

Diez años de investigación en las principales revistas científicas de comunicación. Tendencias y temáticas en las publicaciones de mayor impacto en JCR y SJR.

Ten years of research in the highest ranked communication journals. Trends and subjects in JCR and SJR's highest impact publications

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Palabras clave

Estudios sobre comunicación; Revistas de la comunicación; Metodologías de investigación; Tendencias en la investigación; Producción científica; Análisis bibliométrico

Keywords

Communication studies; Communication journals; Research methods; Research trends; Scientific production; Bibliometrics

Resumen

La comunicación, entendida como campo de estudio y como disciplina, aunque es relativamente joven, ha conseguido una importante madurez en la primera década del siglo XXI como muestra la producción científica y la centralidad que ha conseguido en las sociedades actuales. Este artículo es el resultado de la realización de una Revisión Sistemática de la Literatura científica en las trece revistas académicas del área de la comunicación que ocupan los dos principales rankings de indexación: Journal Citation Reports (JCR) y Scimago Journal & Country Rank (SJR). Tras el análisis de 5.291 textos, ha sido posible encontrar algunos de los patrones y tendencias que se siguen en la publicación de investigaciones académicas en el campo de la comunicación. De este modo, este artículo muestra cómo algunas de las publicaciones privilegian algunos temas frente a otros. Al mismo tiempo, se ha identificado un notable crecimiento de la producción académica gracias, en parte, a la facilidad de difusión a través de la incorporación de plataformas de publicación en línea por parte de las revistas científicas. Además, se ha identificado la presencia y evolución de determinadas temáticas a lo largo de los últimos diez años para entender su desarrollo e importancia. Este texto contribuye a la literatura científica centrada en la comprensión de los patrones de publicación y cita entre investigadores mostrando las principales tendencias en la investigación de la comunicación a lo largo de la última década.

Abstract

Communication, understood as a field of study, is an area with a relatively short history, especially if compared with disciplines like Medicine or Physics. This research article is the result of a Systematic Literature Review of the thirteen-top ranked peer-reviewed journals in the area of communication: Journal Citation Reports (JCR) and Scimago Journal & Country Rank (SJR). After reviewing 5,291 articles, publishing patterns and thematic tendencies were identified. Thus, this article evidences that some journals privilege some topics over others as well as the rise of the academic research in communication due to the ease of publishing, thanks to online publishing platforms adopted by peer-reviewed journals. Likewise, the presence of many topics across the period of analysis was identified in order to set a general idea about their temporal development through the last ten years. This contributes to the literature corpus related to publication and citation patterns among journals and scholars by highlighting the main trends in communication research in the last decade.

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1. Introduction

Communication is both a research field and a discipline (de Moragas, 2011) with a short history, especially if compared with disciplines such as Medicine or Physics. On this basis, many authors set communication research as a subject of the 20th century (Carlson, Robinson, Lewis y Berkowitz, 2018). However, in the last few years, we have witnessed a significant growth in communication journals and communication research. The expansion of communication studies and faculties among international Universities and the need of researchers and professors for those formation centres have been crucial in the development of this field.

Likewise, the current panorama is influenced by the birth of new publications and the increase in production of those still running. It constitutes a dual response both for the increasing number of authors and the ease for publishing through the Internet. Thanks to the web publishing, it is possible to reach new audiences globally, as print issues are not needed. At the same time, publishing in the highest ranked journals —frequently set in countries such as the United States or United Kingdom— is now a more realistic possibility than twenty or thirty years ago, when logistics were more complex.

Our study aims at establishing patterns around the most studied subjects in communication research in the period 2008-2018. Through a systematic analysis of the production in the thirteen journals that take up the first ten publications of the Journal of Citation Reports (JCR) and Scimago Journal & Country Rank (SJR), a classification of the articles in different categories was established.

Findings of the study could be useful for understanding current trends in the study of communication, as well as its recent development. In the same way, results provide an overview of emergent topics and fields of study, as well as of those areas of less interest for both researchers and journals. Thus, the research addresses some of the key areas in communication research fields and discusses future directions for them.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview on communication research field

Communication as an object of study is, unlike other disciplines, a very recent field of research. Barnett, Huh, Kim, and Park (2011) showed, following Berger, Roloff, and Roskos-Ewoldsen (2009), that communication joined social sciences later, in contrast with other branches of knowledge. This idea is supported by Bruhn Jensen (2018) when he sets how:

«The field of communication research was a product of the twentieth century, as social-scientific and humanistic traditions joined forces to account for the technologically mediated condition in which humans learn from the past, asses the present and imagine the future, so as to make their own history».

Michael Meyen (2015) supports the idea of this delay in the integration of communication in social sciences. The author turns to Abbott's *Chaos of Disciplines* (2002) to establish that research in areas like sociology, economics, psychology and political science is considerably older than research in communication. Likewise, the author sets that the birth of the field is the product of both political and economic interests (Meyen, 2015).

