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## Local Media, Rural Depopulation, and Territorial Attachment: Geographies of Hope in Castilla-La Mancha

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### Abstract

This article explores the relationship between local media ecosystems and territorial hope in depopulated rural areas of Castilla-La Mancha (Spain). Drawing on geographies of hope as a travelling concept, we examine how local media shape affective orientations toward the future. Within the framework of rural mediatization, we conceptualize media ensembles as key drivers in the symbolic construction of place and as potential enablers of hope in territories historically marked by demographic decline. Approaching news deserts from the perspective of communicative resilience, we combine a media mapping of 721 depopulated municipalities with a face-to-face survey of 529 residents to analyze the role of local media in sustaining collective affective configurations. We construct an index of territorial hope based on three interrelated indicators: personal optimism, sense of belonging, and outward projection of the locality. Statistical analyses show that municipalities with more local media score significantly higher on this index, and a regression model confirms that media-related variables—especially interest in local news and trust in professional media—are stronger predictors of territorial hope than most sociodemographic factors. Our findings suggest that local media contribute to the emergence of territorial hope. This underscores the importance of integrating communication indicators into the study of geographies of hope and highlights their relevance to strengthen the symbolic agency of rural communities.

### Keywords

geographies of hope; local media; media ensembles; mediatization; rural depopulation

## 1. Introduction

In 2021, the EU laid the foundations for its long-term vision for rural areas (European Commission, 2021). Based on this, the Rural Pact was launched, aiming for a more prosperous, connected, and ecologically and socially resilient Europe. This vision is especially relevant in areas most affected by demographic decline, a process that impacts the broader territory: 69% of NUTS-3 regions (Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics, in which level three corresponds to small regions) lost population between 2011 and 2021. This trend is expected to intensify in already depopulated areas (Curtale et al., 2025). Spain, one of the countries facing the most severe demographic decline (Collantes & Pinilla, 2011), has identified depopulation as a state-level challenge with the Ministry of Demographic Challenge. Among recent policies, one Spanish region, Castilla-La Mancha, is regarded as a European reference in strategies to mitigate and, when possible, reverse this phenomenon (European Network for Rural Development, 2022).

The design of multi-scalar policies to address depopulation and promote rural revitalization includes, among others, two communication-related axes: on the one hand, the infrastructures that ensure these areas remain connected, on the other, a shift in the narrative about rurality, aimed at displacing discourses of abandonment and marginalization (sacrifice zones; Christmann, 2016) in favor of new narratives grounded in hope and future projection (zones of opportunity; Castelló, 2023; Molina et al., 2023) as a way to foster well-being and social cohesion in rural communities.

Our study engages with current debates on places that don't matter (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), news deserts (Gulyas et al., 2023; Verza et al., 2024), communicative resilience (Lundgren & Ljuslinder, 2024; Usher, 2023), and geographies of hope (Hazlewood et al., 2023). The concept of geographies of hope has been applied to ecological and climate change issues (Sabin et al., 2023), and more prominently to research on resistance and protest in contexts of crisis, precarity, or vulnerability (Joronen & Griffiths, 2019; Silveira et al., 2017; Tups et al., 2023).

This article contributes to a situated understanding of geographies of hope as a travelling concept (Bal, 2002), by exploring how local media conditions—in terms of infrastructures, perceptions, and practices—are linked to the configuration of collective expectations about the future. We apply the lens of geographies of hope to rural areas in the enriched Global North, to examine how hope, understood as an affective configuration (Macón, 2020), relates to processes of deep mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2022; Hepp et al., 2024).

The argument is based on the premise that the construction of place cannot be understood apart from its communicative infrastructures (Jansson, 2022), its discursive dimensions (Christmann, 2022), and its media practices (Brantner et al., 2021). Our approach draws on the representational dimension of place-making (Banini, 2021; Banini & Ilovan, 2021; Christmann, 2022), within the framework of geomedia studies (Jansson & Ritter, 2024) and the geography of communication, with a specific focus on rural areas (Braunerhielm et al., 2024; Jansson & Andersson, 2012; Zerrer, 2024).

We analyze how the presence of media infrastructures and practices—conceptualized as media ensembles (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017)—in depopulated rural municipalities relates to an affective orientation toward hope. We aim to highlight the relevance of incorporating media and communication indicators into this interdisciplinary research field. Like previous studies that have sought to measure mediatization processes

by operationalizing them through quantitative methods (Bengtsson et al., 2020), we use data on the media ecosystem of areas classified as depopulated in Castilla-La Mancha, in connection with the results of a face-to-face survey of residents ( $n = 529$ ) about their perceptions of local media, interest in news, and sense of community well-being. This approach enables us to assess the extent to which media presence affects satisfaction with local information coverage and whether this presence has an impact on perceptions of hope for the future of these territories.

The article is structured as follows. First, we introduce the conceptual framework by revisiting the notion of geographies of hope. Second, we discuss the role of media ensembles in rural place-making processes. Third, we present Castilla-La Mancha as our study context—focusing on rural mediatization in depopulated areas—and describe the methodology. Fourth, results are then presented in two stages: (a) a comparison between environments with differing levels of local media, considering sociodemographic variables, media uses, and evaluations; and (b) an analysis of the territorial hope index and its predictors, emphasizing the mediating role of satisfaction with local news coverage. Finally, we discuss implications of the findings and outline directions for future research.

