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## Accountability instruments in Ecuador's social media. Perceptions of journalists and citizens

### *Instrumentos de rendición de cuentas en los medios de comunicación social de Ecuador. Percepciones de periodistas y ciudadanía*

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#### Abstract

Media accountability is a mechanism for transparency and proximity to audiences, enhancing participation, plurality, and diversity; it is based on ethics and is complemented by standards to ensure co-regulatory models. This research employs the typology of instruments proposed in the MediaACES project to establish the perception of journalists and Ecuadorian citizens on the instruments of accountability promoted internally and externally to the media. The analysis is descriptive and relational, using qualitative and quantitative methodology by way of surveys and a virtual discussion forum. The most highly appreciated accountability instruments are the traditional ones external to the media companies in terms of self-regulation, participation and transparency; there is an intention to use those well-known mechanisms through which the media can demonstrate their good practice; there is also evidence of a strong influence of the Participation Law with respect to accountability, which is conceived as a legal duty, determined by what happened with the State Department of Communication during the government of President Rafael Correa.

#### Keywords

citizenship; journalistic ethics; media; journalism; regulation; accountability

#### Resumen

La rendición de cuentas de los medios de comunicación constituye en un mecanismo de transparencia y proximidad con las audiencias para avanzar hacia la participación, pluralidad y diversidad, se sustenta en la ética y se complementa con normas para procurar modelos de corregulación. La presente investigación toma la tipología de instrumentos propuesta en el proyecto MediaACES para establecer la percepción de los periodistas y los ciudadanos ecuatorianos sobre los instrumentos de rendición de cuentas impulsados de forma interna y externa a los medios de comunicación social. El análisis es de tipo descriptivo y relacional, se emplea metodología cualitativa y cuantitativa a través de encuestas y un foro de discusión virtual. Los instrumentos de rendición de cuentas más apreciados son los tradicionales externos a las empresas de medios tanto en autorregulación, participación y transparencia, se aprecia la intención de emplear aquellos mecanismos de amplio conocimiento a través de los cuales los medios pueden mostrar sus buenas prácticas, se evidencia además una fuerte impregnación de la Ley de Participación respecto a la rendición de cuentas, se la concibe como un deber legal, en ello influye lo sucedido con la Superintendencia de Comunicación durante el gobierno del presidente Rafael Correa.

#### Palabras clave

ciudadanía; ética periodística; medios; periodismo; regulación; rendición de cuentas

## 1. Introduction

Media accountability refers to a direct relationship between media organizations and their audiences that involves transparency of media ownership, recognition of the demands of the community to achieve pluralism, and the media's contribution to the public opinion as a condition of democracy.

Accountability is "the willingness of media organizations to be held accountable to society for the activities they carry out" (Mauri-Ríos and Ramon-Vegas, 2015: 381). In similar terms, Rojas-Torrijos and Ramon Vega point out that accountability implies the "commitment of the media to be held accountable to society for their professional practice" (2017: 916). In addition, accountability is "an issue that worries both journalists and audiences" (Chaparro-Domínguez, Suárez-Villegas and Rodríguez-Martínez, 2019: 2) because it reflects on their performance and is manifested through quality indicators (Eberwein, Fengler and Karmasin, 2018).

From an individual perspective, media accountability should be a guiding light in the practice of information professionals (Christians et al., 2009). It occurs when journalists "take responsibility for the quality and consequences of their publications, orient themselves to audiences and others affected, and respond to their expectations and those of society at large" (McQuail, 2003: 19). As Plaisance points out, "to be held accountable is in fact to be responsible" (2000: 260).

Faced with the crisis of trust and credibility caused by phenomena such as inadequate balances in media ownership, media concentration, manipulation of facts enabled by audiences' weak media literacy and disinformation; as well as changes in journalistic dynamics that have been triggered by technological transformations "that affect all phases of the news-making process" (Narberhaus, Ramon-Vegas and Perales García, 2021: 38), accountability stands as a mechanism to recover the prestige of journalism (Bertrand, 2018) and trust in the media, which "is linked to the way in which the public sees political institutions" (Hanitzsch, Van Dalen and Steindl, 2018: 19).

Accountability has vertical and horizontal dimensions (O'Donnell, 1998). The horizontal dimension refers to the mutual inspection between individual powers (a system of checks and balances), while the vertical dimension involves external instances, such as elections, social mobilisations and the exercise of the freedom of the press. In a democracy, accountability can be exercised vertically by society and the media through their monitoring role (Fox, 2015; Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes, 2012).

To assess the relevance of accountability in the context of democracy, it should be noted that the monitoring of the functioning of the media is different from that of other types of companies, particularly due to the ideological load of the messages the media disseminate and its impact on public opinion. The information the media disseminate or suppress will have an impact on the public sphere, the space where citizens "can gather and unite freely and express and publicise their opinions freely" (Habermas, 2006: 103), which justifies the existence of regulatory mechanisms and institutions.

The regulation of the media can be exercised by informal institutions (accountability instruments) and formal mechanisms (laws) (Almirón, Narberhaus and Mauri, 2016). The first form of regulation is in the hands of media companies themselves, while the second is in the hands of the State. However, there is third form of regulation that consists of co-regulation models set by independent authorities to "ensure the harmonious, impartial and pluralistic functioning of the radio and television broadcasting sector, while respecting broadcasters' editorial freedom and independence" (Salomon, 2016: 52).

