Media Consumption in Ecuador: Are *Ultramediaciones* Developing for Everyone?

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Abstract. Ultramediaciones is a concept developed by the authors that proposes that connectivity dominates beyond devices. In this sense, connectivity is not only on the Internet: it occurs in the digital and analogic world in the relationships that people create. It studies how a detonator (energy) generates, from communication, connections (frequency) and brings together interests (vibration) that affect the understanding of the environment. Moreover, the original energy from communication is capable of modifying social function and life. This theory is based on media ecology, social mediation, and hipermediations. This research explores how ultramediaciones work in Ecuador depending on age and geography (rural vs urban). This quantitative study uses the data collected at the Multipurpose Survey for 2019 and the Employment Survey 2022 from the National Institute of Censuses and Statistics (INEC) in Ecuador. The aim is to explore the evolution of use, appropriation, and potentialities of digitality and communication, based on the concept-under-development of ultramediaciones. It discusses that the country is facing an increase in the cultural gap: citizens are increasingly distancing themselves from each other, making it difficult for digital citizenship to consolidate. Digitality is creating an environment that just 63,2% of the population shares and that just 16,15% is capable to create, modifying, or even understanding.

Keywords: Ultramediations · Hipermediations · Media ecology

1 Introduction

Digital citizenship, according to Choi [1] (p. 565) can be understood as a multidimensional and complex concept that can be studied through four major categories: Ethics, Media and Information Literacy, Participation/Engagement, and Critical Resistance. Exploring these categories, is calls the attention that, for instance, Ecuador has a high level of capacity to conduct disinformation campaigns even if it is a democracy: "Much of the research and innovation in this area began in democratic military settings, as defense organizations invested resources into understanding how ideas go viral on social media" [2] (p. 28). According to Bradshaw and Howard, democracies like Ecuador can maintain cyber troops, investing significant funds and resources in an attempt to direct public opinion over social media: "Increasingly, governments and political parties around the

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world are investing in the tools and techniques of computational propaganda to shape the outcomes of elections, disrupt diplomatic efforts, and undermine peacebuilding efforts." [2] (p. 30). What is more, the index of reading comprehension in this country has worrying low levels: 40%, which makes it more difficult to confront sources and to create a critical opinion of the information that circulates. In this sense, it must be said that Ecuador is transiting from populistic techniques to post-truth definitions [3, 4] as leaders benefit from fake news to discredit the "wisdom of crowds" while undermining the opposition.

In contrast, when it comes to participation and critical resistance, according to Maerz and Lindberg [5], Ecuador shows a positive effect of popular protests on democracy. Former president Rafael Correa initiated an autocratization process that could be reversed by grassroots movements in favor of democracy. In 2019, Ecuador's citizens rose against Moreno's economic policies. "The outcome of this new type of protests are uncertain, illustrating that the route from pro-democracy mass protests to a stable democracy is often inconclusive" [5] (p. 922). In 2019, Ecuador hold indigenous massive protests. Indigenous people —who mostly develop in the rural area— claimed for the abolition of the withdrawal of gas. Then, the protests developed into an expression of recognition. It generated the dichotomy of redistribution vs. recognition [6]. According to Fraser [7], the claim for recognition is not simply equivalent to an undervaluation of the other, but to "not seeing their status as a full interlocutor recognized in social interaction and being prevented from participating on equal terms in social life" (p. 124). In 2022, indigenous Ecuadorians lead a new protest; in this case, the main claims included the demand for a lower price of gas, the limitation of extractive expansion, and longer terms to cover debts with banks, among others.

Besides, when exploring ethics, digital citizenship needs to question the construction of principles, values, duties, and rights that guide the behavior in the network. The question may not be just about copyright or the future of work (a recurrent topic because of the development of Artificial Intelligence) but about the original energy that influences behavior, connections, and even ways to interact between citizens. In this sense, the unequal development of technologies broadens the gap between generations and depending on geographic areas.

