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## New approaches to communication teaching in the Spanish university: analysis of competencies associated with the field of Global Communication Studies

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### Abstract

**Introduction.** The definition of the concept of Global Communication Studies (GCS) is still evolving, especially when it comes to their establishment as a new formal area of education regulated by the university system. As GCS cover a very wide range of communication-related issues, it is necessary to demarcate their scope to differentiate them from studies of journalism, public relations, advertising and audiovisual communication, and to place special emphasis on learning competencies. **Methods.** A survey was applied to a sample of 266 communication professionals, teachers and students to assess, through a 5-point Likert scale, the degree of importance given to 62 competencies associated with the exercise of their professional activities. **Results and discussion.** The survey results point to a formulation of GCS that is less associated with the technical aspects of the communication sector, and more strongly linked to the political and sociological aspects of communication. There is also a generalised trend towards the positive assessment of autonomous learning.

### Keywords

Global Communication Studies; Professional competencies; University education; Hyperconnectivity; Internationalisation.

### Contents

1. Global Communication Studies: State of the art review. 2. Hypermedia space, new media and power relations. 3. Research design. 4. Results. 5. Conclusions. 6. References.

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

## 1. Global Communication Studies: State of the art review

The definition of the concept of Global Communication Studies (GCS) is still in evolution and is subject to criticism due to its vagueness in a context in which everything is mediated communication (Livingstone, 2009). Similarly, its interdisciplinary involvement complicates the establishment of clear borders. Is everything global? Is the way we approach “global” phenomena also “global”?

The approach adopted so far is quite reductionist, limited to a Western perspective that does not consider the adaptation to different transnational, political and cultural contexts. There is a need to extend this vision which currently restricts the implementation of Global Communication Studies from multiple perspectives.

The challenges to consider are articulated in three areas. Firstly, the socio-cultural aspects and the inclusion of cultural and communicative perspectives at a global scale. As mentioned, the approach adopted in the past 20 years has been quite Eurocentric and therefore it is necessary to assess the extent to what new technologies affect developing countries and enable an evolution comparable with Europe and the States United of America (Kraidy, 2009; Georgiou, 2012). This would lead to the internationalisation of Communication Studies (Kraidy, 2009), which would once again highlight the importance of diasporas, intercultural relations and multiculturalism (Georgiou, 2006, 2012) as objects of study and meeting points among students and researchers. Finally, the transformation of the mass-media into social media, which would have promoted the transition from unidirectionality to participation (Livingstone, 2015).

The second area refers to the technological aspects, of which we focus on the combination and hybridisation between traditional media and new technologies, which has culminated in the creation of the “hypermedia space” (ANECA, 2005; Kraidy and Mourad, 2010; Punathambekar and Scannell, 2013). Similarly, the process of digitalisation would have also allowed the elimination, transformation and creation of new professional competencies and profiles adapted to this process (Livingstone, 2009).

From a theoretical point of view, we highlight the desirability for a transversal and interdisciplinary perspective (Livingstone, 2011). In the same vein, we emphasise the relevance of production and reception studies, which would be favoured today by an intersectional perspective resulting from the convergence of both processes into the figure of the prosumer (Punathambekar and Scannell, 2013). Moreover, we emphasise the relevance of studies on international media and mediations and communicative relationships (organisational studies, institutions, business communication), framed within the existing power relations on a global scale.

From here, the establishment of boundaries is necessary. Talking about GCS without delimiting their scope leads to the encompassing of a full range of issues with too much amplitude. Communication studies involve different branches, namely: journalism, public relations, advertising and audiovisual communication. Global Communication Studies would not seek to put all of the aforementioned studies under a global approach, but all the contrary: GCS would be trying to define their legitimate object of study within a changing communication landscape. In this way, the need to talk about globalisation decreases, and the need for new studies from a *glocal*, transnational and interdisciplinary

perspective is emphasised. With regards to the main concern of GCS, this could be located at the intersection of cultural and political relations with 21<sup>st</sup> century media and technological phenomena. As a result, the connection between inter-culturalism, migration, mass and social media acquires ever greater relevance.

