



Communication Dynamics in Galapagos Islands: An Analysis of Perceptions in 2023

Tania Orbe^{1(✉)}, Eric Samson², and Luis Luengo²

¹ Universidad San Francisco de Quito USFQ, Observatorio Interuniversitario de Medios Ecuatorianos OIME, Quito 170901, Ecuador
torbe@usfq.edu.ec

² Universidad San Francisco de Quito USFQ, Quito 170901, Ecuador
{esamson, ldluengo}@usfq.edu.ec

Abstract. The objective of this study was to determine the communication dynamics and the most used means of communication in the 4 populated islands of the Galapagos archipelago, Ecuador. Its 33,000 inhabitants live with limited access to quality telecommunications services and very few media compared to the mainland. During February 2023, 130 anonymous surveys and 20 structured interviews were carried out in the populated centers of the 4 populated islands: Isabela, Floreana, Santa Cruz and San Cristobal. The results of this diagnosis show that the use of social networks and instant messaging via WhatsApp progressed with the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing the risk of misinformation on the islands. The radio stations of each island continue to be the means of communication most broadly used by the adult public, but there are very few communications between islands or with the mainland through traditional media. After approaching the local radio stations and other scarce island digital media, it was identified that the media ecosystem in Galapagos generally lacks professional communicators. Local media depends on institutional advertising or paid programming, they do not promote the development of their own reports or investigative journalism, and their newscasts are based on interviews with political actors or local official sources and on press releases issued by public and private institutions present in the archipelago. In conclusion, the journalistic exercise in Galapagos is precarious at a professional level and communication is mainly reduced to social media specialized groups, meaning the population has adapted to the lack of local media.

Keywords: Mass Media · Social Networks · Galapagos

1 Introduction

The Galapagos are an archipelago of volcanic islands that belong to the South American country of Ecuador. They were declared the first Natural World Heritage site in 1978 by UNESCO and constitute the largest marine reserve on the planet. The archipelago is made up of thirteen large islands above 10 km², nine medium-sized islands with a surface area of between 1 km² and 10 km², and another 107 small islets [1].

On February 12th, 1832, the first president of Ecuador, Juan José Flores, decided to incorporate these islands, located about 1000 km from continental Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean, into the Ecuadorian State. At the end of 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, the archipelago was isolated from mainland life and some presidents or colonists even decided to establish jails and almost independent states on Isabela, Floreana and San Cristobal. It was not an attractive destination to inhabit as only San Cristobal has fresh water sources.

By the middle of the 20th century, the prisons were foreclosed, and international tourism began to arrive in the Galapagos through cruise ships. The biggest tourist attraction is the endemic marine and land fauna and lava landscapes due to 22 identified active volcanoes [2].

International tourism also provoked the arrival of new inhabitants from the continent and with them new socio-environmental problems. Of its 13 large islands, 4 are inhabited: Santa Cruz (16,000 inhabitants), San Cristobal (7,200 inhabitants), Isabela (2,400 inhabitants) and Floreana (120 inhabitants). The total population of the archipelago is 25,244 people, according to the 2015 national census. But this figure has grown proportionally to 33,000 inhabitants. Between 2010 and 2015, the population increased 9.5% and in 65 years, the residents of Galapagos multiplied by 18, from 1,300 people in 1950 to more than 25,000 in 2015 [3].

The other islands have no inhabitants because they lack fresh water sources, and the Ecuadorian government tries to limit the increase of the population density. The Organic Law of the Special Regime of the Province of Galapagos (active since 2015) regulates migration and residence on the islands in 4 categories: permanent residents, temporary residents, tourists, and transients. To be a permanent resident, a person must have a father or mother who has lived in the Galapagos for more than 10 years or be the spouse of another resident for the same time [4].

