Depopulation and communication: proposals for approaching an emerging research topic

Despoblación y comunicación: propuestas para abordar un objeto de estudio emergente

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Abstract:

Depopulation has become a public problem in Spain. However, scientific literature on Communication has not yet paid sufficient attention to this phenomenon. This paper presents a bibliographic review using mapping technique and addresses works focused on the overlapping between depopulation and communication. We have utilised Geography of Communication to structure this review and to try to detect priority perspectives and thematic gaps. The

Resumen:

La despoblación se ha constituido como un problema público en España. Sin embargo, en la literatura científica todavía no se ha prestado suficiente atención a este fenómeno desde el área de comunicación. Este trabajo recoge un estado de la cuestión mediante la técnica de mapeo bibliográfico sobre la producción científica que aborda la intersección entre despoblación y comunicación, a partir de las propuestas de la Geografía de la Comunicación, para detectar perspectivas prioritarias

review focuses on two approaches: the analysis of representations of depopulated territory and the structure of the media in the affected areas. The mapping shows disparate output, focused on case studies, with no unifying theoretical paradigm, given the recent attention paid to this object of study. Although this dispersion makes it difficult to establish coherent conclusions between the findings, an emerging and scientifically relevant area has been detected meriting exploration of the link between mediatization and depopulation as a demographic and socio-cultural phenomenon. The discussion proposes potential lines of research that could shed light on the impact of media factors on depopulation processes and on the cultures and experiences of these communities.

Keywords:

Depopulation; communication; public problem; Media Geography; rurality; media; lines of research.

y vacíos temáticos. La revisión se fija en dos enfoques: el análisis sobre representaciones del territorio despoblado y la estructura de medios de comunicación en las zonas afectadas. El mapeo muestra una producción dispar, concentrada en estudios de caso, sin un paradigma teórico unificador, dada la reciente atención a este objeto de estudio. Aunque esta dispersión dificulta establecer conclusiones coherentes entre los hallazgos, se detecta un área emergente y científicamente relevante para explorar el vínculo entre mediatización y despoblación, en tanto fenómeno demográfico y sociocultural. En este sentido, en la discusión se proponen líneas de investigación potenciales que podrían iluminar la incidencia de los factores mediáticos en los procesos de despoblación y en las culturas y experiencias de estas comunidades.

Palabras clave:

Despoblación; comunicación; problema público; Geografía de la Comunicación; ruralidad; medios de comunicación; líneas de investigación.

1. Introduction: depopulation as a public problem

Demographic decline and depopulation in rural areas are common phenomena across western Europe and have intensified since the middle of the XXth century (Collantes & Pinilla, 2019). A massive rural exodus took place in Spain at that time towards the cities (Recaño, 2017), especially in those regions that had a relative disadvantage during the process of industrialisation as they possessed fewer resources and poorer infrastructure, which saw them fall into "demographic decline" (Sáez, Pinilla & Ayuda, 2001: 213). However, such effects can now be observed in a wide and diverse range of populated areas, these being difficult to group together by geographical location or provincial administrative unit.

Although attention is usually focused on those areas with lower population densities, one should consider that small and medium-sized cities have also seen their numbers of inhabitants decrease in recent years (Gonzalez-Leonardo, 2021). This has led some researchers to speak of a "second wave of depopulation" and to warn that "it is no longer a mainly rural and generalised phenomenon", but which is reaching the urban areas of those regions which suffered more intensely the depopulation processes of the 50s and 60s (González-Leonardo & López-Gay, 2021: 31). This new tendency is a consequence of, among other factors, the migration of qualified young human capital to the larger cities, a brain-drain (González-Leonardo & López-Gay, 2021).

When speaking of demographic decline there are distinct terminological acceptations which distinguish between depopulation, which occurs when there is an excess of deaths relative to births, and population decline which incorporates migratory movements and, over time, the gradual deterioration of services and infrastructure (Nieto Calmaestra, 2021: 219). The two are dimensions of a phenomenon which, far from being limited to certain zones, affects a large part of Spain, it is also related to the effects of the processes of concentration in the large urban areas, with the sustainability of regions, demographic balance and the equity of resources between geographical areas. In public discourse, depopulation tends to be represented as a homogeneous phenomenon. However, as explained by Collantes (2020), "there has not been a single trajectory in rural Spain.

