
Manuel Martínez-Nicolás

manuel.martinez.nicolas@urjc.es
Full Time Professor. Group of
Advanced Studies in
Communication (GEAC). School
of Communication Sciences,
Rey Juan Carlos University,
Spain.

Enric Saperas

enric.saperas@urjc.es
Full Chaired Professor. Group of
Advanced Studies in
Communication (GEAC). School
of Communication Sciences,
Rey Juan Carlos University,
Spain.

Ángel Carrasco-Campos

angel.carrasco.campos@soc.uva.es
Assistant Professor. Group of
Advanced Studies in
Communication (GEAC).
Department of Sociology and
Social Work, University of
Valladolid, Spain.

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Journalism research in Spain. Analysis of research articles published in Spanish journals over the past 25 years (1990-2014)

Abstract

This paper analyses the evolution of journalism research in Spain during the past 25 years, in terms of objects of study, research modalities and methodological approaches. A content analysis was designed and applied to a sample of 461 articles published by five renowned Spanish journals in communication research (*Anàlisi, Comunicació y Sociedad, Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico, Revista Latina de Comunicación Social and Zer*). Findings highlight the focus of journalism research on daily press studies and on the analysis of news content, and also a progressive decreasing interest on the institutional dimensions (journalists, companies, markets, sectoral policies, etc.) and social dimensions (audiences, reception processes, effects and influence, etc.) of journalism. Regarding research modalities, theoretical studies significantly decrease over the period of analysis, until their virtual absence in the last decade. In contrast, empirical research increases, especially in terms of quantitative studies, and evidences some methodological sophistication. The analysis of the results explain this trend in relation to the changes experimented by the academic and research system in Spanish communication studies since 2008, because of the implementation of the *Academia* programme for the university teaching habilitation by ANECA. This seems to be directing journalism research towards objects and methods that ensure a high curricular profitability.

Keywords

Journalism research, journalism studies, Spain, journals, objects of study, research methods.

1. Introduction¹

Spanish communication research has experienced an accelerated process of consolidation, probably driven by the impact of the institutional changes that have affected the operation of this disciplinary field during the last twenty-five years. The context in which this field began to develop in the early 1970s, linked to the founding of the first faculties of Communication Sciences, was radically altered during the 1990s with the multiplication of universities that offered degrees in communication (Jones, 1998; Moragas, 2005). This led to an exponential growth in the volume of scientific production (Fernández-Quijada & Masip, 2013; Piñeiro, 2016) and the internal diversity of the academic community (Martínez-Nicolás, 2006 and 2008). The second institutional milestone that had a decisive influence on the general orientation of Spanish communication research was the creation, in 2003, of ANECA, the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain (Soriano, 2008) and, above all, its implementation of the *Academia* teaching accreditation programme in 2008, which attributed a preferential curricular value for professional promotion to research, and particularly to research published in journals (Saperas, 2016).

Thus, the Spanish scientific system adopted an international criterion that was progressively imposed since the 1990s in the social sciences, in which journals became central institutions in the promotion of disciplinary debates, in the establishment of common standards for research and in the public projection and reputation of researchers. In this context, the most relevant international journals, based on their impact factor, strove to create a research paradigm with hegemonic vocation (Carrasco-Campos & Saperas, 2014 and 2016; Saperas & Carrasco-Campos, 2015), which was also adopted by Spanish journals and researchers in the field of communication (Masip, 2011; De Filippo, 2013; Escribà & Cortiñas, 2013; Fernández-Quijada, Masip & Bergillos, 2013; Martínez-Nicolás, 2014).

The analysis of the scientific production disseminated in journals constitutes, therefore, a line of work especially adequate to observe the dominant trends in a particular field, evaluate the results and propose new ways to improve deficient areas. The international take off and homologation of Spanish communication research over the last decade would explain the recent interest in this type of work (Castillo & Carretón, 2010; Fernández-Quijada, 2011; López-Rabadán & Vicente-Mariño, 2011; Martínez-Nicolás & Saperas, 2011; Piñuel, Lozano & García-Jiménez, 2011; Fernández-Quijada & Masip, 2013, among others). However, these studies generally have two deficiencies. First, the preference for little significant sampling designs, in terms of the number and diversity of the journals studied (in some cases, only one journal) and, above all, the periods of analysis (in some cases, only one or two years). Second, the type of the variables considered, usually linked to descriptive basic aspects (number of authors, institutional affiliation, number of cited texts, etc.), neglecting broader epistemological questions: knowledge interests (objects of study), research modalities (theoretical, empirical), methodological approaches (quantitative, qualitative) and data collection techniques (survey, focus group, etc.), which are certainly more valuable elements to evaluate research and guide the scientific work.

Along with general analyses, in recent years these type of studies have also focused on specific areas of knowledge (e.g., Piñeiro, 2016, on radio; Casado del Río & Fernández-Quijada, 2015, on communication policies; Marí-Sáez & Ceballos, 2015, on communication

¹This work is part of the research project entitled “25 years of communication research in Spain (1990–2015): scientific production, academic community and institutional context”, funded by the National Plan for Scientific and Technological Research and Innovation for 2013–2016 (CSO2013-40684-P, <http://www.incomes-25.es>). Rebeca Martínez Fernández, a research fellow attached to the project, participated in the coding of the articles published in 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014.

for development and social change; Baladrón, Correyero & Machado, 2014, on advertising; Míguez, Baamonde & Corbacho, 2014, on public relations; Zugasti, 2013, on the history of communication; Repiso, Torres & Delgado, 2011a and 2011b, on television and radio, respectively). Paradoxically, there is a lack of similar studies on one of the most active and characteristic areas of Spanish communication research, journalism, which, according to the data provided by this work, is the subject of almost half of the scientific production published by most relevant Spanish journals in the last twenty-five years.

