

# 50 years of Communication Studies: Academic Cross Paths

## *50 años de estudios sobre Comunicación: Trayectorias académicas cruzadas*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is a self-reflexive exercise undertaken by the author concerning his path as a university professor and academic researcher in Communication Studies for the last five decades. It assumes that no individual path can be isolated, since history implies recognizing the mutually determining intersections with others and with multi-scale institutional frameworks. Any academic autobiography is necessarily a reconstruction of collective bonds with peers and with institutional contexts situated in specific times and spaces—in this case, Latin America, especially Mexico and Brazil.

**Keywords:** Professionalization, Academic Field, Latin America, Mexico, Brazil

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### RESUMEN

En este texto se despliega un ejercicio autorreflexivo del autor acerca de su trayectoria como profesor universitario e investigador académico en el campo de estudios de la comunicación durante las cinco décadas más recientes. El punto de partida es la convicción de que es imposible aislar una trayectoria individual, puesto que la historia implica reconocer los cruces mutuamente determinantes con otros individuos y con marcos institucionales de diversas escalas. Toda autobiografía académica es necesariamente una reconstrucción de los vínculos colectivos con pares y con contextos institucionales situados en tiempos y espacios concretos, en este caso ubicados en América Latina, sobre todo en México y en Brasil.

**Palabras-clave:** Profesionalización, campo académico, América Latina, México, Brasil

ACCORDING TO THE French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the methodological principle of *participant objectivation* “is undoubtedly the most difficult exercise that exists” because “it requires the breaking of the deepest and most unconscious adherences and adhesions”, that is, the interest “of the studied object itself for the one who studies it” (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 51, free translation). If this statement is applicable to my case, my professional path in the academic field of communication can be understood as a long process of adopting and exercising the principle of “participant objectivation” or, in other words, according to the Spanish sociologist Jesús Ibáñez, of a continuous *epistemological vigilance* to integrate the process of this research into my “researcher persona”, which is “socially determined by the system of social relations” (Ibáñez, 1985, p. 218). According to the North American sociologist C. Wright Mills, in turn, if we are to understand the changes in many personal milieus we should look beyond them. “And the number and variety of such structural changes increase as the institutions within which we live become more extended and more intricately related to each other.” Being able to discover such linkages means “having *sociological imagination*” (Wright-Mills, 1961, p. 30, free translation). More than 25 years ago, in my doctoral thesis in Social Sciences I was able to formulate, supported by the work of these and other authors, “*a commitment to the production of meaning*” by assuming the option of “building a professional position and identity for myself as a communication scholar”, which constructed as an object of study “the very field in which I act as a subject” (Fuentes-Navarro, 1998, p. 10, free translation).

The process of my university education, however, began 25 years earlier. The decision to enter the undergraduate program in Communication Sciences in 1970, at the *Universidad Jesuita de Guadalajara* (Jesuit University of Guadalajara) (ITESO) was basically intuitive. The program was still unknown, and became extremely attractive for those of us who, like me, preferred a *project of future* to be built rather than one pre-specified for traditional professions or careers. Comprehensive grounds in humanities and orientation towards practice in “media” was a novel and stimulating combination in an era that offered young university students multiple options for cultural development (Prieto, 2021). Cinema and audiovisual arts were my core reference for initial learning and professionalization in communication. For ten years, including five years as a student, I worked as radio and audiovisual producer, both in commercial and educational fields. In 1979, I participated in the foundation of a Department of Audiovisual Resources at the *Universidad de Guadalajara* (UDG), with the task of producing support materials for the teaching-learning processes in higher education.

However, film editing gave rise to theoretical and epistemological questions about communication. I could work on these questions as a professor of Communication Theories - a subject that did not exist in the syllabus, but which I took over at ITESO in 1978 and read the few materials available on the subject. In that way, I changed my professional career from being an audiovisual producer toward being a full-time academic. That that transition was consolidated in 1981 when I was appointed director of the *Escuela de Ciencias de la Comunicación* (School of Communication Sciences) at ITESO, so I resigned from my job as a producer at the *Universidad de Guadalajara*. At the same time, the incorporation to national organizations in the academic field was decisive for my future: the *Consejo Nacional para la Enseñanza y la Investigación de las Ciencias de la Comunicación* (National Council for the Teaching and Research of Communication Sciences) (Coneicc), which I chaired from 1984-1986, and the *Asociación Mexicana de Investigadores de la Comunicación* (Mexican Association of Communication Researchers) (AMIC), which had been founded in 1976 and 1979, respectively.

