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Digital strategic communication in Ecuador’s public organisations

Current state and future projection

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Abstract

Introduction: This article analyses how the digital revolution has forced Ecuador’s public organisations to redesign their strategies in order to promote their services and interact with citizens.

Method: The study follows a non-experimental, exploratory and descriptive approach based on a questionnaire survey applied to the chief communications officers of 52 public institutions.

Results: The main findings are related to the structure of the communication departments of public institutions; the stage of development of public organisations in the design of social media strategies;

the social networks and resources most commonly used by public institutions; and the tools used to measure their effectiveness.

Discussion: The results indicate that public organisations need to professionalise their social media management team and to elevate their relationship with citizens to a strategic level.

Conclusions: It is necessary to generate a professional strategy and structure to improve the management of social media.

Keywords

Ecuador; digital media; public organisations; strategic communication; public communication.

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Translation by **CA Martínez-Arcos** (PhD in Communication
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1. Introduction

The use of digital media has altered the management of communications. New technologies allow the expansion of social relations between different groups, citizens and organisations, consumers and companies, all of which want to share their experiences to find solutions to local issues and problems that, in many cases, are common and have a global impact.

“Indeed, participatory democracy, which is critical autonomy, is based on participation as a set of procedures and relational processes where agents engage in a symmetrical and reciprocal relation of communication, cooperation and shared responsibility. The adherence of the agents involved in the social life to this form of participation, as a need and right, is what enables the recovery of the transversal and relational sense of participation. This recovery requires innovations capable of translating participation into relational communication for joint citizen action” (Alguacil, 2006: 24-25).

This issue is of interest to researchers seeking to discover how this new reality develops; and, in particular, to those related to the management of digital communications, its stages of development in different types of organisations and, in this case, in public institutions that seek to maintain a relationship with the community.

This research derives from the project titled “Observatory of strategic communication in Ecuador” [1], which has been carried out since 2014 by the organisational communication section of the Department of Communication Sciences of the Private Technical University of Loja (*Universidad Técnica Particular de Loja*). The first stage of the research project focused on identifying the current state and trends in strategic communication in Ecuador, in order to design the base line of the strategic communication management. The second phase focuses on the analysis of the digital communications of private and public organisations in Ecuador. The study presented in this article focuses on the public sector given that, compared to traditional media, digital media offers an interactive platform for the exchange of views and the research of political issues, and it has made it more convenient than ever for the average citizens to interact with the media (Day, Janus & Davis, 2005: 230). Previous studies have consistently shown a positive impact of the use of the Internet and, in particular, that internet users have greater interest in political affairs, acquire more knowledge and have higher probability of participation in politics than average citizens (Richey and Zhu, 2015: 396-397).

1.1. Public communication

In order for citizens to be able to intervene in public affairs and in the decision making process of the politicians who manage the government and other organisations, and to receive transparent, complete and intelligible information about who their representatives are. Citizens also need to know whether public servants manage the public resources with equity, fairness and efficiency and correctly plan what technicians and the rest of employees should do from their different instances.

The government, through public institutions, aims to comply with the obligations and responsibilities outlined in the constitution and the laws of each country, commissioning and executing works, acquiring goods and requesting services, as well as offering these goods and services to society in order to correct deficiencies and meet needs. Throughout this process, communication plays a key role, which is to advertise the work and governance, and for this, institutions make use of all the traditional and digital media at their disposal to develop specific functions. “The media rarely vanish: they tend to adapt themselves to the new ecosystem in order to survive, for instance, by adopting or imitating the relevant features of the new media or by integrating themselves to the new ecosystem” (Scolari, 2009: 44).

However, information is not only delivered to external audiences, but also to public servants and employees who implement the government’s policies and provide public services, and are thus exposed to the judgment of public opinion.

1.2. Digital integrated strategic communication

Strategic communication performs diverse functions for the organisation, whether they are public or private. These functions include:

1. Defining and advertising the organisation’s identity for the internal audiences, through organisational or internal communication.
2. Transforming the identity features of the organisation into symbols or signs, to systematically communicate them to external audiences.

In this way, the identity of an organisation is projected through an image that generates trust in their public: “In fact, its function can be described as the integral management of the organisation’s brand” (Tironi and Cavallo, 2004: 27). Therefore, “to be able to meet its communication objectives, the organisation requires management, which implies planning, organising, directing, evaluating and controlling the internal and external activities and relations of the organisation” (Paladines, 2012: 35).

Technology has a high impact on the internal communications of all kinds of organisations, whether public or private.

“Communication is no longer one-way and top down, but it encourages conversation among all employees, a more participatory model that allows both descending (top down) and ascending (from bottom to top) communication flows” (Celaya and Herrera, 39: 2007).

