


# FREE AND COMMUNITY RADIO STATIONS IN SPAIN DURING COVID-19. AN APPROACH TO ITS IMPACTS AND THEIR LEARNING THROUGH THEIR CONTENTS AND ORGANIZATION

 **Núria Reguero Jiménez**<sup>1</sup>: Autonomous University of Barcelona. Spain.  
[nuria.reguero@uab.cat](mailto:nuria.reguero@uab.cat)

 **José Emilio Pérez Martínez**: Complutense University of Madrid. Spain.  
[joseempe@ucm.es](mailto:joseempe@ucm.es)

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it a health, social and economic crisis that also affected free and community radio stations in Spain. This paper aims to approach, through the analysis of the contents of two spaces produced during the confinement and the organizational forms adopted by these projects, the most important impacts of this situation and the lessons learned from them. **Methodology:** the work is based on qualitative methodologies, such as content mining and web ethnography, which have allowed us to delve into the contents and adaptive strategies deployed by these radio stations in the face of the exceptional situation experienced. **Results:** The analysis of *El Otro Coronavirus* and the *Cadenazos Ibéricos de Radios Libres* shows the communicative and organizational challenges that these stations had to face and how their adaptive responses contributed to the establishment of a subaltern public sphere and what lessons have been learned from these efforts. **Discussion:** these results have allowed us to understand in depth the role played by these media in the context of the health exception experienced during the pandemic and, consequently, to critically value it as a useful tool for those communities and subaltern groups that

<sup>1</sup> **Núria Reguero Jiménez**: Journalist and Ph.D in Public Policy (2017). She specializes in the communication rights movement. She is a member of the Community, Alternative and Participatory Communication Research Network (RICCAP, for its acronym in Spanish).

were relegated to the margins of the public sphere. **Conclusions:** after the analysis carried out in this paper, we have determined that the confinement derived from COVID-19 constituted a new milestone in the history of the free and community radio movement, as it allowed to demonstrate once again its resilience, its public utility and to resume collaborative dynamics that took on a new meaning in that context of isolation.

**Keywords:** free radios, community radios, COVID-19, alternative communication, contents, organization, community.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic caused one of the world's most catastrophic health and social crises, causing the collapse of our health care system, increasing social and economic vulnerability, and creating a situation of social panic. Nevertheless, in this tragic episode of our recent history we can find experiences of resilience and social creativity. In particular, during the first months of the pandemic, marked by the confinement and the incessant increase in the number of deaths, a multitude of collective action initiatives emerged from neighbors, associations and social movements, which helped to fill some of the gaps left by overwhelmed institutions and created important community ties (Nel lo et al., 2022). One of the clearest examples of this was undoubtedly the various mutual support networks that emerged from the neighborhoods themselves.

The alternative and community communication movement, although shaken by the situation, was also reactivated during the COVID-19 pandemic, so that this episode was not only a blow, but also a new milestone in the history of mobilization for the right to communication. Cases such as KUYI FM, a community radio station of the Hopi people, whose broadcasts succeeded in establishing relationships of solidarity among different Indian communities during the most difficult moments of the pandemic (Moylan, 2021), perfectly illustrate this adaptive capacity.

In the specific case of free and community radio stations in Spain, we note that during the pandemic, several coordination initiatives emerged, both inside and outside the peninsula, reflecting the transformative and collaborative will of different social groups. Among these collaborative experiences, the *Cadenazos Ibéricos de Radios Libres* and the magazine *El Otro Coronavirus* stand out, spaces that were born with the intention of offering alternatives to the topics, approaches and modes of production of the hegemonic media, which ended up generating a notable information fatigue among their audiences, leading to a demand for a greater variety of content (Rodero, 2020).

This study analyzes the organization and the contents addressed by Spanish free and community radio stations during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as its impact on the sector, especially during the months of confinement. With a clearly qualitative approach, we have carried out documentary review techniques, content analysis of the different *Cadenazos de Radios Libres*, of *El Otro Coronavirus* and of the programming networks of some radio stations. We accompanied this qualitative analysis with a

historical perspective. In this way, we understand the events that took place during this period as another stage in the evolution of alternative communication in Spain, which will allow us to highlight its specificities, but also the ways in which the legacy of the organizational culture developed by the free and community radio movement has been collected.

In the same way, with this work we intend to add another vector of analysis to the already complex field of the relationship between communication and COVID-19. In recent years, the number of contributions published on this phenomenon has been of varying depth and with a wide variety of approaches. Thus, we can find works ranging from the analysis of collaborative work tools used in regional media (Olivares-García et al., 2024) or city councils (López Tárraga, 2020), to the influence of the pandemic on the communication policies of some states (Tasente et al., 2024; Poch-Butler & Puebla Martínez, 2021), to the debates within investigative journalism on the origins of the coronavirus (Sarapura Sarapura, 2021), to the proliferation of fake news (Leal Villamizar & Torres Quiroga, 2023) and hate speech (Sy & Lopresti, 2022), or even to its impact on specific industries such as tourism (Paniagua Rojano & Pastor Marín, 2021). It seems, therefore, that the addition of the Third Communication Sector, through alternative broadcasting, completes an academic panorama that has once again relegated to the margins the communicative phenomena from below.