On the islands, 75% of the population has access to technology, be it a cell phone, tablet or computer. Of that 75%, only 35% have access to the internet, and a very limited one. The others use Wi-Fi networks available in urban areas. Announced during former President Lenín Moreno's mandate (2017–2021), a fiber optic project has not been completed [5] In January 2023, the National Telecommunications Corporation CNT-EP offered to break digital inequality in the Galapagos with the implementation of a new satellite reception antenna in Santa Cruz [6]. In April 2023, the Minister of Telecommunications of Ecuador, Vianna Maino, announced during that same year she will present the satellite internet service of the Starlink company, which is part of the giant SpaceX, of the conglomerate owned by the American Elon Musk. According to Maino, the service is already working throughout mainland Ecuador since the beginning of 2023. But it is not cheap, costing 60 dollars a month (plus about 360 dollars for the installation kit) [7].

1.1 Radio Stations and TV Networks

The management of institutional and mass communication has evolved in Galapagos in a very different way from continental Ecuador. Due to the geographic isolation of the archipelago, the lack of economic resources and its condition of relatively recent human

settlement, it can be described today as a media ecosystem without professional media or communicators.

Because of the lack of economic investment, there are no local television channels either at the provincial level nor in the four populated centers of the archipelago. After the closure of Channel 13, founded in 1981 in San Cristobal, the local channel known as “El Lobito” lost the frequency of the Decentralized Autonomous Government (GAD) of Santa Cruz due to lack of resources and not having a grid of stable information. For the people of Galapagos, it was more feasible to connect to peruvian television channels and learn the news from the neighboring country than from their own. “We grew up with the news of peruvian politics, of Shining Path, we were worried about what was happening in Peru; unfortunately, and sadly, we didn’t know anything about Ecuador”, recalls Viviana Naranjo a lawyer from Galapagos [8].

The archipelago has only six radios. They all have provincial authorization, meaning they could be heard in the four populated centers, but due to a lack of economic resources they have not been able to install repeaters. The only exception is radio “Encantada” which, thanks to a larger investment, has been able to install two antennas in Santa Cruz and San Cristobal. This signal can be heard in the upper parts of Isabela and Floreana, which do not have repeaters. Radio “Encantada” prime time newscast starts at 7:00 a.m. till 8:30 a.m. [9].

The administrative capital in San Cristobal also has the radio station of the Franciscan Mission “La Voz de Galápagos” and Radio “Mar”, both strictly local. The former was founded in 1969, making it the oldest in the islands; it has a missionary and catholic editorial line. Radio “Mar” has a larger social broadcast reach in its only news slot, from 7:00 a.m. to 8:30 a.m.

In addition to radio “Encantada”, Santa Cruz has two other stations. One is radio “Santa Cruz”, a franciscan radio station inaugurated in 1974. It is very local and reaches only the upper part of the island. The other, radio “Antena 9”, reaches only the lower urban part of the city of Puerto Ayora. The only radio station on the island of Isabela is “Paraíso Insular”. It is municipal and purely local [10, 11].

On the side of the written press, the only existing monthly newspaper closed back in 2012. Known as “El Colono”, it was produced by an official of the Charles Darwin Foundation, Enrique Ramos. Printed in Guayaquil, the 1,000 copies of its 6–7 annual editions were distributed free of charge in tourist agencies in Guayaquil, San Cristobal, Santa Cruz and Isabela. Its content was a summary of the main information and events from the previous month [12]. After its closure, the only outlet with provincial news content in the Galapagos was lost. “The consequence of this media panorama is the absence of globalized provincial information”, laments Carlos Macías, a journalist and organizational communicator, born in Quito and working in Galapagos for more than 21 years, of which he spent 16 in the Governing Council of the Special Regime of Galapagos, where he designed communication strategies on conservation issues. “What happens in San Cristobal is known only in San Cristobal and stays there... what happens in Santa Cruz stays in Santa Cruz,” he adds [12].

In theory, the presence of correspondents in the four cities of the Galapagos could have allowed broader news coverage, but the lack of economic resources has not allowed the hiring of correspondents or communication workers. In addition, 20 years ago, “there

were only six professional journalists trained on the continent,” says Carlos Macías who is one of them. “There was no one to communicate with,” he continues [12].

