

On the history of Communication research and meta-research in Latin America

Sobre la historia de la investigación y la meta-investigación de la Comunicación en América Latina

Sobre a história da pesquisa e da meta-pesquisa em Comunicação na América Latina

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Abstract: This article proposes, from a communicational perspective, the terms for a continued discussion on history and some strategic and practical relationships between research and meta-research on communication in Latin America. To this end, it emphasizes the importance of history as an indispensable approach and a complement to descriptive statistics and offers some controversial reflections on postulates that seem essential to debate anew within the academic community, in its continental as well as its international scales. The main hypothesis considers communication research as subject to a “disintegrated internationalization,” tensioning convergence and fragmentation at different scales of reference.

Keywords:

Communication Research, Meta-research, Latin America, History, Internationalization

Resumen: Este artículo propone, desde una perspectiva comunicacional, los términos para un debate continuo sobre la historia y algunas relaciones estratégicas y prácticas entre la investigación y la meta-investigación sobre la comunicación en América Latina. Con este fin, destaca la importancia de la historia como enfoque indispensable y complemento de la estadística descriptiva, y ofrece algunas reflexiones controvertidas sobre postulados que parecen esenciales para volver a debatir dentro de la comunidad académica, tanto a escala continental como internacional. La hipótesis principal considera que la investigación en

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comunicación está sujeta a una «internacionalización desintegrada», que genera tensiones entre la convergencia y la fragmentación en diferentes escalas de referencia.

Palabras clave:

Investigación de la comunicación, Meta-investigación, América Latina, Historia, Internacionalización

Resumo: Este artigo propõe, a partir de uma perspectiva comunicacional, os termos para uma discussão contínua sobre a história e algumas relações estratégicas e práticas entre a pesquisa e a meta-pesquisa em comunicação na América Latina. Para tal, enfatiza a importância da história como uma abordagem indispensável e um complemento à estatística descritiva, e oferece algumas reflexões polêmicas sobre postulados que parecem essenciais para serem debatidos novamente no seio da comunidade acadêmica, tanto em escala continental quanto internacional. A hipótese principal considera a pesquisa em comunicação como sujeita a uma “internacionalização desintegrada”, que tensiona a convergência e a fragmentação em diferentes escalas de referência.

Palavras-chave:

Pesquisa em Comunicação, Meta-pesquisa, América Latina, História, Internacionalização

1. Introduction

The author aims to present here some results of an academic endeavor that he has had multiple opportunities to cultivate and enjoy throughout most of his career, and which in recent years has allowed him to propose “critical commemorative” reflections on the occasion of the 40th anniversary (or further) of several academic organizations with which he has been involved for most of that time: the National Council for Teaching and Research of Communication Sciences (CONEICC) in Mexico (established 1976); the Brazilian Society for Interdisciplinary Communication Studies (INTERCOM) (1977); the Latin American Association of Communication Researchers (ALAIC) (1978, reconstituted 1989); the Mexican Association of Communication Researchers (AMIC) (1979) and the Ibero-American Association for Communication Research (AssIBERCOM) (1986). Celebrating his own 50th anniversary as a Communication Sciences graduate, he attended in May 2025 the CAMRI Conference on “Histories, presents and futures of media and communication”, at the University of Westminster (London), where he presented a paper (Fuentes, 2025) partially

reproduced here, being only him and Carlos Scolari the two Latin Americans among more than seventy participants.

2. Meta-Research and Historization of an Academic Field

The aim of documenting the history of the academic internationalization in the field of communication studies in Latin America has included interpretations founded, maintained, and published from the 1980s to the present, both within and outside the region by several authors, including the “founders of Latin American thought in communication” and many scholars belonging to more recent generations, who have critically interpreted and appropriated concepts and methods of “foreign” origin, although there have also been many cases of mechanical and inappropriate transposition to diverse contexts. Undoubtedly, nonetheless, there has been an increasing exercise of meta-research of the best kinds, following the reflective example of what in other areas of science is called “Meta-analysis”, “Meta-discourse”, or within ours, “Critical-reflexive analyses of research practices and studies in the field” (Lopes, 2016); or “Meta-knowledge in Communication”, whether produced through historical or statistical methods, or both (Günther & Domahidi, 2017).