The article first presents, based on a bibliographic review, both a theoretical and conceptual approach to free and community media as particular forms of alternative communication, highlighting the attributes related to discursive and collective action, and a historical contextualization of the social and legal panorama of free and community radio stations in Spain. Secondly, we describe both the objectives of this work and the methodological apparatus used to achieve them. The results, thirdly, focus on the collective action of the sector during the pandemic. We also analyze the issues addressed in the programs, as well as the impacts and lessons learned during the pandemic. Finally, we present the discussion of the results and the conclusions we have reached, relating the results to the theoretical framework to determine the impact of COVID-19 in these settings and the type and extent of their responses.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

In order to understand the ways in which free and community radio faced the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary to approach them both conceptually and historically. Several disciplines have approached this particular communicative phenomenon: from Public Opinion to Cultural Studies, including Political Economy, Communication Policy or History. With the proliferation of contributions from these specialties, the work with these objects of study has been endowed with a theoretical corpus that eventually crystallized into interdisciplinary fields of study such as Alternative Communication and Community Communication (Reguero, 2010).

The first of these can be conceived as a set of initiatives through which social groups change the continuity of the hegemonic public discourse (Reyes Matta, 1983 in Barranquero & Sáez, 2015), while activating their condition as subjects with political rights and freedoms, intervening and modifying the media system (Rodríguez, 2001).

Its genesis is usually located in Latin America in the 1970s, during the mobilizations against the dependence of the countries of the region on the United States<sup>2</sup>. In this context, educational and community media gained prominence for their ability to strengthen the identity of the most vulnerable groups. These media were called alternative because they differed from and opposed the forms of production of transnational communication corporations (they sought horizontality and self-management), while representing other options. At the same time, postulates were emerging in Europe that were critical of the criteria of representativeness of the hegemonic media and in defense of social collectives that created their own press and broadcasting<sup>3</sup>. One of the characteristics attributed to the radio stations that emerged in this context was a form of content production characterized by de-professionalization and, above all, by the "participation and reflexivity of civil society", which would generate horizontal relationships and networks that would transform media communication processes. Thus, its distinguishing features would go beyond the content and include the production and distribution processes, characterized by the use of different circuits such as networks or unpopular places (Atton, 2002, p. 27). A representative example of this mode of operation was the Italian Radio Alice, which facilitated the participation of its audience through the telephone, which never interrupted the communication flow, and whose *Mao-Dadaist* character led them to opt for unusual channels for the distribution of its contents (A/Traverso, 2023).

The other major field of study devoted to these communicative phenomena is that of Community Communication, which initially focused on the local level. From his fieldwork in Canada, Senécal observed how in community media both citizens linked to social movements and professionals work together, directly exercising the power of expression as an alternative to the dominant logic of communication systems (1986, p. 17). On the other hand, focusing on Northern Europe, Jankowsky (1992) emphasized their importance in the symbolic and relational construction of the territory, as they are tools that generate a communicative exchange around them that ultimately leads to social action.

Clemencia Rodríguez (2001) coined the term "citizen media" based on these approaches and emphasizing the democratic participatory structure that characterizes these media. Through these media, subjects can exercise the capacity to define their own image and use their codes to intervene in the public sphere in a dialogic process with other codes and languages. Rodríguez understands citizenship as a form of political identification that allows for a change in the positioning of individuals and groups to access power in the various forms it manifests in everyday life: "The reference to "citizen media" implies, first, that a collectivity enacts its citizenship by actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape; second, that these

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted, however, that community communication in Latin America has its first antecedents in experiences of an educational nature, such as the Colombian Radio Sutatenza (1947), or the mining stations of the Bolivian altiplano, such as *La voz del minero* (1949) (Tornay, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> The most representative cases are those of France (Lefebvre, 2021) and Italy (Lorrai, 2021), with stations such as Radio Campus or Radio Bologna, which directly influenced the projects launched in Spain.

media contest social codes, legitimized identities, and institutionalized social relations" (Rodríguez, 2001, pp. 19-20).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the communicative agency of social groups exploded, giving rise to a diverse repertoire of collective actions to denounce the social inequalities caused by the health crisis, ranging from songs on balconies to digital rallies, boycotts and rent strikes. These strategies include the collection, elaboration and dissemination of information on the impact of the pandemic on the most disadvantaged groups - such as prisoners, migrant workers, the homeless, etc. - and on the unequal distribution of resources. - as well as the unequal distribution of care within families and violence against women (Della Porta, 2020). The existence of such public spheres is not trivial, since the pandemic was yet another episode in the invisibility of the narratives of those groups and communities that have historically been systematically silenced in public discourse. In other words, the experiences and narratives of migrants, informal workers, economically poor and/or violent people, ethnic minorities, etc. suffered the effects of the pandemic, but without a public voice in it (Milan et al., 2021).

A significant contribution to the visibility of subaltern public spheres as groups opposed to the interests and discourses of the dominant public sphere has been made by free and community radio stations. In the following sections we will describe and analyze their organizational and editorial strategies, not without first recalling that free and community communication, like any social movement, is a cyclical phenomenon whose periods of flourishing are closely linked to the contexts of major crises and social mobilizations. Thus, in the history of this movement, we can identify different stages and milestones, both regionally and globally. In Spain, we also observe different phases, which we describe below in order to situate the results in more detail.

