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The operationalization of the concept of framing in the *Journal of Communication* (2009-2013): objects of study, research techniques and theoretical construction

Abstract

Operationalization and theoretical construction are the two core elements that define research activity in any field of social sciences. By operationalizing a concept of social research, we refer to the process by which objects of study are defined by means of two successive types of cognitive action: the construction and replication of theoretical and methodological approaches, and the selection of empirical phenomena that represent abstract concepts. The aim of this study is to observe and explain how is operationalized the concept of framing, and what types of theoretical constructions are present in the papers published in the *Journal of Communication* during the period 2009-2013. For this purpose, a content analysis has been designed and applied to a total of 50 items distributed in 26 issues of this journal. The selection of the *Journal of Communication* is justified not only with regards to its scientific impact and its international headship in the media research community, but also for being a publication closely related to a major research association such as the International Communication Association (ICA). In general terms, a key finding is that a significant cohesion and standardization in framing research published in the *Journal of Communication* during the reporting period is observed.

Keywords

**Framing, media studies, Journal of Communication,
operationalization, theoretical construction, research design**

1. Framing: a long-road concept

The notion of framing is one of the conceptual structures that has experienced increasing changes and diversity in communication research during the last decades (Bryant & Miron, 2004; Weaver, 2007;

Sádaba, 2008; Vicente-Mariño & López-Rabadán, 2009; López-Rabadán, 2010; López-Rabadán & Vicente-Mariño, 2013; Igartua & Humanes, 2004: 257-266; Marín & Zamora, 2014; Oller, 2014). Since its first psychological form by Gregory Bateson (1955, 1972) and its canonical formalization in terms of interpretive sociology proposed by Erving Goffman (1974) to its *balkanized* application in communication research by international reference scholars (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Reese, 2001; D'Angelo, 2002, among others), the concept of framing has undergone a gradual process of theoretical definition, methodological operationalization and empirical application (López-Rabadán & Vicente-Mariño, 2013). According to this progress, the notion of framing is an exemplary case in the process of maturity and present consolidation of communication research. As has been the case with other concepts and theories of communication, the theoretical and methodological development of framing would have evolved through different stages of maturity (Saperas, 2012; Carrasco-Campos & Saperas, 2013 and 2014a), waves (McQuail, 2005) or flows and reflows of topics (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1997: 10) from its primary theoretical diversity in various fields of social sciences (social psychology, cognitive psychology, interpretative sociology, and even social anthropology), to its current status as a highly applicable concept in communication research.

Without intending to describe thoroughly and in detail the stages of the evolution of framing conceptualization and operationalization from the seventies until the present day (this is not the purpose of this work), at the very least we can refer to the first period (Vicente-Mariño & López-Rabadán, 2009: 17-18) in which the concept of frame is considered a susceptible phenomenon to be borrowed from disciplines closely related to communication research, such as psychology, interpretative sociology (Borah, 2011), phenomenology and symbolic interactionism as recognizable theoretical roots (Sádaba, 2008: 23-35), for the study of social communication (public opinion, media effects, news production, social construction of reality). This first stage, which takes us from the early seventies to the early nineties, can be characterized as the period of recognition of framing processes as a communicative issue, and also for the first proposals of theoretical definitions made by other consolidated social sciences (Bateson, 1955, 1972; Goffman, 1974; Tuchman, 1978; Gitlin, 1980; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

A second period covers the decade of the nineties, and it is marked by a conscious need to clarify the position of the notion of framing in communication research. The concept of frame, once incorporated into Media Studies, is claimed by different authors either as a significant theoretical advance in its own right ("framing needs to be different from other closely related concepts in mass media effects research"; Scheufele, 1999: 104) both for studying informative discourse (Entman, 1991; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Gamson, 1992; Edelman, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1993) and media effects (Valkenburg, Semetko & de Vreese, 1999); or either as a second level of agenda-setting (McCombs, Shaw & Weaver, 1997; McCombs, López-Escobar, Llamas & Rey, 2001; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001; McCombs & Reynolds, 2002); or either as "fractured paradigm" in need of clarification (Entman, 1993); or as multiparadigmatic research program (D'Angelo, 2002).