2. Objectives and method

This work examines the main trends in the evolution of journalism research in Spain over the last 25 years (1990–2014) based on the content analysis of articles published in major Spanish communication journals, with the following objectives:

1. Observe the evolution of the position of journalism as the object of study in communication research in Spain.
2. Describe the evolution of the knowledge interests of the scientific community in relation to journalism, identifying (a) journalistic fields (journalism in press, radio, television, etc.); and (b) the elements of the communication process (journalists, companies, contents, audiences, effects, etc.) that are addressed in the study of journalism.
3. Describe the evolution of the modalities of journalism research, according to (a) type of research (theoretical, methodological, or empirical); (b) the research approach of empirical studies (quantitative, qualitative, etc.); and (c) research techniques (content analysis, survey, focus group, etc.).

2.1. Sample and units of analysis

To achieve these objectives, we selected five specialised journals published in Spain that occupy high positions in bibliometric index in general and in those built according to the prestige of communication journals among experts: *Anàlisi* (Autonomous University of Barcelona), *Comunicación y Sociedad* (University of Navarre), *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico* (Complutense University of Madrid), *Ξer* (University of the Basque Country) and *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social* (University of La Laguna). Four of them (*Comunicación y Sociedad*, *Ξer*, *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico* and *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social*) occupy the top four positions in the 1994–2009 cumulative impact index of In-RECS (the Impact Factor Index of the Spanish Journals of Communication) of the University of Granada (<http://ec3.ugr.es/in-recs/acumulados/Comunicacion-5.htm>), and also in the 2005–2009 cumulative impact index of RESH (the Impact Factor Index of the Spanish Journals on Social Sciences and Humanities) of the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC: <http://epuc.cchs.csic.es/resh/indicadores>, Communication). Four of the selected journals (*Ξer*, *Comunicación y Sociedad*, *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social* and *Anàlisi*) are included in the top five positions of the 2009 index developed by RESH, according to the prestige of journals among experts. The analysis does not cover, therefore, the totality of the Spanish scientific production concerning journalism published during the period considered, however, the results can be considered qualitatively representative of the general trends in research of the highest quality and greatest influence in the area, given the referential character of the journals selected according to the indicators of bibliometric impact and prestige among researchers.

The sample design was conditioned by two factors. First, only two of these journals have been edited continuously during the period of analysis (*Anàlisi* and *Comunicación y Sociedad*). Second, the selection considered the fact that the consolidation of any scientific journal requires time to tune its editorial criteria, and the representativeness of the

published works. In accordance with these factors, we used a stratified sampling design based on two criteria:

- (a) The progressive incorporation of journals for the construction of the corpus of analysis, taking the decade as the significant time unit. Thus, the initial decade (1990–1999) only included works published by *Anàlisi* and *Comunicación y Sociedad*. The works published in *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico* and *Zer* were added in the second decade (2000–2009), and *Revista Latina de Comunicación Social* was added in the third period, which only covers five years (2010–2014). This successive expansion of the sample of journals also allowed to attend the progressive increase in the volume of published works on communication in Spain during the period of analysis.
- (b) The 25 years covered in the analysis were divided into five five-year periods, and then three years were selected in each of these periods by following a systematic chronological approach, which consisted of including the initial year and the two intermediate years. The use of this criterion throughout the period of analysis ensured the proportionality and homogeneity of the sample for each of the five-year periods. This systematic chronological criterion for the selection of the sample units (the analysed years of each of the selected journals) was altered only in the last five-year period, where alternate years were included to bring the results as close as possible to the present time.

Following this procedure, the sample included 15 of the 25 years covered in the period under analysis (60% of those years) and a corpus of 1,086 articles (table 1), out of a total of 1,841 articles published by these journals in the period studied, which involves a margin of error of 1.9% at a 95% confidence level. Of the 1,086 articles, 933 were written by authors affiliated to Spanish universities and centres, and 461 (49.4%) of them had journalism as the generic object of study. Each of these articles constituted a unit of analysis from which data was extracted through a coding sheet. For the constitution of this corpus of 461 units of analysis, we included all those works that addressed issues related to the journalistic practice or information in any type of medium (daily and non-daily press, radio, television, news agencies), journalistic modality (print, radio, television, photography, comics journalism) or environment (conventional or digital).

Table 1. Sample subjected to content analysis

Year		<i>Anàlisi</i>	<i>Comunicación y Sociedad</i>	<i>Estudios Mensaje Periodístico</i>	<i>Zer</i>	<i>Revista Latina</i>	Articles per year
1990	Volume	13	3 (1-2)	---	---	---	23
	Articles	13	10				
1992	Volume	14	5 (1-2)	---	---	---	21
	Articles	14	7				
1993	Volume	15	6 (1-2)	---	---	---	40
	Articles	14	26				
1995	Volume	18	8 (1-2)	---	---	---	20
	Articles	5	15				
1997	Volume	20 & 21	10 (1-2)	---	---	---	38
	Articles	23	15				
1998	Volume	22	11 (1-2)	---	---	---	20
	Articles	7	13				
2000	Volume	24 & 25	13 (1-2)	6	8 & 9	---	75
	Articles	15	14	19	27		
2002	Volume	28 & 29	15 (1-2)	8	12 & 13	---	75
	Articles	20	11	23	21		
2003	Volume	30	16 (1-2)	9	14 & 15	---	65
	Articles	12	11	20	22		
2005	Volume	32	18 (1-2)	11	18 & 19	---	66
	Articles	10	10	26	20		
2007	Volume	35	20 (1-2)	13	22 & 23	---	87
	Articles	12	12	30	33		
2008	Volume	36 & 37	21 (1-2)	14	24 & 25	---	102
	Articles	24	12	35	31		
2010	Volume	40	23 (1-2)	16	28 & 29	65	127
	Articles	10	23	26	25	43	
2012	Volume	45, 46 & 47	25 (1-2)	18 (1-2)	32 & 33	67	149
	Articles	17	30	56	24	22	
2014	Volume	50	27 (1-4)	20 (1-2)	36 & 37	69	178
	Articles	9	39	73	24	33	
Articles per journal		205	248	308	227	98	1,086