This is a more fluid and dynamic type of communication that allows the integration of all employees. “Integrated communication involves all employees who are part of the organisation, and in order to have an impact, all employees must be aligned to a corporate identity (mission, value) that is transmitted to the different audiences” (Paladines and Granda, 2013: 106).

Digital communications derive from the use of new technologies that have been introduced radically and quickly in the field of social media, which facilitates users’ instant communication. The communicative symbols are sorted out under linguistic rules that are easy to understand and access (Viladot, 2012: 71).

1.3. The Web 2.0: the social web and its reality in Ecuador

As in other countries, in Ecuador the phenomenon of communication on the web and the emergence of social networks is imminent, and is dramatically changing communication management in both public and private organisations. According to the survey on living conditions carried out by Ecuador’s National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INEC), in 2014, 41.4% of the Ecuadorian people over 12 years of age had an account on a social networks and 24.3% owned a smartphone.

The most popular social networks in Ecuador are Facebook with 97.9%; WhatsApp with 33.1%, and Twitter with 20.4%. These conditions are forcing all organisations to restructure their communication departments, to redefine their strategies and to redirect actions, in order to achieve better results. Even traditional media are committed to design a new way to reach and engage with their audiences, and to be part of the new reality. “Ecuador is becoming a digital country. The emergence of the Web is positive, now we are all digital consumers, although the development of user generated content is slow within the Ecuadorian media” (Punín, Martínez and Rencoret, 2014: 204).

As García-Galera and Valdivia point out:

“This digital tsunami has necessarily produced changes at very different levels of our existence, as it has happened with the name of the media. Thus, in opposition to concepts like mass-media, the term social media has emerged permanently” (2014: 10).

The Web can be used as a tool by any person or entity. For example, with the creation of the well-known blogs, the Web displaces other existing media.

“According to Tascón and Quintana, the Internet and its participatory forms increase the capacity of influence of citizens who have realised that they can increasingly influence institutions and large companies, given that “the role of subjects in the Web is given by what

they bring to the Web and the value that other people attribute to them, in a collective review process” (2012: 27).

Therefore, “64% of the users who write comments do so mainly to offer advice and share experiences with their community” (TNS, 2012: 30). “Technology has changed the dynamics of social mobilisation, and the current situation is the result of a technological democratisation that has created ‘connected multitudes’ who want to speak” (Pérez *et al.*, 2013: 678).

The Web enables social relations, communication and the development of trends towards a positive or negative social position. From the point of view of the organisation, the way of disseminating information or advertising has changed radically, as Robert W. McChesney points out:

“In the new era of smart or targeted digital advertising, advertisers far less frequently place ads on specific websites and hope to appeal whoever might visit those sites. Instead, they purchase access to target audiences directly and placed ads through Internet and networks that locate the desired targets wherever they are online” (2014: 98).

In this sense, Araceli Castelló (2010) points out that the Web 2.0 helps brands significantly because of “its ability to react immediately in the management of corporate image and communication, its ability to create communities, increase coverage, brand integration, and to improve brand visibility and image and brand proximity/friendly brand” (Castelló, 2010: 107).

In fact, new generations, in different countries of Latin America, have adopted almost naturally recent forms of communication between them and the institutions, and have turned them into means of association, through which they make proposals, denounce realities and adopt positions for or against government policies, the local reality and/or the actions of any public or private organisation. An example of this is the Spanish case, where:

“There are very significant percentages of young people who say they use social networks to support solidarity campaigns (34.3%), who claim that they make use of social networks to denounce unjust situations (27.2%), and who claim that social networks have led them to develop or participate in social protests (27%)” (García, Hoyo and Fernández, 2014: 39).

All public institutions constitute a brand and must be handled as such. Therefore, the press or communication departments of public institutions are responsible for developing this information and delivering it to the media. The development of the Internet has favoured the publication of these press releases on the websites of public institutions in the form of news. Assessing how these news stories are made and what they are about requires a quantitative and qualitative analysis, but this is a pending issue that remains to be researched.

“Although new digital and computer technology tools have been developed to facilitate the management of all these changes, their use highlights new challenges in the production and

management of knowledge and is demanding new forms of humanistic and social knowledge, journalism and public opinion that facilitate the generation of a fairer and more equitable organisation, with the participation of plural citizenship in a democratic debate on political management” (Moreno Molina and Corcoy, 2013: 502-528).

1.4. The deregulation of global telecommunications

Today, the telecommunications sector is one of the most influential and important sectors based on its contribution to the government’s general budget, but still many population centres lack access to this global technology (Burgos, 2009: 59). That is why the government continuously seeks free access to telecommunications for all society, not only as a public service, but also as a right for all. Mondría (2004: 168) argues that deregulation involves making telecommunications accessible for the unprivileged social classes, so that they enjoy free access and freedom of choice.