In fact, there have been different rural Spains", which have suffered more from depopulation when their local economies have had difficulty in diversifying beyond agriculture and when they have experienced serious problems of access to infrastructure, materiel, and services.

Although this is evidently a problem and has been studied from geographical, demographic and socio-economic perspectives, it has been the confluence of several factors –citizen involvement, connections between social movements from various regions, lobbying by the business sector via the Southern Sparsely Populated Areas network (SSPA) or institutional measures– which has created a space and a context for it to finally be accepted as a public problem, thus gaining serious media attention (Cefaï, 2016; Peñamarín, 2017). It may also be that it connects with a discourse which reminds citizens that this phenomenon "may imply emotional, cultural, ecological and social loss, which may diminish their wellbeing, though this may not be apparent in their daily consumption nor affect the elements of their productive activities" (Sáez, Ayuda & Pinilla, 2016: 12).

The chronology of its development as a matter of national interest shows a series of milestones since the first citizen movement under the slogan 'Teruel exists'[1], in 1999, up to the institutionalisation of the question with the creation of the Ministry for Ecological Transition & Demographic Challenge, though it has taken two decades for this to come to fruition. Over this period, the alignment of different actors such as business organisations[2] and academia[3], amongst others, has been achieved. However, these and other initiatives at different levels –European, national and regional– were not enough for the issue to become a collective question in public life, as a problem of common interest for the general public. In fact, it did not figure fully in electoral discourse until 2019 (López Ruiz, 2021). As happens with other issues, depopulation has come across obstacles in increasing the number of people who identify with the problem, for numerous reasons: because it is seen as a phenomenon which affects only a small percentage of the population; because it has become normalized as an intrinsic –all but inexorable– situation of rural zones, it is very difficult –if not impossible– to undo or mitigate; or because there has not been a narrative able to mobilise the public, in cognitive, emotional, political or axiological terms (Bernal, Murrieta, Nardacchione & Pereyra, 2018; Peñamarín, 2020).

According to Luis Antonio Sáez (2021), depopulation forced its way onto the Spanish national political agenda in 2017. A point of inflection in getting onto the public agenda was when the demographic phenomenon appeared on prime time tv through well-known communicators such as Jordi Évole[4] or Sergio del Molino[5] (Collantes & Pinilla, 2019: 10), so much so that the essayist's book coined one of the first tags to be assigned to an already existing process "Empty Spain". The syntagm later turned into "Emptied Spain", narrating depopulation as an active, not a passive process, which pointed the finger in particular at the political class as the ones responsible[6]. Since then, depopulation has become consolidated as a reference among the general

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1   "Teruel existe, pero poco", Jorge A. Rodríguez, *El País*, 20/12/1999.

2   The *Southern Sparsely Populated Areas*, SSPA) was constituted in 2016, founded by business organisations from Cuenca, Soria and Teruel with the idea of promoting fiscal and legislative measures in the areas in question.

3   Of particular relevance is the 2017 creation of the Professorship in Depopulation and Creativity promoted by the University of Zaragoza and the regional government, and the Professorship in the Demographic Challenge, promoted in 2019 by CES Next, attached to the University of Lleida

4   The tv program Salvados broadcast the edition Tierra de nadie in October 2017.

5   Sergio del Molino's book –*La España vacía*– became popular in the spring of 2016.

6   A demonstration against depopulation took place in 2019 which gathered 100,000 people in Madrid. "La 'España vaciada' clama por una gran alianza contra la despoblación", *El País*, María Sosa Troya, 31/03/2019.

public, social institutions and the media. An example is that national public television has recently dedicated a news special to showing daily life in emptied Spain[7]. In fact, media attention and awareness of the problem are among the most notable advances in the matter (Campo Vidal, 2021).

The importance of communication is confirmed by the habitual presence of this element in the design of public policy. While the only mention of communication in Law 45/2007, of December 13, 2007, concerning sustainable development in the rural world[8], speaks of infrastructure, more recent plans and regulations show a shift in orientation, amplifying the question toward communication strategies and representation. The action plan produced by the Depopulation Commission of the Federation of Municipalities & Provinces (2017) alludes in point 4.7 to three commonly-held perceptions which are prejudicial to the image of the rural world compared to cities: the difference in the quality of life, the lack of opportunities for professional development and the unsustainability of small municipalities, which can only survive through subsidies. At regional level, Law 2/2021 of May 7, 2021, on Tax, Social & Economic Measures to combat Depopulation and for Rural Development in Castilla-La Mancha, a pioneering piece of legislation on this question, states that "the Regional Administration shall promote measures which favour the rural population's access to accurate information and encourage the human, cultural and economic interactions of said citizens" (Art. 67).