Traditionally, the Ecuadorian radios have been highly dependent on publicity funds from the State, the government, public and private organizations. Due to companies’ lack of interest in investing in the island’s media, local radio stations have essentially lived on state advertising, which has dropped substantially since Rafael Correa’s mandate and during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the local media does not promote reporting or investigative journalism and their newscasts are primarily based on interviews with local political actors or official sources, often asking them to buy a space in the programming to share their messages, and on press releases issued by the institutions.

After the entry of national channels such as “Gamavision”, “Ecuavisa”, “RTU” and digital satellite television, the population has had access to national news but continues to be under-informed in relation to local news. The use of the paid cable is limited in the Galapagos community due to its cost, except in tourist and hotel operators.

1.2 Limited Provincial Information

The highly dispersed media structure of the archipelago is reflected in the way public and private organizations communicate. Reporting something of interest to San Cristobal implies using up all the airway space of the two radio stations in Puerto Baquerizo Moreno and, in particular radio “Mar”. If the information to be transmitted has a provincial scope, the organizations will have to travel to Santa Cruz to occupy space in radio “Santa Cruz” or radio “Paraíso Insular” in Isabela.

The small community of Floreana (with about 120 inhabitants) is very isolated in terms of information due to the absence of a broadcasting medium, except for radio “Encantada”, which is only heard in the upper part of the island. “You find out from the captain of the boat, who tells you what happened in the morning,” explains Carlos Macías. “This is an interesting return to a bygone era of direct oral communication, with the risk of gossip, rumors, misinformation and information mixed in, without filters” [12].

Local radio stations live off publicity from state agencies and organizations dedicated to conservation. However, since the emergence of social networks, these investments have dropped radically and, therefore, their own production is very scarce because of having a very limited staff.

The Charles Darwin Research Station has been present in the Galapagos since 1965 and considers that the best way to reach the people of Galapagos is through the Facebook group “Realidades Galapagueñas” and its 58,000 followers [13, 14].

“The GAD of Santa Cruz pays 2,000 dollars a month to the radio station “Santa Cruz” and 1,500 dollars each to two local radio stations to have 60 min a week of purely institutional programing,” explains Omar Castillo, Communications Director of the GAD of Santa Cruz. Castillo would like media outlets to question his mayor, but no one does [15].

2 Materials and Methods

This research is descriptive or explanatory and is based on a qualitative-quantitative ethnographic methodology. We define ethnography as the attempt to understand a community and its cultural context through participant observation, anonymous surveys and, additionally, with the semi-structured interviews developed in this study. These were created as a method that uses a common questionnaire or dialogue script for all respondents to obtain specific answers about the research problem [16].

A questionnaire with exploratory, open and structured questions was developed to carry out anonymous surveys of the permanent residents of the islands between 18 and 65 years old, both men and women. The type of survey carried out was descriptive, since its objective was to determine a baseline on the forms of communication that exist among the population of Galapagos.

To protect the personal data of the people surveyed, their names and contact information were not asked. The only information required was their age, duration of their residence on the islands and place of birth. All respondents were previously informed of the research's objective and their participation in this study was voluntary.

Some of the participants requested to be identified by name, but most preferred to remain anonymous, as the questionnaire did not require personal data. The survey took less than 5 min to complete. Most of the questions were closed-ended, but some were multiple choice as well.

All the surveys were carried out in person using printed sheets. Sending online surveys was ruled out because connectivity, access to the internet and telephone service in the Galapagos are very limited. The field knowledge obtained from previous visits allowed us to understand in advance that it would not be possible for people to complete a questionnaire online.

130 surveys were collected to guarantee a range proportional to the population density for each of the islands, taking into consideration the logistical complexity of mobilization. Also, there was a selection of the participants in a sample based on community leaders, teachers, environmental activists, merchants, workers in the tourism area, tour guides and other inhabitants who were not necessarily working at the time of the survey. Carrying out more surveys in the field was ruled out, as researchers noticed that the answers were showing common coincidences. So, it was concluded that adding many questionnaires would not alter the result and the final conclusions of the study.