The regulation exercised by the State has suffered from political interference and bias. For this reason, broadcasters have proposed plural self-regulation mechanisms "as a defence measure against the potential arbitrary application of the law by State authorities" (Salomon, 2016: 44). Evidence shows that "a high level of independence results in a better performance in the regulated sector" (Andres, Guasch and Lopez, 2008: 2).

The objective of accountability is to "protect and promote freedom of expression", "prevent or limit the harm the media may cause", and "promote positive benefits to society" (McQuail, 1997: 525).

Accountability is based on three fundamental pillars: information transparency, self-regulation, and public participation (Díez-Garrido, Campos-Domínguez and Calvo, 2019; Eberwein et al., 2018; Heikkilä et al., 2012; Ramon-Vegas, Mauri-Ríos and Alcalá-Anguiano, 2016).

Information transparency refers to the willingness of the media to provide "corporate information about themselves, which allows the audience to understand their editorial principles and processes, organisational structure and financial situation" (Ramon-Vegas, Mauri-Ríos and Alcalá-Anguiano, 2016: 103). It can also be understood as the public dissemination of the economic and political ties of media organisations (Heikkilä et al., 2012) and "the interactivity the media maintain with their audience" (Campos-Domínguez and Redondo-García, 2015: 195).

For its part, self-regulation refers to:

the rules and guidelines of conduct that the media and journalists impose on themselves as a commitment to the public, to carry out rigorous, responsible and ethical communication. These norms are translated into instruments created by the media, journalists and journalistic institutions for accountability to the public (Suárez-Villegas et al., 2017).

Finally, participation “encompasses activities that encourage direct contact with the public and facilitate their active participation in the processes of journalistic creation. These formulas involve the creation of instruments that allow this two-way relationship” (Suárez-Villegas, et al., 2017). Citizen participation in the media is implicit in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a feature of the freedom of expression, which seeks to contribute to fair and inclusive societies (Burch, León and Tamayo, 2004).

According to UNESCO, public participation comprises three levels of intervention (Berrigan, 1979; Guzmán, 2013; Rossi, 2012): 1) in the production of messages, 2) in decision-making; and 3) in the formulation of mass communication plans and policies (UNESCO, 1977).

To be precise, the set of documents and mechanisms aimed at ensuring the responsibilities of the media is called accountability instruments (Suárez-Villegas et al., 2019), which “allow the audience to better assess the quality of a journalistic process or product” (Fengler et al., 2015: 21). For Bertrand (2018), media accountability instruments are executed without State intervention, and instead are promoted by the media, journalists and citizens to ensure the responsible behaviour of the media and the quality of their information products.

Media accountability instruments can be internal, executed from within journalistic companies, or external to companies. The latter group of instruments can be divided into established or innovative. However, “established instruments seem insufficient today to face the new challenges arising from the arrival of the Internet and, more specifically, the explosion of social networks” (Herrera-Damas, Maciá Barber and Luengo-Cruz, 2018: 214).

Table 1 presents the typology of media accountability instruments proposed by Ramon, Mauri-Ríos and Díaz-Campo (2020) in the study “accountability instruments promoted by the media: perception of Spanish journalists and citizens”, which is referenced in the work of Narberhaus, Ramon-Vegas and Perales-García (2021) on “Media accountability in the digital age: the view of Catalan journalists and citizens and proposals for action”, which is in turn based on the classifications set by Eberwein et al. (2011). Media accountability instruments are grouped by type, dimension and character.

**Table 1. Accountability instruments**

Typology	Instrument	Dimension	Character
Journalism-internal	Medium's editorial weblogs	Transparency	Innovative
	Corporate information page on Medium's website	Transparency	Innovative
	Ombudsman	Self-regulation	Established
	Ombudsman weblogs	Self-regulation	Innovative
	Style books	Self-regulation	Established
	Journalism criticism in medium's web spaces	Self-regulation	Innovative
	Letters to the editor	Participation	Established
	User comments in medium's news stories	Participation	Innovative
	User comments on social networks	Participation	Innovative
	Correction boxes	Participation	Innovative
Journalism-external	User digital chat boxes and rooms	Participation	Innovative
	User contributions to content creation and review	Participation	Innovative
	Media criticism observatories	Self-regulation	Innovative
	Media journalism in trade journals	Self-regulation	Established
	Scholarly analysis of journalism	Participation	Established
	Opinion polls	Transparency	Established
	Professional colleges, unions or associations	Self-regulation	Established
	Press or audiovisual councils	Self-regulation	Established
	Professional ethics code	Self-regulation	Established
	Training	Self-regulation	Established
Media audience associations	Participación	Established	
Journalists' media criticism blogs	Self-regulation	Innovative	
Media criticism on social networks	Participation	Innovative	
Confidential complaint systems	Participation	Innovative	

Source: Eberwein et al. (2011); Ramon, Mauri-Ríos y Díaz-Campo (2020); Narberhaus, Ramon-Vegas y Perales-García (2021).

Based on the above and given that perceptions of media accountability instruments have been evaluated in autonomous communities and countries, it is of interest to analyse such perceptions among Latin American journalists and citizens, which is one of the research lines of the project titled "Accountability and Journalistic Cultures in Spain. Impact and Proposal of Good Practices in the Spanish Media" (MediaACES).

