



Connecting publics in latency through communicative practices: a pragmatist operationalization from rural Spain

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Abstract

This article examines how participatory publics persist in depopulated rural areas during periods of low visibility and mobilization. Drawing on pragmatism and mediatization theory, we analyse communicative figurations in Castilla-La Mancha (Spain) using survey data (N=529) and develop a Participatory Public Connection Index (PPCI). Regression models reveal that public connection is driven more by communicative and territorial factors—such as local radio use, civic motivations, and municipality size—than by sociodemographics. Our findings suggest that local media help sustain symbolic bonds and latent publics, contributing to democratic engagement and territorial cohesion despite the absence of visible collective action. We conceptualize latency as the communicative and symbolic potential through which publics persist beyond visible mobilization; operationally, PPCI captures this latent connection sustained by everyday local media practices.

Keywords

Participatory publics, Rural depopulation, Local media, Mediatization, Latency, Communicative figurations.

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Introduction

Rural depopulation is one of the main demographic challenges facing the European Union. Currently, 69% of NUTS-3 regions have experienced population decline between 2011 and 2021. According to projections for 2040, a continued population loss is expected, particularly affecting intermediate regions (−0.11%), more markedly rural regions close to a city (−0.35%), and especially remote rural regions (−0.46%) (European Commission, 2025). This challenge has made depopulation a cross-cutting priority for the allocation of Structural Funds during the 2021–2027 programming period (Pazos-Vidal, 2021). Public policy responses have so far focused on territorial cohesion, service provision, and economic growth (Dax & Copus, 2022). However, the European Commission's *Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas* (2021) calls for a strategic shift: to recognize rural population loss as a complex, multidimensional process that goes beyond economic criteria and requires institutional responses focused on wellbeing. Factors such as quality of life, civic participation, access to arts and culture, and community involvement are now considered key to sustaining rural vitality (European Commission, 2021).

In this new framework, local media are identified as crucial assets. Far from being just sources of information, they act as symbolic and relational infrastructures that foster territorial attachment, identity pride, social cohesion and civic engagement. They also play a role in

showcasing and preserving local cultural and heritage value (Rodríguez-Castro, Cañedo & López-Golán, 2024; Park, Fisher & Lee, 2023).

Today, however, the local media ecosystem faces a critical moment. Platform dominance, falling ad revenues, and financial difficulties threaten its viability (Gulyas, Jenkins & Bergström, 2023). These pressures hit rural, socioeconomically disadvantaged areas hardest, increasing the risk of so-called “news deserts” (Verza et al, 2024). A weakened local information system not only undermines democratic life by allowing misinformation to spread but also erodes its integrative role. The European Committee of the Regions (2023), in its opinion on the *European Media Freedom Act*, has warned of this trend, urging protection of media freedom, pluralism, and equitable access across the single market.

This article builds on the mediatization paradigm (Kopecka-Piech & Bolin, 2023), which views social practices as increasingly shaped by media logics and infrastructures that reconfigure both the material and symbolic conditions of collective life (Hepp, Loosen & Hasebrink, 2024). In rural contexts, this approach helps us see how local media not only transmit information but also sustain social figurations rooted in place. Thus, the issue at stake in the discussion of rural media ecosystems is not just access to information, but the very possibility of forming a community—of constituting a public “we” capable of shaping the future of rural Europe.

This perspective leads us to a core question: to what extent do the structures, availability, and uses of local media shape lived experiences in depopulated areas? Our assumption is that territorial attachment, community participation, and local identity are today inseparable from media dynamics, which shape attention, affective repertoires, and possibilities for collective action (Zerrer, 2024).

This approach draws on the pragmatist tradition of John Dewey (1927), who saw communication as the very condition for democratic life. Only through communicative exchange—as a symbolic process of mutual attention (Quéré, 2017)—can shared meanings be built and publics formed around common problems (Asen, 2016). When communication infrastructures fail or prevent reciprocal attention (Del Castillo, 2016), the emergence of participatory publics is blocked (Zask, 2019).

In previous work, we have shown that the public mobilized around rural depopulation in Spain constitutes a Deweyan public—one capable of activating attention, information and affect beyond those directly affected by the issue (Galletero-Campos et al., 2025). Here, we ask whether, beyond moments of public mobilization, local media practices can help sustain this public. Our hypothesis is that local media may uphold these figurations even during phases without explicit activism, a condition we identify as *latency* (Melucci, 1996).

This exploratory study aims to advance the theoretical and methodological debate on publics through a situated, processual reading of rural mediatization in the demographically declining Spanish region of Castilla-La Mancha. This is one of the European regions most affected by depopulation: 67.5% of its 919 municipalities have fewer than 12.5 inhabitants per km² (Gobierno de Castilla-La Mancha, 2020). This structural trend is compounded by a historically weak local media ecosystem, turning vast areas into genuine information deserts (Saiz-Echezarreta et al., 2023).

