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Radio studies: An overview from the Ibero-American academia

Los estudios sobre radio: Un balance desde la academia iberoamericana

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Abstract

Due to its penetration and access, radio is a very important mass media in the Ibero-American context. However, radio has not received much scholarly attention. In this framework, the present study analyses the situation of Ibero-American radio studies from the perspective of their scientific community. This approach is new in that it focuses on the work, perceptions, and assessment of radio research at supranational level, shedding light on similarities and differences in terms of how Communication is seen as a scholarly field. A questionnaire was used to understand the importance, themes, and quality of radio research from the personal, national and global perspectives, according to its 63 respondents. Participants were also asked to share their perceptions, assessments, and prospects. Despite contextual differences, our study has confirmed that radio studies are a minority field, even in areas of high impact such as new technologies. Likewise, the research career paths of those involved in radio research show how this field is still in its infancy, although some indicators such as participation in projects or cooperation rates point towards a positive evolution in the mid-short term. As per their quality perception, academics are critical of radio studies in the general framework of Communication research.

Resumen

La radio constituye un medio de gran relevancia en el contexto iberoamericano dado su acceso y penetración. No obstante, el estudio de la comunicación radiofónica no ha tenido la presumida proyección en el ámbito académico. En este sentido, el presente trabajo efectúa una aproximación a la situación de los «radio studies iberoamericanos» desde la perspectiva de su comunidad científica. Un abordaje novedoso en tanto que se centra en las trayectorias, percepciones y valoraciones en torno a la investigación radiofónica en una esfera supranacional, con características comunes pero importantes divergencias en el abordaje de la comunicación como ámbito de estudio. A partir de una encuesta a 63 especialistas en radio se profundizó en la entidad, temáticas y calidad de la investigación radiofónica en las esferas personal, nacional y global; así como en sus percepciones, valoraciones y prospectivas. Más allá de las diferencias entre contextos el estudio ha permitido constatar el carácter minoritario de la investigación radiofónica incluso en aquellas temáticas de mayor proyección como las nuevas tecnologías. Asimismo, las trayectorias de la comunidad científica remiten a una fase incipiente de desarrollo de la investigación radiofónica si bien determinados indicadores, como participación en proyectos o índice de cooperación, permiten visar una evolución positiva a corto-medio plazo.



En cuanto a la percepción de la calidad los académicos se muestran especialmente críticos con los «radio studies» respecto a la investigación comunicativa.

Keywords / Palabras clave

Academy, Latin America, communication, scientific community, research, radio, radio studies, perception. Academia, América Latina, comunicación, comunidad científica, investigación, radio; estudios de radio, percepción.

1. Introduction

Radio has a privileged position in the Ibero-American context (Spain, Portugal and Latin America). While the democratisation of Internet has led to the radio being displaced in some countries –such as Chile, Costa Rica, or Spain– it is still the second mass media after television in terms of penetration. It is the first in Guatemala.

Radio still has great potential in a setting marked by oral cultural practices (Lienhard, 1994) and a vast, sometimes inaccessible, territory, with substantial economic and sociocultural differences.

Despite all this, radio has been disregarded by media businesses, public powers and citizens in comparison to audiovisual media and, more recently, to the Internet. According to Lewis (2000), the cultural status of radio lies in its being a private passion that is publicly neglected. If, as León (2012) states, the foundations of Communication Sciences in Latin America lie in experiences prior to formal education, a lower general interest in radio has a direct impact on the academic importance given to the topic.

In this sense, this article approaches the situation of radio studies in Ibero-America from the point of view of its scientific community. This approach is new in that it focuses on the work, perceptions, and assessment of radio researchers; it also focuses on a supranational level, shedding light on similarities and differences in terms of how Communication is seen as a scholarly field.

2. Communication in academia

The development of Communication Studies in the Ibero-American academia has been far from homogeneous. The tradition and influences of each country have produced three different models: A theoretical model, close to the school of Sociology, Political Communication, Semiotics, and Communication Theory; another one focusing on the profession, inspired by the North American tradition, and a third model, somewhere in between the former two (López-García, 2010).