## 2. Geographies of Hope: A Travelling and Situated Concept

As part of the multidisciplinary affective turn, geography (like communication) has become increasingly concerned with affect in relation to territory (Anderson & Harrison, 2010; Thrift, 2000). Within this context, interest in hope has emerged, giving rise to multiple readings (Appadurai, 2013; Harvey, 2000). Along these lines, the notion of geographies of hope has taken shape, grounded in critical geography and postcolonial thought (Hazlewood et al., 2023). We adopt this notion not as a normative or fashionable framework, but as a travelling concept (Bal, 2002), one that crosses disciplinary boundaries, theoretical paradigms, and geopolitical contexts.

In the conceptual translation proposed here, we understand hope as an affective configuration (Macón, 2020), a term referring to the mechanisms that organize collective emotional orders in response to specific issues and historically situated contexts. In the framework of a politics of emotion (Ahmed, 2004), this allows us to conceptualize hope not as an individual emotional state, but as a collective, situated, and performative affective configuration through which the meaning of the future is negotiated within systems of power, territorial memory, and agency. These configurations stabilize what is considered a legitimate affective response—such as optimism, resignation, nostalgia, or resilience—through a sedimented ensemble of imaginaries, commonplaces, practices, institutional devices, and embodied dispositions. Although they may appear natural or inevitable, such orders are always ambivalent: they can reinforce hegemonic interpretations of reality, but also serve as catalysts for transformation (Macón, 2020).

In this line, Hazlewood et al. (2023) capture the complexity of such configurations by conceptualizing geographies of hope as an affective, relational, and performative praxis composed of six interrelated dimensions: place, alliances, the unthinkable, perseverance, resilience, and the (im)possible. This articulation shapes the reconfiguration of spatial imaginaries, territorial identities, and expectations about the future.

Given this complexity, hope cannot be assumed to operate uniformly in the so-called left-behind places (Pike et al., 2023). The dialectic between hope and hopelessness, persistence and disillusionment, action and

inaction (Joronen & Griffiths, 2019; Tups et al., 2023) precludes any assumption of homogeneity or coherence. Several studies have pointed out that contradictory imaginations of hope can shape social realities (Nikunen, 2016) or that optimism—often considered a component of hope—can, under certain structural conditions, act as a limiting factor that prevents hope from translating into effective, future-oriented intervention (Berlant, 2011; Burnett, 2023; Lundgren & Ljuslinder, 2024).

Every affective configuration—as an emotional order—must be inscribed within a historically and socially situated regime through which territory is felt, made, and attached to (Banini, 2021). Such configurations are neither linear nor unidimensional; they are shaped by power relations (Massey, 2005) and by often conflicting modes of defining what territory means—in this case, what ruralities are (Mormont, 1990).

Our starting point is that, in the context of rural Europe, rhetoric around hope and future-oriented optimism circulates across institutional, activist, and media discourses. This circulation can be read as an indicator of a shift away from previous affective dispositions dominated by narratives of hopelessness, abandonment, and institutional neglect. Rural areas have long been represented in terms of lack of opportunity and future, and identified with loneliness, suffering, abandonment, or escape (Font Garolera, 2023), symbolically evicted (Christmann, 2016).

In places like depopulated Spain, in recent years, such representations have been traced in culture, in media representations, and in public policies and social mobilizations. We observe a turn toward rhetorics of ambivalent hope (Castelló, 2023; McClancy, 2022), a dynamic interplay between vulnerability and aspiration (Saiz-Echezarreta, 2024), clearly visible during the Revuelta de la España Vaciada (Esparcia, 2024).

In this transitional context, hope functions as an emerging affective configuration that displaces the historical pessimism associated with depopulated Spain, fostering greater optimism about the future of these territories. This hope not only contributes to symbolic recognition and a sense of belonging in rural areas but it also enhances their visibility and resilience in the face of urban-normative paradigms, mobilizing publics and expanding the boundaries of what is considered thinkable in relation to rural futures.

### **3. Rural News Deserts, Media Ensembles, and Place-Making**

Place cannot be understood as a fixed or merely geographic entity, but rather as a space imbued with meanings, affects, and disputes (Massey, 2005), and always as the result of historical, social, and symbolic processes that make it habitable, narratable, and emotionally significant (Banini & Ilovan, 2021; Christmann, 2022). Territory, at any scale, is a relational and dynamic construction in which imaginaries, representations, systems of meaning, and semiotic practices are interwoven (Peñamarín, 2025).

Attachment to territory presupposes the existence of affective configurations that sustain shared ways of being and remaining in place, as well as narratives that (re)produce or displace meanings of belonging. Place is not only a reference for being, but also for becoming-with-others (Banini, 2021), which entails a work of imagination to project oneself into the future (Appadurai, 2013). In peripheral territories, such as depopulated rural areas, degrees of pessimism or optimism, disaffection or pride are situated responses to material, political, and sociocultural conditions that define what is thinkable, desirable, or attainable for those communities.

Remaining in a territory and projecting its future requires, among other factors, the ability to communicate, represent, imagine, and narrate it—both within and beyond the community (Christmann, 2022; Stoustrup, 2025). For this reason, we argue that territorial identity and place attachment are sustained and transformed through media ensembles (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017), as conceptualized within the paradigm of mediatization (Hepp et al., 2024). Abundant literature has described how the media construct geographies and a sense of place: from Anderson (2016), Gellner (1983), or Rodriguez-Amat (2011) on imagined communities and the nation; or more recently with works exploring geographies of journalism and place making in digital news (Gutsche & Hess, 2018) or local journalism (Costera Meijer, 2020; Olsen, 2021) and hyperlocal journalism (Harte et al., 2017) for urban imaginations (Leupold et al., 2018) or small towns (Hess, 2015). Indeed, far from being mere technical devices, the media act as territorial agents, building forms of geographic imagination, and becoming the conditions of possibility contributing to the definition of who belongs, what is worth telling, and which ways of life are possible in a given place—thus shaping place-making (Braunerhielm et al., 2024), always understood as a negotiated and contested process (Burnett, 2023). The communicative dimension is constitutive of territory, as it is through stories, discourses, and information that the meanings enabling a community to feel part of a place are sedimented—or challenged.

