REVISTA INVECOM
ISSN en línea: 2739-0063

Media, political risk and social vulnerability in a post-pandemic context

Medios de comunicación, riesgo político y vulnerabilidad social en contexto pospandemia

Received: 05/09/2025 - **Accepted:** 01/01/2026

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Abstract

This research analyzes the relationship between media, political risk, and social vulnerability in Peru during the post-pandemic period. The objective was to understand how and to what extent media messages and the dynamics of political risk influence citizens' vulnerability. To this end, a mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining descriptive analysis and the application of a questionnaire through online surveys. A total of 385 people from the regions of Piura, Arequipa, Ucayali, Junín, Lima, and Callao participated, selected from the 17.803.300 inhabitants reported by the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (INEI) in 2020. Piura, Arequipa, Lima, and Callao had the highest participation rates, while in Ucayali and Junín, limited connectivity posed the main challenge. Despite this, participants from all regions demonstrated a remarkable capacity for analysis and reflection. The results show that the media, beyond their informative function, operate as social actors that influence public perception, the interpretation of the political landscape, and how the population understands its own vulnerability. Furthermore, political risk is configured as a factor that amplifies or mitigates this vulnerability, depending on the degree of institutional trust and perceived stability. Taken together, these findings contribute to understanding how the media and political environment shapes social experience in the post-pandemic recovery phase.

Keywords: mass media, risk, vulnerability.

Resumen

Esta investigación analiza la relación entre los medios de comunicación, el riesgo político y la vulnerabilidad social en el Perú durante el período pospandemia. El objetivo fue comprender cómo y en qué medida los mensajes mediáticos y las dinámicas del riesgo político inciden en las condiciones de vulnerabilidad de la ciudadanía. Para tal fin, se adoptó un enfoque mixto que combinó análisis descriptivo y aplicación de un cuestionario mediante encuestas virtuales. Participaron 385 personas de las regiones de Piura, Arequipa, Ucayali, Junín, Lima y Callao, seleccionadas con base en los 17.803.300 habitantes reportados por el INEI (2020). Piura, Arequipa, Lima y Callao concentraron la mayor participación, mientras que en Ucayali y Junín la limitada conectividad constituyó el principal

desafío. Pese a ello, se evidenció una notable capacidad de análisis y reflexión en los participantes de todas las regiones. Los resultados muestran que los medios de comunicación, más allá de su función informativa, operan como actores sociales que influyen en la percepción ciudadana, en la lectura del escenario político y en la forma en que la población interpreta su propia vulnerabilidad. Asimismo, el riesgo político se configura como un factor que amplifica o atenúa dicha vulnerabilidad, según el grado de confianza institucional y de estabilidad percibida. En conjunto, estos hallazgos contribuyen a comprender cómo el entorno mediático y político condiciona la experiencia social en la etapa de recuperación pospandemia.

Palabras clave: medios de comunicación de masas, riesgo, vulnerabilidad.

Introduction

At the end of the first quarter of 2020, the Peruvian population confronted a dramatic situation arising from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This context compelled the Peruvian government to implement stringent measures aimed at containing the spread of a threat that was sweeping across the globe. The pandemic generated a profound impact in Peru, critically affecting the health and economic sectors, both fundamental pillars for confronting the crisis. According to specialized agencies, the phenomenon permeated all productive sectors, disrupting supply chains, employment, and essential services. In this scenario, the media assumed a leading role, not only reporting on events but also transmitting government agreements for crisis preparedness and mitigation, with particular emphasis on the most vulnerable areas, characterized by greater social and economic needs. During the period of social confinement, a series of political events destabilized national governability. This political risk, inherent to the powers of the Peruvian state, exacerbated social vulnerability, as evidenced by growing population demands to respond to the health crisis.

The research problem emerges precisely at this complex intersection: how did media action and political risk influence, both directly and indirectly, the social vulnerability of the Peruvian population during and after the pandemic? Despite the abundance of information circulating during those months, significant gaps persisted in understanding how media discourses, political decisions, and pre-existing structural conditions articulated to deepen, reveal, or even modify situations of vulnerability. This inquiry seeks to fill that gap by exploring the interconnected dynamics that shaped the collective experience during a moment of multiple crises.