Juha Koivisto *et al.* (2008) conducted a large study to identify the main trends, institutions and challenges that shape the fields of communication and media research. In order to have a complete overview of this domain, the authors established the beginning in the emergence of communication university courses and faculties, specifically in the academic training started in the United States by the decade of 1870s. In Europe, «the first European university courses in journalism were held in Paris as early as 1899» (Koivisto *et al.*, 2008). However, it was not until the second decade of the twentieth century when this kind of studies proliferated. Therefore, there is almost a thirty years lag in the beginning of regular academic formation between the United States and Europe. The difference foresees one of the present characteristics of the communication research field nowadays: the prevalence of the United States in universities and journals, as we will mention below.

Besides the fact that the study and research in communication was considered part of social sciences later than other disciplines like political science, psychology and economics, the area presents, since its very beginning, a remarkable dichotomy. From the first steps of research in communication, scholars have discussed about the division between mass and interpersonal communication (Rogers & Chaffee, 1983; Delia, 1987; Park & Leydesdorff, 2009). It was considered that both fields had different natures. However, there are studies that defend integration instead of division of mass and interpersonal communication (Berger & Chaffee, 1988; Wiemann, Pingree & Hawkins, 1988). The cited authors were aware of the complexity of the field, and tried to bring together both mass and interpersonal communication to better understand the of communication processes.

In addition to the enormous complexity of communication as a field integrated in the area of social sciences, there are also many objects of study. As Vidales notes, there are a «diversity of looks, objects and agendas» (Vidales, 2015) which make communication a particular and diverse field of study where many different approaches of many different problems and situations are possible (Martín-Algarra, 2009). We therefore attend to the constant development of new approaches and frameworks that are highly connected to the different contexts where communication processes take place. Thus, it is very influenced by circumstances like «national traditions, methodological loyalties, long-running skills-or-scholarship disputes, mixed disciplinary roots, subfield chauvinisms, and North-South disparities» (Pooley & Park, 2012).

Because of the noted dichotomy and the fragmentation of the field, in the first steps of the research in communication, there was a discussion about the direction of in-

vestigations. Different research organizations were born in order to connect researchers from different parts of the world. Thus, international and national collectives such as the International Communication Association (ICA) or the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) emerged. However, although these initiatives began with the objective of put together researchers from different countries, in the years after the World War II a deep ideological debate was conducted inside one of the biggest associations: the cited IAMCR. Meyen (2015) shows how, in the years of the Cold War, IAMCR conferences were spaces for ideological battlefields between members of the association who wanted to apply their ideological tendency to the study of communication by privileging some topics over others. Thus, as we can see, the development of a research field is highly related to the context and the ideological predominance of those who are studying it. Therefore, changes are frequent and common, because they enrich the advance of investigations by adopting different paradigms.

With the objective of communicate and spread the findings of researchers all around the world, academic journals were born many years after the development of communication as a research field. Thus, we can find the first samples of academic journals in the second half of the seventeenth century. They represented a significant improvement in the communication of researchers' results. Before the emergence of regular academic publications, researchers used to interchange letters with their colleges in order to know more about their investigations. However, the expansion of the movable type printing modified the communication of science with the introduction of academic journals, easier to print and disseminate due to the new printing system. Examples of publications in this period are *Le Journal des Sçavans* (France, 1665), *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* (United Kingdom, 1665), or *Acta Eruditorum* (Germany, 1682) (Castillo-Esparcia, Rubio-Moraga & Almansa-Martínez, 2012).

If we pay attention to the specific field of communication research, we can see how it is deeply linked to the invention of the printed press (Meyen, 2015). Thereby, Michael Meyen (2015) highlight the fact that in the first steps in the development of newspapers, communication studies were dominated by outsiders like novelists, theologians or others who wrote about the topic. It was not until 1690 when Tobias Peucer defended the first dissertation addressing communication at the University of Leipzig.

Nowadays, researchers work in the era of the digitalisation of contents. Contributions from colleagues all around the world are available through the Internet. Accessing contents from investigations of every research fields —even works in progress— is easier than ever thanks to the development of academic social networks as well as the indexation in databases. As a result, researchers have a lot of contents located in the same platform, which opens a new amount of possibilities when they are trying to make progresses in their findings (Vilches, 2011: 21).

2.2. Different approaches in the study of communication

We look now into the meta-research in communication. We will try to set an overview of the recent published literature focused on the analysis of the published research in academic communication journals. Thus, as we will see, there are many different approaches for study this area, each one valid but also with its particularities.

One of the possibilities for the analysis of a particular research field is the scrutiny of different topics and subjects addressed (Montero-Díaz *et al.*, 2018). Thus, in the particular case of communication, it is possible to find articles that try to delve into the literature of many different themes. Examples of this could be those centred in investigations on the Internet (Tomasello, Lee & Baer, 2010; Borah, 2017), advertising (Benavides Delgado, 2012; Baladrón-Pazos, Correyero-Ruiz & Machado Pérez, 2014; Avant, Kim & Hayes, 2017), communication ethics (Díaz-Campo & Segado-Boj, 2017), social media (Ha *et al.*, 2015), communication theories like framing (Borah, 2011), and mobile communication (Kim *et al.*, 2017). These are just a few samples of investigations conducted with the objective of identifying the state of research of the issue in question.

