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Research focus and methodological features in the recent Spanish communication studies (2008-2014)

An analysis of the papers published in Spanish specialized journals

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Abstract: Interest in communication research has grown remarkably in Spain in the last decade, but the studies addressing the research objects and methodological approaches of this research production are still limited. This study follows up a previous work that addressed these issues for the 1998-2007 period, and examines the communication research produced in Spain in the last years based on the content analysis of the articles published between 2008 and 2014 by five communication journals with high impact factors in Spain: *Anàlisi, Comunicació y Societat, Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico, Revista Latina de Comunicación Social* and *Zer*. The sample was selected from alternate years throughout the period under study (2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014). The final body of analysis is composed of 529 articles written by researchers affiliated to Spanish universities and research centres. The analysis of the sample of articles focuses on five variables: two of them related to the objects of study and the remaining three to the methodological aspects. The results indicate that in recent Spanish communication research the preferred object of study is journalism and journalistic content, and particularly media contents, which are the focus of 60% of the works published in this period. With regards to the methodological approaches, Spanish researchers predominantly continue to carry out empirical research studies, based on quantitative approaches, and showing a clear improvement in their methodological quality

Keywords

Spanish communication research, journals, research focus, research methods

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Translation by **CA Martínez-Arcos**
(PhD in Communication from the University of London, UK)

1. Introduction

The volume that the scientific production on communication has reached in Spain in the past two decades and the internal diversity developed by the scientific communication community indicate that Spanish communication research is undergoing a progressive process of consolidation and maturation (Martínez-Nicolás, 2008). In the impulse of this process, there has been a radical transformation of the institutional context in which the research activity takes place, with two factors that have had a decisive impact in the orientation of research in this field.

On the one hand, there was an *explosion* of communication schools and study programmes from the early 1990s to the late 20th century, which opened a structure of opportunities for academic professionalisation, which favoured the exponential growth of the scientific community of communication researchers. In the mid-1980s, only four Spanish universities offered communication studies (with specialties in journalism, image and advertising) and there less than 500 communication professors. Ten years later, in the mid-1990s, that volume increased five times and there were 20 universities that offered communication degrees, to 20,000 students, through 2,000 professors (Jones, 2008). This offer doubled in a few years, and by the beginning of the 21st century in Spain already 40 universities offered 84 bachelor's degrees in communication studies (ANECA, 2005; Moragas, 2005). Currently, there are already 54 centres that offer bachelor's degrees in communication, to 45,000 students and through 4,200 professors (Saperas, 2016).

On the other hand, there were institutional factors that had a decisive impact on research in Spain, and also in the specific field of communication: the establishment of accreditation as a requirement of career access to some university teaching positions (associate teaching staff) by the Spanish Organic Law on Universities (LOU, 2001). This accreditation was performed, in collaboration with other regional institutions, by the new National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain (ANECA), created in 2003. Implemented as a pilot programme, the limited scope of the accreditation requirement initially had a discreet influence on the decisions and practices of the scientific community (Soriano, 2008). It was not until its enforcement in all university teaching

bodies, through an amendment to the Spanish Organic Law on Universities in 2007 (RD 1312 / 2007), that the so-called *ANECA effect* expanded its potential to significantly influence the orientation of scientific research in Spain.

This occurred in January 2008, with ANECA's introduction of the ACADEMIA programme to apply the requirement of accreditation for access to academic career to the faculty of all Spanish universities. The impact of the ACADEMIA programme in the scientific activity initially resided in the decisive curricular weight granted from then on to the research activity, and especially to the publication of articles in journals, particularly in the reduced number of journals with high impact factors, preferably at the international level. Consequently, the assumption that these new institutional conditions had some impact on the practices of researchers is a plausible hypothesis.

With regards to research on communication, the limited available data indicate that there was an increase in the volume of articles published in Spanish journals, which almost doubled between 2006 and 2010 (Fernández-Quijada and Masip, 2013; and Baladrón, Correyero and Manchado, 2014, for the specific case of advertising studies). Another aspect that can also be attributable to the impact of the ACADEMIA programme is the exponential growth of the presence of Spanish authors in specialised international journals, which rocketed precisely from 2008 onwards (Masip, 2011; De Filippo, 2013; Escribà y Cortiñas, 2013; Fernández-Quijada, Masip and Bergillos, 2013; Martínez-Nicolás, 2014). Thus, for example, Masip (2011) found that the number of articles written by Spanish authors in communication journals included in the Social Science Citation Index almost tripled between 2006 and 2009; while Martínez-Nicolás (2014) found out that more than 70% of the Spanish contributions to the journals included in the Journal Citation Reports (JCR) and Scopus between 2003 and 2012 were published in the years following the introduction of ACADEMIA (2009-2012).

This article analyses communication research articles published by authors affiliated to Spanish scientific institutions (usually universities) in journals edited in Spain during the period following the implementation of the ACADEMIA programme. This study is the continuation of a previous work (Martínez-Nicolás and Saperas, 2011) on the communication studies in Spain in the 1998-2007 period. This study will allow us to trace the evolution of Spanish communication research in the past 15 years, and especially to assess the potential impact of these new institutional rules in the orientation of the scientific production in this field.

2. Research design

2.1. Objectives and methods

The objective is to characterise Spanish communication research in the most recent period based on the content analysis of a sample of the articles written by authors affiliated to Spanish universities and research centres and published between 2008 and 2014 in five specialised journals. The derived particular objectives of this study are as follows:

1. Describe the *knowledge interests* of Spanish researchers, identifying the *media and professional areas* (journalism, audiovisual communication, advertising, public relations,

etc.) and *specific objects of study* (professional profiles, contents, audiences, effects, etc.) addressed in the articles published in this period.

2. Describe the *research modalities* of communication studies in Spain, attending the *type of research* carried out, *methodological approach* of the empirical works and the *research techniques*.