In peripheral areas affected by demographic decline, weak or absent media undermine the ability to sustain positive territorial attachment. The scarcity of local outlets, limited media relevance, and persistent negative representations at broader scales (Christmann, 2022, pp. 106–108) erode the collective capacity to imagine a shared future. While this is a shared risk among the so-called news deserts (Gulyas et al., 2023; Verza et al., 2024), we suggest avoiding simplified readings based solely on indicators of abandonment or deprivation. Instead, we propose shifting the focus toward the communicative resilience that many rural communities display in response to these deficits (McAdam, 2025; Usher, 2023). It is essential to consider not only what is lacking but also the alternative forms that emerge to sustain symbolic ties to territory, including municipal communication channels, village social media networks, or hyperlocal outlets that, despite their vulnerability and limitations, fulfil relevant functions (McAdam & Hess, 2024).

Mapping the local media ecosystem—beyond conventional media—makes it possible to identify material conditions with symbolic effects that can shape perceptions of the future, promote optimism, and, ultimately, enable the emergence of hope.

We argue that in historically marginalized territories, the mere presence of media infrastructures—even minimal ones—expresses that the place is narratable, that it can occupy a space in the public sphere, and that it is worthy of attention. Having local media is not just a technical asset; it is a symbolic condition anchoring the feeling of belonging and reinforcing the perception of collective value. Being acknowledged through the media ecosystem implies a form of affective and political dignity, projecting the community as a future-bearing subject within the shared map.

#### 4. Castilla-La Mancha as a Depopulated Region With a Hopeless Past

Applying such frameworks to the rural European context, this article focuses on the Spanish region of Castilla-La Mancha. During the second half of the 20th century, Spain experienced significant migratory flows from rural and agrarian regions in the central part of the country toward industrialized areas on the periphery (Collantes & Pinilla, 2011). This rural exodus led to the progressive emptying of inland Spain,

including Castilla-La Mancha, which lost one million inhabitants between 1941 and 1980 (Artola, 1993), and was marked by poverty and a lack of opportunity in the immediate postwar period following the Spanish Civil War (Amo, 2003). Today, it remains a region with a predominantly rural character and a highly dispersed population, especially in municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, which make up 69.7% of its 919 localities. One of its five provinces, Cuenca, is part of the NUTS-3 triad that forms what has been named the Spanish Lapland, along with Teruel and Soria (Burillo-Cuadrado & Burillo-Mozota, 2018). With a population density below eight inhabitants per square kilometre, it is one of the most pronounced demographic deserts in Europe.

While depopulation has been addressed through public policies and investment, these have been described as fragmented and uncoordinated for years (Pinilla & Sáez, 2017). Since 2015, however, there has been growing concern at the regional, national, and European levels (Esparcia, 2024), leading to efforts to design coherent strategies to promote the development of these territories. The goal is not to reverse irreversible situations, but to implement innovative policies that guarantee people's freedom to choose where they want to live—including in rural areas (Sáez & Pinilla, 2024).

Castilla-La Mancha has been a pioneering region in legislating against depopulation. Law 2/2021 has become a European reference by promoting a cross-cutting approach in which all areas of public policy are involved through rural proofing. To implement the law, a territorial zoning model was established (Decree 108/2021), grouping municipalities into 52 zones across six categories: urban, peri-urban, intermediate rural, at risk of depopulation, intense depopulation, or extreme depopulation. The three categories identifying depopulated areas encompass 721 of the region's 919 municipalities and 22% of its population (438,024 people).

However, depopulation is not only a sociodemographic issue but also a symbolic one. The disappearance of rural settlements may "truncate personal life projects and erase communities with long histories and even great future potential" (Pinilla & Sáez, 2017, p. 3). The Castilla-La Mancha Strategy Against Depopulation 2021–2031 highlights the need to develop territorial communication strategies and "raise awareness of the intrinsic positive aspects of rural life" (Specific Objective 8.1; Gobierno de Castilla-La Mancha, 2021, p. 120), recognizing that narratives shape how these areas are projected as liveable places and revealing the emergence of a hopeful affective configuration. Moreover, recent legislation in this and other regions has incorporated communicative and discursive components, both in terms of infrastructure and narrative, acknowledging the importance of media in reshaping the interpretive frameworks applied to rural territories.

With regard to its media structure, Castilla-La Mancha has historically been defined by a fragile media ecosystem. According to the most recent census (Saiz-Echezarreta et al., 2023), the region hosts 211 media outlets, 43.6% of which are digital media. Most of these outlets are typically local or hyperlocal in scope and sustain small-scale workforces. Private ownership predominates (74.9%), although no major communication conglomerates are headquartered in the region. Publicly owned outlets represent a smaller share (20.8%), consisting mainly of municipal radio stations under the authority of local councils, while community media account for 4.3%. The regional public broadcaster, Castilla-La Mancha Media, based in the regional capital and supported by provincial delegations, also plays a significant role.