In the *Recuperation Plan. 130 steps against the demographic challenge*, presented in March 2021, there is also a specific proposal intended to increase both awareness and importance of the rural world, though it is oriented towards the diffusion of the rural development programs co-financed by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (FEADER) and the National Rural Network. In his analysis of the national strategy against depopulation, Sáez (2021) observes that there is an overriding and incremental interpretation, based on quantitative indicators, in which growth is always desirable, stemming from a functionalist, economics-centered vision of citizens and a response to their needs involving costly investments in infrastructure such as transport and technology. In his opinion, the plan does not pay enough attention to intangibles, that which has to do with talent, tolerance and creativity (Sáez, 2021). Precisely, the dimension connected to communication and the symbolic and cultural aspects of the construction of a shared world.

Depopulation is not only a demographic and geographic process, but has socio-economic and political elements, and inescapably incorporates a communicative dimension, as we find ourselves in a time of "profound mediatization" (Hepp, 2020), in which the media are consubstantial to the conformation and functioning of institutions and social practices. From the classic paradigm of agenda setting (McCombs & Valenzuela, 2021) and framing theories (Goffman, 2006), studies on communication and public opinion have strived to explore how the media demarcate the orientation of problems. It is through these frames in their discursive practices, that they tag and define them, when they capture the public's attention and, in a mediatised system, draw the consideration of political actors, inscribing the question onto the public agenda (Peñamarín, 2017).

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7   "Telediario desde la España vaciada: así te hemos contado cómo es la vida en las zonas menos pobladas del país", RTVE, 25/06/2021.

8   Article 26, dedicated to Information & Communication Technologies, considers measures on three axes: improve telecommunications coverage, promote the use of Technology among the rural la population rural and promote technological innovation in the sectors of activity in the rural world.

2. Objectives

This paper's contribution is part of a research project concerning the social profitability of the media in depopulated areas in the province of Cuenca, including amongst its objectives the carrying out of an exploratory pilot study to analyse the interdependence between the process of mediatization and that of depopulation. Despite the work setting its focus on the media, we intend to construct the object of study from a decidedly interdisciplinary position, one which incorporates the contributions which have come from the disciplinary cross-over between geography and communication (e.g..: Adams & Jansson; 2012; Adams, Cupples, Glynn, Jansson & Moores, 2017; Andersson, 2019; Jansson & Lindell, 2018).

The main objective is to consider the state of the question utilising the technique of an exploratory review of bibliographic mapping (Grant & Booth, 2009) to look into the scientific output which has covered the overlapping between depopulation and communication. The following specific objectives derive from that:

–   Explore the utility of the theoretical perspective of Communication Geography as a guide to performing a review of existing studies connecting the two areas of knowledge, from the field of the Social Sciences.

–   See the degree of scientific output regarding depopulation and its relationship with the media.

–   Design research itineraries for this object of study, thus fulfilling one of the purposes of the review papers (Jesson, Matheson & Lacey, 2011).

The work performed is oriented to answering the following research questions: what are the methodological and theoretical perspectives that have been adopted in studies of depopulation and communication? Can it be concluded that there is a stable line of study into the topic with common epistemological foundations? Which possibilities of research are opened by the findings, to delve deeper into the interdependency between mediatization and depopulation?

3. Methodology

In line with the objectives proposed and following Hart's phases (2008: 34), an initial mapping was done on the topic to detect key concepts in the Scopus and Google Scholar data bases. However, a first step utilising key words such as "depopulation"; "demographic decline"; "shrinkage"; "media"; "communication"; "rurality"; "discourse" and their possible combinations revealed that a coherent corpus cannot be compiled. The consolidation of depopulation as a public problem, studies of which in the area of communication have been concentrated over the last ten years, does not offer sufficient time range for its construction as a stable academic object of study. Also recent is interest in the spatial dimension of the discipline of communication (Jansson & Falkheimer, 2006). Therefore, there is no theoretical inheritance, nor common theme, inscribed in key words, from which one can draw a multidisciplinary production with sufficient coherence to allow for the usual systemised bibliographic review, which is why we have turned to a more traditional review (Codina, 2020).