2.2. Coding criteria

A coding sheet was developed with 36 variables related to different elements of the published articles. This article addresses five of these variables, related to the knowledge interests of researchers in relation to journalism, and the research modalities of the scientific production in this field. Data was obtained in accordance with the following coding criteria:

Knowledge interests. This dimension, related to the objects of study, was observed through two variables:

- (a) The journalistic field addressed in the articles analysed, distinguishing 13 mutually excluding categories (journalism in the press, in television, in radio, in agencies, in digital media, photojournalism, infographic journalism, etc.), which allow for the identification of the type of journalism or journalistic product that constitutes the focus of the research.

- (b) The specific object of study, which identifies the elements of the communication process addressed in each work, distinguishing the following non-mutually exclusive categories: journalists; companies and institutions; contents; technologies; audiences and reception; effects and influence; teaching; and research. This variable captures the difference in terms of the knowledge interests between, for example, three studies on “television journalism” focused, one, on the analysis of journalistic routines (coded in the “professional” category); the second, on infotainment (coded in the “content” category); and the third, on the audiences of news programs (coded in the “public, audiences and reception” category).

Modalities of research. This dimension was examined through the observation of three variables, as follows:

- (a) The type of research about journalism that is published, distinguishing mutually exclusive categories of theoretical research (literature reviews, discussion of theories, concepts, etc.), methodological research (research methods, techniques, designs or procedures) and empirical research (focused on the study of some phenomenal reality related to journalism: contents, journalists, companies, legislation, teaching, etc.).
- (b) The methodological orientation of empirical studies, for which five mutually exclusive categories were established to distinguish between quantitative, qualitative, mixed research (both quantitative and qualitative), research supported by documentary sources and empirical research without systematic or standardised techniques. The category “research supported by documentary sources” includes those works based on the analysis of documents taken from archives or political, legislative and legal doctrinal bodies, etc. (for example, studies on the history of journalism or the structure of the newspaper market and public policies in this sector). The category “empirical research without systematic techniques” involved methodologically deficient empirical works, resulting from research malpractice.
- (c) The research techniques used in empirical works that resort to systematic or standardised methodological procedures, which are distinguished into 11 categories that cover virtually all of these techniques (content analysis, survey, focus groups, in-depth interviews, research on secondary data, biographical methods, etc.).

2.3. Coding and reliability

The corpus of analysis was distributed between two researchers who were previously trained in coding criteria, using 10% of the sample. Subsequently, a test of reliability was conducted over another 10% of the sample, in which the obtained Scott's pi was 0.71 for the whole of the coded variables. Although this was an optimal value, we decided to carry out a double independent encoding of all the articles, discussing the discrepancies on a case-by-case basis until an agreement was reached among coders. For this reason, and based on the methodological requirements of the quantitative content analysis, the results of this work should be considered to be highly reliable.

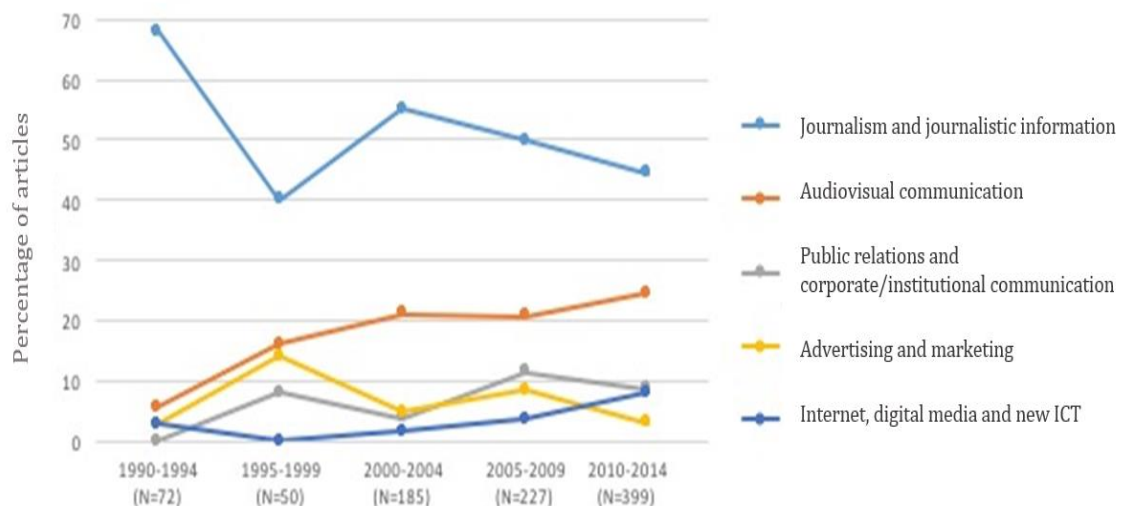
3. Results

3.1. Journalism in Spanish communication research

Journalism is the media and professional communication-related field most widely examined by Spanish researchers in the last twenty-five years. Almost half (49.4%) of the papers published in this period by the selected sample of journals address topics related to this media field. This percentage is more than two times greater than the second most-

addressed topic, audio-visual communication (21.0%), and this is significantly higher than other apparently consolidated fields, such as public relations and corporate communication (7.6%) and advertising and marketing (5.2%). Spanish communication research seems to be, as a result, a research focused very largely on the study of journalism and journalistic information.