From its leading position in the public debate on depopulation, Castilla-La Mancha constitutes a singular and fitting case study for observing the role of local media in shaping residents' perceptions of the future of their territory.

## 5. Objectives

We ask to what extent hope—understood as trust in a prosperous future for rural territories—is related to the media ensembles taking place in these contexts. From this premise, as a general objective, we propose to explore how the local media ecosystem in rural municipalities can shape residents' territorial hope.

The specific objectives (SO) of the study are:

SO1: To examine differences in the perceived impact of local media, trust in these media, and patterns of news consumption, according to the local media ecosystems.

SO2: To construct the index of territorial hope as a tool to comparatively measure confidence in the future of the territory among people living in different local media ecosystems.

SO3: To analyze the relationship between local media ecosystems and the level of territorial hope, also taking into account sociodemographic variables and patterns of interest and consumption of local information.

In general terms, we hypothesize that, in the context of deep mediatization, the public visibility provided by media—the very fact of being symbolically acknowledged through media presence—can operate as a disposition toward hope, acting as a symbolic activator in response to dominant narratives of abandonment.

## 6. Methodology

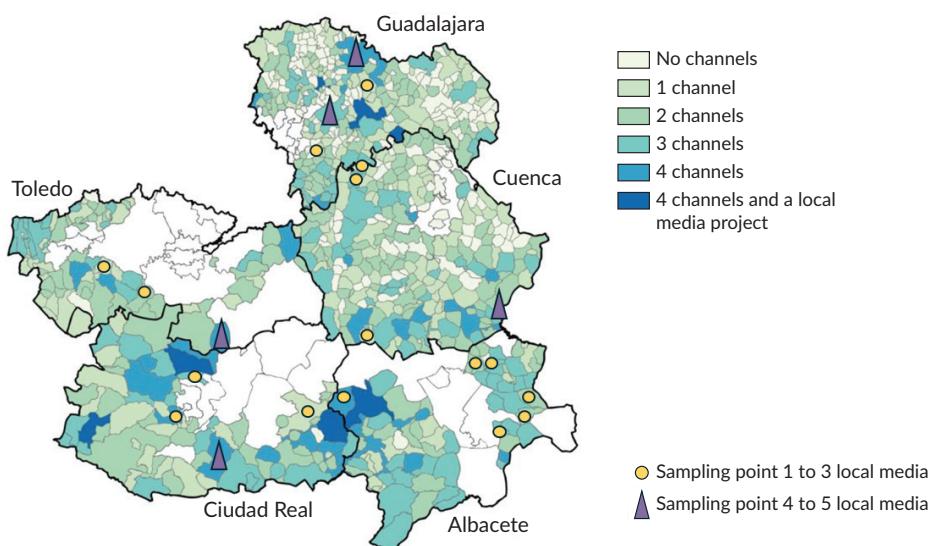
To achieve the proposed objectives and test the central hypothesis, this study adopts a mixed-methods approach that allows for the connection between the structural conditions of the local media ecosystem and residents' perceptions regarding the future of their territory. The research strategy combines the mapping of local media—as an indicator of the degree of local mediatization—with a survey conducted among residents of depopulated rural municipalities in Castilla-La Mancha. This combination allows for the relationship between the media structure of each locality and the perceptions of local media and the levels of territorial hope as inferred from residents' responses.

The data collection and survey design are part of this broader, multi-method research program developed since 2019 on the mediatization of rural depopulation, combining discourse analysis, interviews, ethnographic observation, and participatory workshops. Previous research indicated that an approach to news deserts focused solely on news media was insufficient. Based on focus groups with a sample of the population and an analysis of the media structure, the importance of alternative communication resources and the diversity of functions they fulfill for the inhabitants of these communities became evident, as well as the value attributed to media as a source of social recognition (see Galletero-Campos et al., 2023). This cumulative and situated approach has informed both the design of the questionnaire and the interpretation of the results.

## 6.1. Materials

In a previous study (January–May 2024; Saiz-Echezarreta et al., 2023), a map of municipal information sources was developed, collecting data online and via phone calls to town halls. This database included the presence of the following: mobile public notice apps, messaging platforms (WhatsApp and Telegram), official municipal Facebook pages, municipal websites with updated local news, and non-professional media projects (such as community radios, newsletters, or blogs). This database was supplemented with a mapping of professional local media in the region (Saiz-Echezarreta et al., 2023). The sum of municipal information sources and professional media constitutes the local media variable, ranging from 0 to 5. This measure corresponds to the sum of the channels through which municipal/local information is disseminated, including professional local media, with all channels assigned equal weight. The aim was to identify towns with a more comprehensive information ecosystem in contrast to those with only minimal resources.

Our survey, designed to examine how residents relate to local media and community wellbeing, was conducted between November and December 2024. The questionnaire design draws on similar studies conducted in comparable contexts, including Park et al. (2023), the BBVA Foundation (2023) *Information Consumption Survey*, and the community well-being index developed by Schirmer et al. (2016). The study focused on a universe of 721 municipalities (78.5% of the total in the region) classified as depopulated and with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, with a reference population of 438,024 residents. The surveys were conducted in public settings, including streets, medical clinics, markets, bars, pharmacies, schools and high schools, municipal buildings, and regional administrative offices, seeking to ensure diversity of gender and age within the sample. The final sample comprises 529 valid responses, with a margin of error of  $\pm 4.26\%$  and a confidence level of 95%. The questionnaire was administered through face-to-face interviews, using a quota-based stratified sampling method by age and gender. The final sample included 53.5% women and 46.5% men, with 9.5% aged 17–29, 39.7% aged 30–49, 38.3% aged 50–65, and 12.5% aged over 66. The 21 sampling points (Figure 1) correspond to municipalities from different provinces in Castilla-La Mancha and reflect a balanced distribution of communicative structure levels: one group with 1–3 local media (circle symbol) and another with 4–5 local media (triangle symbol).



