





# Perceptions and participation in community radio stations in Nariño-Colombia

## Percepciones y participación en emisoras de radio comunitaria en Nariño-Colombia

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### ABSTRACT

This work investigates the relationships between community radio and their audiences in the Department of Nariño, Colombia, considering Latin American and European experiences, and participation as a key element for social sustainability. The aim is to investigate whether the participation of citizens in the production, diffusion and radio management has been supported or not. Methodologically, we follow a mixed design that combined the results of two questionnaires: one, applied to 632 people from eleven municipalities; and the second, to eleven directors of communal stations. This was complemented with information provided by eleven groups composed of radio broadcasters, publishers and producers. One key finding within the audiences is that they recognize a radio station as a tool to enhance socio-cultural dynamics in the region. As to the directors of stations, it was found that they didn't encourage active participation with communities. It seems that the absence of active and critical participation on the part of the audiences is due to an organizational and radio production model that mirrors the commercial one. In conclusion, these factors have limited the construction of democratic relations between communal broadcasters and their audiences; and especially, reduced the possibilities for citizens to participate as valid interlocutors in a local communicational project.

### RESUMEN

El presente trabajo indaga sobre las relaciones entre las emisoras comunitarias y sus audiencias, en el Departamento de Nariño en Colombia, en el contexto de experiencias latinoamericanas y europeas, desde una perspectiva de participación, como elemento clave para la sostenibilidad social. Interesa observar cómo los ciudadanos se han propiciado o no de la producción, difusión y gestión radiofónica. Metodológicamente se trabajó desde un diseño mixto que trianguló los resultados de dos cuestionarios: uno, aplicado a una muestra de 632 personas de once municipios, y otro, a once directores de emisoras comunitarias. Esto se complementó con la información de once grupos focales integrados por locutores, editores y realizadores de radio. Uno de los hallazgos más relevantes, en las audiencias, fue el reconocer la emisora como un medio que puede potenciar dinámicas socioculturales en la región. Por su parte, en los directores, se encontró que han agenciado incipientes procesos de participación con las comunidades. Se infiere que existe una deficiente capacidad reflexiva y crítica en las audiencias, esto debido a que la mayoría de emisoras han adoptado el modelo organizativo y de producción de la radio comercial. Se concluye que estos factores han afectado la construcción de relaciones democráticas entre las audiencias y las emisoras comunitarias, y en especial, las posibilidades de participación de los ciudadanos como interlocutores válidos en un proyecto comunicativo.

### KEYWORDS | PALABRAS CLAVE

Community radio, communicative democracy, alternative media, participatory communication, active audiences, communicative citizenship, media access, social sustainability.

Radio comunitaria, democracia comunicativa, medios alternativos, comunicación participativa, audiencias activas, ciudadanía comunicativa, acceso a medios, sostenibilidad social.



## 1. Introduction

With technological advances, access to media information is increasingly simple, versatile and interactive. It is therefore becoming less relevant to talk about audiences from the media singularity and the polarity of actors in the informational model. In recent years, citizens, converted into audiences, participate in intensive exchanges and complex media relations through personalized virtual devices and other digital resources. A huge cluster of massive information is available that is getting closer to our intimate spaces every day, while the intimate has densified the massive scenarios of interactions. Media, mediations and mediators tend to confuse their places of enunciation, to understand each other and look for a new meaning. It is therefore necessary to investigate the relations between media and audiences. This is because of the doubts raised about themselves “Has it finished?... are the audience’s time finishing?” (Orozco, Navarro, & García, 2012: 68), or perhaps its existence is an artifice that is part of the logic of the market of information and publicity (Castells, 2011).

At the dawn of democratic contexts of information and communication, Cloutier (1973) concerned himself with the EMIREC, a term that was retaken and worked by Latin American communication researchers (Kaplún, 1997; Beltrán, 1981) to name a two-way dialogue function between emitters and receivers. Then the tension between producers and consumers was transformed, and more prominence was given to the audience. That is why they created qualifiers as active and passive audiences (Medina, Tamayo, & Rojas, 2010), Critical audiences (Camacho, 2005) and creative audiences (Talens, 2011); and in recent times, with the omnipresence of the Internet and social networks, the notion of prosumers is imposed. This was initially worked by Toffler and McLuhan (Sánchez & Contreras, 2012), where audiences are considered to be producers and consumers of media content at the same time.