1.5. The role of users in social networks

In digital communication, the figure of “prosumer” has emerged to mean a creative Internet user who creates his/her own information. In the past, organisations publish information on the Internet, but now it is users who perform this activity, primarily through social networks. With the Web 2.0, information consumers adopt the role of “prosumers”, because they are those who produce the information they consume (Maciá and Gosende, 2011: 21). “Today there are business models that fed precisely on the existence of such active consumers: websites such as Tripadvisor.com and Ciao.com” (Olabarri, Monge and Usín, 2015: 705).

In this context, everything that happens inside and outside the Internet can be reproduced, reviewed, criticised and disseminated by public institutions.

“Social networks are clearly a means of “presumption” where prosumers turn into speakers that produce conversations with and for a consumer audience. In this conversation, the audience not only consumes those contents, but responds and reproduces these messages and creates others nearly simultaneously. This means that any activity in the offline world can transcend to the online world, creating a “space of autonomy” (Berrocal, Campos and Redondo, 2014: 67).

Citizens make use of different social networks at their disposal to expose their position for or against something.

“Digital media provide citizens with instruments that enable full participation at different levels. For example, Twitter it is more suitable for mobilisation, while blogs promote deeper deliberative spaces, Facebook is multifunctional and, unlike the previous two, is suitable for the dissemination and development of citizens’ debates. To this we should add the potential

of the Web 3.0... especially the so-called “syndication” which allows the retransmission of up-to-date information” (Aguirre, 2014: 211-229).

2. Methods

This is an exploratory, descriptive, non-experimental and quantitative study, which tries to observe the phenomenon as it occurs in its original context. The study uses the survey technique to collect information from the chief communications officers of Ecuadorian public organisations and learn how they manage digital media. The survey is based on a structured questionnaire sent to participants in digital format via email.

According to Hernández (2014: 104), for exploratory-descriptive studies like this, whose purpose is not correlational or predictive, it is not necessary to formulate hypotheses. However, the numerical results allow the verification, with a high degree of confidence, of the behaviour of the analysed actors and activities.

2.1. Population and sample

The universe of study was composed of 337 Ecuadorian public institutions, according to the database published by Ecuador’s National Secretariat of Planning and Development (SENPLADES). According to a previous telephone survey, of these institutions only 117 (34.7%) have a formal digital media management team. The people responsible for these communication departments were sent a questionnaire via e-mail. A total of 52 chief communications officers, 15.4% of the total universe, responded the questionnaire. The sample included institutions from different sectors (social, economic, political, etc.) and from different levels (national, regional and autonomous governments).

2.2. Data collection instruments

Data was collected from the chief communications officers of the sample of public organisations in August and September 2015, by means of a structured questionnaire composed of 13 questions that investigated seven key aspects: a) importance of strategic communication and new technologies; b) perceptions about the increasing use of digital communications; c) budget allocated for digital communication; d) management and administration of digital media; e) impact of new technologies; f) structure of digital communication departments; g) job profile of those responsible for digital communications.

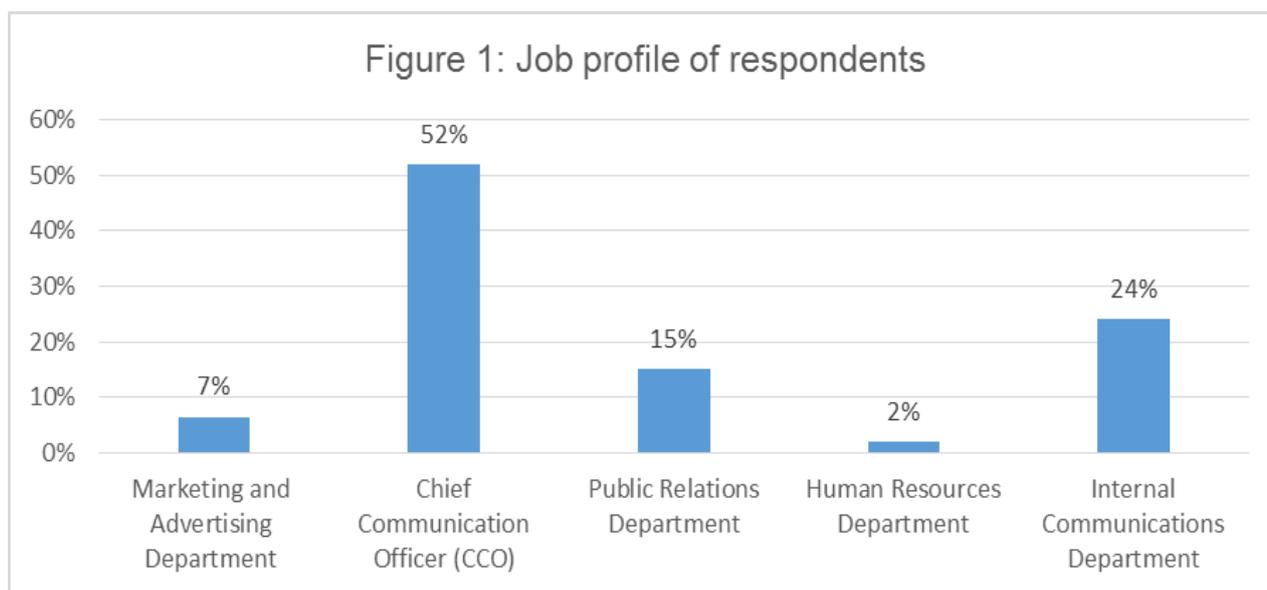
The design of the questionnaire took as reference the questions formulated for a previous study developed by the “Observatory of Strategic Communication in Ecuador”, of which the authors are active members.

