Academic communication research in Mexico: notes for a reflexive balance sheet

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Summary

This work hopes to contribute to the elaboration of a reflexive analysis concerning the academic investigation of communication that can only be collective and provisional, and whose proposal is based on the results of an extensive study of the processes of "structuring" this field in Mexico, carried out by the author during the past five years as a doctorate thesis in social sciences. To document this reflexive analysis, three studies in the field of academic communication research in Mexico have been selected: the first summarizes the results of documentary systemization, which displays the principle tendencies in published works. The second presents a basic characterization of the subjective representations that constitute what could be considered the essence of the professional ideology of Mexican communication researchers. Finally, we put forth a model of the "double alternative" confronting the field in the 1990s, a conclusive synthesis of the above-mentioned study.

As in all countries where it is conducted, academic communication research in Mexico is currently facing a complex and multidimensional transformation or crisis, whose analysis cannot be limited to national peculiarities. The two issues of the *Journal of Communication* published in 1993 focused on considerations concerning "the future of the field" allow for an appreciation of the remarkable changes that the Anglo Saxon "disciplinary conscience" has undergone in less than a decade, following that memorable *Ferment in the Field* in 1983. And this is not the only international publication in which one can find diagnostic and prospective conclusions with respect to the Mexican case. In general terms, it can be asserted that, though the recurrent debates on the very identity of the communication field could be interpreted as a sign of its scientific immaturity –and even of its "intellectual poverty" (Peters, 1986), the permanent reflexive analysis implied in those debates is also indicative of its vitality and of its probable centrality for the social sciences of the 21st century (Giddens, 1989).

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Based on this recognition, this essay hopes to contribute to the elaboration of a reflexive analysis of academic communication research that can only be collective and provisional, and that is put forth based on the results of an extensive study of the "structuralization" of this field in Mexico, undertaken by the author during the past five years (Fuentes, 1997).

This study established three relevant contextual dimensions to analyze the structuralization of the field of academic communication research in Mexico: the cognizable, the socio-cultural and the institutional. In the first category, we include the factors and processes of change that affect the production, reproduction and circulation of knowledge about communication, as well as structures and socio-cultural phenomena in broader terms, and the essence and nature of academic systems and activities. In the socio-cultural category, we have taken into consideration the factors and processes of change that have taken place in these activities and systems in relation to the cultural, political and economic structures (national and international) subjected to wide–ranging transformations in recent years. Finally, the institutional dimension concretely and specifically referred to the changes in which the cognizable and socio-cultural factors came together.

Obviously, from the cognizable standpoint, the disciplinary inconsistencies of communication research were examined. From the socio-cultural dimension, we delved into the conditions of the country's structural dependency. And from the institutional perspective, we looked at the characteristics of the national university system, particularly the promotion of research activities.

Based on this "triple context", nine processes of classifying the academic field of communication were defined, which operate on different levels (individual, institutional, socio-cultural), and which refer to:

The establishment of the subjects (academic history, social origins, etc.);
An evaluation of the *habitus* (patterns of perception, values, action);
Professional level (university degrees or academic achievements, level of job training);
Social institutionalization (the organization of programs, associations, publications); Cognizable institutionalization (origin and make-up of "disciplinary matrixes");
Specialization of production (intra or interdisciplinary scientific exchanges);
Self-reproduction of the field (the formation and incorporation of new elements); Social legitimacy (social acquisition of scientific authority and relative autonomy);
Assimilation/accommodation of an understanding of the changing socio-cultural environment.

The instrumentation of the primary sources of data for this investigation includes three types of direct, empirical work; documentary systematization, a survey with three research tools and a series of non-structured interviews. Forty nine communication researchers, Mexicans or residents in Mexico, directly participated with the subjects, almost all of them belonging to one of the

six universities where research has been concentrated: the National Autonomous University of Mexico, the Metropolitan Autonomous University-Xochimilco, the Iberoamerican University, the University of Guadalajara, the University of Colima and the ITESO.

On this occasion, to document this reflexive analysis, we have selected � ee of the studies conducted in the field of academic communication research in Mexico: in the first, we summarize the results of the documentary systematization in a manner that reveals the objective nature of the major tendencies of published works; in the second, we present a basic characterization of the subjective representations that constitute what could be termed the essence of the professional ideology of Mexican communication researchers; finally, we explain the model of the "double alternative" facing this field in the 1990s, a conclusive synthesis of this study.

Tendencies of published works

Communications Investigation in Mexico, Documentary Systematization 1956-1986 (Fuentes, 1988) was published in 1988, based on 877 documents containing the results of 30 years of Mexican research in the field. In this study, it became clear that the institutionalization was incipient, and that in reality it had just barely begun to manifest itself in Mexico in the mid-1970s. With respect to this situation, a decade ago, interpretations and perspectives arose that until then had not been elaborated with sufficient detail, but that painted a panorama that soon became obsolete. Nevertheless, this documentary systematization gave rise to a broader

and more focused study on the individuals and institutions involved in this endeavor, which was published in 1991 as *La comunidad desapercibida; investigacion e investigadores de la comunicacion en Mexico* (Fuentes, 1991). The structural and contemporaneous "tensions" that determined the characteristics of production were more clearly defined in this work, as well as how the country, its institutions and its actors were changing, and how the objects of study and the theoretical–methodological frameworks were changing. With this work, it was possible to begin an integral study of the processes of structuralization of the academic field, whose most finished product is the book entitled *La emergencia de un campo academico: continuidad utopica y estructuracion cientifica de la investigacion de la comunicacion en Mexico* (Fuentes, 1997).