The relevance of this topic lies in the fact that the pandemic exposed deep social inequalities, institutional limitations, and fragile governance. Understanding how media contributed to amplifying, reducing, or transforming the perception of political and social risk is key to designing more effective public responses to future crises. Furthermore, the discussion illuminates the role of communication in highly polarized societies, where information can become an instrument of power that compromises democratic stability by fostering distrust and divisions.

The theoretical grounding of the study is anchored in approaches that conceive of media as social and political actors capable of influencing the construction of public reality (Cohen, 1963; Silverstone, 1999). These perspectives emphasize that media do not limit themselves to disseminating information but rather determine which issues gain priority and how they are interpreted, thereby shaping the public agenda. On the other hand, studies on political risk —from economic and social perspectives— highlight that political instability, corruption, conflict, and institutional crises erode households' adaptive capacity, deepening their vulnerability (Matthee, 2011; Mendoza & Collantes, 2018). Finally, approaches to social vulnerability argue that crises exacerbate structural inequalities, particularly among poor, rural households with limited access to basic services, education, and digital technologies.

With regard to background, numerous national and international studies have documented how the pandemic affected access to health, education, employment, and food security, with greater incidence among vulnerable sectors. In Peru, recent research has revealed that political polarization, misinformation, and weak public management increased citizen uncertainty and deteriorated living conditions. Nevertheless, empirical evidence simultaneously linking media, political risk, and social vulnerability, from the citizen perspective, remains limited, which justifies this contribution.

Authors such as Cohen (1963) illustrate how media influence a country's political landscape. In any society, messages circulate that shape the perception of political issues, and mass media represent a primary source. Their power transcends mere information: it lies in selecting which issues to highlight and from what perspectives to present them, thus configuring public opinion and defining social priorities. Moreover, Cohen (1963) posits that although media do not control what people think, they do determine what they think about, generating significant variations in the perception of reality according to journalistic approach.

In contemporary times, media not only inform about politics but actively influence it, participating in conflicts, marking institutional agendas, and even impacting public policies. They have evolved into autonomous political actors with their own interests embedded in power networks. This implies that they prioritize specific agendas, which affects the coverage of political risks. Furthermore, they frequently simplify complex information, limiting citizen and partisan understanding of such risks. In sum, media construct public opinion, define political current events, pursue particular interests, and simplify realities, influencing the perception of politicians, parties, and national stability. Clearly, they are not the sole factor, but their role in contemporary society is undeniable, extending to the perception of leaders and political cohesion.

From an economic perspective, Matthee (2011) argues that political risk impacts the expected profitability of investors, macroeconomic variables, and national stability. It acts primarily through unexpected supply shocks, affecting private investment: if the impact is severe, investment contracts; if moderate, the effect is negligible.

For their part, Mendoza and Collantes (2018) specify that in economies such as Peru's, dependent on raw material exports, private investment responds more to external factors (international mineral prices) than to internal ones such as political risk. However, from the business sector, the Lima Chamber of Commerce (CCL, 2018) insists that political instability harms investment, urging its minimization to safeguard economic growth and social cohesion.

To mitigate political risks in Peru and worldwide, social communication emerges as an essential theoretical foundation, enhanced by information and communication technologies. Traditional media (radio, press, television) and alternative media (digital) positively or negatively influence the perception of risk and societal vulnerability. If information is not clear, accessible, and timely —through any channel— it generates uncertainty, aggravating social and political conditions.

Countries such as Peru are globally evaluated for their political risk, information crucial for investors, insurers, exporters, banks, and tourists. These evaluations guide decisions and predict political-economic trends.

Political risk and social vulnerability are intrinsically related: the former increases the fragility of disadvantaged groups (the poor, the marginalized), generating displacement, unemployment, and barriers to basic services, which fuels new conflicts. People in precarious situations are receptive to populist political promises, fostering polarization and extremism. Wilches-Chaux (1993) underscores that the adaptive incapacity to environmental changes complicates resilience; in Peru, this implies altering habits or discarding unfulfilled promises, raising risks of instability.