Another possible approach is the bibliometric study of the academic production in one particular area. In the case of communication as a research field, we can see different types of investigations. Examples of this could be those focused in the co-citation patterns among authors (Piedra-Salomón, 2010; 2015), the existence of citation networks among the main authors of the field (Barnett, Huh, Kim, & Park, 2011), number of authors per text and affiliation (Fernández-Quijada & Masip, 2013) and the existence of differences in publishing between scholars from leading countries in research and those situated in the periphery (Demeter, 2017). In the same way, we can easily find studies on the use of particular methodologies during investigation processes (Castillo-Esparcia Rubio-Moraga, and Almansa-Martínez, 2012). Lastly, there are a lot of contributions which try to show trends in different academic journals in a certain period of time (Bryant & Miron, 2004; Roca-Correa & Pueyo-Ayhan, 2012; Bermejo-Berros, 2014) and country (de-Filippo, 2013; Martínez-Nicolás & Saperas-Lapedra, 2016). This kind of studies are very useful to understand the recent development of a field such as, in this case, communication. Contributions like these are a good basis for the implementation of new research lines, as they can access previous works in the matter of study.

2.3. Communication research nowadays

We turn now to the present to look into the current trends in the study of communication. In this point, we follow Peter Simonson and David W. Park when they point out how:

«Communication and media studies are at a key historical moment, occasioned by the ever-widening recognition of the social significance of their subject matters, the continued structural transformation of higher education, and the rapid growth of the field around the world» (Simonson & Park, 2016: 2).

Therefore, according to Simonson and Park, communication and its study are now more important than ever. It occurs due to the rapid growth of the field as well as the birth of new spaces and platforms where communication processes take place. Although communication is a very diverse and fragmented field (Vidales, 2015; Montero-Díaz *et al.*, 2018), there is a growing interest in its study (Díaz-Campo & Segado-Boj, 2017). Thus, in the last two decades we have seen the rise of meta-research in this area with handbooks and papers focused on the analysis of previous works related with communication processes, tools, theories, and spaces (Rodrigo-Alsina, 2001; Tomasello, 2001; Bryant & Miron, 2004; Cappella, 2017).

As noted before, the growth and spread in communication research is closely linked to the foundation of communication schools and university courses. Since the last two decades of the past century, the spread of communication schools provoked the rise of research in this area as well as the foundation of new journals and conferences where researchers could show their findings (de-Filippo, 2013). Communication, like other research field, is nowadays a very dynamic field where «researchers retire, but more new researchers emerge. Journals fold, but a higher number are launched» (Jinha, 2010).

However, if we pay attention to the geographical and linguistic development of this particular research field, we can see how there are two zones and speeds in the study of communication. First of all, we are in front of a very US-centred discipline (Meyen, 2015) with certain —but lower— presence of some European countries like United Kingdom, Germany, France and Spain. In terms of language, English is the main language of the field, and there are fewer journals in other languages in the top positions of the main indexation ranks. For instance, *Comunicar*, which is issued both in Spanish and English, is in the 12th position of the Journal Citation Reports —in the communication category—, but there are not more examples like this in the first 25 places of the index. Likewise, this journal is ranked in the 25th position of the Scimago Journal and Country Rank, being the very first journal not just issued in English.

Finally, in order to meet the objective of this section, which is drawing a general panorama about the current characteristics of communication studies, we have to emphasise that, in the last few years, communication studies have changed their scope a little bit. In the first years of the new millennium, communication research was dominated by studies focused on traditional broadcast and print media (Kamhawi & Weaver, 2003). The introduction and development of a new medium, the Internet, has changed this paradigm (Borah, 2017). Nowadays, research in communication highlights the expansion and maturing of the Internet, describes the characteristics and potentialities of Social Networks Sites and tries to find the relation between the use of new devices and human communicative processes.

2.4. The particular case of Spain

In the last section of the literature review, we put our scope in the particular case of the Spanish academic production (Martínez-Nicolás & Carrasco-Campos, 2018). It constitutes a remarkable reality because in the last few years it has experimented a rapidly growth due to the requirements for the accreditation of the six-year terms of academic experience. Hence, researchers have to prove their best achievements so they try to publish in the highest ranked journals in order to have bigger merits.

This situation resulted in a rise in the production of academic literature from Spanish researchers in every single area of knowledge, and communication is not an exception. For example, Fernández-Quijada and Masip (2013) found that in 2010 the academic production of research in communication was the tenth part of the total registered in the previous thirty years. It is an important measure, because it is necessary to note that communication faculties in Spain were not regularly established until the decade of 1970 (Fernández-Quijada, Masip & Bergillos, 2013).

Therefore, Spanish scholars have to combine their research with the constant objective of publishing in the highest ranked journals to achieve better marks in the accreditation process. Thus, since 1970, communication as a research field has experimented the birth of many journals as well as the publishing of monographs and guidebooks. It is a consequence of both the necessity of results of Spanish researchers and the rise and development of communication studies in Spain.

In terms of the thematic division of communication studies, Spanish researchers in communication opt for the study of media content, following a «traditional or conservative pattern» (Martínez-Nicolás & Saperas-Lapiedra, 2016) focused on the analysis of practices and products. The explanation of this phenomenon could be the fast-paced production process of the academic research due to the noted necessities for the recognition of the scholars' achievements.

