

Use of nationwide broadcasts to impose the official discourse in Ecuador (2007-2021)

Uso de cadenas nacionales para imponer el discurso oficial en Ecuador (2007-2021)

Utilização de cadeias nacionais para impor o discurso oficial no Equador (2007-2021)

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ABSTRACT | Nationwide television broadcasts have been used as a mechanism of information or recurrent propaganda by several Latin American governments since the seventies of the 20th century. To varying degrees, depending on their nature and scope, through this resource they have sought to support the official version of relevant and sensitive facts and influence the control of public opinion. In the case of Ecuador, its use was intensified and systematized during the governments of Rafael Correa (2007-2017) and Lenín Moreno (2017-2021). Based on the events that occurred in those years, the legislation created and applied, the content analysis of different national networks and interviews with protagonists, we study its use as a strategic key of communication and propaganda by the political power, especially through the new public broadcaster Ecuador TV, parent company of the networks since 2007.

KEYWORDS: nationwide broadcasts; Ecuador; public service media; Rafael Correa; Lenín Moreno; propaganda; television; radio.

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RESUMEN | *Las cadenas nacionales en televisión han sido un mecanismo de información o de propaganda recurrente de varios gobiernos latinoamericanos desde los años setenta del siglo XX. En distinto grado según su naturaleza y alcance, a través de este recurso han buscado sostener la versión oficial de hechos relevantes y sensibles e influir en el control de la opinión pública. En el caso de Ecuador, su uso se intensificó y sistematizó durante los gobiernos de Rafael Correa (2007-2017) y Lenín Moreno (2017-2021). Con base en los hechos acaecidos en aquellos años, la legislación creada y aplicada, el análisis de contenido de distintas cadenas nacionales y entrevistas a protagonistas, se estudia su utilización como una clave estratégica de comunicación y propaganda por parte del poder político, especialmente a través de la nueva emisora pública Ecuador TV, matriz de las cadenas desde 2007.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *cadenas nacionales; Ecuador; medios públicos; Rafael Correa; Lenín Moreno; propaganda; televisión; radio.*

RESUMO | *Os "canais nacionais" na televisão têm sido um mecanismo de informação ou propaganda recorrente de vários governos latino-americanos desde os anos setenta do século XX. Em diferentes graus, dependendo de sua natureza e escopo, através deste recurso eles têm procurado apoiar a versão oficial de fatos relevantes e sensíveis e influenciar o controle da opinião pública. No caso do Equador, seu uso se intensificou e sistematizou durante os governos de Rafael Correa (2007-2017) e Lenin Moreno (2017-2021). A partir dos acontecimentos ocorridos naqueles anos, a legislação criada e aplicada, a análise de conteúdos de diferentes canais nacionais e entrevistas com protagonistas, seu uso como chave estratégica de comunicação e propaganda pelo poder político é analisada, especialmente através da nova emissora pública Equador TV, controladora dos canais desde 2007.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *redes nacionais; Equador; mídia de serviço público; Rafael Correa; Lenín Moreno; propaganda; televisão; radio.*

INTRODUCTION

The frequent use of national broadcasters in Latin America to communicate government messages to citizens or, in some cases, to broadcast electoral propaganda is reported in at least 16 countries, mainly through television. This paper analyzes the case of Ecuador, where the use of *cadena nacionales* (national broadcasts) was frequent during the presidential terms of Rafael Correa (2007-2017) and Lenín Moreno (2017-2021), both from the Alianza PAIS political movement.

The change of government on May 24, 2021, with the inauguration of Guillermo Lasso Mendoza, marked the end of the use of national broadcasts, an informative practice that had been used since 1975. This fact allows a retrospective look at the previous period to analyze the political use of national broadcasts and show the Ecuadorian model in comparison with others in the region. Given the political context of the presidencies of Correa and Moreno, especially the former, which is considered to be framed within left-wing populism (De la Torre, 2016), it can be hypothesized that *cadena*s were a strategic communication key for the control and direction of public opinion. We ask the following questions: (1) How effective was the use of this communication tool? (2) To what extent did it become propaganda? and (3) Did it evolve in the same way under the Correa and Moreno administrations?

In Ecuador, after the entry into force of the new 2008 Constitution, which mandated the early election of all the country's offices, Correa, who had been elected for the 2007-2011 term, ran again and won in a single round on April 26, 2009, with 51.99% of the vote. His second term lasted from August 2009 to May 2013. The third term, after winning in February 2013 with 57.17% of the vote, ran until May 2017. In these last two periods, his confrontation with the media intensified. At the end of his term, in May 2017, Rafael Correa achieved historic levels of acceptance and popularity. He and his party won the 11 general elections, sectional elections, consultations and referendums registered between 2007 and 2017, the longest presidency in the country's history. Correa supported the 2017 presidential election of his former vice president, Lenín Moreno, who govern the country from 2017 to 2021.

THEORETICAL-HISTORICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Since the 1970's, the concept of the *cadena nacional* or *cadena* has been clearly understood in the collective imagination of Latin American countries. It is a government message, specifically from the President of the Republic or the highest authorities of the nation, civilian or military, broadcast on all national, regional, and local television and radio stations with an open signal.

