

Communication research in Spain, 1998-2007. An analysis of articles published in Spanish communication journals

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Abstract: The growth of communication research in Spain in the last decade contrasts with the scarcity of works trying to describe and assess the quality of this research. Attempting to address this problem, this article presents a quantitative content analysis of all the articles published in four years between 1998 and 2007 (1998, 2002, 2003 and 2007) by four of the most important Spanish communication journals, with a total sample of 285 articles, of which 235 are from authors working in Spanish universities or research centres. Results show that the Spanish communication researchers are basically interested in the study of Journalism, and more specifically in the analysis of news discourses. Another finding is that most research is empirically-oriented, but by and large lacks methodological rigour. These deficiencies were decreasing during the period under analysis, but increased once again in the works published more recently.

Keywords: Communication research; Spain; research methods; scientific journals.

Summary: 1. The institutional context of communication research in Spain. 2. Researching research: objectives and methodology. 3. Characteristics of the research published in communication journals. 4. Conclusions. 5. References. 6. Annex: coding sheet. 7. Notes.

Translation by **Cruz Alberto Martínez-Arcos**

1. The institutional context of communication research in Spain [1]

Communication research as a field of scientific interest emerged in Spain in the 1970s, driven by the university institutionalisation of these studies [2]. The first faculties of information sciences were created at the beginning of the 1970s in the Complutense University of Madrid, the Autonomous university of Barcelona and the private religious University of Navarra (property of the *Opus dei*), and then at the beginning of the 1980s in the University of the Basque Country. The faculties of Information Sciences -which in the 1990s changed the name to the now widespread term of Communication Sciences, or simply Communication- emerged with the immediate purpose of replacing the old

official schools (of Journalism, Advertising, Film and Television), which were hitherto responsible for the education of the professional of the various sectors of communication.

This new institutional context of education in communication in Spain -university centres, and no longer vocational schools, allowed the start of communication research that was produced with scientific criteria and was opened to international lines of work. These changes allowed tackling the accumulated delay of the Spanish research in comparison to the academic areas of reference (the US of course, but also the countries of Western Europe and Latin America) and above all the very dogmatic and autarchic attitudes that in previous decades favoured such crazy acts as the fascism-inspired Spanish doctrine of information (Moragas, 1981: 224-225).

The reason why the new faculties constituted an appropriate institutional framework for the development of the Spanish communication research was, first of all, because they enjoyed more intellectual and organisational autonomy than the old official schools, which allowed them to detach themselves from the strict doctrinal orientation imposed by the existing dictatorship. But above all because those university centres offered, for the first time, a genuine structure of opportunities for academic professionalisation through a number of institutional mechanisms of entry and promotion that involved necessarily to demonstrate certain dedication and research capacity (Ph.D. thesis, exercises to obtain a stable permanent position in the faculty or to ascend in the university rankings, etc.). The impetus of this new institutional framework explains to a great extent the emergence in Spain of communication research as a scientific field in the early 1970s.

The consolidation of democracy in the 1980s ended the long period of autarky, isolation and blinkered attitude of the Francoist dictatorship, and allowed Spain to gradually accept the spirit of the time in all aspects of life: the political, social and economic, and also, of course, the communicative aspects. The West started to live what at the end of the 1980s was already experienced as an explosion of communication (Breton and Proulx, 1989), and the communicative system inherited from the Franco regime was subsequently subverted in a short time with the emergence of the first multimedia groups (Prisa, Zeta, Godó, among others); the deregulation of television and the shift to a system of competition between public (national and now also regional) and private broadcasters; and the spectacular growth of the advertising industries and PR agencies as a consequence of the economic development of those years.

The effervescence of the Spanish communicative sector in the 1980s had immediate repercussions on communication studies because it provoked a significant change in the institutional context in which they would develop thereafter. The launch of the cultural

industries involved a relentless increase in the demand for training in communication-related professions and this generated a pressure on the scarce Faculties of information Sciences, which were unable to meet the demand. Thus, when the shock wave from the explosion of the communication business reached the university centres, the old institutional *status quo* was abandoned to make way for a proliferation of faculties that lasted until the mid-1990s.

In the early 1980s, there were four Spanish universities that offered communication studies (with specialties, then, in Journalism, Image and Advertising, which were eventually turned into autonomous degrees in the early 1990s), which were taken by about 2,000 pupils and taught by 500 professors (Jones, 1988: 22). After not more than 15 years, there were already 20 centres of communication, 20,000 pupils and around 2,000 professors. Given the importance that these new institutional conditions represented for the Spanish communication research, the last figures are crucial, since they indicate that the scientific community of communication researchers, or the potential community, quadrupled in Spain in a period of 15 or 20 years at most. And with this increase, obviously, the volume of the production of scientific communication research also increased. The increase in the number of doctoral theses –the academic exercise that marks the entry to the scientific community, as a kind of rite of passage- written about communication in Spanish universities between 1960 and 1998 (Jones *et al.*, 2000: 23) clearly reflects the situation: of the 1,541 thesis presented in that period, 94% were written from 1980 to the mid-1990s.

The explosion of faculties during this period, when the number went from four to 20, continued until it reached the present state of inflation in the offer of communication studies in Spain. The 20 centres, 20,000 students and 2,000 professors that were documented not more than 10 years ago doubled over the 1995-2005 decade: at this stage there were already 44 Spanish universities offering, together, 113 communication degrees (Moragas, 2005: 1); and today probably there are already some more to be added. There are no data on the number of professors in this last period, but the duplication of university centres with communication studies has strengthened the structure of institutional opportunities for academic professionalisation, and for this reason in recent years the incorporation of new faculty members and potential members of the scientific community is very likely to have continued being massive.