3. Method

The methodology used in this article was the methodological triangulation, through the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The first step was the performance of a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), according to the disposed by Lluís Codina (2017). This technique lets «identifying, evaluating, and interpreting available data on a particular research field within a period of time» (Ramírez-Montoya & García-Peñalvo, 2018). This particular analysis was focused on the journals ranked in the first ten positions of the Journal Citation Reports (JCR) and the Scimago Journal & Country Rank (SJR). Although there are many different ranks, both JCR and SJR are the most renowned and used to establish the impact factor within academic journals of any subject. As part of this review, content analysis was conducted in order to find out the main trends in publishing of the analysed journals.

As told before, the analysis was centred in the first ten positions of each rank in their communication categories. Here, Journal Citation Reports offers 79 results and Scimago Journal & Country Rank, 294 (on May 2nd, 2018). After selecting the category, it was observed that the number of journals of the sample would be 13 because *New Media & Society*, *Journal of Communication*, *Communication Research*, *Journal of Advertising*, *Communication Theory, Information, Communication & Society* and *Political Communication* are part of both indexes. Likewise, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *Media Psychology* and *Public Understanding of Science* are ranked in the first ten positions of the Journal of Citation Reports while *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, *International Journal of Press/Politics* and *Public Opinion Quarterly* are ranked in the first ten places of the Scimago Journal & Country Rank.

After the establishment of the sample, the period of analysis was set between January 2008 and April 2018. This period constitutes a good example of development in many fields of communication research like the expansion of social network sites and the technical improvements in mobile communications and the Internet. At the same time, authors wanted to know how the interest on some topics and areas was decreasing and increasing with the changes and whether there were room for studies in growing areas such as information visualization, fact-checking and mobile journalism.

Table 1. Analysed categories

Category name	Built-in items
1. Use of the Internet	Privacy, functionalities, safety, user rights, anonymity
2. Social Media	Uses, effects of the use, social media platforms characteristics
3. Mobile Communication	Smartphone and cell phone use, mobile applications, effects of using smartphones
4. Interpersonal communication	Interpersonal communication and, construction of community
5. Discourse, content and case analysis	Research articles based on discourse, content, and case analysis.
6. Fact-checking	Fact-checking, misinformation, and information verification.
7. Information visualization	Information visualization and design
8. Audience studies	Studies related with audience measures
9. Use, effects, and media reception and public opinion	Studies related with the use of the media, its effects and its reception and analysis about public opinion
10. Information and Communication Technologies	Studies related with the influence of Information and Communication Technologies in communicative processes: search engines, software, digital divide, digital literacy, or video games
11. Communication management	Organizational, crisis, and corporative communication
12. Big Data and data journalism	Studies related with the development of Big Data techniques in communicative processes
13. Transparency	Organizational and governmental transparency
14. Communication theories	Communication theories, research methodologies, and literature reviews
15. Production processes	Work with journalistic sources, gatekeeping processes, and news diffusion
16. Traditional media	Print newspapers and traditional broadcasting
17. Online media	Characteristics and production processes in online media
18. User-Generated Content	Crowdsourcing, user comments, blogosphere, and co-creation sites
19. Funding and informative enterprise management	Entrepreneurial management of informative business, new concepts and strategies for informative enterprises
20. New narratives	Transmedia, crossmedia, virtual reality, augmented reality
21. Citizen's participation and mobilization	Activism, protests, and social movements
22. Advertising	Advertising, marketing, e-commerce, and public relations
23. Legislation and regulations	Censoring, copyright, piracy, press freedom
24. New content distribution platforms	Studies related with the development of new platforms for content distribution like <i>Netflix</i> or <i>Amazon</i>

Source: created by authors

The following step in the construction of the analysis method was the identification of those articles that would be present in the sample. In order to solve this question, only original research articles were analysed, not book reviews, editorials, introductions, summaries and other type of contents. The number of articles analysed was 5.291, divided among 735 issues between January 2008 and April 2018. In order to classify the obtained articles as accurate as possible, 24 categories were set, as showed in Table 1.

The authors were aware that many articles could fit in more than one category. However, each article was assigned to the category in which it fit best after reading its title, abstract and keywords. After that, the obtained data were processed using Microsoft Excel, in order to obtain thematic tendencies among the analysed journals as well as the representation of each research field into the sample during the selected period.

In the qualitative side of the used methods, a micro-discussion group among Journalism academics was conducted after the data collection. For executing this method, four researchers discussed the configuration of the analysis card as well as the categorization of each article. After the review, they were asked about the possibilities and the development of communication as a research field. The use of this tool to discuss the findings of our research will help us in our objective to establish the growing potential of some research subjects. At the same time, it constitutes a good technique for understanding the path of the decreasing themes as well as the current trends in communication research.

With the available data from these two steps of the investigation, an interpretative analysis was conducted. The identification of the key elements from the obtained data was followed by a reasoning aimed at setting conclusions around the present and future of communication research. Hence, an analytical study based on empirical data as well as a bibliographical review of academic text related with the investigation on communication, citations analysis, and bibliometric studies was conducted in order to understand the recent development of this area to foresee the future of communication research.