Introducing Communication Studies in universities has taken different routes depending on the social, political and academic contexts of each country, although it was usually through Journalism that the subject was first introduced (Silva, 2004). In the 1930s, the first Journalism courses started at the University of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), at the Pontifical Javeriana University (Colombia) and the National University of La Plata (Argentina) (López-García, 2010; Del-Arco, 2015). The foundation, in 1935, of the School of Journalism of La Plata marked the beginning of a process that in the 1950s, with the rise and popularisation of television, would be followed by several other Latin American countries (Fernández-Christlieb, 1997; Marques-de-Melo, 1988).

These first courses focused on the professional side of journalism, with little concern about theoretical questions, although González-Samé, Romero-Rodríguez, and Aguaded (2017) highlight that some research initiatives from the behaviour-Laswellian perspective were indeed developed.

The creation of the International Centre for Higher Studies in Journalism for Latin-America (CIESPAL, 1959) and the 10th General UNESCO Conference marked a turning point in the institutionalisation of Communication research, thus laying the foundations of the Latin American Critical School (León, 2012). Thus, in the 1960s, the boom in Communication research mirrored the development of mass media themselves (Marques-de-Melo, 2009). After that, the Latin-American



Association of Communication Researchers (ALAIC for its name in Spanish, created in 1978) played a key role in the recognition and development of Communication as an independent research field (Fuentes, 1991).

According to Antezana (1984), in Ibero-America, Communication courses were subjected to three types of tensions: the crisis of the universities in terms of their social function, as they swayed between theoreticism and pragmatism; the pressure from cultural industries and the space they needed to create for theoretical endeavours and its consolidation as a science.

In the Iberian Peninsula, although the first works in Communication date back to the beginning of the 20th century (Jones, 1993; Oliveira, 2015), the discipline was not studied at University until the 1970s. The fact that both Spain (1939-1975) and Portugal (1933-1974) were under their respective dictatorships hindered the development of an independent discipline. In Spain, the first courses started in 1971, at the Complutense University of Madrid, the Autonomous University of Barcelona and the University of Navarra (Martínez-Nicolás & Saperas, 2011). In Portugal, the New University of Lisbon opened its first Social Communication Degree in 1979 (Martins & Oliveira, 2013).

The creation of the first faculties, departments, and courses in Communication provided the institutional support needed for research to develop in this field (Martínez-Nicolás, 2006; Martínez-Nicolás & Saperas, 2011; Martins & Oliveira, 2013).

Despite the differences across contexts, we could highlight three main common features in the introduction of Communication in university studies in Ibero-America:

1) The expansion of Communication courses, from the 1980s onwards, was linked to new job opportunities; besides, the de-centralisation of universities led to mass university access (Trow, 2006; Barnett, 2001).

2) The diversification of courses to adapt to sector needs and new professional profiles. The profile of the social communicator in Latin America, understood as a professional with a wide and comprehensive understanding of communication processes, differs from the usual European profiles, still dependent on old journalism, advertising and cinematography schools (Red ICOD, 2006).

3) Clear support to quality at the university through the assessment of its lecturers and researchers as its main pillar. For Arencibia and Moya (2008), the point of convergence between national research policies lies in the need to assess the results of scientific activities as elements needed for academic quality and for research and development programmes. Considering the central role of Universities in society, their results, control of performance and contribution to society are to be considered; these are aspects that Barnet (2001) thinks are implicit in the indicators used by academic evaluation organisations such as ANECA, A3ES, CONEAU, CONAES or CLAEP.

In a nutshell, the wide introduction of Communication into universities has to do with endogenous reasons, reasons related to the field of Communication, and exogenous reasons of economic, institutional and political nature (Rebelo, 2008; Barnett, 2001). However, Beltrán (2000) criticises that the exponential growth of courses and teaching centres has not always led to the development of Communication teaching and research.