Table 1. Survey questionnaire.

Number	Questions
1	What are the main sources of media you consume?
2	Do you use any local media from the islands?
3	What social networks do you use to communicate?
4	Are you in any direct information group about the islands and the country?
5	What do you suggest improving communication in your community?

The recording and analysis of data was carried out in the Microsoft Excel program, as were the graphs with the results.

Along with the surveys, around 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of representative members in the communication field on each island. The chosen sources were directors of the main existing radio stations in the 4 populated islands (Santa Cruz, San Cristobal, Floreana and Isabela), communicators and journalists from digital media, WhatsApp groups, city mayors, local political authorities, community activists, leaders and businesspeople, representatives and authorities of the Galapagos National Park and main NGOs present on the islands.

This research is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, inversely applied. The quantitative surveys allowed us to frame the communicational dynamics in the archipelago and generate a structural and preliminary conclusion that was then confirmed and deepened by the qualitative interviews carried out on the islands [17].

3 Discussion of Results

In order to know in detail what the communication dynamics are in the Galapagos, 130 surveys were carried out among the inhabitants of the islands (61 women and 69 men). For the most part, the interviews were anonymous.

The surveys confirmed the starting hypothesis: due to limited internet access and lack of local information in traditional media, there is an increasing use of Facebook and WhatsApp specialized groups to communicate. The radio stations on each island continue to be the main media for the adult public, but a growing use of social networks took place during the COVID-19 pandemic to convey local news through the public more than professional journalists or communicators. However, those groups are usually reserved to inhabitants of the archipelago, meaning local information will circulate through social media while national media from mainland Ecuador will cover national and international news.

Most of the people interviewed were between 20 and 55 years of age. 82 of them have lived in the Galapagos for more than 15 years. Regarding their origin, 84 were born on the mainland, 41 on the islands, 3 were foreigners and 2 did not identify their place of birth. We sought to interview Galapagos residents, natives and settlers who have a productive activity in the archipelago and therefore, may need and use traditional and social media.

In Fig. 1, you can see the number of interviews conducted on each populated island, respecting the local demography with more surveys done in more populated islands.

Being an archipelago and a national park on 97% of its surface, Galapagos is a province geographically isolated from the mainland. However, the COVID-19 pandemic also affected its inhabitants. The first confirmed case by the government in Ecuador was reported on February 29, 2020 [18]. Within a few weeks, cases multiplied throughout the Ecuadorian mainland and insular territory. This global emergency and the lack of decent health infrastructures forced the government to shield the islands and close all airports for inhabitants, as well as national and international tourism for 5 months [19]. Since tourism was and continues to be the main source of income for its inhabitants, people devised food barter mechanisms to survive from March to August 2020, when tourism was reactivated.

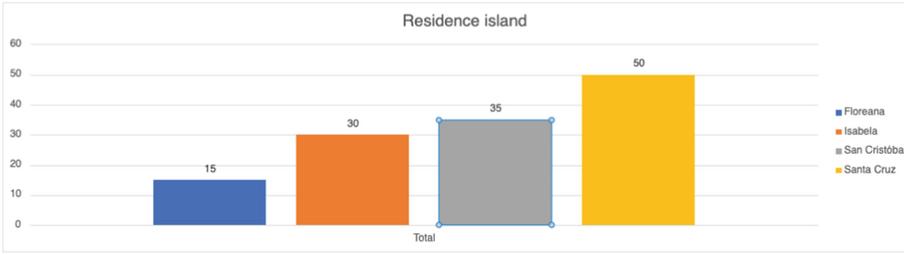


Fig. 1. Number of surveys conducted on each populated island in the Galapagos. Made by the researchers.

