution of Ecuador develops the framework of organization, competencies, and resources of the Decentralized Autonomous Government, which are specified in the Organic Code of Territorial Organization, Autonomy, and Decentralization. The mayor is the first authority of the municipal government and exercises exclusive executive powers, according to Art. 59 of the Organic Code of Territorial Organization, Autonomy, and Decentralization (Registro Oficial, 2010).

This research seeks to verify the statements or speeches issued by local governors, for which the following context is relevant.

The discourse of leaders on television is fragmented due to the time and production conditions of the medium (Astudillo, 2019). Political activism is the one that has benefited the most from television discourse; it represents a highly creative and constantly changing opportunity for generating and cohesive identity. The public discourse of those in power on television is a key element in the construction of social subjects and the public agenda.

For Morales (2020) "discourses serve to interpret diverse social phenomena, to define the agenda of urgent issues, to reduce our uncertainty, to mobilize individuals and to distribute power within society". Therefore, public discourse is a social and communicative phenomenon (Varios, 2022).

Based on the above, the purpose of the research is to determine the accuracy and contexts of the statements made by the mayors of Ecuador using the fact-checking methodology.

The research questions are: Are the public statements of Ecuador's mayors presented in local television news programmes true? What are citizens' perceptions of the mayors' public statements on local television?

The research questions are explained by the fact that the closeness of mayors to citizens generates trust and political protagonism, which can tend towards a short-term or "buy-sell" management instead of being guided by civic values.

2. Materials and Methods

The research methodology is mixed, qualitative and quantitative. It focuses on analysing a situation at a given time, in this case the verification of public discourse, and also describes variables and analyses their incidence (Hernández, Fernández & Baptista, 2014). In addition, when the aim is to understand a social phenomenon, it is appropriate to analyse, observe and ask questions (Corbetta, 2003). The instruments used are content analysis, discussion groups and semi-structured interviews.

The content analysis is carried out on the public statements of the mayors of Ecuador, whose records are hosted on digital social networks. The analysis is based on the verification protocol of Ecuador Chequea, an initiative that arises for the "verification of public discourse and misleading content circulating on the Internet. The portal is part of a movement of fact-checkers" (Portal Ecuador Chequea, 2022).

The location of the audiovisual pieces analysed occurred in the following way. 1) identifying the media outlets listed in the Public Register of Media, as of 2021, of the Communication Council of Ecuador (Portal del Consejo de Comunicación del Ecuador, 2022), 2) determining the television channels that keep archives of their news programmes on Facebook or YouTube, 3) using the search options of social networks through the keywords or tags: mayor, Decentralized Autonomous Government, municipality, mayors' names. A sample of mayors' statements broadcast between February 2020 and March 2022, on six local television stations, and in two community-dedicated slots on national television stations, from the three geographic regions of the country was achieved:

Coast: 1) "TC Televisión", domiciled in Guayaquil. Name of the news programme: "El Noticiero". (2) "Manavisión", based in Portoviejo. Name of the news programme: "Noticias Manavisión". 3. "Rey TV" broadcasting from Quevedo. Name of the news programme: "Rey Noticias". 4. "Palmas TV" from Esmeraldas. Name of the news programme: "Enlace Regional Informativo".

Sierra: 1) "TV MICC" from Latacunga. Name of the news programme: "Informativo 47". 2) "Teleamazonas" of Quito. Name of the news programme: "Noticiero 24 horas". 3) "Academia TV" of Cuenca. Name of the news programme: "Academia TV Noticias".

East: "TVC Los Encuentros" from Los Encuentros (Zamora Chinchipe). Name of news programme: "Encuentro Informativo".

Data processing was carried out in IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) v. 22.

The focus group is an interactive practice and strategy of social research (Callejo, 2001; Galeano, 2004), "consisting of bringing together a group of six to ten people and provoking a discussion among them on the topic of interest, which must be led by a moderator" (López, 2010, p. 150). It is "ideal for capturing the dominant representations, values, affective and imaginary formations" (Pedraz et al., 2014). It allows the expression of different positions and attitudes of the participants (Canales & Peinado, 1995).