European free radio stations emerged with the effervescence of the New Social Movements and the New Left after May 68 and are still active today, together with a variety of community radio stations promoted by different social players. Both models, free and community, coexist, collaborate, and there are even stations that use the terms interchangeably to define themselves. The similarities are to be found on the one hand, in horizontality, participation and the rejection of political or religious proselytism, etc., while on the other hand, the greatest divergences are to be found in issues such as the means of financing (acceptance or not of subsidies) or the inclusion of paid staff or specialized collaborators in the stations. Free radio stations have historically opposed both elements, while community radio stations consider them as long as the financing is in accordance with the ethical principles of the collective. It is also common for some of these projects to have gone through both models throughout their history.

Thus, we can distinguish 4 major phases in the evolution of free and community radio in Spain. If we consider the different social, political and legislative contexts, we would speak of a first moment of gestation and immediate expansion, a phase of weakening and subsequent strengthening of the networks, coinciding with the digitalization and hybridization of formats.

Spain's free radio stations were born during the transition to democracy that began with the death of the dictator Francisco Franco in 1975. From the beginning, they were faced with strong state control of the radio spectrum, but the need for free expression of an important social majority drove the emergence of new stations, such as the pioneer Ona Lliure (Barcelona, 1979). Despite this unfavorable legal context, these stations proliferated rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s (Pérez Martínez, 2021). In this process, they came into contact with community initiatives launched by youth groups, social collectives or neighborhood associations. This relationship gave rise to programming that included musical and counter-informational programs and many hours of broadcasting by and for social movements: feminism, environmentalism, antimilitarism, pacifism, anti-repression, etc. In those years, and despite their differences, the profile of these radio stations found their lowest common denominator in their vindictive spirit (García, 2017). The coverage that these radios gave to the anti-NATO campaign in the 1986 referendum was undoubtedly one of the first examples of coordinated and cooperative broadcasting, a precursor to the experiences that occupy this study<sup>4</sup>.

In 1989, when there were already more than a hundred free and community radio stations, they were excluded from a new distribution of local frequencies. This, together with a significant drop in social mobilization, left them in a residual and vulnerable place in our media ecosystem, since radio stations that broadcast without a license were subject to significant sanctions. Despite this situation, they maintained their collective work dynamic, as they demonstrated during the anti-globalization mobilizations or with the coverage of general strikes, such as that of 27E in 1994.

Nowadays, free and community media have a state legal framework that recognizes their figure, but the development of regulations is proving to be excessively slow and not adapted to their nature (Meda, 2014; Reguero, 2017). The recommendations of the European Union, which has been trying to guarantee pluralism and diversity in the media since the 1990s, have had little impact. Faced with this situation, the need for collaboration and advocacy in the legal framework arose, which favored the emergence of federations at different levels, such as Arosa Irrati Sarea in 2001 in the Basque Country or the *Red de Medios Comunitarios* (ReMC, for its acronym in Spanish) in 2004, of a statewide nature, which joined other longer-lived ones, such as the *Federación Aragonesa de Radios Libres* (FARL, for its acronym in Spanish), active since 1991, or the *Unión de Radios Libres y Comunitarias de Madrid* (URCM, for its acronym in Spanish), established in 1995.

In the heat of these new experiences of coordination and a new cycle of social mobilizations, free and community radio stations participated in the collective coverage of the indignant camping during 15M (2011) or protests such as *Rodea el Congreso* (2012). On occasions, they have even expanded the range of media with which

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<sup>4</sup> The importance of this mobilization in the development of free radio stations was such that the Madrid Anti-NATO Commission (CAO) went so far as to launch Radio Cero, the anti-NATO radio station, in 1984 with the aim of campaigning (Pérez Martínez, 2019).

they collaborated, as happened during the general strikes of 2010 and 2012, when they formed the Agencia29 with alternative publications and television stations. Currently, with the hybridization of formats and the emergence of semi-professionalized models through the Internet, the phenomenon of free and community communication has become more complex. However, within this heterogeneous range of new digital experiences, we find points in common, such as horizontality and self-management in organizational models; bringing together, in the same reality, consumption, production and leisure; the existence of spontaneous processes of self-training and coexistence; the renunciation of profit, ethics in financing or the concern to use free software and creative commons licenses, among others (Reguero, 2017).

It was during this last phase that the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, marking a new milestone in this tradition of collective and coordinated broadcasting to offer alternative information and voices. The paradigmatic examples of collective action in the field of alternative communication during the coronavirus episode were *El Otro Coronavirus* and the *Cadenazos Ibéricos*, the analysis of which is the focus of this paper.

### 3. OBJECTIVES

First of all, the paper aims to include communication from below into the field of studies that is being configured around the relationship between COVID-19 and communicative phenomena. Only through this inclusion will we be able to have a complete view of the impacts of the pandemic on the sector. Second, in relation to the impacts of the coronavirus, we want to analyze the ways in which free and community radio stations have adapted to it through their contents and organizational forms. Finally, thirdly, after studying these adaptive responses, we will be able to approach the lessons learned by these media after facing the social and health crisis.