3. The place of radio research

In a context such as the Ibero-American one, the assessment of academic capital follows its criteria (Lolas, 2008), although in recent years there is some consensus in linking prestige with publication and impact of research outcomes (Fernández-Quijada & Masip 2013; Casanueva & Caro, 2013).

The increasing weight of research led to a certain evolution towards a university model based on generating and conveying scientific knowledge (Ginés, 2004). This evolution coincided with the academic expansion of Communication, the appearance of the first specialised PhD programmes and the subsequent development of an academic critical mass with research training.

Basic Sciences were taken as the model for other knowledge systems and the evaluation-accreditation of lecturers, favouring publication in high impact journals (Piedra-Salomón, Olivera-Pérez, & Herrero-Solana, 2016; González-Samé, Romero-Rodríguez, & Aguaded, 2017).



Even though, according to Beltrán (2000), Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia, Chile, Peru, Brazil or Mexico do have an academic tradition of specialised journals in Communication, the current journal hegemony opened a fracture in that tradition of books and compilations, thus generating a saturation of the most important platforms and other collateral damage (Mancinas-Chávez, Romero-Rodríguez, & Aguaded, 2015).

The establishment of academic accreditation systems became a push for the evolution of Communication research, even though its criteria were imposed on the scientific community and also on the discipline's focus (Osca-Lluch & Haba, 2005; Casado-del Río & Fernández-Quijada, 2015; Fernández-Quijada & Masip, 2013).

In this line, authors such as De-Filippo (2013), Soriano (2008) or Beltrán (2000) have criticised the fact that academic evaluation has triggered research strategies and practices guided by higher curricular efficiency “without considering the complexity of cultural and Communication production in its real practice” (Beltrán, 2000: 338). The clear will to follow a “standardised” research pattern (Soriano, 2008) has shifted the focus toward some themes that are interesting for funding agencies, against others such as radio (Piñeiro-Otero, 2017).

Apparently away from hot topics in the discipline –despite its web, mobile and transmedia potential–, radio seems to have stayed outside the exponential growth of Communication research.

For Lewis and Booth (1989), the trend in public policies to subordinate radio to television has made it invisible, something that is mirrored by Communication Studies. Three decades after all this, radio is still neglected, although it has a different space in Ibero-American Communication research.

Against the limited relevance of radio in Spanish Communication research (Piñeiro-Otero, 2015; 2016), or its incipient development in Portugal (Oliveira, 2015; Santos, 2017), Brazilian radio studies are vibrant both in the number of researchers and in its scientific production (Kischinhevsky & al., 2017; Haussen, 2016).

4. Materials and methods

Giménez and Jiménez (2013) consider that the study of research is a duty that allows academics to go deeper into the understanding of their discipline's ecosystem, potentials, and limitations.

Radio researchers have not been productive in this type of approach, although their presence is increasing in Brazil (Kischinhevsky & al., 2017; Haussen, 2016; Melo & Prata, 2015; Prata, 2015; Prata, Mustafa, & Pessoa, 2014; López & Mustafá, 2012), and in Spain and Portugal with the works of Piñeiro-Otero (2015), Repiso, Torres and Delgado (2011) or de Oliveira (2015) and Santos (2017). These studies have used Bibliometrics as their main tool; an approach Casanueva and Caro (2013) find incomplete if the relationships and dynamics of academia in research are overlooked.

In order to get to know the situation of radio research in Ibero-America, we developed a questionnaire for our exploratory study. This semi-structured questionnaire was organised around three headings:

- Personal data: basic demographics and academic details.
- Research activities: questions about the importance of radio in the participant's career, main themes (following the categories suggested by Sterling (2009) and Martínez-Nicolás and Saperas (2011) and basic quality indicators.
- Radio research: the participant's ideas about mainstream themes, their situation regarding Communication research in general, reference centres for radio research, assessment of the interest of several business-academic-political actors in radio, as well as the respondent's perception regarding the minority status of radio studies.