Two of the most important lessons learned from that first period in my academic career were that communication had to be understood from perspectives that, even then, we called “sociocultural”, i.e., that situated practices in *structuring* contexts on different scales and dimensions, both material and symbolic. Such perspectives included contributions from semiotics (Eco, 1976; Verón, 1980), sociology (Martín-Serrano, 1977; Giddens, 1984) and the Latin American pioneers of communication studies (Pasquali, 1970; Martín-Barbero, 1987). The other fundamental lesson was that, while “communication” was instrumentally adopted by many social agents as a resource for competition and the imposition of proposals of meaning in social life, the academy had the responsibility to exercise it, “comprehensively” or “reflexively” as a resource for collaboration and incentive for the development of the interlocutors’ own visions on common referents (Krippendorff, 1989; Carey, 1992). These two lessons also guided my practice as a teacher and university “trainer” of professionals and researchers. This facet was recently analyzed as one of five ethnographic case studies by specialists in higher education in Mexico (Moreno Bayardo & Torres Frías, 2020), who characterized my position as “interaction as the center of training in thesis supervision”.

And in 1988, already fully incorporated into the academic profession, two changes occurred in my career path that pushed me decisively toward research. One was the end of my tenure as director of the School at ITESO, which shortly after disappeared to become a Coordination and eventually a Department. Freed from that institutional responsibility, I had the opportunity to focus more on research

<sup>1</sup>Site available at:  
<http://ccdoc.iteso.mx>.

through my teaching work in communication theories, and in the development of the CONEICC Center for Documentation on Communication in Mexico, which had been entrusted to me in 1983 and would lead, years later, to the *cc-doc*<sup>1</sup> website, an open access repository of communication research products in the country. The other crucial event of that year was José Marques de Melo's invitation to participate in the *Estudo Comparativo dos Sistemas de Comunicação Social no Brasil e no México*, (Comparative Study of Social Communication Systems in Brazil and Mexico), proposed by INTERCOM to CONEICC. This participation allowed me to broaden and deepen the Latin American links that I had already begun to establish, but which were focused until then on teaching, in the space opened by the *Federación Latinoamericana de Facultades de Comunicación Social* (Latin American Federation of Social Communication Faculties) (FELAFACS). I was assigned the "system" of communication research in Mexico (Fuentes-Navarro, 1991) for the comparative study with that of Brazil, commissioned to Maria Immacolata Vassallo de Lopes, with whom I have a very productive academic relationship of collaboration and friendship ever since.

Both "impulses" to research brought me closer to *meta-research*, i.e., research on research. And recognizing this epistemological "splitting", I tried since then to develop a communicational approach to these same processes. Thus, I assumed that the study of communication could be better understood as the *social production of meaning about the social production of meaning* (Fuentes-Navarro, 2003), as I had the opportunity to present at the 3rd COMPÓS seminar in 2002 in São Paulo, on the 30th anniversary of the postgraduate course at the *Escola de Comunicação e Artes* of the Universidade de São Paulo (ECA-USP). More than a decade of academic collaboration with Brazilian colleagues had allowed me to learn and exercise several critical perspectives on the common *academic field*, a process that, fortunately, has continued for many more years.

In 1990, as the *Comparative Study* progressed, I was invited to stay at ECA-USP with other foreign consultants, within the framework of a process of "Transition toward Modernity" of that School (Melo et al., 1992), and specifically in connection with the research undertaken by the ECA on its graduates and the labor market (Lopes et al., 1992). For a whole month I shared with Luis Ramiro Beltrán and Marcelino Bisbal, among colleagues of other nationalities and many Brazilian academics from ECA, the activities and coexistence typical of an institution that systematically sought to renew and endorse its international importance within the academic field of communication. I also shared with many other colleagues, in those years, the process of restoring the *Asociación Latinoamericana de Investigadores de la Comunicación* (Latin American Association of Communication Researchers) (ALAIIC), headed by José Marques

de Melo, especially regarding the amendment to the bylaws and the preparation of the Latin American seminars, the first of which was held near São Paulo, in the city of Embú Guaçu, in 1992. A little later, I also collaborated in the design of the WGs (working groups or thematic groups) of ALAIC, and I joined the Theory and Methodology of Communication Research from the beginning.