This second period, the richest in a theoretical dimension, must be put into the general context of reorganization of the field of communication, resulting from the strong changes that occurred in a contextual level, and also in the communicative system itself; a process in which scientific journals, academic conferences and international research associations play a key institutional role (Carrasco-Campos & Saperas, 2013 and 2014a). In fact, the year 1993, when the *Journal of Communication* published the monograph entitled *The disciplinary Status of Communication Research*, can be considered as the symbolic date of the beginning of this period, because this special issue collected a paper that, in the end, would be decisive in the definition of framing theory: *Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm*, by Robert M. Entman (1993).

Additionally if within this widely institutionalized new research context, we propose as a landmark a particular special issue of the *Journal of Communication*, we must also point to another issue of this journal as a symbolic closure of this stage of theoretical reorganization of the concept of framing. We refer to *Framing, agenda setting, and priming: the evolution of three media effects models* (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). This issue would consolidate framing as a recognizable theoretical model within the disciplinary field of communication but putting aside the decisive theoretical dispute of the previous decade. Thus, in a similar way as Robert T. Craig manner advocated for a conciliation in the field of communication by means of communication theory (*Communication Theory as a Field*, 1999), the notion of framing stood out as the unifying theoretical element of its great methodological diversity of operationalization, according to its high capacity to generate testable and replicable data as a form of scientific advancement by comparison and accumulation of results. Thus, it is consolidated as an intermediate proposal for framing definition, in which hallmarks and boundaries are determined by its ability to be defined as an empirical program. Since then, if anything stands in the concept of framing, it is its high applicability from both the sociology and psychology of communication.

Framing's value, however, does not hinge on its potential as a unified research domain but, as I have suggested before, as a provocative model that bridges parts of the field that need to be in touch with each other: quantitative and qualitative, empirical and interpretative, psychological and sociological, and academic and professional (Reese, 2007: 148).

An explanation of the relationships between agenda setting (and priming) and framing needs to bridge levels of analysis and answer (a) how messages are created, (b) how they are processed, and (c) how the effects are produced (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007: 12).

This third stage, upon which our analysis will focus on, is characterized by a persistent tendency of empirical production under the conceptual framework conformed by the notion of framing in an advanced phase of methodological development (Igartua *et al.*, 2007; López-Rabadán & Vicente-Mariño, 2013). In other words, after an initial period of borrowing the notion of framing from sociology and psychology, and a second phase of strong theoretical and methodological debate on the operational and conceptual definition of framing, the special issue published by the *Journal of Communication* opened a third period which highlights the status of framing as a largely dominant empirical program. This third period will develop with a high presence of applied work in academic journals. For example, the bibliometric review of major international journals conducted by Bryant and Miron, published in 2004 concluded that framing was one of the most used theoretical models in media research during the recently released in 21st century (Bryant & Miron, 2007: 695-696), being *Journal of Communication* (object of our study) the journal with the highest number of publications on framing during the period and sample analysed (Bryant & Miron, 2004: 693).

Three years later, Weaver confirmed in 2007 a gradual and steady increase in scientific production on framing, exceeding by more than double the number of papers on this notion indexed in *Communication Abstracts* during the period 2001-2005 (165 papers), compared to the previous period 1996-2000 (76 items) (Weaver, 2007: 143). Meanwhile, Scheufele and Iyengar (2012: 2) verified a recurrent presence of framing studies in major international magazines ("today, virtually every volume of the major journals features at least one paper on media frames and framing effects"), therefore both key authors confirm the centrality of this empirical program in international communication research. With this, we can confirm, as Sádaba, Rodríguez and Bartolomé (2012: 112) the recent operative success of framing, as a consequence of the progress on its theoretical understanding.

