The Research Question in Media Studies. From Identifying Gaps to Questioning Existing Knowledge

La pregunta de investigación en los estudios de medios. De la identificación de vacíos al cuestionamiento del conocimiento existente

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A typology of modalities for the formulation of research questions was applied to analyze 61 research papers that studied media, published during a period of five years in the journal *Comunicación y Sociedad*. The objective was to identify how research questions are constructed regarding the literature review. The results show that inquiry based on gap-spotting prevails and fewer studies confront or question previous knowledge.

KEYWORDS: Media studies, research methodology, research questions.

A partir de una tipología de modalidades para la formulación de preguntas de investigación, se analizaron 61 artículos que estudiaron un medio de comunicación y fueron publicados en la revista Comunicación y Sociedad *durante un periodo de cinco años. El objetivo fue identificar cómo son construidas las preguntas de investigación con respecto a la revisión de literatura. Los resultados mostraron que prevalece la indagación fundamentada en vacíos de información y son menos los estudios que confrontan o cuestionan el conocimiento previo.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Estudios de medios, metodología de investigación, preguntas de investigación.*

If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended
on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes
determining the proper question to ask, for once I knew
the proper question,
I could solve the problem in less than five minutes.

Albert Einstein

INTRODUCTION

In Methodology courses and thesis advisory, one of the main challenges is supporting students to be able to construct a relevant research question. There are several issues to take into consideration, however, a very important one is to identify previous knowledge about a topic. Since this paper focuses on media studies, an example we may offer is that of an approach only based on the logic of the theory of the hypodermic needle, leaving aside more recent contributions that explain the intricacies of media influence. Consequently, students are taken through a review of the subject's background for them to understand that such question has already been asked, results obtained from it, and in what sense new questions are required.

Constructing a research question comprises a necessary revision of the existing literature and a capacity to position new studies in relation to prior ones. However, it is not an easy task to teach nor do, even for those formally devoted to research.

> The real process of research is more like a "black box" that rarely opens –as if everyone was afraid to admit how truly uncertain the investigation process is and the levels of improvisation always involved. I think that professional pressures for researchers to present their methodology in a clean and clinical way –as a guarantee of "cientificity"– doesn't benefit new academics entering the field (Morley, 2007, p. 77).

Therefore, this study asks: how are research questions posed in media studies regarding existing literature? This was explored in an empirical body of studies on media to analyze the logic of how questions are formulated based on an analysis led by Sandberg and

Alvesson (2011) in the field of organizational studies. The goal was to visualize and generate conscience about this research practice and offer elements that may serve as a didactical support, since there are few references on this specific subject for the study of communication and media (Galindo, 2009; Orozco & González, 2011).

Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) argue that, despite promoting the formulation of innovative questions, little attention has been paid on how to pose them. Many factors, such as field tendencies, the researcher's experience, motivations for publishing and financial funding, among others, come into play when constructing the questions for a line of investigation. According to the authors, the most significant finding of their study was that the predominant way for structuring research questions is based on gap-spotting in a specific subject's existing literature. However, research questions that confront or query previous knowledge are less common, and they explain:

> We certainly don't claim that those ways are suitable for all research and should replace gap-spotting. However, given the dominance of gap-spotting –and a general feeling that the field is stronger in providing rigor than producing interesting new ideas– we urge authors, reviewers, editors and research institutions to be less inclined to employ and encourage gap-spotting in formulating research questions. Instead, more disruptive modes should be promoted and used, as they are likely to lead to a development of more interesting and significant theories (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011, p. 41).

The authors' perspective is very interesting when reviewing the tendencies of research questions in a field of study, media studies in this case. This article aims at defining and approaching a research question's desirable features. Later on, the method of analysis employed to review a set of scientific papers is described, depicting the modalities and variables that prevailed, as well as examples for each of them.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION

A study's nature and scope are defined by question formulation, which constitutes the first essential step in a research project (Mosavel et al., 2005; O'Brien & DeSisto, 2013). Furthermore, Anastasiadis et al.