Media accountability is peculiar in Ecuador, where a public entity was given power to regulate the media and an Organic Law of Participation guarantees citizens' rights to participate in decision-making in public affairs and establishes instances, instruments and procedures of public deliberation between the State and society. This law contemplates mechanisms of social control. Article 88 specifies that citizens "individually or collectively [...] may once a year request accountability to public and private institutions that provide public services and manage public resources [...] as well as media companies" (Registro Oficial, 2011: 27), which conceives "accountability" as compulsory, but also as a product to be disclosed only once a year and not as a process that involves citizens in dialogues with the media.

Moreover, the first provision of the Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador promulgated the creation of the Organic Law on Communication (Ley Orgánica de Comunicación, LOC) (Registro Oficial, 2008) "to develop, protect and regulate, in the administrative field, the exercise of the constitutional rights to communication" (Registro Oficial, 2013: 3). This provision gave way to the creation of the Superintendence of Information and Communication (Supercom), a "technical monitoring, audit, intervention and control body with penalising capacity" (Official Register, 2013: 21).

The purpose of Supercom was to democratise access to information, "and to regulate media content according to public law and common good" (Supercom, 2014: 3). However, Supercom has been criticised for acting as both judge and party in sanctioning processes, as documented in previous studies (Alegria, 2016; Suing and Quezada-Morocho, 2017), for lacking transparent methods for the application of its exams, for exhibiting a presidential character through the appointment of its Superintendent, and for censoring information and causing the closure of media companies. In 2019, the Organic Law on Communication was reformed to abolish Supercom and create the Council for the Regulation, Development and Promotion of Information and Communication, to "promote mechanisms for the media to adopt self-regulation procedures as part of their social responsibility" (Registro Oficial, 2019: 28).

## 1.1 Objective

The objective of this research article is to analyse the media accountability instruments and their acceptance in the Ecuadorian community, in line with the research project "Information pluralism in the digital deliberation era: perceptions of journalists and citizens" (Suárez-Villegas, Rodríguez-Martínez and Ramon-Vegas, 2020), which examined "perceptions of pluralism and, specifically, of transparency and user participation among Spanish journalists and citizens" (Suárez-Villegas et al., 2020: 1).

The main research question is: what is the perception of internal and external media accountability instruments among Ecuadorian journalists and citizens?

The secondary questions are: A) What is the opinion of journalists and citizens regarding established accountability instruments? B) What is the opinion of journalists and citizens regarding innovative accountability tools and the impact of the Internet? C) What is the opinion of journalists and citizens regarding media self-regulation and State regulation of the media? and D) What is the opinion of journalists and citizens regarding citizens' media literacy?

The following research design was used to answer the previous research questions about the preferences of journalists and citizens regarding accountability, state-driven regulation, and their opinions about innovative systems.

## 2. Methods

The research design is descriptive and correlational (Hernández, Fernández and Baptista, 2000), based on a mix-methods approach that combines surveys and an online discussion forum. Findings are achieved through the analysis of "lived experiences, behaviours, as well as social movements, among others" (Strauss and Corbin, 2002: 20). The descriptive scope involves the collection of data that represent the events (Glass and Hopkins, 1984) and allows for the collection of reliable data on the phenomenon under study (Mellinger and Hanson, 2016).

Two surveys were applied to non-probabilistic, convenience samples due to the availability of participants. Convenience samples optimise time and provide information "according to the specific circumstances surrounding the researcher and the subjects or groups under study" (Sandoval, 2002: 124). Non-probabilistic sampling corresponds to the so-called subjective sampling by reasoned decision, where sample units are chosen according to some of their characteristics (Corbetta, 2007), which in the case of the selection of the sample of the first survey was based on their membership to a specific professional field: acting journalists.

The first survey was conducted between 23 and 29 November 2021. It involved 74 journalists living in several cities in Ecuador. Table 2 summarises participants' main data. Information was collected using Google forms. The survey had the participation of more women than men. About 70% of participants have between one and 10 years of experience. More than 50% are between 25 and 34 years of age and reside mainly in La Sierra region of the country. Participants had to meet the profile suggested by Suárez-Villegas, Díaz and Rodríguez (2021) and Weischenberg, Malik and Scholl (2006: 227): a) work for a journalistic media organisation; b) being an active journalist; and c) work full time as journalist or earn 50% or more of their income from journalistic work (including freelancers who meet the above criteria).

**Table 2: Descriptive data of journalists participating in the surveys**

Media	Gender		Years of experience						Total
	Men	Women	< 1	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	> 20	
Radio	7	11	0	7	7	1	1	2	18
Television	7	7	1	5	2	2	2	2	14
Traditional print media	4	5	0	4	2	2	0	1	9
Digital Media	12	13	1	9	10	3	0	2	25
Freelance	3	5	1	2	2	2	0	1	8
Total	33	41	3	27	23	10	3	8	74

Media	Age					Residence			Total
	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	65 +	Coast	Sierra	East	
Radio	0	10	3	2	3	4	14	0	18
Television	1	7	2	4	0	6	8	0	14
Traditional print media	1	4	3	0	1	1	6	2	9
Digital Media	3	15	5	1	1	7	15	3	25
Freelance	1	4	2	1	0	3	3	2	8
Total	6	40	15	8	5	21	46	7	74

Source: Authors' own creation.