In turn, this brings us to ask ourselves how can we address such complex problems without falling back into a Europeanist and westernised paternalistic attitude (Georgiou, 2012). To this end, we would have to meet two requirements: one methodological and one theoretical. The first could be solved by increasing research based on the case study method (Kraidy and Mourad, 2010; Aslinger and Huntemann, 2013), to better understand the how and why of the evolution of Global Communication Studies in a transnational context, as well as non-participant observation. The second requirement is willingness by students and researchers to renew classical theories and leave space for all emerging literature on new media and digital and information technologies.

## 2. Hypermedia space, new media and power relations

During the last ten years, and still today, we have been witnessing the configuration of a new social, technological and media landscape in which these three concepts are interrelated. New connections that blur traditional boundaries between media, audience and access to technology infrastructure are established. Several authors refer to this phenomenon as the creation of the *hypermedia space* (Deibert, 2000; Drotner and Livingstone, 2008; Kraidy and Mourad, 2010). This space is characterised by the speed of communications and the intertextuality, or inter-operability of the media, which are now fluently interrelated (Deibert, 2000). While Deibert's considerations were made before the birth of YouTube and Twitter, they provide an empirical basis for subsequent definitions. The *hypermedia space* is based on the "personalisation and interactivity of the practices and mobile communication devices" (Drotner and Livingstone, 2008:339), which include new media such as "mobile phones, tweets, email, social networks, text messages, digital cameras, online videos, online newspapers and satellite television" (Kraidy and Mourad, 2010: 3):

The advent of hypermedia space constitutes a qualitative leap in the ways that people seek, access, produce, and react to information. Most importantly, hypermedia space broadens access to the means of communication, since it is obviously easier for average people to "produce" messages today [...] The new media environment is therefore more participatory (Kraidy and Mourad, 2010: 3).

Consequently, the barrier that separated personal communication from mass communication began to disappear, generating a new space for the construction of social identities and relations. Far from being reduced to a Western phenomenon, hyperconnectivity has become a global event that acquires an increasing importance, especially when it comes to documenting and reporting from non-privileged positions. Ranging from the Arab spring, and including the Occupy Wall Street movement (New York), to the 15M (Spain), mobile telephony and social networks had and continue to have a prominent role. Because of this, what we knew as globalisation in relation to the concentration of American, Japanese and European media -the so called global media- would be losing strength, giving way to the legitimate global communication. We refer to the increase in production against the specialisation of

consumption: television is no longer the hub of the home and the figure of the prosumer is empowered against the classic unidirectionality of the mass media, which are controlled by large monopolies. As Croteau and Hoynes, rightly point out, “the acquisitions of the new media provide sources to increase media diversity and give citizens the power of communications to the detriment of the central authorities” (1997:283). This leads us to the next key concept to determine the object of study of Global Communication Studies: the power relations established after the emergence of the new media and the increase in citizen participation.

Myria Georgiou (2012) has examined this phenomenon from a matrix that triangulates different positions: local/urban and national and transnational. In this way, we can identify the influences that the national exerts on the local, framed in a transnational diasporic context. Such triangulation highlights the relevance of the nexus between political communication and cultural and media studies, which were previously unlinked (Georgiou, 2012) and would be at the epicentre of the problem of Global Communication Studies. This could lead to the updating of the theoretical bases currently in force in the field of communication studies, and the implementation of new practices aimed at the internationalisation of knowledge and research.

Consequently, renewing the approach that has been taken involves the rehabilitation and development of the competencies acquired by students of GCS, as well as a subsequent adaptation of the professional profiles of this academic degree. We have observed how certain competencies disappear, are updated or emerge in parallel to traditional, transformed and emerging professional profiles.

Competencies are understood as those “that have significance for employment and that can be acquired by modular training or other types of training and through work experience”, according to the Spanish Law 5/2002 on Qualifications and Vocational Training (Ley 5/2002). The professional profile would be the description of that set of competencies, capabilities and attitudes that identify the training of a person to perform the different tasks of a profession or social needs.

### **3. Research design**

#### *Objectives*

This article is part of the second phase of the research project titled “Evaluation and restructuring of the Communication Studies of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra”, whose general objective is to adapt the offer of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona) to the new professional demands of companies and institutions and to the expectations of national and international students, and at the same time update the intensive research orientations of the university’s postgraduate division. The specific objectives, on which this article focuses, consist of evaluating the competencies associated with the new transformed and emerging professional profiles in the field of Global Communication Studies.