This questionnaire combined different types of closed questions: With two possible answers (sex, theme of the thesis regarding the radio); single choice (academic degree) or multiple choice (research themes) answers; Likert scales (cooperation with other researchers in radio-related studies) or numerical from 0 to 10 (quantity, quality and rigour of research in Communication). In the case of Likert scales, the intermediate level –neutral– was not used to force participants to take a stand.



Likewise, open questions were also included (field of specialisation). These questions required decoding and were particularly useful to better understand the perceptions of participants (reference centres, reasons to value radio). The questionnaire was created using Google Forms and mailed in February-March 2017. This helped reach more respondents, while the fact that it was self-administered and anonymous encouraged more critical and sincere answers (Díaz-de Rada, 2012; Duffy & al., 2005), it also increased the non-respondent rate. Microsoft Excel was used to process the data.

The way the sample was determined was marked by the scope of the study and population dispersion, especially considering that radio studies are a minority field. Several decisions were made in this regard:

- The diverse consideration and access to academic journals in this field led us to focus on international radio meetings. Namely, we registered the participants from Ibero-American Universities attending ECREA Radio (2013; 2015); Net Station International Conference (2015) and International Radio Biennale (2014), both as speakers or exhibitors.
- This list was further refined with data from Piñeiro-Otero (2015) regarding radio studies in Spanish journals (52 recurring authors, 48 from Spain); the researchers recommended by Oliveira (2015) for Portuguese radio studies (13, one from Brazil) as well as twenty authors of individual books or compilations related to radio.

In this first phase, a questionnaire was sent out to a total of 107 individuals. However, the familiarity of the medium and the academic-professional profile of the selected meetings favoured the presence of specialists from the sector and other research areas (accidental authors), which affected the responses.

In trying to be more thorough, we asked the members of research groups specialising in radio studies, such as Intercom Radio (Brazil) or Rede de Estudos de Rádio e Som (Portugal), to disseminate the questionnaire amongst their members (snowball sampling).

This procedure helped us obtain 63 valid responses (after eliminating duplicities and incomplete forms) of academics in Spain (23), Brazil (12), Portugal (10), Argentina (8), Mexico (4), Colombia (4) and Ecuador (2). The presence of Spanish scholars was very high, which comes to show the importance of research in the academic culture of this country. Still, participants do represent the most important radio studies poles in Ibero-America and this, although it has not been adjusted, offers interesting insights for the study.

5. Results

5.1. Research community

The sample shows that in radio studies scholars have high qualifications – 74% of researchers are PhD holders and 10% Post-Graduate students (47 and 10 respectively)– although there are important differences between countries.

In Spain and Brazil, all researchers are Doctors, versus 80% of Portuguese participants, 50% of Mexicans and 22% of Argentinians (8, 2 and 2 respectively). Most participants from Ecuador and Colombia have a Masters or Post-Graduate course (2 and 3 respectively).

The data show that the scientific community is rather young. Most participants are within the 45-54 and 35-44 age group (29 and 20 respectively). Likewise, most researchers (26 scholars, 55%) became doctors in the last decade (9 in 2005-2009, 10 in 2010-2014 and 7 in 2015 and following) and they are therefore mid-career academics (35 participants claim that they hold adjunct or interim positions and 8 have part-time contracts).

Although for Piñeiro-Otero (2017), usually, the year in which the PhD was obtained is an indicator of maturity in a scientific community, this is not so in this context. The absence or late inception of PhD programmes in Latin American universities (Mateus, 2009) or Portuguese Universities (Martins & Oliveira, 2013), delayed access of scholars to this academic level; an element that is also behind



the high international mobility of this group (4 participants from Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and Portugal completed their PhD in Spanish universities).

5.2. Research activities

Quality indicators for this set of researchers once again show the diversity of contexts and profiles. For example, becoming a PhD guide is rare in the sample (38%), and most of them are Spanish researchers (14 of the 24 PhD guides, 61% of the Spanish participants). This also reflects the particularities of doctorate studies in this field.