With a very limited internet connection and a precarious telecommunications service, the people of Galapagos began to set up Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram groups – in that order of importance – to exchange services of all kinds and local information. After 3 years of pandemic, these virtual groups are still active and have strengthened. For this reason, as seen in Fig. 2, social networks are the main means of communication used on the islands, according to 75% of all people surveyed.

Organizations such as the Charles Darwin Foundation have adapted their communication to their different audiences, publishing in English for example, to reach benefactors living abroad or using Tik Tok to reach the young people of their science club, even though “the videos take too much time to upload” [12]. Choosing the correct groups to convey information became a vital part of the public relations jobs as well as mapping local opinion leaders to get accepted in those groups.

The survey also showed that the most used social media are WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram, in that order of priority. But WhatsApp is not comparable to the other two since it is an instant messaging service used as a means of communication and a social network. In terms of connectivity, it adapts better to the connection problems in the Galapagos as messages can be queued and sent once the connection is re-established. WhatsApp messages work much better than a phone call.

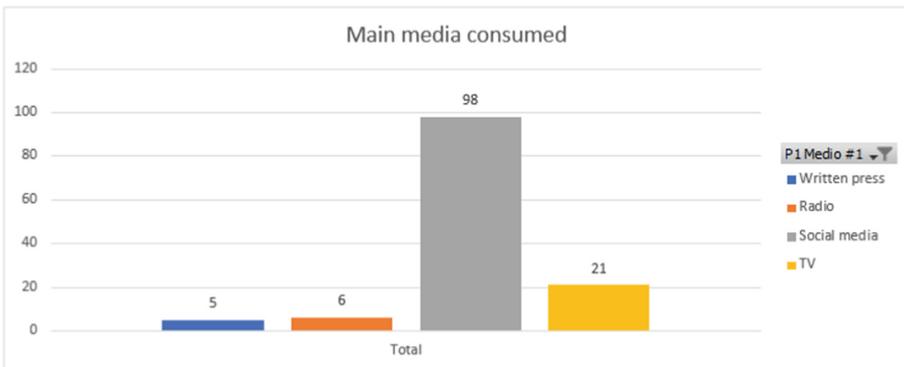


Fig. 2. Main communication medias followed in Galapagos. Made by the researchers.

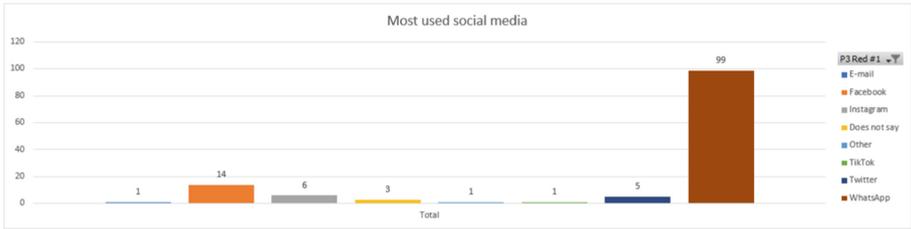


Fig. 3. Most used social network in Galapagos. Made by the researchers.

76% of people surveyed (99 people) use WhatsApp as their main means of communication. It is followed by Facebook - 11% - or 14 people. And in third place is Instagram with 5% (6 people) (Fig. 3).

Only half of the respondents (65 people) follow local radio stations on each island. The most listened stations are “Encantada” and “Santa Cruz”, both located on the most populated islands. “Encantada” broadcasts from Puerto Baquerizo Moreno on San Cristobal Island. “Santa Cruz” from Puerto Ayora on Santa Cruz Island. But there is an important number of people (22 or 17%) who report not consuming in any local media (Fig. 4).

Most people use WhatsApp. “People are used to it. That’s why we created our own group to inform the population”, says Yadira Chávez, president (2019–2023) of the local GAD in Floreana island. “E-mail is also used for professional purposes, and we try to avoid flyers to limit pollution. Still, our island is so small that sometimes it is even easier to visit people directly at their houses if we want to tell them something” [20].