This means of communication has been used in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela. The historical roots of most of their regulatory norms can be found in periods of military rule. Despite the reasons of public utility on which they were generally based, subsequent regulatory reforms in many countries of the region led to their instrumentalization, “transforming them –in practice– into a powerful form of advertising and promotion of government policies, as well as State interference and control, all of which is far from the original *raison d’être* of such channels” (Alianza Regional por la Libre Expresión e Información, 2014, p. 4).

The legality to which they are subject varies in different ways. In Argentina and Colombia, for example, the chains can be imposed by the executive branch. For Mengo (2018), in Argentina, the chains became a means of political communication par excellence, especially in the government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015), and were inscribed in a special relationship of forces.:

[The president] strengthened her style of communication based on confrontation with part of the press, which she chose as her rival. For Kirchnerism, the *cadena* functioned as a kind of counter-hegemonic instrument that it had to use forcefully (with the threat of sanctions), because otherwise the mainstream media would not broadcast, or at least with bad intentions, the issues that it considered to be institutionally relevant. (Mengo, 2018, p. 14).

In Venezuela, national broadcasts are regulated and the President of the Republic is authorized to broadcast through all media, without time or frequency limits. In fact, Venezuela and Ecuador have become a threat to freedom of expression due to the abuse of national broadcasts imposed by the government (Alianza Regional por la Libre Expresión e Información, 2014). Between 2013 and mid-2014, the two countries with the highest number of *cadenas* were Ecuador, with 817, and Venezuela, with 252. Venezuela led in terms of airtime during the period analyzed, with 8,192 minutes of Nicolás Maduro’s broadcasts, while Correa recorded a total of 4,309 minutes (Namur & Correa, 2014).

In Mexico, the use of the national network is limited to government news or work reports. There is *La Hora Nacional*, which is broadcast on all radio stations on Sundays. There are countries where there are either no regulations or where *cadenas* are not mandatory for any media outlet, as is the case in Costa Rica, Paraguay and Peru. In Brazil, the regulation is contained in several laws, and the national networks are mostly used for free electoral propaganda. Similarly, in Chile, television networks are not mandatory except for those related to electoral propaganda. In other countries, however, the networks are

regulated and broadcast frequently. In Nicaragua, for example, a specific law even allows daily *cadena*s, which the government calls “family and community media”, that function as “official channels” (Alianza Regional por la Libre Expresión e Información, 2014, p. 50).

In Ecuador, the legislation to create national broadcasters began with the Radio and Television Broadcasting Law (Decreto Supremo No. 256-A, 1975), at the time of the military dictatorship headed by Guillermo Rodríguez Lara. This law has undergone five reforms (1992, 1995, 2002, 2013 and 2019) under five different administrations (Alianza Regional por la Libre Expresión e Información, 2014). However, in essence, it has maintained the two basic characteristics of mandatory and free broadcasting; i.e., the government could interrupt the regular programming of private, public, and community audiovisual media at any time.

According to the inventory of the National Council for the Regulatory, Development and Promotion of Information and Communication (Consejo de Regulación, Desarrollo y Promoción de la Información y Comunicación, 2020), by May 24, the final day of his presidency, *cadena*s in Ecuador had reached the 24 provinces and its 221 municipalities, and the 786 registered audiovisual media (offline) and its digital platforms, a total of 617 radio stations, 82 open television channels, and 87 cable channels.

During the period studied, two types of *cadena*s can be distinguished: national and citizens'. The former are mandatory broadcasts in public, private, and community media and are audiovisual works, usually produced and post-produced, with an approximate duration of between two and 12 minutes. On many occasions, however, the concept of a *cadena* was not strictly adhered to, since only one network was forced to broadcast them, in order to criticize certain information broadcast or its owners, presenters or commentators. In other words, the network was used to insert the government's message into independent or critical media; the executive branch refuted a piece of information as propaganda in a forced manner by passing it off as a *cadena*. Citizen *cadena*s are usually understood as the Saturday interventions of the President of the Republic on official television, which are later reproduced by related media or taken up by the news programs of independent networks. In general, given their greater media impact, citizen *cadena*s (or the names they have had in other countries) have been studied more than *cadena*s oficiales, although the latter have been numerically important.

Until 2007, a national private network, based in Quito and Guayaquil, acted as the *cadena*'s matrix, to which other television and radio stations throughout the country were obliged to link and rebroadcast. According to Fernando Alvarado (personal communication, February 9, 2021), former minister in the Correa

government, this was done “for practical reasons” to avoid having to send the tape, CD, or DVD, physically or digitally, to all the radio and television stations, “which would be extremely complex”. In this scenario, the most viable option was for one of the six networks with national coverage (on FM frequency) to receive the government content for replication. Or, as was the case until the late 1990s, the authority would go to the television station, to its studios in Quito or Guayaquil, to record or broadcast a live message to the nation.