Regarding contributions to journals, although 55% of researchers (35) published the output of their radio research in international journals, 49% of them in English or another foreign language (31), only 30% (19) have contributions in impact journals (JCR or WoS). There is a higher percentage of Spanish researchers in first level citation databases (57% of Spanish participants against 25% Argentinians, 20% Portuguese and 17% Brazilian), thus showing that in this country, research output evaluation systems have been in place for longer.

However, Spanish universities lag behind in radio projects funded. Here, it is Mexican, Argentinian and Portuguese researchers (mentioned by 100%, 75% and 60% of respondents respectively) who have had projects funded by state-level programmes to increase R+D+i competition, a government measure to foster and strengthen research structures. In Spain, the National R+D Plan for 2013-2016 funded 45 projects in Communication. Only one for radio.

There is unanimity amongst researchers when highlighting the limited interest that this medium offers for funding bodies – the impact of this fact on the development of high-level research is self-explanatory.

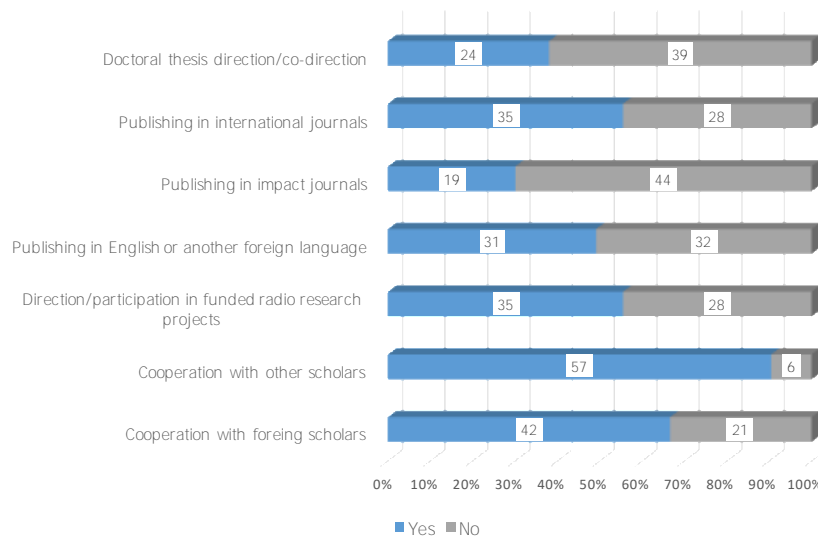


Figure 1. Radio research quality indicators. Prepared by the authors (n=63).

Cooperation with other scholars is generalised in Ibero-American radio research. For 65% of participants, this is their usual working style (13% always work with other academics, and 52% often do) against 9% who claim that radio research is an individual research line.

International cooperation is also high, albeit lower for the participants. 46% of researchers responded that they had occasionally worked with foreign colleagues, while 3% claimed they did this permanently and 17% frequently (29, 2 and 11 respectively).

The relevance of cooperative research in Ibero-American radio studies reveals the presence of a mesh of research structures. 60% (38) of participants indicated that they belong to a radio research group. Half of these researchers (18) are linked to non-formal groups such as the Radio and Sound Studies Network (Portugal) or the organisation of the Conference for Radio in the New Century



(Argentina), these bodies work more as associations rather than research structures. These groups are part of the researchers' exchange and cooperation networks and have a positive impact on the cooperation index and –according to Pulgarín and Gil-Leiva (2005)– the development of the discipline.

5.3. General object

Regarding the definition of a general object for their radio research, participants mentioned technology as their main field, followed by journalism and culture. The transformation of sound media on the Internet has triggered the interest of participants, thus placing technology as the predominant research line of individual research for global radio studies (mentioned by 20% and 23% respectively). The theme becomes more relevant when asked about their prospects on radio research (27%).

The second general object in terms of relevance is journalism. Its importance in the introduction of Communication in academia is still felt both on individual as well as in national and global radio studies. 16% of participants see their research within this field, and 20% responded it is predominant in global radio studies, although in terms of prospective themes, journalism ranks behind other areas of budding interest. Growing interest in sound fiction, with podcasts, has led 13% of participants to tick Narrative/Drama box as one of their most important short-mid-term research lines.

