

Introduction

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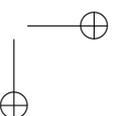
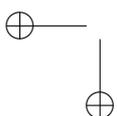
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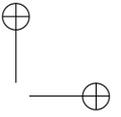
«There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.»

These lines from Michel Foucault, in his introduction to the second volume of his *History of Sexuality*, inspire the core concept of this special issue of *Communication Studies*, which is dedicated to exploring new methodological insights and advances in communication research. As social phenomena seem to grow in complexity within the media landscape of western societies, social scientists are invited to reinvent their methodological approaches, challenging restrictive views about disciplinary boundaries.

In the network society, ‘multimodal communicative networks’ (Castells, 2009: 301) produce and disseminate a plethora of content in a transmedia fashion, enhancing the convergence culture evidenced by Henry Jenkins in 2006. In the rich and complex media environment of present times, there is no concrete content, nor a central channel; rather there are many diverse sets of media producers and users that have gained an unprecedented role in defining the content produced by users and by the media industry.

With the development of the Internet the doors to the core power of the media were open to ordinary people. Thus, any citizen now has the potential to become a producer in their own right, giving rise to what Manuel Castells (2009: 24) defined as ‘mass self-communication’. A considerable amount of digital communication content is produced and broadcast by ‘producers’, with content rapidly and easily disseminated through audiences that they have self-selected, and through these audiences’ contacts, thus becoming a many-to-many phenomenon. The Internet is therefore promoting a horizon-





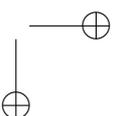
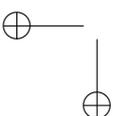
tal communication network built around ordinary citizens' initiative, interests and perspectives.

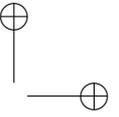
Social digital networks have allowed people, therefore, to overcome the structural obstacles to communicative power previously put in place by traditional media, where content was controlled by the sender and structured in a vertical, top-down and one-to-many communication logic. The digital communication model (Hartley, 2012) gave users the possibility of interacting with the media, and with others, as *producers* if they wanted to, and this has made possible individuals' self-expression and self-representation across media platforms.

Thus, the paradigm of technology-based viral communication (Jenkins, 2009), which framed most of the research about new media was no longer fit for purpose. On the one hand, it could no longer describe the complexity and dynamics of the new communication environment of contemporary societies, as a consequence of changes in the distribution circuit and content flow in the new digital media environment, and, on the other, it lacked understanding of the social meaning of this new type of dissemination.

The viral model, heir to the transitive and linear model, of mass communication (Hartley, 2012), still focused upon the cultural relevance given to both the sender and technology itself to explain the importance given to content. Metaphors such as those of 'infection' and 'viral' fulfilled the discursive imagery of the model based on the primacy of technology. Just like any virus, technology in itself was the central matter believed to explain why content would circulate. The technological determinism of this model framed the first ITCs explanatory models and ignored both the individual relevance and social relationships in the spreading of content throughout digital platforms. Acknowledging this gap, since 2009 Henry Jenkins has been elaborating on the *spreadability model*, which gave rise to the 2013 book *Spreadable Media*, authored with Sam Ford and Joshua Green.

The spreadability model centres its focus on individuals and their social relationships, considering them pivotal to the understanding of content flow and distribution throughout digital platforms, i.e. to the understanding of digital social networking and the cultural practices that shape them. However, this new approach does not ignore the importance of technology in the circulation of content. Digital dissemination of any content is inseparable from technology, and its transmedia sharing tools, which allow any content to spread itself





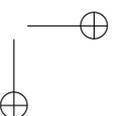
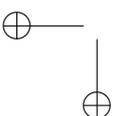
throughout a set of digital platforms. In this new model social relationships are, however, paramount. This model is not technology-centred, though it is technology-oriented. People's social interactions are the main focus, and content must be perceived as a social resource that communities generate, manage and spread according to their own interests.

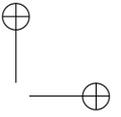
Hence, spreadability may be perceived as a speech act which requires peer validation in order for the conversation to happen. Hence, content is a potential means for dialogue and conversation to start. In spite of the sharing culture of the contemporary digital society (Castells, 2009; Gauntlett, 2011), in the present time, given the saturated media environment, content flow across several communities relies upon the perceived relevance given to it by users. In addition, if prior viral and imitation models focused on how content would spread and replicate itself, together with its importance being defined by the fact that content would spread as the sender produced it; in the emerging spreadability model, decisions and acts of intervening in content are considered indicators of relevance.