(2015), place it on the planification phase and explain that posing the questions is vital to achieve an attainable, well oriented and relevant research.

Questions are central references for constructing the object of study. They are necessary for identifying and defining the problem at hand and a cornerstone for taking conceptual, theorical and empirical decisions throughout the whole research process (Agee, 2009; Arguedas, 2009; Orozco & González, 2011). They represent the tribulations and interests of the researcher or those of a certain field of study.

Authors who have approached the theorical and methodological features of research questions agree that these have a common starting point based on the first intuitions or assumptions of the researcher. However, their construction must have actual support on literature and previous findings in the field of study (Anastasiadis et al., 2015; Fawcett, 2013; Macfarlane et al., 2015). For O'Brien and DeSisto (2013), the main catalysts for research questions are prior states of the art, the acknowledgement of research priorities by a community of professionals, or the actual needs of funding organizations and agencies.

To structure a research question implies clarifying, not only the researchers' objectives and interests, but also their own ontological and epistemological principles, in order to be aware of the way reality is observed and understood by them (Leung & Lapum, 2005; Werner & Rogers, 2013).

The epistemology adopted for research defines the way in which reality is studied and, consequently, the way in which research questions are posed. However, this isn't always a conscious task, mostly among beginners. Werner and Rogers (2013) propose a methodological framework as a didactic guide for planning research projects, based on the classification of epistemological domains, inquiry perspectives, types of questions and the interest of those approaching reality. Although, in practice, research goes through a wide variety of nuances and modalities, this epistemological frame is useful since it synthesizes the features of four main traditions when approaching an object of study.

Research questions must meet certain features in order to find feasible answers by the end of the study. Questions shouldn't be too extensive, ambitious, general or vague, or they will become difficult to

FIGURE 1	
EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAME FOR TYPES OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS	
WHAT?	HOW? / WHY?
Inquiry is focused on knowing the facts. Empirical-analytical or evaluative studies.	Inquiry is focused on employing a theory in order to explain or give sense to a phenomenon. Theorical or comparative-historical studies.
WHAT? / HOW? / WHERE? / WHEN?	HOW? / WHAT?
Inquiry aims at grasping sense in a specific context, based on peoples' standpoint. Phenomenological, hermeneutic and ethnographic research.	Inquiry aims at understanding reality to solve issues or inequities. Studies based on critical theories or participative action.

Source: The authors based on Werner and Rogers (2013).

answer. They mustn't be used to approach an evident issue that doesn't really require research or can be answered with a simple yes or no. On the contrary, questions should be precise, targeted and clear enough to avoid ambiguities or multiple interpretations.

Some authors who deal with this subject (Anastasiadis et al., 2015; Macfarlane et al., 2015; O'Brien & DeSisto, 2013; Rude, 2009) point out several common features met by proper research questions:

- *Viable*. They enable research with the available materials and human resources.
- *Interesting*. They don't answer only to the interests of the researcher, but to those of the whole scientific community.
- *Relevant*. They will contribute to a specialized literature and are pertinent for the current knowledge of a field of research, influencing various theorical and practical features while paving a trail for future studies.

- *Ethical*. They follow the socially approved principles in which the research is developed, causing no harm to third parties.
- *Innovative.* In addition to confirm, refute or widen previous results, they promote further questions that lead to new findings; they must be different than those already answered by other studies.

There are other perspectives on the role of research questions. Hansen and Trifković (2015) argue that questions can lead to systematizing findings in a field of study, besides contributing to the elaboration of public policies and social development. They point out that this practice is more common in health sciences, but scarcer in natural and social sciences. Furthermore, Moreno-Fernández and Moreno-Crespo (2015), offer a didactic proposal for teaching research methodology to college students that includes question formulation.

A METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL
FOR THE ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research led by Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) motivated the analysis of how questions are formulated in the case of media studies. The journal *Comunicación y Sociedad* (CyS) was chosen for this purpose, since in Mexico it is one of the most representative, best evaluated by several indexes, and the only of its kind registered by the National Council of Science and Technology (*Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología*, CONACYT).[4] The analysis covered a five-year period that ranged from 2013 to 2017, during which 110 papers were published. We found that 67 of these papers were based on empirical studies.[5]

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[4] In the case of Sandberg and Alvesson's study (2011), they randomly chose two editions of each of the four magazines in the United States and Europe leading the field of organization studies from 2003 to 2005. They reviewed 52 articles in total and the analysis they lead was aimed at identifying how each of these articles constructed their research question based on existing literature.

[5] In addition to empirical studies, 19 essays, 11 theorical papers, 8 state of the art and 5 methodological papers were published.

Subsequently, empirical investigations in which a communication medium was the object of study were identified; in this analysis books were included, because the media referent was understood in a broad sense. According to the main media that was studied, 17 of those were identified as being focused on the press, 16 on culture and digital practices, 15 on television, 9 studied a media system, 3 books, 2 radio and only for one film was its main interest.[6]

These articles were examined extensively, using a matrix to identify the following: statements portraying the research question; the object of study, main theories on which they were based on, methodology and conclusions. Out of the 63 empirical studies approaching media, only 61 made it to the final body of research, because two of these articles showed no reference to previous literature nor their position in relation to it.

This is relevant since the research question could have been analyzed through several criteria. However, this study followed Sandberg and Alvesson's proposal (2011), which focused on how the research question was formulated in published papers respecting the field's existing literature.

The notion of existing literature was taken into consideration in an ample sense in terms of identifying and analyzing current theorical or empirical references around a topic or object of study. Nuances were not distinguished among a state of the art (Gómez et al., 2015; Molina, 2005), state of things (Esquivel, 2013; Reboratti & Castro, 1999), or comprehensive literature search and review (Anastasiadis et al., 2015; Fawcett, 2013; Macfarlane et al., 2015; O'Brien & DeSisto, 2013).

Published papers served as tangible texts for identifying the research question in the empirical research that was examined.

> Hense, by studying research texts, we do not claim that we can say anything about what actually influenced the emergence of the research question during the first stages of the research process. Instead, what we offer is an

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6   Among the total of empirical studies, four focused on something different than media studies. Their objects of study were graphic manifestations, mural art, academic journals and postgraduate studies in Communication.

inquiry of the relationship between literature in a field and the (formulated) research question guiding the delivery of the (final) results –as expressed in the scientific text (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011, p. 25).

These authors draw two main basic modalities through which research questions are formulated. They define the first one as a modality of aligned nature, due to its tendency to take previous knowledge as a fact and its orientation toward gap-spotting. However, they refer to the second one as a disruptive modality, for it questions previous theories and knowledge in a specialized field's literature.

Mainly aimed at gap-spotting, the aligned modality features the following variants:

a) *Identifying studies displaying contradictory evidence and competing explanations*. This variant refers to a type of research question based on the contradictions found in a topic's existing literature. Meaning that some investigations present findings or evidence with contradictory results and, thus, they offer explanations that oppose each other and compete to remain as the most valid version of all. The purpose of this type of questions is triggering an inquiry on which of the findings is the most relevant.

b) *Identifying an overlooked area*. In this case, the formulation of the research question starts from the statement that, once existing literature has been extensively reviewed, there are areas regarding a topic or object of study that have not been addressed. It is pointed out as an unexplored territory or a gap in knowledge that drives researchers towards further inquiry and to build knowledge on a phenomenon that no one has ever shown any interest in.

c) *Identifying an under-researched topic*. This variant refers to a subject that has scarcely been researched before. The research question is supported by the fact that the topic proves to be interesting, though it remains unattended, thus regaining its value as an object of study.

d) *Identifying a subject that lacks empirical support*. In this case, the variant alludes to a gap related to the lack of empirical data. The research question is fueled by existing literature, theorical or speculative, and it aims at suggesting an inquiry through empirical data.