As mentioned, among the different sources of this study, documentary systematization remained essential. After 1986, in order to establish with greater precision what had changed, how it had changed, and what had remained static and why, it was necessary to update, or better said, to continue recovering the published works. The result was *La investigacion de la comunicacion en Mexico, sistematizacion documental 1986 - 1994* (Fuentes, 1996), in which the criteria of the previous anthology was basically maintained. Nevertheless, to overcome certain defects and update the study with respect to some changes that had been detected, the second set of non-published works was eliminated, that is, the dissertations and unedited reports. In their place were included graduate theses, which tend to be solid

research projects. At the same time, documents were selected that provided contributions, even if just collateral, to the systematic knowledge of communication in Mexico. Most of these came from the academic community and were published between 1986 (not included in the previous book) and December 1994. This new *body* of analysis was made up of 1,019 documents.

The first tendency that becomes immediately clear, is the sustained growth in published research in Mexico. Between 1986 and 1994, more of these works circulated than in the previous 30 years. If by 1986, more than half of the selected documents had been published after 1980, the sum of both *corpus* increased the production to 84 percent in 1994. This statistic is perhaps more eloquent if it is inverted: only 16 percent of Mexican communication research studies were published before 1980. This represents a reaffirmation of the fact that the activity is currently in a full phase of expansion in Mexico, although it began less than 20 years ago, and it can be expected to continue growing in the near future. But in order to study the characteristics of this growth, there are other bibliometric indicators that can be used.

In terms of the manner in which the works are presented, it can be asserted that the tendency also clearly favors publication. Between 1956 and 1986, only 78 percent of the documents had been formally published: 129 books, 495 articles in books or magazines, 58 monographs or seried articles, for a total of 682 works. Between 1986 and 1994, without including unpublished documents, there are 126 books, 772 articles, 44 monographs and 77 graduate theses, for a total of 1,019 works. There are three specific characteristics that stand out in this tendency toward published works: the emergence of the "article" format as the predominant option, the publication of books with contributions from various authors, and a considerable lack of centralization with respect to the publishing firms that promote these works.

Though the predominance of the article format seems obvious, this is not necessarily the case. The article format presupposes, on the one hand, the investigators' aim to synthesize and concretize their works in terms relatively more provisional and debatable than a book, but more detailed and serious than an oral presentation. On the other hand, it presupposes that specialized magazines are the means of internal communication within the academic community. However, neither of these suppositions have attained the level of development of other social sciences in Mexico, and are far from approaching international standards. In communication research one can clearly perceive the process toward the institutionalization of this basic system of scientific communication. From the total body of 1,896 systematized documents, 1,267 –that is, 67 percent– are articles. This ratio has increased in recent years: from 56 percent in 1956 to 1986, to 76 percent between 1986 and 1994.

Thirty percent (235) of the articles published in recent years form part of collectively authored books, which include two modalities: those coordinated by one or two editors, who entrust work to several researchers

concerning different aspects of a general theme, and, more frequently, the collections of one or two coordinators who gather and organize a book based on oral presentations given in a conference or congress. Though strictly speaking they are not considered proceedings, these books have been increasingly used to publish the studies presented at the conferences or congresses. A noteworthy case, though an exception, were the four books edited by the organizing committee of the 7th Latin American Conference of Social Communications Departments, held in Acapulco in October 1992, which were distributed at the beginning of the event, and contained most of the presentations to be made.

But most of the articles (70 percent, or 537) published between 1986 and 1994 are included in specialized academic magazines. During those years there was a noteworthy change in this aspect of Mexican communication research. Of the 10 most important publications in late 1994, only one existed in 1986: *Cuadernos de Comunicación*, edited since 1975, though annually since 1984. The other nine were established during the intervening years: *Estudios sobre las Culturas Contemporaneas*, from the University of Colima Cultural Program, in 1986; *Communicacion y Sociedad*, of what had been the Center for Information and Communications Studies, currently the Department of Social Communications Studies of the University of Guadalajara, in 1987; the Manuel Buendia Foundation's *Revista Mexicana de Comunicacion in 1988; Cuadernos de Comunicacion y Practicas Sociales*, of the Iberoamerican University's Institutional Program of Communications Research and Social Practices, in 1990; *Version, Estudios de Communicacion y Politica*, of

the Metropolitan Autonomous University-Xochimilco's Education and Communications Department, in 1991; *Cuadernos del Posgrado*, of the Iberoamerican University's Communications Department, in 1992; the *Mexican Journal of Communication*, of the Manuel Buendía Foundation, in 1993; *Cuadernos del Departamento de Communicacion*, of ITESO, and the *Anuario CONEICC de Investigacion de la Communicacion*, in 1994. All of them seem to have at least transcended the initially difficult stage of all publications, but *Estudios sobre las Culturas Contemporáneas* and *Comunicación y Sociedad* have gone further: they have been included by the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT) in the Index of Excellent Scientific Publications.