After winning the elections in November 2006, Correa’s campaign team considered it a “high political and communication strategy” to create the first public television station and, at the same time, a public radio station (Sánchez, personal communication, March 15, 2020). In 2007, *Ecuador TV* was born and since then has been the parent of all *cadenas*. For Chavero and colleagues (2017), who analyze President Correa’s Saturday program *Enlace ciudadano*, similar to *Aló Presidente* (1999-2012) in Venezuela, he bet on a political strategy by making private and independent media his main opponent, relegating political opponents themselves to the background. The radio and television program, colloquially known as *Sabatinas* because it was broadcast on Saturdays for an average of three hours, served as the government’s accountability to Ecuadorians. The direct contact with the people and the content of these links were in turn picked up by national news programs and the press (Conaghan & De la Torre, 2008), so that the topics covered were included in the weekly media agenda.

Correa thus marked the agenda setting. For Stornaiolo (2019), Correa’s protagonism was almost absolute, and he pursued the construction of a character idolized by the population. “He was master of ceremonies, singer, presenter, dancer and whatever the situation demanded. He was accompanied by his Quichua translator, the ‘mashi’ (companion) José Maldonado” (p. 52). The president mocked his political opponents, activists, and trade unionists live. “He gave orders so that in the following week some judges would promote trials in favor of Correa and his government” (Stornaiolo, p. 53).

In his *sabatinas*, in addition to attacking journalists, Correa tore up newspapers and –on several occasions– called on the audience to boycott them by not buying them or watching certain television networks. His attacks on critical media included insults such as “mercantilist press”, “corrupt”, “immoral”, “manipulative”, “unethical”, “scoundrels”, “tabloids”, “loudmouths”, “vultures”, “cynics”, “gossips”, “unbalanced”, “ink hitmen” (Fundamedios, 2012; Stornaiolo, 2019; Neira, 2021). This staging deeply penetrated the audience, considering that from January 2007 until his departure from power in 2017, Correa made 523 citizen *cadenas*, corresponding to 1,544 hours of transmissions financed by State resources (Stornaiolo, 2019).

On the other hand, it was recorded that between 2008 and 2017, the government issued 477 administrative and economic sanctions against media and journalists.

With this pattern, Correa not only constructed an image of activity before public opinion –as Bouza and González (2009) and Chavero (2015) have stated– but he also elaborated a climate of tension and hostility that would continue to mobilize the electorate. Correa’s political communication was therefore tactical: he used the same media tools to “counterbalance the hegemonic discourse of information and impose a new vision of political reality and actors” (Chavero et al., 2017, p. 148).

Since his inauguration in January 2007, Correa has transformed the media landscape, which has historically been dominated by private companies linked to the banking sector (Panchana-Macay & Barrera, 2021). For Cerbino and colleagues (2014), the actions of the Ecuadorian State have historically favored the concentration of private ownership of media companies, their close ties to finance capital, and the formation of media conglomerates through a set of legal norms promoted successively by governments of different signs since at least 1935. According to these authors, for decades the media had control over the selection and prioritization of issues that could be discussed. “The political system has not been able to maintain true independence from the media, leaving to them the leadership of the production and dissemination of social representations that converge with the interests of the dominant sectors” (Chavero et al., 2017, p. 127).

Correa’s discourse during his first years in office has been analyzed by Zepeda (2010), who shows that the president referred to the “oligarchy”, the “servile press”, and “power groups” as his internal enemies, and to “big transnational capital” and “neoliberal globalization” as his external enemies (p. 178). All of this, Mancero (2017) adds, was accompanied by a nationalist and conservative discourse about “recovering the homeland” or “the homeland already belongs to everyone” (p. 320), and even the revival of hymns such as “homeland, sacred land”, to which he opposed a press that, he called “*vendepatrias*” (p. 327). In this way, he framed his messages within an already established narrative.

Correa’s discourse thus prioritized the populist perspective of conflict with the other, once the enemies of the homeland were identified and revealed. Characteristics of this type of discourse are Manichaeism, simplification of the political space and polarization, along with the symbolic appropriation of the leadership of the political mobilization of the targeted people (De la Torre, 2010).

1. To sell one’s homeland (translator’s note).

The communicative dimension of his discourse reached, for the first time in the history of Ecuadorian democracy, the preponderance to impose a single vision of facts through the expansion and use of public media (Panchana & Mena, 2020), especially during the electoral period (Panchana-Macay & Barrera, 2021). The weekly programs of *Enlace Ciudadano* in Ecuador represented a form of transversal and obligatory communication. Correa's discourse was reinforced by recently created public media, confiscated media, or private media aligned with the government's thinking through State advertising.

In this line, the professionalization of government communication and its discursive narrative becomes important. Riorda (2011) argues that it is not accepted that all communication, especially government advertising, should be informative or neutral, and Carlos Galecio (personal communication, July 15, 2022), former news director of *Ecuavisa*, claims that in Ecuador's networks, the Correa government used the most modern tools of audiovisual communication to create a contemporary, attractive and effective staging.