2. Objectives and methodology

2.1. Operationalization of «framing»

As we described, our research sets its background within the previously defined third stage in the development of the notion of framing, which has been characterized by a high scientific productivity in applied studies and a remarkable diversification of its areas of application and the objects of study evaluated. In this context, the development of framing research has experienced two apparently contradictory tendencies. First we can discuss the promotion of a diversity of research topics, which would have affected the already mentioned significant increase in the presence of studies on framing in major international journals, as a result of the operational capability developed through several years of theoretical debate. As a consequence, it would have allowed a remarkable creativity and a conscious paradigmatic diversity capable of leading to a comprehensive view of the framing processes (Borah, 2011: 246). However, in the context of continuous methodological dispersion of the notion of framing, a medium term consequence has been the consolidation of a tendency contrary to a univocal model. That is, the development of this tendency would have led to a lack of accurate and shared understandings (Scheufele, 1999: 103; Reese, 2001; Amadeo, 2002) and also to a lack of common procedures to operationalize the notion of framing.

This second tendency has generated approaches and research strategies clearly diverse, and often opposite (Borah, 2011: 247), and in a wide variety of objects of study. Although, Robert Entman had already warned that there should not be a single paradigm for framing research (Entman, 1993: 163), and even though ten years after Paul D'Angelo proposed the advantages of developing a multiparadigmatic research program (D'Angelo, 2002: 879-880), it has not avoided solving the significant conceptual ambiguity, the remarkable polysemy and the notable lack of success in consolidating a unified and coherent theoretical and methodological framework (Reese, Gandy & Grant, 2001; Koenig, 2006). However, the diversity of applications of the concept of frame and the coexistence of these two tendencies have not hindered the promotion of framing research and its underpinning as one of the theoretical frameworks with a greater impact on empirical communication research (Saperas, 2011: 53-55). Quite the contrary, it seems to have provided an opportunity for its development as a research program highly adapted to a contemporary context in which media system mediatizes other social systems in many different ways. Therefore, we appraise that studying the operationalization of the concept of framing can give accurate information regarding the current development of this kind of communication research and its definition.

By operationalizing a concept of social research we refer to the process by which academics construct objects of study by means of two successive types of cognitive action: the design and replication of theoretical and methodological approaches and the selection of empirical phenomena that represent these abstract concepts. Through the process of operationalization we can take the step from a theoretical concept paradigmatically created by a research community to the recognition of the process and actions taking place in the social reality. In other words, by analysing scientist's working routines we can move from overall research approaches to empirical observation.

2.2. Case study and sample procedure

As we have already noted, the purpose of this research is the observation of the operationalization of framing in the papers published by the *Journal of Communication* during the period 2009-2013. The analysis covers a total of 26 issues published during five

calendar years: from Volume 59-Issue 1, edited in March 2009, to Volume 63-Issue 6, released in December 2013.

The selection of this period as case study is not accidental because, as indicated earlier, we intended to include a five-year period in which, after the proposal of formal closure of the debate on the theoretical status of the notion of framing with the special issue *Framing, agenda setting, and priming: the evolution of three media effects models* (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007) published by the *Journal of Communication*, a phase of applied research would have begun. Thus, an analysis of the 2009-2013 period would allow us to characterize the limits and standards of the operationalization of a theoretical notion in a mature stage, and after being widely discussed and debated for two decades by the international scientific community.

On the other hand, scientific journals in the disciplinary field of communication, always attentive to the debate and definition of the field itself, can be defined as an appropriate case for the study of the operationalization processes of major conceptual frameworks in communication research. The *Journal of Communication* is certainly a preferential object of study to observe the operationalization of framing, as most of the fundamental texts for its theoretical discussion during the last twenty years (Entman 1991; Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; D'Angelo, 2002; Bryant & Miron, 2004; Reese, 2007; Weaver, 2007; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007 among others) have been published by this journal, going beyond its role as a mere mean for the dissemination of scientific knowledge by adopting an active institutional position in the academic debate on framing (especially considering its decisive contribution to the aforementioned outstanding monograph edited in 2007).