Thus communication research in Spain emerged in the 1970s, went through a phase of consolidation as a field of study throughout the 1980s, and entered a stage of development in the last decade. The current volume of the academic production in this area, and the internal complexity and diversity that the scientific community has gained,

suffice to infer that Spain is transiting a path of maturation in communication research. The rhetorical caution of the previous observations shows that there is a gap of knowledge which should not be filled with intuitive impressions that are not supported by data, or by reducing what we know in this regard to the outcome of a mere bibliometric analysis.

Because mature or immature, developed or not, what is clear is that Spanish communication researchers have not invested too much effort to reflect on their research interests, the scientific practices, the knowledge they generate, the contributions they make or the deficiencies they suffer from. Although an interest in researching the research production revived recently, this type of evaluation does not abound in the Spanish academic field [3]. And in any case, the existing knowledge on this matter, in general, can hardly be seen as a critique of the research, since it is usually limited to the identification of topics or objects of study and ignores any analytical category that allows the evaluation of the quality of its research procedures and results.

2. Researching research: objectives and methodology

The interest in knowing the status of the research in any field of scientific knowledge must be guided by an indicator of the maturity of that field. Moreover, as previously stated, this effort should not be limited to the mere description of what is done but it should propose a critical evaluation to somehow determine the quality of what is being done. With this purpose, the Group of Advanced Studies in Communication (GEAC) from the Rey Juan Carlos University (Madrid) is developing a project for the systematic examination of the scientific communication in Spain, and their first results are presented in this article.

The initial phase of this project is based on three decisions that delimit the object of study and determine the method of research. First, it seemed convenient to start with the analysis of the research published in the Spanish scientific journals specialised in communication. This decision is justified by the fact that journals occupy a crucial position in the system of disseminating of scientific results. Firstly, because journals are the vehicle for the proper presentation of the latest research, since the time between production and publication is usually not too long.

They are therefore the most reliable indicator of the open research lines. Journals express in the most updated way the interests of the scientific community at any given time. In addition, and in response to their status as scientific publications, journals use certain procedures and criteria for the selection and filtering of original work that guarantee an

adequate level of quality in the work they disseminate. In other words, the articles included in this type of publications should represent the good research, the works meeting the criteria of scientific rigour and validity.

Second, we decided to focus the analysis on the latest stage, approximately from the mid-1990s to the middle of the first decade of the 21st century. Apart from the intrinsic interest of the knowledge about the characteristics of the research undertaken in recent years, during this period there was, as mentioned before, a massive incorporation of potential communication researchers in Spain, as a consequence of the process of inflation in the offer of these studies at Spanish universities. Therefore a study like this one can be useful to determine the impact that this new institutional context is having on communication research.

The third methodological decision was to begin the systematic study of communication research in Spain with the quantitative content analysis of the articles disseminated by the selected journals. This is certainly a limited methodological procedure to generate evaluative data on the research production [4]. But we also considered that in order to direct the other effort of critical review, it would be convenient to start with a broad, empirically-grounded and verified description of the published research, particularly if we consider that content analysis is a technique based on the (quantitative) counts of the (qualitative) judgements of the analysts, so that the more demanding the required judgement is, the closer the obtained results will be to the evaluative practice.

For this reason, we designed a coding sheet that includes up to 40 extensive and carefully categorised variables to examine each of the sampled articles in terms of: authorship and authors' institutional affiliation, object of study, type of research (methodological or empirical), disciplinary field (social sciences or humanities), resources for the construction of theoretical frameworks (basically the theories), and empirical research techniques and their mode of use, in the case of articles with this orientation [5].

In this work we present the results of the analysis of a set of articles published between 1998 and 2007 by four Spanish journals specialised in communication research: *Anàlisi* (Analysis), published by the Autonomous University of Barcelona since 1980; *Comunicación y Sociedad* (Communication and society), published by the University of Navarre since 1988; *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico* (Studies on the Journalistic Message), published by the Complutense University of Madrid since 1994; and *Zer*, published by the University of the Basque Country since 1996 [6].

The history of these journals is longer than a decade, and although some of them were created in the 1990s all of them are edited by departments attached to the four pioneering faculties of Information/Communication Sciences in Spain (the ones founded in the 1970s). Therefore, they represent the most consolidated tradition in the effort to disseminate the results of communication research in Spain. In addition, these journals generally occupy outstanding positions in the various impact factor listings of the scientific publications on communication in Spain (the Impact Factor of the Spanish Journals of Social Sciences, IN-RECS, produced by the University of Granada; and the Impact Factor of the Spanish Journals of Social Sciences and Humanities, RESH, produced by Spain's Higher Council of Scientific Research). If we focus on the high position that these journals often occupy in the previous impact factor listings, and the fact that they also occupy the first places in the appreciation of researchers themselves (Giménez, Toledo and Alcain, 2006: 116), presumably the selection criteria of these journals ensures that they can provide one of the most significant and relevant *corpus* to examine communication research in Spain.

For the period covered by the analysis (1998-2007), which is the first phase of the project, we did not select a strict sample, instead we did a kind of polling on the decade under study through its fragmentation in two five-year periods and then selected the issues published by the four journals in the initial and final years of the two five-year periods. Following this procedure, the resulting textual *corpus* included 287 articles published in 1998, 2002, 2003 and 2007 [7]. The distribution of the sample by journals and years are presented in the following table [8].