Ultramediaciones is a concept developed by the authors that proposes that connectivity dominates beyond devices. In this sense, connectivity is not only on the Internet: it occurs in the digital and analogic world in the relationships that people create. It studies how a detonator (energy) generates, from communication, connections (frequency) and brings together interests (vibration) that affect the understanding of the environment. Moreover, the original energy from communication is capable of modifying social function and life. This theory is based on media ecology, social mediation, and hipermediations. This research explores how *ultramediaciones* work in Ecuador depending on age and geography (rural vs urban). It discusses that the world is facing an increase in the cultural gap.

1.1 Media Ecology and Convergence Theory

McLuhan developed the concept of "media ecology" in the 1960 s. According to the author, the media are technologies and technologies are media. "Technology" includes

hardware, software, and all forms of organization. A technology or medium is any artifact or methodology that mediates between a human user and its environment—that includes the physical, biological, and social dimensions of human interactions—. In other words, a spoon is a means and a technology, and this, in turn, "domesticates" the human being in its use and limits.

"McLuhan addressed and characterized the ecology of the media in various works: All new media have enriched our perceptions of language and older media. They are to the man-made environment and what species are to biology" [8].

"It is clear to me that all media are environments. As environments, all media have all the effects that geographers and biologists have associated with environments in the past…the medium is the message because the environment transforms our perceptions governing areas of attention and neglect alike ecology does not look for connections, but rather patterns" [9].

"Each new medium is a cliché that digs up, borrows, and drags away, or discards, previous clichés. Media as environments are quoting devices, so to speak: they engage, discard, and engage, all at once (McLuhan letter to John Wain, December 8, 1970, retrieved from the McLuhan Archive at the National Library in Ottawa, Canada)" [10].

The word "ecology" in this theory is related to biology. The rules that dominate technology and progress are given by the rules of nature, such as the rules of variety and selection, which are directly related to the laws of evolution. Additionally, the keyword in the definition of ecology is relationships; in this sense, the media are devices that are an extension of the human being, that interact with the user and that, in turn, modify their way of relating. Thus, as Scolari explains, "If we think of space, we will see an ecology; if we think in time, we will find evolution" [11] (p. 49).

In the same line of media ecology, Henry Jenkins developed the theory of convergence culture. Convergence is "the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences, willing to go anywhere in search of the desired type of entertainment experience" [12]. Sola Pool, considered a prophet of convergence, proposed that this would be the force for change within the media industries.

Cultural convergence, which must be understood as a path, not as a point of arrival, has generated changes in the recipients, who assume the role of "active prosumers": "The concept was anticipated by Marshall McLuhan and Barrington Nevitt, in 1972, who in the book "Take Today" affirmed that electronic technology would allow the consumer to simultaneously assume the roles of content producer and consumer" [13].

1.2 Social Mediations

Social mediations, a concept voluntarily unfinished by Jesús Martín Barbero [14], approaches symbolic representations and the hegemony of the media in the creation of representations.

In this sense, the Internet must be understood, for example, as an instrument or means of mediation, but not as a medium, which is by no means the same. The opposite of mediation is immediacy, and the meaning of mediation (in the sense of mediating) is to mark the middle or center between otherwise immediate things. A relationship is immediate if there is no third factor, no means to mediate the two poles of the relationship.

It is interesting to explore Vygotsky's theory, which in behaviorism theory puts a third item in the stimulus-response scheme: an auxiliary or "mediating stimulus", mediation between subject and object. The author claims that by using "tools", originally invented to control other humans, how to control himself, man becomes self-aware, thus freeing himself from the determinism of nature. The mediation produces a difference between "lower" (or "natural", "rudimentary", "primitive" or "elementary") and "higher" ("artificial", "complex" or "instrumental") forms. The basic characteristics of the higher forms consist of "self-stimulation, that is, in the creation and use of artificial means of mediation and in controlling one's behavior by these means" [15].