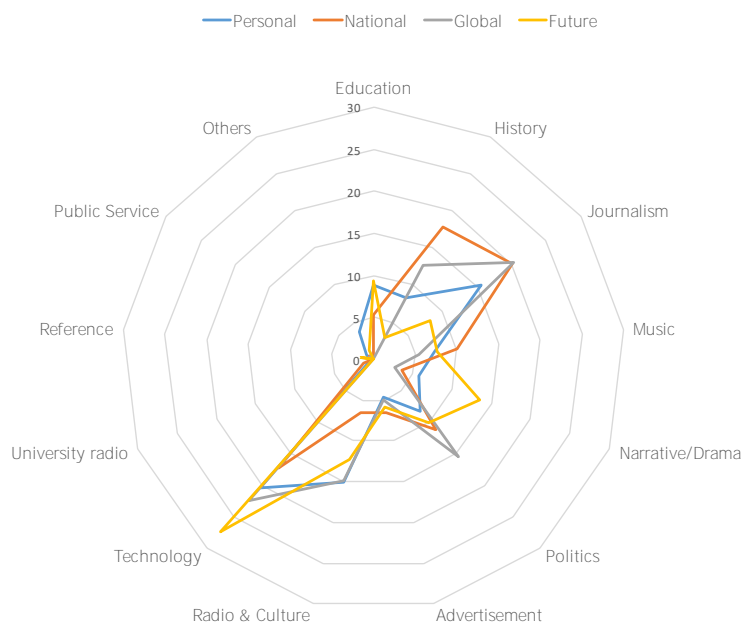


Figure 2. The general object of individual research against predominant themes in national and global radio studies and their development prospects (%).

This theme-based approach to individual radio studies and the perception of participants regarding the two main lines in national and global radio studies has confirmed three things: (1) While they are flexible and adapt their interests to the concrete radio context, academics have a very conservative image of national radio research; (2) There is a certain convergence between individual research and global radio studies – this supports the idea of adapting to a more global context and the openness of researchers to mainstream international themes and currents; (3) The mainstream lines underline the heterogeneity of national radio studies, although journalism and history still rank first due to the large presence of Spanish, Brazilian and Portuguese researchers in the sample (Piñeiro-Otero 2015; Oliveira, 2016).



5.4. Specific object

Regarding the specific object of their research, content studies (43 authors, 68%) dominate over other approaches. This is shared by Communication research in general (Martínez-Nicolás, 2009), and is directly linked to the relevance gained by some themes such as journalism, new sound manifestations, advertisement and even education or audio and drama.

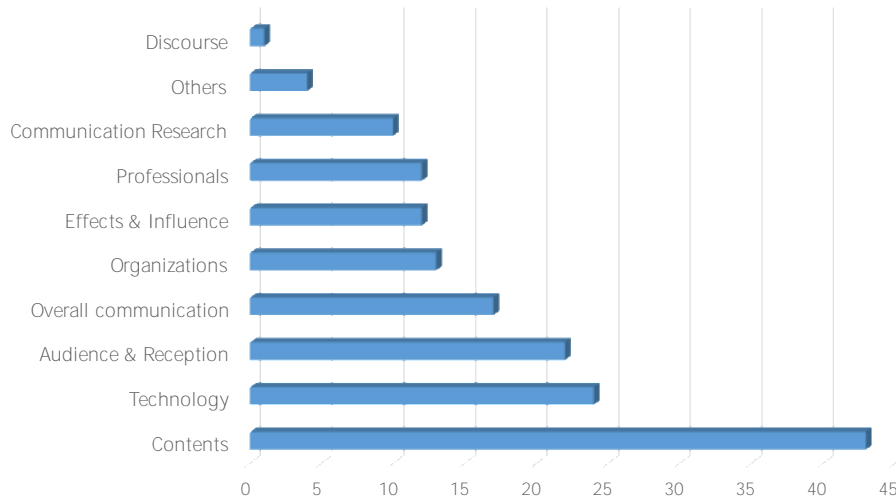


Figure 3. Approach Personal Research. Prepared by the authors (n=158).