**Figure 1.** 21 sampling points for the developed survey.

Survey responses were grouped into two categories depending on whether the respondent lived in a municipality with more or less local media. When designing the sampling points, the aim was to select locations in depopulated areas, ensuring that each province included at least one municipality with a high number of channels and one with a low number, from different zones, with the third point from any category. Following these criteria, the sample was expanded to 21 points. The responses were then recategorized into two groups to capture the greatest possible disparity in media ecosystems, resulting in a balanced division of the sample. The first group includes individuals from municipalities with 4–5 local media, specifically, Iniesta, Brihuega, Calzada de Calatrava, Urda, and Sigüenza ( $n = 266$  respondents). The second group comprises respondents from the remaining 16 municipalities with 1–3 local media ( $n = 263$ ): Alhambra, Alpera, Bonete, Cañaveruelas, Corral-Rubio, El Provencio, Fuente el Fresno, Golosalvo, Mahora, Menasalbas, Ossa de Montiel, Petrola, San Martín de Pusa, Tendilla, Torremocha del Campo, and Villalba del Rey.

The questionnaire (Table 1) consisted of 21 questions, which were structured around the following themes:

**Table 1.** Dimensions and items of the questionnaire.

Themes	Variables
Sociodemographic	Gender, age, employment, education, income, time in the municipality, ideological self-placement, and municipality size
Interest in current affairs Scale from 0 to 5: 0 = <i>not at all interested</i> and 5 = <i>very interested</i> *	Scope: regional, national, and local Topic: politics/culture and society/economics/environment/sports
Media use Available options: a lot, quite a lot, a little, not at all, don't know, I do not keep myself informed about local news	Gets local news from TV, radio, newspapers, municipal channels, WhatsApp and/or Facebook groups, or other social media
Satisfaction Scale from 0 to 5, indicating agreement: 0 = <i>strongly disagree</i> and 5 = <i>strongly agree</i>	There is enough news about my village and my region in the media I feel that my interests are reflected in the local media The media offer an accurate portrayal of villages like mine If there is a controversial issue in my area, the media will come to cover it
Trust in media Available options: very likely, quite likely, not very likely, not at all likely	Likelihood of receiving false news about current affairs through: TV, radio, newspapers, municipal channels, WhatsApp and/or Facebook groups, or other social media
Media impact Scale from 0 to 5, indicating agreement: 0 = <i>strongly disagree</i> and 5 = <i>strongly agree</i>	They help people get involved in local activities They have no impact They allow for understanding different points of view on controversial issues affecting the area They help draw attention from higher-level administrations They help preserve the stories of local villages and their inhabitants They serve as a tourist attraction

**Table 1.** (Cont.) Dimensions and items of the questionnaire.

Themes	Variables
Motivational	Informs in order to talk with others
Scale from 0 to 5: 0 = <i>not at all important</i> and 5 = <i>very important</i>	Informs in order to understand local events
	Informs in order to manage daily life
	Informs in order to participate in local decisions
Community well-being	I am optimistic about the future of my area
Scale from 0 to 5, indicating agreement: 0 = <i>strongly disagree</i> and 5 = <i>strongly agree</i>	I would recommend my village to others as a good place to live
	I feel well integrated in my locality

Note: \* = Among the response options, the questionnaire incorporated a spontaneous "Don't know/No answer" category.

## 6.2. Statistical Methods

The statistical analysis included both bivariate and multivariate techniques to explore the relationship between the local media ecosystems and residents' perceptions of them, as well as territorial hope. In this exploratory analysis aimed at identifying significant differences between the two categories of municipalities and given that normality of data distribution could not be assumed, non-parametric tests were applied: the Mann-Whitney U test for ordinal and scale variables, and chi-squared tests of independence and Cramér's V for categorical and dichotomous variables.

Drawing on the literature review, we constructed the territorial hope index, structured around three interrelated dimensions that operate as partial indicators and can be understood as entry points into the more complex affective configuration of hope. These items showed statistically significant and consistent relationships based on Pearson correlations, measured on a Likert scale from 0 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*:

1. Identity and integration ("I feel well integrated in my locality"): This item seeks to capture the attachment to place, understood as a shared mode of being and becoming-with-others in a historically and socially constructed space (Banini, 2021; Banini & Ilovan, 2021).
2. Optimism about the future ("I am optimistic about the future of my area"): This item reflects an individual affective orientation that expresses a positive disposition and a hopeful anticipation toward what lies ahead, opening up the possibility of alternative futures. Optimism, as a resource, can provide a foundation for hope, although there is also the risk that it may ultimately hinder it (Lundgren & Ljuslinder, 2024).
3. Perception of value/external recognition ("I would recommend my village to others as a good place to live"): This item addresses the outward projection and symbolic legitimacy of the territory, expressing indirectly the desire for recognition and visibility in broader publics—a key element in the constitution of hope as a relational (Hazlewood et al., 2023).