In this case, mapping technique (Grant & Booths, 2009) is useful for describing a field of research, but at the same time, it acts as a prior exploratory strategy for the design of later research, as well as of additional bibliographic reviews of questions not known beforehand. This approach permits an appreciation of the volume and dispersion of the issue, acting as a tool with which to formulate new, relevant research questions and to nuance existing ones. It is not an objective of the mapping to incorporate

a detailed synthesis of the studies in terms of quality or statistics, but to outline a blueprint of tendencies, a roadmap with which to direct oneself in future phases. Utilizing this type of open design allows one to face possible fragmentation and dispersion of the findings, and to avoid presenting their results in an artificial or forced compendium (Grant & Booths, 2009).

Despite its open and exploratory character, a series of practices have been adopted in order to avoid bias (Codina, 2020), such as, for one part, to guarantee the repercussion and quality of the sources utilised (indexation); and also, to follow a coherent analytic plan when addressing documents, in this case, defined by the field of Communication Geography (Adams & Jansson, 2012; Adams, Cupples, Glynn, Jansson & Moores, 2017). This categorisation has been expressed in the presentation and synthesis of the results.

Therefore, this review is not a bibliometric analysis and is not intended to offer quantitative results of scientific output, as it is about an object of study that has not been institutionalised. What it does provide is an original and illustrative compendium about an emerging question of increasing interest in politics and the media, which promises growing scientific interest in coming years. Studies found on the question have been compiled and discussed, offering a considered list of them and identifying trends and gaps in the research (Perryman, 2016). Later, an itinerary is outlined that future research could follow, offering possible directions from which a methodological and theoretical framework could be constructed, to address depopulation as a sociocultural phenomenon.

4. Theoretical framework: an approach from Communication

To structure the bibliographical mapping the perspective of Media Geography has been adopted. Among other authors, Adams, Andersson and Jansson have brought to light the existence of an interdisciplinary area of work which stems from the crossover between communication, media and geography. This is a recent subdiscipline within human geography, which has not emerged as something lineal or defined, and still lacks a single clear focus (Adams *et al.*, 2017). Although the interest shared by geographers and communicators is growing and the scientific concerns are both multiple and of relevance, it is as yet a disorganized field that lacks a unifying paradigm (Adams, 2018).

The priority objective of Communication Geography is to discover what it means that the interdependence of infrastructure, representations and practices occurs in some places and, at the same time, to participate in the construction and definition of spaces and places. The articulation of spaces and places –such as the imaginary place of depopulated regions– depends on media logic and the processes of technological mediation (Hjarvard, 2018):

> The very fact that communication takes place and makes place implies that the spatial impetus of communication does not stop where people's thoughts are turned into expectations of/in certain spaces and places, and where individual or collective plans for creating or transforming space/place may emerge. Media and communication also lead to concrete thickenings of space, which means that places are defined by and felt through communication in the shape of sounds, sights and other sensory flows that continuously mould our ways of relating to particular places (Adams *et al.*, 2017: 7-8).

To organise Media Geography and deal with the analysis of these aspects (Adams, 2011: 40-48) Adams proposes a foundational taxonomy:

– Places-in-media: research into events related to their location and representations of places in all types of media.

– Media-in-places: a non-representational focus on how the presence of media makes a performative change to the experience and perception of places, including questions of affection or corporality.

– Media-in-spaces: observations on how transformations of space-time coordinates linked to communications technology, media, and infrastructure are produced, with the focus on phenomena such as convergence, accessibility, de-centralisation, etc.

– Spaces-in-media: inquiries into the premise that communications are a space in which ideas, images and information circulate; as they pass from person to person and from group to group, they generate topologies, enable and restrict modes of interaction, define relations of power.

Although these are all applicable to the study of depopulation in different dimensions, our interest, from a Social Sciences perspective, is confined to the concept of place and, therefore, to the first two categories, which would encompass the following classes of research:

1. **Places in media:** work covering discourses and representations of depopulation and depopulated zones in news media.

2. **Media in places:** research into media structure in areas of low population density, the impact of an ecology in which hyperlocal, regional and national media[9] hybridise, with global networks or communication strategies oriented to the survival of the depopulated areas.

Given that interest is limited to places, not in themselves but in terms of their relationship with people, that work which refers to the topological concept of spaces is excluded, an example being the way in which they are mediated by technological devices. Neither have we considered those studies into technological infrastructure which connect to engineering and telecommunications. Finally, although some notions are remarked on, we have not looked deeply into the representations which refer to rurality in cultural products such as film and literature, as this would be to stray from our intention.