2.2. Sample and unit of analysis

In order to reach the previous objectives, we have analysed a sample of articles written by researchers ascribed to Spanish academic institutions and published in the aforementioned period by five communication journals edited in Spain: *Anàlisi*, *Comunicación y Sociedad*, *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*, *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social* and *Zer*. With regards to the previous study, covering the 1998-2007 period, we decided to expand the sample of journals to incorporate *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social* (“Latina Journal of Social Communication”) to strengthen its qualitative representativeness and attend the spectacular increase in scientific production on communication published in Spanish journals after the implementation of the ACADEMIA programme.

The five selected journals are considered source journals in communication based on which the University of Granada develops the In-RECS index, and four of them (*Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*, *Zer*, *Comunicación y Sociedad*, and *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico*) occupy the top positions of accumulated impact in the 2005-2009 period of the aforementioned index, which is the period closest to the period covered in this work (<http://ec3.ugr.es/in-recs/acumulados/Comunicacion-5agnos-5.htm>). On the other hand, four of the five journals (*Zer*, *Comunicación y Sociedad*, *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social* and *Anàlisi*) are in the top five positions of the 2009 RESH index of Spanish communication journals developed by the Superior Council for Scientific Research, based on the prestige given by experts in the area (<http://epuc.cchs.csic.es/resh/indicadores#>, communication). Taking into account these bibliometric and qualitative indicators, the articles published in sample of journals should be considered to be representative of the Spanish communication research of the highest quality carried out in the most recent stage.

From this population of journals, we selected a sample from alternate years throughout the period under study (2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014), which resulted in a total body of 598 scientific articles, according to the distribution by journal and year presented in table 1. The study is based on the results obtained from the analysis of 529 texts (about 90%) signed by authors affiliated to Spanish universities and research centres. The scientific article was the unit of analysis subjected to the content analysis.

Table 1. Sample of analysis

Year		<i>Anàlisi</i>	<i>Comunicación y Sociedad</i>	<i>Estudios Mensaje Periodístico</i>	<i>Revista Latina de Com. Social</i>	<i>Zer</i>	Papes per year
2008	Volume	36 & 37	21 (1-2)	14	63	24 & 25	144
	Articles	24	12	35	42	31	
2010	Volume	40	23 (1-2)	16	65	28 & 29	127
	Articles	10	23	26	43	25	
2012	Volume	45, 46 & 47	25 (1-2)	18 (1-2)	67	32 & 33	149
	Articles	17	30	56	22	24	
2014	Volume	50	27 (1-4)	20 (1-2)	69	36 & 37	178
	Articles	9	39	73	33	24	
Articles per journal		60	104	190	140	104	598

Source: Authors' own creation

2.3. Coding criteria

Data were collected through an analysis sheet of 36 variables related to different aspects of the content of the articles (number and features of authors, institutional affiliation, objects of study, methodological issues, etc.). The content analysis was applied in accordance with the following encoding criteria:

Knowledge interests. Refers strictly to the *objects of study* related to communication that are addressed in the articles and reveal, precisely, the aspects of the communication phenomena on which the scientific community *is interested* in generating knowledge. Given the complexity of the decisions relating to the *object* (or theme, if you will) of a given research work, this dimension was divided into two variables:

- (a) *media or professional areas* linked to the communication object addressed in the analysed articles. 61 mutually exclusive categories were established to distinguish accurately between works that aim, for example, to investigate issues related to journalism in the daily press, in television, and in digital media; between articles investigating graphic and radio advertising; and between documentary and fiction cinema. These 61 categories were subsequently grouped into 12 more general, equally exclusive, categories to identify the major media or professional areas of interest to researchers: journalism, audiovisual communication, advertising, public relations, propaganda, marketing, internet and digital environment, etc.

- (b) the *specific object of study* in relation to each of those media or professional areas, which is a variable that aims to identify the element of the communicative process on which a particular research work focuses, distinguishing non-exclusive categories (in anticipation of works that address several of these elements simultaneously) of professional profiles; companies and institutions; content; technologies; publics, audiences and reception; effects and influence; teaching; and research. This variable captures the difference between, for example, three studies on “radio advertising” that address, respectively, the analysis of the processes of advertising production in this environment (classified in the category “professionals”), the use of expressive resources in the development of the ads (coded in the category “content”), and the reception by audiences (coded in the category “publics, audiences and reception”). The media or professional area would be the same in these works (advertising, specifically radio advertising), but would differ in terms of the element or aspect of the communicative process on which knowledge is generated (professional process, contents and reception), which allows for a more complete and adequate characterisation of the *knowledge interest* of the articles.

Research methods. This dimension, which refers to the epistemological aspects of the articles, is determined by the observation of the empirical behaviour of three variables:

- (a) *type of communication research*, based on the mutually exclusive categories established for theoretical works (those that discuss theories and concepts, or literature reviews, etc.), methodological works (proposals or discussions on research methods, techniques, procedures, etc.) and empirical works (those that discuss the reality of communication phenomena: professional routines, media discourses, corporate history, legislation, characteristics of audiences, teaching, etc.).
- (b) *Methodological approach* of empirical studies, with five mutually exclusive categories to distinguish between quantitative, qualitative, mixed (quantitative and qualitative) approaches, research based on documentary sources and empirical research without systematic and standardised techniques. The three first categories were coded according to the character of the data collection techniques: quantitative methods (content analysis, survey, etc.), qualitative methods (discourse analysis, in-depth interview, etc.), or a combination of both. The category “research based on documentary sources” was included to identify empirical works based on the analysis of archives, or the wide range of documents generated by political, legislative, legal or corporate institutions (reports, regulations, laws, rulings, memoranda, etc.), whose use is common, for example, in research on communication history, on the structure, organisation and public policies in the communication sector. The “empirical research without systematic techniques” was included to identify methodologically poor works; that is, works that address communication phenomena (i.e. the empirical reality) but do not support their results with data obtained through standardised procedures (systematic techniques or analysis of documentary sources), and lack scientific rigour and appear to be commentaries, personal reflection or casual or intuitive descriptions.