At the heart of these tensions has been the ideal for democratizing the word, media and communications with the idea that it would encourage a more democratic society (Beltrán, 2016; López, 2005) from a Latin American perspective. Also some experiences in community media in Europe and Latin America (Martínez, Mayoke, & Tamarit, 2012) coincide in the appropriation of media and communicative processes achieved by experiences of communities, beyond legal recognition. In this sense, initiatives of the community, free and university media in Spain are highlighted (Collado, 2008). These are motivated by social movements, non-profit organizations, and from an inclusive radio approach (García, 2017), constituting what has been called the third Sector of communication in France and Spain (Ortiz, 2014), which also highlights experiences of university radios (Aguaded & Martín-Pena, 2014).

Parallel to these processes, a hegemony has been developing among the mercantile logic of the mass media and the global technological developments (Martín-Barbero, 2000) that have transformed this ideal in local versions of radio production where they articulate, indiscriminately, elements of the commercial media with their own cultural expressions and contents. Recent audience studies seem to be located in the conditions of a globalized, convergent, interconnected and trans mediated world (Lazo & Gabelas, 2016; Padilla & al., 2011), which shows how citizens are more active in their use of technologies. Bonilla believes that many of these studies have lost their political dimension when they stop seeing audiences as interlocutors and understand them as media receivers (2011). Thus, Padilla discusses the differences between being citizens and being audiences in a relationship charged by a mediated, political public sphere, and said author concludes that audiences tend to orient their media practices more towards communities of belonging and less towards political communities (2012). Other reviews distinguish between traditional audiences, social audiences and prosumers (Quintas & Gonzalez, 2014).

The emergence of community radio in Colombia has been linked to a set of political conditions such as the transformation and adoption of a new Political Constitution in the year 1991. Additional factors are related to the worsening of the armed social conflict, characterized as long-standing violence and dating from the beginning of the narco-trafficking phenomenon (Osse, 2015).

In the context of the second half of the end of the twentieth century, we see the appearance of the first regulations on community radio and those of public interest. From this moment on, the licenses for a first group of 564 community-based broadcasters are gestated. These were born with little institutional support and an incipient orientation to materialize their social function.

It is significant that the description of the community remains on a typology of radio stations legally recognised by the government of Colombia. Firstly, this is because it establishes a difference with private commercial radio stations in terms of their nature and mission objectives. Secondly, this was done because the opportunity to consolidate democratic processes of information and communication from the local is still latent.

The Ministry of Information and Communications Technologies of Colombia conceives community Sound Broadcasting as: a participatory and pluralistic public service, aimed at satisfying the needs of communication in the municipality or coverage area, facilitating the exercise of the right to information and the participation of its inhabitants through radio programs that promote social development, peaceful coexistence, democratic values, the construction of citizenship and the strengthening of cultural and social identities (Min TIC, 2017).

Thus this ministry does not carry out processes of accompaniment or follow-up; rather it only limits its functions to demand the fulfillment of technical and legal requirements. Meanwhile the Ministry of Culture focuses its efforts on the promotion of the production of contents through the Direction of Communications. And so, the idea of building democratic communication projects remains as a basis for the management of participatory practices from the plurality of their expressions and in articulation with those who lead media and local experiences, so that they can guarantee real possibilities of expression, dialogue, exchange and discussion of content, produced and disseminated, from the needs and aspirations of the citizens.

## 2. Material and methods

This article derives from the project “Challenges and limitation of sustainability that faced the community broadcasters affiliated to the Sindamanoy network of the Department of Nariño”, executed in agreement between the Mariana University and the UNAD during the years 2014 to 2016.

Based on the information collected, results are presented that respond to the objective of identifying the perceptions, preferences and needs of audience participation in community broadcasters. This objective is aimed at establishing how the role of audiences in social sustainability affects, as one of the key dimensions, the integral sustainability of these radio stations (Gumucio-Dagron, 2005). It is supposed that a community radio station is consolidated if the citizens, as audiences, validate, legitimize and contribute to the local communicative project.