5. Results

5.1. Places in media: discourses and representation of depopulation in the news media

Public discourses are often sustained in the construction of representations and narratives based on the rural/urban axis (Sørensen & Pless, 2017). There is abundant academic literature which has inquired into the symbolic construction of rurality defined from a social dimension (Cloke, 2006), shaped by the representation that society and its different groupings make about these spaces and the communities that inhabit them (Collantes & Pinilla, 2019).

The scientific research confirms that the terminology employed to allude to the phenomenon –depopulation, emptying, decrease– is generally framed in negative values (Sousa & Pinho, 2015; De Sola, 2021) in contrast to ideas of growth associated

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9   Hyperlocals are those media with an orientation to the community, to service and civic commitment, which report on a specific and limited geographical area (neighbourhood, village, county,…) and which try to fill news gaps concerning the area or subjects that do not figure in the coverage of media at other levels (López-García, Negreira-Rey & Rodríguez-Vásquez, 2016).

with progress or wellbeing. Several international studies deal with media use of metaphors linked to death or agony, so that those municipalities affected by depopulation go from being structurally weak spaces directly to being lost causes, denying them any perspective of a future. They are the "dying villages" (Christmann, 2016: 361) or "deathscapes" (Douglas, 1987: 43).

In the US, Christina E. Dando (2009) performed a critical analysis of the discourse in national media coverage of depopulation on the North American plains (Grand Forks, North Dakota and Nebraska) between 1997 and 2007. Although some hopeful frames were identified, related to how communities are "creatively handling the matter" (2009: 7), negative visions predominate –the metaphor of terminal illness– such that she concludes: "The American print media have become active agents in the region's topocide/domicide" (Dando, 2009: 3). Her work records the words of a university professor in North Dakota, Tom Isern, on the fascination these depopulated areas exercise over journalists, determined to reinforce the image of abandonment and emptiness in their coverage: "Partly, it's simply the journalistic imperative to maximise the perception of tragedy" (Isern, 2000, quoted in Dando, 2009: 16).

Gabriella B. Christman writes along the same lines, concluding, in an analysis of German media discourses, that journalists present demographic change within a framework of dramatizing metaphors, such as "bleeding to death" (2016: 365). It is a vicious circle, for, as pointed out by the researcher, negative representations spread by the media about all that has been lost and the lack of perspectives for the future may encourage those who remain to wish to leave:

> We can suppose that the inhabitants of rural areas, faced with the negative predictions regularly presented by the media (from a greater population decline, and a lack of perspectives for the future, to future desolation), could come to the conclusion that they should abandon their regions unless they want to be among the losers (Christmann, 2016: 365).

The connotations of weakness and backwardness are not only imputed to the places, but to those who inhabit them, somehow blaming these people for the lack of progress in the affected areas, as Eriksson's work (2008) on the depopulated region of Norrland (Sweden) concluded.

Apart from the negative isotopies, there is another branch of study that looks at metaphors of the rural world from a romanticized vision on the axis urban-dehumanised vs rural-humanised or in contact with nature. We can observe this in the concept of "rural idyll" (Shucksmith, 2018), with reference to expectations heaped onto the rural world, especially, all that which has been lost during processes of urbanisation. This type of representation has been associated with urban centres in modern, post-industrial societies (Paniagua & Hoggart, 2002) and is also present in studies of commercialisation strategies, which dovetail, among others, with the marketing of food products, tourism or leisure-time (Figueiredo, Pinto, Soares da Silva & Capela, 2014; Martínez-Rolán, Tymoshchuka, Piñero-Otero & Renó, 2019; Huertas & Martínez-Rolán, 2020).

The media representations associated with rural idylls have been activated by the pandemic, linked to the experiences of the new neo-rural inhabitants (Moyano Estrada, 2020). Nevertheless, in spite of certain optimism reflected in some news discourses, recent studies show that this stage has not supposed a change in the dominant mobility patterns, nor a reversion in rural depopulation processes. Everything points to the changes observed being temporary, although they had a considerable effect on the rural areas (González-Leonardo, López-Gay, Recaño & Rowe, 2022).