Political risk in Peru has intensified uncertainties linked to decisions and stability, eroding governability. In the post-pandemic period, polarization and partisan fragmentation are observed, hindering effective policies. Political risk and governability are inseparable: weak governance can generate instability, economic deterioration, and loss of trust, compromising social stability.

During the health crisis, the demand for essential goods fueled corruption and impunity (manipulation of medical supplies), while the government response eroded institutional trust. This impacted the economy, raising poverty and inequality, revealing health deficiencies, and exacerbating insecurity and violence, calling into question the state's capacity for protection.

Politically aligned media weakened governability and exacerbated risks by reporting in a biased manner, aggravating inequalities and exclusion. This generated unemployment, poverty, and barriers to services, polarizing society. Strengthening governability is vital for a prosperous and stable Peru.

Thus, the Peruvian post-pandemic context is defined by polarization, the crisis of governability, unemployment, labor precarization, digital gaps, rampant poverty, and a weakened health system. To this is added the growing influence of traditional and digital media in narratives about risks, responsibilities, and social problems.

Given this panorama, this study offers an articulated perspective. Its central objective is to analyze how and to what extent media and political risk are linked to social vulnerability in post-pandemic Peru, based on the perceptions of citizens from various regions.

Methodology

This research was developed under a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach, which integrated quantitative and qualitative methods in a complementary manner to comprehensively analyze the relationship between media, political risk, and social vulnerability in the post-pandemic Peruvian context. This sequential design involved an initial quantitative phase, focused on collecting numerical data through a structured questionnaire, which facilitated the identification of general trends, relative frequencies, and average levels of citizen perception regarding the study variables. Subsequently, a qualitative interpretive phase was undertaken, designed to deepen,

contextualize, and enrich the initial findings through detailed analysis of quantitative data and open-ended discursive responses provided by participants. This sequence allowed for robust triangulation, where quantitative insights guided qualitative exploration, maximizing the validity and depth of the conclusions.

The mixed design proved suitable for capturing the complexity of the variables analyzed, combining objective quantitative measurements of citizen perception with interpretive qualitative analyses that reveal subjective and contextual meanings. In this way, not only was the magnitude of associations between media, political risk, and social vulnerability quantified, but also the nuances, narratives, and social constructions that citizens attribute to these phenomena in a context of prolonged crisis were elucidated. The pertinence of this approach lies in the multidimensional, dynamic, and socially constructed character of the variables, which transcend one-dimensional measurements and demand methodological integration for a holistic understanding.

The study was classified as correlational, since its primary purpose was to determine the degree and direction of the association between the independent variables (media and political risk) and the dependent variable (social vulnerability), without manipulating or intervening in them experimentally. Additionally, a non-experimental, observational, and cross-sectional design was adopted, given that data collection was concentrated at a single specific point in time, during the post-pandemic period, and was based on natural observation of participants' perceptions and experiences, without altering environmental conditions or inducing variables.

The target population consisted of 17,803,300 inhabitants from the selected regions of Piura, Arequipa, Ucayali, Junín, Lima, and Callao, according to official records from the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics (INEI, 2020). From this broad and diverse universe, a sample of 385 participants was extracted, a size considered statistically adequate for the study's objectives and sufficient to detect significant patterns with a reasonable margin of error (approximately 5% at a 95% confidence level). Selection was carried out through non-probabilistic chain-referral or snowball sampling, a technique particularly useful in post-pandemic contexts with mobility restrictions and unequal access to digital platforms. This method allowed for progressive and inclusive recruitment of adults residing in the aforementioned regions, prioritizing those with minimum digital connectivity to participate in the online survey.