Cultural studies, which are the basis of mediation, give a more leading role to the recipients. Stuart Hall raised the idea of encoding/decoding. The author explains that the media produce a message with predetermined codes (coding, encoding), but it is the receiver who determines how these messages will be consumed (decoding, decoding) [16].

The social mediations understand that mass culture tends to be seen solely as the result of the mercantile industrialization process, which prevents us from understanding and considering the structural effects of capitalism on culture. For this reason, it allows a second displacement, which is to investigate mass culture from the other model, the popular one, and the conflicts that popular culture articulates. The starting point of the entire theory of mediation is that popular culture, being crossed by class culture, must overcome, in the first place, the function of denying that is attributed to it; that is, by default, part of the recognition request:

Popular culture cannot be defined in any sense, neither as that which is produced nor as that which is consumed or fed by the popular classes, outside of the processes of domination and conflicts, the contradictions that this domination mobilizes. Cultured culture has a pure vocation to think of itself as culture. The popular, on the other hand, "cannot be named without naming both the one that denies it and the one that affirms itself through an unequal and often ambiguous struggle" [17] (p. 60).

1.3 Hipermediations

In 2011, Carlos Scolari's book, Hipermediaciones, talked about "interactive digital communication". This denomination encompassed the new types of communication that arose from the digitization of communications and the creation of an integrated world network through which information circulated.

According to Scolari, interactive digital communication has five characteristics: digitality, hypertext, reticularity, interactivity, and multimedia. Baricco explains that "The term digital comes from the Latin digitus, finger: we count with our fingers and therefore digital means, more or less, numerical". Digitality implies "non-places", virtual spaces for interaction characterized by a new configuration of time, asynchronous per excellence, as well as constituted by a space other than the physical one [18]. In these non-places, there is a strong influence of individuality and subjectivity derived from an abundance of the presence of the ego. As Jenkins exposes, digitality implies a new moral economy [19]; in the sense that it calls for questioning the parameters established within social contracts.

The second characteristic, hypertext, refers to a new phenomenon: The linearity of the traditional text begins to be combined with texts from which other information can be accessed. This changes the way of thinking since linear thoughts are increasingly difficult if users are "surfing" from information to information. As Barthes develops: "the networks that interact with each other without anyone being able to impose itself on the others; this text is a galaxy of signifiers and not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning, it is reversible; we can access it in various ways, without any of them being able to qualify as main; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can see; they are indeterminable […]; systems of meanings can be imposed on this plural text, but their number is never limited, since it is based on the infinity of language" [20].

Interactive digital communications are characterized by their reticularly: compared to the "one to many" scheme typical of mass communication, an organized model in the form of a network is being configured that allows "many to many" communication. It means "transmission or broadcasting", which consists of transmitting information to a crowd (p. 12). Then, the reticular model allows the possibility of different orderings that provide meaning to the sequence of contents without it being interpreted for this reason that there is a "proper sequence" to be traversed. The notion of ordering depends on the sequence of contents that is provided by its application.

Moreover, technological evolution has generated new ways of interaction between users and devices in recent years. Interactivity evokes a type of narrative experience that involves definite paralinguistic activities: "meaning is conveyed through the media through gesture, space, color, sound, activity, and agency. I think one of the reasons these experiences are so compelling is that they allow us to access our prelinguistic homo ludens consciousness more directly, as we can playfully interact with them. Of course, then we step back and talk about it, which involves our discursive awareness of homo narrans. Then we have ludic narrans, playful tales" [21].

Finally, multimedia is related to the integration of text, graphics, drawings, still and moving images, animation, audio, and any other media where every type of information can be signified, stored, communicated, and handled digitally. According to Scolari, multimedia can be related to cross-media. Multimedia allows the creation of a set of stories (like any other story) that has a center of origin, a primitive product that, is developed in a certain language and format (audiovisual, written, sequential…). It is expanded and transformed by the application of other languages. Therefore, each product is a piece of a macro story, of a mega-text.