- (c) data collection *techniques* used in empirical works that resort to systematic or standardised procedures, which are divided in 11 categories that include virtually all of the techniques usually identified in the methodological literature (content analysis, survey, experimental designs, discourse analysis, focus groups, in-depth interviews, research on secondary data, biographical methods, ethnographic observation, etc.).

2.4. Coding and reliability

Three researchers participated in the coding of the selected sample. The first phase of this process focused on the establishment and consolidation of the coding criteria over 10% of the sample of articles (60 approximately). The second phase involved a test of reliability over another, randomly selected, 10% of the sample. The results did not achieve the degree of agreement required between encoders to grant external validity to the results, specifically with regards to the variables considered in this work, which require a more interpretative effort (particularly the determination of the “specific objects of study” and the category “empirical research without systematic techniques”). For this reason, a double encoding was performed for all the units of analysis and the discrepancies between encoders were discussed in a case by case basis. Accordingly, the results obtained in this work should be considered to be highly reliable in accordance with the methodological standards of quantitative content analysis.

3. Results

3.1. Knowledge interests: media and professional areas

Spanish research on communication carried out during the most recent stage has mostly focused in the study of journalism and journalistic content, which are addressed by almost half of the articles published between 2008 and 2014 in the sample of analysed journals (table 2). The attention paid to the remaining media-professional areas is way lower. The volume of research on journalism is almost twice as much the amount research on audiovisual communication, although this seems to be a perfectly consolidated area of work, and is present in a quarter of the scientific production in this period. The interest in other traditional fields of communication research seems to be lower, although work on public relations and corporate and institutional communication represent about 10% of the sample, which is twice as much as the percentage of articles dedicated to research on advertising and marketing, which are analysed by just 5% of the articles.

Articles investigating the internet and, in general, the digital environment represent 7% of the sample, but this figure does not accurately reflect the interest of Spanish researchers in phenomena related to digitisation. In fact, this category only gathers those works that study aspects of the digital environment (internet, social networks, blogs, websites, etc.) without links to any of the aforementioned media-professional areas (journalism, audiovisual communication, advertising, public relations, propaganda, etc.). For example, research works on digital journalism or the use of social networks by companies were assigned, respectively, to the categories “journalism” and “public relations and corporate and institutional communication”, although their reference to the digital

environment was noted. If we take into consideration this fact, the works that address communication in the digital environment represent nearly 20% of the sample, making the impact of digitisation on communicative practices and products one of the objects of study of most interest for the scientific community.

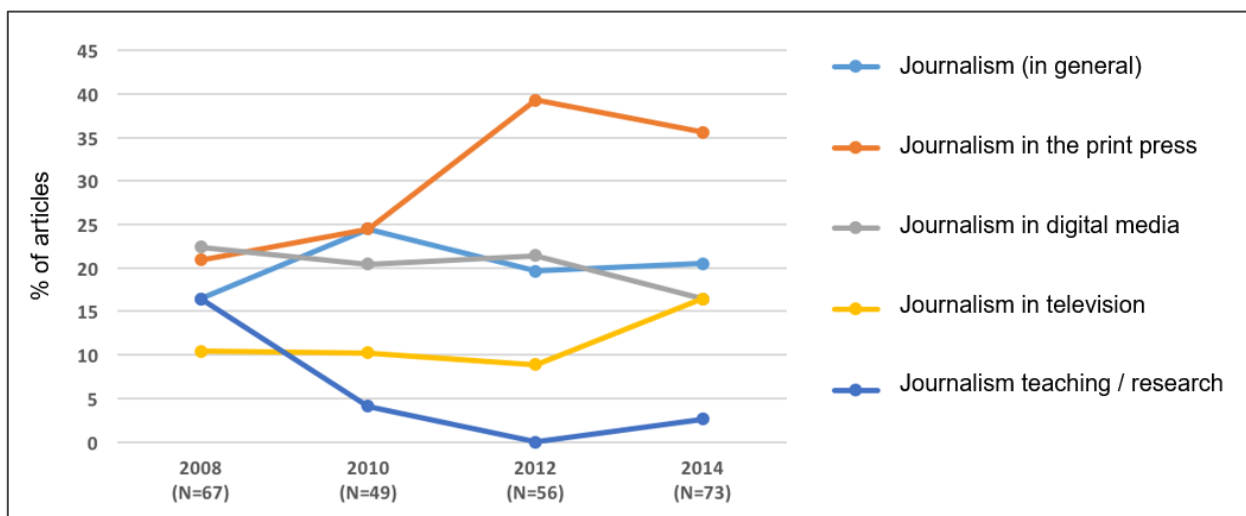
Table 2. Media or professional area, object of study (2008-2014) (summary of the 61 coded subject categories)

		Number (T = 529)	%
Journalism or journalistic content	Journalism (in general)	49	9.3
	Print press	74	14.0
	Television	29	5.5
	Radio	3	0.6
	Digital media	49	9.3
	Teaching / research	15	2.8
	Other	26	4.8
Total		245	46.3
Audiovisual communication		123	23.3
Public relations and corporate / institutional communication		47	8.9
Internet, digital media and ICT		37	7.0
Communication or media communication (in general)		34	6.4
Advertising and marketing		25	4.7
Propaganda		8	1.5
Other		10	1.9

Source: Authors' own creation

In any case, and as mentioned, communication research in Spain privileges the study of issues related to journalism and journalistic information, which are the focus of five of every ten articles published in this period. If examine in greater detail the features of Spanish journalism research (table 2), we can observe a clear predominance of works centred in the print daily press (almost a third of the articles on journalism), above the attention dedicated to journalism in digital media and, above all, to journalism in television and radio (the latter with a purely testimonial presence). However, the analysis of digital journalism is an area already consolidated, and is the object of study of 20% of the articles on journalism in this stage.