The study was conceived from a mixed design (Creswell, 2013; Greene, 2006) based on a sample of 632 people surveyed and eleven directors of community stations affiliated to the Sindamanoy network of the Department of Nariño, Colombia. This was complemented by a simultaneous triangulation (Morse, 1991). This was the result of eleven focal groups, composed of radio broadcasters and radio producers, whose perceptions were consolidated by a SWOT matrix (Martínez & Ortega, 2016), in the first phase of the project.

The Department of Nariño is located in the south of Colombia on the border with Ecuador. Most of its population consists of small landholding farmings integrated by indigenous people, black communities and peasants. For the study, the community radio stations of the municipalities of Pupiales, Sandoná, Leiva, Mallama, Consacá, San Lorenzo, Gualmatán, Samaniego, Guaitarilla, Tuquerres and Funes were selected. The selection was made on the basis of reciprocity criteria, between researchers and investigated people, from a sense of trust, understanding, agreement and Sensibility (Sandín, 2000); A second criterion was the geographical location of the radio stations; and a third criterion took into account its active link to the network of broadcasters. The population of the audience was formed by men and women over 14 years-old who met the requirements of: 1) To have lived the last three years in one of the selected municipalities; 2) to have been a listener to one of the selected stations, thus we are within a group of active audiences of the radio stations (Medina, Tamayo, & Rojas, 2010). The sample design was organized by conglomerates equivalent to 0.3 of the population; and the selection was made by equal quotas of gender in each municipality. For the application of the survey, we opted for a simple random sampling system, depleting the two above-mentioned requirements. The surveys were applied between May 2014 and

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February 2015 at the head of each municipality and its environs, through direct interview. The gathering of information was achieved with the support of a team of pollsters, previously trained, and that gave the information for tabulation and analysis. The pollsters adopted the strategy of a verbal informed consent prior to each interview.

The questionnaire consisted of 26 questions that were divided into two large groups: from question 1 to 8, demographically characterized to the population; from 9 onwards, priority was given to the category of social sustainability, namely the relationship between community radio stations and their audiences. To classify or group the type of questions, the following categories were used: access to the medium; media consumption frequencies; reception and programming preferences; knowledge about the community environment and participation in the Community radio station. The information was organized in a tabulation and analysis matrix. This was done with the support of the SPSS program in frequency tables. The descriptive analysis was made based on frequencies of response options that were consolidated in percentages compared to the inside of each question, which prioritized those that allowed one to respond to the objective of this work.

### 3. Analysis and results

Based on the proposed objective, the most relevant questions were prioritized for the categories of media perceptions, consumer preferences and citizen participation, which sought to identify a media trend in each of the responses in global percentages of all radio stations.

#### 3.1. Media perceptions

The perceptions of citizens on an informative medium, as audiences, allow us to identify possible misconceptions related to their organisational nature, the meaning of their contents and the forms of relationship with society. Figure 1 shows citizens' perception of the ideal nature of a community broadcaster. A 42.5% defines it as one that allows community participation, followed by a 35.3% that disseminates local interest information. Thirdly with 10.5% is the idea that has a varied programming. Two ratings below 5% consider that a community station is an information company or a media that makes social and institutional campaigns. Only 1.9% consider that it does not have an advertising pattern.

Another perception makes reference to the programming of the community radio medium. This emphasizes a trend of 53% that considers it varied, followed by a 26.7% that think it is interesting. The lowest values show that a 0.8% qualifies it unimportant. The perception of a varied and interesting programming gives community broadcasters an important recognition as a medium of local information, while only 0.9% think it is educational.

#### 3.2. Consumption preferences

The temporal frequency of citizens' media consumption, as shown in Figure 2, establishes that the radio continues to have a high daily preference (84.1%) competing very closely with television (82.4%), while the Internet occupies a third position (27%), and the written press (5.5%) is relegated. These results are related to two associated factors: 1) easy access and 2) listening as a historical-cultural practice. The internet is enjoying an emerging trend because of the

