
Miscellaneous

Ángel Carrasco-Campos
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0986-5305>
angel.carrasco.campos@uva.es
Universidad de Valladolid

Enric Saperas
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2017-078X>
enric.saperas@urjc.es
Universidad Rey Juan Carlos

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Between Centrality and Theoretical Dispersion: Theoretical Frameworks in Spanish Peer-Reviewed Communication Journals. Analysis of Research Papers Published by Five Top-Ranked Journals 2011-2020

Abstract

This paper describes the research published during the period 2011–2020 by five leading Spanish peer-reviewed journals of communication, aiming to identify the most common theoretical frameworks and standard theories. A statistically representative sample of the articles published during that period was systematically selected from the five journals of communication ranked as having the greatest continuity and impact according to SJR–Scopus: *Profesional de la Información*, *Comunicar*, *Communication & Society*, *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico* and *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*. A coding protocol that includes 13 variables and 74 categories was defined and applied to compare the type of theoretical frameworks and the theories in the different subject areas observed. The results show that although almost all the papers studied have a theoretical framework, fewer than half are grounded on recognizable theories. Specifically, journalism and digital communication are the two subject areas whose articles frequently include standard theories: in journalism by the support of classical theories of communication (framing, agenda setting, journalistic professional cultures and roles), and in digital communication by the support of more theoretically dispersed frameworks. Theoretical frameworks developed by literature review are common in other subject areas (such as audiovisual studies, public relations and documentation).

Keywords

Theoretical framework, theories of communication, objects of study, subject areas, meta-research, peer-reviewed journals.

1. Introduction, justification and state of the art

Over the second decade of the past 21st century, communication in Spain has consolidated a third stage of maturity that had already begun in the first decade of the 2000s (Martínez-Nicolás, 2009; Saperas, 2016). In this period, three trends have modified the dimension, centrality and theoretical scope of the disciplinary field. The first trend is the transformation of its objects of study, with the emergence of new problems and research challenges as a consequence of the changes in the global media system, where traditional media coexist with innovative products such as audiovisual platforms, social networks and media services providers (Castells, 2009; Hartley, 2012). Complementary to this transformation of the media system is the recognition by the academic community of a common research agenda in which emerging objects of study are integrated with more traditional ones. The third of these trends is a renewed institutional profile of research shaped by the predominance of peer-reviewed journals, scientific associations and the consolidation of bibliometric databases. These three transformations, which we have referred to in more detail in previous research (Carrasco-Campos & Saperas, 2021), define an international institutional framework for the production and dissemination of cutting-edge knowledge and for the construction of collaboration networks and of professional competence among researchers.

This new stage of maturity cannot be explained only by the “Bologna Effect” (Sánchez-Vigil, Marcos-Recio & Oliveira, 2011; Moreno, Carrasco-Campos & Saperas, 2014) or the “ANECA¹ Effect” (Soriano, 2008; Masip, 2011). In the last two decades, the adoption in Spain of this international framework has led to the promotion of scientific associations as meeting spaces for researchers: in the national context, through the consolidation of both miscellaneous and thematic associations (such as AE-IC, ACOP, SEP, AIRP, REDIPUB or ULEPICC) that, following the large international associations, have strengthened their internal operations and their social influence; on an international scale, the growing presence of Spanish scholars in international associations, both in the presentation of communications and to a lesser extent in the organizational structure of sections and working groups (Vicente-Mariño, 2017). In a complementary way, this framework has also involved the incorporation of Spanish academic journals in the main international reference rankings, especially since 2010, with the rapid increase of the presence of these journals in indexes such as the SJR, a ranking that in the 2020 edition includes 21 communication journals edited in Spain. This increasing number of Spanish peer-reviewed journals included in international rankings is parallel to the increase of Spanish scientific production towards a progressive, although still timid, presence of authors from Spain in indexed international journals during the first decade of the 21st century (Fernández-Quijada & Masip, 2013; De Filippo, 2013; Martínez-Nicolás, 2014). Thus, although academic journals have always played a key role in the dissemination of research processes and results, they currently play a central role as an institutional agent that determines research interests, the standard procedures for building knowledge, as well as the criteria to evaluate science and its impact. For the very first time, they have displaced academic books, readers and monographs from this role as compilers of the dominant theories of a field, the setting of research agendas and the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another. Therefore, peer-reviewed journals are the most prominent institutional agent in the standardization and the internationalization of research activity.