Finally, apart from texts, images are also operative in this bucolic projection of rurality. A recent study into photographs circulating on social networks has also found how images of the rural world related to hard work, inequality or poverty are

buried beneath other, more iconic and popular ones, reflecting nature and landscape (Amerani & Partalidou, 2020). This reading may take away from younger generations –particularly those who live in urban areas– social awareness of the problem of depopulation and of the precarious conditions in those areas. In conclusion, as Moyano Estrada said (2020, p. 36), accounts of the rural world constructed outside of it focus on the most eye-catching and news-worthy, giving a "somewhat distorted" image of rurality, which is neither so "idyllic" nor so "desolate".

5.1.1. In Spain

The only study looking principally at an analysis of news media discourse on depopulation in Spain is that of Alexia Sanz Hernández (2016), which analyses a sample made up of 560 articles published in three daily papers, *Diario de Teruel*, *Heraldo de Aragón* and *ABC*, over the period 2008-2015. She identifies four types of discourse: the agonizing, which feeds on the narrative patterns of decadence; the adaptable, which alludes to resigned and normalized acceptance; the protesting, notable for its activism; and the creative, based on proactive messages about hope and the future. Sanz Hernández points to a certain increase in the protesting and creative discourses (fruit of the empowerment of the affected collectives, among other factors) in the latter years of the study and mentions journalists' capacity to warn or alert the public about the problem by activating emotional mechanisms (Sanz Hernández, 2016). Thus, feelings relative to the "dying" not only form a part of an agonising narrative but may also have a mobilizing character among activists (Lundgren & Johansson, 2017). However, it is important that the media do not fall into sensationalism, an idea on which the Spanish study and other international ones coincide (Christmann, 2016; Dando, 2009).

The media pay special attention to political discourse. A study based on the 2019 electoral period shows that leaders frame depopulation as a problem, more than as a process of transition or adaptation; they portray it as a novel issue (despite demographic decline being a global phenomenon and the rural exodus in Spain occurring mainly between the 50s and the early 70s), even though, at the same time, it is a given that there is a relevant common body of experience shared with the public, despite its recent emergence (López Ruiz, 2021). It could be concluded that there is a simplification of the phenomenon with the object of focusing on electoral proposals.

In synthesis, although there is a major number of studies that have dealt with visions of depopulation in cultural productions (Lancellotti, 2020; Paniagua, 2018; Teti, 2020) and in the discourse of the inhabitants of the areas affected (Paniagua, 2009; Paniagua, 2014; Querol Vicente, Ginés Sánchez & Aparici Castillo, 2019), there are hardly any studies to be found that refer specifically to depopulation in news media. In those which do deal with it the identification of negative representations and stereotypes is noteworthy, though there is space to point to some communicative practices which seek to displace them and extend their sight to more positive and creative aspects. To corroborate these alternative voices it seems necessary to amplify research in the area from paradigms alert to intersectionality, complexity and ambivalence.

5.2. Media in places: presence of media in depopulated regions

The historical and geographic conditions of the regions conform their identities and also condition their media structures, which reproduce patterns of population dispersion and concentration, even in a situation of convergence (Jenkins, 2008) in

which the information flow meets no physical barriers. Do local and hyper-local media have an impact on their communities? And how much do they have in a globalised context?

"What about the hyperlocals?" (Leckner, Tenor & Nygren, 2017) is the title of a study in Sweden, a country with a low population density where some areas have figures of 8 inhabitants per Km^2 and where press consumption has historically been among the highest in Europe (Díaz Nosty, 2005). Since 2008 an enormous variety of media in different formats have emerged, grouped together under the ample definition of "hyperlocal" as the place where a community share ties, regardless of geographical or political proximity (Nielsen, 2015). According to a survey carried out by Swedish researchers on the prime movers of these media, the chief motivation cited by most of the participants was to make up for the news vacuum concerning coverage of local affairs. Here is one of the responses gathered by the authors: "I started (the operation) in the autumn of 2009 to show all the activities taking place in the countryside where I live/lived, despite a lot of people saying, "nothing ever happens around here"" (Leckner, Tenor & Nygren, 2017: 11).