2.3. Procedure

The questionnaire was pilot tested with professors from the Department of Communication Sciences of the Private Technical University of Loja. The final version of the questionnaire was applied through the *Survey Monkey* platform. The most relevant results are presented below in the corresponding tables and graphs.

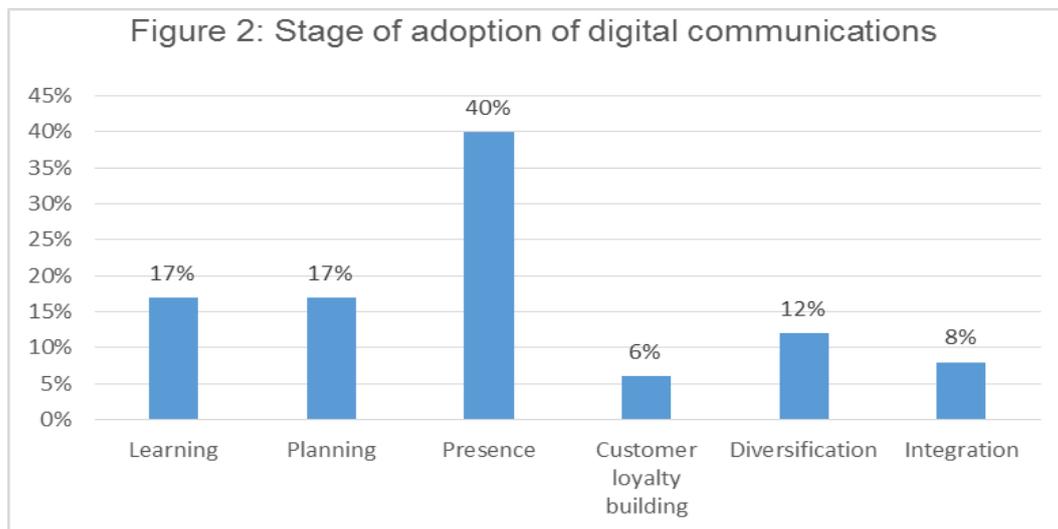
3. Analysis and results

The analysis presented below reflects the results of 52 national organisations. In general, the people responsible for digital communication in Ecuador consider this type of communication has evolved in a positive way, along with the emergence of participatory tools that enable the dissemination of contents, messages and the sharing and contrasting of opinions, facilitating a direct relationship with the community in general and their particular audiences. However, the analysis begins with the verification of the current structure of the digital communication departments in public organisations and the identification of the people directly responsible for their management.



Source: Survey applied to people responsible for communications in public organisations.

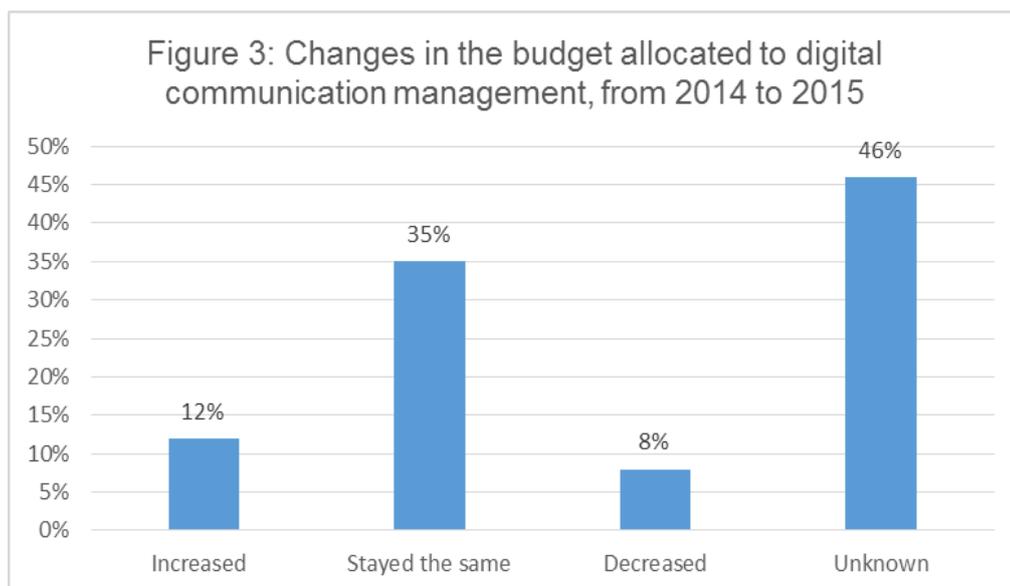
As shown in Figure 1, in most institutions digital communications depends directly on a department of communication or public relations; that is, they do not have a department especially devoted to digital communications, the directors of each department perform various specific institutional communication activities, including digital communication.