This new framework for communication sciences, in which associations and journals have incorporated the aforementioned new institutional profile, has resulted in a highly effective context for standards and research agendas to be promoted globally, reshaping the

¹The National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain.

general framework known as the dominant paradigm (Gitlin, 1978). That is why the theories and theoretical frameworks are a central component for understanding the aims and scope of the field, as well as its current definition and delimitation. However, the theoretical status of communication has always been a matter of discussion that is commonly approached by alluding to its multiparadigmatic character in which different theoretical perspectives converge according to common objects of study (De-Moragas, 1981; Craig, 1999). The theoretical fragmentation of the field is a commonplace in the different phases of the process of construction, revision and formation of new disciplinary models (Bryant & Miron, 2004), to the point of even postulating it in recent studies as “post-discipline” (Waisbord, 2019). However, despite its characteristic epistemological pluralism (Martínez-Nicolás, Saperas & Humanes, 2019), consensus has been consolidated by the scientific community by the delimitation of communication as a specific and recognizable field through the “increasing integration and cross fertilization of models, methods and paradigms in theory and research” (Deuze, 2021, p. 6). Evaluating the existence of a certain degree of coherence between the theories, as well as with their objects of study (Donsbach, 2006; Calhoun, 2011), is essential for understanding the limits and consistency of the field, especially in periods that, like the current one, are defined by the transformation of the discipline, the coexistence of new lines of research with more classical objects, and the accompanying theoretical and methodological challenges.

2. Research objectives

This paper analyses the presence and uses of theories in recent communication research and aims to know the modalities and functions developed by the theoretical frameworks in a representative sample of the research articles published during the past decade (2011–2020) by five top-ranked Spanish journals of communication, according to the SJR ranking.

Relevant precedents, some of them classics, that study and analyse theories in communication research can be found in the international literature. Works such as the first two *Ferment in the Field* published by the *Journal of Communication* (Gerbner & Siefert, 1983; Levy & Gurevitch, 1993), as well as T. Gitlin (1978), P. Golding and G. Murdock (1978), R. T. Craig (1999), W. Donsbach (2004), or the more recent by K. Nordenstreng (2017), S. Waisbord (2019), M. Deuze (2021), the special issue for the 25th anniversary of *Communication Theory* (Hanitzsch, 2015) and the new edition of *Ferment in the Field* (Fuchs & Qiu, 2018) are some examples. However, these inspirational cases are characterized by a reflexive and eminently theoretical analysis of the state of the theory or the disciplinary status of communication, without giving empirical evidence.

In Spain, a growing literature on the study of different aspects of communication research has recently developed. The objective of these works has primarily been the observation of authorship patterns (Escribà & Cortiñas, 2013; Martínez-Nicolás & Carrasco-Campos, 2018; Segado-Boj, Prieto-Gutiérrez & Díaz-Campos, 2021), the objects of study and research techniques (Martínez-Nicolás & Saperas, 2011 and 2016; Vicente-Mariño & López-Rabadán, 2011; Martínez-Nicolás, Saperas & Carrasco-Campos, 2017 and 2019), the production of doctoral theses (Barranquero-Carretero & Simón-Serrano, 2017), the presence of Spanish researchers in international databases and citations indexes (De-Filippo, 2013), the evolution of presentations at conferences, the development of research groups (Caffarel-Serra, Ortega-Mohedano & Gaitán-Moya, 2018), and the concession of R&D projects (Caffarel-Serra, Ortega-Mohedano & Gaitán-Moya, 2017). However, the study of theoretical frameworks based on empirical evidence is an innovative project with very few precedents (Saperas & Carrasco-Campos, 2015; Carrasco-Campos, 2019; Piñeiro-Naval & Morais, 2019).