The second survey was applied between 17 and 28 January 2022, to people residing in several regions of Ecuador. The questionnaire was designed with Google forms. It was answered by 91 people, most of them university students of social communication. Participants were recruited by means of snowball sampling. As Table 3 shows, the sample was mostly composed of female students (70%) aged 18 to 24.

**Table 3: Descriptive data of citizens participating in the surveys**

Occupation	Age				Gender		Residence			Total
	18-24	25-34	35-44	65 +	Men	Women	Cost	Sierra	East	
Public company employee	3	8	1	0	6	6	1	9	2	12
Private company employee	5	10	1	0	4	12	3	12	1	16
Freelance	7	7	4	0	7	11	6	11	1	18
Student	37	5	2	1	9	36	9	32	4	45
Total	52	30	8	1	26	65	19	64	8	91

Source: Authors' own creation.

Both surveys required participants to produce evidence of the qualifications proposed in Table 1. The perceptions of the people surveyed were measured using Likert scales (Wimmer and Dominick, 2011). A 10-point scale was used with journalists, and a 5-point scale with citizens, based on the agility of the former group and the greater diversity and less expertise of the latter. The surveys' reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's Alfa. The resulting values of this test were 0.947 for 24 elements for the

journalist survey, and 0.957 for 24 elements for the citizen survey, which implies a very high reliability level (Chaves-Barboza and Rodríguez-Miranda, 2018; Frías-Navarro, 2020). These values also indicate that the instrument can be used to collect reliable data and yield reliable results (Mendoza, Nieto and Vergel, 2019). Data processing and analysis were performed using IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, v. 22).

Both surveys were complemented with three open-ended questions that aimed to collect participants' impressions. Those questions are: 1) In your opinion, what type of media accountability is more convenient: self-regulation or State regulation? 2) How do you perceive the execution of accountability processes? and 3) Do you think it is necessary to increase citizens' media literacy to ensure they are actively involved in holding the media accountable? The presentation of results follows a coding that identifies the testimonies of journalists and citizens with a number.

In addition, the journalists' survey included a dichotomous question on the contribution of accountability instruments.

Qualitative data were collected using an online discussion forum, following Arriazu's proposal for online social research in virtual spaces, which argues that asynchronous communication "is part of the basic pillars of interaction and socialisation on the Internet" (2007: 8). The discussion forum constitutes an element for reflective learning (Moreno and Gallo, 2016) and creates a familiar environment to deepen certain aspects that in other circumstances would not be possible (López, 2010).

The online discussion forum, held between 21 and 30 January 2002, was attended by 21 women and 10 men who shared the same proximity to communication activities: journalists working in radio, television and social media, media managers, teachers of communication and freelance journalists living in 13 cities of Ecuador: Chone, Guayaquil, La Concordia, Latacunga, Loja, Manabí, Manta, Pujilí, Puyango, Quevedo, Quito, Santo Domingo and Saraguro. The average age is 44 years. The question used to trigger the discussion is: "do you think the Internet has caused the media to be more transparent and to offer better quality content? In the presentation of results, participants are identified with the codes H (male) or M (female) and their corresponding number.

### 3. Results

The results of the surveys to journalists and citizens are shown in Table 4 and Figure 1, ordered from highest to lowest.

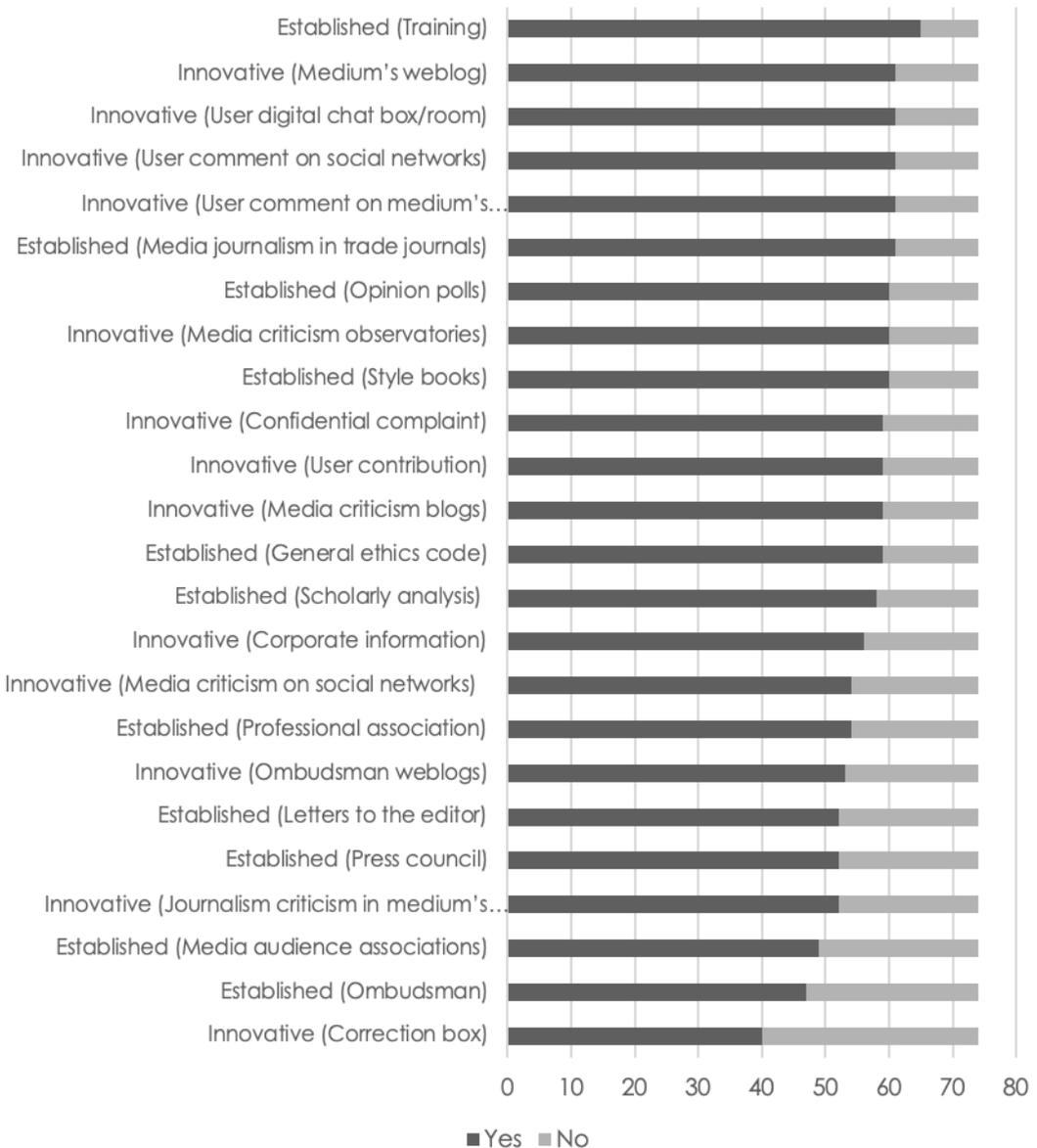
**Table 4: Evaluation of accountability instruments**