Table 1						
CORPUS FOR THE CONTENT ANALYSIS						
Year		Anàlisi	Comunicación y Sociedad	Estudios Mensaje Periodístico	Zer	Articles per year
1998	Volume	22	11(1) & 11 (2)	4	4 & 5	60
	Articles	7	14	12	27	
2002	Volume	28 & 29	15 (1) & 15 (2)	8	12 & 13	75
	Articles	20	11	23	21	
2003	Volume	30	16 (1) & 16 (2)	9	14 & 15	65
	Articles	12	11	20	22	
2007	Volume	35	20 (1) & 20 (2)	13	22 & 23	87
	Articles	12	12	30	33	
Articles per Journal		51	48	85	103	287

The data obtained from this *corpus* of articles were recorded, as mentioned, using a coding sheet that included 40 variables related to various elements of the content of the articles, although this first approximation to the results will be more modest and limited than the approximation to be performed in the whole project of which this is part. Regarding the communication research published in the last decade by the selected Spanish scientific communication journals, this article aims specifically to address three aspects about these articles: their *authorship*, their *objects of study*, and their *methodological orientation*.

The question of *authorship* should enable us to determine researchers' institutional affiliation, which is understood as the identification and location of the universities or research institutes where they work (Spain, European countries, Latin America, etc.), and in the case of researches working in Spanish centres, this variable should also determine the public or private character of the institutions. This data will be included here only in a constative manner, since it seemed appropriate that in order to establish the current state of communication research in Spain it was convenient to restrict the results on the other two variables (objects of study and methodological orientation) to those cases, which are

obviously majoritarian, in which the authors are attached to universities or research institutions located in Spain.

In spite of its apparent specificity, the question concerning the *object of study* of the articles presented enormous difficulties in its implementation for a quantitative analysis. Not in vain, the gap and sometimes the inadequacy of the analytical categories used in many of the previous studies limit the validity of their results simply because it is difficult to get a clear answer to this apparently simple question. In this matter, almost all the methodological requirements needed for the appropriate categorisation of variables are also often overlooked, and it is not uncommon to find categorical systems that not only are exhaustive, but are decidedly not exclusive and incoherent. This is just the summary of a clear difficulty.

To avoid these risks as much as possible, we decided to resort to a multiple approach based on four variables (the variable 28 to 31 of the coding sheet; see annex), but here we will provide the results of only two of them: the one about what we have called the *media or professional area*, that a given article addresses, and the one asking about the *specific object of study* within that area. The first variable included 48 categories -i.e. 48 classification options for the examined articles-, which sought, of course, total exhaustivity. The second variable contains seven substantive categories (journalists, businesses, content, technologies, audiences and reception, effects and influence, and communication research), which allow, unlike the previous, multiple responses, which is something useful for articles addressing several objects of study.

The analysis also aimed to establish the *methodological orientation* of the published articles, which here will be limited to two indicators: the *type of research* (i.e. whether the articles are theoretical-conceptual, methodological, or empirical); and the *empirical research techniques* used in articles of empirical character (survey, content analysis, focus groups, biographical methods, secondary data, etc.). The coding of the 285 articles eventually included in the *corpus* was equally performed by the authors of this article, making sure that both authors registered data from the four journals and the four years under study. In other words, in order to avoid analysts' potential biased judgements from affecting only one journal or one year, we prevented that a single encoder could register all the data from one of the journals or one of the years.

3. Characteristics of the research published in communication journals

Authorship of research

In the analysed period (1998-2007), the journals specialised in communication included in this study (*Anàlisi, Comunicación y Sociedad, Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico* and *Zer*) have mostly published articles signed by authors affiliated to Spanish research institutions, especially universities (8 out of 10) and, within them, particularly public universities. Table 2 presents the distribution obtained for this period in the four journals: of every 10 published articles, six were written by authors working in Spanish public universities, two by authors working in Spanish private universities, and two by researchers belonging to non-Spanish institutions, mostly Latin American.

Table 2		
AFFILIATION OF AUTHORS		
	Number (T = 285)	Percentage
Spanish public universities	179	62,8
Spanish private universities	44	15,4
Spanish public research centres	2	0,7
Spanish private research centres	2	0,7
Other (Spanish)	8	2,8
Articles with authors from Spanish institutions	235	82,4
Latin American research centres or universities	36	12,7
European research centres or universities	8	2,8
Universities or research centres from the United States	2	0,7
Other (non-Spanish)	4	1,4
Articles with authors of non-Spanish institutions	50	17,6

Based on these results we must highlight two issues. Firstly, there is a limited presence of work from Latin America (only 36 of the 285 articles, which accounts for about 13%), even when the language should facilitate a greater penetration of Latin American researchers in Spanish communication journals. The welcoming attitude of these journals to the Latin American scientific production is scarce, and also conditioned, in general, to

the existence of a previous relationship of education (doctoral or master's degrees, etc.) between the author and the Spanish universities, since much of the authors ascribed to Latin American universities at the time of publication are in fact former students of M.A. and Ph.D. degrees offered in Spain, according to the curriculum vitae of many of these authors.

However, we think that these figures cannot provide conclusions about the editorial policy of the Spanish journals towards Latin American researchers, which is something that can only be determined by studying the proportion of articles submitted by Latin Americans and the number of articles eventually published. In other words: it cannot be ruled out that the limited presence of Latin American communication research in Spanish journals is due simply to the lack of proposals for publication from that region.