This paper specifically seeks to offer empirical evidence on the state of theory in communication research over the past decade (2011–2020) by the systematic observation of the original research articles published by Spanish academic journals in the field, including

delving into the presence and uses of the theories and theoretical frameworks. A coding protocol has been designed and applied to a statistically representative sample of the articles published in that period of analysis by the five Spanish communication journals with the greatest impact and continuity in the SJR ranking: *Profesional de la Información*, *Comunicar*, *Communication & Society*, *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico* and *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*. Specifically, the objectives of this paper are:

- O1. To observe the uses of the theoretical frameworks and the methodological procedures developed in the research articles of the journals studied.
- O2. To analyse the presence of standard theories and concepts in the theoretical frameworks.
- O3. To compare the results according to the methodologies and subject areas under study in the articles analysed.

3. Method

To observe the scientific production published by the reference peer-reviewed journals in the field of communication spanning the 2011–2020 decade, it was first necessary to delimit the journals from which the articles would be analysed. The Scopus-SJR index was chosen for this process, it being the international index with the highest presence of journals of communication edited in Spain. The five journals with the highest impact and continuity on this ranking during the studied decade were selected:

- *Profesional de la Información* (included in SJR-Scopus since 2006, and always among the top five positions. Ranks Q₁ in the 2020 edition).
- *Comunicar* (included in SJR-Scopus since 2007, and always among the top five positions. Ranks Q₁ in the 2020 edition).
- *Communication & Society* (included in SJR-Scopus since 2010, and always among the top five positions. Ranks Q₂ in the 2020 edition).
- *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico* (included in SJR-Scopus since 2010, and always among the top five positions, except for the editions in 2019 when it ranked 7th and Q₃, and in 2020 when it ranked 6th and Q₃).
- *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social* (included in SJR-Scopus since 2010, and always among the top five positions, except for the 2010 edition. Ranks Q₂ in the 2020 edition).

The second step in the sample design was to exclude the articles published in the thematic sections or issues of each journal and volume edited during the period of analysis; except for those, all of the original articles were included independent of the number of authors or their institutional adscription. According to this, the research universe is composed of 2,322 articles, with the article being the observed unit of analysis (Table 1). A systematic “constructed volume” sampling (i.e., a proportional selection from each volume for each year for each of the journals) was conducted for a statistically representative sample to ensure the proportionality of each of the five journals and of each of the years of the analysed period. The procedure was as follows:

- A sample of 390 articles was initially estimated (95% confidence interval; 4.5% margin of error).
- According to this estimated sampling, a lift coefficient was calculated for each journal and volume (among 5 and 7, depending on the number of published articles per volume and journal).

- For each journal and volume that was chosen, the order in which the articles were published was listed, and the articles were selected considering their position from the last digit of the referring year (the 1st article of 2011, the 2nd article of 2012, the 3rd article of 2013, and so on) and the consecutives, with the interval of the coefficient lift previously calculated.
- Following this systematic sampling, the resulting corpus of analysis is composed of 381 articles (17.1% of the research universe; 95% confidence interval, 4.58 margin of error). Table 1 shows the distribution of the sample per journal and year (volume).

A coding protocol tested in previous research has been applied. The coding sheet applied to the 381 articles that compose the sample includes 13 variables and 74 categories distributed as follows:

- *Identification variables*: three variables to identify the journal of the analysed article, the unit of analysis code, and the publication year.
- *Authorship variables*: identification of the total number and gender of the authors. A specific variable was included to encode the university adscription and the type of author collaboration.
- *Object of study variables*: two different variables to identify both the subject areas in communication and other related subject areas (documentation, education, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, computation sciences, etc.). A different variable was included to encode the specific object of study by 22 categories.
- *Methodology variables*: one variable was included to encode the research modality of the article (theoretical-methodological, documentary research, quantitative research, qualitative research, mixed methods research). Two additional variables were included to identify up to two research techniques by applying 15 categories.
- *Theories and theoretical frameworks variables*: the theoretical frameworks were encoded by the orientation and function developed in each of the analysed articles: i) exclusively as an introduction to the research problem (cases in which there is no theoretical framework or, at most, it is exclusively a presentation and contextualization of the research problem), ii) literature review and state of the art (theoretical frameworks based on the review and commentary of previous research related to the research problem, without ordering or systematizing this previous research according to specific theoretical or conceptual approaches), iii) theoretical and/or conceptual review related to the object of study (theoretical frameworks that analyse the contributions of different theories or concepts related to the research problem of the article), or iv) theoretical basis on specific and recognizable theories and/or concepts with a theoretical description and/or discussion (theoretical frameworks that ground the article in a specific theoretical tradition).