### 4. METHODOLOGY

We come closer to free and community media with a qualitative approach, adopting the premises of critical epistemologies. According to these, the practices and claims of alternative cultures, or those in clear antagonistic relationship with the dominant ones, are constructed as invisible in the discourses of political and economic elites (Raymond Williams cited by Marí, 2010; De Sousa, 2009; De Sousa & Monedero, 2005), so we believe it is necessary to value the knowledge generated by social movements and especially by these media. Therefore, we adopt the grounded theory approach.

In order to get closer to the networks and contents of these radio stations, we have collected the topics of programming in general, as well as those relating specifically to the impacts and lessons learned that COVID-19 has brought to the stations. The analysis of these aspects is based on the case studies of the initiatives promoted by free and community radio stations in the context of the pandemic: *El Otro Coronavirus*, a program of 19 episodes of about 2 hours each, and the *Cadenazos Ibéricos*, the result of the collaboration of several radio stations that led to the coordinated broadcasting of 17 programs of about 1 hour each. In total, about 50 hours of programming were analyzed in depth, including more than 30 hours of *El Otro Coronavirus* and 16 hours of the first *Cadenazo Ibérico*.

The research on organization and collective action was done in an exploratory way, based on listening to the programs mentioned above, as well as on the news about them obtained from their websites and those of other media. Likewise, web ethnography techniques were also applied to the radio stations involved in both initiatives, as well as to other free and community radio stations. The fieldwork was carried out during the second half of 2020 and throughout 2021.

## **5. RESULTS. ORGANIZATION, CONTENTS AND LEARNING FROM *EL OTRO CORONAVIRUS* AND THE *CADENAZO IBÉRICO***

The social problems that arose during the COVID-19 crisis led several Spanish groups to break the isolation by collaborating in the production of radio programs and chain broadcasts, especially during the most critical moments of the confinement caused by the first wave of the virus, between March and May 2020. On the one hand, the Community Media Network (ReMC) launched the weekly program *El Otro Coronavirus*, with the collaboration of *Onda Color* (Málaga), *Cuac FM* (A Coruña) and *Radio Vallekas* (Madrid), among others. On the other hand, free radio stations organized several *Cadenazos Ibéricos*, each of which lasted more than ten hours. In these *Cadenazos*, more than 20 radio stations and podcasts from all over Spain formed a network to reflect on the different social and economic impacts of the pandemic, including *Ágora Sol Radio* (Madrid), *Radio Almaina* (Granada), *Ràdio Aktiva* (Alcoy), *Radio Malva* (Valencia), *Radio La Granja* (Zaragoza), *Radio Bronka*, *Contrabanda FM* or *RSK* (Barcelona<sup>5</sup>).

### **5.1. Organization of *El Otro Coronavirus* and the *Cadenazos Ibéricos***

*El Otro Coronavirus* was a weekly collaborative magazine show launched in March 2020 by the Community Media Network (ReMC). Throughout its 19 episodes, it sought to make visible realities that the general media coverage of the social and health crisis was relegating to the margins. The use of digital media allowed the inclusion and participation of a multitude of voices in the different broadcasts, which became one of its great potentialities, as it allowed the experiences of national and international groups to be known. Likewise, and with the aim of deepening this sense of participation, from the very first episode a mobile phone was made available to the audience so that they could send messages and intervene in the broadcasts. We can find, among others, messages that raised key issues in those days, "a question: And for those of us who are at home and follow the rules but do not have the economic means to buy, what do we do? We have small children and we have a family, what do we do?", greetings and thanks for the initiative, "thank you because, damn, it helps to cope with the confinement and, above all, it warms the heart a lot" (ReMC, 2020).

On the other hand, the degree of coordination and collaboration among all the members of the ReMC and their affinity networks allowed for interesting exercises such as the successive "Sound maps of de-escalation", sound productions that gave a

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<sup>5</sup> In the same city, the Barcelona Community Radio Network (XRCB, for its acronym in Portuguese) also conducted programming focused on the coronavirus.

perspective "from below" on how this is happening and its effects in some Autonomous Communities. It also highlighted the collaborative infrastructure supported by the means and technical expertise of Cuac FM and other radio stations of the Network. The concern for this aspect was such that it is possible to perceive in this weekly a progressive improvement in the technical aspect as the episodes progressed. Thus, the magazine went from moments like the one that occurred in one of the conversations of the first broadcast, in which the presenter had to intervene because of the noise — "you know that we are working with a multiconference program, so if you wish, when it is not your turn to speak, mute your microphone [...] and when we ask you to unmute it, unmute it. and when we ask you to unmute it, so we don't load the connections [...]" (ReMC, 2020) — to the normalization of this type of sections with up to four or five guests intervening without interference of any kind.