To explore the relationship between local media and participatory publics in these areas, we conducted a survey among residents of depopulating municipalities. From a pragmatist and relational perspective that sees publics as communicative figurations (Ampudia de Haro, 2022; Hepp, Breiter & Hasebrink, 2017), the goal is to understand how local media practices enable the activation, maintenance, or latency of a participatory public around the demographic challenge. Rather than describing individual attitudes or media habits, we focus on perceptions, motivations, and local media use as part of the inquiry and experimentation practices that define Deweyan publics (Zask, 2011, 2019).

The article is structured as follows. First, we present the theoretical framework, combining the Deweyan notion of publics with mediatization theory and communicative figurations. Next, we outline the trajectory of the depopulation public in Spain, currently in a latent phase. The third section details the survey’s methodological design. In the fourth, we introduce the Participatory Public Connection Index (PPCI), based on the survey data. Finally, we

interpret the findings through the proposed model and discuss their implications for a processual and relational approach to participatory publics.

Foregrounding latency, we frame these publics as ongoing communicative potentials rather than episodic mobilizations, extending a pragmatist reading of democratic persistence and tethering it to situated media practices and PPCI as an operational lens.

Theoretical Framework: Participatory Publics in Deep Mediatization Contexts

In communication studies, the concept of “public” has traditionally been approached through audience-based perspectives or media-user typologies (Graan, 2022), often neglecting the theoretical insights offered by sociology (Ojala & Ripatti-Torniainen, 2023). While relevant, these views overlook key dimensions for understanding how publics form and mobilize around specific social problems—an approach developed within the sociology of public issues (Cefaï & Joseph, 2002).

For Dewey (1927), the public is not a pre-existing group, but an emergent formation arising from shared recognition of problematic consequences that transcend the private realm and demand collective inquiry. Publics, in this sense, are neither passive audiences nor stable communities, but contingent configurations shaped through processes of investigation, experimentation, and deliberation (Zask, 2019; Cefaï, 2022). Communication is not merely instrumental, but constitutive: only through symbolic exchange can people become aware of their mutual entanglement and construct shared meanings (Asen, 2016; Quéré, 2017). Dewey identified three key stages in the formation of a public: (1) the diffuse experience of unease; (2) its articulation as a collective problem requiring response; and (3) the development of legitimizing strategies that transform it into a public issue embedded in democratic values and collective action. This process relies on a communicative environment (what Dewey calls publicization) that enables the circulation of shared meanings and practices. Without these conditions, publics remain fragmented or fail to emerge (Zask, 2011).

To operationalize this concept, we turn to the model proposed by Hasebrink, Merten, and Behre (2023), which defines publics as *communicative figurations*: dynamic constellations structured by shared relevance frames, media practices and repertoires (*media ensembles*), and interdependent actor networks. Drawing on Norbert Elias (1990), these figurations are understood as relational webs in which actors mutually shape one another and modulate the course of collective action. The authors distinguish three ideal types of publics: *group publics* based on shared belonging; *topic publics* formed around specific topics; and *polity publics* oriented toward intervention in the public sphere. While analytically distinct, these types often overlap in what the authors term *issue publics*—hybrid configurations such as Deweyan publics formed around concrete problems.

Guided by a pragmatist lens, we propose a processual and semiotic-relational reading of this model. Here, publics are not fixed types or sequential stages, but coexisting dimensions that are activated contingently depending on context. The identity-based dimension tends to dominate during affective experiences of unease; the thematic dimension provides discursive articulation; and the political dimension expands the field of experience, turning a particular concern into a shared public issue. Thus, a single public may engage different dimensions—identity, thematic, or political—with varying intensity depending on the moment and communicative context.

A central contribution of this perspective is its emphasis on the intrinsic fragility of publics: their formation is neither automatic nor stable, but depends on symbolic, material, and communicative conditions. Publics evolve through phases of formation, emergence, and institutionalization, yet they may falter or dissolve at any point. Dewey (1927) already warned that the emergence of participatory publics can be obstructed by failures in attention, information flow, or collective deliberation.

To capture this vulnerability, we draw on the concept of *latency*, which describes conditions in which a public does not disappear, but loses visibility, coherence, or discursive articulation. Unlike inactive or dissolved publics, latent publics retain symbolic ties, shared repertoires, and the capacity for reactivation (Hallahan, 2000). Latency is not necessarily a final

stage—it may follow visible mobilization or precede it, existing as a collective form without full public visibility or institutional recognition, moving constantly between these states, as is typical of contemporary movements (Melucci, 1996: 392–393).