Figure 1. Evolution of journalistic areas as objects of study



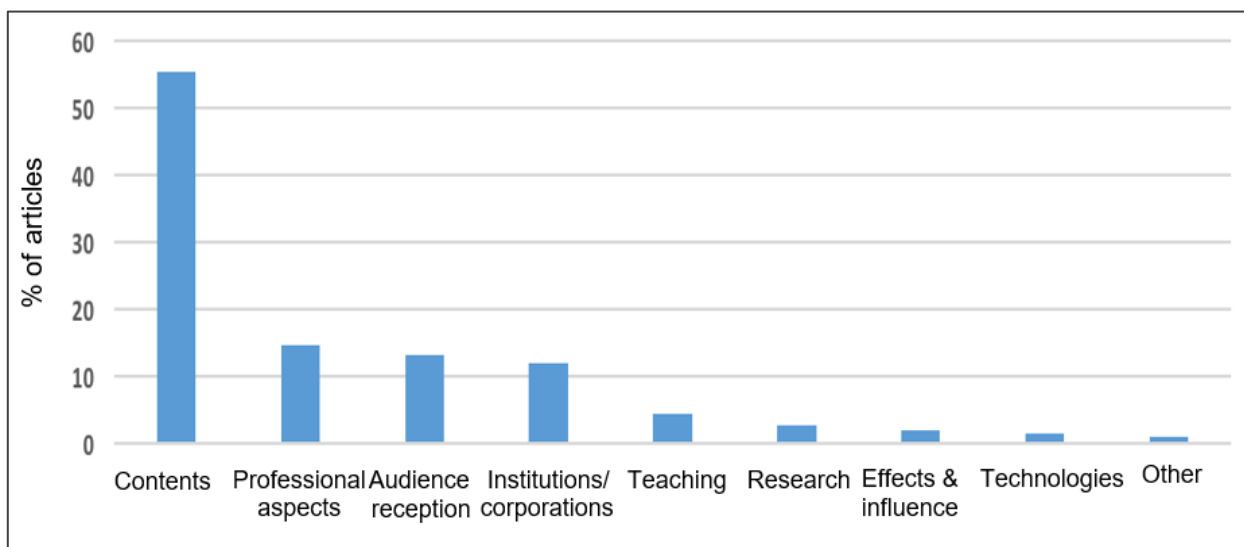
Source: Authors' own creation

If we look at the specific evolution of journalism research in this period (Figure 1), we can see that at the beginning (2008) there was a noticeable diversification of the knowledge interests, with a balanced distribution of works addressing the main objects of study in this field (digital media, daily press, journalism in general, journalism teaching and television journalism). This situation of diversification and balance is maintained basically in 2010, except for the abrupt decline of articles on the educational aspects of journalism, after the advancement, and even conclusion, of the adaptation of university education on communication to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which prompted the attention to this issue in previous years. In the second half of the period, from 2012 onwards, this panorama is clearly subverted, with a spectacular growth of works on the daily press, which represent 40% of the articles on journalism that year. The trend continued in 2014, with a decline in the percentage of texts that addressed digital journalism, but with a significant increase in the number of articles focused on television journalism.

3.2. Knowledge interests: specific objects of study

The analysis of the communication-related issues that have interested the Spanish scientific community in this latest stage was complemented with the examination of the *specific objects of study*, which are understood as the specific elements or aspects of the communicative process about which knowledge is generated (Figure 2). The results indicate that Spanish research is notably inclined to the study of media content, which is the object of study of more than 55% of the articles. Of every ten articles published by Spanish authors in this period, almost six focused on contents, which reflects the strength of this *content-centred* bias.

Figure 2. Specific objects of study (2008-2014)

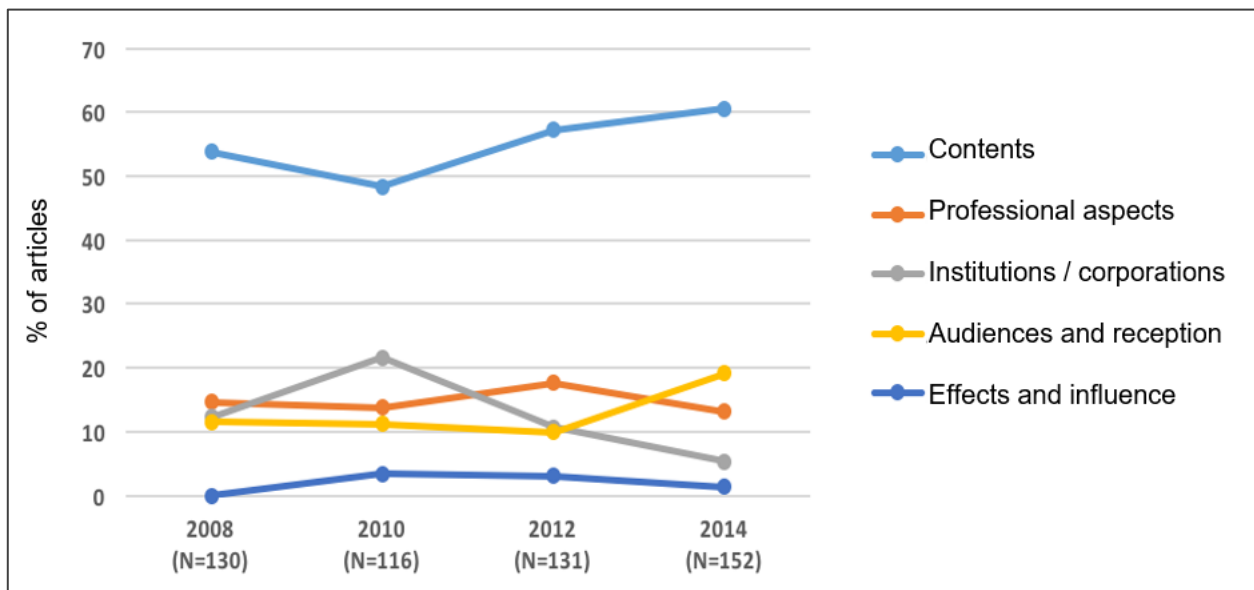


Source: Authors' own creation

If we combine this result with the centrality of journalism in the media-professional areas addressed by the academic community (almost half of the articles), we get a typical profile of the Spanish communication research, characterised by a clear predominance of studies on *journalistic contents*, which is the object of almost one-third of the total scientific production on communication disseminated by these journals in the most recent period (167 or 31.6% of the sample of 529 articles). One of every three articles written by Spanish authors is an analysis related to journalistic contents, specifically informative discourses (treatment, representation or coverage of social referents: immigrants, health crises, domestic violence, election campaigns, etc.), which constitute 20% (one in every five articles) of the articles published on communication between 2008 and 2014 in the analysed journals.