This was not the only case in the region. Latin American countries experienced economic crises that marked the end of the neoliberal cycle, amid social outbursts and repressions with varying degrees of violence. Such a context was the breeding ground for the emergence of a new regional left (Natanson, 2010), also called the progressive left wave (Albán, 2016), 21st century socialism, socialism of good life (Souza, 2010), or neopopulism (Rincón & Magrini, 2010), which practically dethroned the traditional party systems and gave way to very popular leaderships.

Figures such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Néstor Kirchner in Argentina, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador reconfigured presidential authority and proposed a broad program of institutional and economic reforms with broad popular support (Badillo et al., 2015).

Natanson (2010) argues that the vacuum left by the traditional parties in this reconfiguration was filled by other actors, such as some media, which in certain countries and at different times assumed the political role of the opposition, creating a climate of polarization and confrontation. This would explain the tense relationship with the media that almost all Latin American presidents of this political tendency have been "ultra-mediatic in a double sense: they owe part of their rise to the power of the media and they are very aware of the weight and influence of the press in the political game" (Natanson, 2010, p. 63), which does not prevent them from also being anti-mediatic.

The awareness of the power of the projected image and the will to use it to their advantage led these governments to develop strategies to establish their own times and formats. Such a scheme, called mediapolitics by Rincón and Magrini (2010), basically seeks to position the political agenda over the media agenda, without mediation or intermediaries. Governments of the new Latin American left became communication actors and, to this end, followed certain processes that Fernando Ruiz (2010) identifies as “strategies of politicians to recover politics” (p. 46). Other authors have referred to these strategies in the context of what has been called mediatized populism, inscribed in the global trend of the mediatization of politics in different regions of the world (Mazzoleni, 2014; Chakravartty & Roy, 2017), although the models differ according to different political and media cultures and whether populism is considered an ideology or a discourse (Manucci, 2019).

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

Three complementary resources will be used to achieve the objectives of this research: the historical-documentary method, based on the reconstruction of facts from documents and primary sources, as well as interviews with protagonists or witnesses conducted between 2019 and 2022, the analysis of the media policies of the different governments, and the collection and processing of data on national broadcasters.

The analysis of media policy refers to the regulatory and legal aspects that have structured a new institutional scheme and a *modus operandi* allegedly in favor of the interests of governmental political control. By calibrating the spirit, the letter, and the application of specific laws on freedom of expression, information, and communication, we conceptualized the possible ways in which propaganda may be engaged, despite the existence of a formal democracy in Ecuador. Jowett and O’Donnell (2012) define propaganda as “the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that promotes the desired intention of the propagandist” (p. 7). I.e., it is a precise, methodical, and organized development of means to achieve an end, and its results are aimed at controlling people through a single interpretation of what is known (Ellul, 1973).

Data on the number and nature of radio and television broadcasts were obtained mainly from the reports of Fundamedios (Fundación Andina para la Observación y Estudio de Medios), an Ecuadorian non-governmental organization founded in 2007 to promote and defend freedom of expression and quality journalism in Ecuador and Latin America. The fact that Fundamedios has been criticized by Correa, who even threatened to close it down because he considers it a political

actor (Scharfenberg, 2015), should not lead us to classify its reports, which are generally well-received, as biased.

The information was supplemented by 22 interviews with protagonists of the subject, with informed consent, conducted between 2019 and 2022, with structured and semi-structured questionnaires of between ten and 20 questions, as part of a doctoral thesis. This work uses seven interviews, including directors and professionals of media considered opposition by the Correa government, former directors of public media, mainly of the conglomerate *Medios Públicos EP* and *Ecuador TV*, employees of some of these public communication companies, teachers specialized in the regulatory history and exercise of communication in the country, and spokespersons of organizations that oversee these processes, such as Fundamedios.

Access to some of the oral sources used was more difficult because they were fugitives from justice. This was the case of Fernando Alvarado Espinel, head of the Secretariat of Communication (Secom) during most of Correa's presidency, ideologist of his communication apparatus and head of the private networks seized by the State in 2008. It should be noted that until June 2022, there were 20 high-ranking former officials of Correa's government with fugitives from justice.

RESULTS

Nature, use and frequency of *cadena*s in the Correa era

After almost five decades, the consolidated state communication structure has been modernized and systematized since the launch of Ecuador TV, an open television signal, in 2007. Fundamedios accounted, between 2007 and 2016, 5584 channels broadcast nationwide. The year 2016 concentrated the largest number: 2405 (figure 1). According to this organization, this accumulated time corresponds to 158 days, 3,792 hours or 22,841 continuous minutes of news. The largest growth peaks occurred first between 2012 and 2013, and especially between 2016 and 2017, when they practically quadrupled from one year to the next. It was “an almost daily media bombardment that has taken over the information and entertainment spaces” (Fundamedios, 2017, p. 4).

Edison Lanza, in his report for the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), warned of the excessive and discretionary use of national broadcasters. The report states that the information transmitted by the government through mandatory links should be used to meet urgent needs in matters of “clear and genuine public interest” (Lanza, 2015, p. 161) and for the time strictly necessary:

It is not just any information that legitimizes the President of the Republic to interrupt the normal program, but information that may be of interest to the community for the knowledge of facts that may be of public importance and that are really necessary for the real participation of citizens in the collective life (Lanza, 2015, p. 161).