With regard to the *Cadenazos*, we can say that they were the most complete experience organized by free radio stations in favor of the plurality of voices around a specific theme. In this way, they brought together different radio stations and channeled a large number of social groups from inside and outside Spain. This model of diverse programs was inspired by the chain broadcasts that took place in Latin America, both through streaming and on the airwaves (Marshall, 2020, May 19). In March 2020, a group of Mexican radio stations began a joint broadcast with stations from other neighboring countries, which they called a *cadena* dedicated to "the health and life of all people." In order to share realities and reflect together, studios in different locations and countries were coordinated so that the source of the broadcast, live or deferred, jumped from one to another simultaneously through the same streaming web link. In the third of the *cadenas*, they contacted radio stations in the peninsula, which joined the initiative and later replicated it in the state (*Todo por hacer*, 2020). Radio Almaina (Granada) and Ágora Sol (Madrid) promoted the first *Cadenazo Ibérico*, where in addition to fifteen free radios stations, other podcasting and press initiatives joined so as to put technology at the service of citizenship and collaboration between social players.

The first *Cadenazo*, broadcast on Sunday, May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020, consisted of 15 hours of specially produced programming from participating free radio stations and podcasts. In the second, launched on June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2020, a total of 25 free radio stations and podcasts from across the state joined together under the hashtag #*CadenazoApoyoMutuo*. In the third, held in conjunction with a similar initiative in Latin America, more than 20 free radio stations and podcasts from the state joined together to coincide with LGTBI+ Pride Day, Sunday, June 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020. The fourth was very international, organized on October 11<sup>th</sup> together with different Latin American radio stations. And the fifth, broadcast on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020, brought together 17 projects during 11 hours of broadcasting.

In both cases, there was the complicity of digital media related to the free radio stations to announce the programming they produced. Some of these media were *El Salto Diario*, with its coverage of state issues, *Diario Libre de Aragón*, *Ara.Info* or the anarchist monthly publication *Todo por Hacer*.

## 5.2. Topics of *El Otro Coronavirus* and the *Cadenazos Ibéricos*

Both *El Otro Coronavirus* and *Cadenazos Ibéricos* proposed topics that are difficult to access in the conventional media. Both initiatives were characterized by addressing the different issues from the voice of the direct protagonists themselves, and with non-stigmatizing or sensationalist approaches. The groups and the audience in general took up the voice in different ways: by preparing and disseminating content, by bringing the microphones closer to the different players, inside and outside the studios (initially in private homes, due to confinement), by sending audios via WhatsApp, etc. In this way, the microphones were open to peasants —especially seasonal workers—, to people affected by different forms of discrimination —job precariousness or racism, among others—, and to a multitude of mutual support networks and associations, such as the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (PAH, for its acronym in Spanish), the *Regularización Ya* campaign, the Intercultural Association of Home and Care Professionals, or Presxs in struggle.

*El Otro Coronavirus*, in particular, offered a wide variety of topics and protagonists, covered by the multiple sections that made up the space: interviews, talk shows, opinion columns and musical spaces. Among the latter, it is worth mentioning the "viral antihymns", an ironic selection of songs whose verses and choruses did not comply with health regulations: *Contamíname* by Ana Belén and Víctor Manuel ("*contaminíname, mézclate conmigo*") or *Salir corriendo* by Amaral ("*si tienes miedo, si estás sufriendo/tien que gritar y salir, salir corriendo*"), among others. The effects of the pandemic were the main focus of interest, which led the program to address issues such as the situation of the "forgotten" neighborhoods during the health crisis, the situation of frontline workers, the debates on the minimum living income, LGTBIphobia, addictions and their relationship to the pandemic, and the increase in ultra-right-wing violence, the impact of the pandemic on areas such as sexuality or border management, the role played by various citizen solidarity networks, the role of community media in the new situation, the evolution of the coronavirus with an international perspective, de-escalation and its various effects, or other macro- and micro-economic consequences. The incorporation of these points of view, specialized and knowledgeable about the issues dealt with in each episode, as well as the defense of a journalism that moved away from the sensationalist logics that populated the general media at that time, were the main values of this weekly.

As for the *Cadenazos Ibérico*, each one revolved around a thematic axis. The first, broadcast in the midst of confinement, culminated in several discussions on the role of free media in the face of the "new *abnormality*". The second focused on the importance of mutual support networks against the exclusion and poverty generated by the "new normality". The third, which coincided with LGTBI+ Pride Day, was dedicated to the role of dissidence and social struggles in this new context. Under the slogan "For a normality in which we all fit. For a normality that is worth living", we reflected on the class struggle, against exclusion, poverty, for the right to housing, work, etc. Actions and demands were made visible, as well as the reality of people and collectives in their struggle against racism and towards sexual and gender liberation. The fourth *Cadenazo*,

this one international, "Unmasking Colonialism," was organized together with different Latin American radio stations. And the fifth was a monograph on centers of deprivation of liberty: prisons, detention centers for foreigners (hereinafter CIE, for its acronym in Spanish) or centers for minors, among others. Dissidence and social struggles during the pandemic were other issues addressed.

Focusing our attention specifically on the first *Cadenazo Ibérico*, issues such as agroecology, seasonal peasants, male violence during imprisonment, difficulties in accessing housing, the condition of people in an irregular situation, the informal economy, working conditions during the pandemic, ERTE, the pandemic in different countries, social control of the poor classes, COVID-19 in prisons, alternatives to capitalism and self-management, feminism, polyamory, anarchism or alternative cinema stood out. Along with these topics, the role of the media during the health crisis was also addressed, as well as the situation of the free media (highlighting the closure of the Madrid radio ELA, for its acronym in Spanish).