Relevance now relies upon the set of decisions people make. Content relevance determines its adoption, spreadability and amplification. Spreadability shapes information and cultural flows, expanding potential meanings and opening up unexpected new meanings. This paradigm is structured upon users' productivity, according to John Hartley's definition of the digital communication model, assuming as well that reframing and content remixing means that content was significant enough to involve users in it and they were willing to add value to it by simply sharing it or adding comments.

This technology-decentred approach focuses on the individuals and their choices. Social media should then be perceived as a place where individuals and social interests can be understood. This also means that digital communication flows are relevant elements of civic ecology, which help us to understand what matters to people.

We can also say that these technological developments are foregrounding public opinion, something which was more theorised than empirically proven by the *agenda-setting* (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; McLeod, Becker and Byrnes, 1974) hypothesis and by the *cascading activation model* (Entman, 2004). Blogs, vlogs, streaming, and other forms of interactive communication, have been allowing people to participate actively in the news-making process for some time now (Gilmor, 2006; Deuze, 2008; Allan and Thorsen, 2009). These





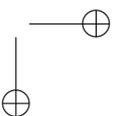
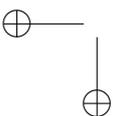
and other feedback systems are being used to feed both around-the-clock media outlets and citizen-generated media. Ordinary people are capturing real events as they are happening and making them almost instantaneously public. By doing so, citizens are responding to the news agenda of media outlets, but are also pushing journalists to accommodate user-generated content. For some theorists, the unparalleled degree of human agency and user control expressed in these new ways of collaborating is undermining the position of journalism in contemporary society because it challenges its symbolic leading role as watchdog and information provider (Norris, 2000: 22). While doing so, demotic journalism is also reconfiguring and bypassing traditional hierarchies and relations of communicative power (Deuze, 2008: 860), which were traditionally attached to the power elites, journalism's institutionalised primary definers.

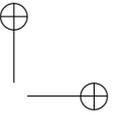
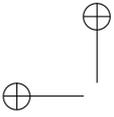
The digital communication ethos promotes new definitions of authority and knowledge, expressed in the DIY/DIWO approach (*Do-It-Yourself/Do-It-With-Others*) (Hartley, 2012), promoting a 'making and doing' culture (Gauntlett, 2011) as opposed to the 'sit back and be told' culture which prevailed throughout the second half of the 20th century.

This hyper-media environment led authors such as Roger Silverstone (2008) to describe society today as a 'media-polis', where the city became the place of the media and the media the space of life. People circulate across public space using personal media (such as cell phones or music devices) at the same time as they are surrounded by media, allowing a constant interaction in three different ways: individuals with their own devices, individuals with each other through mediated communication, and with the urban space surrounding him. Living the urban life today is a totally different experience from some decades ago. Now life is lived both in reality and virtually.

The media blends into all aspects of daily life and must not, for this reason, be seen solely as an external agent that influences people's lives, but as part of our daily practices that help us to build meaning, as Mark Deuze (2012) suggests. Hence, media should no longer be perceived as electronic devices or isolated practices, but as part of our daily routines, profoundly embedded in meaningful contexts.

Media has become ubiquitous, invasive and invisible, and this means that we are always being exposed to it and that it is impossible to totally escape, leading Deuze to suggest that we no longer live with the media but in the me-





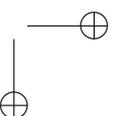
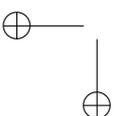
dia. Media and technology are everywhere and we cannot shut them out from daily life or make them disappear from our conscience as they are increasingly connected with the fabric of everyday life, to the extent that it is not easy to distinguish one from the other anymore.

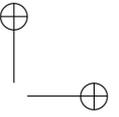
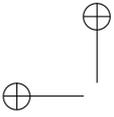
In the unlimited media environment, as Todd Gitlin (2006) defines contemporary society, everybody ‘*becomes media*’ (Deuze, 2012: 5). This brings new light to Marshall McLuhan’s theory of media as an extension of the human faculties (psychic or physis). In 1964, the Canadian author had already perceived the impact of media and technology as reaching far beyond its content, and had already stated that media and technology are no different from life.