We are currently in an incipient phase of a new stage for communication studies, which emphasises the need to understand the opinion of the professionals currently working in the sector, as well as academic managers and university students in the area of communication. Based on the previous, this research uses the survey method, which methodologically fits the objectives of our descriptive research and allows us to obtain an overview of the current landscape in the area of global communication.

### **Sample**

The selection of the sample was as representative as possible to generate a volume of data that allows us to delve into the issue in a comprehensive manner, by including professionals from the communication sector as well as students and university teachers in the area of communication, from across Spain. Participants were contacted via email using a purpose-created database that contained the information of professionals from all communication sectors and from communication agencies and associations, which were asked to distribute the survey questionnaire among their members. The questionnaire was also disseminated in all the communication schools and departments of the Spanish universities, which in turn disseminated it among their teaching staff and students. The email invited recipients to participate and included a link to the online questionnaire.

### **Methods**

Survey data were collected through an online questionnaire previously designed with “Google Forms”. The questionnaire was applied between April and June 2017. The items were closed questions that asked respondents to assess the degree of importance given to a series of competencies with a 5-point Likert scale (Not important, Slightly important, Moderately important, Important and Very important). The set of questions were formulated based on the competencies described in the *White Paper of Degrees in Communication Sciences*, prepared by Spain’s National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA, 2005), in charge of the evaluation, certification and accreditation of official studies of the Spanish universities. The *White Paper* indicates that the set of competencies are distributed across the three degrees in which communication studies are divided: Journalism, Advertising and Public Relations, and Audiovisual Communication.

Since our study seeks to assess the competencies that would be assigned to GCS, for the design of our survey it was necessary to unify the competencies that the *White Paper* distributed across the three aforementioned degrees. In addition, since the report was prepared in 2005, it was appropriate to incorporate some updated competencies, which have been detected through a benchmarking analysis, and have emerged from the contextual factors that we have explained in the preceding paragraphs. The *White Paper*, in turn, organises competencies in four thematic blocks for each of the three degrees: a) Disciplinary knowledge (know), b) Professional competencies (know-how), c) Academic competencies, and d) Other competencies. This way, these four blocks have helped us to organise our survey questions based on the competencies, adapted and standardised, proposed by the *White Paper*. A total of 62 competencies were assessed (19 disciplinary, 21 professional, 10 academics, and 12 specific).

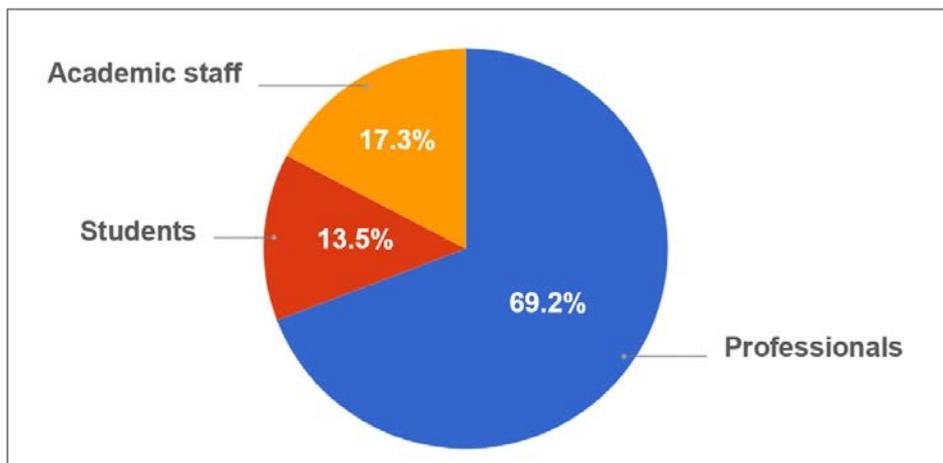
## **4. Results**

### **Sample distribution**

Once the online questionnaire was closed we undertook a first review to filter invalid results (incomplete, incoherent, etc.) and remove them from the total number of results. After this process, a total of 266 valid responses were obtained. Participation by the three different sample profiles was heterogeneous. The group of communication professionals had a greater participation, with 69.2% of

the total. Thus, the survey collected a greater turnout of opinions from those working actively in communication professions and know the current demands of the sector. On the other hand, the views of teachers and students complement the balance, with 17.3% and 13.5%, respectively, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Sample distribution**