In its validation, a principal component analysis confirmed the existence of a unidimensional structure, with an explained variance of 58.5% and an acceptable Cronbach's alpha of 0.616. The index is scored on a scale from 0 to 15, which allows for the distribution of the sample into low, medium, and high levels of territorial hope. The overall mean was 12.51 ( $SD = 3.71$ ), with predominantly high values likely due to social desirability bias. Three levels of hope were classified: low (0–9; 13.8%), medium (10–13; 28.5%), and high (14–15; 57.7%). The statistical significance of differences in the index between the two subsamples—based on the presence of local media—was tested using ANOVA and Student's t-test. Once these differences were confirmed, a multiple linear regression was designed to evaluate the simultaneous influence of sociodemographic and media-related variables on the index, with the aim of identifying which variables carry the most weight in predicting hope regarding the future of the territory. The absence of significant collinearity was verified through the variance inflation factor and the condition index analysis, which supports a reliable interpretation of the model.

Finally, to examine the relationship between the territorial hope index and local media, a mediation analysis was performed using Model 4 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2022), with 5,000 bootstrap samples and a 95% confidence level. The objective was to explore whether satisfaction with local information acts as an intervening mechanism between the media ecosystem of the municipality and residents' optimistic perception of their territory.

Both methods make it possible to go beyond bivariate comparison and to detect indirect relationships and compound effects that are common in complex phenomena of a social and symbolic nature.

## 7. Results

### 7.1. Differences Between Local Media Ecosystems

The comparative analysis between respondents living in both types of municipalities (with more or less local media) reveals a series of statistically significant differences that allow us to characterize the impact of the local media ecosystem across several dimensions: in particular, satisfaction with local information, perceptions of media impact, and community well-being.

Residents of municipalities with a greater number of local media report significantly higher scores across all evaluated items on satisfaction with local information. Regarding the perception that "there is enough news," localities with more media rank higher (mean = 283.4) than the 246.4 ranked in municipalities with lower activity ( $p = 0.003$ ); similarly, the feeling that their interests are reflected in the local media is higher in environments with more media outlets (277.86 vs. 251.99,  $p = 0.039$ ). The most pronounced difference appears in the perception that the media offer an accurate portrayal of the village, with a mean rank of 287.97 in municipalities with more media, vs. 241.77 in those with fewer media ( $p < 0.001$ ). Likewise, confidence that the media will cover controversial local issues is significantly greater in municipalities with a more numerous media structure (282.60 vs. 247.20,  $p = 0.002$ ).

With regard to perceived media impact, significant differences are observed in five out of six items. The belief that the media help to understand different perspectives on local conflicts is stronger in municipalities with active media (277.55 vs. 252.31,  $p = 0.038$ ), as is their perceived ability to attract the attention of higher-level administrations (279.01 vs. 250.83,  $p = 0.022$ ). The media are also more highly valued as tools for preserving

local stories (276.32 vs. 253.55,  $p = 0.043$ ) and as instruments for tourism promotion (276.46 vs. 253.41,  $p = 0.047$ ). Although it does not reach the threshold of statistical significance, a positive trend is observed in the perception that the media help people get involved in community activities ( $p = 0.080$ ).

In contrast, the proportion of people who believe that the media “have no impact” does not differ significantly between contexts ( $p = 0.334$ ). In fact, nearly one-third of the entire sample (28.4%) strongly agree with the statement that the media “have no impact” on the life of their village or region. This response is transversal across sociodemographic groups, suggesting a form of shared structural skepticism. The only type of media that shows differences in consumption for this group compared to the others is radio. There is a statistically significant relationship between the perceived impact of media and local radio consumption, a finding consistent with the preeminence and importance of radio in these areas.

Subjective indicators of community well-being show a clear difference in favor of municipalities with active media. These municipalities report higher levels of optimism about the future of the territory (245.13 vs. 284.64,  $p < 0.001$ ) and a greater willingness to recommend the village as a place to live (253.93 vs. 275.95,  $p = 0.021$ ). In contrast, no significant differences were observed in the level of local integration ( $p = 0.224$ ).

Other variables, however, show weaker associations. With regard to media consumption, significant differences were found only in the use of local print or digital newspapers, which was higher among respondents living in municipalities with active media (276.3 vs. 227.1;  $p < 0.001$ ). For all other channels—such as radio  $p = 0.735$ , TV  $p = 0.454$ , municipal website  $p = 0.175$ , municipal Facebook page  $p = 0.936$ , and other social media  $p = 0.883$ —no statistically significant differences were observed, suggesting that their use is widespread and not directly dependent on the local media ecosystem.

Regarding motivations for staying informed and the willingness to share information, no statistically significant differences were found between municipalities ( $p > 0.05$ , for all items). In both contexts, the most valued reasons are those related to understanding the local context and engaging in conversation with others, rather than practical or participatory functions.

In relation to interest in current affairs topics, respondents from municipalities with less local media show greater interest in environmental issues, both at the local scale (282.54 vs. 247.66,  $p = 0.004$ ) and the national scale (282.00 vs. 248.19,  $p = 0.004$ ), while no significant differences were found for topics such as economy or sports. Conversely, municipalities with more active media exhibit less interest in local politics (278.09 vs. 252.05,  $p = 0.036$ ) and in local cultural and social issues (277.07 vs. 253.07,  $p = 0.048$ ), which could reflect a shift or diversification in informational repertoires.