Thus, selecting this journal as object of study was not decided by taking into account representativeness criteria, but according to an intentional purpose to delimit the investigation to a head journal for communication studies, not only scientifically but also institutionally. Therefore, this decision would be justified not only by its impact and its international leading position, but particularly for being a publication closely related to a major scientific association such as the International Communication Association (ICA), and for the main character of its papers and special issues in the process of reorganization and systematization of the field of communication in general and, in particular, of the notion of framing itself. Consequently, this study settles in the context of globalization, institutionalization and empiricism to which we are referring as distinctive characteristic of contemporary communication research and, hence, takes the paper as unit of analysis, since it is a privileged vehicle for the dissemination of scientific knowledge in both institutional and on a scientific level (Carrasco-Campos & Saperas, 2014b: 1714).

2.3. Coding process and research objectives

Our research has been conducted by content analysis, the main objective of this was to study the papers published in the *Journal of Communication* that manifestly make use of the concept of framing in their theoretical framework. To perform this analysis, a coding sheet was developed and specifically designed for the systematic observation of the scientific practices in operationalizing those concepts that identify a theoretical framework and, in parallel, provide conceptual structures that regulate positions, forms and procedures of research activity. Specifically, the design has been made in order to accurately observe the conceptual and expositive procedures for the operationalization of a theoretical concept and its empirical approach. These procedures are of two types: (1) those that allow the construction of operative concepts of a general nature, related to the particular uses of the theory that researchers propose in each paper, and (2) the expositive procedures made for the observation of empirical phenomena by diverse methods and techniques of quantitative,

qualitative, experimental class, and by describing theoretical frameworks or literature review, among others.

In order to compile the coding sheet we started from previous research carried out in recent years in relation to the study and relating to the description of the contents and the institutional role of major academic journals (Carrasco-Campos & Saperas, 2013 and 2014b; Martínez-Nicolás & Saperas, 2011; Castillo, 2011; De-Pablos, 2010) and the evolution of the disciplinary field of Media Studies during the last decade (Carrasco-Campos & Saperas, 2014a). A priority of this study last work has been the development of lists of specific terminology that identify and systematize the research objects present in major international journals and the methods and techniques applied in their papers.

As a result, a coding sheet has been designed with 8 variables and 143 indicators. The coding sheet is structured in five sections. The first allows the identification of the units of analysis, according to the year, volume and issue of publication by the *Journal of Communication*. The second section focuses on the research modality carried out: empirical by quantitative techniques, empirical by qualitative techniques, empirical by case study, empirical by experimental techniques, theoretical or conceptual research, and studies on the content of peer-reviewed journal articles. A third section is intended to identify research objects by a list of 41 units already tested in previous research studies (Carrasco-Campos & Saperas, 2013). The research techniques are under observation in a fourth group. Based on the indexing performed in previous research (Carrasco-Campos & Saperas, 2013 and 2014b; Saperas & Carrasco-Campos, 2014a), a list of 53 research techniques have been used and regularly applied in international communication research. Finally, the theoretical construction procedures of framing have also been observed.

These operative processes have been performed by the use of a standard theory or by characteristic lexical uses of scientific jargon. In the first case, the use of the theory can be observed as (1) a unique theoretical framework, (2) framing as a part of a theoretical framework in a dominant position with respect to other solidary theories, (3) is part of the theoretical framework but in a subordinate position, and (4) framing theory is identified as a standard theory but without definition or periodization of a theoretical framework. Regarding to lexical uses, two cases are observed: (1) the concept of framing presents a mere lexical use, referring to frame as a part of communication process (preferentially in sociological studies), or to the effects of frames or framing in audiences (preferentially in psychological studies) (Borah, 2011: 253), and (2) the concept of framing is operationalized as a descriptive concept that refers to a segment or to a regular part of the communication process.

According to the coding applied, we define the research objectives (RO) as follows:

RO1: Determine the presence of framing research papers in *Journal of Communication* (the total number of papers and its distribution by volume) during the period of analysis.