Primary data collection was instrumented through a structured questionnaire composed of 30 items, specifically designed by the researchers based on theoretical literature and the study's objectives. The instrument was structured into three main dimensions (media, political risk, and social vulnerability) ensuring exhaustive coverage of the variables. Most items were measured using a five-category ordinal Likert-type scale, which captured levels of perception and degree of agreement-disagreement among participants. Response options included: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree. This scale allowed for hierarchical ordering of respondents' opinions, facilitating trend analysis without assuming equidistant intervals between categories, which is congruent with its ordinal nature.

Complementarily, the questionnaire incorporated dichotomous nominal-level questions (yes/no), intended to identify binary trends and clear positions on key aspects, such as trust in media or perception of political instability. These questions served as initial filters to segment the sample and contextualize subsequent responses.

To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was subjected to a rigorous expert judgment validation process. Three specialists in social communication, social sciences, and research methodology evaluated the semantic clarity, logical coherence, theoretical relevance, and representativeness of each item with respect to the dimensions studied. Their observations and suggestions, which included adjustments in wording, elimination of ambiguities, and refinement of scales, were fully incorporated before the pilot phase and final application, thus raising the reliability of the instrument.

The questionnaire was administered exclusively online, using open-access and free digital platforms such as Google Forms, which democratized geographic participation and reduced logistical costs in a context of post-pandemic restrictions. The average completion time ranged between 10 and 15 minutes per participant, optimizing retention and minimizing fatigue. Prior to the survey, an informed consent form was presented detailing the study's objectives, procedures, minimal risks involved, and expected benefits. The strictly voluntary nature of participation was emphasized, with the explicit right to withdraw at any time without repercussions.

Confidentiality and anonymity were safeguarded through strict ethical protocols: no identifiable personal data (such as names, emails, or ID numbers) were collected, and information was used exclusively for academic and scientific purposes, stored on secure servers with access restricted to the researchers. This approach aligned the research with international ethical principles, such as those established in the Declaration of Helsinki and the norms of the Research Ethics Committee of Peru.

It is important to note that the analysis of quantitative data focused on univariate and bivariate descriptive statistical techniques, including absolute and relative frequency tables, percentages, means, medians, and

distributions to interpret patterns and associations. Processing was carried out with SPSS software version 25, a robust tool that facilitated data cleaning, generation of descriptive graphs, and preliminary normality tests, ensuring efficient and systematic handling of information. In parallel, the qualitative phase involved an interpretive analysis of open-ended and discursive responses, applying thematic coding to identify emerging patterns, categories, and narratives that complemented and explained quantitative results. This sequential integration allowed for methodological triangulation, strengthening the convergent validity of the findings and offering a multifaceted view of the phenomena.

Finally, the main limitations of the study are acknowledged as the use of non-probabilistic sampling, which limits population representativeness and statistical generalization of results to all of Peru; as well as digital connectivity barriers in rural areas of Ucayali and Junín, which may have biased participation toward urban profiles or those with greater technological access. These restrictions, inherent to the post-pandemic context, suggest opportunities for future research with probabilistic or multimodal designs.

Results and discussion

The study's findings reveal that the relationship between media, political risk, and social vulnerability in Peru during the post-pandemic context constitutes an intricate and multifaceted phenomenon, driven by structural, communicational, and political factors that operate in simultaneous and reciprocal interaction. This dynamic confirms that media transcend their role as mere informational channels to position themselves as influential social and political actors in citizen perception and the collective construction of social reality, aligning with the perspectives of Mora-Figueroa (2009), who emphasizes the reconfiguration of media corporations in crisis, and Silverstone (1999), who highlights their ethical mediation in the public sphere.

During the pandemic, Peruvian media faced severe structural challenges derived from the generalized economic contraction and the drastic reduction in advertising investment, which threatened their operational viability. According to respondents, 34% identified this contraction as the main factor compromising media sustainability, evidencing the vulnerability of a media ecosystem dependent on volatile advertising flows. On the other hand, 45% recognized that governments —at central, regional, and local levels— provided crucial support through subsidies, direct economic aid, and tax exemptions, acknowledging their essential function in disseminating vital information during the health crisis. These findings directly dialogue with Casero (2020), who documents how the pandemic accelerated the digital transformation of global media systems, forcing the redefinition of business models toward income diversification and adaptation to online platforms.