Four online focus groups were conducted between 15 October and 6 November 2022, due to the restrictions on mobility, which are maintained in order to reduce the spread of Covid-19. The implementation of the "online focus groups is logistically feasible. Social researchers currently have a range of technological and communicative resources available to us that we can manage and configure to shape group dynamics" (Parada, 2012, p. 112).

Each focus group discussion lasted one hour, with the participation of citizens of both sexes, of different ages, professions, and occupations living in various provinces. The selection criteria were: they were of legal age, related to or familiar with the work of the media, not involved in elected office or judicial processes, and possessed a basic general knowledge of democracy and elections.

The placement of participants in the focus group discussion was done through a "snowball" dynamic based on referrals between people from different cities. Two focus group discussion involved residents of highland cities, one with people living on the coast, including the Galápagos Islands, and one with people from the eastern region of Ecuador.

The identification codes are: GS1-# for the first focus group discussion conducted with people living in highland cities; GS1-# for the second CGG in highlands; GC-# for the focus group discussion conducted with inhabitants in coastal cities; and, GO-# for residents in eastern cities.

The distribution of participants corresponds to 14 men, 14 women; average age 33 years; 15 live in highland cities, 8 in coastal cities and 5 in eastern cities.

The issues that guided the focus group discussion are related to the authenticity, intentionality, and contexts of the mayors' statements, expressed as questions, the questions posed are: 1) Do you consider the mayor's public statements broadcast on television to be true? 2) Do you consider the mayor's public statements to be intentional? 3) Does local television contextualize the mayor's statements, or does it broadcast his or her speeches verbatim?

Table 1. Description and identification of the participants in the focus group discussion

Code	Sex	Age	City of residence
GS1-1	Male	20	Ambato
GS1-2	Female	31	Loja
GS1-3	Female	32	Riobamba
GS1-4	Male	21	Quito
GS1-5	Female	52	Quito
GS1-6	Female	26	Tulcán
GS1-7	Male	62	Célica
GS2-1	Male	32	Quito
GS2-2	Female	29	Tulcán
GS2-3	Male	42	Quito
GS2-4	Male	21	Quito
GS2-5	Male	38	Machachi
GS2-6	Female	41	Saraguro
GS2-7	Female	26	Alamor
GS2-8	Male	22	Santo Domingo
GC-1	Male	19	Machala
GC-2	Male	36	La Libertad
GC-3	Male	44	Santa Elena
GC-4	Male	41	Portoviejo
GC-5	Male	29	Santa Rosa
GC-6	Female	50	San Cristóbal (Galápagos)
GC-7	Female	38	Portoviejo
GC-8	Female	24	Guayaquil
GO-1	Female	21	Zamora
GO-2	Female	32	Zamora
GO-3	Female	43	Sucumbíos
GO-4	Male	42	Coca
GO-5	Female	23	Zamora

Information gathering, in addition to content analysis and focus group discussion, should be complemented by other research techniques, such as interviews (García & Martínez, 2012). Interviews are recommended for obtaining direct information from key people, in certain situations or when inquiring about a personal experience (Pedraz et al., 2014). Interviews "will allow for a qualitative and nuanced expression of the information obtained, while serving to contrast, confirm and triangulate the information" (Sancho & Giró, 2013, p. 128).

The interviews were conducted between April and May 2022 via video calls (*Zoom, Google*). The questions answered by the experts are: 1) Is it possible to capture the essence of mayors' public discourse in two to three minutes, 2) Should mayors' public statements on local television be subject to verification, 3) What elements are indispensable for the credibility and relevance of mayors' public discourse, 4) What themes should mark mayors' public discourse, 5) What elements should be included in the public discourse of mayors, and 6) What elements should be included in the public discourse of mayors? 4) What issues should the mayors' speeches be about? 5) Are there any arguments missing in the mayors' statements on local television? 6) Do you think that there may be inconsistencies in the mayors' public statements when participating in television?