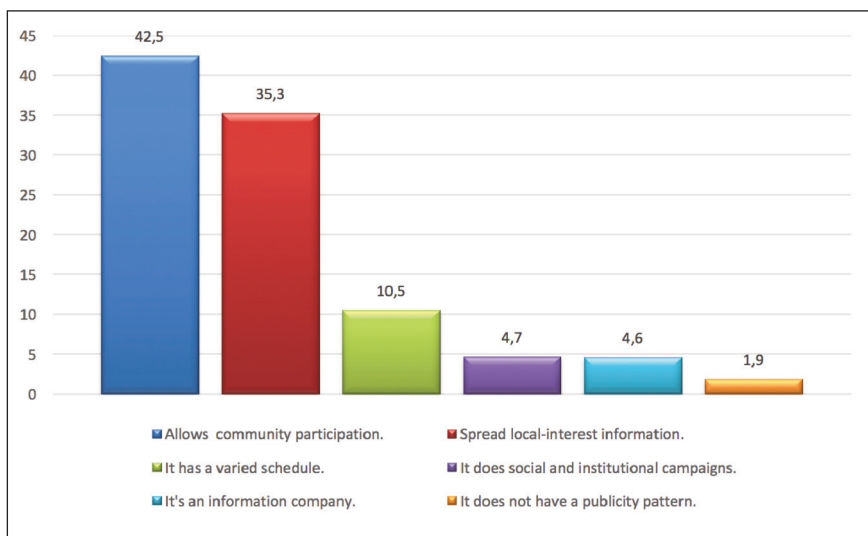


Figure 1. What defines a community station.

expansive market of mobile and Internet services, along with the promotion of government programs for digital modernization in educational institutions and local government. The written press is declining because of the few printed copies that are distributed in municipal offices and public institutions of the municipalities. This contributes

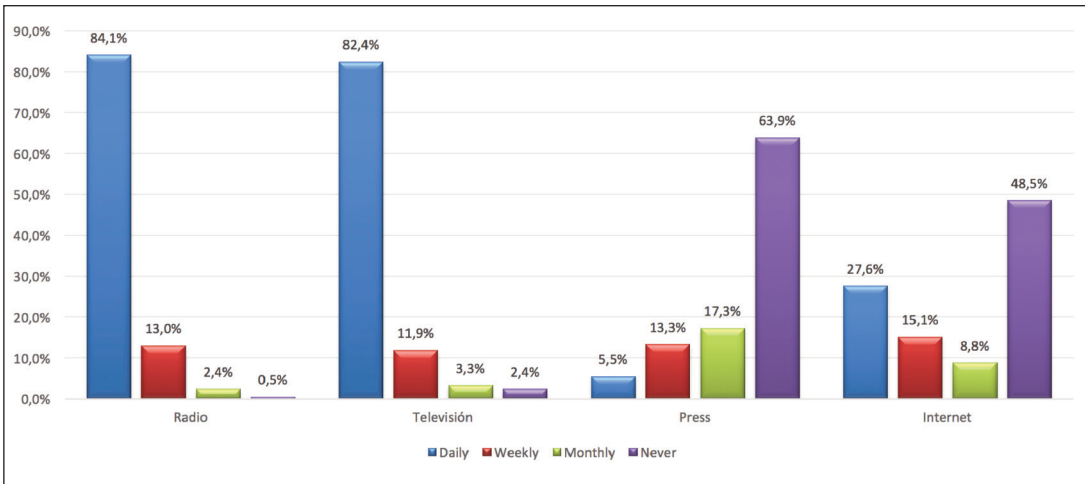


Figure 2. Frequency of media consumption.

to the fact that more and more people access the websites of the big newspapers, radio and television newscasts.

In addition, a second question indicates that 40.3% of the people listen to the community radio station between seven and ten in the morning. After this time, the average percentage of listeners is between 16.7% and 18.4%. Most community broadcasters only transmit up to six or seven in the afternoon.

This emission strip corresponds to the work activities of many people in the countryside whose day begins between six and seven in the morning and ends between five and six in the afternoon.