In the first half of the 1990s, however, in that process of “transition” toward research as a priority academic task, I had the opportunity, which I had not sought before, to take a high quality doctoral program, without changing residence. I was part of the first generation of the PhD in Social Sciences offered jointly by the Universidad de Guadalajara (UDG) and the *Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social* (Center for Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology) (CIESAS), specifically in the area of Sociology. My instinct, jointly with the experience accumulated during more than twenty years in the field, led me to place my theoretical and practical questions about communication in a broader “epistemic space”, that of the Social Sciences. It was very clear to me, from the beginning, that what I would seek to develop in the doctorate would be methodological “solvency”, and therefore I decided to work on an “object” that I had already worked on, namely the constitution of the academic field of communication in Mexico.

During the PhD process, the most academically demanding stage in my university education, I managed to learn a lot about methodologies and disciplinary approaches, but also something more difficult and of greater importance: I learned to work at home without isolating myself from family life, i.e., I learned to “come and go” instantly from concentration, surrounded by four children and a wife who, also, learned to facilitate the process, accompanying me lovingly but without interfering too much or “unnecessarily” in my tasks. Of course, it meant that they defined what was “necessary”. The experience of those four years was very stimulating and enjoyable both personally and academically. I received my degree shortly before my 44th birthday, an age that at the time and in my academic environment was not as late as it might now seem. The following two and a half decades have reaffirmed that for me.

I began to assume myself as a “communication researcher” when I presented a paper at the *Primera Reunión Nacional de Investigadores de la Comunicación* (First National Meeting of Communication Researchers) of AMIC in 1980. But I felt institutionally fully recognized as such in 1996 when I obtained my doctorate degree, and was accepted into the *Sistema Nacional de Investigadores* (National System of Researchers), which at that time only ten colleagues in the field of communication had joined. Two years earlier I had returned to the UDG, now with a position as a professor-researcher. As “collective” and “social” as the

construction of any other identity, that of researcher depends on the *habitus* as a system of “internal” dispositions, as well as on institutional recognition and positioning, in addition to peers. The term “colleague” that is usually used to treat academic peers implies the condition of being “mutually chosen” subjects. And that is the basis of collegiality, the form of collectivity inherent to the Academy. I have been fortunate to share my professional activity with excellent people, colleagues and work teams. I have been able to join that broad and multifaceted collective subject in Mexico and Latin America that has sought and succeeded to a great extent in legitimizing communication studies, and keep them in permanent consolidation and renewal, restlessly following their object in changing and elusive contexts.

I could summarize, as I did in my speech of gratitude and acceptance of the *Doctorate Honoris Causa* awarded to me by the *Universidad Autónoma de Baja California* (Autonomous University of Baja California) (Fuentes-Navarro, 2020), that as a member of several collective subjects I have had the opportunity to dedicate myself for five decades to learn, discover, experiment, convene, organize, stimulate, criticize, question, preserve and renew knowledge and interventions, more than to teach them; to share, imagine, discuss, disseminate, consolidate findings and methods, rather than cultivate pretended scientific certainties of universal value. The legacies I have appropriated and the generosity with which I have been treated made me confident in the long-term effects of university education and the essential contribution of research in it. Thus, I assume myself to be a full-time academic, who has learned to understand their world as a result and stimulus of communication, and knows that one cannot oppose or separate social and professional commitment; nor communication from education, culture and politics. Communication is indeed an ethic, a practical and inescapable reality, as well as a resource for interaction and an exercise of power. But it is also, in many ways, an *enigma* that challenges us permanently. As the North American colleague John Durham Peters (1999, p. 2) states, “understand communication is understand much more”, and that could be a summary of my path over the last fifty years: as a student and professional, as a teacher and researcher, as the most reflective practitioner of communication possible.