The data presented in table 2 highlights another situation that must be examined carefully. Research originating in Spanish universities accounts for almost 80% of all research published in these journals; but there is a significant disproportion between the private and public centres: authors attached to the former centres are responsible for more than 60% of this research and those working in private institutions are responsible only for 15%. Certainly, there are way more public than private universities offering studies in communication (Journalism, Audiovisual Communication and Advertising and Public Relations): 29 public and 16 private. However, it is likely that the number of faculty, and therefore of potential researchers, does not reflect the same proportion and is more than double in some universities, because private universities offer less than half of all communication degrees offered in Spain since they typically concentrate on those degrees with higher demand and, therefore, with greater potential for profitability.

In any case, and in the absence of data on the volume of the teaching staff in public and private Spanish universities, it does not seem that the difference in research potential between them is not enough to generate a difference of 4 (public university) to 1 (private university) in the authorship of communication research published in Spain. Put another way, everything seems to indicate that the scientific production of researchers working in private universities would not correspond with the potential of these centres, at least regarding the journals and the period under analysis.

It is true that the aforementioned process of inflation of universities with degrees in communication (which has been led basically by private centres attracted by the demand of these studies) as developed steadily throughout the last decade, and therefore the research potential probably also developed gradually. But when it comes to explaining the reasons for the differences in the research capacity of public and private universities,

we should not rule out factors relating to the conditions of work in these centres – for example, the greater the burden of teaching hours is, the less time for research is available, - and even to the research training of the faculty members recruited at top speed to take advantage of the shock wave of the demand for communication studies triggered in Spain in the last decade.

The objects of study of communication research in Spain

Whatever the scientific field of research, the determination of the objects of study is one of the most controversial points in the analysis of the research production due to the resistance of this variable to any closed taxonomisation, since its characterisation can fit different categories. An investigation into the routines of the journalistic production is about journalism in the same way as it is about the informative treatment of immigration, but no one would argue that in both cases the same object of study is addressed. The established categorical system must allow, therefore, the recognition of the coinciding aspects (journalism) and the different elements (the routines and the discourses).

This difficulty, as we said before, has generally not been well tackled in studies about communication research in Spain. Here we decided to determine what the articles investigate about through two questions that focus on the object of study: one refers to what we have called the *media or professional area* about which knowledge is generated; and the other one refers to the *specific object of study* within that area. The results of the first question are presented in table 3.

Table 3

MEDIA OR PROFESSIONAL AREA OF REFERENCE			
		Number (T = 235)	Percentage
Journalism or journalistic information	Journalism (in general)	43	18.3
	Press	55	23.5
	Television	6	2.6
	Radio	4	1.6
	Digital media	8	3.4
	Total	116	49.4
Audiovisual communication		40	17.0
Communication or media communication (in general)		20	8.5
Advertising and marketing		18	7.6
Corporate communications and public relations		12	5.1
Communication research		11	4.7
Internet, digital media and new ICTs		7	3.0
Other		11	4.7

The results in table 3 actually correspond to a rearrangement of the 48 thematic categories included in the coding sheet, which we summarised in his way to facilitate a first examination of the interests of the Spanish scientific community. The data indicate that Spanish research on communication –at least the one published by the four journals under analysis in the last decade– is very fundamentally about journalism, and more specifically about journalistic information in the press. Articles dealing with issues related to this activity are virtually half (49.4%) of all those analysed, and half of them (55 of 116) focus on the press, and more specifically on the daily press (only 4 of the 55 explore non-daily media).

Another finding that highlights the predominance of studies on *Press journalism* in the Spanish research is that about a quarter of all the published articles focus on this media-professional area. It is also significant the relatively little research attention put on audiovisual journalism (radio and television), which together account for less than 5% of the total, and the comparatively greater interest in journalism in digital media than in

journalism in radio and television (3.4% of articles are devoted to digital journalism, against 2.6% and 1.6% devoted to television and radio, respectively).

In light of the centrality of *journalism*, the effort put on issues related to audiovisual communication (regardless of the specific object of study: from non-informative content - entertainment, fiction, etc.– to public policies; from radio to cinema or photography) only accounts for 17% of the articles. However, it should be noted that the articles on cinema account for nearly five points of that percentage. Something similar happens with studies on advertising and marketing (about 8% of the total); and corporate and institutional communication and PR (around of 5%); and even the Internet, new technologies, and digital media (not more than 5%).

Leaving aside the category we called “communication or media communication”, which is reserved for those articles dedicated to communication and mass media communication without specifying the medium or activity, it should be noted that there is a relatively high proportion of articles (around 5%) devoted to studying communication research itself, which may confirm our impression about the recent re-emerging interest in researching the Spanish communication research.

If we examine the *specific objects of study* in relation to the *media-professional areas* that attract researchers’ interests, the results presented in table 4 [9] indicate that more than half (53% or 125 of 235) of the articles published in this period analyse some aspect relating to the *contents* of communication, which is practically twice the number of articles examining *journalists* and *media companies*, and way larger than the number of articles focused on the other categories.