Other relevant approaches are the technological field or audience and reception studies (38% and 35% respectively). The incipient booming of these trends is linked to radio morphosis: technological developments are closely linked to radio's communication potential, while online tools help to get to know the audiences better, both qualitatively and quantitatively.

5.5. Reference hubs

When participants were asked about the research poles in radio research, opinions were varied. Different countries, research groups inside and outside of the field, are mentioned in this case.

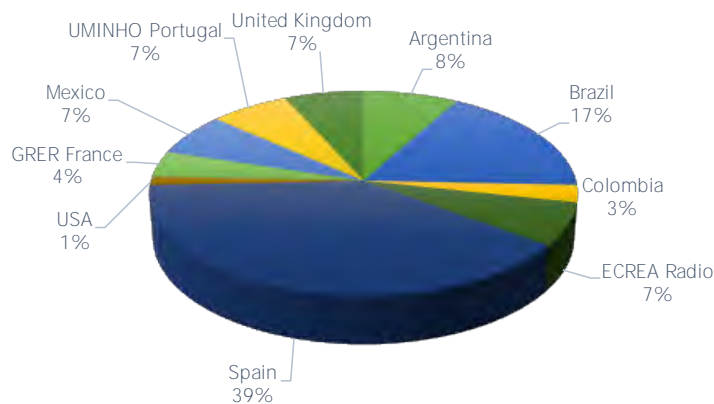


Figure 4. Main Radio Research Hubs. Prepared by the authors (n=74).



Within this heterogeneity, Spain or its universities is highly mentioned (29 mentions, 12 foreign researchers). Although one participant mentions the loss of status of Spanish research, as “there were universities with good researchers in the past, who had to leave radio as a research line or have not published anything new in years”, researchers still place Spanish institutions at a predominant place in radio studies and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona as their main reference centre (9 mentions).

The second radio research hub is in Brazil (13 mentions to the country or specific institutions, 3 of Portuguese researchers). The relevance of Brazilian radio studies and their key location in some research fields, such as radio morphosis, has given them a special place in the research community (Fernández-Sande & Gallego, 2016; Oliveira, 2016). In particular, the Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto (UFOP) is mentioned as a key reference centre (6 mentions, second after UAB). This public university is the only one with a specialised academic journal on radio in the whole of Ibero-America: Radio-Leituras.

Apart from these two countries, the relevance of the group Net-Station of the Universidade do Minho (Uminho, Portugal) and the radio section of the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA-Radio) are also mentioned by participants. The international projection of these two bodies places them third in the ranking (6 mentions each, all external in the case of Uminho).

5.6. Radio as a research topic

Regarding their perception regarding the quality of communication and radio research, globally and nationally, there are large differences between contexts. While there is consensus around the fact that global communication research ranks higher than the rest, around 7.4 points (except for Ecuador), in the case of radio research, the perception of quality fluctuates from that of Colombian participants, who claim global research is of higher quality, to the lower value attached to it by Mexicans (with a spread of 2.5 points).

These differences are again seen at national level. Thus, participants show a more positive perception regarding Communication vs Radio Research; something that becomes particularly obvious for Mexican and Ecuadorian researchers (with a spread of 3.2 and 2 respectively) for whom their scientific output in Communication has more quality than global radio studies (≥ 1).

The perception that Communication research is more important than radio research is practically unanimous, including in countries such as Argentina or Brazil where there is a more balanced relationship. In this sense, the perception of Portuguese Communication scholars regarding radio production breaks with this trend, as they consider it to be above Portuguese Communication research, and above global radio studies (0.3 and 1.1. points above respectively).