Undoubtedly, the most productive period of that path is the most recent 25 years, in which most of my publications appeared, most of the Master’s and Doctoral students I had advised received their degrees, and I visited most of the countries of Latin America at least once as a visiting professor. In this last aspect, the country where I carried out the greatest number of these activities was Brazil, including my participation in 2015 in a PROCAD/CAPES Project, entitled *Comunicação e Mediações em Contextos Regionais: usos midiáticos, culturais e*

*linguagens*, which involved teaching a seminar on *Epistemología de la comunicación y mediaciones de lo local: heurísticas socioculturales* (Fuentes-Navarro, 2019) at the ECA/USP graduate school in São Paulo (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwRXm42KdSk>), and later at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte, in Natal, RN, and the Universidade Federal do Mato Grosso do Sul, Campo Grande, MS. Before and after these experiences, I taught similar seminars at the *Universidad Nacional de Córdoba*, Argentina; *Universidad Católica del Perú*; *Universidad Católica de Minas Gerais*, Belo Horizonte, Brazil; *Pontificia Universidad Javeriana de Cali*, Colombia; *Universidad Iberoamericana*, in Mexico City; and the *Universidad del Norte*, em Barranquilla, Colombia, among others.

With different emphases, in all these Latin American academic spaces I exposed how dispersion and fragmentation in the academic field of communication are conditions currently observed anywhere in the world and are increasingly manifested in the multiple perspectives and prevailing positions on four major dimensions (ontological, epistemological, praxeological and methodological) of theoretical interpretations of communication, and their mutual relations in an increasingly ambiguous *epistemic hierarchy*. Therefore, a special attempt can be made to identify, historicize and contextualize the fundamental tensions and options, as well as the practical consequences that their confusing multiple intertwining entails for the public understanding of the resources, communication rights and for the consolidation of scientific research programs and researcher training at global, national, regional and local scales.

I have proposed and debated - beyond my regular courses in graduate programs at ITESO and UDG - with several academic communities that defining “communication” as a result of how and from where one proposes to study it and how one approaches its problematization and conceptual development. The undifferentiated and undiscussed proliferation of definitions generates what James Carey (1992, p. 34) very eloquently reported many years ago: “Our existing models of communication are less an analysis than a contribution to the chaos of modern culture.” Accordingly, far from authoritatively claiming a reductionist unification, I know that it is appropriate to communicatively engage, in a committed and responsible conversation among agents in the field (Craig, 1999), on the relationship between the generic question “what is communication?” (Located in the ontological dimension) and “how to know communication?” (Core question of the epistemological dimension). Additionally, not only should the consistency of the epistemological question be depended on the ontological definition, but also vice versa, recursively and reflexively.

The recursive and reflexive search for consistency of knowledge about communication implies that communication as an object of knowledge is the

result of a work of *modeling reality*, of imposing some model on reality in order to be able to recognize it as such. There are interesting difficulties in the specific work that should be investigated in order to do that “modeling of reality”: selecting and, therefore, constructing that reality in some terms determined by our way of knowing and not by the “objective reality” itself, which we cannot know as such without that mediation (Coudry & Hepp, 2017). This allows us to bring into play the definition or core concept of communication as “social production of meaning”, as a starting point and also as a point of arrival. This concept of communication, defined from a sociocultural perspective, as mentioned above, implies that the study of communication is the ‘*social production of meaning about the social production of meaning*’ and is a way, among others, to locate, understand, contextualize the object of knowledge, at the same time as its relationship with the subject of knowledge; a way of not leaving the object ‘floating in the air’ as if it were a totally arbitrary definition.