**Table 1**

*Topics of El Otro Coronavirus and the Cadenazos Ibéricos*

<b>Programming/ Broadcast</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Topics</b>
<i>El Otro Coronavirus 1</i>	29/03/2020	Forgotten neighborhoods, solidarity networks, leisure time management
<i>El Otro Coronavirus 2</i>	05/04/2020	Economy, solidarity networks, COVID-19 at the borders, male violence, the pandemic in Mexico and Chile
<i>El Otro Coronavirus 3</i>	19/04/2020	Minimum living income, situation of domestic workers, situation of free and community radio stations
<i>El Otro Coronavirus 4</i>	26/04/2020	Confinement and childhood, animal confinement, solidarity networks, migrants, importance of local communication
<i>El Otro Coronavirus 5</i>	03/05/2020	Impact of de-escalation, learning during confinement, difficulties of the cultural sector, citizen cooperation in the face of the pandemic, importance of community communication
<i>El Otro Coronavirus 6</i>	10/05/2020	Sociological and political impact of the pandemic, situation of social services, youth and radio
<i>El Otro Coronavirus 7</i>	17/05/2020	De-escalation, LGTBIfobia, Impact of the future Audiovisual Law
<i>El Otro Coronavirus 8</i>	24/05/2020	Addictions, impacts and economic consequences of the pandemic
<i>El Otro Coronavirus 9</i>	31/05/2020	Impacts of the pandemic on sexual life, community communication, Minimum Living Income
<i>El Otro Coronavirus 10</i>	07/06/2020	Ultra-right-wing and LGTBIfobic violence, Solidarity networks
<i>El Otro Coronavirus 11</i>	14/06/2020	De-escalation by autonomous regions, climate emergency, racism in Spain and Black Live Matters
<i>El Otro Coronavirus 12</i>	21/06/2020	Dependency system, Transphobia in Spain, new normality

<i>El Otro Coronavirus</i> 13	28/06/2020	Community communication, LGTBI Pride, impacts of the pandemic on community media, social mobilization
<i>El Otro Coronavirus</i> 14	05/07/ 2020	Compilation
<i>El Otro Coronavirus</i> 15	12/07/ 2020	Compilation
<i>El Otro Coronavirus</i> 16	19/07/ 2020	Compilation
<i>El Otro Coronavirus</i> 17	26/07/ 2020	Compilation
<i>El Otro Coronavirus</i> 18	02/08/ 2020	Compilation
<i>El Otro Coronavirus</i> 19	09/08/ 2020	Compilation
<i>Cadenazo Ibérico</i> 1	10/05/ 2020	The new abnormality created by the Coronavirus crisis from the free media perspective
<i>Cadenazo Ibérico</i> 2	07/06/2020	Mutual support networks against exclusion and poverty in the new normality
<i>Cadenazo Ibérico</i> 3	28/06/2020	Struggles and dissidence in the new normality
<i>Cadenazo Ibérico</i> 4	11/10/2020	Colonialism and anti-colonialism
<i>Cadenazo Ibérico</i> 5	20/12/2020	Prisons, CIEs, juvenile centers

Source: Own elaboration.

### 5.3. Impact and lessons learned by free and community radio stations during COVID-19

As happened with the rest of economic and social activities, the pandemic and the lockdown had an impact on the daily practice of these radio stations: most of them saw their studios closed without time to react, others were able to take out production material for those programs that did not have home equipment, and some even made use of the studios, since the media was one of the authorized activities. If we take a closer look at the programming that was carried out, as well as the web contents of many of these radio stations, we can clearly see that one of the main lessons learned by these projects during these critical months was to resume their traditional collective and coordinated broadcasts, organizing themselves by telephone, videoconference and podcast so as to be able to carry out special programs in a context of exceptionality. The fact that both *El Otro Coronavirus* and *Cadenazos Ibéricos* dedicated part of their contents to collective reflection on the role of these projects reinforces the importance of this learning.

In this way, the members of these collectives with computer skills supported the rest so that they could make sound productions from their homes, thus ensuring that the programming of many of these radio stations did not lose the rhythm due to confinement. We found examples such as *Ágora Sol*, which at that time launched the *Cápsulas Víricas*, a space in which all the programs of the radio station participated, by telephone or virtually. The members of the station themselves stated that experiences

such as the *Cadenazos ibéricos* or the marathon *Desconfina la radio*, held on April 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020<sup>6</sup>, made them gain in technical experimentation.

The technical possibilities offered by digital and new technologies have made it possible to create small, decentralized production studios, and have greatly facilitated the recording of podcasts thanks to free audio editing software such as Audacity. This is perhaps one of the most interesting lessons learned, deepening a relationship with the digital that for many free or community radio stations, before the pandemic, was limited to simultaneous streaming on FM and uploading the recorded live broadcasts to podcasting repositories. In this field, experiences such as #Encerradios, small sound pills digitally produced at home, in which Radio Almenara (Madrid) was able to generate content collaboratively, or Radio Pat(i)o, an initiative of Cuac FM to address the confinement and that thanks to an experimental system, supported by the Internet and digital, went out through the airwaves from the station member homes.