Reasons underlying the consumption of community radio stations: it was possible to demonstrate, in Figure 3, that the highest percentage of respondents (30.9%) do so by musical programming; followed by a (24%) for the diversity of programming; and a third group (16.4%) prefers it because it is part of the community and can participate in it. This trend was observed in the radio stations of Sandoná, Gualmatán, Guatarilla and San Lorenzo, where their directors have encouraged methods of bringing people closer to the broadcaster's programs. An intermediate group

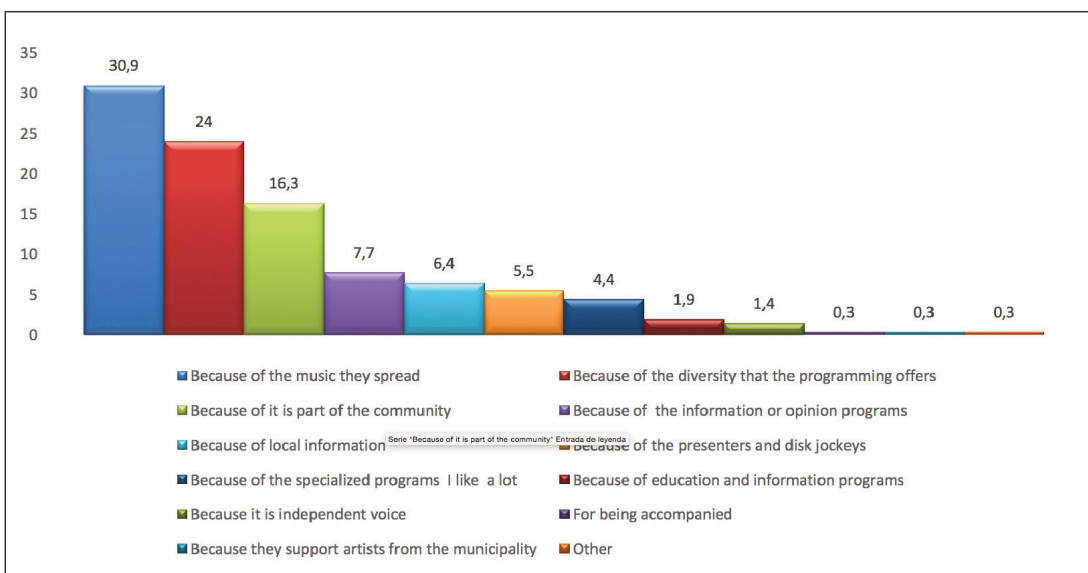


Figure 3. Reasons for listening to the community radio station.

of listeners appears (between 4.4% and 7.7%) whose motivation is located in programs of information, opinion and of specialized subjects, with the exception of another group that, although they are within this percentage range, their option is inclined towards the presenters and disk jockeys.

### 3.3. Citizen participation

Survey respondents were asked about the reasons why they had contacted the station. Figure 4 shows that 46.6% did it to request a song, then 9.4% to comment on a topic. This is significant in a group of community broadcasters where the production of informative and opinion programs is scarce. There are other reasons (8.9%) that are not clear according to the proposed response option. The options for: Making a suggestion, a complaint, a critique of the broadcaster, and participating in a debate, were below 4.1%. This demonstrates the precarious access that citizens have to the community media to express their critical opinions, grievances and disagreements freely.

In the survey applied to the directors, they consider that asking for a song constitutes an effective form of participation in the radio station. This is corroborated with (93%) of answers for Yes, against 7% No, in the option by telephone calls as a way to participate with the station.

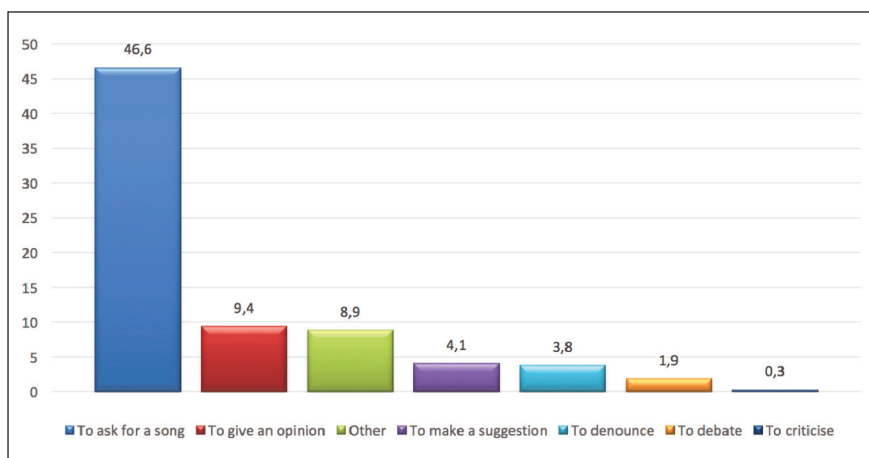


Figure 4. Reasons for contact with the station.