As extensions of the human, media and technology may connect, amplify, accelerate or overload life. People use media ‘partly to try to maintain – not always with success – a sense of ontological security in a modern world in which biological death and the predictable cycles of clock-and-calendar time are among the only certainties’ (Postill, 2010: 18). Media are perceived as elements that aid in building ‘normality in everyday life’ (Christensen and Røpke, 2010: 233), which is organised in clusters of joint actions, where media are included in, and its place defined by, individuals’ needs.

Dynamics produced at the global stage and in public life, but also in the private realm, suggest that the place of media must not be assumed, preconceived or generalised, but continuously researched from a wide-angle perspective (Bird, 2003: 3), i.e. by including the broader context of cultural practices in which media practices take place. Hence, this approach, in spite of acknowledging media as an institution rooted in contemporary society, perceives it as having a wide array of distinctive relevance in peoples’ everyday lives, which includes the possibility of the media having no particular relevance, because it is not needed or because people have decided to exclude it from their lives (Hobart, 2010).

In this context, the growing complexity of the relationship between media, technology, society and individuals demands from Communication, as an established scientific field, an ongoing process of reflection and debate. This process may shed light onto what we already know about the issue, the scope of what still remains to be explored in the near future, and better ways of producing relevant knowledge. Therefore, this special issue aims to contribute to the development of our “methodological imagination” in Communication



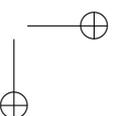
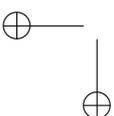


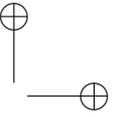
research. The context is a challenging one: like other social sciences, Communication Studies have to deal with the increasing complexity of social issues and, consequently, the disciplinary boundaries that surround them. The challenge lies precisely in facing the fact that innovation may not be achieved simply by crossing disciplines, or by importing well established “ways of doing”, from either close by or further afield territories of knowledge.

As with social thinking and theorisation, research methodologies have developed around a few well known dichotomies that, despite their operational utility, have resulted in us defining reality in oversimplified and crystalized ways. Such dichotomies, in tandem with those inherent in classical sociology (individual/society, nature/culture, structure/action), have been pointed out to exist as a result of an epistemological fallacy, and countless targeted as something in need of overcoming. Among them we find classic oppositions such as subject/object, understanding/explaining, intensive/extensive, and qualitative/quantitative. And it is precisely the latter that we highlight as particularly illustrative of the deadlock in which we believe methodological research about social reality in general, including communication acts, stands today.

In fact, although such a distinction is frequently presented as obsolete and outdated (for instance, Tashakori and Teddlie, 1998; Creswell, 2013), in practical terms the majority of researchers and their concrete projects end up being confined to one method or the other, clustering around trivialised techniques. In this way they seek a kind of “methodological security” and try to avoid, by all means, any risk. This kind of positioning contributes in itself to the prevention of boldness, creativity and innovation.

A few serious attempts have been made to overcome these dichotomies. Tashakori and Teddlie (1998) propose the articulation of qualitative (qual) and quantitative (quant) approaches in models that may be sequential, parallel, nested or convergent. The assumption is that these approaches have different ways of looking at reality and should only be used together when, and if, necessary. In other words, a mixed methods research design shouldn't become a tool of methodological security, using both methods as a defence strategy to overcome the typical researcher's anxiety. On the contrary, mixed methods should only be applied when the object of study calls for it. For example, if the main goal is to know the incidence of a specific media image, then its quantification is not only necessary, but also probably sufficient; conducting in-depth interviews with those who produce such images would probably be



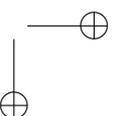
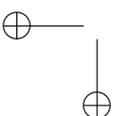


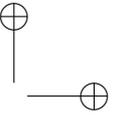
an inadequate procedure, considering the goals of the research. However, a common practice would be the accumulation of several techniques, regardless of their specific features and adequacy with respect to research objectives. Our point is that such a “methodological insecurity” causes serious injury not only to the knowledge of the objects under study, but also to the freedom of thought which is necessary to innovate.