After establishing the methodology for the study, three research questions were set:

- RQ1: Which are the publishing patterns of academic communication journals?
- RQ2: Which are the main issues addressed in recent research in communication?
- RQ3: What is the development of the addressed issues during the period of analysis?
- RQ4: Is there any particular thematic specialisation across the different journals?

These questions conducted our analysis in order to discover the main characteristics of recent research in communication. In the next section, results of this work will be shown for its subsequent discussion and the establishing of conclusions related with the matter of study.

4. Results

As told before, this study is the result of a Systematic Literature Review of 735 issues of thirteen high ranked in the top-ten positions of the two main citation indexes: Journal Citation Reports (JCR) and Scimago Journal & Country Rank (SJR). In this section, thanks to the obtained data, we will answer our three research questions in order to be able to demarcate the main tendencies of communication research during the past ten years.

4.1. Publishing patterns of academic communication journals

In the first stage of our results, we pay attention to the publishing patterns of the thirteen analysed journals. Thus, we can see how every publication has, at least, four issues per year. The following chart contains the number of issues per year published by the thirteen main communication journals:

Table 2. Number of issues per year

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	*2018
New Media & Society	6	8	8	8	8	8	8	11	11	12	3
Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	6	6	6	0
Journal of Communication	4	4	4	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	0
Media Psychology	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	2
Communication Research	6	6	6	6	6	6	8	8	8	8	3
Journal of Advertising	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	1
Communication Theory	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	0
Information, Communication and Society	8	8	8	8	9	10	10	12	12	12	7
Public Understanding of Science	4	6	6	6	8	8	8	8	8	8	3
Political Communication	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	2
Research on Language and Social Interaction	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	1
International Journal of Press/Politics	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	1
Public Opinion Quarterly	5	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	1

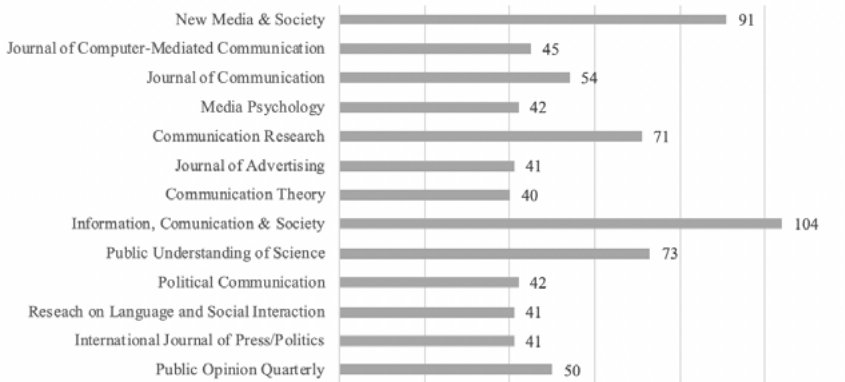
*2018's results were collected until April only.

Source: created by authors

As Table 2 shows, seven journals maintained their publishing patterns during the period of analysis. They were *Media Psychology*, *Journal of Advertising*, *Communication Theory*, *Political Communication*, *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, *International Journal of Press/Politics*, and *Public Opinion Quarterly*. Journals which maintained their tendency during these ten years published mainly four issues per year, with the exception of *Public Opinion Quarterly* with five issues per year.

On the other side, we can see that six journals increased their production to a greater or lesser extent. They are *New Media & Society*, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *Journal of Communication*, *Communication Research*, *Information, Communication & Society*, and *Public Understanding of Science*. Thus, journals such as *New Media & Society* and *Information, Communication & Society* increased their production from 6 and 8 numbers per year respectively in 2008 to 12 in 2017, being the more productive outlets among the thirteen ranked in the top ten positions of Journal Citation Reports and Scimago Journal & Country Rank, as Figure 1 shows:

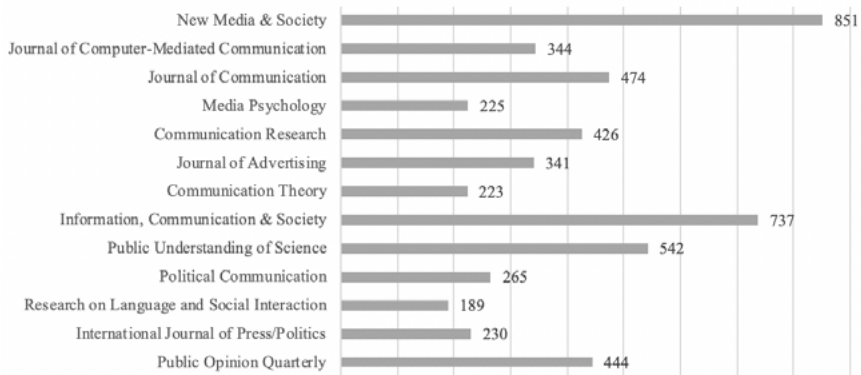
Figure 1. Issue production between January 2008 and April 2018



Source: created by authors

As far as the number of articles published by each journal in the period of analysis is concerned, we obtained very similar results. *New Media & Society* and *Information, Communication & Society* were the most prolific journals with 851 and 737 research articles published between January 2008 and April 2018, as shown in Figure 2:

Figure 2. Article production per journal between January 2008 and April 2018



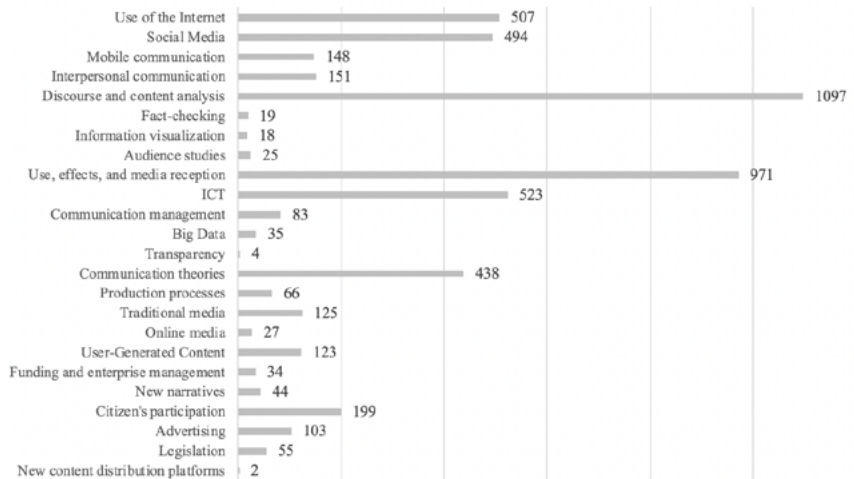
Source: created by authors

As Figure 1 and Figure 2 show, there is a correlation between the number of issues published by a journal and the final number of articles of the outlet. It is important to start this analysis displaying data around the publishing patterns of academic journals. Recently, we have attended to the explosion of new technologies, which affected publishing industry too. Nowadays, academic journals can spread their message through the Internet, without the logistic limitations provoked by the print processes a few years ago. Thus, we can see how the tendency among communication journals is to increase the number of issues and, as a consequence, the number of articles available for their audiences.

4.2. Main issues addressed in recent research in communication

The objective of this second Research Question to understand the main trends in communication research. Therefore, we pay attention to the presence of the twenty-four categories highlighted in the method section along our sample. As told before, the authors are aware that many articles could fit perfectly in more than one category and, of course, that a deeper thematic division could be displayed. However, the introduction of more topics could harm the understanding of the study by making difficult dealing with it. Figure 3 contains the results from the analysis of the thematic division of the 5,291 reviewed articles:

Figure 3. Thematic division of published articles



Source: created by authors

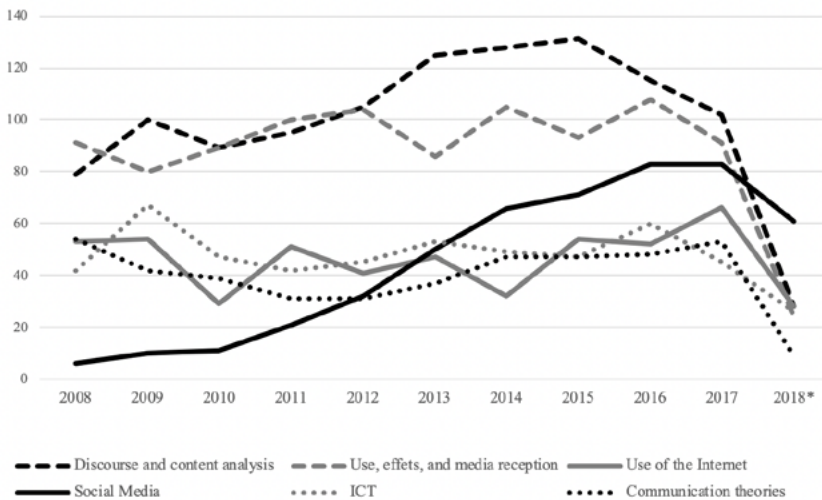
As Figure 3 shows, discourse, content and case analysis are the main types of articles among the reviewed ones —1,097—. It is followed by the analysis of the use, effects, media reception, and public opinion, with 971 matches in the sample. Articles focused on the development of new technologies such as the use of the Internet —507 examples—, Social Media —494 articles— and the influence and use of Information and Communication Technologies in communicative processes —523 examples— are part of the second step in terms of presence. Communication theories and methodologies with 438 examples in the sample is another important subject of study for communication researchers.

In contrast, we found that if we look into the thirteen high-ranked communication journals, there are issues with lower —and even residual— presence. This could be the case of studies related to growing disciplines and fields of study like Big Data, fact checking or information visualization which, in the following years, are supposed to grow exponentially in practically and theoretically. However, our study shows how these topics, as well as others with low presence, have not been deeply studied by scholars. Some explanations for this phenomenon could be the novelty of the fields of study, the specialization of the journals in some particular fields and the publication of the research related with these issues in specialized journals ranked out of the top-ten positions of the main indexes. In the next section, we will try to explain the development of some of the analysed themes by explaining its presence in academic journals in the last ten years.