The profiles of the interviewees are:

- Interviewee 1 (code E-1). Research professor at universities in Ecuador and Paraguay, PhD in Communication and Journalism. Expert in university management and quality.
- Interviewee 2 (code E-2). Teacher, journalist and researcher in communication. Lines of analysis: reception and audience studies, television industry, communication and migration.
- Interviewee-3 (code E-3). News correspondent for SciDev.Net. Collaborates with digital magazines. Journalism teacher. Editor of magazines, books and digital content.
- Interviewee-4 (code E-4). Diploma in Organisational Communication. Lecturer at the Universidad Nacional del Santa (Peru). Consultant in audiovisual marketing and brand management.
- Interviewee-5 (code E-5). Media manager, she was responsible for communication in the area of the National Planning Secretariat of Ecuador.
- Interviewee-6 (code E-6). President of the Latin American Association of Political Consultants (LACOP 2016-2018). Communications consultant for electoral campaigns.
- Interviewee-7 (code E-7). Journalist and educator. Representative of the weekly *En Contacto-Tumbes-Peru*. Served as Regional Prefect of Tumbes.
- Interviewee-8 (code E-8). Journalist, correspondent for an international television channel in Ecuador, specialist in international politics.

The methodological novelty lies in the decision to use a protocol typical of current trends in verification journalism, since it is considered applicable to the processes of social research. Both, in principle, respond to the same purpose related to the search for truthfulness in the data. In addition, fact-checking is an advantage when presenting structured descriptions and responding to the concerns of this report, as it enhances the ability to synthesize the evidence collected.

However, social research processes must transcend journalistic practices related to the dissemination of information that is only "verifiable". The use of other qualitative research techniques adds "weight" to the evidence, contextualizes it, and contributes to the discussion of other research concerns that can emerge from the systematic analysis of its findings.

3. Results

The statements of the mayors of eight cities in Ecuador collected in the news broadcasts of the main local television stations, which keep their audiovisual records on the social networks *Facebook* and *YouTube*, are in the following table.

Table 2. Verification results

Topics	Duration of testimonies				Plans			Total
	Less than 1 minute	From 1 to less than 3 minutes	From 3 to less than 5 minutes	More than 5 minutes	Close-up	Middle plane	General plan	
Assistance, food	5	1	0	2	1	3	4	8
Culture and heritage	5	6	0	0	2	3	6	11
Economy	4	8	0	1	1	7	5	13
Education	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	2
Justice	3	1	0	0	1	1	2	4
Public works	5	6	1	1	0	4	9	13
Policy	3	7	0	9	6	8	5	19
Health, Covid-19	6	7	0	7	4	10	6	20
Citizen security	3	3	1	2	0	6	3	9
Public services	5	3	0	3	3	7	1	11
Total	40	42	2	26	18	50	42	110

Topics	Checks				Región			Total
	True	False	Imprecise	Satire	Costa	Sierra	Orient	
Assistance, food	8	0	0	0	0	7	1	8
Culture and heritage	9	1	0	1	0	11	0	11
Economy	7	2	4	0	2	11	0	13
Education	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
Justice	3	0	1	0	0	4	0	4
Public works	8	2	3	0	0	13	0	13
Policy	18	0	1	0	1	17	1	19
Health, Covid-19	17	0	2	1	6	12	2	20
Citizen security	9	0	0	0	1	8	0	9
Public services	9	1	1	0	4	6	1	11
Total	90	6	12	2	15	90	5	110

In the focus groups, divergent positions were obtained on each proposed topic, with close proportions in each region, as shown below.

3.1 Truthfulness of the Mayors' Statements

Some people who live in highland cities consider that the mayors' statements on local television are "true because they report and keep their word correctly" (GS1-1), "because when they make statements about works carried out, we can confirm that their testimonies are true" (GS2-6), "unfortunately, the media cover up or are bought to avoid showing the real public statements" (GS2-4).

For other participants in the focus group discussion, the mayors' expressions "are not true, they promised things that they never delivered" (GS2-7), it is mentioned that "there is no clarity in the activities they promise, and in the end they do not deliver. And they always look for ways to excuse themselves when the people ask for answers or facts" (GS1-5), and problems of "corruption and influence peddling" (GS2-5) affect the trust placed in television (GS1-7).

One participant pointed out that "not everything [television] says is true, it always hides the reality of the city" (GS1-2), the mayors' testimonies "are partly true, but there are also unfinished works, so they harm the citizens" (GS1-3). "Sometimes the mayor's public statements do not carry the necessary veracity, problems are omitted, events occurring in the city are hidden" (GS1-4). Another focus group discussion attendee pointed out that "opinions vary depending on what the population wants to hear, political history leaves something to be desired and the culture of conformity is ingrained" (GS2-1).