Fortunately, this is not the norm, and there are many studies that have applied mixed methods designs in a rigorous and pertinent way. These studies have achieved a reasonable impact in social sciences in general. However, their echo in communication sciences has been, so far, incipient. Furthermore, their approach evidences the persistence of an endemic difficulty in really overcoming the dichotomy of qual/quant by merging both methods. On the contrary, qual and quant methods continue to be used jointly in several ways (sequentially, in parallel, convergent, etc.), but they seldom “merge”.

Another important aspect is that, after more than a decade of discussion about mixed methods designs, the majority of handbooks about research methodology continue to privilege a presentation of contents built around this classical distinction and dichotomy. See for example the 2012 edition of the work of Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods*. Following the first part about the nature and process of research, the author develops a second part focusing upon the “nature of quantitative research” and a third about “qualitative research”. He finishes the book with a chapter in which he approaches, finally, the need to “break down the quantitative/qualitative divide”. The same can be said of other works referenced in the teaching of methodology in general (e.g. Seale, 2004; Creswell, 2013; Neuman, 2013), as well as qualitative (e.g. Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) and quantitative (e.g. Reinard, 2006; Hayes, Slater and Snyder, 2008; Wrench et al., 2008). This suggests that, at least from the point of view of teaching and learning, such distinctions continue to be seen as useful and operational, an indispensable “alphabet” to mastering the use of social research techniques.

Maybe this can, in part, be explained by the incommensurability of both methodological approaches with reality. In other words, maybe these methods (qual and quant) cannot meet, as they are rooted in quite distinct epistemological perspectives and traditions: one more phenomenological and constructivist, the other more realist; one more reflexive, the other more descriptive; one more literary, the other more mathematical. This being so, the methodo-



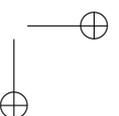
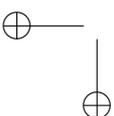


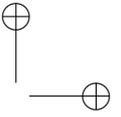
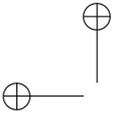
logical dichotomisation might in fact be an expression of a broader process of dichotomisation, that of the process of knowledge itself.

Such a distinction is also present, although in a less totalitarian way, in communication studies. Here, the aspect that contributes the most to a certain distance from the dichotomy that we have been discussing is the very same that has been an obstacle to its methodological assertion: the heritage and proximity of literary and artistic studies, of hermeneutics and essayistic tradition. If, on the one hand, this tradition has enriched and diversified the study of communication, avoiding the corset of rigid methodologies that were not thought to understand their objects of study from the very beginning; on the other hand, it also made it more difficult for these studies to affirm themselves in the scientific arena, or to be accepted under the code of strict scientific rules of method. All of this has caused a certain inconsistency of identity. When urged to follow the scientific method, namely to undertake empirical and field research, communication studies (and scholars) needed to acquire the basic and classic methodological skills from the social sciences. In this process, they absorbed the dichotomisation discussed above. This is why, for instance, in his work *Media and Communication Research Methods: An introduction to qualitative and quantitative approaches* (2013), Arthur Asa Berger distinguishes, like Bryman, between qualitative and quantitative methods, in separate parts, essaying an integrative synthesis in the end. There is, however, a major difference regarding Bryman's work: the inclusion of a section about textual analysis, in which Berger introduces us to some of the approaches "born and raised" in communication territories (semiotics, rhetoric, ideological analysis and psychoanalytical analysis).

It is precisely in this territory that communication makes a specific contribution to research methodologies, offering alternatives to the classical dichotomy of qual/quant. Going back to the early beginnings of the systematic study of communication, we can highlight the pre-structuralism approach (Vienna circle), structuralism (studies about verbal language, with seminal authors such as Saussure, Greimas, Chomsky; but also about wider cultural phenomena, with Levi-Strauss), semiotics (Peirce, Barthes), ideological analysis (Gramsci) or rhetoric analysis (Aristotelian tradition).