Most professions like tourism guides, coffee growers, fishermen or National Park guards have their private groups, closed to other professions, and exclusively reserved to information’s related to that group. Beside the group linked to their profession or company, most inhabitants are usually members of a general group covering the information

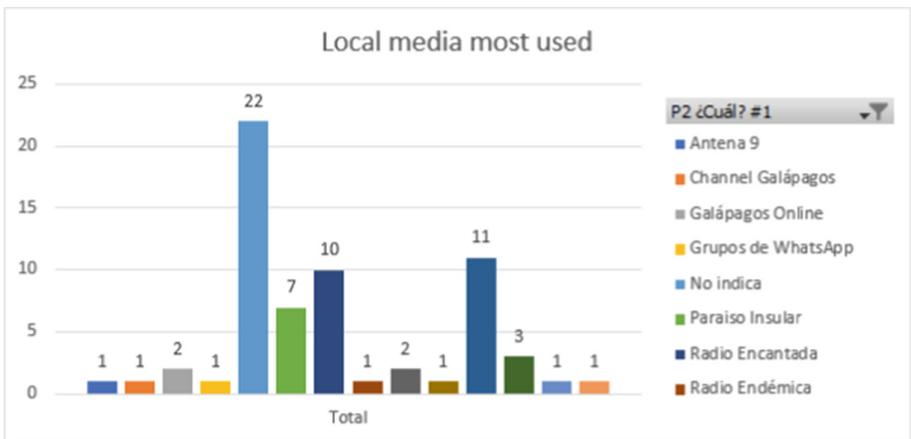


Fig. 4. Local media reported that Galapagos residents consume the most. Made by the researchers.

Consequently, WhatsApp groups were massively developed, where information on politics, tourism, economy, and all kinds of topics was and is produced and distributed. Speed is its main advantage when browsing on a weak internet connection thanks to the lesser use of audio and video on that network.

Facebook groups have become another solution to produce and spread information in the absence of traditional media. In Galapagos, half a dozen generalist Facebook groups allow the publication of all sorts of information, even from state institutions, for example “Galapagos without censorship” and its 13,000 members [12].

In San Cristobal, three groups are particularly important as “Growing Cristobaleños” whose 1,600 members represent more than 20% of the population of San Cristobal. “Encántate Isabela” represents 10% of the population of Isabela and is the group where information about the island is concentrated.

These groups function as a market. They are completely open, with free publications and subsequent control by administrators. In case of abuse, disrespect for the group’s theme, false information or any data that may affect the population, the authors can be removed from the group by its administrators and thus lose a valuable source of information. These groups can be a source of national and international news, as in the recent case (September 2022) of the sinking of a ship between the Santa Cruz and San Cristobal islands [22].

Widely used during the pandemic for buying and selling issues, Facebook groups have given way to more social messaging while business topics have moved to Instagram.

Numerous public and private institutions have learned on the way to segment their communication policy. With content edited by the Ministry of the Environment, Water and Ecological Transition, PNG produces press releases with its most important news and what it called “notes” on more routine activities or “feature” news for its social networks. “This year we want to segregate and not put everything on all the networks,” explains Rosa León, the park’s communication manager [21]. “Twitter for us is for international news and Facebook for local news, the most routine news. We have just opened a Tik Tok account for species news, videos of penguins, boobies... lighter news” [21].

The PNG, however, does not manage its social networks in the same way as other institutions in the archipelago. Being a control institution that by nature has its own limitations, the park is often questioned and wants to keep its communication under control. To avoid contrary positions, PNG does not handle WhatsApp groups but distribution lists.

It is important to mention that there are no studies of communication in Galapagos prior to the diagnosis included in this research. This is proof that the media ecosystem of the archipelago is still in the process of evolution and that training in communication skills, recognition of misinformation, verification principles and content curation is required for the inhabitants of Galapagos.

References

1. Isla Galápagos, Ecuador. Red Pacifico. <https://redpacifico.net/es/isla-galapagos-ecuador/>, last accessed 2023/03/15.