The sample was analysed by two trained encoders. An inter-coder reliability test by Krippendorff's alpha was applied in a random 10% of the sample (n=38 articles) with an average result for the analytical variables $\alpha > .900$, above the optimal reliability standard (Krippendorff, 2004). Specifically, for the variable "subject area" $\alpha > .941$, for "research modality" $\alpha > .935$; for "type of research framework" $\alpha > .927$; and for "identification of standard theories" $\alpha > .902$.

Table 1: Sample.

	<i>Profesional de la Información</i> (total=615; sample=107)	<i>Comunicar</i> (total=200; sample=30)	<i>Communication & Society</i> (total=373; sample=64)	<i>Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico</i> (total=538; sample=93)	<i>Revista Latina de Comunicación Social</i> (total=506; sample=87)
RESEARCH UNIVERSE (SAMPLE; LIFT COEFFICIENT)					
2011	33 (6; 6)	20 (3; 7)	26 (5; 5)	20 (3; 7)	23 (5; 6)
2012	40 (7; 6)	20 (3; 7)	30 (5; 6)	29 (5; 6)	22 (4; 6)
2013	32 (6; 5)	20 (3; 7)	41 (7; 6)	26 (5; 5)	32 (6; 5)
2014	47(8; 6)	20 (3; 7)	39 (7; 6)	44 (8; 6)	33 (6; 6)
2015	52 (9; 6)	20 (3; 7)	34 (5; 6)	49 (8; 6)	50 (9; 6)
2016	59 (10; 6)	20 (3; 7)	38 (7; 6)	46 (8; 6)	70 (11; 6)
2017	79 (14; 6)	20 (3; 7)	38 (6; 6)	48 (8; 6)	81 (14; 6)
2018	88 (15; 6)	20 (3; 7)	38 (7; 6)	83 (14; 6)	59 (10; 6)
2019	87 (15; 6)	20 (3; 7)	42 (7; 6)	97 (17; 6)	64 (15; 6)
2020	98 (17; 6)	20 (3; 7)	47 (8; 6)	96 (17; 6)	72 (12; 6)

Source: Own elaboration.

4. Results

A descriptive analysis of the sample (Table 2) shows that two of the general trends detected in previous research (Martínez-Nicolás, Saperas y Carrasco-Campos, 2017 and 2019; Piñeiro-Naval & Morais, 2019) are also present in the decade analysed in this article: the pre-eminence of journalism (33.1%) as the main subject area, and of quantitative research (33.9%) as the principal methodological approach. Other prominent subject areas are digital communication (21.5%, a subject area with an accelerated increase in the analysed decade, which mainly includes research on social media, web contents and mobile devices) and audiovisual communication (19.2%). Although with a significantly lower presence, other subject areas specific to the field of communication were also identified: public relations (5.5%), research on generic or transversal aspects of communication (4.2%) and advertisement (3.7%).

Table 2: Subject area, research modality and theoretical framework.

SUBJECT AREAS	Journalism	33.10%
	Digital communication	21.5%
	Audiovisual communication	19.2%
	Public relations	5.5%
	Communication - transversal aspects	4.2%
	Advertising	3.7%
	Other	12.9%
	RESEARCH MODALITY	Quantitative research
Qualitative research		18.6%
Quantitative and qualitative research (mixed methods)		18.9%
Documentary research		8.4%
Theoretical research		7.9%
RESEARCH FRAMEWORK	Literature review and/or state of the art	41.7%
	Theoretical and/or conceptual review related to the object of study	31.2%
	Theoretical basis on specific theories and/or concepts	21.3%
	Introduction	5.8%
STANDARD THEORIES	No	59.1%
	Yes	40.9%

Source: Own elaboration.