According to John Ioannidis (2018, p. 1), co-director of METRICS (Meta-Research Innovation Center at Stanford), “Meta-research” is the study of research itself: “its methods, reporting, reproducibility, evaluation, and incentives”. These five areas constituting Meta-research correspond, respectively, to questions regarding the design and conduct of studies, their dissemination and public communication, their verification and self-correction, the assessment of their scientific quality, and the criteria and awarding of their rewards and penalties. All of them are relevant to Meta-research on Communication, although none of them has been fully developed anywhere, or at least systematically projected in Latin America.

For practitioners of the Communication Sciences all over the world, it is well known that identifying the boundaries of any discipline —let alone a densely multidisciplinary field like ours— is “a dynamic and somewhat arbitrary process that requires constant updates and refinements” (Ioannidis et al., 2015, p. 4). But there are undoubtedly other implications worth considering, especially when working from a region that is still relatively marginal in terms of scientific output, such as Latin America. Consequently, academic research and Meta-research on Communication requires both a review of the refinements achieved in the scientific frameworks of this specialty, and an update of concrete research output, starting

from the basic level of data, in sociocultural contexts with relatively lower degrees of consolidation and recognition—but precisely for that reason, no less relevant.

It can be observed, from the outset, that the fundamental questions that Meta-research allows us to address with increasing analytical rigor, have been present throughout the history of Communication Sciences, particularly in relation to their theoretical identity, and that the interest in identifying transnational and international constants in the institutionalization of such a “field” (Craig, 1999; Nordenstreng, 2007) has led to a certain proliferation of useful Meta-research approaches (Koivisto and Thomas, 2008; Park and Pooley, 2008; Gehrke and Keith, 2015; Simonson and Park, 2016; Averbek-Lietz, 2017, Miike and Yin, 2022, Scolari et al., 2026).

Various contributions to Meta-research in communication were included in a systematic review displayed by John Corner, who highlighted in particular the expansion of historical work on the study of communication to include international contexts and “the examination of how teaching programs and research activity have contributed to institutionalizing the field as one with a distinct, albeit highly debated, academic identity” (Corner, 2019, p. 1). Meta-research, for him, ultimately contributes to making us more aware of the diverse, and sometimes precarious, modes of institutionalization through which the study of public communication has developed, “breaking with older academic and professional frameworks while continuing to draw upon them” (Corner, 2019, p. 9). The final part of this assessment inevitably recalls that “persistence of denied theory” that Jesús Martín-Barbero denounced in Latin America many years ago (1982, p. 101).

3. Disintegrated Internationalization and Latin American Critical Thought

The hypothetical characterization of communication research as subject to a “disintegrated internationalization” (Fuentes, 2014, 2024), tensioning convergence and fragmentation, can still render heuristic utility at different scales. Thus, the four major temporal phases considered by Simonson and Park in their *History of Communication Studies* as the period during which these studies have developed worldwide following a long “prehistory,” are constructed around three domains: “educational and pedagogical systems,” “practical applications and other modes of reflective practice,” and “research and theorization” (Simonson and Park, 2016, p. 9). The four phases or stages span, respectively, from 1870 to 1938, when a “space for intellectual problematization of communication emerged and developed”; from 1939 to 1967, when “the processes of institutionalization of this academic field were consolidated”; from 1968 to 1988, when “the dominant paradigms

were challenged from multiple fronts, sparking upheavals that fundamentally altered the study of communication socially, politically, and intellectually”; and from 1989 onward, the contemporary stage in the study of communication, characterized by “pluralization” and “disciplinaryization”.