Our use of latency diverges from ‘inactive’ or ‘latent’ publics in public relations theory, which often index low knowledge or low involvement states oriented to predicting activism (e.g., situational theory). Hallahan’s (2000) critique distinguishes ‘inactive publics’ (low knowledge/low involvement) from ‘aroused’ and ‘aware’ groups; crucially, he treats latency as a trait related to activation propensity across categories. Here, latency is not a deficit state but a processual, relational condition: publics retain symbolic ties, repertoires, and capacities for reactivation through communicative figurations anchored in local media use. This repositions latency from a marketing/PR segmentation logic to a pragmatist mediatization lens focused on how publics endure in practice.

Latency, then, does not mean absence of action but a different, less visible way of sustaining public figuration—through communicative practices that preserve symbolic and affective bonds, even without explicit media representation. The endurance of publics depends not only on their visibility in the public sphere, but on their capacity to persist as *potential* (Melucci, 1996: 116), rooted in everyday communicative practices and local meaning-making infrastructures. Along these lines, Mattoni and Ceccobelli (2024: 59–61) stress that information-gathering helps maintain activist engagement during phases of low media attention, preventing isolation and supporting political commitment through trusted, proximate sources. Such communicative practices provide the groundwork for sustaining both communicative figurations and active belonging, even in the absence of visible action.

The Depopulation Public in Spain as a Public in Latency

If publics are inherently fragile, they are constantly at risk of disarticulation. Our ethnographic observation of the depopulation public in Spain confirms this premise, revealing its fluctuating phases of activity and structural weakness in both political and social arenas (Pazos-Vidal, 2022). Its initial formation was diffuse and prolonged. The rural depopulation process in inland Spain dates back to the 1950s and 60s, when migration toward industrialized areas began to empty less advantaged territories (Collantes & Pinilla, 2011).

Castilla-La Mancha, together with other areas of central Spain, was one of the regions of origin for migratory movements toward major cities and their outskirts. Covering an area of 79,436 km², which makes it the third largest region in Spain, it has 919 municipalities, 69.7% of which have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants. Depopulation there is a structural feature linked to its vast natural areas, but it was exacerbated by population outflows in the mid-20th century (Aparicio Guerrero y García Marchante, 2016).

Although not a new issue, it is only recently that depopulation has gained prominence on the political and public agenda. In 2017, as part of the broader *demographic challenge*, it was incorporated into the national government through the creation of a commissioner. In parallel with this political move, several symbolic milestones occurred in the following years (Castelló, 2023), allowing the issue to be reframed as a matter of national concern and engaging citizens not directly affected by the phenomenon. Symbolically, many residents of depopulated areas took part in a collective exercise of attention, becoming aware of their situation and demanding changes in public policy, challenging the dominant perception of rural decline as irreversible.

The emergence and crystallization of this public culminated in the *Revolta de la España Vacía*, a mass demonstration held in March 2019¹ where associations and groups from across Spain gathered to demand greater attention to rural areas. This event marked a turning point, successfully placing depopulation at the center of Spain’s national agenda and connected local concerns with broader civic values such as cohesion, equity, and social justice. Thus, this process transformed depopulation into an *issue public* (Hasebrink, Merten & Behre, 2023): a hybrid public combining affective-identity anchoring (group dimension), discursive articulation (topic dimension), and institutional confrontation (political dimension).

¹ Associated Press. (31/03/2019). Thousands march in Spain to demand more help for rural areas. <https://apnews.com/article/fc1b7ef2184f488d8361ac66271dc1cc>

The depopulation debate has involved a wide range of actors: rural residents with varying degrees of activism, lawmakers at multiple levels, specialized journalists, and academic experts—each playing a role in exploring and addressing the demographic challenge. Despite the visibility it achieved, the issue failed to remain central on the public agenda, and both social and media interest have steadily declined. Our longitudinal observations point to several contributing factors: a preference for consensus framing over political polarization, fragmentation of communities and perspectives, weak coordination among activist actors, and the co-optation of the discourse by technocratic experts and administrative institutions (Galletero-Campos et al., 2025).

This drop in media attention coincides with the struggles faced by sociopolitical actors, especially rural activists, to keep depopulation in the electoral spotlight or secure stable inclusion in institutional and political frameworks (Esparcia, 2024). Adding to this, partial adoption of civic proposals by national and regional governments (Pinilla, 2023) has paradoxically contributed to demobilization and fragmentation of the initially cohesive public.

Drawing on Vallverdú's (2005) perspective on scientific controversies, we interpret that the depopulation issue has entered a phase of closure combining two elements: *closure by consensus*, where dominant actors consider existing responses satisfactory; and *closure by natural death*, marked by waning public interest due to the rise of other issues, despite the problem remaining unresolved. In this scenario, depopulation becomes latent, awaiting new moments of salience that might reignite public and media engagement—and reactivate the public itself.

Still, this disarticulation coexists with signs of persistence. Depopulation remains present in the background of broader debates on housing or energy transition. From a pragmatist perspective, public issues and controversies unfold in dispersed and unpredictable ways. As Munk and Ellern (2015:91) write: “The problem is perhaps that controversies, in order for them to be beyond reduction to mere disagreements, are never in something. On the contrary, it is the fact that they cut across different domains, upsetting them, creating moments of “ontological disturbance.”