This way of theoretically conceiving the study of communication is by far not the prevailing one in the processes of university training and institutionalized research in Latin America. For this reason, my main interest has been to investigate these processes of institutionalization, through their most important “objectivation”: undergraduate and graduate programs, academic publications and specialized associations. In 1992 I published a first approach, under the title *Un campo cargado de futuro. El estudio de la comunicación en América Latina* (Fuentes-Navarro, 1992), and in the following years several updates and developments of that “history”, including articles on its “disciplinary and post-disciplinary challenges” (Fuentes-Navarro, 1997), its “conditions and perspectives for the 21st Century” (Fuentes-Navarro, 1999), its “international referents and conditions of a transversal dialogue of knowledge” (Fuentes-Navarro, 2010) or its “disintegrated internationalization” (Fuentes-Navarro, 2014). There are also the conferences held in Bogota - FELAFACS - in 1992 on “*El estudio de la comunicación desde una perspectiva sociocultural en América Latina*”; in Quito -SEICOM-CIESPAL- in 2011 on “*Tendencias de la investigación de la comunicación en América Latina: perspectivas y desafíos*”; in Curitiba -INTERCOM- in 2017 on “*Memoria e historicidad de la investigación en Comunicación en América Latina*”; or in Campo Grande (remote) -COMPÓS - in 2020, on “*Comunicación y fronteras: geografías y espacios simbólicos de las prácticas comunicativas en América Latina*”, among others.

From the sociocultural perspective developed throughout multiple experiences of research and debate, we consider *institutionalization* in university programs and professional associations as the most “objective” manifestation of the constitution of an academic field, to the extent that in this way the instances of social power assign or recognize a specific place to the production and reproduction

of knowledge, as well as to professional training in a given area, and implicitly or explicitly define the orientation and meaning (social function) that the work on that area in that place should fulfill to obtain and reinforce its legitimacy. This process is then inseparable from the *professionalization* of the subjects who, within the established programs, have to exercise academic practices and articulate, in more or less strong ways, academic production with decision-making in the area, which in turn contributes to the *legitimization* of knowledge, of the institutions where it is cultivated, and of the subjects who generate it.

The extension and distribution of programs in the higher education system of one country or another indicate, at the same time, the “positions” the “discipline” is acquiring in the system in relation to others, and that distinguish university institutions in the constitution of the field, as well as the networks that coordinate them in certain ways and not in others. In addition to these processes of *social* institutionalization in university facilities and networks that interconnect them, it is essential to take into account the *disciplinary* institutionalization which, following the classic contribution of Burton Clark (1991), is considered even more important than the former for the analysis of the academic field structuring. At the level of social institutionalization, and even more so at the cognitive level, the constitution of a discipline or scientific specialty “crosses” the facilities linking (and unlinking) them to each other through the action of the subjects attached to them. The trans-institutional dimension is fundamentally important in the study of this structuring, and is even more so when institutions and subjects are located in different countries, i.e., in different national regimes. But an international history of communication studies has yet “to be written” concerning this or any other logic, for “so far, most histories have been national, with a predominant focus on North America and Western Europe” (Simonson & Peters, 2008, p. 764). What is quite clear is that the social institutionalization has been much stronger than the disciplinary one...

Nevertheless, in the most recent decade an “international point of view” has emerged and been strengthened, in which I have been able to participate, and that “helps us to see how the organized study of communication has at the same time reflected, refracted and driven the transnational geopolitics, institutional patterns of education and professionalization, and ways of knowing and acting” that are determinants of collective life since the last century. The search for adequate socio-historical frameworks to ground not only international, but increasingly “transnational” research into the processes of constituting the academic field of communication with properly theoretical foundations has recently gained strong momentum: “transnational history takes shape alongside comparative, international, world and global histories” (Simonson & Park, 2016, pp. 2-6,

free translation). That is the academic context to which I most identify today, when I have been honored as a *National Researcher Emeritus* by the *Sistema Nacional de Investigadores del Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología* (National System of Researchers of the National Council of Science and Technology) (CONACYT), based on an evaluation that considered a self-presentation that I summarize to conclude this paper.