The use of this mechanism for partisan purposes could become a surreptitious form of censorship, because when their programs were interrupted to broadcast the link, the media were “prevented from exercising their right to disseminate the information they wish, within the framework of their exercise of freedom of expression” (Fundamedios, 2012, p. 3).

The *cadena*s routinely interrupted newscasts to defend the official position on bills or trials, often clarifying, denying or directly discrediting information or opinions that it deemed inaccurate in private media (Fundamedios, 2017). On several occasions, the networks were used as a replica to contradict an editorial position of a particular television network, or even to discredit a news anchor or interviewee in the same space. Therefore, the *cadena* concept was not respected in terms of the relevance and timeliness of the content and that it was linked, i.e., throughout the network of television and radio stations in the country.

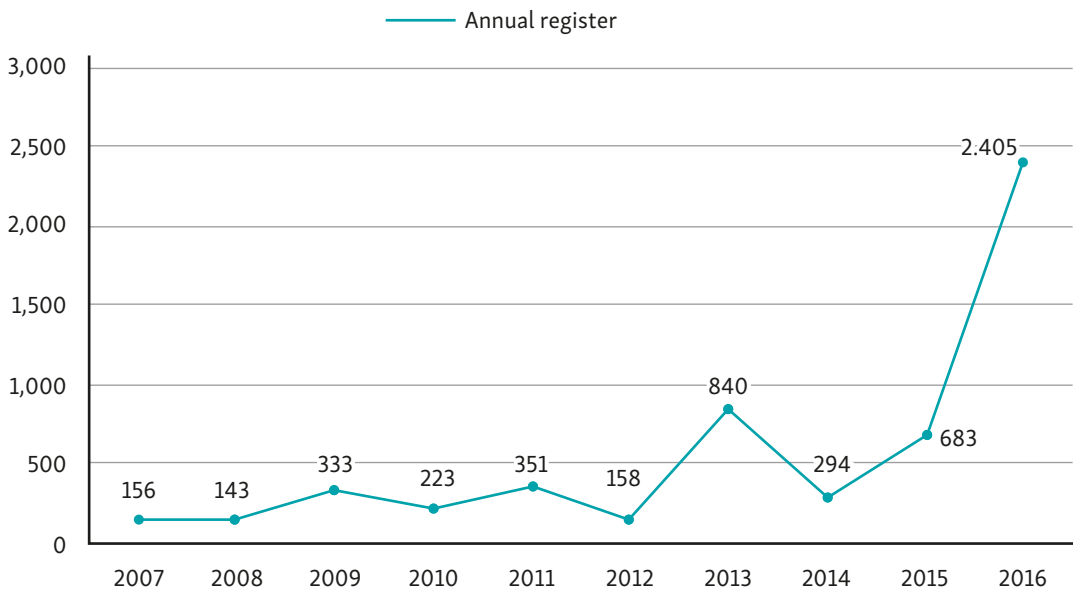


Figure 1. Radio and TV networks in Correa’s government (2007-2016)

Source: Own elaboration based on Fundamedios data (2017).

“It was like they were insulting you in your own house. There was no network: they invaded your talk show or your news program to disguise, under the pretext of a *cadena*, some kind of response in the form of insults” (Galecio, personal communication, May 5, 2021). In this context, the pressure was concentrated on the executives of Ecuador TV. As a former news director of that channel testified:

The public channel had to have all the material ready –which was sent to us by Secom– so that the networks and radios could be hooked to our signal. Sometimes *Ecuador TV* had to lend its resources, such as editors, journalists, cameras or archive material, to collaborate with the content of the channels. (personal communication², February 21, 2020).

Between January 2008 and January 2017, 178 *cadenas* with disqualifying purposes were reported. “In all of them, the opinions of the characters were attacked, discredited and questioned for having criteria or thinking differently from the ruling party” (Fundamedios, 2017, p. 3). This is a 3.18% of the total number of national broadcasts during Correa’s presidency. Even though they represent a rather low percentage, they were revealing of his disqualifying intentions. The main peak occurred in 2016, as shown in figure 2, when 65 *cadenas* were broadcast with the sole purpose of attacking and discrediting a journalist, a media outlet or its owners.