It is therefore clear that the publication outlets of the academic community have gone through a virtual 360 degree renovation in the past 10 years, with the exception –as we pointed out– of *Cuadernos de Comunicacion*. We can also point to the continuity of publications outside this specific field, even though for some decades now they have included articles on communication, like the *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Politicas y Sociales*. The last issue of *Comunicacion y Cultura*, edited by the UAM Xochimilco was published in 1985. So, too, was the last number of *Cuadernos del CEC*, issued by the UNAM's Political and Social Science Department. The most recent edition of *Cuadernos del TICOM* (UAM Xochimilco) was published in 1983. *Conotaciones*, of the Mexican Association of Communications Researchers, ceased to exist in 1983. *Intermedios*, of the General Directorate of Radio, Television and Cinema, only published eight issues,

between 1992 and 1993. Many other publications, that had also achieved certain importance, also ceased to publish.

This "renovation" of academic publications on communication is quite important, not only in terms of the fragile nature of the institutional structure in this field of research, but also due to the scientific character of the published articles. As opposed to the publications that abounded in previous periods, the new magazines and journals have established a system of anonymous arbitration in the selection of those works to be published, as well as certain norms of formality in terms of the articles. This has undoubtedly contributed to a greater scientific quality of the publications, and as a result, has probably also contributed to a higher level of research.

In short, there has been an accumulation of very interesting data with respect to these publications, which has given rise to a broader analysis of the contents of the articles published on these themes, and that point to the differential impacts of the economic crisis on the production of communication research. For example, the pressure on researchers to publish, resulting from new systems of labor promotion and analysis, has had a significant impact, particularly the National Researchers System. At the same time, there is an irrefutable growth and development of the academic field, as well as a more rational use of support resources, which are relatively more scarce compared to the previous decade.

By the same token, we cannot fail to point out –though briefly– the impact of decentralization in the publications on communication research during recent years. While the body of this research corresponding to the 1956 to 1986 period was published in the Mexico City metropolitan area, during the 1986-1994 period, this proportion decreased by 56 percent. The most notable increase corresponds to two cities in western Mexico, Guadalajara and Colima, in which 27 percent of the documents were published, though only 3 percent was published in 12 other cities. That is, the impact of decentralization is somewhat deceiving, though nonetheless real. Perhaps a more accurate concept would be the rise of a "second center" –still minor and practically exclusive– or of "peripheral centralization", or "sub-centralization".

This "bipolarity" is also a recent tendency, taking into consideration the origin of its production instead of the origin of its research. It is interesting to note that there is a parallel growth in the proportion of communication research produced and published in Mexico's central-western regions, since the publications are not exactly the same: the region produces research published in other parts of the country, and in the region, research is published from other areas. The growth of research production in this region has been greater and more emphasized than in the country as a whole, and is very similar to the growth of publications: from 12.2 percent up to 1986, it increased to 29.5 percent in the past 10 years. Particular consideration should be given to the fact that the two CONACYT–recognized publications are edited in Colima and Guadalajara.

Though the results are still incipient, they imply the beginnings of a new emergency pattern in the development

of new centers of reference for research in Monterrey and Puebla, which would be very fortunate for national research. Though here we are incapable of developing a more detailed analysis, the relation between the "national" and the "regional" in Mexico's communication research could be more clearly illustrated if we take into consideration the institutions and individual producers as units of research analysis.

Between 1986 and 1994, slightly more than 70 percent of the country's academic research concerning communication was generated by researchers attached to only six institutions, three of them in the central-western region. This tendency toward concentration demands a review of the factors that have given rise to relatively favorable conditions for research in these universities and not in others, as well as a review of the "productivity indexes" of their researchers, which are above the national norm. Of the 25 researchers with the largest number of published works in recent years, only five do not belong to these six institutions. These are, as we have already indicated, the UNAM, the Iberoamerican University, the UAM Xochimilco, the University of Guadalajara, the ITESO, and the University of Colima.

On the other hand, in the first systematic balance, 877 documents from 420 authors were included. A simple division of these statistics indicates that up to 1986, there was an average of 2.08 documents per author, while between that year and 1994, this average rose to 3.12. Before delving into the content of the publications, it is important to point out that this tendency toward the concentration of communication

research could indicate a certain maturity in this activity, but could also reveal some degree of stagnation or decline. Taking 1986 as a point of departure, it is clear that there are more researchers who publish a great deal, though also more who publish less — both before and after this date. The 25 authors who most contributed to the *Sistematizacion Documental 1986-1994* are: Javier Esteinou, Enrique Sánchez, Guillermo Orozco, Raúl Fuentes, Jesús Galindo, Jorge González, Rossana Reguillo, Francisco Aceves, Nestor García Canclini, Fernando Mejía Barquera, Carmen Gómez Mont, José Carlos Lozano, Florence Toussaint, Raúl Trejo, Fátima Fernández, Mercedes Charles, Delia Crovi, Gilberto Fregoso, Rafael Reséndiz, Pablo Arredondo, José Luis Gutiérrez, Carlos Luna, Alma Rosa Alva de la Selva, Eduardo de la Vega and Carlos Monsiváis. Half of them only began publishing with certain regularity in recent years, and none of them are under 35 years old.

Based on this data, there seems to be sufficient evidence to argue that during the past 10 years Mexican communication research has been going through a transition phase that could be considered structural in character. From a series of isolated efforts, most of which have been the result of sheer willpower, academic investigation in the sphere has begun to acquire levels of institutionalization and professionalism that have given it legitimacy –at least, in an academic, if not social sense– that can only be interpreted as very positive and relatively optimistic.