Comparing Simonson and Park’s four stages history with Raúl Trejo’s seven periods chronology from 1934 to the present in Latin American terms and references (2018, pp. 317-352), it can easily be confirmed that, with some occasional time lags and diverse national circumstances serving as the context for the processes of institutionalization and legitimization of communication studies, as well as the consolidation of specialized international and transnational organizations and networks in Latin America, the main “milestones” of regional history can be readily situated within this chronological framework to reinterpret them in relation to broader contexts than those generally considered — contexts that transcend theoretical and epistemological “traditions,” “paradigms,” or “currents” as categories that some Latin American authors still consider useful.

As an example, during the first stage (1870–1938), one can identify the humanistic, historical, literary, and legal studies that — primarily regarding journalism, though also, in their infancy, regarding film and radio — were conducted in various Latin American countries. At the end of this period, the first schools (and a chair) of Journalism were founded in South America. During the second period (1939–1967), amid the geopolitical and cultural tensions generated by World War II and the ensuing “Cold War,” Latin America saw a clash between the “functionalist” and “developmentalist” perspectives on “mass” communication with the “critical” and “militant” perspectives derived from the socialist model inspired by the Cuban Revolution of 1959.

Between 1968 and 1988, during the third stage, academic communication research began to consolidate institutionally in several Latin American countries, and intense sociopolitical processes derived in debates, pressures, and government decisions —not always consistent— regarding the development model adopted for the mass media, especially radio and television. At that time, critical studies on transnational information flows and the corresponding documentation and denunciation of the imbalances and dependence of Latin American countries gained continental and global relevance, coinciding with similar movements in Africa and the Arab countries. These issues were central to the proposal for “national communication policies” and the “New World Information and Communication Order” advocated by UNESCO.

But in the 1990s, in Latin America as in other regions, the consolidation achieved through the institutionalization, professionalization, and social legitimization of the study of communication was immediately called into question by the emergence of global processes with a major impact, precisely, on “communication systems”. In this contemporary era, communication practices, media industries, and social imaginaries have been radically transformed. These developments may (or may not) create new national and transnational spaces for communication, increase the social and occupational relevance of education in the field, and reconfigure both research topics and the means to conduct it and to interpret it, of course. It is necessary to emphasize that, given the speed and depth with which media networks are transforming and converging—with divergent consequences—processes and structures that until recently were kept separate, such as those of broadcasting and telecommunications, or those of entertainment and education, or those of politics and advertising, or even those of public and private practices, it seems clear that another collective and systematic effort is needed for informed diagnosis and shared vision, for a critical renewal of the resources of meta-research.

Following and interpreting those documented traces of the field’s evolution is perhaps the best way to discover its history and the changing relations it has built within different socio-cultural, economic, and political structures. What has been formulated as a hypothesis of “disintegrated international development” is a transition marked by tensions between convergence and fragmentation in the field, rather than by a polarized structure of opposition between well-defined options, as the emergence of this field was understood in more Manichaeic times, not only in Latin America. Due to these “tensions,” to which the multiple implications of the digitization of all media must be added, many contributions have been marginalized from institutional priorities, while others have just emerged.

4. Latin American Communication Studies and Post-Disciplinarization

A decade ago or so, Silvio Waisbord asserted that in Latin America “the field of communication/media studies remains united though fragmented”, since it emerged from a common intellectual trajectory and its “canon” is more intellectually homogeneous than its US and European sources, by incorporating “classic texts from the tradition of cultural and media imperialism, structural semiotics and discourse analysis, continental philosophy, cultural studies, and political economy.” In this subcontinent, notably, “the field has been open to global and regional intellectual and developmental trends” (Waisbord, 2014, pp. 6–7), a view coincident with that of Miquel de Moragas, for whom Communication research in

Latin America is not homogeneous, but it is based on something very particular: “sharing diversity and deconstructing theoretical frameworks on communication based on the foreign experience of the great metropolises of the developed Western world” (Moragas, 2011, p. 302).