Within communication studies, the methodological tension is therefore between a "culturalist" approach which is textual and essayistic, and an "empiricist" approach, using methods and techniques developed in other social

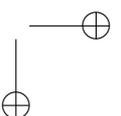
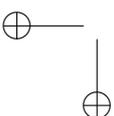


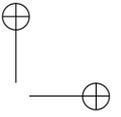


sciences. In the history of communication sciences, this tension is particularly visible in the debate between the Frankfurt School (critical theory) and the Columbia School (empirical studies). The European tradition of Cultural Studies (Stuart Hall and others) has tried to bridge this gap, by merging a critical theoretical approach with an empirical and data-driven one. It can be argued that every time they have tried to come closer to an empirical perspective communication studies did not simply reproduce the *modus operandi* of other sciences, but tried to build something new. Some of these contributions already enable the partial overcoming of typical methodological dichotomies, such as qual/quant. Let us take the classic example of content analysis: initially addressed by Berelson (1952), its use begins with a “qualitative” approach, or the bottom-up construction of categories and subsequent codification of the data, that are subsequently quantified and statistically analysed. Content analysis is also a good example of a technique that overcomes another important methodological distinction: the separation of the data collection stage of research from the data analysis stage, a dichotomy that also structures many handbooks of social research. In fact, in content analysis these steps are integrated, as with other methods of social research such as ethnography, which are, however, classified as qualitative. Another example of the contribution of communication studies to methodological research is the focus group interview, later “exported” to other social sciences.

Notwithstanding, the potential of communication studies for methodological innovation lies dormant. Just as social research methodologies in general have reached an impasse, so communication studies have kept themselves withdrawn from moving forward in this debate. One of the reasons for this double impasse may well lie in the perpetuation of the separation of their two “objects”: “society” on the one hand, and “communication” on the other. Instead, this fallacious separation is denied by the very transversal nature of the methodologies created by those disciplines, which, like water through sand, pass smoothly between fields of knowledge. “Communication” arises spontaneously in the work of sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists; “society” is always present in the study of media, technology, corporate communication, and so on.

Thus, communication emerges today renewed, as a “meeting point” for the social sciences and sciences in general, with the society in which they operate. It refers to phenomena which are transversal to all societies, to founding

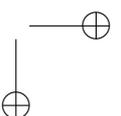
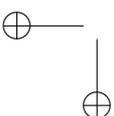


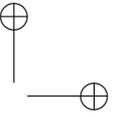


aspects of the human experience, the starting point of social existence itself. Following Niklas Luhmann (1995; 2000), we can argue that all social systems are communication systems. This potential for communication to work as a “meeting point” for other sciences had already been addressed by authors such as Gregory Bateson (e.g. Jurgen and Bateson, 1951; Bateson, 1972). More recently, the “explosion” of information and communication technologies (ICTs), and the importance attached to the Internet and social media, have contributed to bringing communication to the centre of interest of several disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, social psychology and psychology. However, this movement does not mean that these disciplines have become closer, but rather that they have employed an aseptic and isolated appropriation of communication phenomena (such as the use of Internet, mobile phones or other ICTs). Unlike with Bateson or Luhmann, there is no holistic or integrative thinking that cross-cuts these scattered studies. Likewise, there is no integrative methodological approach, but rather a quite sectarian one, in the literal sense – separating it from all the rest. What remains to be known is if it is really necessary, or useful, to achieve an integrative approach. Maybe diversity, fragmentation and dispersion are instead inner characteristics of social sciences, both in theoretical and methodological terms, in tune with the post-industrial societies they study and within which they develop.

Social research methodologies have therefore reached an impasse, where it is not simply by articulating qualitative and quantitative methodologies, pursuing exclusively and proficiently one of them, or even by simply migrating “ways of doing” and “tricks of the trade” between disciplines, that we will be able to innovate. The call for a “methodological imagination” imposes itself, a focus on enabling integrative thinking about the concrete research experience and the wider scientific context. Only then can we foster methodological innovation.

This special issue intends precisely to contribute to the fostering of a “methodological imagination” in communication and social sciences. It is a space of academic debate, also aiming towards dialogue with other stakeholders interested in methodological issues. Throughout the following articles, the journal focuses on methodologies and methods engaged with the design and development of research within the framework of communication. On the one hand, it proposes new strategies of research for “old” objects of study, and on the other, discusses issues related to the emergence of new objects and

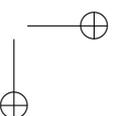
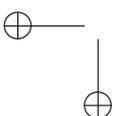




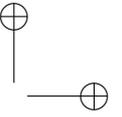
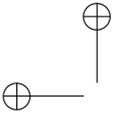
contexts of communication, which demand an updating of the methodologies traditionally used by researchers.

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