e) *Identifying the shortage of a particular theory or perspective in a specific theme or area of research*. In this variant, the subject matter has been already researched, but it will be approached from a different or alternative theory or perspective, that hasn't been implemented yet. The research question presents an original alternative to approach an object of study and its aim is to expand existing knowledge in order to achieve further understanding of the matter.

f) *Identifying a researched issue that should be updated*. This last variant constitutes a proposal made by the authors of this paper, since the analysis lead by them pinpointed several investigations that fell in this category, which Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) didn't distinguish. The research question is based on existing literature reporting an investigation lead in a specific place or time frame and argues in favor of replicating it in a different situation, most times aiming at comparative results. In the case of media studies, it refers to investigations or statistics that gather data on their production, messages, distribution or consumption. In this case, the research question has already been formulated, however, it acquires relevance because it is necessary to update data or place the object of study in a different context.

The second basic modality adopts a disruptive stance regarding existing literature on a topic. These are its main variants:

a) *Critical confrontation*. Here, the researcher alludes to a theory or set of findings from a critical standpoint in order to pinpoint its mistakes or deficiencies and question its validity. This type of research question is designed to prove and test a theory, explanations or findings reported in literature.

b) *A new idea*. This variant presents an innovation, an idea that is totally different respecting a topic that has not been studied before and presents no foundations, references or guidelines present in current literature. This kind of formulation is an alternative to existing theories and methodologies.

c) *Problematization*. To a certain extent, the authors note that all the previous variants used to construct research questions somehow

problematize existing literature and previous studies. However, they also explain that they refer to Foucault, who "conceptualizes problematization as the effort to know how and to which extent it is possible to think differently to what is known" (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011, p. 32). This logic represents the greatest challenge in research, since it consists of a critical review of traditional thought, as well as of its concepts and empirical results, to prove, based on solid arguments, their deficiencies or mistakes and come up with a new theorization and approach. Formulating this type of questions requires more experience, effort and originality, because its task consists, to a different extent, of disrupting prevailing knowledge.

TABLE 1

MODALITIES OF RESEARCH QUESTION FORMULATION
BASED ON EXISTING LITERATURE[7]

Modality 1. Gap-spotting in existing literature	Specific variants
	a) Identifying studies displaying contradictory evidence and competing explanations
	b) Identifying an overlooked area
	c) Identifying an under-researched topic
	d) Identifying a subject that lacks empirical support
	e) Identifying the shortage of a particular theory or perspective for the study of a theme
	f) Identifying a researched issue that should be updated
Modality 2. Disruptive stance in relation to literature	a) Critical confrontation
	b) A new idea
	c) Problematization

Source: The authors based on Sandberg and Alvesson (2011).

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7   Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) work on further categorization, but this analysis only includes basic modalities plus a variant that didn't correspond to any of the proposals made by these authors.

RESULTS. MODALITIES OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS
IN MEDIA STUDIES PUBLISHED BY *COMUNICACIÓN Y SOCIEDAD*

The modality used to formulate the research question was identified in each article, following the variants adopted in relation to existing literature. Results are displayed on Table 2 and subsequently some examples of the specific variants are presented. Also, how these modalities were distributed according to the media that was their object of study are presented.

TABLE 2

MODALITIES AND VARIANTS FOR FORMULATING RESEARCH QUESTIONS
IDENTIFIED IN PAPERS ON MEDIA STUDIES (CYS, 2013-2017)

Modality 1. Gap-spotting in existing literature	
Specific variants	
Identifying studies displaying contradictory evidence and competing explanations	3
Identifying an overlooked area	4
Identifying an under-researched topic	13
Identifying a subject that lacks empirical support	6
Identifying the shortage of a particular theory or perspective in a specific theme or area of research	15
Identifying a researched issue that should be updated	19
Total	60
Modality 2. Disruptive stance in relation to literature	
Specific variants	
Critical confrontation	1
A new idea	0
Problematization	0
Total	1

Source: The authors.