Source: Survey applied to people responsible for communications in public organisations.

According to Figure 2, the people responsible for digital communications claim that the Ecuadorian public companies are going through the phases of ‘learning’ (17%) and ‘presence’ (40%), and that their digital strategies enjoy a significant level of acceptance from their public. At other end of development, 6% of the organisations are at the “customer loyalty building” stage, which involves the incorporation of various technological channels with the public.

These results indicate that most of the public companies of Ecuador are at the early stages of adoption of a digital strategy, and still have not exploited all of its benefits and advantages.



Source: Survey applied to people responsible for communications in public organisations.

Although it is difficult to obtain concrete information about the specific budgets allocated to digital communication, respondents were asked whether the budget increased, decreased or stayed the same in 2014 in relation to the previous year. In 35% of the cases the budget did not change in comparison to the previous year, while in 12% of cases the budget actually increased.

However, a significant percentage of the respondents (46%) indicated that they did not know how the budget changed in comparison to the previous year. This may be due to the rotation of communications officers or simply due to the fact that no specific budget was allocated for digital communications in the previous period.

In the case of the institutions that maintained the same budget than in 2014, it could be inferred that they are satisfied with the results, or that they do not have greater resources available.

Table 1: Activities in which the budget is invested

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Outsourcing of social networks management	6	12%
Development of mobile applications	4	8%
Tools for social media analysis	5	30g
Online monitoring	9	17%
Digital advertising in specialised media	4	8%
Development of websites and social media	8	15%
Tools for internal communication	16	30%
Total	52	100%

Source: Survey applied to people responsible for communications in public organisations.

As table 1 shows, unlike what happens in private companies, in the public sector the main intention is not to increase sales or attract more customers, but to publicise the actions, policies, programmes and new services developed for citizens. Additionally, these entities pursue goals of communication and internal information services, which become a priority for their performance. It is perhaps for these reasons that 30% of the surveyed organisations allocate resources to develop tools of internal communication, in order to improve their communication systems, either vertically or horizontally, their internal relations and processes, and to obtain feedback on what they want to communicate at different levels and to external audiences.

Moreover, 17% of the public organisations have allocated resources to online monitoring, which allows them to know the level of recognition and acceptance of their projects, the needs and opinions of their audiences and allows them to generate data that will allow them to adjust policies and make decisions in tune with the feelings of the population.

Finally, 15% of the organisations allocated budget for the development of their website and for the implementation of their social media, which is consistent with the previous finding that indicated that a large group of institutions are still in the early stages of the digital strategy.

On the use of social networks

The next part of the study investigated the particular uses of social networks by public institutions, in two specific areas: a) external communication; and b) internal communication. The following table presents the most relevant results:

Table 2: Social networks and web-based tools used for external communication

Variables	Frequency	% Facebook	Frequency	% Twitter	Frequency	% Blog	Frequency	% YouTube	Frequency	% Skype	Frequency	% Website
To increase the visibility of the institution's name	35	67.3	37	71.2	37	71.2	1	1.9	18	34.6	8	15.4
To promote products/ services	37	72.5	39	75.0	38	73.1	7	13.7	23	45.1	2	3.8
To monitor the competition	22	42.3	24	46.2	28	53.8	3	5.8	15	28.8	2	3.8
To improve the image of the institution/brand	37	71.2	38	73.1	36	69.2	7	13.5	19	36.5	1	1.9
To generate contact with the public	22	42.3	31	59.6	30	57.7	1	1.9	9	17.3	8	15.4
To collect the opinions of users	23	44.2	33	63.5	36	69.2	5	9.6	7	13.5	1	1.9

Source: Survey applied to people responsible for communications in public organisations.

The main objective of external communication is the construction and projection of a positive image, associated with the institution, its plans, projects and the services offered to its different external audiences. In addition, the institution delivers messages about its corporate identity, through visual platforms, which reflects a style, a symbolic representation of its institutional values, as well as, a short “description” of its name (Bosovsky, 2011: 59).