1.4 Ultramediaciones

Ultramediaciones is a concept developed by the authors that go beyond digital communications and explores connectivity and not only devices. This concept claims that original energy that is created through communications —in any form— is capable of modifying the social function of life. For instance, the concept "always on" may particularize the way that workers are approaching their lives and social relationships. In the same way, even cognitive processes have changed because of the way people link information in a more hypertexted way. This theory observes that connectivity occurs in the digital and analogic world in the relationships that people create. It studies how a detonator (energy)

generates, from communication, connections (frequency) and brings together interests (vibration) that affect the understanding of the environment.

Then, connectivity does not describe just the use of devices, but the creation of individual and group networks in different dimensions. According to Goyal in his economic theory, "a network describes a collection of nodes and the links between them. (…). A link between two nodes signifies a direct relation between them." [22] (p. 2). Networks in ultramediaciones are based on the reticular model. Being part of a network refers to the connection among actors and devices that are in the different nodes; they interact strategically and the effects of any action, developed in any node, are mediated by the structure of the network In this sense, the pattern of connections between individual rational agents shapes their actions and determines their rewards. What is more, location in a network has significant effects on individual rewards; so, individuals will seek to form connections to move the network in their favor. However, as individuals use their devices through this process, devices and their limitations determine the formation of connections and networks, founded on individual incentives.

In the same line of ideas, connections are created depending on the devices. In some instances, adopting a technology depends on whether others with whom people will interact frequently use the same product. In the same way, "the patterns of interaction between individuals are likely to play a key role in shaping individual choice and therefore shaping innovation at an aggregate level as well" [22] (p. 22). What is more, "every interaction facilitates the transmission of valuable information". This suggests that the structure of interaction may be viewed as an instance of informal institutions that supplement nodes in the presence of imperfect or asymmetric information [22]. Then, connected devices shape the way people interact; also the transmission of information that commands how people act and organize. Based on the media ecology, Ultramediaciones claim a new way of organization at all levels: from ideas, and communication, to social interactions.

According to Goyal [22], networks generate patterns of behavior and interactions influence coordination and cooperation outcomes. This is the vibration on which a context will be interpreted and perceived: a diversity of actions is sustainable with certain network structures but not with others. Then, in these networks, people are no longer anonymous because they work as nodes due to differences in their connections and their story will depend on the network they belong to.

2 Material and Methods

This research has a mixed approach. First, the authors aimed to consolidate a new concept based on an extended literature review. In this sense, qualitative research was developed. It allows to look for elements in a "multi-layered and textured social world" [23] (p 3). Mason (2002) affirms that qualitative research is always intimately connecting context with an explanation. This means that qualitative research is capable of producing very well-founded cross-contextual generalities. These characteristics of qualitative design make it perfect when it comes to taking a look into a concept that is still under construction.

In the second phase, this research aims to test the concept under construction on variables already explored in the Multipurpose Survey for 2019 and the Employment

Survey 2022 from the National Institute of Censuses and Statistics (INEC) in Ecuador. In this sense, it tries to explore on a general basis the environment in which ultramediaciones may develop and to predict the barriers that digital citizenship may phase in an unequal country like Ecuador. The data collected were disaggregated according to geography (rural/urban) and age (from 12 to 17; from 18 to 24; from 25 to 35; from 36 to 45; from 46 to 55; from 56 to 64; and 65 and over). The first group is interesting to explore as in Ecuador —as it was described in the introduction— citizenship is understood and developed in different urban and rural areas. Then, it is important to explore what happens in the digital world. Age ranges are created through natural ranges; this research team aims to explore the conceptualization of digital generations for Ecuador because it claims that they are different from the ones that were developed for the United States and Europe and popularized in Latin America.

The data was collected in 2019 and in 2022 to test the difference after the pandemic. However, it must be said that for 2019 10837 cases were collected; and in 2022 there were only 7 964. In Ecuador, Statistical Processes were more difficult to hold during COVID-19. However, the number of observations allows the generalization and dropping of objective conclusions.