Material and Method

Castilla-La Mancha is among the regions most affected by depopulation: according to INE data, 74.5% of its municipalities lost population between 1996 and 2020, making it the sixth most impacted Spanish region. In recent years, it has also led in adopting policies against depopulation, with its institutions acting as relevant players in this public².

The methodological design centers on a survey tool aimed at reconstructing the social and communicative configuration of a public through the ways people relate to a shared issue. Following Marres (2007), we view research methods not as neutral but as devices that render certain matters investigable and, in doing so, help constitute the publics surrounding them (Cefaï, 2023).

This survey is part of a longitudinal study on the mediatization of depopulation in Castilla-La Mancha, ongoing since 2019. Its design and analysis draw from cumulative knowledge gathered through media and social media coverage analysis, ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, workshops with key actors, and focus groups with citizens and communicators. This approach, inspired by multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) and situational analysis (Marres, 2020), has enabled the development of situated knowledge guiding both the questionnaire's design and result interpretation.

The survey targeted a reference population of 438,024 residents across 721 municipalities categorized as severely or extremely depopulated³. A sample of 529 people was obtained, with a $\pm 4.26\%$ margin of error and 95% confidence level. A stratified quota sampling was used based on

² The European Network for Rural Development (2022) points out that the “Regional Law of Castilla La Mancha to combat depopulation” is an outstanding example of good integrated practices, replicable in other EU territories. Hence the interest of this case study.

³ According to Decree 108/2021 of zoning of the territory foreseen in Law 2/2021, of Economic, Social and Tax Measures against Depopulation and for the Development of the Rural Environment in Castilla-La Mancha.

demographic distribution: 10% aged 17–29, 39% aged 30–49, 36.9% aged 50–65, and 14% over 66, with 53.5% women and 46.5% men. Fieldwork took place in person between November and December 2024 across 21 sampling points distributed among the region's five provinces.

Selection was informed by a proprietary database previously developed that mapped each municipality's communication channels. The database recorded the municipal channels of the 721 depopulated municipalities—including Mobile Public Notice Apps; messaging platforms (WhatsApp, Telegram, unidirectional or bidirectional); official municipal Facebook pages; municipal websites with updated local news; and non-professional media projects such as community radio stations, newsletters, or blogs (Rueda Córdoba et al., 2025). Each municipality was coded according to the number of active channels (0 to 5), using a variable that summed them with equal weight and served as an indicator of the available media ensembles.

The 21 sampling points were not only chosen to ensure geographic balance but also to capture contrasting communicative ecologies. Each point represents a distinct communicative and territorial configuration within depopulated Castilla-La Mancha, combining provincial diversity (at least four per province) and variation in local media density, demographic scale, and access to information infrastructures. At least one municipality per province was selected with high media presence (levels 4–5) and one with low presence (levels 0–1). This design allows the comparison between different levels of communicative structuring to inform the Participatory Public Connection Index (PPCI) and to interpret how local media environments shape patterns of public connection.

The 21-question survey included blocks on territorial identity and community well-being, motivations and media consumption habits, especially regarding local media and perceptions of them, as well as respondents' connection to and participation in depopulation-related matters.

Given that respondents live in depopulated areas and are part of territory-bound communities, they were asked how strongly they identify with various territorial levels (local, regional, national, European, urban, rural, depopulated) and how long they had lived in their municipality. As potential members of a participatory public engaged with demographic challenges, several questions assessed their activism levels, ranging from being informed, discussing the issue, posting online, attending protests, to participating in topic-specific organizations.

Questions on media consumption habits, interest, and satisfaction drew on tools used by Park, Fisher, and Lee (2020) and the Fundación BBVA's Information Consumption Patterns Study (2023). Respondents were offered a list of sources for local news: print or digital newspapers, radio, TV, town hall communication channels, WhatsApp/Facebook groups, other social media, and informal venues like bars or shops—considered communication nodes in this study. They were also asked to compare their interest in local vs national news across various areas. Satisfaction with the amount and quality of local information was categorized using adapted statements from Park et al. (2020). Trust was measured through perceived likelihood of encountering fake news across the same information sources. Another question addressed the perceived usefulness of media for producing and circulating information: for example, whether respondents would share local news via a medium, contact the mayor for its dissemination, post it on personal or group social media, or share it physically at a local venue.

Following the mediatization paradigm, we assume daily practices are increasingly shaped by media and their uses (Jansson, 2018). In addition to motivations for local news consumption described by Park et al. (2020), we included civic motivations proposed by Bengtsson, Fast, Jansson, and Lindell (2021), such as gaining knowledge, improving society, and staying connected to others—reflecting the role of media in fostering community participation. The perceived impact of local media was assessed through the functions attributed to them by the depopulated communities themselves (Galletero-Campos et al., 2024). Finally, community well-being perception was measured using the Community Wellbeing Index developed by Schirmer, Yabsley, Mylek, and Peel (2016), to examine its relation to media practices.