In terms of perceived reliability of information sources, only one significant difference was found: municipal channels were perceived as more reliable in municipalities with fewer media. This is reflected in the lower perceived likelihood of receiving false news through these channels (187.3 vs. 220.4,  $p = 0.003$ ). Although it is not the focus of our study, we consider that this may be due to relational proximity to local authorities and lower exposure to multiple information sources, which reinforces the perception of authenticity and legitimacy of these messages (Torre et al., 2024; Verza et al., 2024).

It is worth noting that sociodemographic variables—gender, age, employment, education, income, time in the municipality, ideological self-placement, and municipality size—do not show significant differences between residents of the two types of municipalities ( $p > 0.05$ ). Employment status shows a marginal difference ( $p = 0.050$ , Cramér's  $V = 0.121$ ), as does time in municipality ( $p = 0.002$ , Cramér's  $V = 0.178$ ). These results allow us to rule out that the observed differences in media perceptions and uses are due to different population compositions.

Lastly, the presence of active media is predominantly concentrated in larger municipalities ( $p < 0.001$ , Cramér's  $V = 0.528$ ), which reinforces the structural relationship between demographic size and communicative infrastructure.

In the following section, we address how these dynamics affect the index of territorial hope.

## **7.2. Media predictors of territorial hope**

The index of territorial hope used to measure territorial hope in depopulated areas in Castilla-La Mancha was constructed from three key survey questions: the optimistic feeling about the future of their area, the feeling of belonging in their locality, and whether they would recommend their village as a good place to live. Principal component analysis showed how these items effectively capture a shared sense of hope, explaining a positive 58.5% of the variance in the sample responses.

Each item contributes differently to the index: the strongest loading corresponds to whether respondents would recommend their village (0.852), followed by sense of belonging (0.771), and optimism about the future (0.661).

In the initial exploration, the student's t-test for independent samples revealed statistically significant differences with respect to the variable of local media. Municipalities with more local media showed higher levels of hope ( $M = 12.99$ ,  $SD = 3.42$ ) than those with low or moderate communicative activity ( $M = 12.03$ ,  $SD = 3.93$ ),  $t(515.5) = 2.99$ ,  $p = 0.003$ . Although the effect size was small ( $d = 0.26$ ), it was statistically significant and relevant, suggesting that local media ecosystems may be associated with a more optimistic perception of the future.

Given the differences between the two samples, a multiple linear regression model was tested to further explore the factors influencing optimism about the future of the territory. The model incorporated both sociodemographic and media variables. Among the sociodemographic variables listed in Table 1, those included in the model were gender, age, employment, education, income, time in the municipality, ideological self-placement, and municipality size. On the communicative side, two types of variables were introduced: (a) the presence of local media channels (high: 4–5, low: 1–3), and (b) three indicators of individual communicative practices, that is, interest in local news, interest in national news, and trust in professional local media (press, radio, and TV).

This combination of variables allows for an integrated analysis of the extent to which structural conditions and perceptions about media influence the level of territorial hope expressed by citizens.

The model was statistically significant ( $F(10, 367) = 5.506, p < 0.001$ ) and explained 10.7% of the variance. The most relevant predictors are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Statistical values for predictors of territorial hope.

Independent variable	Standardized coefficient ( $\beta$ )	Significance ( $p$ )
Interest in local news	0.281	< 0.001
Trust in professional media	0.151	0.003
Age	0.163	0.002
Municipality size	0.120	0.040
Presence of local media	0.123	0.035
Interest in national news	-0.164	0.027

The results indicate that the territorial hope index varies according to certain communicative and sociodemographic conditions. Regarding the latter, higher age is associated with higher levels of territorial hope ( $\beta = .163, p = 0.002$ ). Likewise, larger municipalities within the sample tend to show higher levels of territorial hope ( $\beta = 0.120, p = 0.040$ ). Among the sociodemographic variables, only age (and municipality size) show significant effects in the linear regression model.

The statistical significance of media variables, alongside the absence of effects from the sociodemographic factors included in the model—gender, income, educational level, and ideological self-placement—reinforces the initial hypothesis: the level of territorial hope is explained primarily by the local media ecosystem. In line with this, living in a municipality with active media or communication projects is significantly associated with higher levels of territorial hope ( $\beta = 0.123, p = 0.035$ ).

In addition, trust in professional media—radio, newspapers, and TV—also has a positive effect ( $\beta = 0.151, p = 0.003$ ), suggesting that a positive perception of the local information ecosystem strengthens optimistic dispositions. Moreover, the strongest predictor in the model is interest in current affairs (see Table 1, for the response scale): the greater the attention paid to what is happening in one's immediate surroundings, the higher the level of hope placed in the future of the territory ( $\beta = 0.281, p < 0.001$ ). Conversely, interest in national news has a negative effect ( $\beta = -0.164, p = 0.027$ ).

Finally, a mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether satisfaction with local news coverage mediates the relationship between the presence of local media and the level of territorial hope. The results show that the indirect effect is statistically significant, although moderate (coefficient = 0.0956; 95% CI [0.0448, 0.1710]). A significant indirect effect was observed, indicating that the influence of the media structure on territorial hope is mediated by satisfaction with local information.

## 8. Discussion

In this study, we hypothesize that in a mediated environment, the existence of media infrastructures and local media practices can activate a disposition toward hope in rural areas marked by depopulation. Our analyses support the presence of such effects.