3 Results

Data collected from the Employment Survey 2022 from the National Institute of Censuses and Statistics (INEC) in Ecuador shows an unequal evolution in the use and appropriation of connectivity that may explain a broader gap among citizens.

The use of the Internet amplifies the possibility to connect and interact; then, *Ultramediaciones* theory explores connectivity and not only devices. It recognizes that the use of the Internet can modify broadly the vibration and perception of the environment. In Ecuador there is a difference of more than 25 points in 2019 between rural and urban areas: 26% vs 71%. In a broader sight, without this connectivity, the next steps of the

Table 1. Have you used the Internet, from anywhere, in the last 12 months?

	Yes 2019	No 2019	Yes 2022	No 2022
Total	63,3%	36,7%	72,7%	22,0%
Urban area	71,2%	28,8%	81,1%	14,1%
Rural area	45,7%	54,3%	54,2%	39,4%
De 12 a 17	73,4%	26,6%	85,1%	13,4%
From 18 to 24	85,3%	14,7%	88,6%	6,0%
From 25 to 35	80,8%	19,2%	85,7%	8,7%
From 36 to 45	70,5%	29,5%	79,4%	15,3%
From 46 to 55	57,3%	42,7%	67,2%	26,8%
From 56 to 64	40,9%	59,1%	56,3%	38,4%
From 65 and above	17,5%	82,5%	27,8%	63,0%

relationship energy, frequency, and vibration can occur, but in a different environment or may evolve in a very different way from the urban areas. In rural areas, the nodes (people and devices) in a network are poorer and connections are smaller; this effect the transmission of information and the subsequent consequences: communications, media, and messages are created no matter the geographical area, however, the cognitive process and media literacy arrive in a differentiated way.

Second, reading the extremes of the age ranges, there is a difference of more than almost 56 points in 2019 and 57 in 2022. This shows that in contrast to what might be expected regarding the evolution of Internet penetration rates and digital culture, the older you get, the bigger the gap is with other generations. In terms of communication, the reticular model of networks in *Ultramediaciones* allows different orderings of information that provide meaning to the sequence of contents without it being interpreted for this reason that there is a "proper sequence" to be traversed. However, this gap suggests two scenarios: completely different interpretations of the information depending on age; or completely different information reaching nodes. If there are no bridges between networks, information will not be shared and the vibration generated by a phenomenon will not be perceived in the same way.

Third, the pandemic reveals an increase in Internet penetration and is almost identical for rural and urban areas. Then, the pandemic does not narrow the gap between rural/urban individuals and young/old. However, it grew, which implies the individual possibility of becoming a node in the network. This is important as the appearance of new nodes invites others to use connections; besides, in the analogic world, it can be translated into new vibrations of the environment.

In Ecuador, 76,7% (76% in urban area and 56,9% in rural area) of its population has a smartphone; and from this group, 93,4% uses the Internet on it. Table 2 reveals that one of the main apps that are consumed is social media. *Ultramediaciones* theory is not reduced to reflection on social media, however, it does examine how these networks work creating a flow in the nodes. Besides, social media helps to understand the diffusion

Table 2. Do you use social media on your phone?

	Yes 2019	No 2019	Yes 2022	No 2022
Total	94,4%	5,5%	96,1%	3,9%
Urban area	95,4%	4,5%	97,0%	3,0%
Rural area	90,5%	9,5%	92,7%	7,3%
De 12 a 17	97,2%	2,8%	96,1%	3,9%
From 18 to 24	98,6%	1,4%	98,2%	1,8%
From 25 to 35	96,9%	2,9%	97,4%	2,6%
From 36 to 45	94,6%	5,4%	96,7%	3,2%
From 46 to 55	91,3%	8,6%	95,9%	4,1%
From 56 to 64	86,5%	13,3%	93,1%	6,9%
From 65 and above	78,3%	21,2%	86,2%	13,8%

of information and how it is interpreted among the people that participate in it. There are narrow margins between rural and urban users; however, the gap keeps broad depending on age.