Figure 1. Evolution of media and professional fields as objects of study in communication research in Spain



However, if we look at the evolution of these different objects (Figure 1) we observe a significant decrease in journalism studies in the whole of the Spanish communication research since the start of 2000, and a progressive consolidation of the interest in other media-professional areas. This is especially noticeable in the case of audio-visual communication and, to a lesser extent, but also relevant, in public relations and corporate communication, and in advertising and marketing. At the beginning of the first five-year period considered (1990–1994), seven of every ten works published in the analysed journals addressed aspects related to journalism, but in the final five-year period (2010–2014) this proportion decreased to only little more than four out of every ten works, while the works relating to audio-visual communication reached almost 25% of all the works published in the sample of journals. In this last period, studies on the Internet and digital media not related to the journalistic field also proliferated (8% of the works), reaching the same level of scholarly attention as research on public relations (8.5%), and far above works on advertising (3.1%). In short, and recognising its pre-eminence over the last twenty-five years, data suggests that journalism studies are losing the overwhelming dominant position they had in the first half of the 1990s. Further, that Spanish communication research has since then began a period of relative normality that suggests more diversified knowledge interests, and a gradually-specialised scientific community.

3.2. Journalistic fields of interest for research

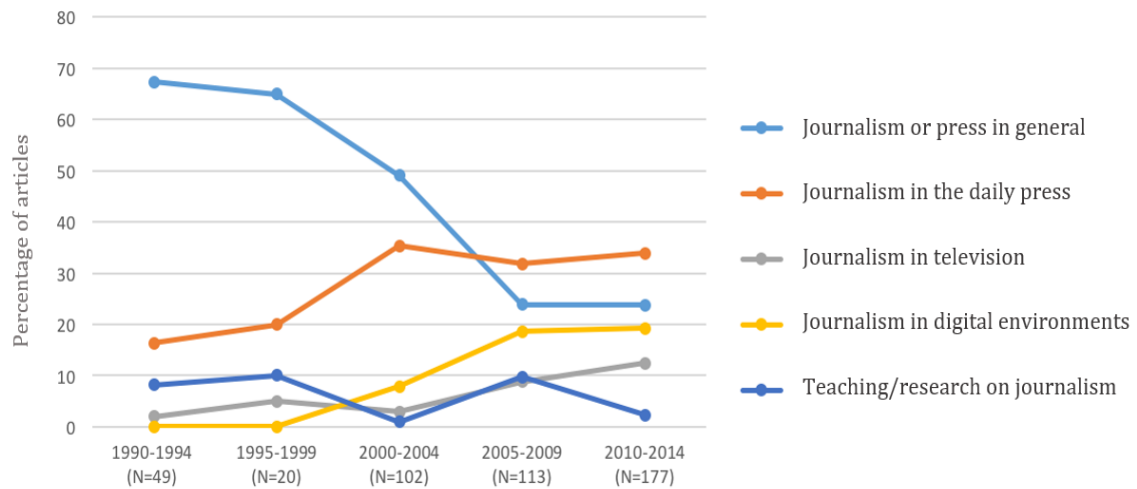
Journalism is an activity performed in different media-professional fields (press, radio, television, digital environments, etc.), whose differential capacity to attract academic interest reveals the thematic structure of the journalistic research carried out in a given period of time and the demands of knowledge addressed by the scientific community. Table

2 presents the results of this variable, where the most relevant distinction is the one generated grouping the works on journalism and journalistic information in conventional media or in the digital environment. Data indicates that Spanish research focuses mainly (almost half of the works) on the analysis of journalism practiced in conventional media, which is an expected result given the breadth of the analysed period (1990-2014), half of which is previous to the impact of the digital revolution in this field.

Table 2. Journalistic fields as objects of study (1990-2014)

		Articles (N=461)	Percentage
<i>Journalism in conventional media</i>	Journalism in the daily press	144	31.2
	Journalism in television	37	8.0
	Journalism in non-daily publications	15	3.3
	Journalism in radio	8	1.7
	Photojournalism	4	0.9
	Journalism in news agencies	2	0.4
	Comics journalism	1	0.2
	Journalism in conventional media	211	45.8
<i>Journalism or the press (in general)</i>	Journalism (in general)	148	32.1
	Press (in general)	17	3.7
	Journalism or the press in general	165	35.8
<i>Journalism in digital environments</i>	Journalism in digital media	46	10.0
	Journalism in social networks	8	1.7
	Infographic journalism	5	1.1
	Citizen journalism	4	0.9
	Journalism in digital environments	63	13.7
	Teaching/research on journalism	22	4.8

Even more interesting is to verify the existing imbalance in the academic attention paid to the different journalistic fields in conventional media, where most of the research focuses on journalism and journalistic information in the daily press (nearly one third of all published works, and about 70% of all the works on conventional media), significantly more than studies on journalism in television and radio. The little importance granted to audio-visual/broadcast journalism becomes even more significant when compared with the importance given to journalism in digital media, an object that since its breakthrough at the beginning of 2000 (Figure 2) has attracted as much research attention (10% of all published articles) as journalism in television and radio, together, in the past twenty-five years. In order to definitively measure this imbalance, it should be noted that the number of works published on an area as recent as journalism in social networks (1.7%) is as large as the number of works on radio journalism that have been published in the last twenty-five years.