Sociodemographic variables included age, gender, ideological orientation, education level, income, and employment status, adopting response categories from the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas barometers and media studies.

Results

Constructing the Participatory Public Connection Index (PPCI)

Based on exploratory descriptive analysis, we selected a set of variables to construct the Participatory Public Connection Index (PPCI), operationalizing the three dimensions of hybrid publics —political, topic, and group dimensions (Hasebrink, Merten & Behre, 2023)— using eleven indicators drawn from the questionnaire. These reflect identity, attitudes, and communicative practices, dichotomized for political and topic dimensions, and scaled (none, low, high) for the group one. We understand the topic dimension as “feeling part of something”, the topic as “what concerns people”, and the political as “how they participate”.

A total of 22 variables were grouped into the 11 items shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Theoretical dimensions of the PPCI.

Dimension	Indicator	Range
Political	<i>Sought information on depopulation</i>	0-1
	<i>Discussed depopulation</i>	0-1
	<i>Commented on depopulation in forums or social media</i>	0-1
	<i>Attended depopulation protests/events</i>	0-1
	<i>Participated in depopulation-focused organizations</i>	0-1
	Political Subtotal	0-5
Topic	<i>Likelihood of sharing info via media ensemble (none–high)</i>	0-2
	<i>Interest in local vs national news</i>	0-2
	<i>Concern about depopulation</i>	0-2
	Topic Subtotal	0-6
Group	<i>Identification with “Empty Spain”</i>	0-1
	<i>Feeling integrated in the village</i>	0-1
	<i>Likelihood of recommending their village to live</i>	0-1
	Group Subtotal	0-3
TOTAL INDEX		0-14

Source: Author’s own elaboration

A reliability test (Cronbach’s alpha) on the 22 original variables confirmed the internal consistency of the index ($\alpha = 0.803$, $p < .001$, $N = 483$). We then conducted a principal component factor analysis to assess the weight and dimensional validity of the indicators. The analysis confirmed the three-component structure and their theoretical grouping. Only one item (identification with “Empty Spain”) behaved slightly differently. It showed a mild negative loading in the emotional component and a moderate positive loading in the thematic one, suggesting a cross-cutting role between affective attachment and thematic concern. This

ambiguity reflects the complex, mediated, and institutionalized nature of the “Empty Spain” identity, not always tied to emotional or community integration but also to political discourse.

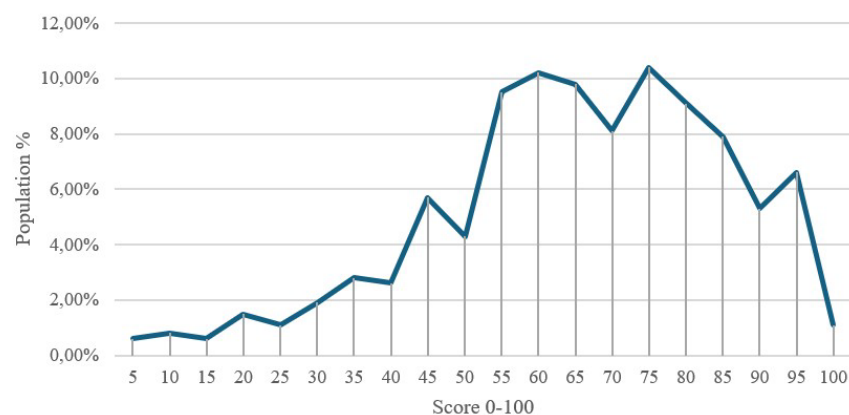
Table 2. Principal Component Analysis of the ICPP.

Component	Indicator	Loading
Political	<i>Sought information on depopulation</i>	0,640
	<i>Discussed depopulation</i>	0,766
	<i>Commented on depopulation in forums or social media</i>	0,799
	<i>Attended depopulation protests/events</i>	0,810
	<i>Participated in depopulation-focused organizations</i>	0,834
	<i>Likelihood of sharing info via media ensemble (none–high)</i>	0,574
Topic	<i>Interest in local vs national news**</i>	0,681
	<i>Concern about depopulation</i>	0,527
	<i>Identification with “Empty Spain” *</i>	0,460
Emotional	<i>Identification with “Empty Spain”</i>	-0,201
	<i>Feeling integrated in the village</i>	0,809
	<i>Likelihood of recommending their village to live</i>	0,822

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

The index was standardized on a 0–100 scale for interpretability. As Graph 1 shows, few people score low (4.5% below 25 points), most fall in the mid-range (17.4% score 25–50; 48% score 50–75), and 30.1% score above 75. The mean is 62.9, with a standard deviation of 19.25.

