

Extended abstract

*Media Policy Silence in Depopulated
Territories: Communication in Regional
and National Regulations
on Depopulation*



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Highlights:

1. Communication has come to be an important input in policies and strategies to face the demographic challenge.
2. So far, Spain has not implemented policies to support local media in areas at risk of depopulation.
3. In the future, it is necessary to design measures that specify Territorial Communication Strategies.

Abstract: Through an analytical review of national and regional regulations on the demographic challenge, an exploratory study is carried out to detect the place of communication and the media in these public policies. It is observed that the presence of the communicative aspect is important in the corpus of regulations analysed, which has had its main development since 2017, coinciding with the growing presence of the issue in the media. The standards and strategies refer to the media as accomplices in the achievement of the objectives, highlight the need to promote and protect local media, propose specialisation in journalism professionals and raise awareness of the benefits of the rural environment. However, so far there are no specific measures aimed at the communication and protection of local media in depopulated areas, which some authors have conceptualised as media policy silence. This context represents an opportunity to design innovative strategies in which the media are not considered as mere transmission channels, but as fundamental actors and as part of the intangible values that favour the rootedness to the territory.

Keywords: Communication policies, local media, journalism, territorial communication strategies.

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

Depopulation is a pressing issue affecting rural areas across Europe, particularly in Spain, where vast swathes of land face declining populations, aging demographics, and economic challenges. In recent years, the demographic challenge has gained political recognition, as evidenced by the creation of institutional frameworks such as the Commissioner for the Demographic Challenge in 2017. This shift marks the prioritization of rural depopulation on Spain's public agenda. Despite this political momentum, communication and media, vital for shaping public perception and fostering community resilience, have not been adequately incorporated into policy responses. This study explores the role of communication and media in the legislative and strategic frameworks developed to address depopulation. It assesses whether these elements are integrated into policies and examines the extent to which media policy silence exists—defined as the absence of specific measures to support local media in depopulated areas, where the lack of information infrastructures further deepens socio-territorial inequalities.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in the concept of mediatization, which posits that all social, political, and cultural processes are deeply intertwined with media and communication technologies. As societies become increasingly mediatized, the way issues such as depopulation are perceived and addressed depends heavily on how they are represented in the media. This framework allows for an understanding of how communication shapes not only public opinion but also the social and cultural fabric of rural territories.

Furthermore, the study adopts the lens of media policy silence, a concept introduced by Freedman (2010), which refers to the absence of policies, discussions, or interventions aimed at supporting media infrastructures in certain contexts. In the case of rural depopulation, media policy silence manifests in the lack of targeted

measures to sustain local media, which are crucial for providing residents with relevant information, fostering local identity, and bridging the rural-urban divide. The absence of these measures in public policies exacerbates rural areas' marginalization and creates news deserts, regions where there is little or no access to local journalism and information, thus limiting the rural population's ability to engage with wider societal discourses.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis of national and regional laws and strategies designed to combat depopulation. The analysis focuses on regulations enacted since 2017, when the demographic issue gained more visibility in Spain. The corpus includes documents from various regions, such as Galicia, Aragón, Castilla-La Mancha, and the Valencian Community, as well as national frameworks like the National Strategy for the Demographic Challenge and the 130 Measures Plan presented by the Spanish government in 2021. The research aims to identify explicit references to communication and media, examining how these elements are conceived and incorporated within public policies.

A semantic analysis was conducted to catalog references to communication and the media, paying particular attention to how policies frame the role of these elements in addressing depopulation. Additionally, a semiotic discourse analysis was applied to explore how the media's role in rural life is depicted, the assumptions underlying these depictions, and any noticeable gaps or silences. The analysis also draws from framing theory, which examines how the presentation of information influences public understanding and perception. The study seeks to uncover whether communication strategies are framed as central components of demographic policies or are relegated to a secondary, supportive role.