Instrument	Self-regulation					
	Character	Typology	Journalists		Citizens	
			Mean (0-10 Likert scale)	SD	Mean (0-5 Likert scale)	SD
Training	Established	External	8,14	1,897	4,21	0,90
Professional ethics code	Established	External	7,57	2,221	4,02	0,91
Trade journals	Established	External	7,42	2,270	4,12	0,84
Media criticism blogs	Innovative	External	7,20	2,293	3,73	1,02
Professional association	Established	External	7,20	2,601	3,92	1,07
Media observatories	Innovative	External	7,09	2,377	3,90	0,94
Style book	Established	Internal	7,07	2,331	3,81	0,98
Press Council	Established	External	6,80	2,494	4,02	0,91
Ombudsman	Established	Internal	6,43	2,559	3,73	0,93
Media criticism websites	Innovative	Internal	6,35	2,534	4,01	0,90
Ombudsman weblogs	Innovative	Internal	6,30	2,374	3,60	0,99

<b>Participation</b>						
Scholarly analysis	Established	External	7,57	2,276	4,07	0,96
User comments in medium's website	Innovative	Internal	7,54	2,178	3,77	0,94
User comments on social networks	Innovative	Internal	7,47	2,283	3,87	1,04
User digital chat boxes and rooms	Innovative	Internal	7,35	2,395	3,90	0,93
Criticism in social networks	Innovative	External	7,09	2,417	3,80	0,89
User contribution to content creation and review	Innovative	Internal	6,95	2,438	3,87	0,95
Audience association	Established	External	6,91	2,371	3,65	1,00
Confidential complaint	Innovative	External	6,89	2,573	3,71	1,11
Letters to the editor	Established	Internal	6,59	2,606	3,49	1,13
Correction box	Innovative	Internal	6,28	2,441	3,60	1,07
<b>Transparency</b>						
Opinion polls	Established	External	7,58	2,227	4,05	0,95
Corporate information	Innovative	Internal	7,22	2,172	3,95	0,99
Medium's blog	Innovative	Internal	6,57	2,227	3,87	0,97

Source: Authors' own creation.

**Figure 1: Journalists' assessments of the contributions of accountability instruments**



Source: Authors' own creation.

### 3.1 Journalists' opinions

Among the opinions in favour of accountability, journalists pointed out that it "forces the media to rethink their formats according to the market's needs and to create contents that are more aligned with their audience" (65), "projects institutional reputation" (59), fosters "a framework of responsibility and guarantees access to secure information" (39).

It is also mentioned that accountability constitutes "a space for interaction between the public and citizens and" allows the media to "know better what people want" (25), which results in the media taking "into account the participation of the audience in terms of their needs" (6), which is in turn a form of "transparency about the work of journalists and their media" (33).

Through accountability, "citizens evaluate the media and thus can have sustainable and reliable media organisations" (64) that provide them with "secure, feasible and reliable" information (20).

For some of the surveyed journalists, "it is important to be responsible, transparent and aware of the consequences" (67), that is, "the journalist must have limits, but must never be censored" (41), which is why they will be "permanently in contact with the practices and the code of ethics of the profession" (34).

In favour of external regulation, it was stated that it is the best alternative "because the media's own accountability processes often lack truth and only include what suits them" (74) and that it is necessary to establish "a norm that regulates all activities" (58), "otherwise there will be an excess of the press" (60). It is believed that external regulation "would be better and more effective than self-regulation" (11) "provided legislation is created for the proper functioning of the press in all its forms" (21).