RO2: Distinguish the research objects in framing research papers published in *Journal of Communication* during the period of analysis.

RO3: Analyse the research methods and techniques used in the papers submitted for analysis.

RO4: Identify the theoretical construction processes in framing research in the analysed papers.

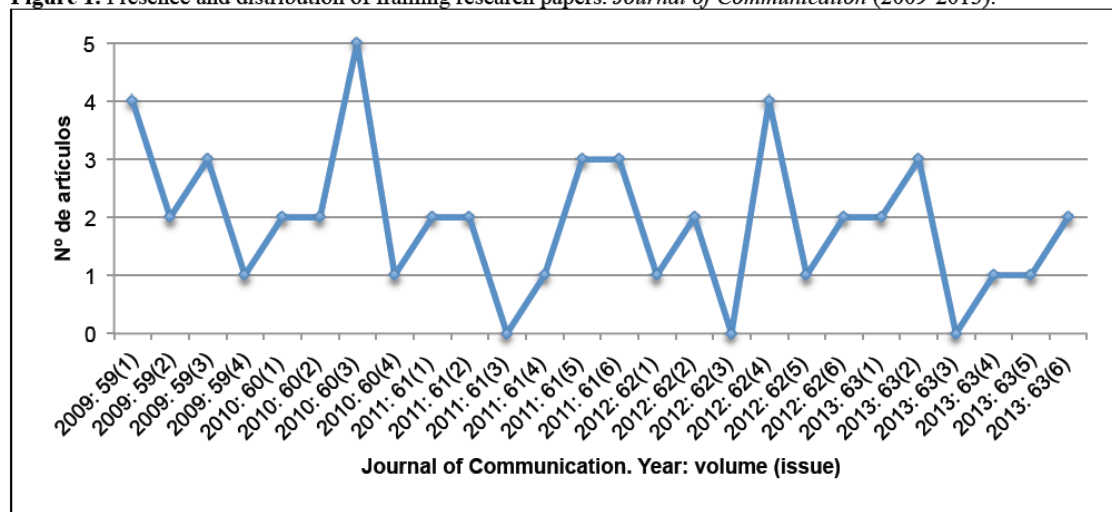
3. Results

3.1. *Presence and distribution*

As a first of the descriptive element of our analysis, we must refer to the prominent presence of articles that, in one way or another, refer to the notion of framing. A total of 50

articles (units of analysis) in 26 issues are counted from the *Journal of Communication* during the period of analysis; amounting to an average of 1.92 articles, with at most a recurrent presence of 2 articles (mode = 2). In general terms, this is an important number, particularly considering that the *Journal of Communication* edits between 8 and 10 papers by issue in its "Original articles" section. It is also necessary to mention that, usually, in every issue we can find at least one article on framing research, coinciding this with the previously outlined data that placed the notion of framing, in a moment of operative success, as one of the main theoretical frameworks in contemporary international applied research.

Figure 1. Presence and distribution of framing research papers. *Journal of Communication* (2009-2013).



Source: own elaboration.

However, as can be seen in Figure 1, a relative dispersion in the presence of articles during the analysed period can be observed. This presence varies from the 5 articles published in Vol. 60/3 2010 to its absence in three subsequent issues, edited in 2011 (vol. 61/2), 2012 (vol. 62/3) and 2013 (vol. 63/3). The observed variations in the frequency of framing research articles should not prevent us from recognising the regularity of this theoretical framework in the papers analysed. Clearly, with regards to the delimitation of our object of study, the analysis makes it impossible for us to advance long-term tendencies, an aspect that is far from our initial objectives and that we reserve for future research.

3.2. Objects of study

The definition of the objects of study is a central procedure in operationalizing a reference abstract concept such as framing. In this case, we can observe (Figure 2) a dominant object of research: journalism and media coverage of current events or specialized information, preferentially health issues. 35 out of the 50 papers under observation refer to journalism by a remarkable diversification of objects of study in three recurring areas: political information, media coverage, and health information and communication. In precision, 26% of framing processes observed are in the field of political journalism through three modalities: media polarization and coverage of current political events, journalistic information during electoral campaigns, and political communication and public debates in social media and online political debates.