4.3. Development of the addressed issues during the period of analysis

We review in this section the development of the most present topics in articles published. As noted before, the six main issues treated by the analysed journals were: discourse, content, and case analysis; use of the Internet; Information and Communication Technologies; use, effects, reception of the media and public opinion; Social Media; and communication theories. Figure 4 displays its progress during the last ten years.

Figure 4. Development of the most studied subjects



*2018's results were collected until April only.

Source: created by authors

Figure 4 shows many interesting patterns and tendencies in the last few years. Especially attractive is the case of Social Media studies. As we can see, the black line starts in a very low position, due to the publication of only six articles related with this matter in 2008. However, during the years the growth was consistent and, in 2017 —the last complete year of the analysis—, the highest ranked communication journals published 83 articles related with Social Media platforms and its characteristics and applications into communicative processes. If we look into the current year, between January and April 63 articles have been published yet. Thus, research on Social Media is supposed to increase in number at the end of 2018.

Discourse, content and case analysis studies have experimented a growth between 2012 and 2015. However, this category shows more homogeneous values than Social Media studies. Something similar occurs with texts focused on the use of the Internet; Information and Communication Technologies; communication theories; and use, effects, media reception and public opinion. Those fields of study show very homogeneous tendencies and, although it exists variation through the years, they have been highly studied consistently.

4.4. Thematic specialisation across the different journals

As noted by Borah (2017), the merge of different spaces and platforms where communication is possible turns out in the growth of academic journals related with many particular topics. This could be the case of the development and spread of the Internet, which provoked the appearance of publications like *New Media & Society*, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* as well as many special issues of existing journals (Borah, 2017). Following this idea, in this section we will try to present the most paradigmatic publishing trends. In order to reach this objective, we will show data around the most addressed topics by paying attention to the publishing patterns of the analysed outlets.

The editors of *New Media & Society* displayed the main ideas of its foundation in the first number of the publication by saying that the journal was the result of the «remarkable growth in scholarship addressing the social implications of emerging communication and information technologies» (Jankowski *et al.*, 1999). Thus, this journal was created to group together research around topics such as the development of the Internet and new information and communication technologies and how they influence communicative processes.

The idea coincides with the presence of these topics into the analysed sample of articles. As noted before, *New Media & Society* published 851 research articles between January 2008 and April 2018. Within this sample, we identified 163 articles involving the Internet —use, effects and characteristics—. Social Media, as well as its use and development have presence in 164 articles whereas there were 137 related with information and communication technologies and their implications for communicative processes. Finally, the fourth most addressed topic was mobile communication, with 76 research articles. Therefore, the four main themes have technological roots and they constitute the 63.45% of the published articles in the last ten-year period with 540 examples.

Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication shows a very similar pattern. Thus, out of its 344 research articles published during the past ten years, 70 are focused on the study of Social Media, 53 on the analysis of the Internet and 51 address the implications of Information and Communication Technologies. It constitutes more than a half of the published research —a 50.58% out of the total number of arti-

cles— concentrated in three topics. The fourth main issues are the discourse, case and content studies with 38 examples.

Journal of Communication's main topics are discourse, case and content analysis —with 117 examples out of the 474 published articles—; media use and its effects and public opinion —with 87 articles—; and communication theory —in 69 times—. Those three issues constitute the 57.59% of the published research in this journal in the last ten years. More technological subjects like Social Media and Information and Communication Technologies have 39 and 34 examples respectively, being together the 15.40% out of the total.

Media Psychology published 225 research articles between January 2008 and April 2018. Out of those, 122 were focused on the use, effects and reception of the media and public opinion —more than a half with the 54.22% out of the total—. In second, third and fourth place in terms of presence we can find research related with Information and Communication Technologies —38 examples—; Social Media and the Internet —10 examples of each category— which constitutes the 25.77% of the published research in the period of analysis.

Communication Research's most addressed topic was use, effects and media reception and public opinion with 131 examples out of the 426 published articles. It constitutes a 30.75% out of the total. The second most addressed topic was interpersonal communication with 70 examples —16.43% of the published research in this journal—. Another two important subjects tackled by *Communication Research* were discourse, content and case analysis —with 46 examples, the 10.79% of the times— and communication theories and methodologies —40 times, the 9.38% out of the total research published by this journal—.

Journal of Advertising follows a very similar pattern where use, effects and media reception and public opinion is the main subject with 130 examples out of the 341 published articles. Thus, in this particular case it is necessary to note that most of the articles are focused on the reception and effects of advertisements, not on the reception of the media in general. Discourse, content and case analysis, with 55 examples, are the second most addressed thematic with 55 examples, and advertising —in this case generalities about advertising— is the third subject with major amount of publisher research in this journal —52 articles, 15.24% out of the total—.

Communication Theory, just as its name shows, is mainly coped by research about communication theories. Thus, we have found 122 articles related with this subject out of the 223 published by this journal —54.70%—. The second most addressed issues are discourse, content and case analysis, with a presence of 33 articles —14.79% out of the total—.

Information Communication & Society follows the same pattern as *New Media & Society* and *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, where studies on new technologies are the most important concerns. Thus, 171 examples of research articles related with Information and Communication Technologies were found

—23.20% out of the 737 articles published by this journal during the period of analysis—. Social Media is the second most addressed category with 167 examples —22.65%— and there were 59 articles related with the Internet, its uses and its effects —8% of the whole research of *Information, Communication & Society*—.