Most noteworthy is the fact that this "arrival at maturity" has occurred precisely in the epoch in which the

country's universities are suffering a crisis that only promises to worsen. There is truly something paradoxical in this "against the current" development, since according to the neoliberal and techno-bureaucratic standard, most of what is accomplished shouldn't have to be justified: it is hardly profitable and not applicable. But this concept also contains an explanation, since it is obvious that, fortunately, the techno-bureaucracy is not as efficient as it would like to be. In different scenarios, in crises, in transitions, even in revolutions, history changes, but not all of a sudden. Institutions and individuals are also part of history, objectivized and incorporated, and history is not just what has occurred in the past; it is also the struggle to impose the predominance of future projects, each of which constructs the past in its own particular manner.

But before reviewing the "projects" subjectively incorporated into research practices, it is necessary to recover the tendencies in terms of publication content, which also eloquently indicate the transitions occurring in the field, particularly in terms of the themes, context and the theoretical methodology employed.

It is increasingly more difficult to identify communication research with research into the mass media. Even though approximately two-thirds of the documents included in the models presented before and after 1986 focus on themes related to the media, there are some notable differences: for example, though structural and contemporary research into industry continues, there are many more specific studies with respect to politics, economics, ideology, labor, and

technology, as well as a much greater emphasis on regional, national and global aspects. Particularly interesting, for example, is the wealth of contributions concerning the multidimensional impacts of the North American Free Trade Agreement on Mexican communication, culture and identity. There is less emphasis in treating the "mass media" in general, and an evident and very understandable predominance of studies concerning the audiovisual aspects of published material. While until 1986 there was practically an equal number of works concerning both aspects, during the past few years there have been almost four times more published material on television, video and cinema than on the press, magazines and books. There was also a considerable increase in the proportion of studies focusing on radio and music, as well as a quite understandable increase in material concerning "new technologies", "new communication media" and "new forms of communication".

Though it is clear than in the past decade communication research has been "culturalized", it has also been "economized", "politicized" and "technologized". That is, there has been a strong tendency toward more diversified and in-depth research with specific respect to the socio-cultural dimensions of generic objects such as "communication media", "television" or "audiovisual space". Though there was a transition from "the media to mediations", there was also a healthy and necessary effort toward a return to the idea of "from the mediations to the media", toward which –as an industry and a hegemonic apparatus– a critical posture continues. A review of the

themes taken up in post-graduate theses is particularly interesting. Few of these works existed before 1986, but the *corpus* that has been studied includes 70 masters theses and seven doctorate theses presented between 1986 and 1994. Barely more than 20 percent can be considered media studies, including focuses on history, politics, analysis of content and message reception. In reality, most of the theses –in terms of their themes and content– tend more toward "social sciences" and education research than toward "communication", in the restricted confines of undergraduate programs.

Though it isn't easy to separate theme from content, the tendency toward the predominance of more specific studies, which at the same time are more in-depth and inter-connected with others, has much to do with the fact that more and more studies are incorporating what Enrique Sanchez (Sanchez & Fuentes, 1990) called "empirical content". In its broader sense, this has to do with studies that transcend the knowledgeable essay or the freely and purely theoretical. It represents an organized effort in the gathering/production of data. These include historic and/or structural studies, the quantitative as well as qualitative analysis of content, survey research, experimental designs, action-research and ethnography. In the *corpus* 1956-1986, it was noted that only 38 percent of the documents contained evidence of "empirical content", and only 11.2 percent of field research. In the *corpus* 1986-1994, the proportion of documents with empirical content reaches 52 percent, and those demonstrating field research or direct interaction on the part of the researcher

with his or her subjects, 17 percent. This index reflects a considerable increase in studies resulting from formal research projects, though it also reflects the scarcity of resources to carry out extensive field research studies, be they quantitative or qualitative.

Though the empirical or "essay" focuses are basically methodological definitions of research projects, it is very important to recognize that designs –due to their variability– also depend on the availability of resources. Sources of financing, besides their scarcity, have tended to closely associate themselves with official criteria concerning the project's evaluation, as well as its "ownership" and "scientific character". As a result, those who can hope to obtain support in their fieldwork practically all belong to the National Research System or are graduate students of the CONACYT's Scale of Excellence. Given these official mechanisms, the universities have virtually eliminated budgets for research support, leading researchers to work on their own and professors to dedicate themselves solely to their classes. Nevertheless, in general, the situation has improved in the past 10 years. It should be noted that it was also difficult to obtain material support for research before 1986. And those resources obtained from international agencies, at times with high interest rates, did not always result in publishable works.

Worth noting is the establishment of institutional research centers like the University of Colima's Cultural Program, the CEIC (now DECS) of the University of Guadalaljara, the Iberoamerican University's PROIICOM –all less than 10 years old. They have

given rise to research programs and publishing mechanisms that most of the communication departments have been incapable of achieving. These programs, in very general terms, have defined the thematic and theoretical-methodological "essence" of all, or of at least their most important and productive research projects. In this way, contemporary cultures, the communication media and their historical–structural mediations and the social practice of communication, beginning with the reception of messages, have the strongest "nuclei" giving impetus to certain themes that, not by coincidence, are the focus of works by nationally and internationally renowned researchers, such as Jorge Gonzalez, Enrique Sanchez and Guillermo Orozco. The emphasis has been centered as much on television, as on a multi-disciplinary approach in style, and on connecting methodological reflection with empirical work, though with some differences in terms of diverse aspects of academic practice, its priority orientations and development strategies.