During the pandemic, these media reaffirmed their community nature by strengthening their links with their environment and opening up to new players and groups, a process that could be observed in radio stations such as Contrabanda FM (Barcelona). A key element for this group was its virtual meeting, a space in which, with care at the center, mutual accompaniment was provided in order to re-situate themselves in the new social and health context. For its part, Radio Bronka (Barcelona), after more than two years of inactivity, took advantage of the production of the program *Rompiendo el aislamiento* (Breaking the Isolation), a space for reflection and denunciation of the effects of the state of alarm, to make progress in its return to the airwaves.

Strengthening ties with distant movements, addressing the wars that were taking place during the pandemic, reinforcing collaboration with international *Cadenazos* or interviewing radio stations from other countries were other valuable experiences. We should also point out that although most of these spaces were dedicated to making visible the impacts of the coronavirus on the most vulnerable population groups, some experiences, such as Radio Alegría Libertaria or some episodes of *El Otro Coronavirus*, decided not to talk directly about COVID-19 and to focus on other issues that remained invisible, thus broadening their agenda.

In short, both the groups interviewed in the different episodes of *El Otro Coronavirus* and the promoters of the first *Cadenazo Ibérico* stressed the advantage of working together to offer other critical views on COVID-19. Not in vain, one of the slogans of the first *Cadenazo* was: "At home, but rebellious. Free radios are at home, but not silent".

**Table 2**

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<sup>6</sup> Radio Almaina (Granada), Radio Bronka (Barcelona), Onda Expansiva (Burgos), Radio Vallekas (Madrid), Radio Kras (Gijón), Radio Topo (Zaragoza), Radio Klara (Valencia), Radio Oasis (Salamanca), EcoLeganés (Leganés, Madrid), La Linterna de Diógenes (podcast), La Anciana del Futuro (podcast), Diario de Cuarentena Sonora y Colectiva (podcast) and Ágora Sol Radio (Madrid) participated.

*Impacts and learning during the COVID-19*

Impacts	Learnings
Confinement	Programs broadcasted from home. Extensive use of podcasts and free software. Innovation in program creation. Importance of care for male and female broadcasters.
Social isolation	Remote collaboration via telephone and videoconferencing. Offering other points of view. Encourage dialogue and broadcaster/receiver exchange.
Increased economic insecurity	Enhancement of cooperation in production and broadcasting: -Rebroadcasting of programs from other radio stations; -Joint productions. -Special programs. Free software valuation.
State of alarm / Social commotion	Improvement of their existence: new energies, revival of radio stations (e.g. Radio Bronka). Opening and contact with other social groups. Double discursive bet: -Making visible the situation of the most vulnerable groups; -Talking about other issues made invisible by the pandemic.

**Source:** Own elaboration.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In our opinion, this study has a number of limitations that should be taken into account before discussing the results and conclusions. Thus, on the one hand, we understand that the nature of the object of study – alternative media based on volunteer work – sometimes makes it difficult to collect documentation and build a large corpus. On the other hand, the methodology applied, although it allowed us to obtain relevant results and achieve the research objectives, also limited the potential of the article, leaving out of our analysis realities relevant to understanding the role and experiences of these radio stations during the pandemic. However, we believe that this article opens the door to future research that could focus on issues such as the in-depth analysis of the contents of these radio stations or the reception of these programs by their audiences, among others.

Despite the above, we believe that the organization of Spanish free and community radio stations during the COVID-19 pandemic shows the capacity of social groups to activate their citizenship status by intervening and modifying the media system (Rodríguez, 2001), as well as changing the continuity of hegemonic public discourse (Reyes Matta, 1983). The innovation of their collective action demonstrated the vitality of this sector, despite the impacts of the socio-health crisis and an unfavorable legal

context. In the first place, the autonomous and collaborative agency stands out, narrating in their own terms, focusing on issues that are little addressed or not present in the mainstream agenda, through a synthesis of spontaneity on the one hand and great planning on the other, as well as a combination of amateur and professionalized action that gives these radios a closeness to their listeners.

Second, both *El Otro Coronavirus* and the *Cadenazos Ibéricos* generated relationships and horizontal networks of production and dissemination of content with the intention of making visible other realities different from the generalist media discourses. They gave voice to collectives such as the *Regularización Ya* Campaign, *Presxs in Struggle*, anti-racist care networks or resistance boxes. Issues such as dissidence and social struggles during the pandemic, the situation of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods, CIES and juvenile centers, the effects of alcoholism and male violence, colonialism, Black Lives Matters, the importance of care and mutual support networks, etc. were addressed. All of this from the voice of the subjects themselves and from non-stigmatizing or sensationalist approaches. Such a commitment to participation at the local, regional and international levels and to the reflexivity of civil society leads to the transformation of media communication processes (Atton, 2002) and contributes to the symbolic and relational construction of their territories (Jankowsky, 1992).