Studies that constructed their research question on the identification of papers with contradictory evidence and opposing explanations added to no more than three, turning them into the scarcest variant among the reviewed articles. We found two cases of digital culture and practices as their object of study and only one that focused on media systems. The work of Díaz Jiménez (2017) offers a clear example of how this modality was adopted.

> The effects of exposition to media messages and civic compromise campaigns have resulted into an extensive theorical debate. While theories focused on mediatic discomfort sustain that the impact of these messages on policy involvement is negative, mobilization theories speak of a positive influence (p. 140).

Based on the latter, this author presented six alternative hypothesis that inquire if the impact of exposition on political information and news/analysis programs on electronic media, press and social networks was positive or negative regarding the indicators of civic commitment that guided the research.

Four papers that stated that the area hadn't been researched were located, this was the second scarcer variant. Three papers studied press and one studied a media system. This variant is illustrated by two investigations: on the one hand, Mercado-Martínez and Ascencio-Mera's (2014) analyze the coverage of written press on organ donation and argues that:

> In spite of how dramatic it can be and the decreasing rates of organ donation in this state, there are no actual studies on the matter nor on specific media coverage or its short- or long-term influence (p. 163).

On the other hand, García Leiva's (2016) studies the implementation of community policies in relation to audiovisual media, arguing the following:

> … the state of the art's research on media community policies enables a true confirmation in this area, of a lacking field of action –and, subsequently, of study– with a clear definition, a consensus underlying logic, a competent authority or agents with homogeneous interests (p. 225).

Furthermore, there was a larger number of papers –13 in total– identifying an under-researched topic and based on this formulating their research questions. This variant was mainly identified on papers focused on analyzing press, which added up to eight; two approached TV, one digital culture and practices, another a media system, and a last one the book. This study inquires: "Do readers get to books, or do books get to readers?". Canavire (2013) argues the approach of this question based on the following:

> Self-help books have a privileged position, leading best-seller lists, and the large number of sales they reach across the globe speaks of the relevance of this phenomenon in contemporary mass culture. Nevertheless, this has been sparsely addressed by the academic sphere (p. 43).

Furthermore, the author refers: "There are very few papers coming from the field of psychology, philosophy and cultural theory… However, an elaborated description of the self-help genre can be found in an unpublished doctorate thesis…" (p. 43).

Another study belonging to this same variant is authored by Domínguez Gutiérrez (2014), who openly grounds his question in the following way:

> In general terms, we have observed that the reviewed investigations follow the quoted tendencies, but this paper focuses on how the students use and apply the scientific research they do on the web. Despite a growing interest in the employment, impact, consumption and consequences of accessing the Internet, there are only a few studies referring to the specific usage of this media to learn about scientific matters, and the list only gets shorter (p. 49).

The variant of papers based on identifying a subject that lacks empirical support wasn't the most frequent, only six were recognized, distributed according to the following objects of study: two researched digital culture and practices, two TV and two a media system. One of the latter was an article by Huerta-Wong and Gómez (2013), who explain:

> When approaching the nature of companies, media content, their distribution and the impact on social relations of power between corporations and political power, and how audiences are influenced by content, a normative posture prevails while there aren't enough data to support it (p. 114).

Identifying the shortage of a particular theory or perspective in a specific area of research proved to be one of the most frequent variants; with 15 papers total, it positioned itself as the second tendency followed by media studies published in this journal. Most of the articles that formulating this type of research question approached digital culture and practices, adding up to seven papers, followed by two papers approaching press, two TV, two a media system, and radio and film with one each.

The research led by Rodríguez and Vázquez (2014) employs this modality for researching digital culture and practices. These authors propose a broader perspective on the definition of communication oriented towards communication and culture, in order to widen the definition of their categories to study human rights.