Something similar

happens with letters written with (80%) positive; and emails, chat, Facebook and Twitter with (73%). The lower percentages (60%) are in the participation in spaces of opinion and meetings with the work team of the station. This reflects a precarious opening for the organization of broadcasters to link citizens as active audiences in the production of programmes or in the management of other activities. It is clear that the directors and owners mark a clear distance with their audiences, similar to the traditional commercial radio model.

On the other hand, Figure 5 consolidates citizens' responses to their possible participation in activities convened or organized by community broadcasters in the last year. Here it was evidenced that 62.2% had not participated in any activity. A second group of replies (between 5.7% and 7.5%) are related to participation in: bazaars, fairs or community or municipal festivals; sports, religious activities, environmental campaigns, cleanliness and public areas.

In accordance with the consultation of the directors and the discussion groups, many of these activities have been promoted by local institutions and organizations with the support of the broadcaster in its dissemination and promotion. The lowest percentages (less than 2.8%) were obtained in: cultural activities, control and monitoring, campaigns in critical situations or catastrophes, radio workshops and protests or mobilizations. These results were because the broadcaster never promoted this type of activity, and only in a small proportion of them were carried out.

It was also asked if citizens would be interested in participating in a listeners' club. It was found that 45.3% would be willing, while 54.7% responded negatively. One last question was to establish whether citizens would be willing to support the community broadcaster in some way, and it was found that 36.1% opted for any of the above, 27.6% stated that it would do with voluntary work, 18.1% proposes programs, while only 1.1% would be willing to link directly to the radio station's team. It is inferred from this that citizens do not accept the radio station as their own, and therefore they do not express a clear desire to support it. However, the second and third highest percentage, show a favorable tendency to want to support the radio station explicitly and directly, engaging in its dynamics of production of content, which confirms the need and opportunity to strengthen actions for promoting citizen participation in the community radio stations.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

In 1994, for the first time the government of Colombia opened the possibility of legally recognizing the community broadcasters as an initiative that opened to a local radio conceived and produced from the communities. Twenty years after there are few studies in Colombia that realize what happened to these experiences, therefore, it is necessary to ask about their scope and limitations. This is important because of the relationship they have maintained with their audiences, and by how this relationship has allowed or not to set up a social sustainability.

At first glance, citizens associate community radio with two areas: participatory and dissemination of local information, and especially with the media visibility of microsocioal life in the village, the countryside or the neighborhood. The participatory appears more as an ideal than as a fact. To the directors the sense of these community radio stations is assumed as the dissemination of local information. This is an appreciation that the discussion groups also share. Everyone agrees with the idea that the community radio station is the place where fragments of local history are shared with people and institutions are known to each other. The community radio station is considered to be a close and a very emotional medium.

Although for the citizens there is a collective feeling to reassess the local as a cultural and emotive place to find themselves, this does not correspond with the organizational dynamics and programming of the radio stations. The feeling of valuation by the local is closer to identifying with aesthetic-cultural and territorial-institutional symbols than with political and social situations arisen from the needs and problems felt by the citizens. Perceptions of what defines a community radio station show a paradox between local, as the place that includes them socially and culturally; and the radio station, as a space that excludes community participation, but at the same time it is useful to the facts of community life.

In different ways, each one of the community radio stations has configured a sense of territorial belonging expressed in the valuation of the medium as relatively own and close to its realities. Beyond being considered a business organization it conceives as a space that disseminates, sporadically, some narratives of local life. Paradoxically, this perception of the radio station as an information company does not manage to be general in the citizens, while for directors and owners, the issue of economic sustainability and consolidate it as a company, is one of its main concerns. The production teams of community broadcasters, four to seven people, are linked to low salaries or voluntarily. The historical cause of the privatization of many of these community radio stations in Colombia is largely due to the way the Ministry of Communications allocated licensing concessions. The majority were given to individuals or families who, as part of a social organization, assumed the representativeness of the communities of a municipality and appropriated the radio station as a private medium.