To this aggregation of cases regarding political information we should add, with a presence of 28%, another close modality: media coverage of non-political current events in

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both conventional and digital media (immigration, gender, infotainment, stereotypes in journalistic discourse, risk perception, comparative studies of media coverage, and media coverage in its broadest sense), and journalism as a *newsmaking* professional activity (news sources, credibility, practices and values of journalism profession, digital transition in professional practices, online journalism and information). This significant dominant group of journalistic objects of study is completed with the relevant presence of health communication research, achieving 16% (persuasive narrative and disease prevention, persuasion and selective focus on communications aimed at prevention, risk perception, media persuasion and short-term effects on habits and behaviours, health information, and selective exposure).

In second place another group of research objects with solid precedents in communication research stands out: media reception. This second group reaches the 16% of the analysed objects of study and is defined by two fields. The first one is a classic American research object such as media persuasive capacity and its use in audiences decision-making, which also incorporates the study of selective exposure and interpretation and reception processes by individuals. The second field of research topics, the minority one in our sample, refers to media consumption habits by individuals.

Facing this major preponderance of the aforementioned thematic blocks, it appears, with at least one case, that a great variety of research topics in framing are revealed, such as interpersonal communication, video games, multiculturalism and the media, strategic and corporate communication (each with one case), and other objects unable to identify under these general categories (three cases).

Figure 2. Objects of research in framing research. *Journal of Communication* (2009-2013).

Objects of research		Frequency (N=50)	Percentage (%)
JOURNALISM AND NEWS COVERAGE (excluding political and health communication)		14	28%
POLITICAL INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION	Political communication: political news coverage	5	10%
	Political communication: social media, online political debates	4	8%
	Electoral campaigns and media	4	8%
	TOTAL: POLITICAL INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION	13	26%
MEDIA RECEPTION AND CONSUMPTION	Individual media reception/interpretation, persuasion, decision-making	5	10%
	Multitasking media consumption	2	4%
	Media consumption	1	2%
	TOTAL: MEDIA RECEPTION AND CONSUMPTION	8	16%
HEALTH INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION		8	16%
INTEPRESONAL COMMUNICATION		1	2%
VIDEOGAMES		1	2%
MULTICULTURALISM AND MEDIA CONTENTS		1	2%
STRATEGIC AND COROPORATE COMMUNICATION		1	2%
OTHER		3	6%

Source: own elaboration.

From this data, we can at least hold three statements. Firstly, in the analysed articles framing is, in general terms, used for a scientific approach to topics and objects that can be considered "classics" for this theory, such as journalism, political information and communication, and media consumption. By this we mean that the notion of framing primarily reveals its viability and applicability in the same objects and topics of social communication for which it was originally borrowed from sociology and psychology, as we

summarized in our introduction. Secondly, it should also be emphasised that the relevant presence of "new" research topics in framing studies published by the *Journal of Communication* during the period of analysis: health information and communication can be described as an emergent topic in media studies for which the notion of framing has also revealed capability for its implementation. And thirdly, we should also take into account some other topics and objects different to those previously mentioned, although with a much minor -and almost testimonial- presence.

3.3. Research modalities and techniques

The data collected on framing research modalities (Figure 3) reveals that almost all the analysed cases correspond to the empirical studies; only two cases are purely theoretical studies, and only a unique case could not be classifiable by this distinction. In addition, within this remarkable empirical character, the majority use of quantitative techniques (48%) is emphasized. In a second place, although with a lower but, comparatively, still strong presence, experimental researches are located (26%). On the contrary, qualitative research cases are a minority (14%), and mixed research (combining quantitative and qualitative techniques) and theoretical research modalities are almost the exception, both with 2 cases (4%) respectively.