The research shows that, on one hand, consumption of local information favours citizens' involvement (Schubert & Wolling, 2017); and on the other, helps configure the perception of and discussion of the dominant account of cities as the focal point of opportunities and development (Christmann, 2016). A studied carried out in La Niña, Argentina, concluded that the most important element for the community in terms of social cohesion was the setting up of the Almanaque La Niña, an illustrated calendar containing photos of the inhabitants and expressions designed to preserve pride in their identity. This communication resource became "a collective projection in which the inhabitants recognised themselves as the daily inhabitants of their own place, somewhere that had been lived in and which had its own deep history; and therefore, created a cultural front against external forces" (Urquijo, Bocco & Boni-Noguez, 2018: 1312). Another study of the Saxon population of Treptitz (Germany), with barely 130 inhabitants, exemplifies the value of a communication tool – the web of an association created by the community – to make the residents feel recognized and appreciated. By generating messages about themselves, they redefined the place as "a creative, vibrant space anything but moribund" (Christmann, 2016: 369).

If the media participate in the articulation of social and geographical territories, it seems reasonable to assume that where there is no media the awareness of community deteriorates. Some countries such as Portugal present revealing data, with 57 municipalities from a total of 308 (18.5%) not having any social media according to data analysed in the Re/Media.Lab project. These municipalities are found, once more, in the most depopulated parts of the country such as Portalegre (Alentejo) and Vila Real (north), parts of the interior whose development contrasts with that of the coastal districts (Ramos, 2020). These municipalities are neither the protagonists of local current affairs nor receive information that directly affects their surroundings.

5.2.1. In Spain

There has not been a complete diagnosis in Spain which permits us to precisely detect these media vacuums –there is no media register equivalent to the Portuguese Regulatory Authority for the Media (ERC)– and neither has there been study of the repercussions of this lack for these towns and villages. The crisis in print newspapers, accompanied in some cases by a shortage of local radio broadcasters, has led some areas of Castilla-La Mancha, Castile and León, Aragon or Andalusia to be without media coverage (Chaparro, 2018; Galletero-Campos, 2019; Sanz Hernando, 2017; Segura Anaya, De Sola Pueyo,

Iniesta Alemán & Mancho de la Iglesia, 2020) and these are precisely areas in regions threatened by depopulation. Although digitalisation has favoured the appearance of micro media which strive to cover those gaps (Metzgar, Kurpius & Rowley, 2011), these small projects tend to depend on advertising from local and provincial institutions (Segura Anaya *et al.*, 2020). "The problem is that the local information that many citizens desire is not being produced as the cost is so high that it's just not sustainable using traditional models of press, radio or television" (*Ídem*).

This deficit cannot be ignored by public policy (Radcliffe, 2012) and there may be an important role here for local administrations or intermediate agencies such as the provincial institutions. An example is public news publications. Apart from municipal bulletins, *Lanza* (Ciudad Real) and *Diario de Teruel* are provincial publications run by entities linked to their respective local councils. The presence or absence of media that cater for these local communities, constitutes another aspect of the demographic challenge and an area for exploration which affects even countries with highly divergent media consumption. Whether it be through public media, the establishment of inter-county work networks or by direct subsidies, there needs to be an urgent reflection into how to encourage the creation of sustainable media to correct such imbalances in a market orientated media system.

As regards the profession, the setting up of the Network of Rural Journalists in 2019 should be mentioned. This was driven by the journalist Manuel Campo Vidal, who in recent years has championed a re-evaluation of the rural world. It gathers together some forty journalists from regions such as Extremadura, Andalusia, Castilla-La Mancha, Castile and León, and Asturias who are committed to the preservation of cultural and natural heritage of the places they live and who propose to showcase rural Spain setting city-to-country and country-to-city perspectives on equal footing.

Finally, regarding public communication, this is usually present in action plans against depopulation, but consideration should be given to whether it is employed in a transversal and strategic manner. As other studies have concluded (Schubert & Wolling, 2017), it is a tool in encouraging involvement with the community which may act as a counterweight to other arguments affecting the intention to abandon one's birthplace, such as, for example, job opportunities or expectations relative to living standards. Carlos Taibo advocates a "a dignification of rural life" (2021: 95), not only returning to the traditions and knowledge of those places but altering values towards a recuperation of social life, cooperative working or creative leisure time, in detriment to others such as competitiveness or productivity. As mentioned above, the FEMP (2017) proposes the development of territorial communication strategies, informing of the competitive, social and economic advantages of rural areas. However, one of the risks is that communication dynamics end up being limited to policies of the mere communicating of the results of rural development programs. An example is to be found in communication on demographic decline by the local governments in Sweden and Germany, where pragmatic questions about grants and projects predominate over arguments favouring public debate in the long term (Syssner & Siebert, 2020).