Professional ideology and research styles

As has been mentioned, the study upon which this work is based attempted to analyze the social determination of structural practices in a multidimensional process that at the same time has given impetus to the structuring of Mexico's academic communication research and has defined the distinctive characteristics of the subjects of field research. A reconstruction of the cognizable elements in this field, summarized in this study, is based on 24 open interviews that attempted to synthesize the researcher's representations in three interpretive dimensions: personal professional careers, professional identities or *habitus*, and the utopian aim of the academic work in question.

The "reinterpretation" (Thompson, 1993) elaborated, based on the inter-connection of these dimensions, was organized in the context of a reconstruction of the collective processes in the articulation of a "professional ideology", put together in the *habitus* and the *campo* (Bourdieu, 1972), which serves as a "disciplinary matrix" in the broadest sense of the term. And in terms of the relationship between researchers, subjects "struggling" for prestige and legitimacy, it also attempts to seek knowledge transposed by the subjects (Bourdieu, 1988).

Aside from personal and circumstantial differences, the subjects narrated their academic careers beginning with the moment they chose communication as their field of study. That is, upon university enrollment, or, those who had majored in other areas when they decided to dedicate themselves to this particular field. In all the cases (without exception, though with different emphases), researchers mentioned as a determining factor the very ambivalence of the field of study, its broad nature or lack of a defined professional horizon, with diverse personal characteristics (self-defined), and centered in different institutional environments, though limited to certain universities and a specific time period: the first half of the 1970s. But within the "broad spectrum" of the academic career in communication, whether as students or educators, the selection of

the "specialization" in research is an extremely variable dimension among the academicians interviewed. There are those who spoke of a "calling" clearly assumed at an early stage. Some delved in-depth into the factors that determined that calling, in different senses. Others placed more emphasis on the circumstances of time and place –of an emerging academic project– as determining factors in their careers as communication researchers. Finally, still others don't consider themselves researchers, but rather, academicians. They prefer to define themselves as educators, as "trainers" of communicators.

The collective appraisal of the conditions giving rise to this academic field are in large part homogeneous, as much in the reconstruction of personal motives for taking an interest in the subject as in the characterization of the specific time and place. A mixture of nostalgia and frustration is certainly evident –in many cases explicitly admitted and accepted– in the discourse of those interviewed concerning that time frame ("the 1960s") in which one finds the origins of the academic field and the personal careers of those more advanced in years. That was also an era of conflicts that 20 years later are more "calmly analyzed" by those who played active roles at the time.

The struggle for "a monopoly on legitimate knowledge" (Bourdieu, 1988) in the origin of the field of academic communication research in Mexico was taken up, above all, by those who sought to buttress empirical "scientific" models and those who radicalized their "academic" commitment to social transformation, within the context of Latin American "political activism". Undoubtedly, this era of "conflicts"

(between 1976 and 1982) established the limits within which this field would have to continue developing. But it also resulted in a decisive contribution to the definition of the researchers' *habitus*, and to the rise of "enormous experience" and personal "differences" between the period's major protagonists. Nevertheless, it can be asserted that the actors share the sensation that in this struggle everyone lost, since their reconstruction of "the crisis of the 80s" –despite diverse nuances– is very homogeneous, above all in the field of research as a profession.

The collective diagnosis of the conditions for academic development in the 1980s, particularly in terms of institutions (infrastructures and university policies) and labor (salaries), concludes with more "encouraging" results in terms of the "current situation". An analysis of the motives that led most researchers to seek additional income without leaving the university, allows for an explanation of this fact within the logic of the contradiction between "personal satisfaction" and "economic frustration", by means of the dichotomy of certain specific characteristics of the specific. *habitus*. It also allows for an explanation of the conditions that led to individual rejection of assuming "leadership" in the field, projected in other instruments of the same study. Within the context in which these histories were analyzed, the researchers placed emphasis on "personal satisfaction" and the aim of accepting a commitment with the profession as a "life-long project".

In the 1970s, a series of factors came together (economic, political, cultural)

that gave rise to the development of a "communication utopia" (professional and social), adhered to by many who had opted for an academic career. As a result, in a large measure, the research project immediately became an arena of conflict. But in the 1980s, a change in this series of factors ("national crisis") –which also coincided with the excessive increase in undergraduate programs and a generalized awareness of the scientific, as well as political, "weakness" of communication research– led to an institutional restructuring of this academic field. At the same time, in terms of cognition, this led to an "adjustment" in the community *"habitus"* and to a greater degree in the demand for internal exactness, even though it also led to a significant reduction in the number of "researchers". From this flows the representation of the "actual state" of this academic field, as well as its foreseeable future, in which a consensus prevails.

> *I believe we are going to conduct very little academic research in the future, but the few of us are going to have greater possibilities to do so. And perhaps the research will be of greater importance, in the sense that it will be more precise, more up-to-date, less esoteric, and will be able to contribute more and have a greater impact even though our ranks are diminished.*

The concern over the weakness and "scattered" nature of the research field is quite generalized, and in interviews is associated with three factors: institutional (the lack of support in the field), theoretical-methodological (the lack of definition of the subject to be studied), and the interpersonal (isolation, conflicts). With surprising frequency, the older subjects spoke of "reconciliation" as a shared desired, but also of the prevalence of "envy" as a generalized attitude, which almost all directly associated with the field's weakness as well as with its isolation as individually perceived.