In this context, 14% of participants highlighted that some media forged strategic alliances with competitors or digital entities to share journalistic resources, technological infrastructure, and operational costs, thus optimizing their survival. Concurrently, 7% underscored the emerging role of the audience as direct financiers, through voluntary subscriptions, recurring donations, and solidarity crowdfunding campaigns, reflecting a shift toward participatory and community-based models. These adaptation mechanisms illustrate a forced reconfiguration in the face of new fragmented consumption dynamics, coinciding with Mora-Figueroa's (2009) observations on the structural resilience of media corporations in scenarios of prolonged economic turbulence.

In terms of informational content, 57.14% of respondents perceived that media exhaustively prioritized coverage of the health situation, including virus propagation rates, prevention protocols, vaccination progress, and public health sequelae, which shaped an agenda dominated by immediate urgency. In contrast, only 12.98% recognized significant attention to economic issues such as mass unemployment and recession, while 25.45% valued the visibility given to digital gaps in access to technology and connectivity, particularly in rural contexts. A minimal 1.8% limited coverage to mere updates on government protection policies. This thematic hierarchy validates the agenda-setting hypothesis of Cohen (1963), who argues that media, although they do not dictate specific opinions, exercise decisive power in selecting priority issues for public reflection. Thus, the focus on health matters relegated structural problems of social vulnerability, such as persistent inequalities, limiting a broader debate on systemic solutions.

Regarding specific coverage of social vulnerability, 26.23% identified food insecurity as a leading topic, reflecting reports on shortages and assistance programs. 21.03% emphasized the worsening of economic vulnerability and the risk of mass impoverishment, with emphasis on labor informality. These patterns corroborate World Bank (2023) reports, which estimate that a substantial portion of the Peruvian population remains at thresholds of vulnerability or risk of poverty, amplified by prolonged events such as the pandemic.

However, the results also expose critical limitations in journalistic practice. 17.7% attributed the rise of practices such as misinformation, sensationalist speculation, and yellow journalism to informational pressure,

precarious working conditions of journalists, and chaotic reorganization of work routines, which distorted public narrative. Furthermore, 28.6% pointed to difficulties faced by traditional journalism in competing with the speed of social media, while 39.3% criticized the predominance of emotional, viral, and poorly verified content on these platforms, which eroded trust in formal sources. Such dynamics support the analyses of Barcelos et al. (2021), who document the proliferation of unverified information during the pandemic, often instrumentalized for political or commercial purposes.

Regarding adaptation strategies, 47.3% recognized proactive adjustments in content to align with digital dynamics, including a 34% increase in the use of social media and streaming platforms for live transmissions and interactive newsletters. Nevertheless, only 7.27% perceived sufficient promotion of preventive educational content, and 21% lamented the absence of robust monitoring and fact-checking mechanisms, facilitating the virality of fake news. This landscape resonates with Frisancho and Aparicio (2021), who criticize media prioritization in Peru toward the spectacular over pedagogical communication oriented toward collective action.

On political risk, the results delineate a unanimous perception of its role in amplifying social vulnerability: 98% agreed that the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing inequalities, with political risk acting as a catalyst. 96% saw in the health crisis a revelation of structural gaps in access to resources, basic services, and decent employment. Political polarization emerged as a pivotal factor for 76%, fostering social instability and generalized uncertainty, in line with Canel and Sanders (2005), who explore the symbolic power of the press in conflict contexts to legitimize or question official narratives.

Likewise, 89% perceived a devastating impact of the pandemic on the national economy, disproportionately affecting informal workers, the self-employed, and those with low educational attainment, which triggered social demands for food, health, and employment. This validates Casero (2020) in his linking of political crisis, institutional distrust, and spirals of vulnerability.

In the educational sphere, 98% highlighted how school closures and virtual education exposed deep digital divides, especially in rural areas, with 87% reporting obstacles in access to the Internet, devices, and teacher training. Although state interventions partially mitigated urban poverty, only 9% valued effective rural programs, underscoring territorial inequalities documented by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL, 2002) and Ruiz (2012).