Table 4		
SPECIFIC OBJECT OF STUDY		
	Number of articles	Percentage (based on 235)
Journalists	65	27.7
Companies	64	27.2
Contents	125	53.2
Technologies	9	3.8
Audiences and reception	25	10.6
Effects and influence	10	4.3
Communication research	11	4.7
Communication in general	3	1.3

The coding sheet distinguished a number of different options for the category *content*: discourses; languages and genres; design and formal elements of communicative products; and historical or legal aspects relating to these different categories. A more detailed analysis of this category reveals that the interest in *contents* in Spanish research is basically an interest in the study of the *journalistic content*, accounting for almost 65% (78 of 125) of the articles dealing with some aspect (discourse, language, etc.) of the media message. Moreover, this interest focuses primarily on research on *informative discourses*; i.e. journalistic information in any media (press, radio, television and Internet). This subject of *informative discourses* is present in about 60% of the articles dedicated to journalistic content (44 of 78), and has a preference for the analysis of the information disseminated in the press (29 articles, or i.e. two out of three, are about informative discourses).

Articles about *journalists* and *media companies* also have a relevant presence in the Spanish research. The first of these categories includes all those articles about the processes and organisation of the communicative production; journalists' practices, organisations and training; ethics and values; historical and legal aspects of the journalistic profession; and studies focused on the work of certain persons, which is a kind of work that is well developed in Spanish research on communication *professionals*. Research focused on the *media companies* present almost exclusively the analysis of the structure, markets and economy of communication, and to a lesser extent issues such as

the organisation and operation of the companies or policies and regulations affecting the communications sector.

The rest of the objects, except perhaps the one relating to the study of audiences and reception processes (with a considerable presence in a bit more than 10% of the articles), are not part of the research interests consolidated among Spanish communication researchers, and this calls for some reflection. For now, it is enough to point out that, from the methodological point of view, two of these objects of study, the *audiences/reception* and *effects/influence* of communication, have traditionally been very demanding research fields when they are studied empirically, and for this reason it cannot be ruled out that the disregard for these themes reflects major methodological deficiencies in Spanish research.

Ultimately, these results support the hypothesis that the recent communication research in Spain tends to focus on the study of *journalism* (practically half of the examined articles addresses issues related to this media-professional area), and more specifically on the analysis of the *journalistic contents* (a third of all the articles included in the sample, 78 of 235, deals with these issues). And within the interest in the study of the journalistic message, the research interest put in the *informative discourses* (a fifth of all examined articles) is outstanding, and particularly towards the discourses disseminated by the press, which is greater than the interest in the discourses disseminated by television, radio and the internet.

This supremacy of press journalism and journalistic information as objects of study is probably the consequence of some unique characteristics of the institutional working context of the Spanish scientific community dedicated to communication research. Firstly, the prominent position that journalism and journalists' education have had in Spain in communication studies since the first faculties of Information Sciences were founded at the beginning of the 1970s. Those faculties were born to replace the old vocational schools, but mainly motivated by the vocational schools of journalism, whose members widely commanded their transformation into university faculties. This gave a sort of journalistic imprint to these centres, which started to be promoted with the foundation of three autonomous degrees -Journalism, Audiovisual Communication, Advertising and Public Relations- in the early 1990s.

This journalistic imprint was also very inclined, precisely, towards written journalism, due to the miserable situation of the audiovisual media in Spain until the 1980s and the enormous economic investment (in recording studios, recording and editing equipment, etc.) which demanded the university education of professionals in audiovisual

communication. These circumstances conspired in favour of written journalism, its teaching and scientific study, while the audiovisual information and in general everything related to Audiovisual Communication and Advertising and PR gradually gained consolidation in the curricula and consequently gained greater teaching and researching strength.

This situation began to change at the beginning of the 1990s with the introduction of degrees in these specific fields. But this process was precisely one of the factors that encouraged the inflation of communication studies in the Spanish university system since the mid-1990s, and that forced a massive incorporation of teaching staff -especially in those areas in expansion within audiovisual communication, advertising, corporate communications and public relations- which was recruited largely from the media sector, which was generally lacking solid scientific training to immediately undertake academic research. The own historical inertia and the latest junctures contributed, therefore, to explain the preference of the recent communication research in Spain towards printed-press journalism and journalistic information as the objects of study.

The methodological orientation of communication research

To learn about the methodological orientation of the articles published in the communication journals we sought to identify two aspects: the *type of research*, i.e. whether the articles were theoretical-methodological –those dedicated to the presentation or discussion of theories, approaches, concepts, or investigation procedures- or empirical -those generating knowledge on the communicative phenomena. In the case of articles presenting empirical research, we also established the *research techniques* used for the production of data.

Table 5 RESEARCH TYPE		
	Number (T = 235)	Percentage
Exclusively theoretical-conceptual	50	21.3
Methodological	3	1.3
Empirical without systematic research techniques	111	47.2
Empirical, with quantitative techniques	33	14.0
Empirical, with qualitative techniques	23	9.8
Empirical, with quantitative and qualitative techniques	12	5.1
Not classifiable under these categories	3	1.3

If we re-categorise the data in table 5 according to a criterion that distinguishes the theoretical-methodological and empirical works, the result is that the research undertaken in Spain in recent years is empirical by and large (179 of the 235 examined articles, more than 75% of the total, three of every four articles). In other words, research in Spain has been dedicated to the study of the communicative reality itself, and not to the exclusive discussion of ideas or methods to investigate that reality [10].

Now, the examination of the data about the *type of empirical research* highlights some doubts that Spanish researchers should think about very seriously. 75% of the published articles are empirical, but of the 179 empirical studies only in one third (68 articles, 38%) it is possible to identify a *research technique*, whether quantitative or qualitative, or both. A research technique is understood as any methodological procedure used to examine reality and obtain data by following the precepts standardised by the scientific literature. The precepts, obviously, are not arbitrary or random, but seek to ensure, as far as possible, that reality is objectively interpreted in a reliable manner with the data, and this fundamental, and the basis, for empirical research.