As we can see in Table 2, each of the social networks is used with different intensity according to the purpose. So for example, to give visibility to the name of the institution, 71% of the communication managers use Twitter and institutional blogs. 67% prefer to use Facebook and 35% Skype. For the promotion of their services, 75% uses Twitter and 73% uses institutional blogs and Facebook.

Although the institutions of this kind could not speak of competitors in the strict sense, the people responsible for communications do observe the activity of other related institutions, in order to compare their activities, visibility and number of followers. For that purpose, 54% monitors blogs, 46% Twitter, and 42% Facebook. To improve their brand's image, 73% use Twitter, 71% Facebook,

69% institutional blogs, and 37% Skype. When it comes to generating contact with users or potential audiences, 60% of the institutions use Twitter; 58% blogs, and 42% Facebook. Finally, to collect the views of citizens, 69% use institutional blogs, 64% Twitter, and 44% Facebook.

Obviously, all the institutions try to use as many media (social networks) available, which makes the job more complex in terms of the unification of criteria, time and type of responses, customisation of messages, etc. All this results in the need to structure a professional team specialised in this type of activity.

In general terms, the social networks most commonly used in the public institutions of Ecuador for different external communication activities are: Twitter and Facebook, supplemented by institutional blogs.

Table 3: Social networks and web-based tools used for internal communication

Variables	Frequency	% Facebook	Frequency	% Twitter	Frequency	% Blog	Frequency	% YouTube	Frequency	% Skype	Frequency	% Website
To strengthen internal leadership capacity	21	40.4	23	44.2	22	42.3	5	50,0	8	72.7	6	11.5
To communication between departments	14	26.9	10	19.2	7	13.5	2	3.8	8	15.4	2	3.8
For work meetings	8	15.4	5	9.6	4	7.7	3	5.8	16	30.8	2	3.8
For training	13	25.0	6	11.5	4	7.7	6	11.5	15	28.8	2	3.8
To enhance the sense of belonging	32	61.5	24	46.2	20	38.5	4	7.7	6	11.5	6	11.5
To promote collaboration through chats, messengers, images	18	34.6	24	46.2	22	42.3	6	11.5	8	15.4	7	13.5

Source: Survey applied to people responsible for communications in public organisations.

According to Table 3, the public institutions of Ecuador also use social networks to carry out internal communication activities like the following:

To strengthen the capacity of internal leadership: 73% use Skype; 50% YouTube; and 44% Twitter.

To communicate between departments or offices in different cities: 27% use Facebook, 19% Twitter and 15% Skype. To carry out business meetings: 31% use Skype, 15% Facebook and 10% Twitter.

For activities related to training: 29% use Skype; 25% Facebook; and 12% YouTube and Twitter. All of these networks and tools enable interaction in real time and the inclusion of previously-made audio and video presentations.

The results indicate that Facebook generates a higher level of identification and sense of belonging towards the institution, according to 62% of respondents. 46% also use Twitter and 39% institutional blogs, with the same purpose.

In general terms, it can be argued that public institutions increasingly use digital technology as a strategy of internal communication, to reinforce interpersonal relationships and collaboration, and thus unify efforts, align objectives and achieve goals.

On the use of other mobile applications

The results indicate that 56% of the public institutions develop actions and, in addition to social networks, use tools in communications management. The following table present the results in this aspect:

Table 4: Specific actions carried out with mobile applications

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Web applications, landing pages, emailing to mobile platforms.	9	17%
Use of apps and push notifications.	7	13%
Display advertising campaigns: Google, Facebook in mobile platforms.	10	19%
Promotions, discounts or contests on social networks	1	1%
Location-based information and services	7	11%
WhatsApp to contact customers or send special promotions	19	31%
SMS marketing	4	8%
Total	52	100%

Source: Survey applied to people responsible for communications in public organisations.

The efficient management of digital communications requires those responsible for public institutions to perform other actions in addition to having a presence in the most common social networks, to capture the attention and establish interaction with their audiences and users. This action is also favoured by the increased access of the Ecuadorian population to the Internet and devices

such as smartphones. As we can see in Table 4, 31% of the institutions resort to sending messages via WhatsApp to promote specific activities and events, etc.

The second most common activity carried out by Ecuadorian public institutions is display advertising campaigns [2] (19%), which aim to reach specific segments of the population that use the Internet and online search engines such as Google and networks like Facebook.

Another tool used is landing pages [3] and the sending of emails to mobile databases to draw attention and generate interaction on a specific topic or campaign (17%). It should be noted that this action requires a wider design, planning and management work, for which advice from external agencies is requested.