Graph 1. PPCI Population Distribution



Source: Author’s own elaboration.

Explaining the PPCI: Regression Models and Results.

After constructing the index, we sought to identify which factors influence higher public connection. Table 3 lists the potential explanatory variables, grouped into four categories: sociodemographic, motivational (reasons for seeking information), media-related (informational channels used), and territorial (municipal size and media ensemble size).

Table 3. Variables by Type.

Type	Variables
Sociodemographic	- Gender
	- Age
	- Employment
	- Education
	- Income
	- Time in municipality
	- Ideological self-placement
Motivational	- Informs to talk with others
	- Informs to understand local events
	- Informs to manage daily life
	- Informs to participate in local decisions
Media Use	- Gets local news from TV
	- Gets local news from radio
	- Gets local news from newspapers
	- Gets local news from municipal channels
	- Gets local news from WhatsApp/Facebook groups
	- Gets local news from bars/shops, - Gets local news from other social media
Territorial	- Municipality size
	- Municipal media ensemble size (number of municipal communication channels)

Source: Author's own elaboration.

As can be seen in the table, the variables have been grouped into four groups: sociodemographic, motivational (which include the stated motivations for which the respondent gets information), media use (which refer to the channels used by the respondents to get information) and territorial (which include both the size of the municipality and its municipal media configuration).

Together with classic sociodemographic variables, both the local media network and the uses and practices of the media influence the levels of connection. Thus, we suspect that people with high scores on the PPCI will have a higher media consumption pattern and will show more

motivation to inform themselves. As for the territorial variables, we hypothesize that a larger municipality size and a more robust media fabric will correlate with a stronger connection.

The strategy for exploring correlations will be twofold. First, we will explore through multiple linear regression the correlations between the independent variables and the PPCI, their weight and orientation. Then, we will explore through a binary logistic regression the specific profile of those who obtain a high score (from 16 to 20 points) with respect to those who obtain lower scores, dichotomizing the dependent variable. We consider the two models to be complementary because while the first model provides us with a more detailed analysis of the dependent variable, the second model provides us with a more detailed analysis of the dependent variable.

a. *Multiple Linear Regression*

Using a stepwise method, we estimated a model where the dependent variable is the PPCI (scaled 0–20). The final model includes six significant predictors (Table 4), with an adjusted R^2 of 0.159 and no multicollinearity issues (all VIFs < 1.5). The results partially confirm our initial assumptions and add new insight.

Table 4. Multiple Linear Regression

	B	SE	β	t	p	VIF
Constant	8,211	1,116		7,360	<,001	
Age***	,716	,202	,159	3,549	<,001	1,180
Gets local news from other social media*	,837	,369	,107	2,267	,024	,1322
Municipality size***	,903	,222	,201	4,072	<,001	1,434
Informs to talk with others**	,337	,108	,144	3,115,	,002	1,265
Informs to participate in local decisions**	,233	,085	,129	2,755	,006	1,296
Municipal media ensemble size ***	-,775	,163	-,232	-4,744	<,001	1,416

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The results show that the PPCI is influenced by a combination of sociodemographic, motivational, media and territorial factors. The variable *municipality size* ($\beta = ,201$; $p < ,001$) reinforces the territorial hypothesis: larger municipalities within the rural world present higher levels of connection to the participatory public. This can be explained by a higher density of networks and opportunities for conversation and involvement, i.e. a richer ecology of the public (Cefai, Berger, Carlier & Gaudin, 2024).

Age also appears as a positive predictor ($\beta = ,159$; $p < ,001$): the older the age, the greater the connection. This finding questions the widespread image of mobilization as a predominantly youth phenomenon and suggests that life trajectories and accumulated involvement capital, as well as the experience of rootedness, positively influence levels of participatory connection in the case of depopulated territories and is consistent with the desire and predisposition of younger generations to migrate to urban areas (González-Fernandez & Águila-Díaz, 2024). It is relevant to note that the rest of the sociodemographic variables did not result statistically significant, which redounds to the characterization of depopulation as a cross-cutting issue, the object of a broad consensus in terms of ideology, class, etc. However, this consensus may have become naturalized in both public opinion and institutions and deserves a critical review (Sáez & Pinilla, 2024).

In contrast to the low relevance of sociodemographic profiles, variables linked to communicative practices appear as significant. The use of other social networks (other than Facebook groups and WhatsApp channels) as a source of local information ($\beta = ,107$; $p = ,024$) shows a positive association. Those who access information through platforms such as Instagram, Twitter/X or TikTok tend to show higher levels of participatory connection, indicating that in

environments with a fragile conventional media structure networks function as spaces for politicization and thematic circulation in the rural ecosystem (Barclay et al., 2022).