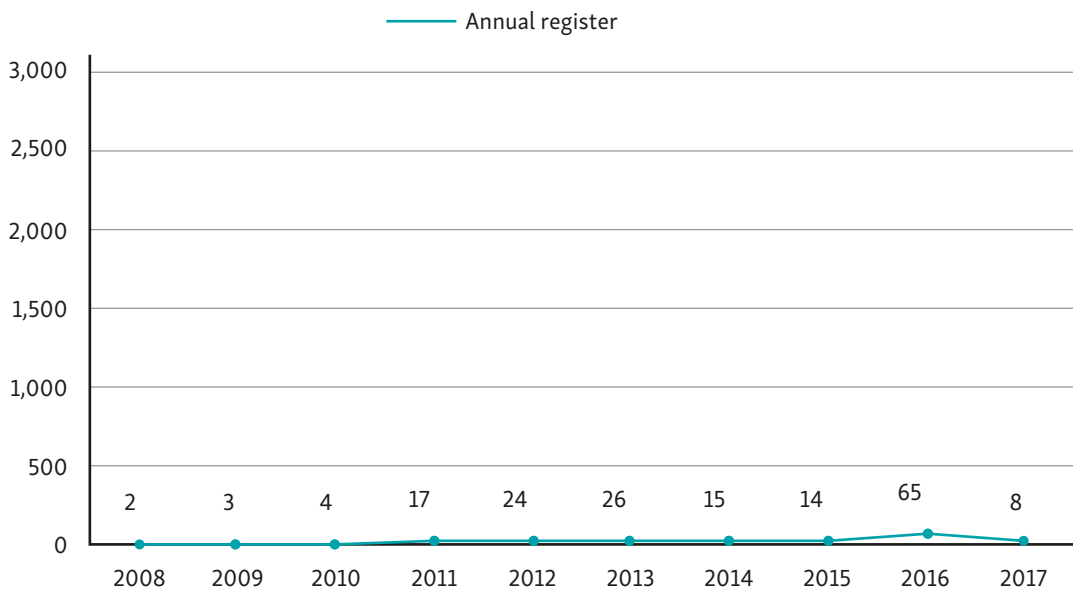


Figure 2. Radio and TV channels in Correa’s government with disqualifying purposes (2008-2017)

Source: Own elaboration based on Fundamedios data (2017).

2. The person requested not to be identified.

In 2014, for example, a *cadena* issued by Secom interrupted opinion and news programs “to disqualify the newspaper *Expreso* and claim that the media are deceiving their readers” (Fundamedios, 2017, p. 5). In the same year, Secom aired through cadenas a fifty-second space titled *La ciudadanía le habla a los medios* (Citizens speak to the media), with testimonies of citizens criticizing the journalistic work of a particular communicator. Similarly, on December 1, 2015, a *cadena* interrupted the stellar newscast of the private channel *Ecuavisa* to disqualify the vice-president of news and anchor of that channel since its creation in 1967, “because of comments made by the journalist about one of the constitutional reforms that the ruling party presented as an amendment and that was approved by Congress” (Fundamedios, 2017, p. 6). In the words of César Ricaurte, executive director of Fundamedios.:

There were countless insulting messages dedicated exclusively to critical channels such as *Ecuavisa* and *Teleamazonas*. Let us not forget that some networks, under pressure, had to get rid of iconic journalists, such as the interviewer Jorge Ortiz of *Teleamazonas*. Even a newspaper [*El Universo*] had to fire its opinion editor [Emilio Palacio], who was prosecuted because an editorial entitled *No a las mentiras* (No to lies) upset the President (personal communication, August 12, 2021).

The above cases show how the strategy of using national broadcasts was used to impose an official version and generate public opinion, even to the point of discrediting and publicly disqualifying certain communicators. By personalizing the narratives and inserting a well-known character in the imagination of the viewers, the message gained more power. Moreover, as a result of the 2013 Organic Law of Communication and the role played by Supercom (the sanctioning body that created this law), at least 20 journalists and media companies were reprimanded and sanctioned with the obligation to publicly apologize, with economic fines, or –given the impossibility or their refusal– with suspensions or closures (Macaroff, 2010; Checa Montúfar & Barredo Ibáñez, 2017). An extreme but paradigmatic case of the use of national broadcasts was the one carried out to quell the rebellion that broke out after a police protest, an attempted coup according to the official version, on September 30, 2010. Without going into all the details, it was an “indefinite and uninterrupted” chain, according to the memorandum received by radios and televisions, which would end up lasting just over six hours (Seis horas..., 2010). “Along with a very professional team”, recalled the then Secretary of Communication, Fernando Alvarado, “we demonstrated that day the importance of having a public communication platform” (personal communication, February 9, 2021).

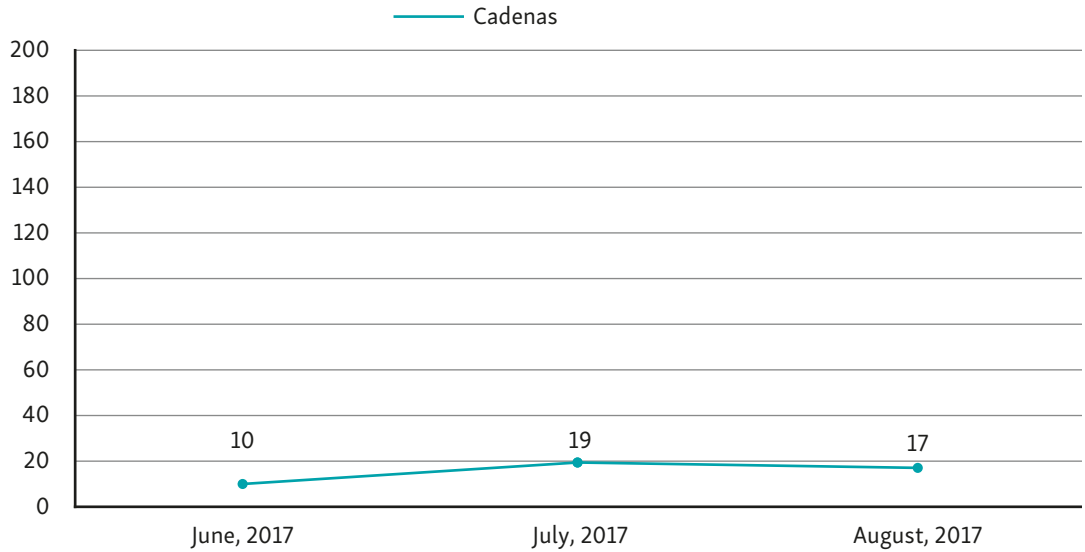
Cadenas in the Moreno era (2017-2021)