Legislation prevents "the manipulation of news for purposes other than those of communicating" (8). "According to their objective, the law establishes norms in the use and transmission of information, so it is a viable option to regulate the treatment and presentation of information" (37), so "journalism can change and be respected" (44).

Some participants indicated that it is possible to combine accountability with public regulation. However, they also recall the sanctioning mechanisms exercised under the Organic Law of Communication: "When a media outlet wants to say something against the State, they tend to silence or sanction it" (27); "The only thing that the State regulation promotes is the establishment of censorship mechanisms such as the Superintendence of Information and Communication during Correa's authoritarian era" (5).

The ideal mechanism would be "a balance between the two resources. The regulation of the media is necessary to establish limits and is mandatory, while accountability could be optional for each media company" (29). It should be remembered that, in Ecuador, accountability "is a civil right that guarantees citizens' access to information in a clear and transparent manner. Accountability grants society the opportunity to demonstrate the results of each media company without distorting information and data" (23).

One respondent indicated that although the Organic Law on Citizen Participation establishes "accountability processes based on the fulfilment of objectives, taxes and labour obligations" (30), "citizens do not hold the media accountable moved by their sense of social responsibility, and instead do so to avoid sanctions as it is mandatory" (74).

Regarding established accountability instruments, journalists indicated that they perceive them "positively because the information disseminated by the media is welcomed at the territorial level and it is precisely those who are part of the territory (citizens), who participate" (6):

each media outlet has a style book that serves as a guide about the editorial limits that are set internally, which is very useful when doing the work. This resource seems fundamental to me, but I also consider that an excellent way to get feedback is the user comments received through web pages and sites (29).

Some consider that accountability instruments are used "to the extent that media organisations consider them useful to strengthen their image and reputation" (28). Along this line, one respondent pointed out that in the media company he works for he "interacts with these instruments depending on how the needs are presented" to him (17). Another journalist indicates that his company "has an internal regulation that allows them to reach a process of interrelation through dialogue with citizens and public institutions, maintaining the commitment to provide fair and democratic information" (39). Similarly, another journalist commented that because he is "an editorialist" he is "subjected to the internal regulations of the newspaper, as well as to public opinion" (66).

In relation to established accountability instruments, participants mentioned having used "face-to-face" interviews (74) and "interaction in surveys to know the opinion and preferences of the public" (20), as well as "continuous communication with the editor" (41), "internal interactions" (news editor, 52), and "instruments such as market studies and opinion polls carried out by the media" (53).

As for the innovative instruments, journalists pointed out social networks (1) (22) (25). Some mention that "the most important thing is the interaction through podcasts" (25) "and specific channels created by the medium for different purposes, such as Facebook and Twitter" (33). However, one person says that "none of these instruments is put into practice" (36).

In general, journalists have "interacted mainly with corporate information pages on their media's website, editorial blogs, letters to the director, comments on social networks and user comments on published news" (19). In the case of "digital media", accountability is "very much based on the comments received by the audience and citizen feedback" (16) and on "live broadcasts" (32).

Despite the possibilities offered by the Internet, "there is a widespread ignorance of certain innovative participation mechanisms aimed at improving journalistic quality" (63).

Regarding the possibility of increasing citizens' media literacy, some pointed out that "it is necessary to develop awareness campaigns on how to resort to reliable sources, verify and contrast information before disseminating it" (50), particularly because "young people do not inform themselves, do not care about verifying the veracity of news sources, nor read news stories in full and instead just read the headlines, which leads to a world of speculation" (66).

Media literacy allows citizens "to acquire knowledge about the media through a pedagogical model that is based on investigation. Therefore, citizens will be able to question what they see, read and hear, and to analyse the variety of messages they receive" (30). In addition, "training spaces must be established to empower citizens in the consideration of the media as allies of development and as valid interlocutors to achieve consensus" (28).

### 3.2 Citizens' opinions

The citizens who participated in the survey expressed opinions in favour of media accountability in the following terms: "the media has the opportunity to do it by themselves, without anyone forcing it or being on top of them" (84), "it gives the media more credibility than any law" (14), "it makes processes transparent" (10), it is "one of the best ways to solve the ethical problems of communication" (19), and it guarantees "that no communication rights are violated" (16).

Some participants consider that citizens "can have greater access to information on the management of different media, which leads to a more a transparent and controlled work" (60), and that "everyone can participate and feel more involved in the process" (29). It is believed that "the transparency generated between the media and citizens guarantees the veracity of the information disseminated, achieving a common good" (20).

Meanwhile, the regulation exercised by the State "allows freedom of the press and expression, that is, greater scope and veracity, but above all allows for transparency, which are advantages that would be more welcomed by the public due to the participation and trust that these laws provide" (85).

The media acquire commitments when "they are immersed in a system of regulation based on legislation, proactivity and responsibility to maintain their work" (18). Some believe that "greater information is achieved on the management of these entities, when social control is activated" (24). State regulation is also justified in the sense that "accountability would have a greater reception if the public were clearly informed about the decisions and sanctions given to those who do not comply with the law" (38).

Like journalists, citizens also consider "that a combination of external regulation and self-regulation would be better, since it is good to have an external point of view, from the outside, that notices the errors that the media do not see" (9).