The fact that the Spanish communication researchers dedicate more efforts to empirical research, but without using scientific techniques tested for the production of data, should encourage reflection in the scientific community. There is a great production of empirical research, but a large part of it (62%) is performed without using the standardized and reliable procedures designed to obtain data and information. Due to the relevance and

implications of this finding, we need to clarify the coding criteria used to classify the empirical articles under these categories.

Those articles that made explicit reference to quantitative techniques (content analysis, survey, experimental research or secondary analysis of statistical data) or qualitative methods (discourse analysis, in-depth interview, focus groups, direct observation, etc.), or a combination of both types were obviously classified under the appropriate categories. The difficulty lies, therefore, in the classification of empirical studies (generally dedicated to the study of media content) that were often presented under the label of *discursive analysis* or *qualitative content analysis* without identifying the discourse theory that was used to generate (with the analytical categories proposed by the theory) the empirical evidence needed in any investigation of this kind.

Although the authors of these type of articles labelled them as (qualitative) *discursive analysis*, such works are not narratological studies based on conceptual and methodological tools of narrative semiotics; nor explore categories that have further developed the critical analysis of the discourse; nor take advantage of the analytical potential of any of the specialties of the linguistic studies (lexical, grammatical, semantic, or pragmatic analysis, etc.); nor resort to consolidated and renewed traditions such as rhetoric or argumentation theory, etc. Although these articles want to be ascribed to the diverse family of discursive analyses, they are works *of another kind*: “descriptions” of the content of some media texts (news, editorials, chapters of television series, ads, etc.); “reflections” merely based on authors’ personal and intuitive knowledge about something (like the use of language in journalism, for example); “exhibitions” of cases whose representative value is not justified, and cases that are “counted” rather than “analysed”; “stories” of what the media say about certain issues; and other (poor) research practices in a variety of case studies. This is a kind of empirical work on discourses which, in short, should be identified as “commentary” —more or less sophisticated and informed according to the case -and not as “scientific research”.

Having established this criterion, we decided to apply it rigorously to determine the quantitative or qualitative nature (or both) of the empirical research based on the employed analytical techniques and categories. This decision was aimed to avoid reducing the concept of *qualitative research* to the condition of a mere residual category, as it would happen if we considered -particularly with regards to the study of media content- that what was not explicitly quantitative was *necessarily* qualitative. This kind of methodological indolence is unjustifiable, and it would be even more in works of this kind, which attempt to describe in the most rigorous way possible the empirical research in Spain.

The most notable finding in this regard is, as we have mentioned before, the very high percentage (62%, 111 of 179) of empirical communication research articles published in Spanish journals that commits, in our view, the methodological failure of not identifying their research techniques (including also the analytical tools that are provided by discourse theories). The identification of research techniques was done only in 38% of the empirical articles (68 of 179), with a certain predominance of quantitative studies (about 20% of all empirical works) over qualitative ones (about 13%), and a low presence of articles that combine both methods of research (7%). If we focus strictly on the articles that can be considered as solvent empirical research (studies that at least use tested techniques), it can be observed that in two thirds of them (66% or in 45 of 68 articles) the authors use, exclusively or in triangulation, quantitative research designs, and that in approximately half (51% or 35 of 68 articles) the authors opt for qualitative designs.

On the other hand, among the findings about the *empirical research techniques* used in Spain (see table 6 [11]) it is relevant (apart from the high percentage of articles that do not use any) the high position occupied by those techniques related to the study of the messages, whether (quantitative) content analysis or the various forms of the qualitative discourse analysis (narratology, critical discourse analysis, rhetoric, argumentation, linguistics, etc.). These techniques are used separately or simultaneously in nearly one third of the examined empirical works (55 of 179).

Regardless of whether these studies are quantitative or qualitative, it must be emphasised that both methods are applied preferably (and with a similar frequency) to generate knowledge about media contents (news, ads, TV series, etc.). This use is coherent with the recent interest of Spanish researchers in this object of study (see results in table 4). It is also worth noting that there is a very frequent use of the secondary analysis of data, usually statistical, in empirical works on the structure, markets and economy of communications, which is also an outstanding object in the Spanish research.

Table 6		
TECHNIQUES USED IN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH		
	Number of articles	Percentage (based on 179)
None	111	62.0
Quantitative content analysis	28	15.6
Discourse analysis	27	15.1
Secondary analysis of data	19	10.6
Survey	11	6.2
In-depth interview	11	6.2
Focus groups	5	2.7
Experimental research	3	1.7
Ethnographic observation	2	1.1
Biographical methods	—	—

When presenting the results about the objects of study of the Spanish communication research, we pointed out that the reason for the little attention given to some of the most internationally consolidated areas, like studies on *audiences and reception* or the *effects and influence* of the media, could be the fact that traditionally these fields have been very demanding in the methodological designs that are needed for their empirical approach (surveys, ethnographic observation, discussion groups, experimental research, etc.). We also said that this circumstance could be reflecting some methodological deficiencies in the Spanish research. The results of table 6 also point in that direction, and highlight the rare use of research techniques other than those used in the study of media contents, and the merely testimonial use of some of them (there was not a single article using discussion groups, experiments, ethnographic observation, or biographical methods). This means that Spanish research on communication is mainly based on *documentary sources*, and lacks interest in phenomena that requires access to *living sources* (i.e. people). Quantitative or qualitative research in Spain tends to be locked up in libraries of newspapers, journals and videos, and apparently does not like getting out to the streets.