Source: Authors' own creation

### ***Comparative by thematic blocks***

Like the *White Paper of Degrees in Communication Sciences*, our study divides the 62 competencies in four thematic blocks:

- a) Disciplinary knowledge (19),
- b) Professional competencies (21),
- c) Academic competencies (10),
- d) Specific competencies (12).

The questionnaire asked participants to rank the degree of importance given to 62 competencies using a 5-point Likert scale (Not important, slightly important, moderately important, important or very important). For the statistical analysis of the results we assigned a numeric value from 1 to 5 to each of the degrees of importance, as shown in Figure 2.

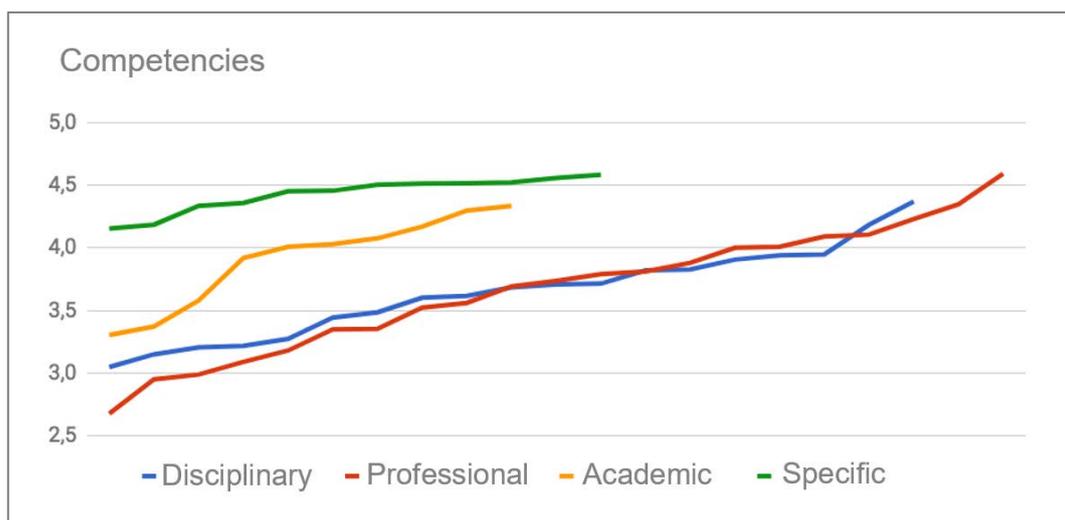
**Figure 2: Numerical correspondence of the Likert scale values**

Not important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Important	Very important
1	2	3	4	5