For respondents, accountability "provides a space for dialogue between citizens, with the aim of increasing transparency, strengthening trust and guaranteeing social control" (12), and must occur "in compliance with social responsibilities, as indicated by the Organic Law of Communication and the Participation Law" (64). In addition, accountability is perceived as "a public event where the institution's expenditures and achievements are made known" (33).

Citizens recall that they "come from a process full of laws to 'regulate' the media, which left them a 'bad taste in the mouth', but it is necessary to restructure it, because we have not achieved effectiveness in terms of accountability" (65). It is also mentioned that it is necessary to "avoid harming the work of small media companies with strong monetary sanctions" (6).

On the other hand, for citizens, media accountability should be carried out through social networks (15) (22) (34) (90), since it is where "users freely express their opinions, which can be subsequently supported or debated" (6).

In Ecuador, accountability is executed "through a report that details all the activities carried out in writing and with their respective photographs, so that there is evidence for future audits" (1). Respondents add that "one of the accountability mechanisms used by several media companies is to specify their expenses and income because this is part of being transparent" (81).

There is also positive appreciation for editorial weblogs, which are considered "an accessible mechanism that facilitates their understanding and transfers the roles of editor, reader or viewer that exist in different media organisations" (56). A surveyed participant pointed out that "the media must share corporate information responsibly on their websites, as part of their accountability" (59).

For another person, "the information the media make available on websites and social networks is not transparent, and instead is loaded with ideology, which makes it subjective" (74). However, some believe that "a blog is and accountability mechanism that helps us to better understand the information that is represented, as it is a simpler option to stay updated" (73).

Citizens point out that "it is necessary to increase media literacy for the continuous democratisation of the media" (82) and to "create spaces to accept responsibilities and not make excuses" (83). Respondents believe that "good media training helps people interpret the abundance of images, content and communication applications" (12), "allows them to distinguish between true information and fake news" (76) and identify political intentions (74).

Some respondents also highlighted that it is important "to be involved as citizens in the activities of the media, to ensure that the information that is shared and commented online is true and was obtained legal" (30). In addition, it is mentioned that citizen participation "would increase dissent and awareness of their environment" (35). In short, "to improve journalism, citizens must be involved, but also need to be trained to function properly, be sure of their opinions of the media" (11) and be able to "criticise in a conscious and ethical way" (84).

Media education "revolves around the development of critical and creative capacities, to learn to question the representations created by the media" (91). This type of education "would facilitate people's understanding of these representations when it comes to ordering and organising new content as well as the integration of different media" (81).

It is necessary to "develop awareness campaigns on how to resort to reliable sources and on how to verify and contrast information before disseminating it" (63). Media literacy "would motivate people to analyse, evaluate and create messages, and acquire a wide variety of knowledge not only in the media, but in all aspects in which they are necessary" (69).

Among the testimonies shared in the virtual forum there are some that agree that the Internet has enabled transparency in media accountability:

- "The Internet has managed to make some media companies transparent" (M-06), "since there has been a digital democratisation that give most people access to their right to free information" (H09).
- "Media organisations are forced to maintain or improve the quality of the information they disseminate because any user with access to the Internet can challenge a news story that is poorly written or lacks facts" (H-05). "If a news media organisation publishes a dubious piece of information, many people will realise it and that medium will lose credibility, and a medium without credibility is nothing; it is evident that now the media seek to provide information of improved quality" (M-05).
- "Each media organisation can interact with citizens and citizens have access to them via electronic devices to stay informed" (M-02). "It is easy to search for information and for it to reach citizens immediately" (M-01), "with a simple Google search we can find more than one answer. Thanks to the Internet, we can demand more transparency" (M-10), "we have a tool to check facts and find more things, which help us stay informed in a wide-ranging way about the news" (H-02).
- "Citizens can corroborate the published information and confirm its veracity. User comments let the media know whether the information they provide is of quality for society" (M-09) "and when there is competition the media can improve the quality of their programming" (H-10).

Other opinions do not consider the Internet helps transparency.

- "When looking for immediacy, journalists are often tempted to lie to get the scoop" (H-08). In addition, "the rules of the Internet are used and exploited in favour of capital; delivering quality content no longer matters as much as getting clicks" (H-06). Thus, it is perceived that "the Internet obscures information. The media want to be the first to break the news and often do not verify their sources and end up disseminating fake news" (M-11), "we usually we get carried away by sensationalist reporting and do not check the facts" (M-15).
- The Internet does not help the media organisations, "but has forced them to look for a different way to tell the news. Information transparency and quality depend on journalists, their values, knowledge and training, rather than on the Internet, so they must adapt to changes by telling news stories differently" (M-13). Likewise, "it is undeniable that the Internet has boosted citizen participation" (M-16).
- It is also mentioned that "social networks are the most used sources of information, but contain fake news, which generates disinformation that affects people and public institutions" (H-04), "not

everything on social networks is real, but they are also a useful mechanism to obtain breaking news" (M-12), "that is why, it is always good to check the sources to corroborate these news" (M-21).

- "There are very few social networks that provide truthful information, so we must know the who, where, and how of the information. In communication, you must be clear and concise and, above all, true about what we say" (M-14), "some things go out of context, and this generates a lack of transparency and quality" (M-17). Moreover, it seems that "most contents are inconsequential, useless and empty" (H-03).