The presence of other subject areas related to communication is significant (12.9%) and two areas are prominent: documentation (25 articles, 6.6%) and education (11 articles, 2.9%). Although these figures may be explained attending to the aforementioned interdisciplinarity of communication, the pre-eminence of these two subject areas instead of others also related to communication, such as sociology, philosophy or linguistics, is closely related to the characteristics of two of the journals observed in this study: *Profesional de la Información* and *Comunicar*. Both journals were the first to be included in the SJR rank in communication, but they are also included in other categories. Since 2007 *Profesional de la Información* is included not only in Communication but also in Library and Information Sciences (alternating Q1 and Q2 positions since 2008) and Computer Sciences in the Information Systems area (ranking Q2 since 2014 and reaching Q1 positions in 2020). *Comunicar* is also included, since 2009, in Culture Studies (ranking Q1 since 2012) and, additionally, in Education (ranking Q1 since 2014). The influence of the multidisciplinary focus of these two journals is visible in the results for the category “other subject areas,” as almost half of the identified articles under “documentation” (24 out of the 25) were published by *Profesional de la Información*, and the 11 articles encoded under “education” were almost all published by *Comunicar* (6 articles) and *Profesional de la Información* (4 articles). Nevertheless, according to the achieved results, both journals must be considered primarily journals of communication: almost three out of four of the articles in *Profesional de la Información* (72.9%) are included in the subject areas of communication, with similar figures for *Comunicar* (76.7%). For the remaining journals of the sample, all of those included only under the category of Communication in SJR data are significantly higher: 96.7% in *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*, 93.2% in *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, and 100% in *Communication & Society*.

Practically all the articles analysed (94.2%) have a recognizable theoretical framework, with a minority of cases that include that framework only in an introduction, as a presentation of the research problem. This reveals the centrality of the theoretical frameworks since, indeed, they are core elements of the articles analysed. However, the presence of different types of theoretical frameworks is confirmed. The greatest presence (41.7%) are of those developed exclusively through a literature review oriented to the theoretical contextualization of the research problem. A slightly lower presence (31.2%) is for those developed by theoretical and conceptual review related to the object of study. This type of theoretical framework is also carried out by literature review, but unlike the previous typology, precise theories and concepts are identified. However, in these cases the theoretical elaboration is not carried out by a theoretical basis in specific and recognizable theory or concepts, since this type of theoretical framework has been identified in only 21.3% of the articles observed. Notably, the presence of standard theories is minority (40.9%), as more than half of the cases do not include mention of specific communication theories.

Comparing the types of theoretical framework between the main subject areas under study shows significant differences (Table 3), which suggests that these are areas with different theoretical development. For journalism (30.2%) and for research on transversal aspects of communication (31.2%) a greater presence of theoretical frameworks grounded on recognizable theories is observed in comparison to the rest of the subject areas. In the case of journalism, this data is explained by understanding that it has been the dominant field in Spanish research, especially in its early stages of development (Martínez-Nicolás, Saperas & Carrasco-Campos, 2017), while the data for research on general aspects can be justified considering the need for a greater theoretical basis to develop research that precisely focuses on cross-sectional objects of study that utilize already consolidated theories and concepts for their explanation. Research on digital communication, which has had a very recent deployment in the scientific community, has a greater presence of theoretical frameworks by the theoretical and conceptual review (45.1%), and that shows that this area has rapidly incorporated into the conceptual standards of the scientific community. The articles included

in both public relations and advertising are notable for presenting the areas under study with a greater proportion of theoretical frameworks based on states of the art (60% and 64.3%, respectively) in such a way that for the analysed sample they are areas theoretically oriented to the description of their objects of study. Lastly, research on audiovisual communication shows balanced data, in comparative terms, by the presence of the different types of theoretical frameworks, although it is notable for being the area of study with the highest proportion of cases of introductory theoretical frameworks (13.7%).

Table 3: Type of theoretical framework by subject area.

	Journalism (n=126)	Digital communication (n=82)	Audiovisual communication (n=73)	Public relations (n=21)	Communication - transversal aspects n=16	Advertising (n=14)	TOTAL (N=381)
Literature review and/or state of the art	35.7%	38.8%	38.4%	60.0%	37.5%	64.3%	41.7%
Theoretical and/or conceptual review	30.2%	45.1%	31.5%	23.8%	31.2%	7.1%	31.2%
Theoretical basis on specific theories and/or concepts	30.2%	13.4%	16.4%	19.0%	31.2%	21.4%	21.3%
Only introduction	4.0%	3.7%	13.7%	0%	0%	7.1%	5.8%

$\chi^2=37,982$; $df=18$; $p=,003$ (Monte Carlo significance test). Source: Own elaboration.