2. Espín, C., Sierra, D., Yépez, M., Almeida, M. and Cisneros C. Mantenimiento de estaciones sísmicas e instalación de estaciones CGPS y DOAS en las islas Galápagos. Instituto Geofísico de la Escuela Politécnica Nacional. (2022/09/09). <https://www.igepn.edu.ec/islas-galapagos/tag/gal%C3%A1pagos>, last accessed 2023/03/12.
3. INEC. Principales resultados Censo de Población y Vivienda Galápagos 2015. https://www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/documentos/web-inec/Poblacion_y_Demografia/CPV_Galapagos_2015/Presentacion_CPVG15.pdf, last accessed 2023/03/12.
4. Organic Law of the Special Regime of the Galapagos Province. Official register 2015, June, 11. <https://www.turismo.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/LOREG-11-06-2015.pdf>, last accessed 2023/06/20.
5. Dávalos, N. Ecuador tiene 11,18 millones de conexiones a internet fijo y móvil. Diario Primicias. <https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/tecnologia/ecuador-millones-conexiones-internet-fijo-movil/>, last accessed 2023/02/10.
6. CNT. La navegación en Galápagos tendrá una velocidad similar a la del continente. <https://institucional.cnt.com.ec/noticias/la-navegacion-en-galapagos-tendra-una-velocidad-similar-a-la-del-continente>, last accessed 2023/02/10.
7. EFE News Agency. Ecuador ingresa a Starlink, el servicio de internet de Elon Musk. (2023/04/25). <https://www.expreso.ec/actualidad/economia/ecuador-ingresa-starlink-servicio-internet-elon-musk-157214.html>, last accessed 2023/02/26.
8. Naranjo, V. Executive secretary of Cantonal Council for the Protection of Rights of the Isabela Canton. Personal interview (2023).
9. Álvarez, J. Communicator in Digital media Galapagos Online. Personal interview (2023).
10. Cocha, D. Producer of radio Santa Cruz. Personal interview (2023).
11. Gil, E. General manager of radio Paraiso Insular. Personal interview (2023).
12. Macías, C. Communicator of Governing Council of the special regime of Galapagos. Personal interview (2023).
13. Charles Darwin Foundation. <https://www.darwinfoundation.org/en/about>, last accessed 2023/03/26.
14. Grijalva, I. Communication coordinator at Charles Darwin Station. Personal interview (2023).
15. Castillo, O. Communication director of the Decentralized Autonomous Government of Santa Cruz. Personal interview (2023).
16. Monje, C. Metodología de la investigación cuantitativa y cualitativa. Guía didáctica. Universidad surcolombiana. Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y Humanas. Programa de Comunicación Social y Periodismo. Neiva, Colombia. <https://www.uv.mx/rmipe/files/2017/02/Guia-didactica-metodologia-de-la-investigacion.pdf> (2011).
17. López-Roldán, P. & Fachelli, S. Perspectivas metodológicas y diseños mixtos. In Metodología de la Investigación Social Cuantitativa. Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona, Spain. <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/163565> (2015).
18. Se registra el primer caso de coronavirus en Ecuador. National Secretary of communication. <https://www.comunicacion.gob.ec/se-registra-el-primer-caso-de-coronavirus-en-ecuador/>, last accessed 2023/04/20.
19. Galápagos retoma actividad turística con primer vuelo de 138 pasajeros. El Universo newspaper. <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2020/08/03/nota/7927383/galapagos-reinicio-actividad-turistica/>, last accessed 2023/04/20.
20. Chávez, Y. President GAD Puerto Velasco Ibarra (2019–2023) Floreana. Personal interview (2023)
21. León, R. Communication officer of the Galapagos National Park. Personal interview (2023).
22. Cuatro fallecidos tras naufragio de lancha en Galápagos. Primicias digital newspaper. <https://www.primicias.ec/noticias/sucesos/galapagos-naufragio-embarcacion-extranjero-fallecido/>, last accessed 2023/04/15.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