#### 4. Discussion

The research questions about the perception of Ecuadorian journalists and citizens about internal and external media accountability instruments have been answered based on the results. The media accountability instruments that are appreciated the most by journalists and citizens (Table 4) are the established and external types used in the dimensions of self-regulation (training), participation (scholarly analysis) and transparency (opinion polls). Therefore, there is an evident interest in using those widely known mechanisms through which the media can demonstrate their good practices and attend their audiences. This evidence also serves to answer the secondary question A.

The innovative instruments, despite reaching above average scores, remain in the medium and low perception categories. Blogs are in last place. In Ecuador, *El Comercio* newspaper, one of the oldest and most read digital outlets, has maintained specialised blogs for years. This practice is poorly valued as a mechanism of transparency, but its contribution to accountability, in the opinion of journalists (Figure 1), is highly appreciated.

The most valued participation instruments, after scholarly analysis, are those linked to the logic of the Internet, ranging from user comments to user intervention in content generation, as established by UNESCO. This also related to the identification of social networks as new spaces for debate that surpass the limits of traditional mechanisms but involve new challenges to ensure civic participation (Fenoll, 2015; Valera-Ordaz, 2019). However, it is naïve to think that digital media are the only safe spaces that promote cooperation since "many newsrooms show participatory fatigue instead of a participatory culture" (Porlezza, 2019: 2).

In the discussion forum, users pointed out that the Internet facilitates transparency in media accountability but also recognise improper practices that are generated by publishers and users and tend to be aggravated by aggregation algorithms that promote consumption flows that reduce content diversity, plurality and quality (Dweyer, 2019; Parcu, 2019). As Llorens and Costache point out, internet mediation "has brought us new and improved conceptual tools to analyse more complex phenomena [...] However, it seems to us that it is a descriptive and normative tool that must understand its limitations" (2013: 73).

Faced with the opinions of journalists and citizens for and against the traditional regulation of the State, public intervention would still be necessary to protect media pluralism, even with the possibilities of the digital environment (Meier, 2011).

On another shore is the defence of self-regulation because accountability contributes to "monitor, control, criticise and analyse the quality of journalistic information" (Ramon, Mauri-Ríos and Alcalá-Anguiano, 2016: 102). The "preservation of ethical standards must be erected as a guiding principle in an ecosystem marked by new crucial challenges that affect information quality" (Ramon, Mauri-Ríos and Díaz-Campo, 2020: 222). It is accepted that "if journalism does not regulate itself, it will lose its credibility and its ability to foster democracy" (Ferruci, 2019: 290).

Similar criteria is presented in the study carried out by Ramon et al. (2022) on the perception of Spanish journalists who prefer accountability over regulation based on the fact that laws tend to limit the emergence of a culture of greater responsibility. In other words, it is the media's commitment to accountability what guarantees high quality standards in the information disseminated to maintain the trust and credibility of citizens (Karlsson, Clerwall and Nord, 2017).

A limitation of the study is the gender and residence proportions of its non-probabilistic samples, which differ from the population composition, in which 51% of the population live on the coast of the country (INEC, 2022), which may affect the assessments.

#### 5. Conclusions

There is a strong presence of the Law of Participation in the testimonies of journalists and citizens regarding media accountability, which is conceived as a legal duty, because of what happened with the Superintendence of Information and Communication during Correa's Presidency. Fears are manifested in the testimonies that allude to economic sanctions.

According to journalists and citizens, more training work must be developed in the community of journalists so that they know and take advantage of the possibilities of self-regulation. In addition, the promotion of training is identified as a responsibility of the Council for the Regulation, Development and Promotion of Information and Communication (which answers the secondary question D).

There is a willingness to welcome processes of media literacy to achieve critical media consumption, distinguish real information, identify fact-checking strategies, participate in accountability practices and make contributions to the public opinion that improve coexistence, tolerance and diversity.

An important point shared by journalists and citizens is the convergence of self-regulatory and legal mechanisms, towards a co-regulation model, a combination of ethical commitments and control through independent regulatory authorities, as Salomon (2016) points out. However, the Organic Law of Communication promotes a system based on the ethics and social responsibility of the media. It should be noted that the testimonies of journalists and citizens reflect a lack of trust in the commitments of the media and their managers (which answers the secondary question C).

There is a strong appreciation of social networks, websites and blogs. Survey participants want this route to be evaluated for future accountability processes. In general, the Internet is perceived as a window for transparency, as it offers resources for citizens to contrast information. However, participants also highlighted the need to evaluate the decisions of media editors and business models so that, as far as possible, quality is privileged over immediacy and all publications make effective contributions to the public opinion and, therefore, to democracy (this is the answer to secondary question B).

The participants of the forum emphasise that the foundations of journalism do not change, and that it requires work close to the community, the territory and the deontological principles of the profession. As Suárez et al. (2019: 530) point out, "it is convenient to vindicate the professional role of the journalist".

Future lines of research include quantitative and qualitative studies on the effectiveness of the accountability processes established in Ecuador's legislation, and a comparison of the results of this study with those of countries belonging to the Andean Community, which share common characteristics and experiences in the trajectory of the media.

## 6. Specific contributions

Contributions	Authors
Research conception and design	1, 2 and 3
Literature review	1 and 2
Data collection	1 and 3
Critical data analysis and interpretation	1, 2 and 3
Drafting, formatting, review and corrections	1 and 2

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