Beyond population composition, the media ecosystem accounts for differences in the perceived value of media, satisfaction with information, attributed impact, and sense of community well-being (SO1). In addition, we have developed, as a methodological contribution, an index of territorial hope based on three interrelated indicators: personal optimism, sense of belonging, and outward projection of the locality (SO2). Analysis using the PROCESS procedure confirms that part of the positive effect of media ensembles on territorial hope is mediated by satisfaction with local information. This indirect effect suggests that territorial hope is shaped not only by the objective presence of media but also by how positively these media are evaluated by residents. Satisfaction, understood as the feeling that there is sufficient news, that one's interests are represented, or that the media offer an accurate portrayal of the locality, functions as a key mechanism through which the communicative structure of a municipality translates into a hopeful disposition toward the future.

Furthermore, the most explanatory and predictive factors for territorial hope are variables linked to the communicative ecosystem and media-related practices (SO3). The most influential predictor is interest in local information, confirming that attention to one's immediate environment reinforces hopeful outlooks. Another relevant predictor is trust in professional media—radio, press, and TV—as well as the presence of local media. These findings suggest that the perceived reliability of the information system and the vitality of local communication contribute to sustaining a hopeful perspective on the future of the territory.

Despite the positive effects associated with the local media environment, one third of the respondents (28.4%) fully agree with the statement that “the media have no impact” on the life of their municipality. This pattern of skepticism does not differ significantly between municipalities with high and low levels of communicative activity, indicating that it is not primarily a response to current media conditions, but rather to news disaffection and to shared historical experiences of institutional neglect and accumulated disillusionment. This structural skepticism serves as a counterpoint to overly optimistic interpretations of the findings and may point to the limits of the symbolic power of the media when they are not perceived as legitimate spaces of representation by citizens who do not see themselves reflected in dominant discourses (Castelló, 2023; Galletero-Campos et al., 2023).

It is worth noting that, when comparing both categories of municipalities, the most significant media-related impact concerns outward projection. In particular, we highlight responses such as “they help draw attention from higher-level administrations” and “they serve as a tourist attraction.” In this regard, within the composition of the index, the item with the greatest explanatory weight is the statement “I would recommend my village as a good place to live,” which ranks above both the sense of integration and personal optimism. This suggests that territorial hope cannot be reduced to emotional attachment or individual optimism alone (Banini, 2021; Christmann, 2022).

This outward projection of the place's value—the desire for validation by others—reveals that hope operates as a relational disposition that transcends subjective experience (Hazlewood et al., 2023). Territorial hope cannot be understood solely as a disposition arising from individual experiences, but rather as a shared affective configuration shaped by institutional rhetorics, local communicative infrastructures, and everyday informational practices.

Rural mediatization (Zerrer, 2024) reinforces the idea that local media do not merely inform, but also shape how the community imagines itself and is imagined by others (Anderson & Harrison, 2010; Appadurai, 2013). Public visibility is not simply a technical condition for communicative existence; it constitutes a fundamental symbolic dimension that structures the perception of the territory as a legitimate, active, and future-oriented space (Brantner et al., 2021; Braunerhielm et al., 2024). Local media, therefore, function not only as channels of information but also as devices for collective visibility, in the Arendtian sense of public appearance. The perception that a territory matters, that it deserves to be inhabited or can be recommended to others, is mediated by the media's capacity to make everyday experiences, shared values, and possible horizons visible. Thus, the projective function of hope is closely tied to symbolic recognition, which not only affirms the internal value of the territory but also positions it externally as a legitimate place.

## 9. Conclusions

This study offers an empirical proposal for understanding territorial hope as an affective configuration that emerges from media ensembles in depopulated areas, which have historically been made visible through hopeless framings.

It certainly has limitations that should be acknowledged. It must be noted that the territorial hope index may be affected by social desirability bias. The high scores recorded ( $M = 12.51$  out of a maximum of 15,  $SD = 3.71$ ) could reflect, at least in part, the effect of a positive discursive climate currently permeating institutional, activist, and media rhetoric around rural territories. This phenomenon—which may be specific to the Spanish context when compared to other European cases—requires more in-depth analysis. Additionally, the questionnaire structure—positively framed response options—may introduce acquiescence bias, potentially inflating associations between local media and territorial hope (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

In this sense, the presence of local media not only facilitates the place-making process, but should also be considered in terms of how it may convey institutional and activist discourses that legitimize the territory as a place that deserves to exist and can have a future. For future research, we may assume that municipalities with strong local ecosystems tend to exhibit more circulation and sharing of these narratives of possibility, reinforcing a common sense that binds the community emotionally and discursively through hope. Qualitative studies are needed to explore whether expressions of territorial hope stem from lived everyday experiences in the immediate environment, or whether they instead reproduce an institutionalized rhetoric disseminated by the media. This distinction is key to understanding which future-oriented discourses are appropriated, resisted, or simply repeated by citizens. On the other hand, previous research has suggested that it is not enough for media outlets to merely exist; news outlets must provide up-to-date and valuable information, be active and engaged in the community, that is, produce reliable and accurate journalism (Costera Meijer, 2020).

The results open pathways for the development of situated communicative resilience indicators that assess the capacity of territories to sustain collective hopeful dispositions in the face of adverse conditions. The findings also suggest implications for the design of territorial communication strategies sensitive to local dynamics, and for the promotion of participatory media governance models that reinforce the symbolic agency of rural communities.

At the same time, future longitudinal studies could examine the evolution of affective dispositions in contexts of communicative transformation and assess whether changes in the media ecosystem lead to sustained variations in territorial hope. Comparative research in other rural regions would also be valuable, as it could identify contextual patterns and local specificities. Such an approach would contribute to consolidating a robust interpretive framework for understanding territorial hope as a communicative, relational, and political phenomenon.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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