In the motivational dimension at the time of consuming information, two key predictors stand out: getting information to talk with other people about local current affairs ($\beta = ,144$; $p = ,002$) and to participate in the town's decision-making ($\beta = ,129$; $p = ,006$). The first reveals that communicative sociability - the desire to share and discuss information - acts as a driver of public involvement. The second reflects an explicitly political orientation: informing oneself not only as consumption, but also as a way of preparing for action.

Finally, the model yields a particularly striking result: the size of the municipality's media ensemble - that is, the number of municipal institutional channels identified to disseminate local information - has a negative effect on the PPCI ($\beta = -.232$; $p < ,001$). This finding partly contradicts the initial hypothesis that a higher density of municipal information channels would favor connection to the public. Our qualitative approach to the field allows us to formulate a hypothesis that points to the differentiation between communication devices that imply the possibility of dialogue, and others - such as those mapped as municipal media ensembles - that are oriented to the dissemination, often unidirectional, of service provision information. In line with this, we interpret that a proliferation of municipal channels does not necessarily translate into greater citizen involvement.

Overall, the model outlines a profile of high connection to the public characterized by a combination of personal trajectories (age), interpersonal communicative ecologies (conversation), political disposition (participation), strategic digital uses (other networks) and denser rural environments (size of the municipality). The model also warns about the possible limits of communicative institutionalization when it is not articulated with a participatory culture. Next, we will analyze a second model - a binary logistic regression - to explore the profile of those in the upper quartile of the PPCI, i.e., those who could be characterized as belonging to the latent public.

b. *Binary Logistic Regression*

We dichotomized the PPCI to identify those in the top quartile (16–20 points = “connected”) versus the rest. A backward stepwise logistic regression yielded the final model (Table 5).

Table 5. Binary Logistic Regression Model

	B	SE	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Constant	–3,072	0,762	16,252	<,001	0,046
Municipality size (501–1000 hab.) **	2,703	0,877	9,503	,002	14,927
Municipality size (1001–2000 hab.) *	2,019	0,878	5,287	,021	7,534
Municipality size (2001–5000 hab.) ***	2,921	0,802	13,262	<,001	18,551
Informs to participate**	0,167	0,056	9,025	,003	1,182
Media ensemble: 2 channels **	–1,301	0,423	9,440	,002	0,272
Media ensemble: 3 channels ***	–1,290	0,401	10,352	,001	0,275
Media ensemble: 4 channels ***	–1,791	0,353	25,806	<,001	0,167
Local radio use*	0,593	0,257	5,340	,021	1,810

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The model has moderate predictive power (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.175$) and passes the Hosmer-Lemeshow test ($p = 0.910$). It classifies 75.3% of cases correctly, though it performs

better at identifying the “not connected” group (96.3%) than the “connected” (21.9%), revealing asymmetry. Still, it highlights key factors increasing the likelihood of high connection.

Municipality size again stands out: compared to towns with <500 inhabitants, larger towns significantly increase the odds of high connection —especially those with 2001– 5000 residents (OR = 18.5). This result reinforces the hypothesis that, in more densely populated contexts, the opportunities for mobilization, public debate or the visibility of the depopulation problem are also greater, facilitating the emergence of active and connected publics. The data point to a logic of scale: the largest centers within the most depopulated Spain not only concentrate more resources, but also more organizational and communicative capacity.

The importance of media use is also confirmed, given that for this group the motivation to be informed has to do with participating in the town’s decision making, as opposed to other purposes such as understanding what is happening in the area or managing day-to-day activities. Each additional point on the scale for this motivation increases the probability of belonging to the group of connected people by 18% ($\text{Exp(B)} = 1.182$), reaffirming the political (and not just affective or thematic) nature of this connection. Media ensemble size again shows a negative effect: more channels correlate with lower odds of connection, likely due to their limited interactivity.

Regarding the relationship between connection to the public and media consumption, local radio consumption as a source of information appears as a significant predictor ($\text{Exp(B)} = 1.810$). Our previous studies on the media ecosystem in the region identified that radio is the majority medium in unpopulated areas (13 radios out of 18 active media). The results confirm that this medium plays a relevant role in the construction of committed audiences, possibly due to its role as a community channel and backbone of the commons in rural environments. These results reinforce previous research that highlights the role of municipal radio stations in rural environments (Peralta García, Sanz Hernando & Álvarez Peralta, 2022).

Together, these predictors—municipality size, civic motivations, local radio use, and conversational practices—indicate that PPCI captures a communicatively sustained connection consistent with a public in latency rather than mere inactivity.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results obtained through the construction and analysis of the Participatory Public Connection Index (PPCI) allow us to affirmatively answer the question that guided this article: media practices linked to local media effectively help sustain the existence of participatory publics even in contexts of low visibility and without explicit mobilization.

This confirms the analytical relevance of latency as a key condition for understanding how publics endure through everyday media practices despite low visibility. In our case, PPCI renders this persistence empirically visible, distinguishing processual endurance from the low-engagement profiles associated with ‘inactive publics’.