The interest in this *discursive dimension* (the study of media content) contrasts with the relative neglect of the *institutional* and *social* dimensions of the communicative system. The first one includes those works on the professional areas (processes of production, ethical and deontological issues, occupational profiles, corporate partnerships, etc.) and business sectors (operation of corporations, structure of markets, sectorial public policies, etc.), and in fact constitutes a consolidated field in the latest Spanish communication research, since they constitute around a quarter of the articles analysed (26.6%). With regards to the *social dimension* (analysis of audiences, processes of reception, media effects and influence, etc.), the results indicate that it is an ostensibly deficit area (only about 15% of the articles included in the sample), although the research on audiences and reception have an discreet yet relevant presence (in more than 13% of the sample).

Figure 3. Evolution of specific objects of study



Source: Authors' own creation

If we look at the evolution of these specific objects of study between 2008 and 2014 (Figure 3), we can see that the *content-centred* bias of Spanish communication research is not mitigated nor stabilised throughout the period, but is even emphasised in the most recent phase (2012 and 2014), while there is a decline in the interest of the scientific community in the analysis of the institutional aspects related to communication, and particularly in the business sector, the structure of markets and the public policies affecting the sector. On the other hand, research works on the characteristics and activity of audiences in the communicative processes has picked up notably to become a frequent object of study in Spanish research (20% of the articles published by these journals in 2014), which is undoubtedly linked to the extension of the communicative practices undertaken by audiences in digital environments, especially in social networks.

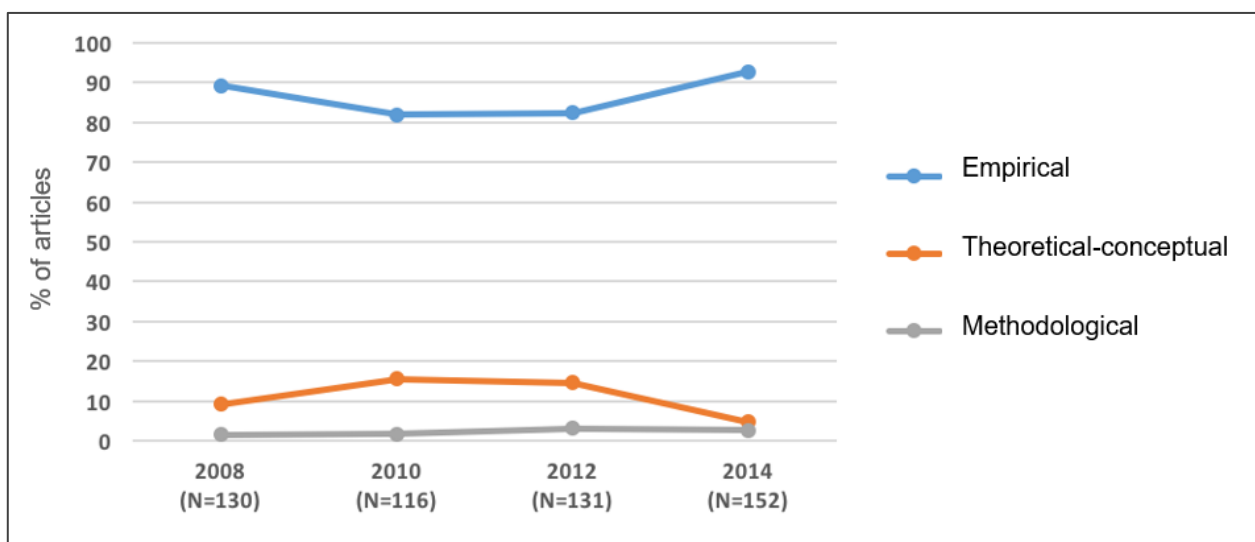
3.3. Types of research in communication studies

Spanish communication research published in recent years in these journals is, in an overwhelming volume, empirical, i.e., it addresses issues linked to the phenomenal reality of communication (characteristics of contents, analysis of production processes, studies of the communicative market, consumption of media products, description of audiences, etc.). Nine of every ten articles published during the period can be classified in this category, with a clear trend (figure 4) to the reinforcement of that profile during the period (almost 93% of the works published in 2014).

This result reflects an academic community that is attentive to the generation of knowledge about the communicative reality, but is also symptomatic of the scarce effort made by researchers in the

conceptual reflection and the discussion and proposal of methodological procedures for empirical research, a type of work that, in the general economy of the production of scientific knowledge, adopts the functions of conceptual clarification and the proposal of technical procedures necessary to advance empirical research in an epistemologically productive and valid direction. And this task has been almost abandoned in the current Spanish communication research. In the last year of the period under analysis (2014), works of this type are a very small minority, and do not even represent, adding both modes (methodological and theoretical), one in ten of the articles published in these journals.