4 Results

The findings reveal that communication and media are recognized as important components in addressing depopulation, but their role is often superficial and lacks concrete policy measures. At the national level, the National Strategy for the Demographic Challenge and the 130 Measures Plan include references to improving

the image of rural areas and countering negative stereotypes through media. However, these strategies primarily focus on external promotion rather than fostering robust local media ecosystems. The 130 Measures Plan, for instance, proposes a communication plan for the National Rural Network aimed at promoting rural development programs, but it lacks specificity regarding support for local media platforms in depopulated areas.

In contrast, regional laws show more explicit, though limited, attempts to integrate communication into policies. For example, a recurring theme in regional laws and strategies is the promotion of local media and the collaboration with them. For example, the regional regulations dedicated to the demographic challenge of Castilla-La Mancha, Extremadura and the Valencian Community support the promotion of "radio broadcasting, television and any other means of social communication in rural areas". However, despite these intentions, the concrete mechanisms for supporting local media remain underdeveloped. There are no comprehensive funding strategies, training programs, or infrastructure investments targeted at bolstering local journalism in depopulated areas. The concept of news deserts is particularly relevant here, as many rural regions in Spain suffer from an absence of local media outlets. Without access to locally produced news, residents are left with a vacuum of information, which can hinder community cohesion and democratic participation. Moreover, there is little acknowledgment of the structural challenges facing rural media, such as low advertising revenues and limited readership, which make it difficult for local outlets to sustain themselves without external support.

Another significant finding is that these laws highlight the need to eliminate stereotypes and improve the image of rural areas, promoting rural life as attractive and viable. The documents argue that transforming public perceptions of rurality is essential to making depopulated areas more appealing to both current residents and potential newcomers. However, while the rhetoric around these strategies is strong, their implementation is weak. The focus is often on promoting a positive image of rural life to urban audiences, with less attention given to addressing the internal communication needs of rural communities themselves. This suggests a disconnect between the policies' stated objectives and their practical execution.

Furthermore, the analysis uncovers a persistent urban-rural dichotomy in how communication is framed in demographic policies. Rural areas are often depicted in contrast to urban centers, with media strategies aimed at highlighting the advantages of rural life over urban life. This binary framing oversimplifies the complexities of rural territories and overlooks the increasing hybridity of urban and rural experiences. For

instance, the Avant 20-30 Strategy in the Valencian Community emphasizes promoting rural areas as spaces with unique advantages, but it does so by positioning them as fundamentally distinct from urban environments. This type of framing can reinforce stereotypes rather than challenge them, potentially limiting the effectiveness of media campaigns designed to attract new residents or investment to rural areas.

5. Conclusions

This study highlights the critical role of communication and media in shaping public perceptions of rural life and addressing the demographic challenge. Yet, even as communication is increasingly acknowledged as a strategic asset, a significant disparity remains between the rhetoric of policy and the implementation of effective measures. The concept of media policy silence is evident in the absence of specific, actionable support for local media in depopulated areas. This silence perpetuates the marginalization of rural communities, limiting their access to information and exacerbating social inequalities.

The research suggests that future demographic policies must go beyond promoting rural areas as attractive destinations for urban dwellers. Instead, they should focus on building sustainable local media ecosystems that can serve the information needs of rural populations and foster a sense of community belonging. This includes the development of targeted funding programs for local journalism, the creation of training initiatives to build media capacity in rural areas, and the establishment of collaborative platforms where rural and urban media can exchange knowledge and resources. Furthermore, policies should move away from the urban-rural dichotomy and embrace a more nuanced understanding of rural life that reflects the hybrid nature of contemporary society.

In conclusion, while communication is recognized as a crucial element in demographic policies, its potential is underutilized. Addressing media policy silence and investing in local media infrastructures are essential for ensuring that rural communities have access to the information and representation they need to thrive. By strengthening the role of media in depopulated areas, policymakers can contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable vision of rural development.