As previously noted (Table 2), the presence of standard theories in the analysed sample is only 40.8%. However, those articles that do include standard theories (Table 4) show significant differences by subject areas. Digital communication (51.8%) and journalism (46.4%) are, in comparative terms, the two subject areas that show more presence of standard theories in their theoretical frameworks, either by literature review or by specific theories and concepts. In audiovisual communication (34.9%) and public relations (25%) standard theories have been also identified, but to a lesser extent. Documentary research stands as the subject area that does not include standard theories.

Table 4: Standard theories by subject area.

	Journalism (n=126)	Digital communication (n=82)	Audiovisual communication (n=73)	Public relations (n=21)	Communication - transversal aspects n=16	Advertising (n=14)	TOTAL (N=381)
No	53.2%	47.6%	65.8%	71.4%	56.2%	50.0%	59.1%
Yes	46.8%	52.4%	34.2%	28.6%	43.8%	50.0%	40.9%

$\chi^2=19,823$; $df=6$ $p=,003$. Source: Own elaboration.

These observations must be considered, taking into account the standard theories that have been identified during the analysis (Table 5). Thus, although a great diversity of theories is observed, some have been dominant in international research over the past decades: the framing theory (12.1%) and the agenda setting theory (9.2%). These theories have particularly contributed to journalism research, the subject area to which other relevant standard theories are connected such as newsmaking and sociological theories of journalism (4.3%), and journalistic roles and professional cultures (3.5%), as they make journalism the area with the most theoretical standardization in the articles published by the analysed journals edited in Spain. However, digital communication, the other subject area with a greater presence of standard theories, manifests a significant diversification in its theories; this suggests that they are conceptual frameworks under development. Thus, for the category identified as “social

media and internet theories” (24.1%), two different types of theories are identified. The first is a set of theories developed over the past two decades, but widely consolidated in scientific literature, to explain technological transformation and globalisation, such as the notion of network society (Castells, 2005); the psychological predictors in the uses of communication technologies; and the integration into daily life and consumption of the internet, social media and mobile devices (Livingstone, 2008; Livingstone & Helsper, 2008, among others). The second is a set of emerging theories in regard to phenomena such as digital democracy and citizen participation (Longo, 2011), new digital media users and prosumers (Scolari, 2009; Fuente-Cobo, 2017; Guallar & Codina, 2018) and even digital media itself as object of study (Kim, Russo & Amnå, 2017). Therefore, digital communication is the subject area that not only reveals the greatest growth but also the greatest theoretical dynamism for the analysed sample. On the other hand, for audiovisual communication, although the use of standard theories refers to research on reception and audiences (5.7%), some theoretical dispersion is observed. Other theories encoded in the analysed articles that are usually linked to communication research are the normative theory of media (5.7%), critical theory and the political economy of communication (5%), and theories comparing media systems (2.8%). However, it also stands the presence of theories of other areas different from, but connected, to communication both in its classical (semiotics, philosophy of communication) and contemporary shape (gender studies, for instance).

Table 5: Standard theories with greatest presence (2011-2020) (%).

Internet and social media theories	24.1%
Framing theory	12.1%
Agenda setting theory	9.2%
Normative theories of the media	5.7%
Reception theories	5.7%
Gender studies	5.7%
Philosophy of communication	5.0%
Critical theory of communication, political economy of communication	5.0%
Sociology of journalism, <i>newsmaking</i>	4.3%
Semiotics	4.3%
Journalistic professional cultures and roles	3.5%
Comparing media systems	2.8%
Culture studies	2.1%
Theory of social mediation	2.1%
Online deliberation	2.1%
Public relations theories	2.1%
Grounded theory	1.4%
Infotainment	1.4%
Critical discourse analysis	1.4%
Big Data	1.4%
Post-truth	1.4%
Gatekeeper theory	0.7%
Interactionism and social action theory	0.7%
Other	18.4%

Percentage calculated for n=141 articles that include standard theories.