Some interesting parallels, indeed, can be found between the institutionalization of the field in continental Europe, Anglo-Saxon America and Latin America, and their historical relationships cannot be reduced to unidirectional influences or even “colonization”, processes which are perhaps better explained as a multidimensional critical tension between different political, intellectual and socio-cultural projects, although not always and necessarily opposed. Nonetheless, there are also some radical differences in the institutionalization of scientific practices in Latin America in terms of their orientations and social justifications. Sociocultural, popular communication and media political economy approaches have been the preferred orientations over the decades, but research on other theoretical models has also been developed.

However, it must be stressed that there is no single “Latin American vision of communication” just as there are no single European or US visions, although at some point of our history it may have been convenient to imagine such a reduction. As in the rest of the world, communication research in Latin America shows diverse historical, cultural, and demographic experiences, and mainly diverging trends. The fact that some historical processes were shared between the 1960s and 1980s as a common reference point for academic and political work on communication, specially the struggles against dictatorships, poverty and domination, made it possible to imagine “Latin American alternatives” to the perspectives imported from the United States and Europe, by means of “creative appropriations”, and through the development of different theoretical and methodological approaches to “communication for social change”.

Nowadays, in the face of globally prevailing reductionism to evaluate scientific output through journal impact factors, citation counts, and the h-index, and keeping in mind that communicating on communication necessarily influences the sociocultural practices and structures, it is maybe worth recalling and revisiting a premise formulated by Jesús Martín-Barbero in 1980:

Theory is one of the key spaces of dependency... but dependency does not consist in adopting theories produced ‘outside;’ what is dependent is the very conception of science, of scientific work, and its function in society. As in other fields, here too the significant issue is not that the

products, but rather the very structures of production, are exogenous. (Martín-Barbero, 1982, p. 101)

For Immanuel Wallerstein (1991), “unthinking” communication —rather than rethinking it, as the social sciences of the nineteenth century did— implies that many assumptions “are too deeply ingrained in our mindset” and “today constitute the main intellectual barrier to analyzing the social world in any meaningful way.” Just as thirty years ago, when the Internet emerged as the central hub of a radical structural transformation of communication in society and consequently of its study, Wallerstein’s warning regarding the social sciences may be repeated considering recent developments in global geopolitics and the role of political communication in its reconfiguration:

We are not at a moment when the existing disciplinary structure has collapsed. We are at a moment when it has been challenged, and rival structures are attempting to emerge. We believe that the most urgent task is to have a thorough discussion of the underlying problems. (Wallerstein, 1996, p.111)

Perhaps the hypothesis of the “post-disciplinarization” of the academic field — formulated several decades ago by Wallerstein among others, but still only tentatively accepted— will advance more consistently in Communication Sciences thanks to contributions emerging from two different, though eventually converging, academic and social contexts: the Brazilian, in Muniz Sodré *A Ciência do Comum* (2014), and the USA, in Silvio Waisbord *Communication: a Post-discipline* (2019), among other exemplar works. Perhaps by epistemologically and methodologically shifting the focus of communicative analysis from media and messages to social subjects and the processes of meaning production, the study of communication as a practical exercise in communicative reflexivity could be better developed and adopted.

It is true that the structures of cultural production, the models of representation underlying the practices, are probably the most opaque dimension for the practitioners themselves, researchers committed to “capital accumulation” and “evaluation” through the observance of certain rules and the investment of certain resources, both defined, if not in reference to “other” fundamentals, then perhaps to “other” foundations —to projects of scientific production distinct from the predominant ones in the field. As part of the social world, the social-scientific discourse implies a perpetual self-revision of its premises and its proposals, its methods and its articulations with the other practices and social structures it takes as its object. And thus, reflexively and critically, through communication and not in

some other way, will the international integration of Latin American communication scholarship be strengthened and advanced.

5. References

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