During forty years of academic career I have learned to articulate interpretation and intervention as fundamental operations for the production of knowledge about communication. Research on theory and practice has allowed me to develop a methodology based on heuristic and self-reflexive models. The formula is recursive: to know communication is only possible through its exercise, so the central task has been to practice the *social production of meaning on the social production of meaning*. This summary of many authors' contributions, and their manifestations and consequences systematically reviewed at empirical level, has been recognized as a useful and productive contribution in the academic contexts of the study of communication both in Mexico and in Latin America and other regions, and increasingly in other academic fields of social sciences and humanities, as the importance of communication as a process of social structuring is recognized. In this way, communication is no longer conceived simply as "exchange of messages" or "instrumental use of media", although these practices are also incorporated in what is assumed to be a sociocultural perspective. In this framework, I have been able to develop activities and resources that are highly valued for their scarcity and usefulness, such as those related to academic documentation, to which I have dedicated myself since 1983. This work is materialized in the *cc-doc* repository, available for open consultation on the Internet since 2003. To date, it includes more than eight thousand documents, products of research on communication in Mexico or about Mexico: books, chapters, articles and graduate theses, more than half of which can be retrieved in full text. This core resource to make critical summary and research background in Mexico serves as a complement to the construction of theoretical-methodological as well as referential frameworks on international documentary sources. As such, it facilitates the most pertinent orientation of projects, especially graduate theses, toward close and very relevant contexts. It also facilitates the development of comparative projects, at national and international levels, on topics and approaches of emerging academic interest.

My specialty as a university professor has been the field of communication theories, especially those oriented toward a sociocultural perspective and as resources for post-disciplinary construction of models of scientific interpretation

and professional intervention. For more than fifteen years, the primary objective of my work has been the professional training of competent and reflective communicators to explore new spaces of sociocultural development through communication. I supervised 75 undergraduate theses in communication. The next twenty-five years, without abandoning that objective, my priority was oriented toward the training of researchers at the Master's and Doctoral levels, I supervised 47 graduate theses. I was able to do that simultaneously in one of the best public and one of the best private institutions in the country in the field of communication. Hundreds of communication science undergraduates and dozens of graduates have extended their learning, with which I was able to contribute directly, in various regions of Mexico and other Latin American countries.

An essential dimension in my academic path has been the collaborative and articulated work through inter-institutional instances, to promote shared spaces of action for the discipline in broader contexts than one single local. Participation in the building and development of national and Latin American academic associations has been an essential means to contribute to the strengthening of responsible and solvent scientific and academic communities. This also implies the promotion of institutional development projects which, in my case, were channeled through the integration of different work teams that, between the mid-1980s and the first decade of the 21st century, designed, managed their approval and put into operation three Master's degree programs and two Doctoral programs that, at the time, reached the highest level ("International Level Competition") in CONACYT's National Quality Programs of Graduate Courses, and have maintained it at the Universidad de Guadalajara and ITESO. In these five programs, communication research is a central axis of training and a fundamental institutionalized link with national and international academic production in the field. On the other hand, since the early 1980s I have collaborated in the construction of convergent academic spaces through the trans-institutional academic associations.

The main contribution of my research comes from my studies on the institutional structuring of the communication academic field. Thirty years ago, in a book entitled *La comunidad desapercibida, investigación e investigadores de la comunicación en México* (Fuentes-Navarro, 1991), I made a first systematic approach to what I have continued to do in the following years, and in which, with a generous foreword, Jesús Martín-Barbero helped me to better understand what it was all about and how far the project could go. I quote him:

In these times of disenchantment, in which disillusioning balance sheets and realistic reformulations abound, this book knows how to read, beneath the visible

dispersion and fragmentation of the field, the slow maturing of a community and in broad strokes it clarifies - and in this it is undoubtedly a pioneer - how communication becomes an intellectual field to the extent that its actors form a community, made not only of knowledge but also of re-knowledge, not only of paradigms but also of theoretical positions and social questioning. (Martín-Barbero, 1991, p. 13, free translation).

The game of meanings that I deliberately included in the title of this work, since qualifying the community as unnoticed meant it as “unknown or ignored”, but also as devoid of essential resources, allows us to recognize it now as better appreciated and more consolidated, both advances as part of a complex and sustained, but insufficient, process of maturation. The multifaceted communication, generic object of study, has exceeded and challenged those of us who study it. And that is why I believe, with others, that it is more important than ever to reinforce university attention to it, that it is the core responsibility of university programs of research and training in communication to formulate as precisely as possible how to *interpret and intervene*, and not only one or the other: not only interpret nor only intervene in the diverse and complex social realities in which communication is currently a fundamental mediation. ■

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Article received on October 15, 2022 and approved on November 16, 2022.