Citizens prefer to listen to community broadcasters for their musical programming and some informative programs from early hours of the day. Nevertheless, in municipalities in the south and the center of the department

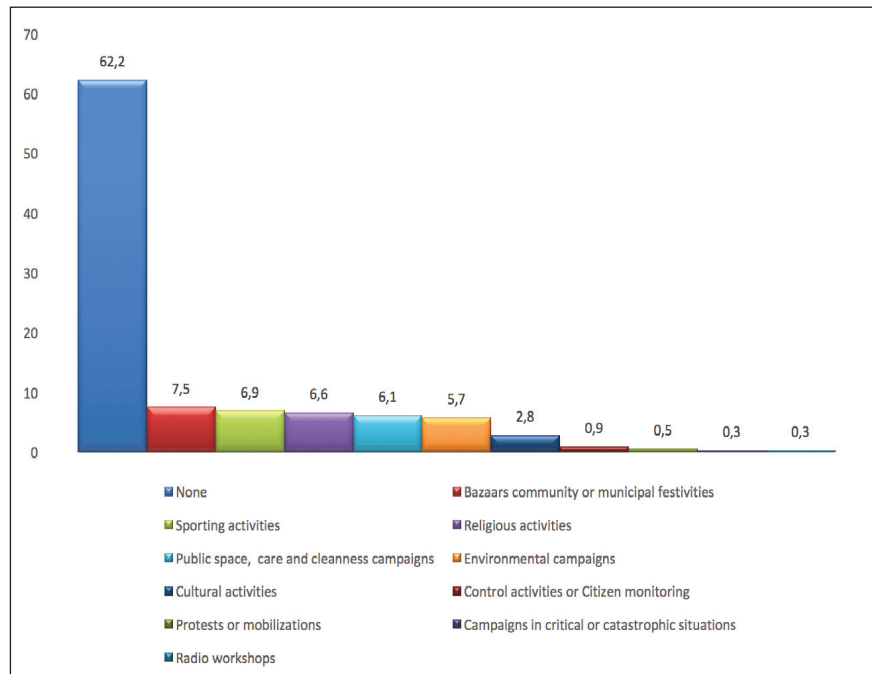


Figure 5. Activities promoted by the station.

have the option of listening to other radio stations of regional coverage. The musical preference, as a radio reception practice, is based on the way in which the listeners have traditionally been constituted in Colombia. The notion of the tradition of radio-listening comes very deliberately as a variable of great influence in the historical-cultural formation of the Colombian citizens, especially those who inhabit the rural sectors. Many learned to listen to the radio of the commercial models. It has built a collective imagination that considers as a "good radio station" to the one that offers a commercial music programming that the listeners like. Thus the musical genre has become the guideline for greater consumption of the commercial radio stations, which has been imitated by the community members.

This referential effect or mirror action of the commercial model arose from the granting of the licenses of the Community stations to people and organizations. Their knowledge in production of radio programs was based on the commercial radio stations, since the scarce experiences of popular and alternative media in Latin America managed to be significant but invisible; Many were reviewed by academics and social organizations, but in essence they do not transcended their political sense to the community broadcasters in Colombia. This is explained by the global and neoliberal sociopolitical dynamics that were undermining critical thinking and liberal speeches that inspired social movements at the end of the cold war and throughout the late twentieth century.

Of the first radio speakers, journalists and radio producers in Colombia, including the community radio stations started as empirical, some had secondary school education. Some were technicians or teachers, and many of them learned the formats and ways of making the commercial radio. Some risked producing information, live broadcasts of sporting and cultural events, and a few explored the magazine format. The radio producers of the community radio were adjusting their formats, schedules and contents from the early morning to late afternoon, in such a way that they avoided the strong and expansive competition with the national channels of the commercial television, for many years they were positioned from noon the night. This strategy has enabled community broadcasters to achieve partial social sustainability with their audiences through a musical, informative, and little local-opinion program, implying that citizens choose to combine their preferences media consumption between local radio and national television.

The results make it possible to observe that the citizens participate passively in the station, which agrees with Ramírez (2014:122) in Chile, and García & Ávila (2009) in Ecuador, although there are stations in Nariño whose directors make efforts to promote participatory processes with their audience (Martínez & Ortega, 2017: 19). The audiences of the community stations in Nariño have gradually been assuming the dynamics of social audiences due to the gradual use of social networks to interact with the radio station. Therefore, efforts are required to foster spaces and dynamics whereby listeners are assumed as prosumers of community radio.