Figure 2. Evolution of journalistic fields as objects of study

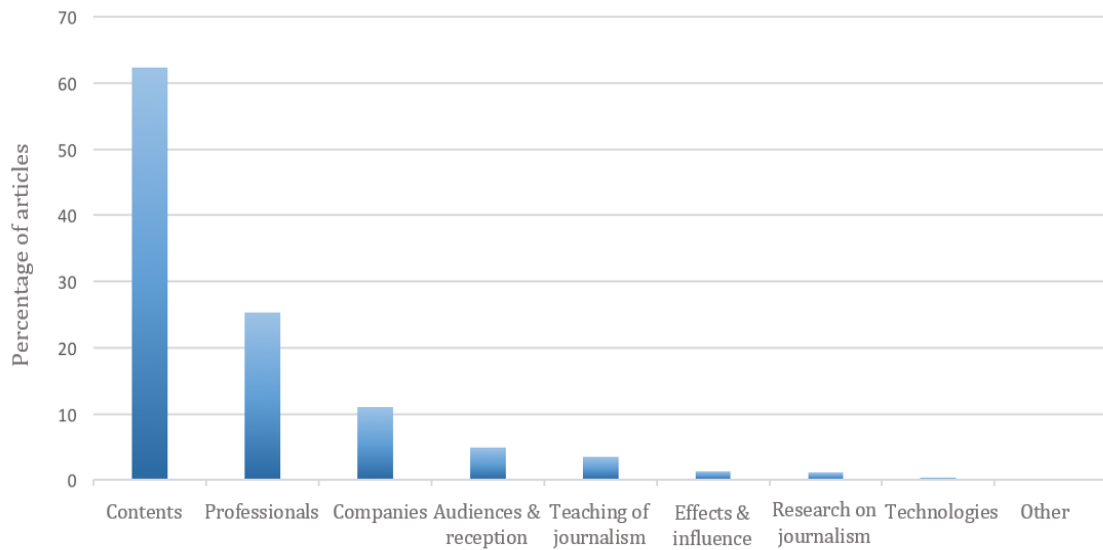
On the other hand, the evolution of the interest in these different journalistic objects (Figure 2) reveals some trends that would indicate a progressive maturation of this field. Significantly, the number of works that address journalism in general (usually generic reflections on the news media or the journalistic profession), which represent nearly seven of every ten articles published during the initial five-year period (1990–1994), is becoming smaller to make way for a more thematic specialisation, that places the study of journalism in the daily press on the dominant position it occupies since the beginning of the 2000s (around 35% of the articles published since 2000).

It should be noted, moreover, that this is not an isolated behaviour, but one that also affects the growing interest in television journalism and digital journalism. Thus, in the 2005–2009 period only two of every ten published works dealt with journalism in general, and six of every ten address specific aspects of the exercise of journalism in press, television or digital media. Therefore, this would be an intentional choice of the scientific community towards a progressive specialisation, which is a clear indication of the maturation of the discipline in the last 15 years. Additionally, which would be accompanied by the cyclical interest in reflecting on the teaching of journalism driven by the adaptation of these studies to the European Higher Education Area in the mid-2000s.

3.3. Specific objects of study in journalism research

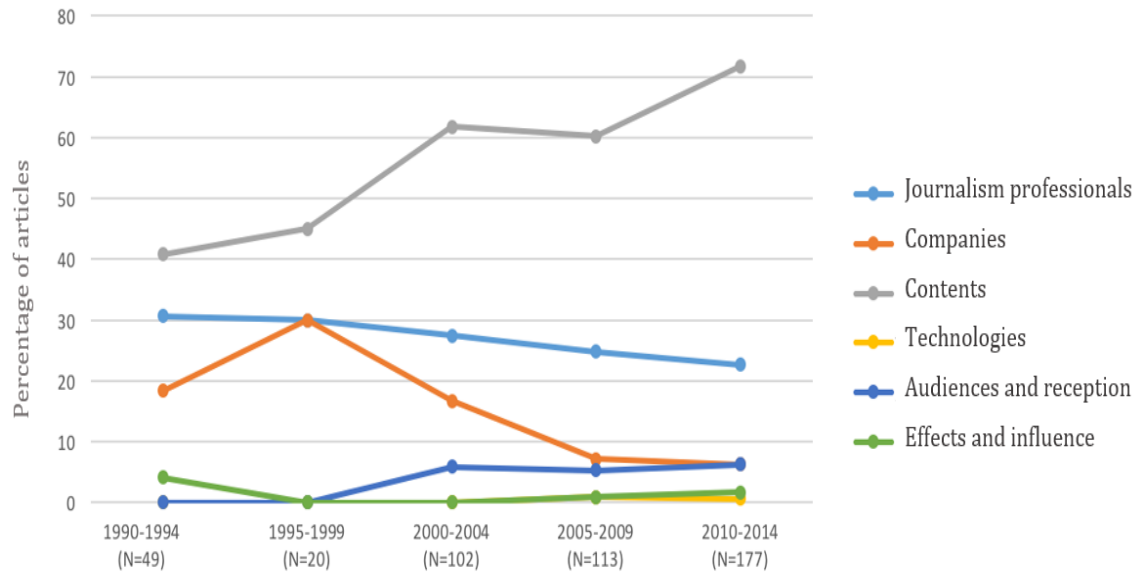
The analysis of the knowledge interests was complemented by observing the *specific objects of study*; i.e., the elements or aspects of the communication process (communicators, contents, audiences, etc.) that are addressed by researchers. The behaviour of this variable (Figure 3) reveals an overwhelming predominance of works about journalistic contents, and specifically news discourses, which are addressed by two of every three studies on journalism published in the sample of journals. Together with the results obtained on the media-professional fields, it can be argued that typical or predominant profile of the Spanish research on journalism throughout the past 25 years is a work that analyses the news discourse (treatment, representation, coverage, etc.) of the daily press on any social referent (population groups, such as youth, immigrants, marginalised groups; situations, such as health crises, conflicts, elections; fields, such as politics, economy, justice; and phenomena, such as gender violence, climate change, etc.).