On perceived outcomes

In general, the people responsible for communications consider that the use of digital tools and social networks to carry out the communication activities of their institutions is beneficial. Their contribution and effectiveness is appreciated for the organisation's external and internal communication.

Table 5: Changes perceived in the institution's communication with the use of digital communication

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Efficacy and immediacy	20	39%
Work distraction	2	3%
Positive and efficient interaction between staff	10	20%
Bad projection of the institution's brand and imagen	1	2%
Workers are better informed about the activities carried out by the institution	16	31%
Economic loss for the institution	1	2%
Other	2	3%
Total	52	100%

Source: Survey applied to people responsible for communications in public organisations.

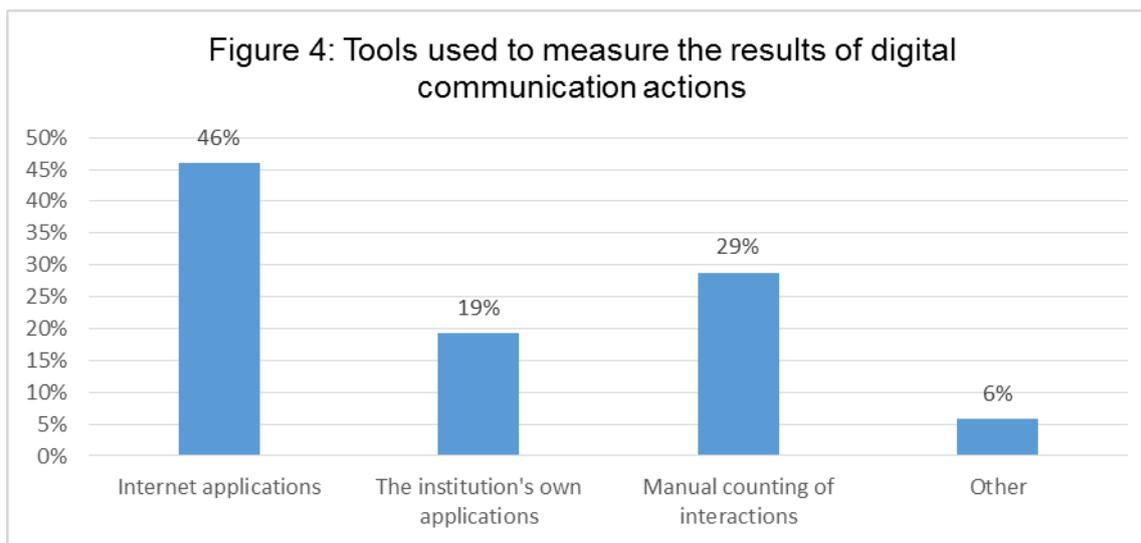
As Table 5 shows, 39% of the respondents perceived as positive the immediacy with which information can be disseminated and the feedback that can be obtained from the audience. This is linked to the capacity of certain specialised tools to measure the effectiveness of communication actions.

In terms of internal communication, a significant group of communications officers (31%) detected a higher level of awareness of the activities carried out by the institution among employees, as well as

the positive and efficient interaction between the staff (20%), which is not possible to achieve through traditional media.

The previous results suggest that the perceived changes are mostly positive and extend to the internal and external areas of the organisation.

Figure 4: Tools used to measure the results of digital communication actions



Source: Survey applied to people responsible for communications in public organisations.

Effective communication management implies, obviously, the measurement of the real impact of the actions undertaken. Therefore, it is necessary to resort to the use of monitoring and measurement systems, without which it is impossible to manage and innovate the information processes.

As we can see in Figure 4, in Ecuador institutional communication officers rely on the tools developed by Google and Facebook, which generate statistics and metrics on the actions deployed in each network (46%).

It is important to note that, according to the results, 19% of the organisations have their own applications for measuring impact and interaction with their public.

On the future projections of communications management

The survey also investigated the changes communication officers from the public sector expect to occur in their work in the immediate future.

According to 87% of respondents, the most popular social networks will continue to grow, but this growth will involve the possible emergence of specialised networks, targeting users interested in specific issues, with certain features and particular lifestyles.

The following table presents the actions and strategies that must be implemented within the institutions, as a central part of the work of the digital media manager and which will constitute an essential contribution to the achievement of the objectives of each organisation.

Table 6: Lines of action needed to consolidate the position of the digital media manager in public organisations in three years

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Creation of a manual for social networks management, based on the specific application of each network and the target audiences	17	32%
Consolidation of an online community to generate interaction with target audiences	11	22%
Design of strategies to manage online crises	9	18%
Promotion of creative interaction with users	7	13%
Design of an organisational sales pitch to provide information to the public online	5	30g
Establishment of regular metrics-based reports to measure social media management	3	5%
Total	52	100%

Source: Survey applied to people responsible for communications in public organisations.