Some inhabitants of coastal cities consider that the mayors' statements "are true, [if] each of the campaign proposals has been successfully implemented" (GC-2). There are specific cases where it is stated that "the current mayor has gained trust with the citizens because of his honesty and his positive actions in the city" (GC-4); another authority commented that "he says things as they are, he is very confident when he speaks on camera, you can hear his public statements in an accurate way" (GC-7).

The expressions of agreement with the veracity of the speeches are various, in one intervention it was pointed out that the mayor "constantly exposes the works and activities that he executes with the citizens, the interventions are true, since they are evidenced in works and activities" (GC-5), "referring to our mayor, of the city of Machala, his performance has been notorious, generating works for the benefit of his community, therefore, generating jobs" (GC-1).

One person finds it "difficult to believe that [the testimonies] are completely true, because for me there is no such thing as bad publicity and everything that is publicly exposed sells. On the other hand, they [mayors] always have communications advisors on hand to provide them with rehearsed texts before a press conference" (GC-8).

For a few citizens of the coast, the "statements are not true, because his words are not reflected in the work he has done in these three and a half years, nor in his previous term. He has a very populist strategy" (GC-3), "for me they are not true because of a lack of resource management to carry out public works" (GC-6).

In the case of governors of eastern cities, the mayors' statements "are not entirely true, they are used so that citizens can see the "positive" actions carried out by the administration, however, they can be exaggerated, they want to make the mayor's office look good" (GO-1).

Like the sierra, it is considered that "within the arguments that the mayor pronounces there are issues that are true, as many times when influenced by the media it is difficult to comply with what they have said and proposed" (GO-3), an intervener indicated that "the information that he gives us daily is truthful and timely, our mayor is a centred, humble person and is always concerned for the wellbeing of the people" (GO-5).

3.2 Intentionality of Statements

For some sierra residents, the mayors' public statements on television "are always intentional, they do it according to their personal and partisan interests, they do not seek the public interest" (GS1-2), "they seek first to gain a good image, before saying the real needs of the city and what are the real problems that exist around their mandate" (GS1-4), "they camouflage the activities to highlight what is convenient for them" (GS1-5), "obviously every mayor wants to have a good image with their citizens" (GS1-1).

Some of the burgomasters' testimonies are "prepared by a group of advisors so that they say certain things, their statements are not sincere, they are made up. They are generated to improve the figure of the political figure" with the intention of "remaining in power for their own benefit" (GS2-1), "to remain in office" (GC-4), thus "many times they are intentional statements about lies or exaggerations about the management in office" (GS2-1).

For other participants in the focus group discussion convened with inhabitants of highland cities, the mayors' statements "are aimed at positioning the figure [of the mayor] as an option for re-election" (GS2-6), "so that citizens can once again trust him and his political party" (GS1-3). "Many [mayors] want to be re-elected, even if they do things badly, they want to stay in power to benefit themselves or to keep promises" (GS2-4), therefore, "their statements are a permanent campaign to stay in a favourable position and try to be in office again" (GS2-3).

Few participants perceive positive values, one notes that "all statements have only one objective, to inform interested citizens of works that the mayor does" (GS1-6), another points out that "there are loyal authorities who act honestly" (GS1-7), although it is reiterated that "the media have become a platform for information to be disseminated at the convenience of a certain person or authority" (GS2-2).

On the other hand, most of the participants of the coastal SDGs indicated that the public discourse of the mayors is intentional. The mayor "says what the people want to hear and does what seems convenient for his own benefit" (CG-3), "always seeks to look good to his constituents in order to stay in office. This is common in local politics, therefore, it discourages citizens from getting involved and being informed about their political leaders" (GC-4).

Little authenticity is observed, "the declarations have always been pre-designed, because in spite of carrying out works for the citizens, their way of expressing themselves transmits the learning of a well elaborated script" (GC-5).