Figure 4. Evolution of types of research



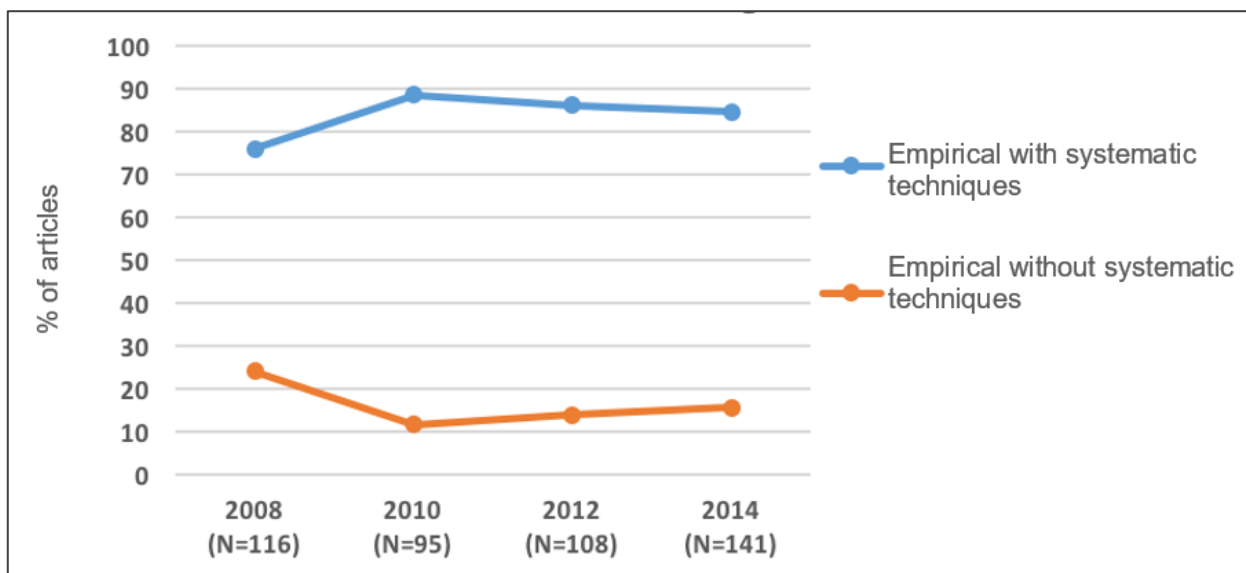
Source: Authors' own creation

In any case, the dominant position acquired by empirical research in the Spanish scientific production on communication seems to have been accompanied by a progressive improvement of the methodological quality. In order to assess this aspect, we distinguished between those works that collected empirical data through any of the systematic techniques established in the methodological literature (quantitative content analysis, survey, discourse analysis, focus group, experimental research, etc.), from those that were based on data that were merely casual, circumstantial or subjective (personal impressions of the author) and presented other deficiencies in the collection and management of empirical data. The use of these systematic techniques should be understood, in any case, strictly as an *indication of quality*, since the mere employment of these procedures does not necessarily mean that its effective implementation is carried out with the required methodological accuracy.

Taking into account this circumstance, the results indicate that Spanish empirical research carried out in this recent period meets, in general terms, the minimum standards enforceable to works of this type. In more than 80% of the sample of articles it was possible to identify at least one of these

systematic or standardised techniques, which means that nearly 20% of the articles should be considered products of bad research praxis.

Figure 5. Evolution of empirical research



Source: Authors' own creation

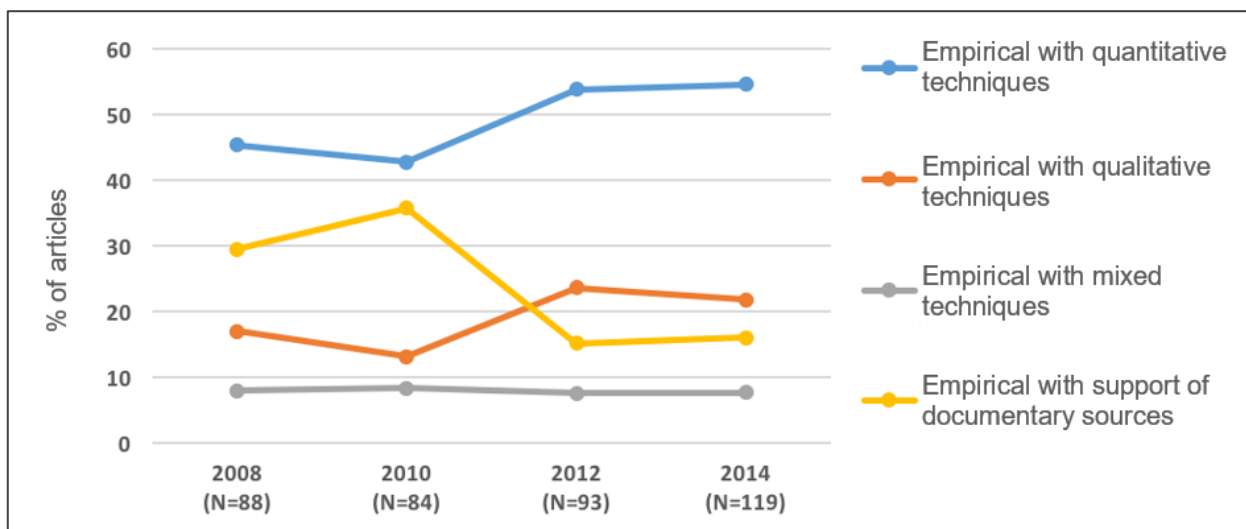
If we look at the evolution of this variable, there has been a very substantial improvement in the quality of the empirical research published over the course of this period, given that at the beginning, in 2008, nearly one-quarter (24.1%) of the articles suffered from basic methodological shortcomings, and in the following years that proportion declined to around one in ten. In any case, the light but steady upward trend from 2010, which puts the percentage of poor empirical research in 2014 in a high 16%, indicates that the condescension of the Spanish journals to the publication of works that do not meet the minimum methodological requirements has decreased in comparison to previous stages, although it still remains.