Source: Authors' own creation

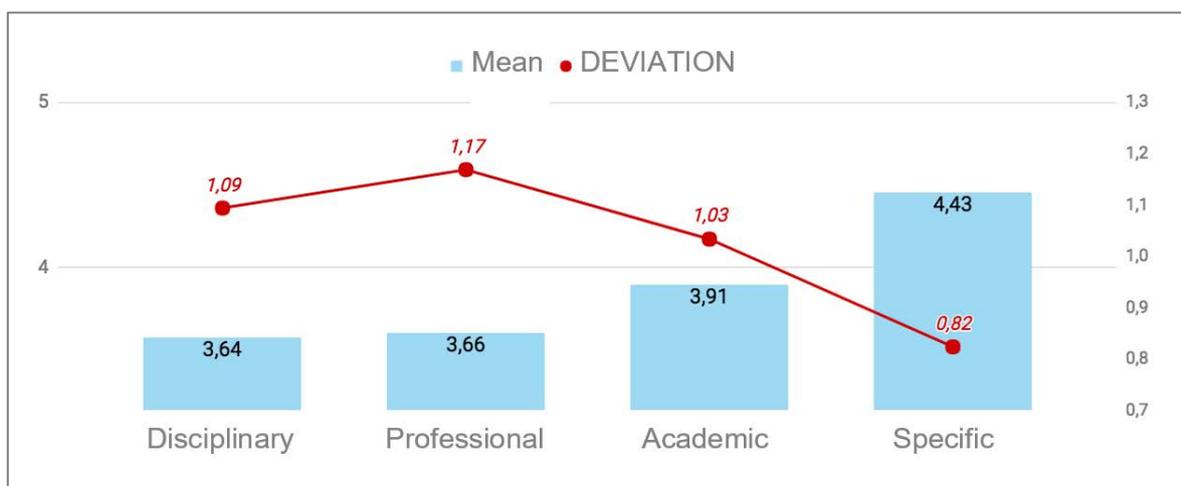
This numerical correspondence enabled us to obtain descriptive results, and to extract means and standard deviations to proceed to a more detailed analysis. In general terms, the best ranked block of competencies by participants is Specific Competencies (E), with an average of 4.43 points out of 5. In second place is Academic Competencies, which obtained an average of 3.91 points. In third place are Professional competencies (3.66 points in average), followed closely by Disciplinary Competencies (3.64 points in average), which were the worst ranked in general (see Figure 3 and 4).

**Figure 3: Average ranking by blocks of competencies**



Source: Authors' own creation

**Figure 4: Means and deviations of the thematic blocks**



Source: Authors' own creation

Comparing the results with the average standard deviations, the Specific Competencies block has the lowest degree of deviation, which means that the positive appreciation these competencies received is the most homogeneous, i.e., in general most participants agreed that these are the best valued. In contrast, Professional Competencies obtained the highest average scores in terms of standard deviation, which means that there is greater disparity between the views of participants about the competencies that make up this block (see Figure 4).

On the other hand, there is a correlation between the means and deviations. Trends indicate that the higher a competency is valued, the lower its standard deviation is (see Figure 5). This means that better valued competencies are valued homogeneously, i.e., the opinion of participants is less dispersed and therefore most participants agree that they are the more important competencies.

**Figure 5: Trends in means and deviations**



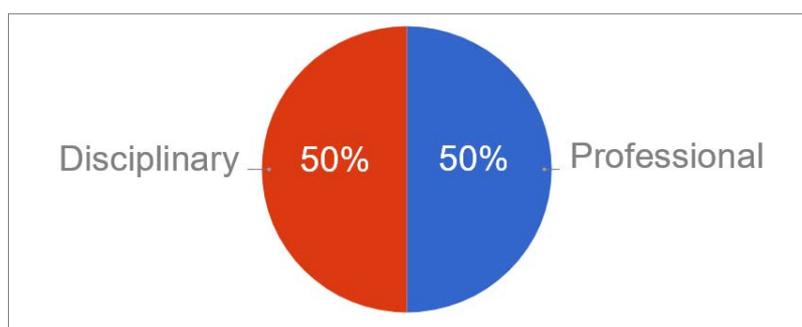
Source: Authors' own creation

### *Assessment of competencies*

Participants were asked to rank the importance of the competencies with a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being “Not important” and 5 “Very important” (see Figure 2). The means of the competencies have ranged from 2.68 and 4.59 points. Of the 62 competencies, the lowest valued was P21 [*Use animation and special effects techniques*]. On the opposite side, the most highly valued competency was P12 [*Learn autonomously and adapt to changes*]. In terms of deviations, which ranged from 0.71 to 1.36 points, a higher score indicates greater dispersion of opinions, and vice versa. The lowest score corresponds to the competency E8 [*Capacity of analysis, synthesis and critical judgement. Know how to relate causes and effects*], while the highest ranked is the competency P16 [*Create and direct audiovisual productions*].