The most significant result of this analysis of the methodological orientation of the Spanish research on communication is probably the verification of the generalised methodological deficiency in empirical studies published in the last decade. Undoubtedly, it should be the most worrying issue for the scientific community, since it is a central indicator to evaluate the quality of the research in the country. However, this result should be approached with the caution and nuances suggested by table 7, which shows the evolution of the different types of research during the period under study (1998-2007). As we can see, the annual percentage of empirical work not identifying any research technique declined very significantly between 1998 and 2003, and increased again in 2007, the last year under study. Of the articles published in 2003, the percentage of non-solvent empirical research decreased by half with respect to the publications in 1998, and was 25% lower than in the previous year, 2002.

	1998		2002		2003		2007	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Theoretical-conceptual or methodological	7	15.2	24	38.1	11	20.4	11	15.3
Empirical without research techniques	30	65.2	29	46.0	18	33.3	34	47.2
Empirical with research techniques	8	17.4	9	14.3	24	44.4	27	37.5
Not classifiable with these criteria	1	2.2	1	1.6	1	1.9	—	—
Total number of articles per year	46		63		54		72	

This favourable decrease was also reinforced by the unusual increase of what we can consider to be the solvent empirical research, which accounts for almost half of all the research published in 2003, with percentages three times higher than the ones in the previous years under analysis (1998 and 2002). However, this trend towards solvency in empirical research seems to be declining in the last period, as shown by the data for 2007: although the percentage of empirical articles using research techniques in 2007 is still higher than in 1998 and 2002, it is lower than the percentage in 2003. Moreover, the percentage of empirical articles without research techniques in 2007 is the same as in 2002. And this apparent discontinuity in the last stage of a healthy trend towards improvement in the Spanish empirical research is what compels us to reflect carefully.

The reasons for this discontinuity are a complicated matter. It could be something merely cyclical, which is a doubt that could be solved only by expanding the sample; it could be the result of a relaxation in the controls and requirements established by the scientific journals; or it could be the result of the enormous pressure put on researchers (and journals) by the new conditions for career advancement (mainly, official accreditations), which is forcing the production of research to the detriment of the methodological rigour and the parsimony required by scientific work. It would be regrettable that this could be one of the unintended consequences that Soriano (2008) has called the “ANECA effect”.

4. Conclusions

This analysis of a sample of articles published in the journals *Anàlisi*, *Comunicación y Sociedad*, *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico* and *Zer* in the period 1998-2007 (235 articles) has produced the following results: firstly, that the recent communication research in Spain tends to focus in few very specific objects of study, and to widely neglect others. Communication research in Spain is focused on the study of journalism, which is studied in almost half of the examined scientific articles. The other half of the research production addresses the rest of the media-professional areas in which the communicative activity develops: advertising, marketing, audiovisual communication, public relations, corporate communication and communication in new digital media (excluding journalism).

Communication research in Spain is also particularly interested in the study of media *contents* –and within them the study of discourses–, which is the object of study addressed by more than half of the works included in the sample. Given the absence of more detailed analysis, these results support the hypothesis that the study of *journalistic discourses*, and in particular of discourses produced by the press, has been the most recurring theme of the communication research in Spain over the last decade. Probably, the journalistic imprint exhibited by the Spanish faculties of information/communication sciences, since their foundation in the early 1970s, still remains well rooted, and perhaps this is one of the factors that explain the recurrence of this object of study in the articles published in scientific journal.

Without neglecting the contributions of exclusively theoretical-methodological studies, communication research in Spain is largely empirical (three quarters of the articles included in the sample), and thus pays attention to the analysis of the communicative reality itself. But according to our data, generally, the empirical articles have serious methodological deficiencies, at least regarding their use of standardised techniques to

obtain data. Such quantitative or qualitative techniques were identified in only one third of the articles, but there was a predominance of the techniques used for the study of media messages (content analysis and discourse analysis) and a scarce use of procedures to obtain data from *living sources* (survey, in-depth interview, focus groups, etc.).

However, the widespread methodological deficiency that we have identified in the published empirical research admits some nuances. Indeed, in the period analysed, between 1998 and 2007, there is a very positive trend in which the non-solvent empirical research significantly decreases, while the empirical research meeting the appropriate scientific standards increases. The increase of non-solvent empirical research in the last years under analysis, 2007, should encourage us, once again, to activate the alarms about the quality of the research among Spanish researchers.

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6. Annex 1. Coding Sheet

Communication Research in Spain Analysis of articles published in scientific journals
<p>IDENTIFICATION VARIABLES</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of unit of analysis 2. Journal 3. Year of publication 4. Full title of the article
<p>AUTHORSHIP VARIABLES</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Number of authors 6. Name of the authors 7. Affiliation of the authors (universities, research centres, etc.) [6 categories] 8. Character (public or private) of the Spanish research institutes [4 categories] 9. Memberships to research groups (group name) [3 categories] 10. Spanish public universities [30 categories] 11. Spanish private universities [17 categories] 12. Type of university department (only Spanish universities) [4 categories] 13. Department not specific but attached to the Faculty of communication or mixed [13 categories] 14. Department not attached to faculty of communication nor mixed [13 categories] 15. Location of non-Spanish universities or centres [6 categories] 16. Location of Latin American universities or centres [6 categories]
<p>VARIABLES ABOUT THE CONTEXT OF CONTENT</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 18. Affiliation of the study to a research project [2 categories] 19. Agency funding the research project [10 categories] 20. Number of articles cited in the bibliography [5 categories] 21. Number of cited articles originally published in Spanish 22. Number of cited articles originally published in other Spanish languages 23. Number of cited articles originally published in other languages 24. Number of cited articles published before 1980 25. Number of cited articles published between 1981 and 1990 26. Number of cited articles published between 1991 and 2000