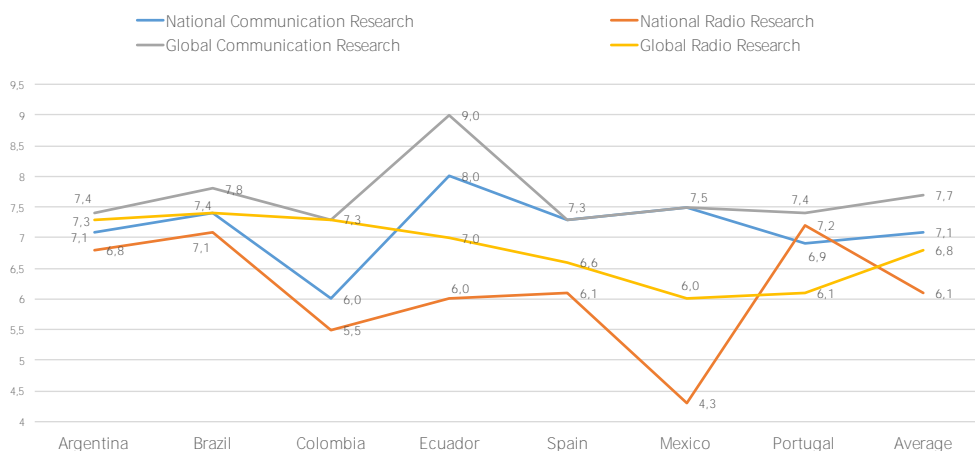


Figure 5. Perceived Quality of Communication and Radio Research (Globally and Nationally). Prepared by the authors (=63).



Regarding the perception and consideration of radio in the current context, there is basic unanimity amongst researchers (92%, 58 participants) in stressing the neglect of the sound medium. This is due to several interrelated aspects that are going to deeply affect the perception of radio studies. Participants considered that the radio is a medium of limited interest for bodies with power over the matter (4.2 over 10) and the research community (4.7). Besides, radio specialists must face the negative perception of radio research when applying for funding programmes (3.8) and by journal editors (3.9); these two aspects have an impact in the quality of their research output. Radio also has limited presence in the curricula (4.7), something that leads to knowledge not being passed on to new generations of communicators, thus reinforcing the lack of interest of the sector and academia.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Radio is a mass media of great relevance in Ibero-America, although it has not been equally studied by the academia. Regardless of the different contexts, radio is a minority research line, even within those themes of larger projection in Ibero-American Communication research.

For researchers, radio has hardly interested the academia, profession or public authorities, which has had a further negative impact on its status in Communication research. Still, radio is a permanent and key line in their research career, mainly for those mid-career researchers.

The fact that radio is an essential element in the research output of these researchers right now becomes particularly relevant at a moment when the focus in academia is on output evaluation and radio studies are problematic as “accreditable research”, in Soriano’s terms (2008).

If we look at the quality of individual careers, we can see that radio research is in an incipient stage of development, while some aspects –such as participation in projects– allow us to foresee a positive evolution in the short-mid run, due to the transformation potential that Bozeman, Fay, and Slade (2012) see for funded research.

The same thing happens for cooperation between researchers and their belonging to specialised groups, two aspects that reveal the existence of research structures that are more or less formal, and that can push this study field in its development. Against the individual character of Spanish radio research (Piñeiro-Otero, 2017), participants highlight –national and international– cooperation as their most habitual way to work. This can be seen in the influence and consideration of research hubs amongst participants.

Regarding the main themes in radio studies and their prospects, even though journalism was the entry point for Communication Sciences in academia, this discipline is now losing importance against other lines studying the possibilities and expressions of the sound sphere.

This theme-based approach also reflected a higher adaptation of personal research versus national research to the concrete radio context, as stressed by Piñeiro-Otero (2017). Another finding was the convergence of mainstream research lines in global radio studies and the researchers’ scientific output.

Finally, regarding the quality of radio research, academics are particularly critical when assessing –national and global– radio studies as of lower quality than Communication research. This is remarkable as –following Kuhn (1971)– it is the community which determines the path of discipline, and therefore, the community’s decisions and practices affect its development.

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