Figure 3. Specific objects of study (1990-2014)



The interest in the discursive dimension (contents) of journalism can be contrasted with the relative neglect of its institutional dimensions (journalists and companies) and social dimensions (audiences, reception, effects and influence, etc.). Although the former forms a core of solid interest whose problems are dealt with in more than a third of the published works (36.5%), especially those relating to the journalistic profession (practice and production routines, job profiles, education, ethical and deontological issues, professional associations, etc.). The analysis of the social dimension is, on the other hand, practically absent from the agenda of Spanish researchers, thus, studies on audiences or reception of information (5.0% of the works) and, more significantly, on the effects and social influence of journalism (1.3% in 25 years) are scarce or virtually non-existent.

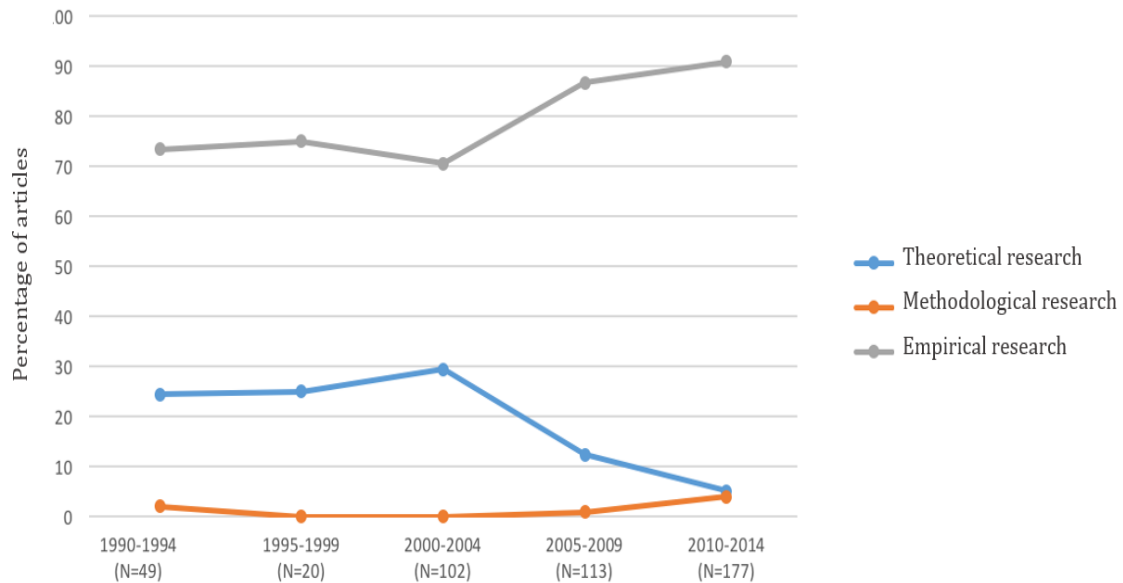
Figure 4. Evolution of the specific objects of study



If we look at the evolution of this variable (Figure 4), the results indicate that, far from moderate, the inclination towards the study of contents has become consolidated in Spanish journalistic research to the point of reaching in the final stage (2010–2014) more than 70% of the published works. In fact, during the analysed period there seems to have been a very significant change in the structure of the knowledge interests of the scientific community. At the beginning of the period under analysis (the 1990–1994 five-year period), four of every ten works focused on aspects related to contents, but five of every ten addressed the professional or business fields. This situation has been radically subverted in the final period (2010–2014), where seven of every ten works studied journalistic contents, and only three of every ten addressed these other areas. The institutional dimension of journalism is, therefore, an object of study in recession in the Spanish research.

3.4. Research modalities in journalism studies

The Spanish research on journalism published in the past 25 years in the selected journals has been dominated by empirical works, which represent 82.8% of all the analysed articles, way above theoretical works (heuristic approaches, concepts, theories, etc.) and methodological works (research methods, techniques, procedures, etc.), which represent 12.2% and 1.9%, respectively. Researchers in journalism constitute, therefore, a scientific community occupied preferentially with the study of the “journalistic reality” and not so much with the conceptual and methodological construction of the field. Although with a marked tendency, as we have seen, to analyse “contents”, neglecting other aspects of that reality.

Figure 5. Evolution of the research modalities

During these 25 years (Figure 5), empirical research has been acquiring a hegemonic position, and in the last decade it has reached very high volumes (86.7% in the 2005-2009 period and 91.0% in the 2010-2014 period), which makes it virtually the only form of scientific work on journalism in Spain, which subsequently contrasts significantly with what happened in the three previous five-year periods. In the initial five-year period (1990-1994), theoretical research represented one fourth of the works published, and rising to almost 30% in the 2000-2004 period to start since the mid-2000s an unstoppable decline to 5.1% in the final five-year period. Nine out of ten of the recently published papers are empirical and only one is devoted exclusively to discuss conceptual or methodological tools for the scientific study of journalism.