Very noteworthy is the general consideration that research work is "lonely and isolated", both because of "objective" conditions and due to inter-subjective conditions (envy, conflicts), as well as "personal preferences". It can therefore be stated that the "objective isolation" is quite a bit less than that perceived by the subjects. During more than a year of interviews, the interviewer was increasingly surprised by the homogeneous nature of the responses, which each person interviewed termed as a "very personal impression". This and other aspects are shared by the majority of those interviewed, as part of their specific habitus, without their own conscious knowledge.

On the other hand, "established" researchers share in common a concern over the reproduction of the field, and almost in the same terms. This concern is shared by the youngest of those who in recent years have incorporated themselves into this endeavor, and, in general, the field of study is not perceived as self-fulfilling by the majority of the researchers interviewed. In this there is also an ample common language, despite the age of the subjects.

But among the multiple factors raised by those interviewed –at different levels of abstraction and generalization– some are unique, and contribute key,

and very important interpretations, not only of their careers and professions, but also of the field itself, or at least some of its aspects. Here are several examples:

> *I believe identity is a vital necessity of all human beings. And we had a tremendous necessity to find a name for ourselves. Strangely enough, I don't think anyone liked the term communicologist. And I think it still doesn't satisfy anyone, but we can find no other label. One of our problems that I think adds fuel to the flame of this debate is that we don't feel like citizens of any country, we don't feel that we lay a claim to any territory. Consequently, on many occasions, our extreme reactions were often directed abroad, and those abroad were laughing at us.*
> *I feel differently now about academia's need to influence events (in the country) than I did in 1979. Even with the immaturity of that period, both collectively and personally, there were proposals that today both embarrass me and make me laugh, but that concern is the same as today. (...) It is very important that we examine the issue strictly from the intellectual, academic, and productive point of view, while at the same time once again taking up that which was present during the initial years: the desire to participate. (...) If we were 20 some-odd years old then, now we are over 40, and, well, we are (...) more mature, and we can come up with (...) very concrete ideas.*
> *If we want to turn communication research, or anything similar, into a true academic field, the first thing we have to do is work in the way that an academic field works. We have to accumulate specific capital, and that capital is called knowledge. (...) If we want to develop a research field, we have to make an in-depth inventory of our knowledge — which belongs to no one, not to sociologists, but at the same time belongs to everyone. When we are able to achieve quality in the interpretation of contemporary elements and in the design of new elements, and when we are able to say that we not only belong to the field of communication, but are also normal, everyday people, then we will begin to be respected. And this is done with the tools of the trade, in terms of research projects, with debate, because this is the only thing that will garner the respect of others.*

Consequently, the professional identity of academic communication researchers is still subject –according to they themselves– to a growth process for which the foundation is already there, and in function of which it is necessary to activate the knowledge accumulated in the field, though in two complementary and at the same time opposite senses: "outwards", in terms of social responsibility and as a strategy of legitimacy (politically), and "inwards", in methodological terms, as a condition for professionalization (scientifically). In the connection between the researchers and these two opposite poles, there is a clearly defined and deeply rooted ethic in terms of professional ideology, the habitus and the "disciplinary matrix". They operate as a "shared and basic common nucleus" in the structured practice of the subjects, though insufficiently established. This, perhaps, is due to the more profound "underlying logic" in the connection between these elements.

The "return to mysticism" (like astrology) –sometimes as a game, other

times as an "underground activity" among some communication researchers– probably, according to they themselves, represents "the symptoms of the necessity of new forms of understanding, putting together, finding a new morality and giving new sense to all that is occurring". Because

> *we are building up an academic communication research field based on the logic of the last century, for a society on the verge of crisis, for a way of social life, for a logic of understanding that is currently in crisis, and we are struggling to institutionalize something that's going in all directions. And we pull it toward this, a mold or shell that is already breaking. It's suicide. (...) The field of academic communication research is still nothing more than a project on paper that doesn't add up. We're still there. We're young, very young. We are immersed in a moment in which everything is still moving, in a way of speaking: it's a global process that is going to have an impact in the centuries to come. We are in transition..."*

This is one of the "options of the future" that some (few) researchers see in the field of communication, and which in a very radical sense ("from the grassroots") extends the foundational "utopian imagination" of the field toward the future, in socio-cultural and at the same time scientific-ethical terms. At the other "extreme", with a socio-cultural horizon perhaps less utopian, other researchers (few) put forth as a "future option" for the field a "recuperation" of its participation in the market of information production, by means of applied research projects:

> *This is a process (...) we forget that some of the great communication researchers, including Lazarsfeld and Eco and Schramm, among many others, felt in many moments the necessity –or the obligation– to get involved in activities more pragmatic than the theory of academic activity. (...) I would say that perhaps in some of us there is a necessity to nourish theoretical reflection with practical challenges. I don't mean that this is the solution for everyone, but for some, yes.*

At any rate, both "options" imply a radical reorientation of the foundations upon which –perhaps precariously– academic research has been institutionalized, both in the social as well as in the cognizable arenas. In both cases ("the great steps forward" or "the recuperation of pragmatism"), the reshaping of the basic sense of research practice, a recognition of a general change of circumstances, the necessity to reinforce the methodology of research and the elimination of disciplinary limits in the field are implicit.