The community radio stations in Nariño do not achieve a local leadership that summons other social or cultural activities other than the ones of its programming. That is because of the absence of a political-social communication project that allows the articulation of efforts between those who run the radio stations and the organized communities. The incipient participation of the communities in these radio stations is due to four factors: first of all, to the connotation of private means as their directors and owners have conceived; Secondly, to the adoption of the commercial model in its organization and programming; Thirdly, by the incipient formation of citizens as radio producers and critical audiences; and fourthly, the lack of accompaniment mechanisms, monitoring and control over the mission of community radio stations.

The above questioned the appropriation of citizens with their community radio station, particularly when they were asked on how they would be willing to support or to link with it. Although these percentages are low, they become an opening opportunity to articulate and advance in the missionary spirit of community radio. This indicates that there is a lot of potential citizens who would be willing to participate and strengthen their programming from the sociocultural realities. This environment of estrangement between those who run the community stations in Nariño and their audiences has generated a relationship in which the citizens are excluded and the right to free expression is denied.

It is concluded that the community radio stations investigated have potential audiences (Medina, Tamayo, & Rojas, 2010) that have not been sufficiently used as interlocutors, producers and collaborators within a communicative project. This is due to the little community sense which the information practices and the social relations between the environment and the citizens have been assumed. On the other hand, there is also the lack of interest of the Colombian Government, in particular the Ministry of Information and Communications technologies, for the issues of social participation and democratization of the community media and citizens. This situation is similar to



what happened in Argentina with the community broadcasters within the policies of communication and culture (Linares & al., 2017), as evidenced in the case of this study.

A second conclusion reveals how none of the community broadcasters has a community communicative project built collectively and from the needs of its citizens. This is owed to the improvisation of activities and short-term planning. A factor of great incidence, observed in the responses of directors and discussion groups, this organizational vertical scheme where decisions are concentrated in the head of a director (as the owner of the medium) and in other cases on the board of Directors, which coincides with the Mora study (2011).

A third conclusion of this work shows that, from the organizations and managers of the community broadcasters, a participation of citizens in their programming is not promoted, nor do they lead other social or community activities, which it generates a double relationship: on one side of proximity as listeners in front of its musical programming; and on the other hand distance in terms of actions of participation and social appropriation of the medium, conclusion that agrees with Rodríguez in relation to the lack of participation in the informative discourse of the community radio (2012). This confirms the fact that community broadcasters continue to orient themselves with a sense of private organization. This coincides with Padilla (2012), about the incipient link between being audiences and being citizens. Thus, the community on the radio is adopted as a label (Talens, 2011) little linked with its democratic, participatory and inclusive sense; In recent years, some Latin American countries have renewed their policy frameworks and communication policies (Sosa, 2016) and unequal advances in legislation and the right to communication (Gómez & Agerre, 2009); however, in Colombia there is still an outstanding profound change in this direction.

It is clear that the political commitment between the community and the citizen remains a pending issue in the radio stations investigated, which a structure of organization and production taken of the commercial reference is adopted, with some attempts to incorporate contents of the culture and events of local life. Communicative citizenship is not a practice of political significance through these community media (Rodríguez, 2009:18), nor does it recognize its inhabitants as interlocutors in the relation medium – audiences, which coincides with the study of Álvarez (2014) on the community radio stations in Valle de Aburra in the department of Antioquia in Colombia. The community broadcasters in this region of Colombia go through a moment of relative stagnation and redefinition of their political and social horizon. Recently they have advanced in the consolidation of the Sindamanoy network community radio stations of Nariño where they share democratizing, participatory and collective-building principles that try to materialize by articulating actions with the Communication System for Peace (SIPAZ) in Colombia, and AMARC at the global level.

### Funding agency

Interinstitutional cooperation agreement signed between the Mariana University (UNIMAR) and Open University of Colombia (UNAD) for the development of the research project "Challenges and limitations of sustainability facing the community broadcasters affiliated to the Sindamanoy network of the Department of Nariño", through the research groups "Desarrollo Humano y Social" from UNIMAR and "Fisura" from UNAD.

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