In *Public Understanding of Science*, 213 out of the 542 published research articles are focused on discourse, content and case analysis —39.29%—, whereas 172 tackle the use, effects and reception of the media —31.73% out of the total—. The third most addressed subject is citizen's participation and mobilization with 47 examples, an 8.67% of the research published by this journal between 2008 and 2018.

Political Communication follows a very similar pattern. The main subject is discourse, content and case analysis —with 77 examples out of the 265 articles published by the journal, a percentage of the 29.05%—. The second most addressed category is use, effects and reception of the media and public opinion with 58 examples —a 21.88% out of the total—. In third place, we can find 29 studies related with communication theories, a 10.94%. In this case, we have to highlight the low presence of articles related with new technologies and the influence of technology in communicative processes. Thus, *Political Communication* opts for a more analytic and theoretical research in contrast with some of the reviewed journals.

Something similar occurs with *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, where discourse, content and case analysis are the main issues of this particular outlet with 151 examples out of the 189 published by the journal during the period of analysis. It constitutes the 79.89% of the total of articles of this publication and it is the highest presence of a single category in the conducted analysis. In second term, interpersonal communication appears in the 8.46% of the published research, with 16 examples of articles related with this area. The rest of the subjects have a residual role, with a very low presence.

International Journal of Press/Politics follows the main tendency observed in this section, the high presence of studies based on discourse, content and case analysis. It happens in 49 times, the 21.30% out of the 230 articles published by this journal in the last ten years period. Use, effects and reception of the media and public opinion is the second most addressed category with 42 examples —the 18.26%—. Studies related with the analysis of traditional media —traditional radio and television broadcast or print newspapers— are the third option, with 34 examples —the 14.78% out of the total research published by International Journal of Press/Politics.

Lastly, *Public Opinion Quarterly* follows the same tendency noted before with journals like *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *Political Communication* or *Public Understanding of Science*. It predominates the presence of research based on discourse, content and case analysis with a presence of 204 articles out of the 444 published by the journal between 2008 and 2018, a 45.94%. The second most addressed thematic is the use, effects and reception of the media and public opinion with 139

examples, a 31.30% out of the total. Thus, these two categories gather more than three quarters of the whole research of this journal with the 77.25% of the total.

5. Discussion and conclusions

Gathered data from the 5,291 reviewed articles shows some interesting patterns in the development of the high-ranked communication journals in the last ten years. Thus, if we look into their publishing frequency, we can see how six of the thirteen analysed journals augmented the number of published issues per year. As a result, more research articles are now available and this number is even bigger and more accessible due to the ease of online publishing. Because of this rise in the productivity of the main communication journals, many of them have increased the number of published articles.

When it comes to topics in publication patterns, results evidence a high presence of studies based on discourse, content and case analysis, being more than a fifth of the total amount of analysed research. Investigations around the use, effects and reception of the media and public opinion is the second most addressed category with 971 articles out of the 5,291 of the sample. Information and Communication Technologies is the third most studied subject with 523 articles, with similar numbers than research related with the Internet —507 articles— and Social Media —494 examples—.

If we pay attention to the development cycle of the most studied subjects, we can see how many of them have a constant presence in academic journals during the last ten years. This could be the case of research related with the Internet, communication theories and the use, effects and reception of the media. In contrast, research related with Social Media platforms and its implications for communicative processes has experimented a significant growth since 2008. Thus, as shown in Figure 4, research related with this topic has experimented a constant growth year after year since the appearance of Social Networking Sites.

Finally, three tendencies have been identified relating the presence of topics in the analysed journals. As noted before, there are emergent journals where the most addressed subjects are related with new technologies. This is the case of *New Media & Society*, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, and *Information, Communication and Society*. The second trend is the particular case of *Communication Theory*, with a theoretical approach, which publishes articles focused on communication theories and discourse analysis. Finally, the most common thematic approach is the main presence of research based on discourse, case and content analysis, as well as the analysis of the use, effects and reception of the media. Nine of the thirteen analysed journals to a greater or lesser extent shares this tendency: *Journal of Communication*, *Media Psychology*, *Communication Research*, *Journal of Advertising*, *Public Understanding of Science*, *Political Communication*, *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, *International Journal of Press/Politics*, and *Public Opinion Quarterly*.

Regarding to the limitations of the conducted study, as noted in the method section, the authors were aware that many of the reviewed articles could fit in more than one single category. However, they were assigned to the category in which they fitted better. This study is based only in thirteen journals, those located in the top-ten of the two main citation indexes Journal of Citation Reports (JCR) and Scimago Journal & Country Rank (SJR). It is a little sample among all the academic publications in the field of communication, but it is a good example of the current trends in the study of this field.

Finally, there is room for further research related with publication patterns in communication journals as well as the presence and development of different subjects over the years. It could be interesting to assess research related with topics such as information verification, Information and Communication Technologies, and mobile communication. Those fields, as well as others like Social Media and the Internet, have an interesting future within the context of academic research.

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