Nevertheless, the struggle for prestige (individual and collective) is undoubtedly a key factor in understanding the multidimensional processes of the structuring of Mexico's academic communication research field. This factor, manifest in numerous strategies pronounced by the subjects ("political" as well as "scientific") has led to a strongly balanced tension (and consequently a tendency toward stagnation) between "the competition for creative achievements" and "the competition for a monopoly on legitimate knowledge" (Knorr-Cetina,

1981: 70). This competition has evolved among the few agencies (personal or institutional) that have internalized the objective conditions externally imposed on the field, as well as its practices (the "disciplinary inconsistency", the "structural dependency" and the "university crisis"), and that have maintained among the tools (resources and interpretative outlines) of their structure (Giddens, 1984) the "founding" projects of "academic institutionalization", "intellectual autonomy" and "utopian continuity". These have been maintained up to a point that seems to be a viable historic limit (as perceived by the subjects). Consequently, without the subjects' awareness, no one subjectively assumes (being capable of "objectively" doing so) the role of intellectual and political leadership, which through prestige can generate legitimate power (Sewell, 1992) both "internally" and "externally", as is demanded by the field for its own survival.

The interpretation concerning the field's "disciplinary weakness" is practically unanimous among those interviewed. At the same time, there is a practically unanimous interpretation of the "growing importance", in socio-cultural terms, of the "object" of study. This points to a more in-depth "reinterpretation" of the field's cognizable factors, within an ethical dimension, which has been least examined by the sociology of science. As Pickering (1992) pointed out, it implies a definitive step in the conception of science as knowledge to a conception of scientific activity as an ethically oriented and specific socio-cultural practice, in which the subjects continuously generate and regenerate its content. As a result, based on this premise, the conclusion of this study seeks to establish a model of structuralization, destructuralization and reconstructuralization of the field, emphasizing the available options for its academic and social legitimacy.

The structuring and restructuring of the academic field

The study partially summarized here (Fuentes, 1997) hoped to explain, in general terms, the dynamics of Mexico's overall socio-cultural situation, "in global transition". Also, within a national educational system characterized by intense internal and external pressures, this study attempts to demonstrate how, in the 1970s, academic communication research emerged in some universities as a utopian project, experienced the "crisis" of the 1980s –despite the fact that this same period established its institutionalization– and is faced with, in the 1990s, the challenges of its consolidation as a professional and legitimate academic practice.

Hypothetically, the development in Mexico of the multidimensional, complex and contradictory academic field of communication has been determined –in general terms over the past 25 years– by the convergence of intense processes of change. On the one hand, this development has taken place in the conditions of the national academic market, on the other, within the context of the epistemological and theoretical-methodological context of communication study. In this way, there has been a convergence of the economic and political with the intellectual and cultural factors in the development of a socio-cultural "scenario" in which Mexican communication researchers have established themselves as

responsible, and relatively conscious agents of the academic practices that have defined the field.

Due to the author's participation as a subject in the processes that he studied, the research immediately adopted a self-reflexive character, guided by the methodological principle of "participating observer" (Bourdieu, 1989; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In contacts with the principle contemporary tendencies in the sociology of knowledge –particularly constructivists– the work became an empirical and exploratory approach for the construction of its objective. This required copying and systematizing a considerable volume of information that had been dispersed concerning Mexico's knowledge of communication and its contextual conditions — about its producers, both individual and institutional, and about its productive aims, particularly with respect to academic publications.

It was also necessary to update and organize the information in university programs where that knowledge and the academic associations that produce it are to be found. And it was necessary to organize the information concerning the individuals who cultivate that knowledge, the background on their professional lives and the cognizable premises they have adopted. The corresponding database, whose efficacy is undeniable as an infrastructure for research and decision-making, is nevertheless only an instrumental platform. It is a resource based on an analysis that attempted to support the concrete data of interpretations that sought to establish a model in the structuring of the academic field. To accomplish this, two heuristic models

were established, one based on structures and another with respect to the processes in the structuring of the communication research field.

Therefore, methodologically speaking, the research was oriented along the lines of a hybrid logic: in as much as the object of study was constructed from a socio-cultural perspective, it was necessary to make patent the connection between social objectives and subjective interpretations that weren't directly observable. As we tried to not subordinate one of the study's dimensions to another, but rather to analyze the meaning of structurally situated practices in order to build a model of the academic field's components, it was necessary to employ varied descriptive methods to systematize information on the object's diverse aspects. At the same time, we had to devise an explicatory method to consistently integrate the results of those "partial" analyses, from an interpretive point of view.

The "central question", around which the study's design and instrumentalization were organized, implied heuristically seeking and identifying the principal socio-cultural factors between the confluence of knowledge (practical, instrumental and formal) and the experiences of the "academic researchers" in the forging of Mexico's academic field of communication.

From the beginning, the identification of these "principle socio-cultural factors" –both in the field's external structures, as well as internally– were sought in the experiences of the subjects, of the "academic researchers" as agents of this structuring. With this aim, a "triple

context" was established (cognizable, socio-cultural and institutional), characterized by a multifaceted crisis in which disciplinary inconsistency, structural dependency and the crisis of the universities were considered as objective conditions, imposed from the outside. Academic institutionalization, intellectual autonomy and utopian continuity, on the other hand, were seen as internal factors. This, at the same time, implied that "Mexico's academic communication researchers weave together their experiences and knowledge by internalizing those conditions and externalizing the relatively shared institutional project." Thus, the general hypothesis that was developed is as follows:

> *The forging of the academic field of communication research in Mexico has been guided by the work of the subjects who share a utopian project of their generation, the primordial source of their beliefs and professional identities. This, phenomenon, at the same time, has been molded by its situational context in the framework of an institutional, disciplinary and social environment characterized by the scarcity of resources, instability and marginality, which have limited its growth, and –through the loss of the tools of communication knowledge, from one generation to another– have prevented the attainment of its social legitimacy.*

The analyses of the programs, associations, publications and cognizable aspects of the field, based as much on secondary as on primary sources, not only allowed for the empirical confirmation of the predominance of "internal" factors

(subjective, ideological) and their influence on "external" conditions (structural, economic "in the last instance") in the processes of structuring and destructuring. They also allowed for an inference and projection (based on the points of view of the researchers themselves) concerning the strategic options of restructuration whose field, above all, has been opened in the past decade by the "professional vanguard" in terms of its academic and social legitimacy.