Only two participants in the focus group discussion of the sierra indicated transparency, "the mayor has shown good intentions and this has been reflected in his administration" (GC-2), "the idea is to respond to the community that trusts in the work of the municipality" (GC-6), "I would believe that when he speaks, he expresses himself sincerely" (GC-7).

In the focus group discussion with inhabitants of the east, the pattern of opinions from the highlands and the coast was repeated, with many believing that there is intentionality and few the opposite. It was indicated that the mayor's statements on television "are intentional, his objective is to stay in office for four more years" (GO-2), "the idea is to give the citizens the false impression that he does deliver" (GO-3). On the other hand, one participant indicated that "the mayor has earned the affection and affection of the voters for the hard work and commitment he puts into the well-being of all" (GO-5).

3.3 Contextualization

In the focus group discussion of sierra it was mentioned that "local television broadcasts literally the mayor's speeches" (GS1-1), "they do not take the trouble to interview someone to verify, the word of the mayor and his followers is enough for them to release information that is not verified" (GS2-7), a participant pointed out that "the dissemination of information is decontextualised, the tendency is to be yellow" (GS2-1).

The "majority of local media transmit the speech literally, few carry out analyses, with the respective comments" (GS1-2), "any statement by politicians in the television media is presented as it was made, without removing or adding anything" (GS1-3), "on many occasions they omit facts in the face of possible reprisals or problems that could be generated with the leaders" (GS1-4).

It is specified that "there are media that contextualise everything in favour of the mayor" (GS2-4), "some work for the mayor, therefore, they should improve their statements" (GS1-6), in a generic way it is indicated that "the press limits itself, the biggest example are the solemn sessions, in which the mayor has conflicts with the councillors, but the press does not show it" (GS2-5), this would explain, for example, that "the mayor of Tulcán has made certain media his space to congratulate himself" (GS2-2).

There are two opinions in favour of equal treatment. "The information shows transparently what the mayor is expressing. They contextualise the statements, some are against and some are for" (GS2-6), "it is not whitewashing or putting the mayor's speeches in contexts favourable to him" (GS2-3).

For coastal participants, local television "limits itself to broadcasting the mayor's statements verbatim without adding complementary information. This can be a disadvantage for citizens, as they do not receive the necessary information to understand the political leader's speech" (GC-4), "television stations take many things out of context, they do it for the benefit of the company, to gain more followers and comments" (GC-8).

Local television "broadcasts the statements as the mayor speaks" (GC-2), "it limits itself to broadcasting his speeches literally" (GC-6), "there is no interruption, he is listened to in full" (GC-7).

In the eastern cities "most media choose to broadcast the speech live and then close the signal" (GO-2), "they usually give way to broadcasting [the mayor's] speeches" (GO-3). Local television "does not contextualise" (GO-5).

3.4 Expert Opinions

As a result of the responses received in the semi-structured interviews, it is known that it is difficult to summarise the mayors' statements in a few minutes, "if you hold a position as a senator, president or mayor, obviously three minutes is insufficient to talk about different topics" (E-7). Although "it depends on the way it is done [...] in an international media they give one minute and 30 seconds to address what the interviewee said. So, it is based on the way the journalist writes and the conclusions he/she reaches" (E-8). "The time on television is short, but it depends on the topic to be analysed. A journalistic interview is a format that requires planning" (E-2).

However, interviews with mayors "of two to three minutes are adequate as long as there is a communications consultancy team to help construct a strategic message that reaches the unprotected, who are not always connected to the Internet" (E-1). Fundamentally, "it is necessary to consider the objective and the platform on which the message is broadcast [...] it is important to adapt the communication to the format of the channel and to social networks" (E-4), "with digital native media it is likely that a podcast can be explored, which has a greater reach" (E-3).

Regarding practices to combat disinformation, all the experts interviewed agree that public statements by mayors on local television should be verified. Verification "is more relevant than ever, it should be done in general" (E-2), "it is one of the basic principles of journalism, but a single person cannot do it, human and economic resources are needed" (E-3), although it is recognized that "television by its very nature does not give a chance for verification. Television is entertainment, it is spectacle, we believe in what happens on television" (E-1).