Therefore, far from disappearing, citizens’ connection to the issue of depopulation persists in a latent form, articulated through everyday media practices such as the use of social networks and conventional media like local radio. Seeking information to participate in local public life acts as another connecting factor. This finding aligns with the contributions of Mattoni and Ceccobelli (2024), who highlight the role of collecting reliable information to sustain political engagement during phases of low visibility.

The analysis of the PPCI shows that this public connection is not significantly structured, except for age, by sociodemographic variables. Instead, the regression analyses, which reinforce each other, identify other factors for public connection. First, municipality size: in larger municipalities, the probability of being highly connected to the public increases up to 18 times, pointing to a logic of scale in which opportunities for organization and the public circulation of information are amplified. Second, people who consume local media such as municipal radio the most, and those who explicitly seek information to participate in decision-making or to converse, show a significantly higher probability of being part of the group of members of the latent public. Conversely, third, a larger municipal media ensemble (understood as the diversity of available channels) appears negatively associated with public connection. This suggests that

communicative plurality does not guarantee citizen engagement, but rather the situated use of certain channels.

Although it exceeds the objectives of this article, this issue deserves broader reflection in line with the critique of participation models. From her conception of contributive democracy, Zask (2011) argues that participation involves not only being present but also contributing and being recognized: taking part, having a part, and contributing a part are, for her, the three inseparable dimensions of truly democratic participation. When institutional communication is limited to unidirectional transmission, without creating spaces for active contribution, it risks rendering these essential dimensions invisible and weakening the political bond between citizens and institutions. Confirming whether this occurs in rural areas requires future research.

Despite the Participatory Public Connection Index having high internal consistency and a structure that is empirically coherent with the theoretical model of public figurations, its construction is not without limitations. First, the index is based on self-reported variables that may be affected by social desirability biases, especially in questions related to political participation practices or a sense of community belonging. Second, the identification of topic, group, and political dimensions involves theoretical decisions which, although justified in the literature (Hasebrink, Merten & Behre, 2023; Zask, 2011), remain just one possible form of operationalization among others. Moreover, the statistical models used explain only a limited part of the PPCI's variance, which reinforces the need to contrast this index with other tools such as qualitative interviews, longitudinal analyses, or situated studies that allow for a deeper validation of the links between media consumption and belonging to latent publics.

Future research should also examine the spatial dynamics of discourse production, as many narratives about rural areas are generated from cities or shaped by an urban-centric perspective rather than emerging from within the territories themselves. This may influence how connection to publics is produced and sustained, as well as the role that media play in this process.

Despite its limitations, this operationalization as a whole aims to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon of publics in contexts of low mobilization and latency, where not only are there fewer visible actions, but where—regarding discursive construction and circulation among public arenas—the issue is dispersed, we might say out of focus, which poses a methodological challenge (Munk & Ellern, 2015). In the face of this dispersion, our proposal is to consider that local media, in the case of the depopulation issue, enable its continuity and anchoring by fostering reconnection.

From a theoretical standpoint, the pragmatist reading on the transversal character of connection to the participatory public reinforces the idea that publics are not necessarily given social groupings or typologies, but rather contingent figurations articulated around shared problems and mediated by communicative practices. Within this framework, the concept of latency emerges as a central analytical category for thinking about contemporary publics. The study suggests that attention to the issue, interest, and the desire to participate, even if not immediately translated into visible collective action, can still shape participatory publics in less perceptible, but no less relevant, forms. Our proposal seeks to open a line of inquiry focused on the role played by communicative networks in sustaining public figurations, such as publics connected to the demographic challenge. These are not solid or permanent structures and can be maintained through everyday practices such as consuming local media, circulating information, and symbolic engagement with the territory.

In connection with European concerns about territorial cohesion and citizenship in rural areas, this work emphasizes that local media—and in particular radio as a privileged channel—alongside other communicative practices, constitute material and symbolic conditions that allow for the existence of a “public we” committed to the future of depopulated areas. Far from being merely a technical issue, access to communicative infrastructures in these territories is essential to articulate common problems and nurture everyday forms of democratic deliberation. This dimension has been recognized in the Long-Term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas, which starts from the premise that territorial disparities undermine social cohesion and trust in democratic institutions, and which sets as its goal a just transition that “leave[s] no one and no place behind” (European Commission, 2021).

Sharing information, holding meaningful conversations, and recognizing one's own narratives are forms of participation that help repair the bond between citizenship and territory. The Rural Pact, with which this project is aligned, has been conceived precisely as "a new space to discuss issues of importance for the future of rural areas across all policy domains and build specific ideas for action." With this study, we aim to contribute elements to that conversation: tracing where and how the bond with a public committed to the demographic challenge persists today, even in a latent state, is also a way of imagining the communicative conditions necessary for effective territorial cohesion.

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Conflict of Interests

The author(s) declared no conflict of interests.

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