27. Number of cited articles published since 2001
VARIABLES ABOUT THE OBJECT OF RESEARCH 28. Media or professional are object of study [48 categories] 29_1. Specific object of study: professionals [9 categories] 29_2. Specific object of study: companies [5 categories] 29_3. Specific object of study: contents [6 categories] 29_4. Specific object of study: technologies [3 categories] 29_5. Specific object of study: audiences and reception [4 categories] 29_6. Specific object of study: effects and influence [3 categories] 29_7. Specific object of study: communication research 29_8. Specific object of study: communication (in general) 30. Social subjects object of study (in the case of 29_5 or 29_6) [19 categories] 31. Preferential field of interest (political or health communication, etc.) [31 categories] 32. Geographical area of study [12 categories] 33. Spanish Autonomous community on which the article is centred
VARIABLES ABOUT THE METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION 34. Type of research (theoretical-conceptual, methodological, empirical) [7 categories] 35. Generic disciplinary area (social sciences, humanities, etc.) [3 categories] 36. Main approach or perspective (positivism, critical theory, etc.) [5 categories] 37. Theories or conceptual devices mentioned in the article
VARIABLES ABOUT TECHNIQUES OF DATA COLLECTION [only when V34 = empirical research] 38. Empirical research techniques used in the study [9 categories] 39. Implementation of research techniques [9 categories] 40. Data sources (living, documentary, etc.) [7 categories]

7. Notes

1. We thank professor María Luisa Humanes for her cooperation in the design of the coding sheet, the database and statistical analysis. The first version of this work was presented in the 7th *Iberoamerican Biennale of Communication* held from 22 to 25 September 2009 in Chihuahua (Mexico), and published in the proceedings of this Congress with the title “Ten years of communication research in Spain (1998-2007). Analysis of articles published in scientific journals”.

2. This section sums up some arguments that are further developed in Martínez Nicolás, 2006 and 2008b.

3. Next to the pioneering studies of Moragas (1981, 1988, 1989, and 1990) and the subsequent attention of Jones on this matter (1994, 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2000), there are more recent work produced by Martínez Nicolás, 2001, 2006, 2007 and 2008b; Díaz Noci, 2006; Xifra and Castillo, 2006; Almirón, 2007; Almirón and Reig, 2007; García Jiménez, 2007; and Humanes, 2007.

4. Since they require a detailed and in-depth examination of the textual corpus under consideration, this type of critical evaluation should not focus exclusively on specific topics, fields or areas of research, which are in charge, obviously, of specialists with wide and up-to-date knowledge on the different subjects. This has been precisely the purpose of the contributions gathered in the collaborative work of Nicolás Martínez (coord.), 2008a, which offers evaluations of the *current status* of audiences and reception studies (Javier Callejo), the history of communication and journalism (Josep Lluís Gómez Mompart), political communication (José Luis Dader), the political economy of communication (Francisco Sierra), and studies on the journalistic profession (Félix Ortega).

5. In view of the length of the coding sheet, annex 1 only indicates the set of included variables, without specifying the number of categories contained in each of them.

6. The full name of the first journal is *Anàlisi. Quaderns de comunicació i cultura* (Analysis. Journal of Communication and Culture); and of the last journal is *Zer. Revista de estudis de comunicació/ Komunikazio ikasketen aldizkaria* (Zer. Journal of communication studies).

7. The coding sheet was applied only to 285 articles because the linguistic limitations of the authors led to the temporary exclusion of two articles published in Basque Language in the numbers 5 (1998) and 15 (2003) of *Zer*. The analysis did include the articles (frequently) published in Catalan in *Anàlisi*; and the articles published in English by *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico* (number 13, 2007) and *Zer* (number 4, 1998).

8. The second phase of this project, which is currently in the process of codification, expanded the number of scientific publications with the inclusion of *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social* (Latino Journal of Social Communication), and also the period under analysis to cover 15 years from 1996 to 2009, by considering the years 1996, 2000, 2005 and 2009. This sample design, which draws a dividing line in 2002 (before and after that year), should enable us to verify empirically, among other questions, the impact in

the Spanish communication research of what Soriano (2008) has called the *effect ANECA*.

9. As we noted in the methodological section, the categories included in table 4 are not exclusive, so that a single article could have been classified in several of them if the research addressed more than one of these specific objects of study, typically not more than two. For example, the article entitled “Les entrevistes científiques al diari *Avui*: anàlisi de la terminologia i prova de comprensibilitat” (Scientific interviews in the *Avui* newspapers: analysis of terminology and test of comprehensibility) (*Anàlisi*, N. 29, 2002) simultaneously admits a classification as research about *content* (the terminology used in scientific interviews) and about *audiences and reception* (the test of comprehensibility made by the authors).

10. To avoid confusion in this issue: empirical research is, by definition, theoretical-empirical: discusses ideas, concepts, etc., and generates knowledge about phenomena based on such ideas and data. Theoretical and methodological research studies are not supported by empirical data because they seek to clarify, propose and discuss ideas or methods or modes to interpret reality. The definition and value of empirical research, obviously, only applies to the good empirical research.

11. The categories in table 6 are not exclusive, since the same empirical research project may have been resorted to a combination of different quantitative or qualitative techniques.

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