It is recalled that "the good reputation of government has two important keys; on the one hand, permanent accountability, on the other, citizen participation and social control" (E-5), despite this relevance, "we do not have a good system for verification, but the best verifiers are the people. The audience must be educated to recognize when a message is manipulated" (E-1), so it is "important that citizens work on this issue for a better control of information, both of the media and of society" (E-4), and "it would be a great step forward for democracy" (E-6).

Credibility and relevance, the discourse of those in power "must contemplate what they promised, what they announced, what they are going to do, but always corroborating it with real facts" (E-3). "All statements made by a governor must be based on data; many times, we see mayors on television who do not deliver anything concrete. Television is a medium to take advantage of, to say concrete things" (E-8).

Political discourse "must relate what is said and what is done, establish principles of democratic governance through

dialogue" (E-5), use "simple, didactic language, with examples of stories. Communication has to be clear. People want accurate and substantiated information" (E-6), which is why it is important to review "what their campaign offer was, the ideology they represent" (E-1) and the "technical aspects to put an end to political demagoguery" (E-7).

In terms of the issues that should mark the mayors' discourse, they proposed content on "health, education and healthy eating" (E-1), "a mayor must respond to the basic needs of his or her people, and also employment, work, security" (E-3). "The basic themes are indispensable for society, although the context changes" (E-4), but in general "the subject matter will depend on the situation, on the political, social and economic reality of a city" (E-6). It is insisted that "the main objective of politics is service and the common good. Politicians must be immersed in current issues in order to respond to immediate demands, but they must reflect the citizen who is at their side" (S-5).

Regarding the lack of arguments in the mayors' statements on local television, there is the opinion that "sometimes there is a lack of argumentation, as well as a lack of verification of the data that is projected" (E-6). Some of the mayors' "speeches are empty, they lack content" (E-3) "because many of the statements are not based on real or necessary data" (E-8).

The inconsistencies are due precisely to "the short time slots that mayors have on local television, the seconds or one minute do not allow for the context of analysis of the speech. However, I think we have made a lot of progress in the policy of accountability" (E-1), and it also happens that "inconsistencies occur because the mayors do not arrive prepared with sufficient information for the interviews, so there are gaps in the information" (E-3). In other cases, there is "exaggeration in the speeches, the mayor is a politician and will try to make up his statement" (E-7), it is regretted that "many mayors do not realise that the ability to communicate makes it possible to sustain the discourse" (E-2).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The first research question, Are the public statements of Ecuador's mayors presented in local television news programmes true, is answered in the affirmative, while the second question related to citizens' perceptions of the mayors' public statements is answered on the basis of the results of the focus group discussion and expert interviews.

The public statements of the mayors of eight cities in Ecuador made on open television news between February 2020 and March 2022 are grouped around 10 thematic areas: food assistance, culture and heritage, economy, education, justice, public works, politics, health - Covid 19, citizen security and public services, therefore, there is a correspondence between the functions that according to the law (Organic Code of Territorial Organization, Autonomy and Decentralization) they must fulfil with the expressions of the work they carry out.

The largest proportion of statements (18%) refer to health in relation to the control of the Covid-19 pandemic, a logical situation, given that the control of contagion is a common concern. Other issues are the economy, public works and culture, which are the main axes that drive and sustain the provision of goods and services.

In second place, the treatment of political issues stands out (17%), which are specific to the role of mayors and are related to citizen care, but do not result in a paternalistic or populist image, as was considered in the research question.

The statements of the governors are true; through Ecuador Chequea's methodology, ambiguous, doubtful or inconsistent expectations were verified.

Adding the percentages of true and conditional contrasts (yes, but) it is established that 93% of the expressions tend to be true, so the research question is answered in the sense that, although some statements are ambiguous, they are based on certainties, those that seem exaggeration are rhetorical figures, typical of the speech of small towns or motivated by the close relationship, which do not imply falsehood.

There is no contamination of fake news in the mayors' communication; proximity helps direct accountability.

At the local, proximity and neighbourhood level, consistent discourses are motivated.

The most supportive mechanisms for verification are media and institutional data repositories, which are forms of open digital government.

Table 2 provides the support for noting that:

- The majority of mayors' testimonies on local television are presented in less than three minutes.
- The most common news genre used on local television to present mayors' testimonies is the news story.
- *Facebook* is the preferred social network for local television in Ecuador to host its news archives.
- The television plane most frequently used for mayors' testimonies in the medium.
- The majority of testimonies are collected from within the Decentralized Autonomous Government.