3.4. Methodological features of qualified empirical research

Qualified empirical research (i.e. works based on the use of systematic or standardised techniques and procedures for data collection and processing) represents, as mentioned, more than 80% of the works of this type, with a clear predominance of quantitative works, which constitute half of the works of the empirical research articles (191 of 384 articles with evidence of an acceptable methodological quality). The other modalities of methodologically sound empirical research obtained much more discrete percentages. Research works based on qualitative methods and technical reach 20%, while works based on the analysis of documentary sources (archives, political or business reports, legal documents, etc.) represent nearly one fourth (23.2%) of the works

published in the most recent period. Meanwhile, works that combine quantitative and qualitative techniques represent almost 8% of the sample of articles.

Figure 6. Evolution of empirical research with systematic techniques



Source: Authors' own creation

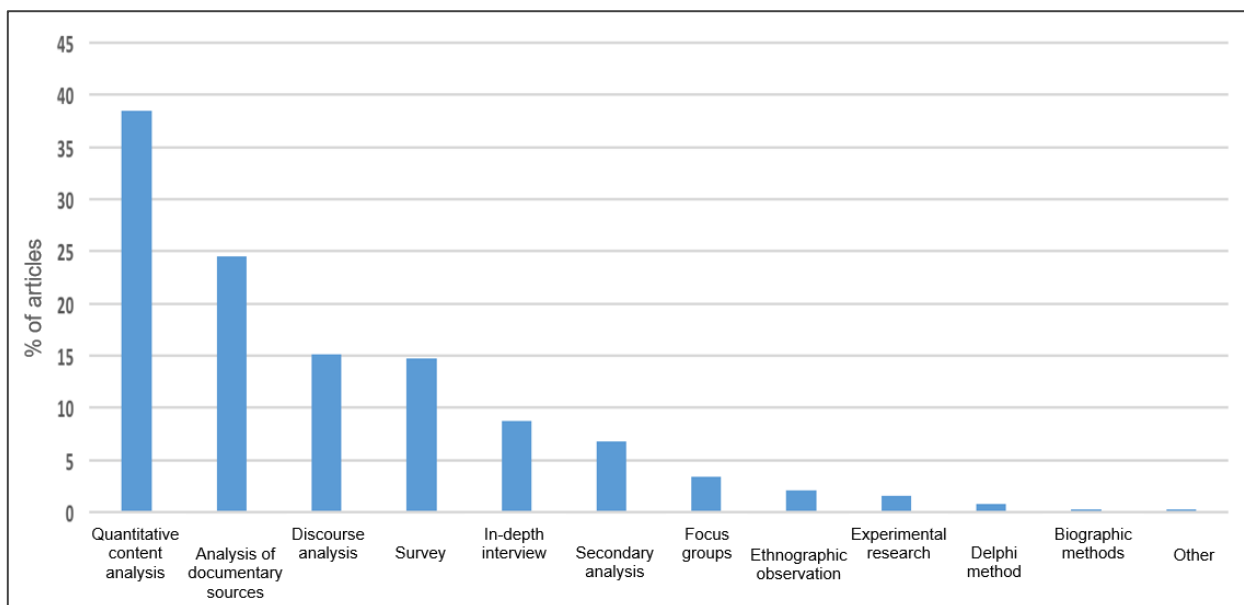
In addition to the expected dominance of empirical research, the most significant data is probably the progressive strengthening of quantitative studies in the most recent Spanish communication research (figure 6). At the beginning of the period under analysis there is a stage of relative diversity in terms of research modalities, and none of them reached an overwhelmingly dominant position. In the first part of this phase, between 2008 and 2010, of every ten published articles, four were quantitative works, but three were based on the analysis of documentary sources, two were qualitative works and one combined quantitative and qualitative techniques. This balanced situation changes in the second stage of the period, and in 2012 and 2014 quantitative works represented already almost six of every ten articles, while qualitative works stayed around 20% and the percentage of works based on empirical source dropped very significantly.

The results regarding the research techniques of methodologically sound works allow us to close the characterisation of current empirical research in Spain (figure 7), and it particularly affects the use of quantitative content analysis, a technique used in nearly 40% of the articles published by these journals. As mentioned, research on media contents is by much (about 60% of the articles) the specific object of study most frequently studied by the Spanish scientific community, but it usually refers to quantitative content analysis, and only 15% of the works offer qualitative discourse analysis in any of its variants (linguistic, textual, narratological, critical, rhetoric, argumentative, etc.).

Among the remaining techniques, and aside from the works based on documentary sources, only the (quantitative) survey and the (qualitative) in-depth interview reach a regular presence in Spanish communication research (in around 15% and 9% of the articles, respectively), while the rest of the empirical procedures available to researchers, either quantitative (experimental research) or

qualitative (focus group, ethnographic observation and Delphi and biographical methods), are used only very occasionally, with percentages that do not exceed in any case 5% of the published articles.

Figure 7. Empirical research techniques (2008-2014)



Source: Authors' own creation

The features of the techniques used reflect the type of source of data that supports the empirical research on communication in Spain in this period. 75% of the articles dealing with aspects of the communicative reality are based on data extracted from documents (journalistic information, ads, interventions in social networks, websites, laws, reports, codes of ethics, university study programmes, scientific articles, etc.). Only the remaining 25% are based on live sources; i.e., the data is collected from people through surveys, interviews, observation, biographies, focus groups or participation in experiments. Spanish communication research is, essentially, a research based on the analysis of documents, carried out by a scientific community that is locked in newspaper archives and digital repositories, and unlikely to capture the communicative reality that takes place on the streets.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The analysis of the articles published between 2008 and 2014 by authors affiliated to institutions and research centres based in Spain in five of the most important journals reveals the following general profile of Spanish communication research in the most recent period:

- (a) the centrality of journalism and journalistic content as the media-professional area to which greater researcher effort is dedicated by the scientific community (almost 50% of the sample of articles), although studies on audiovisual communication are also a well consolidated area. On the contrary, the interest for public relations and corporate communication, and, above all, advertising and marketing, moves within more discrete parameters.
- (b) In the specific field of journalistic research, attention seems to focus on the analysis of aspects related to the daily press (production processes, news content, etc.), which is addressed by a third of the work in this field, overcoming widely the percentage of works dealing with the analysis of digital journalism or audiovisual media (television and radio). Moreover, the interest in the daily press seems even more accentuated in the most recent journalistic research (years 2012 and 2014 of the sample).
- (c) the growing relevance of the research on the digital environment, both specifically (internet, social networks, etc.) as well as its links to the different media-professional areas (journalism, audiovisual communication, advertising, corporate communication, etc.), which represent already a fifth of the published articles.
- (d) the overwhelming predominance of studies on media content, which represent almost six of every ten published works, reflects an interest that, far from been mitigated, become steady or decline over the course of the period under study, follows an upward trend in the most recent years (2012 and 2014).
- (e) the interest in the *discursive dimension* of communication contrasts with the relative neglect of the *institutional* dimensions (professional aspects, corporations, markets, sectorial policies, etc.) and *social dimensions* (audiences, media consumption, effects and influence, etc.). The interest in the former dimension declines even in the last years of the period under analysis to 15% of the published articles; while the interest in the second dimension has just picked up recently to reach 20% in the last year of the period (2014), driven by studies on the activity of the audiences in the digital environment.
- (f) the gradual decay, until its virtual disappearance in the last year of the period under analysis (2014), of the works of theoretical-conceptual and methodological nature, and the simultaneous strengthening of the tendency to the publication of empirical research (more than 90% of the articles), and specifically quantitative research, with a clear predominance of content analysis as a data collection technique.
- (g) the apparent improvement of the methodological quality of the empirical work, with an appreciable decline in articles based on poor research praxis. This type of works went from representing a fourth of the articles published in 2008 to around 10% in subsequent years, although with a new upward trend that places the presence of this non-solvent research at 16% of the empirical articles published in 2014.

If we compare this general profile of the recent communication research in Spain with the one obtained in the analysis of the 1998-2007 period (Martínez-Nicolás and Saperas, 2011), we can note

that Spanish researchers are still basically interested in the study of journalism and journalistic content, which has represented almost half the works published by the Spanish journals back then and now. However, in this recent stage there has been a significant growth of studies on audiovisual communication, and public relations and corporate and institutional communication. With regards to the journalism research, at this late stage the interest has increased in the analysis of digital journalism (going from 3% of articles in 1998-2007 to nearly 10% in the latest period) and, to a lesser extent, in journalism in audiovisual media (especially television journalism, whose percentage has doubled in comparison to the previous period). However, there has also been a significant alteration in the thematic structure of journalism studies in recent years, whose knowledge interests seem to go back to a traditional or conservative approach, which is focused on the analysis of the practices or products (discourse, formats, etc.) generated in a field, the daily press, whose relevance in the information ecosystem has been declining in this recent stage, and there is a declining interest in those journalistic modalities of greater social influence (television and radio journalism) and greater professional projection due to their emerging character (digital journalism).

Another of the apparently perennial traits of communication research in Spanish is its *content-centred* bias, being the analysis of media contents the object of study most widely addressed by the scientific community. And this preference has become even stronger in these last years. The works focused on contents account for 53.2% of the articles published in the 1998-2007 period, for 55.4% of the sample collected from 2008 to 2014, but in the last year exceed 60% of the sample. More significant is the drastic reduction in this recent period of the academic interest in the *institutional dimension* of the communication system (professional aspects, corporations, markets, policies, etc.), going from more than the half of the works in the 1998-2007 period to one fourth of the sample of articles in the latest period.

However, the most noticeable change between the two periods is the substantial improvement -at in indicators- in the methodological quality of the empirical research. Depending on the year, between 30% and 45% of the articles published in the 1998-2007 decade presented basic methodological deficiencies, while this percentage dropped to 16% in the most recent period. Everything seems to point to the gradual process of improvement, since in the first year of this period of analysis, 2008, still 25% of the empirical articles were classified as non-methodologically-solvent research. The qualitative leap in this regard occurred thereafter, and in 2010 bad research practices only affected one of every ten empirical works, although there was a worrying resurgence of the same in the following years (2012 and 2014).

The period covered jointly by this work and the preceding (Martínez-Nicolás and Saperas, 2011), between 1998 and 2014, is marked by a point of institutional caesura, the implementation of the ACADEMIA faculty accreditation programme, whose impacts in the orientation of Spanish research, in general, and in communication, specifically, are still going to impact the scientific rigour, and whose characterisation may be developed with some of the results obtained here. It is significant, for example, that despite media content has traditionally been the predominant object of study in Spanish communication research, the interest in its analysis, and especially in journalistic content, has increased after the implementation of ACADEMIA up to 60% of the published research works. Equally significant is the fact that research in journalism is currently experiencing a kind of conservative turn which once again gives priority to the daily press, particularly to the analysis of

treatments, representations and news coverage based on samples of the daily press, which is easily accessible to researchers.

Also relevant for this discussion is the confirmation of the decreasing interest, up to the point of almost current irrelevance, of the *institutional dimension* of the communication system, whose object of study (professional profiles, production processes, corporate organisation, market structure, communication policies, etc.) usually demands the employment of more expensive techniques and procedures of empirical research (survey, in-depth interview, ethnographic observation, document analysis), in terms of the resources needed for their implementation (including time), in comparison, for example, to quantitative content analysis, which is the recurrent technique in Spanish communication research with a tendency to reinforce its dominant position. Finally, also significant is the virtual disappearance of theoretical works in the most recent Spanish scientific production, which is widely focused on empirical research with a quantitative approach (almost 60% of empirical articles published in 2014), according to the internationally hegemonic methodological standard (Carrasco-Campos and Saperas, 2014 and 2016).

Finding the relation that exists between these recent trends in communication research and the new institutional requirements imposed by the ACADEMIA programme for faculty professionalisation is a subject matter that requires, without doubt, a more detailed analysis. However, there is increasing evidence that indicates that the decisions and practices of communication researchers begin to respond, to some extent at least, to the strict calculations of academic profitability.

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