As Table 6 shows, chief communications officers should add more and more value to the management of digital communications in public institutions. Perhaps, it is this premise what underpins the fact that according to the communication officers, one of the main tasks to develop in the immediate future is to create manuals and procedures for the use of social networks, based on the characteristics of the target audiences of each entity (32%).

Another aspect to develop is the level of interaction with specific users and audiences in general, through the creation of strong virtual communities (22%).

According to the respondents, another relevant activity that must be carried out to strengthen the digital communication of organisations in the future is to design strategies to manage online crisis (18%), which occur with some frequency, especially in organisations that have direct relation with the management of the political leaders of greater representativity and visibility.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The management of public institutions in any country requires the commitment of the government officials, elected or appointed, with the aspirations and expectations of citizens. In that situation, the role of organisational communication and its managers acquire increasing importance, to the point of becoming critical to the achievement of institutional objectives, in so far as direct, active and effective channels must be established to ensure harmony between the proposals, projects and policies of government officials and leaders and the needs and aspirations of citizens.

In that sense, communication is consolidated as a central axis of democratic processes and, of course, in the administrative management of government institutions. This role is even more relevant when citizens access more and more easily to technological resources and make effective use of them, to interact with their representatives, delegates and elected officials.

The exercise of power now faces the direct action of citizens, who are able to monitor, question and even directly oversee the actions of government officials and the institutions they represent. Today, citizens share opinions and critiques, make demands, show support or disagreement towards all kinds of activities, interventions and actions of governmental representatives from all levels and instances.

Somehow, the public administration and the exercise of power are affected and the organisations that constitute them are almost forced to manage the relationship with their constituents differently from the past.

It is essential to have professional communication teams to develop strategies and structures to face the new reality with better results, in real time and with the maximum optimisation of the resources available.

Within this area, this study is just an initial approach to the way in which this new form of communication works in the public organisations of Ecuador. Based on the data obtained, we can make the following conclusions:

- In Ecuador, as in the rest of the world, citizen participation in public issues has increased, to the point that now the State has to explain and justify the actions and decisions it has undertaken in the social, economic and political fields, etc. Similarly, every day the government seeks consensus among citizens and a greater involvement in issues of disagreement and conflict. For a public institution, communication management can determine its success or failure in an increasingly informed and participating society.
- The communication manager and, therefore, the communication departments of public institutions, must adapt themselves to the new communication methods, media and forms. This requires speeding up the process of adoption of a digital communication strategy which, according to the results of this research, in the majority of cases is in the 'presence' and 'learning' stages.

- The new communicative structure in public institutions must go beyond the promotion of its leader or director, and should include formal strategies carried out by professional departments that are adequately structured, both in the internal and external areas of communication.
- The resources allocated for communication have been increasing in general, and the access to technology and the adoption of digital media by citizens forces public institutions to generate a consistent structure and allocation of resources, however, the budget allocated to communications in traditional media are still disproportionately higher with respect to those who are assigned to digital media even when the latter can generate good results, with lower costs and offer the ability to measure results immediately.
- The implementation of an adequate digital communications strategy brings positive results, both in the relationship with the audience, and at the internal level of the organisation, strengthening leadership, interaction between groups, awareness about the actions and the alignment of efforts.
- In Ecuador, the social networks most commonly used by digital communication officers are Twitter and Facebook. Official *blogs* are also used. All these tools are used to manage the company's image; promote services, plans and programs; to increase the visibility of the leader and the institution; to generate new followers and contacts and to immediately collect opinions on the actions carried out.
- As in other Latin American countries, probably due to ignorance or lack of interest, most of the efforts and resources of the digital communication strategy are allocated to institutional activities on social networks, to the detriment of other open access tools and platforms and other resources such as data mining, institutional chats and others.
- It is necessary to promote the effective participation of society in the development of public policies and to know their views on those policies that have been already implemented. For this reason, digital media are definitely an option that, despite their obvious disadvantages, guarantees wide coverage, direct interaction, low costs and a wide range of creative possibilities and innovation.
- Digital communication managers require a formal structure for the development of their work. However, the institutions participating in this study put in charge of digital communication to departments which, although related, are not specific, not optimal.
- The new communicational challenges are driving the emergence of new professional job profiles, but in Ecuador, this is still a pending task for higher education institutions which only train people to become generalist communication professionals.

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5. Notes

[1] See the details of the project titled “Observatory of Strategic Communication in Ecuador” in <http://observatoriocom.utpl.edu.ec/>.

[2] Display advertising is advertising in the form of banners on websites, in order to reach potential customers who navigate those sites.

[3] A *landing page* is a single web page that pops up in response to clicking on an online advertisement. They contain very little information, and focus on converting site visitors into sales or leads.

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