Thanks to the way local television is received by audiences, it has become a channel for accountability between

governors and citizens. The proximity of local television to citizens is shown in the results presented above: both the experts and the inhabitants of several Ecuadorian cities agree in recognising the relevance of the mayors' interventions in the news programmes, but also how little use is made of them.

There is a perception of a poor preparation of the governors to participate in television, there are manifestations of the use of the media as spaces for propaganda, but not as mechanisms for dialogue towards diversity and plurality, in short, identity is eroded and democracy is weakened, contrary to the potential pointed out for local television (Rincón & Estrella, 2008) as it could contribute to tolerance and sustainable development.

In the case of this research, few television stations are shown because few use social media, little use is made of the potential for dialogue through Internet options, and the opportunities of the digital and online information ecosystem are missed. Broadcasts are traditional, few have active social media accounts and leave their material for delayed consumption.

In the methodology section, the mechanism followed to locate the analysis sample was noted, during the recording period, statements by mayors were located in six local television stations, and in two national news spaces dedicated to the city. For a country divided politically and administratively into 22 provinces, only one third of the country's viewers are registered and served with the support of social media, which is at odds with the growing demand for information and digital consumption. As of October 2022, 69.7% of Ecuador's population has access to the Internet and among the top three sites they visit are *Facebook* and *YouTube* (Alcázar, 2022).

So, if Ecuador's local television stations have little presence on the Internet, it implies that they provide minimal spaces for accountability and contribute marginally to democracy, i.e., the theoretical premises are minimally fulfilled.

Efforts to make public administration transparent so that citizens are aware of the efficiency and effectiveness of public spending is a key aspect in the promotion of current e-government systems, a goal towards which progress is being made thanks to the media because they work under deontological standards with the immediacy provided by online communication. However, this longed-for goal will only be achieved if there are frequent practices of direct, two-way contact between mayors and their constituents and better information skills are developed among citizens, otherwise the public statements of mayors will be formal, maintaining protocols without depth.

The examination of the mayors' statements under Ecuador Chequea's verification methodology showed that most of them are true, that they are not erroneous or that they do not transmit false information, in principle due to their closeness to their constituents, but, although verification standards are met, there is a lack of analysis of the quality of the contents issued, in broad pieces and with the corresponding social, cultural and political contexts.

This work provides a starting point for further research. Seventy-five percent of the stories tabulated in Table 2 are less than three minutes long, which, in the words of the experts interviewed, is insufficient, for example, to compare government plans with the effective implementation of public works. The remaining 25%, which are longer than five minutes, are related to the slots where local TV stations literally broadcast the mayors' speeches.

On the other hand, with respect to the role of mayors as leaders, responsible for the search for well-being in their cities and spokespersons for their local governments, according to Ecuador's territorial code, weaknesses, excessive publicity and circumstantial interests that distort the purposes of the office and the desired accountability were observed. The DMGs and expert interviews showed weak coherence and the need to implement verification mechanisms to form critical audiences that consume the contrasted media messages.

In the execution of the focus group discussion, proportionality was kept with the tabulated sample of local stations, so two groups were organised in the highlands, one with inhabitants of the coast and one with personnel from the east. The results are grouped into the variables truthfulness, intentionality, context. The participants from the three regions consider the mayors' statements to be truthful, with reservations about the independence of the television stations. While the statements of Ecuador's mayors on local television are considered intentional, there is a perception of political interests to perpetuate themselves in office, while with respect to the context, there is a majority opinion that the journalistic performance of television news should be improved.

Among the limitations that had to be overcome are the limited audiovisual evidence that remains in the web repositories and social media accounts of television stations, so future research will have to deal directly with broadcasters. One alternative is to share open data from previous work. Another aspect is to advance research with international groups to distribute methodologies and receive immediate feedback, which allows for greater social impact.

Future lines of research are methodological triangulations, employing qualitative designs to reaffirm the findings here, explore other reasons and interpret data. It is also of interest to evaluate the management practices of local governments based on the proximity axis.

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