Particularly relevant is the "double alternative": an advance in the subjects' work toward a restructuring of the field, and through this work, its legitimacy is determined (limited, measured) by three "new" conditions. These can be summarized in the subjects' advanced professionalization, which implies a "postdisciplinarization" (the rupture of disciplinary "borders") in research practice, the demonstration of methodological solvency (systematic capacity to resolve problems) of communication researchers and the restructuring of the practices and projects (individual, collective and institutional) that directly confront the "conformist inertia" generated and accumulated by the current structures.

This is the field's first alternative emerging in the 1990s: change or disappear as a productive academic field. The second alternative implies the change and "confrontation" of the "new conditions" assumed through advanced professionalization, in an effort to seek legitimacy through "extending the utopian imagination" or the "recovery of pragmatism" — future prospects that are seen as mutually exclusive.

During the first half of the 1990s, the tendency toward fragmentation gained

greater force in Mexico's field of academic communication research, as opposed to the tendency toward synthesis. This is due, on the one hand, to the fact that the "struggle" for hegemony in the field (trans-institutional) has remained subordinated to the "struggle" of academic communication researchers for the conservation of "space" (intra-institutional) and the resources earmarked for research — within the context of the institutional crisis of Mexican universities. This reality has not facilitated the emergence of strong "leaders", nor the incorporation of new actors in the field (individually, institutionally or regionally).

Based on the analyses of the processes of the field's social institutionalization, three underlying premises were established in Mexico's academic communication research in terms of the "accumulation of capital" (prestige and "position") in its "intellectual" elaboration (publications, conferences, courses), in its "political" elaboration (coordinating associations, organization of events), or through both, in order to at the same time accumulate "social capital" ("political" relations, organizational merits) and "cultural capital" ("intellectual" contributions, scientific merits).

Information gathered on the 49 researchers included in the study was transformed into a database with 28 "variables", from which emerged a correlation matrix that demonstrated (among many other relations) that the aspects most inter-connected (statistically) were the number of publications and mutual recognition (coefficient of 0.8265) –both among those with masters degrees and Ph.ds-,

membership in the National Researchers System and the elections for posts of coordinators and presidents of academic associations. In this way it was verified that the prestige of the field's researchers depends primarily on their "scientific qualifications" (or at least on their "visibility" among those who elect and recognize them). Also revealed were the factors of concentration found among individuals and among institutions, and the increasing difficulty in "breaking" this pattern.

On the other hand, however, this relative concentration and structuring of positions is also related to the increasing predominance of the tendency toward fragmentation as opposed to a (disciplinary) synthesis of communication research through the interpretation of the analysis of the field's cognizable structure. Not only in the publications of those better "positioned", but also in broader terms, can we assert that the current process of advanced professionalization (recognizable as an increasing compliance with the "profiles" officially imposed) implies a recognition of research as a work of "social sciences" more than the product of an academic science that could be called "communicology".

In one sense, it has been confirmed that the institutionalization of Mexico's communication studies has not generated a scientifically consistent "disciplinary matrix", because it has followed a logic that in itself is contradictory and tends toward dispersion. Within this logic, the quantitative growth of the availability of education at the undergraduate level has predominated. This has been

subordinated to the development (quantitative and qualitative) of post–graduate programs, research and the elaboration of theoretical-methodological systems.

In another sense, and aside from the field's disciplinary institutionalization, cognizable elements have been incorporated that reject this institutionalization, that emphasize the importance of methodology in the attainment of knowledge, and that imply a restructuring of the essence of academic practices within a rapidly changing environment (national and international). This also appears to demand a radical redefinition of university-society relations within a series of structural changes (on diverse scales) and epistemological changes (specifically scientific interpretive formats).

The two main consequences recognized by the subjects are the "distancing" of research with respect to the formation of professionals, and fragmentation, which tends to separate research practices not only from undergraduate communication studies, but also from the "internal" articulations upon which the field has evolved thus far (though in a precarious and insufficient manner). It is evident that social and academic legitimacy is more relevant than ever before in justifying work in this field, and in the "intrumentalization" of the knowledge generated in "concrete applications" — above all when the "centrality" of the socio-cultural practices of communication as applied to the contemporary world is reinforced. The alternative between "the extension of the utopian imagination" and a "reivindication of pragmatism" has led to tensions that are beginning to be felt as a strategic urgency, within the context of professional "survival", among some Mexican academic communication researchers.

Consequently, it is imperative that we begin a wide-ranging and intense reflexive discussion, in which "all" research investigators participate, on the possible reorientation of their practices and, particularly, on the degree of ethical and epistemological factors with which the field can be academically and socio-culturally legitimized, in terms of its own history. Only a future project with these guidelines will be able to rearticulate the "utopian continuity" with the "scientific structuring" of Mexico's research studies.●

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