As it has been said, the gap suggests that perception and vibrations toward a phenomenon are differentiated. What is more, the use of social media suggests a new way of thinking more horizontally, through the use of links. What is more, one characteristic of socials is immediacy; this affects directly connections and frequency.

In contrast to the phenomenon observed in Table 1, the pandemic reduced in almost 7 points the difference between age groups. Then, it can be said that the necessity of connections boosted new uses in the devices. This fact can evidence exactly the opposite of what *Ultramediaciones* suggest: the environment is what modifies energy, communications, and vibrations. Then, it must be said that environment and connections assemble (Table 3).

In Ecuador, in 2019, 42,4% used a computer, but after the pandemic, the number decreased: 31,2%. From the users, in 2019 just 16,2% could develop a program, and in 2022, 7,2%. Then, the pandemic represents a challenge to digital literacy. According to Ultramediaciones theory, the networks may be conditioned by devices, but if in Ecuador nobody creates these devices and only adapts to them; there is an imposition on how to create networks that come from very different and far nodes.

Following this data, networks are not created by Ecuadorians; Ecuadorians just adapt to the way they are developed; in this sense, vibrations are recreated by others. Then, there are others developing the reticular model. The possibility of different orderings providing meaning to the sequence of contents without it being interpreted for this reason that there is a "proper sequence" to be traversed. The notion of the order depends on the sequence of contents that are provided by every application; however, if they do not come from a local network, it implies that even the way the nodes connect does not represent how the analogic environment works.

Table 3. Have you written an informatics program?

	Yes 2019	No 2019	Yes 2022	No 2022
Total	16,2%	82,7%	7,2%	92,8%
Urban area	17,1%	81,6%	7,5%	92,5%
Rural area	11,6%	88,2%	5,3%	94,7%
De 12 a 17	13,4%	85,4%	4,0%	96,0%
From 18 to 24	17,7%	81,0%	8,2%	91,8%
From 25 to 35	19,3%	79,4%	8,8%	91,2%
From 36 to 45	14,7%	84,5%	7,1%	92,9%
From 46 to 55	12,5%	86,5%	6,3%	93,7%
From 56 to 64	13,8%	85,7%	3,3%	96,7%
From 65 and above	8,8%	89,9%	3,4%	96,6%

4 Discussion

In Ecuador, the pandemic COVID-19 showed bigger gaps among the population: while new connectivity developed and increased in the urban area, the rural citizens were left behind. The same occurred in the observations according to age. In contrast, the pandemic reduced the gap in the use of social media; which can be interpreted as a better assimilation and share of the vibration according to Ultramediaciones theory. These vibrations are produced by the networks, where a more diverse group of people become nodes in social media; however, in Ecuador, Internet penetration remains the first obstacle to creating a more egalitarian development on Ultramediaciones.

The strength of this research relies on the conceptual approach to digital citizenship by the development of ultramediaciones. However, it is a concept under construction. It is a broader view of how digitality may affect the analogic world. It is closely related to the category of Media and Information Literacy as it may explain the emergence of a new culture full of energy that may be converted into differentiated social interactions and relationships in the analogic world. Ultramediaciones is based on the convergence theory. It defends that a migration is occurring in multiple media platforms, media industries, and the entertainment experience that modifies the way people will interact and the links that they may "naturally" create between others. What is more, the feedback that they can receive will also depend on the information that others are consuming and creating; then, more specialized language and cognitive processes are developed. Ultramediaciones are also related to Participation/Engagement and Critical Resistance. The analysis of digital literacy reveals that the networks that are capable of modifying our behavior are not being developed nor understood by Ecuadorians; then, citizens are just adapting to models that are written from outside. In addition, to explore this affirmation, a quantitative study was developed: the cases of rural citizenship vs urban shows that basic connectivity is not ensured and this may explain why in the analogic world, the way rural citizens interact with their politicians is different.

On the contrary side, the weakness of this study is to try to adjust quantitative variables to a concept that is still under construction. However, as the aim of this research is not to generalize, but to explore possible relationships, it may be allowed.

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