Lenín Moreno took an important step to reconcile with the media after Correa left power. Distancing himself from his predecessor's government, which he even called a propaganda State (Araujo, 2017), he announced a review of the public communication policy from the beginning of his term in 2017. One change had to do with the distribution of the radioelectric spectrum for radio and television: public media could not exceed 10% and community media, 34%, whereas in the law of 2013, public media could have up to 33%. This reform allowed again the private prevalence in the communication sector, whose minimum percentage could reach up to 56%, although in fact they represented, as of May 2021, 86.86%.

However, the new President used some communication and propaganda mechanisms inherited from his predecessor for political purposes, although in a measured way, according to the editor-in-chief of *TC Televisión*, Alina Manrique (personal communication, July 15, 2021). Since 2017, national *cadenas* were broadcast at set times, detailing the activities carried out weekly, such as the program *El gobierno informa*, broadcast every Monday, at prime-time AAA (20:00), before the prime-time newscasts. Likewise, these spaces were used to disseminate news about social plans, economic diagnoses, and other aspects of the country. Between June and August 2017, according to data sent to the authors for this research by César Ricaurte, executive director of Fundamedios, 46 national *cadenas* were broadcast, although this number is sized by different repetitions. In total, there were 129 imposed for all television and radio channels in those three months (figure 3).

In June 2021, Fundamedios began collecting data on the *cadenas* during the Moreno administration. According to Ricaurte, "Moreno continued to use the *cadenas* to position his image and do the same thing as his predecessor: propaganda" (personal communication, August 12, 2021). He illustrates that in just 43 days –from April 1 to May 13, 2021– the government broadcast 313 radio and television *cadenas* for a total of 814 minutes. When the pandemic broke out in March 2020, the government provided daily bulletins on national television at different times of the day, which became the only way to know official data on the number of cases of COVID-19.

Most of this content was live, when the then President or government officials broadcast the measures taken, epidemiological reports, the number of deaths, restrictions, measures due to the state of emergency, or the visits of the authorities to different hospitals and morgues in the country. At the end of his mandate, the communication strategy was to position the progress of the vaccination and to appease the critics for the cases of corruption in the administration of the vaccines, which even invaded the television news, since the chains lasted from eight to 20 minutes. All radio stations and channels were forced to link to the *Ecuador TV* signal.



Note: A total of 129 cadenas were broadcast with repeats during the day.

Figure 3. Radio and TV cadenas in the Moreno administration (June-August 2017)

Source: Own elaboration based on Fundamedios data (2017).

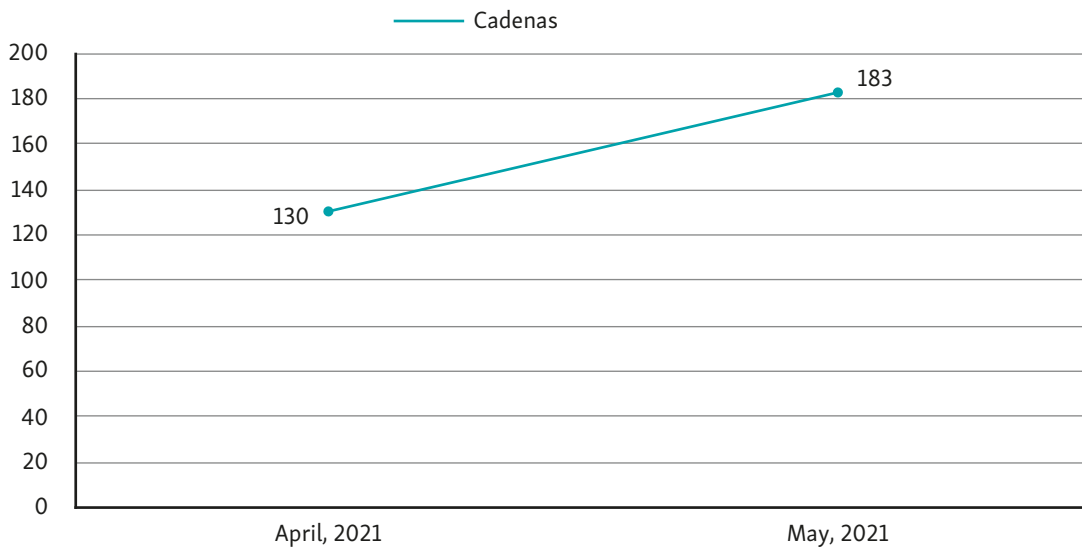


Figure 4. Radio and TV cadenas related to COVID-19 in the last months of Moreno's government

Source: Own elaboration based on Fundamedios data (2021).