Third, we should point out that behind the work of content production lies another layer of collective action aimed at overcoming the limitations of physical isolation and increasing economic precariousness. These learning and collaborative dynamics are, for the most part, here to stay. Among them, we can highlight the dynamics of reappropriating technologies (radio, podcasts, free software) to turn them into drivers of solidarity. In addition to the innovation and cooperation in the creation and broadcasting of programs by these radio stations, which increased during the pandemic, other aspects such as care - including that of the communicators - or the transnational exchange of contents to inform about common and foreign realities and struggles come to the fore. Public reflection on the sector's own functioning and learning is another of its characteristic features.

In light of the above, the organizational and discursive strategies described here show that, despite the exceptional scenario and the unfavorable legal context, the Spanish free and community media continue to be active, expanding the legacy of the organizational culture developed by the movement since the 1970s. Therefore, we believe that the COVID-19 pandemic can be considered a milestone in the history of this type of media and of the mobilization for communication rights in general, for its impacts, for its lessons learned and for the responses found by citizens to the challenges it proposed.

As a milestone that radically transformed the ways of doing things in these media, many of the advances incorporated during the pandemic – the digitalization of radio stations, for example – have profoundly changed their ways of proceeding and conceiving themselves. These changes, besides marking the future of the new projects, have laid the foundations for them to continue adapting to future crises and significant social transformations. Finally, having shown throughout these pages the social

importance of free and community radio stations, we believe that state and regional authorities should implement the recommendations of the European Parliament (2008) for the normalization and funding of these social initiatives.

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### **Author contributions:**

**Conceptualization:** Reguero Jiménez, Núria and Pérez Martínez, José Emilio. **Methodology:** Reguero Jiménez, Núria and Pérez Martínez, José Emilio. **Software:** Reguero Jiménez, Núria and Pérez Martínez, José Emilio. **Validation:** Reguero Jiménez, Núria and Pérez Martínez, José Emilio. **Formal analysis:** Reguero Jiménez, Núria and Pérez Martínez, José Emilio. **Data curation:** Reguero Jiménez, Núria and Pérez Martínez, José Emilio. **Writing-Preparation of the original draft:** Reguero Jiménez, Núria and Pérez Martínez, José Emilio. **Writing-Revision and Editing:** Reguero Jiménez, Núria and Pérez Martínez, José Emilio. **Visualization:** Reguero Jiménez, Núria and Pérez Martínez, José Emilio. **Supervision:** Reguero Jiménez, Núria and Pérez Martínez, José Emilio. **Project management:** Reguero Jiménez, Núria and Pérez Martínez, José Emilio. **All authors have read and accepted the published version of the manuscript:** Reguero Jiménez, Núria and Pérez Martínez, José Emilio.

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**AUTHOR(S):**

**Núria Reguero Jiménez:** Ph.D. in Public Policy (2017) from the Autonomous University of Barcelona. She specializes in the movement for communication rights. In her thesis, *Políticas públicas y sostenibilidad de los medios libres en América Latina y Europa. De las radios libres a los comunes digitales* (Public policies and sustainability of free media in Latin America and Europe. From free radio to digital commons), analyzes the gestation and challenges of free media governance. She is a member of the Research Network on Community, Alternative and Participatory Communication (RICCAP) and was a board member of the European Community Media Forum (2008-2011). She has collaborated with the Community Media Network (ReMC) and LaTele.cat (Barcelona). She was the coordinator of the UNESCO Chair of Communication InCom-UAB (2006 - 2014), conducting research and organizing international seminars.

[nuria.reguero@uab.cat](mailto:nuria.reguero@uab.cat)

**Orcid ID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1471-507X>

**Google Scholar:** <https://scholar.google.es/citations?hl=es&user=ecVPCnIAAAAJ>

**ResearchGate:** <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Nuria-Reguero>

**Scopus:** <https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=57897655400>

**Academia.edu:** <https://uab.academia.edu/N%C3%BAriaReguero>

**José Emilio Pérez Martínez:** Ph.D. in Contemporary History (2017) and Journalism (2019) from the Complutense University of Madrid, where he currently teaches and conducts research at the Faculty of Information Sciences. He is a member of the Research Network on Community, Alternative and Participatory Communication (RICCAP) and has been involved in Radio Almenara, a community radio station in the north of Madrid, for more than a decade. He collaborates with ReMC and is currently president of the Union of Free and Community Radios of Madrid (URCM, for its acronym in Spanish). He is the author of the books *Radio y mujer* (Spain, 1960-1975). *En las ondas de Radio Nacional* (Abada, 2020) and *La voz de las sin voz: el movimiento de radios libres entre la Transición y la época socialista* (1976-1989) (Sílex, 2022).

[joseempe@ucm.es](mailto:joseempe@ucm.es)

**Orcid ID:** <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0082-7687>

**Google Scholar:** [https://scholar.google.com/citations?hl=es&user=rJ13\\_bEAAAAJ](https://scholar.google.com/citations?hl=es&user=rJ13_bEAAAAJ)

**ResearchGate:** <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jose-Perez-Martinez>

**Scopus:** <https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=57210129476>

**Academia.edu:** <https://ucm.academia.edu/JoseEmilioPerezMartinez>

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