Source: Own elaboration

5. Conclusions

This paper analyses a statistically representative sample of original articles published by five of the main peer-reviewed journals in communication published in Spain, aiming to describe the most common theories and types of theoretical frameworks in use over the last decade (2011–2020). The results show the centrality of theoretical frameworks, observing that they still play a relevant role in the development of the field. However, a certain dispersion has been detected in the type and functionality of the theoretical frameworks, with significant differences for the main subject areas under study. Two subject areas stand out from the rest, and they are also those with the greatest presence in this period: journalism and digital communication. In both cases, the theoretical frameworks were grounded on standard theories in approximately 50% of the articles, although the differences in the processes of operationalization and theoretical development are noteworthy.

Research on journalism shows the most significant presence of theoretical frameworks grounded on specific theories, such as agenda-setting, framing, newsmaking and journalistic professional roles and cultures. Therefore, this area not only maintains its pre-eminence compared to previous decades, but also consolidates as the one with the greatest theoretical standardization. Research on digital communication, interest in which has grown as a result of the most recent social and technological changes, shows signs of being the area with the greatest theoretical dynamism in the analysed period. The theoretical frameworks of the articles in this subject area make explicit references to standard theories in half of the cases observed, but unlike journalism research, these theories appear mainly as part of the literature review and of the question (45.1%), and only in a minority of the cases were the theoretical frameworks explicitly grounded on standard theories (13.4%). This combination of factors, as well as the theoretical diversity observed, allows for the conclusion that digital communication is a subject area experiencing a maturing process.

For research on audiovisual communication, the subject area with the third highest presence observed, theoretical frameworks are mainly developed by literature review or theoretical review, with a significantly lower presence of standard theories (34.2%) compared to journalism and digital communication (especially related to studies on reception), and with the highest data, in comparative terms, regarding theoretical frameworks oriented to the introduction and presentation of the object of study (13.7%). Research on public relations has its own particularities, such as a very low presence of standard theories and theoretical frameworks, developed primarily through literature review and state of the art of research problems. This same significant presence of theoretical frameworks by means of state of the art is also identified in the articles on advertising, although with a much greater presence, in comparative terms, of standard theories as a particular characteristic of this subject area.

Summing up, during the decade under analysis (2011–2020), the results evidence some fundamental features of the research published in these five Spanish journals of reference in the field of communication. Firstly, they refer to relatively unified research interest in three main subject areas: journalism (33.1%), digital communication (21.5%) and audiovisual communication (19.2%). Apart from these three main areas, a broad dispersal of research topics has been identified, including public relations (5.5%), advertising (3.7%), research on transversal aspects of communication (4.2%), and even other subject areas related to communication identified in the analysis, such as documentation (6.6%) and education (2.9%). It should be emphasized that the three dominant subject areas mentioned refer to issues inherent to the communication studies canon. Secondly, although data confirmed the centrality of the theoretical framework in the research papers analysed, as its presence in nearly all of the cases under study means that it must be considered an unavoidable moment in the elaboration of scientific articles, its typology and function are mainly oriented to literature review, either by the exclusive elaborations of a state of the art (in 41.7% of the cases

analysed), or by a theoretical review of the object of study (31.2%). The frameworks by theoretical basis through grounding on standard theories are in the minority (21.3%) and, comparatively, are particularly prominent only in journalism research and for those articles that analyse transversal aspects of communication. Lastly, as a complement to the previous consideration, the cases that include standard theories show a significant dispersion, although with three core groups: specific communication theories, generally referring to journalism research (with framing and agenda setting theories having the greatest presence); social media and internet theories; and other theoretical approaches that without being exclusive to the field of communication, have had and still have a strong proximity to this field (philosophy, sociology, gender studies, cultural studies, semiotics).

In short, the recent research published by the main Spanish journals of communication studies, according to the SJR ranking, shows signs of a prominent cohesion with respect to its objects of study, most of which are specific to the field, but it also shows a strong theoretical dispersion in which the theoretical frameworks are mainly elaborated by literature review and without ascription to specific theories. Somehow, despite the theoretical dynamism of research on digital communication and the clear theoretical-conceptual delimitation of journalism research (a subject area for which it is possible to identify a theoretical canon internationally accepted based on agenda setting, framing, newsmaking, comparing media systems and professional roles and cultures), the cohesion of the field with respect to the subject areas under study is not occurring with respect to theories and conceptual discussion, which reaffirms the multi-paradigmatic status of communication that has been mentioned in international research since the 1990s to the present day.

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