Such spaces have also been used to impose the official version on other issues, under the concept of issues of public interest. For example, in October 2019, Ecuador experienced violent social protests following the announcement of some economic measures, especially the increase in fuel prices. There were 11 days of blockades and

violence, with more than 550 injured and five dead. A quarter of the country was paralyzed. National *cadena*s tried to calm the situation and government messages were generated to denounce, among other things, the existence of a coup attempt led by opposition politicians, of which Rafael Correa and his allies, who have distanced themselves from Moreno since June 2017, were mainly accused. As a result of the public pressure exerted by the executive branch and the alleged evidence presented in these *cadena*s, the judiciary ordered the detention of several government critics.

Likewise, on Sunday, May 23, at 9:00 p.m., on its last day in power, the government broadcast the obligatory 53-minute chain called *Un país de todos* (A country for all), made by the independent production company Satré at a cost of US\$78,171 (including VAT), according to the managers of the General Secretariat of Communication of the Presidency (Segcom), who were consulted for this investigation. It was an interview with President Moreno conducted by the journalist Gisella Bayona, host of the seized channel *TC Televisión*. The purpose of the interview, according to the journalist, was to discuss the achievements and successes of this administration. Moreno described the previous government as “repressive” and his as one of “full respect for rights and freedoms” (Secretaría General de Comunicaciones, 2021), in an effort to distinguish himself from Correism, although in the end he used the same technique to impose the official version.

Ecuavisa’s Teresa Arboleda, anchor of their news program since 1979, points out that from 2007 to 2021, the government imposed the official discourse through the networks, “which became their weapon to belittle the words of others and destroy those who think differently, especially during the presidency of Rafael Correa. With Moreno the *cadena*s had a different nuance, but with Correa the attacks were constant” (personal communication, August 9, 2021). Despite their support in several laws, according to Ángel Sánchez Mendoza (personal communication, March 15, 2020), former content director of *Enlaces Ciudadanos*, the networks have “repeatedly” violated legal and administrative procedures at critical political moments, such as when the government had to position a single point of view in the midst of social and political upheavals or military rebellions since 1997 (Jordán Tobar & Panchana Macay, 2009).

CONCLUSIONS

The new legal framework for communication created by the administrations of Rafael Correa (2007-2017) and Lenín Moreno (2017-2021) allowed the improvement of a tool that already existed and was effective in other Latin American countries, albeit with different variations: mandatory national broadcasts (*cadena*s).

These provided a guaranteed space in all audiovisual media, even without a time limit when the messenger was the President of the Republic. Relying on independent private networks to broadcast was a limitation, as happened to presidents before Correa, some of whom were overthrown and had to borrow studios from commercial channels to deliver their message to the nation. Therefore, it was essential to create the first public channel, *Ecuador TV*, in 2007, in order to have communication control over all the links of the networks, from production to broadcasting, including live broadcasting, since this was the matrix of all the national channels, to which the other media were forced to connect to reproduce the official message.

A modern and effective State communication structure, previously non-existent or weakly functioning, was consolidated, with the new public television as the main instrument. This practice did not change in the government of Lenín Moreno, although its intensive use was focused especially to calm the social protests of October 2019 and share the information related to the COVID-19 pandemic, to create an image of managerial efficiency, without the personalistic and populist protagonism constantly sought by his predecessor in the presidency.

The national networks, both in terms of their number and their content, were important instruments at the service of the government to define the official message and impose it on public opinion through the audiovisual media, the most widely viewed in the country. The networks were a key element in the legal framework created to control information and public opinion, to the detriment of freedom of expression and freedom of the press, given their coercive nature. Their political effectiveness in shaping public opinion was evident in the successive presidential and other elections won by Correa. The wounds they left on the political and journalistic opposition led the new government of President Guillermo Lasso to abandon the national broadcasts in 2021, considering them incompatible with a full democracy.

The frequent use of networks in a large number of Latin American countries, including Ecuador, can be explained by the remarkable history of overthrows and coups d'état, which an effective control of public opinion would help to reduce. In this regard, television –or audiovisual history in all its platforms in this 21st century– has emerged as the most appropriate instrument for its mass audience, which opens the door to future case studies or comparative research in the region.

In the use of national broadcasts, and more so in Correa's citizen *cadena*s because of their media impact, there is a clear tendency to use them as propaganda tools, attempting to expand and impose the official discourse. This is mainly due to their number, but also to the technical quality with which they are produced and

the coercive character that accompanies them, which the presidents themselves have recognized. The case of the national television broadcast following the police rebellion of September 30, 2010, which could have led to a coup against Correa, was paradigmatic in this regard. A well-oiled public communication platform proved crucial to channeling public opinion, quelling the uprising and the events of public disorder.

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