Integrating these elements, 86% affirmed that political instability and regional violence increased population vulnerability, while 89% linked media coverage of presidential changes and protests to a climate of generalized tension. These patterns support De Moraes et al. (2017), who postulate that media shape ideologies and social perceptions of political events through selective framing.

In synthesis, the results and their discussion demonstrate that the interaction between media, political risk, and social vulnerability in post-pandemic Peru is dialectical and non-neutral. Responsible and ethical coverage can catalyze social cohesion and collective resilience (Silverstone, 1999; Mora-Figueroa, 2009); conversely, when misinformation, sensationalism, or polarization prevail, media aggravate inequalities, weaken the social fabric, and perpetuate cycles of instability, demanding urgent regulatory and ethical reforms.

Conclusions

The exhaustive analysis carried out in this study allows for a robust affirmation that the interaction between media, political risk, and social vulnerability in post-pandemic Peru constitutes a dynamic and complex system, in which each component not only interacts with the others but also reciprocally reinforces or weakens the citizenry's resilient capacity to face and overcome scenarios of multifaceted crisis. The empirical data obtained, derived from a representative sample of six diverse regions, demonstrate that the population perceives media as crucial actors beyond their traditional informational function: they are key agents in the configuration of collective perceptions, interpretative frameworks, and dominant narratives about social and political reality. This empirical finding corroborates classical communication theories such as agenda-setting (Cohen, 1963) and cultural mediation (Silverstone, 1999), by confirming that unbalanced public communication —lacking analytical depth, rigorous verification, or pluralism of voices— not only amplifies subjective feelings of uncertainty and anxiety but also fosters a fragmented and polarized reading of the political and social context, perpetuating cycles of distrust and exclusion.

Likewise, the evidence gathered reveals that social vulnerability transcends its purely economic or structural roots, becoming inextricably intertwined with political instability and chronic institutional fragility. The citizen perception documented in this study illustrates how elements such as exacerbated partisan polarization, the progressive erosion of trust in authorities, and recurrent inconsistency in public policies act as powerful amplifiers of systemic risk, disproportionately impacting already marginalized sectors, such as rural households, informal

workers, or those with low incomes. This cyclical interdependence demands a paradigmatic rethinking in the design of strategic communication strategies and public policies, prioritizing comprehensive approaches that foster socioeconomic recovery, promote social cohesion, and strengthen democratic governability through inclusive dialogue mechanisms and transparent accountability.

In the educational and digital spheres, persistent gaps —particularly acute in rural areas such as Ucayali and Junín— evidence that technological inclusion remains a critical pending issue on the national development agenda. Citizens, with notable clarity in their responses, identify the urgent need for sustained investments in digital infrastructure, massive training programs in digital competencies for teachers and students, and multisectoral articulation involving the state, the private sector, and civil society. This perspective reaffirms that digitalization should not be conceived as an isolated or reactive technical process, but as a transversal and structural axis of collective well-being, territorial equity, and the reduction of historical inequalities, aligning with recommendations from organizations such as ECLAC (CEPAL, 2002) on inclusive digital transformation in Latin America.

While this study provides a panoramic and valuable view from six representative regions of the country —capturing geographic, socioeconomic, and cultural diversity— it also illuminates pending questions that demand future research to advance cumulative knowledge. Among the most relevant are: how does citizen trust in media and state institutions evolve as the political landscape changes, considering variables such as future elections or institutional reforms? What specific communication strategies, such as media literacy campaigns or collaborative verification protocols, can effectively mitigate the impact of misinformation in contexts of high social and economic vulnerability? And how can composite indicators and econometric models be developed to more precisely and longitudinally measure the causal relationship between the digital divide, political risk, and social cohesion, incorporating dimensions such as community resilience? These questions not only open a vast field for longitudinal studies tracking cohorts over time but also for international comparative approaches —for example, contrasting Peru with other post-pandemic Andean countries— and experimental designs that test communicative interventions, thus allowing for deeper validation and complementation of the findings achieved in this initial research.

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