6. Conclusions

As an object of study, depopulation has been approached chiefly from geography, anthropology and sociology as well as from the design of public policy (Moyano Estrada, 2020). However, as it has become a collective challenge and problem for the whole country, it defends and, at the same time, extends interest into other areas of science such as communication. Moreover, there is perceptible attention from other areas on analysis of media discourse concerning demographic phenomena in general (Domingo, 2018) and on depopulation and rurality in particular (Ginés Sánchez & Querol Vicente, 2019).

A first finding of the mapping performed is that the scientific output on the issue in the discipline of communication is recent, having taken place basically over the last two decades and also that it is disperse, in the form of international, and to a lesser degree, Spanish, case studies. The emerging character of the object of study and the disparity of the studies can be seen in the absence of a common theoretical paradigm or of a pre-eminent focus. Nevertheless, the studies consulted have shone a light on the importance of the media, both as generators of discursive frames and as elements favouring cohesion and encouraging the involvement of members of a community These two aspects are substantial when turning a critical eye to public policy and to the design of strategies which try to face up to the challenge of depopulation in Spain.

On detecting this vacuum, this paper proposes several lines of research which may offer a deeper understanding of a complex phenomenon, considering not only its demographic dimension but the sociocultural as well. Firstly, it is important to analyse the news discourse to observe which are the relevant public voices and how, by the use of frames (López Aspeitia, 2018), the question is being discussed. For example, it will be important to look into the chronology of the tags utilised in Spain –depopulation, demographic challenge, empty Spain, Spain emptied– and the role that this strategy of symbolic condensation has had in political and public mobilization on becoming commonplace.

Apart from the semantic categorisation of the problem, one can consider what affective and emotional meanings derive from forging an identity rooted in or connected to a depopulated zone, how much does it work as an instrument of self and external recognition and identification, a socio cultural and political identity with performative effects which operate with a certain degree of independence with respect to the specific demographic conditions. Along these lines, the concept of a "shadow landscape" (Bryant, Paniagua & Kizos, 2011) alludes to the cultures of depopulation, paying attention to material and discursive aspects which this may suppose for persons who inhabit traditionally depopulated areas, zones which have experienced a situation of cultural margination. It is however fundamental not to apply simplified theoretical recipes as, at the same time, rural spaces display great internal transgression and complexity. Production of depopulated rurality is fruit of a fluid, complex and rational process, not only as regards urbanity, but in many dimensions (Andersson, 2019), experiences and cultures which define rurality –and, in consequence, depopulation– as a culture or field of experiences (Bryant, Paniagua, & Kizos, 2011).

Another line to explore is related to journalists as message producers. To avoid stereotyping and simplification in portraits of depopulated areas, work is necessary on sensitivity, so that reporters do not fall into clichés (Querol Vicente *et al.*, 2019), as well as "adding greater and intrinsic, first-hand knowledge, of the demographic reality" (De Sola, 2021: 830).

Lastly, another point of interest are the effects on the population of the disappearance of hyperlocal media which gives rise to "media deserts" (Ramos, 2020) and the gaps this supposes in terms of local information. Consumption and practices related to

technology or with social networks open new ways to inter-relate with the community. One example is the WhatsApp groups shared between all the inhabitants of a village. Such new dynamics represent an opportunity to look at the inter-relation between communicative, technological and geographical processes. However, while the information needs of practical utility are covered by these new platforms, the fact that a medium exists in these places may also activate emotional mechanisms that connect with the desire of these population centres to avoid becoming irrelevant.

In summary, the mapping does not identify interdisciplinary or specific theoretical or methodological perspectives that define an area of interest, nor an epistemological approach that covers the spatial dimension of communication idiosyncratically. In its place, among the few references found, conventional techniques for the analysis of media discourse are prevalent, here applied to representations of depopulation and the study of the structure of media in the areas of lower population density.

Just like media narratives, academia needs fluid visions which incorporate multidisciplinary perspectives to cover the phenomenon. Given that there is a sparsely explored space and a clearly defined challenge in the public space, pertinent and adequate theoretical-methodological tools are called for, not only confined to case studies or particular projects, but capable of –over the medium– and long –term– offering answers that promote discussion of the findings on communication with other disciplines and which allow us to deepen our knowledge of the interdependence between mediatization and depopulation.

7. Acknowledgements

Article translated into English by Brian O'Halloran.

8. Specific contribution of each author

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Discussion & Conclusions	Belén Galletero-Campos and Vanesa Saiz Echezarreta
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