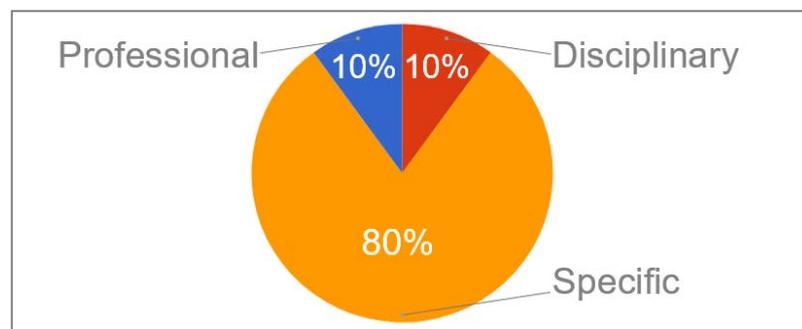
If we consider the 10 lowest-valued competencies there is an equitable distribution between the disciplinary competencies and the professional competencies, which confirms the previous results that indicated that the competencies of these two groups are, in general, the lowest valued (see Figure 6). On the other hand, when considering the 10 most highly valued competencies we found that, indeed, most of them correspond to the Specific competencies block (80%), as we had perceived earlier in the analysis by blocks. However, it is also surprising to find out that these 10 best valued competencies also include two belonging to the lowest valued competencies blocks as a whole: one professional competency and one disciplinary competency (see Figure 7).

**Figure 6: 10 worst ranked competencies**



Source: Authors' own creation

**Figure 6: 10 best ranked competencies**



Source: Authors' own creation

In fact, unexpectedly, out of the 62 competencies, the best valued competency does not correspond to the Specific competencies block, but to the Professional block: The P12 [*Learn autonomously and adapt to changes*], which is above all other competencies in the ranking of importance. Another competency that stands out among the 10 most highly valued competencies and does not belong to the Specific block is the D8 [*Correct use of mother language and English applied to the sector*], which belongs to the disciplinary block.

The rest of the best valued competencies correspond to the Specific competencies block including: E3 [*Work as part of a team in different settings...*], E8 [*Capacity of analysis, synthesis and critical judgement...*], E2 [*Learn to manage time, and organise tasks*], E10 [*Insight, inventiveness and creativity to find effective solutions to new problems*] and E7 [*Make decisions in situations of uncertainty, assuming risks and responsibilities*].

## 5. Conclusions

The current panorama of global communication raises new challenges for university education in communication. Communication studies in Spain are still being marked by a classic trend that privileges a system of competencies that are sometimes too associated with the traditional professional profiles. This article has offered an analysis to assess the competencies associated to the field of Global Communication Studies. This type of studies, which is less linked to the technical aspects of the communications sector and more strongly linked with the political and sociological aspects of communication, require a reformulation of competencies to adapt to the demands of Global Communication.

The results and analysis of this article highlight a general trend that points towards a positive evaluation of autonomous learning. This competency, which goes hand in hand with the need to adapt to changes, could be related to the changing landscape alluded by several authors when referring to the way in which the *hypermedia space* has reconfigured the classical borders between the social, technological and media realms (Drotner and Livingstone, 2008). This could suggest that the concern stems from a few professionals who have obtained a bachelor's degree in classic communication, mainly focused on the development of professions in traditional media, and have been forced to adapt themselves to the needs of today's job market, which is marked above all by the hybridisation between traditional media and new technologies (Punathambekar and Scannell, 2013).

On the other hand, these new requirements are marked by an increasingly global hyperconnectivity (Kraidy and Mourad, 2010) which leads us to consider the correct use of the English language applied to the communication sector as a major competency.

The phenomenon of digitalisation enables the elimination, transformation and creation of new competencies and professional profiles adapted to this process, as pointed out by Livingstone (2009). Thereby, in this panorama of Global communication there a more intense assessment of those competencies related to the ability of analysis, critical judgment, inventiveness and creativity to find effective solutions to the new problems that may derive from the globalised contexts, which flow between the local/urban and the national and transnational (Georgiou, 2012), the technological aspects and the hyperconnectivity. This, in turn, requires the assessment of the capacity to make decisions in situations of uncertainty, assuming risks and responsibilities, given that hyperconnectivity is closely linked to immediacy. This, in turn, is also linked with another one of the most valued competencies: the need to know how to organise and manage time.

Finally, the rise of transnational contexts, together with the internationalisation of communication studies, as Kraidy (2009) points out, leads to the need to grant greater importance to intercultural

relations and multiculturalism (Georgiou, 2006; 2012), and this also includes paying special attention to training future students to work in teams and multicultural contexts.

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