> The question leading this paper is about the communication modalities through which democratic practices and conditions are processed, focusing on the role of cultural activism and its agents, and productions in the processes of broadening a field of senses such as the case of human rights in Argentina (Rodríguez & Vázquez, 2014, p. 231).

Gutiérrez Vidrio and Reyna Ruiz (2015) wrote another paper also categorized in this variant. These authors explain that emotions have been mainly researched by psychology and philosophy. Thus, they propose a different approach: "acknowledging that the meaning of an emotion and its functional relevance can be found in the sociocultural system" (p. 129).

As we mentioned before, there was a variant that didn't respond to Sandberg and Alvesson's (2011) categorization. This variant displayed the highest tendency, we identified 19 articles that justify their research question by noting that several issues require a constant questioning of their reality, such as the case of annual inquiries on different aspects of media. These studies were mainly centered on TV, adding eight, four on press, four on culture and digital practices, three studied a media system, one researched about books, and another one radio. Torrecillas Lacave (2013) explained this clearly in regard to media consumption:

> With the rise of new communication and information technologies, attention has been drawn towards the risks and opportunities of consuming the so-called new media, but research can't forget about the screen which, despite its age, remains a priority in media practices among youngsters at home (p. 136).

The second modality for posing research questions refers to adopting a disruptive stance in relation to previous theories or studies. The results of this analysis coincide with Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) in establishing that this is a scarce modality in each of its variants. When analyzing the articles published by CyS, only one paper was found that responded to the variant of critical confrontation. It was a research that describes the prevailing standpoint in a line of investigation and confronts it directly; its research question makes it clear.

> When presenting an editorial overlook on the books for the wixáritari, based on editors that have already published for them, amount of printed copies, the languages in which they are written, and the dates and genres addressed, it is possible to approach a feasible answer to the question leading this investigation: Are the books published for the wixáritari a strategy to achieve national integration, a way to exclude them from written communication or a means for emancipation? (Corona, 2013, p. 12).

> Can books, product of western culture, respond to other means different than those responding to the disciplinary logic from which they were produced? What can we understand from the books edited particularly for the wixáritari? (Corona, 2013, p. 14).

CONCLUSIONS

In the media studies that were analyzed it was possible to identify the question that was asked and how it related to existing literature. This highlights the importance of promoting awareness of not only to explicitly pose the research question, but also to argue how it was formulated regarding a theorical background and the empirical studies in a research article. Furthermore, it leads to a higher rigor aimed at developing solid investigations that enable knowledge building, not only accumulatively –broadening and complementing it–, but exploring innovative formulations that promote creative thinking in order to find new ways of approaching objects of study.

In this analysis, findings coincide with Sandberg and Alvesson's (2011), that were obtained in organizational studies. There was a predominance of research questions based on different variants of the aligned modality, mostly oriented toward gap-spotting and scarcely ever displayed those corresponding to a disruptive nature aimed at questioning. These authors explain that they aren't affirming that one is preferable than the other, instead, they argue that both are necessary. In addition, they state that policies for the formation of new researchers, generation of new knowledge and publication of academic articles tend toward the first modality and there are few conditions and resources to achieve the formulation of critical and disruptive questions. This paper does not ask itself why this situation might be taking place. However, it aims at providing elements to start a debate on this issue. Furthermore, it contributes with data not only on how research questions are mainly formulated in media studies in this case, but also on how they were distributed according to the media that was studied, which also fuels new questions.

The present paper focused on an analytical approximation of methodological aspects that is different from a regular distinction between quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods, emphasizing the logic behind the research question in order to provide elements that enable a better understanding and systematization of this task, in practice and teaching. Certainly, this analysis has its limitations, since it was exploratory it could have broadened its classification criteria and could

even be replicated in other journals. This paper accomplishes the task of opening the so-called "black box" of methodology. Fundamentally, "the question about the question" –in terms of research– allows us to see beyond topics and objects of study in order to understand the level of development and the scope of a line of studies or field of knowledge.

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