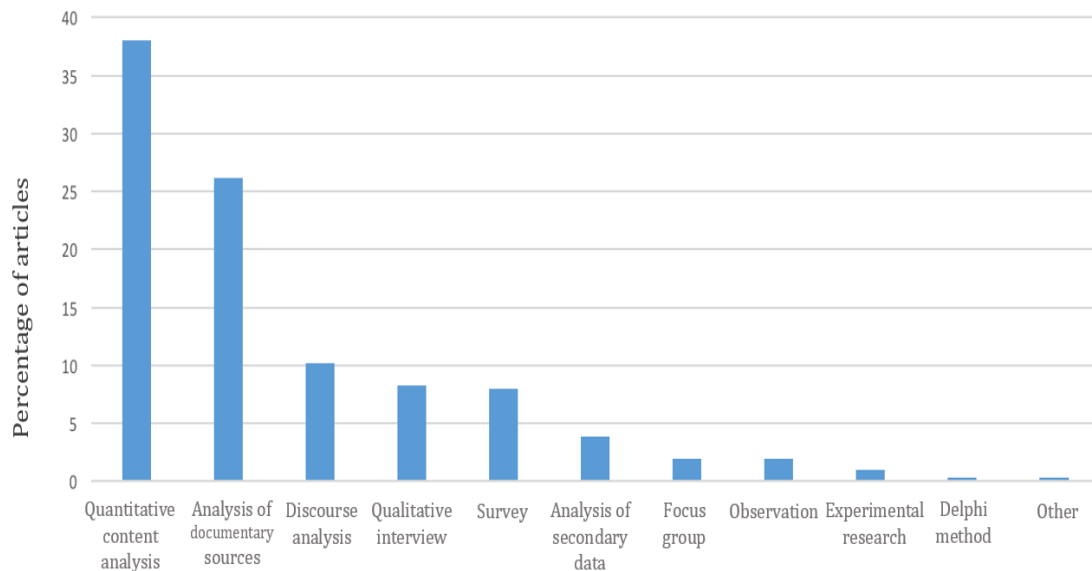
However, perhaps the most significant finding regarding this increase in empirical research is that it has been accompanied by the substantial methodological improvement of the published works. To assess this aspect, we divided the empirical research articles into two categories, according to the use or not, of systematic techniques (content analysis, survey, focus groups, etc.), understanding that the use of such procedures that have been standardised by the methodological literature, regardless of the rigour of their application, are an indication of the quality of the research. The results indicate a strong change in trend over the last decade in relation to the situation observed in the previous 15 years.

Until the mid-2000s, almost half of the empirical works on journalism that were published in the sample of journals analysed were methodologically deficient. In other words, they dealt with objects related to the “journalistic reality” (study of news contents, matters relating to journalists or companies, etc.), but their proposed analyses are not based on empirical data obtained through proven scientific techniques (quantitative or qualitative), and, therefore, they are closer to the commentary, reflection or intuitive description than to the rigour that is expected from scientific research. Such types of works represent almost one-third (30.1%) of the empirical research on journalism published in the last twenty-five years by the analysed journals, and about half (44.7%) of the works registered in the 1990-2004 period. In the last ten years, empirical studies have not only experienced a dramatic increase, but have also gained methodological soundness, reaching

over 80% in the most recent stage (2010–2014). Although currently about 20% of the articles still suffer from basic methodological deficiencies.

With regards to methodologically-sound empirical research works, they are quantitative studies in more than half of the cases (53.4%), well above qualitative studies (15.3%) and mixed studies (10.0%), although those with empirical support of documentary sources (historical archives, laws, political or business reports, codes of ethics, etc.) not treated with quantitative techniques (content analysis) or qualitative procedures (discourse analysis) add up to about 30%. The results regarding the empirical techniques used (Figure 6) allow us to complete the typical profile of the Spanish journalistic research, in which almost more than a third of the published works are quantitative content analyses carried out, preferably, on daily newspapers. The study of contents is, in fact, the predominant object, but they are analysed almost exclusively with this quantitative technique, while only 10% of the articles use a form of qualitative discourse analysis (textual, narratological, argumentative, linguistic, rhetoric, etc.).

Figure 6. Empirical research techniques



The aggregation of all those works whose empirical foundation is data extracted from documents, regardless of the techniques and approaches used in the collection and analysis, confirms the strictly documentary character of the research on journalism in Spain. Around 90% of the empirical works published over the last 25 years by the analysed journals respond to this profile, and only around 25% rely on data obtained from live sources, primarily through survey and in-depth interviews. Techniques such as focus groups, ethnographic observations and experimental designs have virtually disappeared in a disciplinary field that, as mentioned, preferentially examines those “journalistic realities” that can be found in archives, digital repositories and newspaper libraries.

4. Discussion and conclusions

This work characterises the evolution of the research on journalism carried out in Spain over the past 25 years based on the analysis of a sample of articles published by five top Spanish scientific journals specialising in communication. The number of journals and articles included in the sample (461 texts) is not statistically representative of the total

volume of the Spanish scientific production on journalism in this 25-year period, but it is representative of the most influential and relevant production research, since these works have been published in journals considered prestigious by the Spanish scientific community working in this field. In consequence, and even taking into account these limitations, the results would be valid as an indication of the overall trends in Spanish journalistic research in this period.

Firstly, these results have shown that in the past 25 years journalism studies have been the predominant field in Spanish communication research. Although they began to lose weight from the second half of the 1990s with the progressive consolidation of the academic interest in other media-professional fields, which is especially remarkable in the case of audio-visual communication, and more irregularly in public relations and advertising. This gradual diversification is probably the result of some of the transformations that have taken place in the institutional context in which communication research in Spain has been developing over the last twenty-five years.

Since their emergence at the beginning of the 1970s and during the following decade, the first faculties of Communication Sciences (of the public universities Complutense University of Madrid, Autonomous University of Barcelona and University of the Basque Country, and the private one University of Navarre) were centres basically oriented to a journalistic professional education, generating a scientific community that was very largely attentive to this media field, at a time when the democratic transition recognises the value of the social role of the news media and, therefore, the interest and urgency of their analysis (Martínez-Nicolás, 2008; Saperas, 2016). The legacy of that initial imprint was even more noticeable in the first half of the 1990s, when, according to our data, 70% of the works published in the most relevant Spanish journals addressed issues related to journalism, and the contributions to the remaining fields (audio-visual communication, public relations or advertising) were practically insignificant.

During the 1990s that institutional context was radically altered, and this affected the general orientation of communication research in Spain. At the beginning of that decade, those four pioneering schools were joined by new public centres (Seville, Santiago de Compostela, Málaga, etc.) that offered a place to the surplus of teachers and researchers accumulated in the previous decade (Jones, 1998; Moragas, 2005). However, the most important factor in our discussion was perhaps the decision to divide the old bachelor's degree programme in Information Sciences (with specialties) into three new independent degrees: in Journalism, Audio-visual Communication, and Advertising and Public Relations. This promoted the diversification of a scientific community that from that moment has specialised niches that are institutionally recognised. This situation was reinforced in the same period with the multiplication of Communication studies offered by new private universities (Moragas, 2005) and the establishment of the autonomous degrees related to audio-visual communication and advertising and public relations, which had wide demand at a time of expansion for the audio-visual and advertising markets due to the rupture of the monopoly of the State television and the implementation of private television in Spain in the early 1990s. These circumstances would explain the fact that, without ceasing to be preeminent in the past 25 years, journalism studies started to lose its overwhelming dominance in the first half of the 1990s, giving rise to a community of communication researchers with more diversified interests.

With regards to the specific evolution of the journalistic research, the indicators examined in this work point to a significant modification of the internal structure of the field whose turning point could be placed at the start of the last decade, since the mid-2000s, which would have altered the general orientation of the knowledge interests and of the modalities of research in this disciplinary field. In comparison to the previous period (1990–2004), this recent stage is characterised by the following trends:

- (a) A gradual thematic specialisation that began in the second half of the 1990s and became consolidated in the mid-2000s (from the 2005–2009 period onwards), when generic works decreased ostensibly and the specific problems of journalism in the various media-professional fields (press, television and digital media, especially) were addressed. Although with a clear predominant interest in the analysis of the daily press.
- (b) The undisputed centrality of journalistic contents, and specifically of news discourses, as the preferred object of study, which increased even in the last decade, with a progressive neglect of the institutional dimension (journalists, companies, markets, policy, etc.). As well as the social dimension (audiences, reception, influence, etc.) of journalism.
- (c) The decrease, or direct abandonment, of theoretical-conceptual research until its virtual disappearance of the analysed journals in the last ten years, and the subsequent consolidation of quantitative empirical research based on the examination of documentary sources through content analysis as a basic mode and methodological standard of the scientific work in this field.
- (d) The improvement of the methodological quality of empirical research works, with a sharp decrease in the percentage of methodologically deficient works during the 2005–2009 period. However, in more recent years (2010–2014) they still represent almost 20% of the empirical studies on journalism published in the sample of journals.

The typical profile of a Spanish research work on journalism in the past 25 years, significantly strengthened over the past decade (2005–2014), would be, therefore, a research work on the news discourse of the daily press about any social referent, performed by means of quantitative content analysis. It is significant, first, that the scholarly attention has been directed especially towards the study of the daily press, with records that far outweigh the journalistic areas that are more socially influential (broadcast journalism) or more relevant in the professional terms due to their emerging character (digital journalism). This preference becomes even more intense in the most recent stage (2010–2014), precisely at a time of declining influence of the daily press in the general news ecosystem.

Something similar happens with the progressive disinterest of researchers in the institutional dimension of journalism, especially in terms of the functioning of organisations, markets or public policy, despite the fact that the adaptation of media companies to the impact of the digital revolution would seem to require a greater research effort. On the other hand, the decline of theoretical works and the predominance of quantitative content analysis suggests a kind of “monoculture of research”, with few contributions to the conceptual foundation of the field and to the knowledge of empirical objects that require qualitative approaches (news making, news reception, discourse analysis, etc.). Ultimately, these trends would draw a general picture, characterised by a certain imbalance between the interests of the academia and the media reality itself, and a discrete contribution of Spanish research to some of the areas of work on journalism that are more consolidated and recognised internationally.

This dominant profile of the Spanish journalistic research (an increasing empirical orientation, preferential attention to the contents of the daily press, the adoption of quantitative analysis as methodological standard, etc.) can perhaps be explained simply because of the accessibility of the empirical sources necessary for this type of work (which are generally news pieces), which are easily available through digital newspaper libraries. This could also explain the reduction of the academic interest in the discursive dimension of journalism, because the study of its institutional components (journalists, companies, markets, etc.) and social components (audiences, reception and effects) requires sources

and access that are generally more onerous (business reports, legislative bodies, regulations, etc.), and, above all, data collection techniques (survey, in-depth interview, focus group, experimental designs, ethnographic observation, etc.) whose application requires material resources (including time) more complex than that required for the study of the journalistic discourse through quantitative content analysis.

However, it is possible that these seemingly pragmatic or instrumental motivations (accessibility of sources, availability of resources, etc.) are in turn the result of the adaptation of the scientific community to the new rules and requirements established a decade ago for the professional promotion of researchers in Spain. As mentioned in the introduction to this work, the implementation in 2008 of the *Academia* faculty accreditation programme, introduced criteria for the evaluation of the quality of research which, among other provisions, attributed a preferential curricular value to papers published in scientific journals and the internationalisation of the academic activity (publication in journals with the highest impact factor, participation in conferences and international associations, etc.). This criteria would have drive to a relative improvement observed since the mid-2000s in the methodological quality of the works published in Spanish journals, perhaps as a translation to the domestic environment of the standards established by the most important international journals (Carrasco-Campos & Saperas, 2016), which are already used by Spanish researchers in this last decade (Masip 2011; Martínez-Nicolás, 2014).

However, under these conditions of publish or perish the decisions of researchers (choice of objects of study, type of research methods and techniques used, etc.) are increasingly less informed by genuinely epistemic considerations (objective needs of knowledge in a particular area, contribution to the theoretical-conceptual development of a discipline, etc.) than by calculations related to the curricular profitability of the research effort (accessibility of empirical sources, speed to obtain results, adoption of internationally hegemonic methodological standards, etc.). We should not rule out, therefore, that this renewed institutional context that has become consolidated in the last decade is having a significant influence on the orientation of the scientific production on communication in Spain, and also in the specific field of journalistic research.

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