Figure 3. Research modalities in framing research. *Journal of Communication* (2009-2013).

Research modalities	Frequency (N=50)	Percentage (%)
EMPIRICAL BY QUANTITATIVE TECHNIQUES	24	48%
EMPIRICAL BY EXPERIMENTAL TECHNIQUES	13	26%
EMPIRICAL BY QUALITATIVE TECHNIQUES	7	14%
EMPIRICAL BY BOTH QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE TECHNIQUES	2	4%
THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL RESEARCH	2	4%
EMPIRICAL BY CASE STUDY	1	2%
NOT CATEGORIZED UNDER THIS CRITERIA	1	2%

Source: own elaboration.

In contrast to previous stages of framing research development, in which different significant studies were carried out offering findings, hypothesis and theoretical reflections with a clear purpose of conceptual demarcation, our first data on research processes points to the aforementioned current stage of framing research based on the dissemination of empirical applied studies. This data allows us to delimit a dominant model in framing studies as an empirical program in terms of experimental and, above all, quantitative research: both modalities assemble 74% of the cases observed. These results seem to point to a tendency towards certain standardization of studies on framing published by the *Journal of Communication* in the maturity phase that defines our work.

The examination of specific research techniques and instruments (Figure 4) also reveals this eminently quantitative and experimental character of framing studies. Thus, a systematic analysis of the principal research technique of each studied paper reveals three dominant groups of techniques and instruments: content analysis (quantitative technique used in 30% of the analysed cases), the original design and implementation of an experiment study (22%), and surveys and questionnaires (18%); all of these such instruments and techniques were routinely applied in quantitative and experimental research. As in the previous case, these main techniques gather a significant majority of cases (70%), with respect to which we can find a relative diversity of techniques, most of them qualitative

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techniques, but with a minimal presence (textual analysis, discourse analysis, structured and in-depth qualitative interviews, etc.). With this, the current tendency toward standardization of framing as an empirical research program reveals two closely related additional characteristics: firstly, the use of techniques, instruments and designs is easily replicable in future research, such as content analysis and experiment; and, furthermore, the capacity of these techniques to generate measurable and objectionable data, liable to be accumulated and compared.

Figure 4. Principal research technique in framing research. *Journal of Communication* (2009-2013).

Principal research technique		Frequency (N=50)	Percentage (%)
CONTENT ANALYSIS		15	30%
ORIGINAL DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF AN EXPERIMENT STUDY		11	22%
SURVEYS AND QUESTIONNAIRES	Questionnaire: closed format question	3	6%
	Online questionnaire	3	6%
	Panel survey	2	4%
	Questionnaire: Likert scale	1	2%
	TOTAL: SURVEYS AND QUESTIONNAIRES	9	18%
DOCUMENT ANALYSIS AND DESCRIPTION		4	8%
QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW (STRUCTURED AND IN-DEPTH)		2	4%
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS		2	4%
TEXTUAL ANALYSIS		1	2%
ETNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS		1	2%
SECONDARY RESEARCH SOURCES		1	2%
META-ANALYSIS		1	2%
BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS		1	2%
OTHER		2	4%

Source: own elaboration.

In a more detailed analysis of the research techniques, by taking into account up to three techniques and instruments, it appears the results hardly differ from those mentioned above. The most common techniques remain almost the same: surveys and questionnaires (24.4% over the total of the techniques used, up to three), content analysis (19.5%) and the original design and implementation of an experiment study (13.4%). This data confirms our previous findings concerning the eminently quantitative and experimental research modality on framing studies during the analysed period.

However, it is worth noting two new pieces of data, as we can consider from Figure 5. Firstly, an increase in the relative presence of the use of surveys and questionnaires can be seen, these are located here as the main technique, compared to third position which was achieved during the analysis of only a single principal technique; and secondly, a significant presence of the use of relative complex statistical analysis, with a presence of 17% over the total of techniques employed. These data not only disclose again the intention of framing research, published in the *Journal of Communication* during the period analysis, to generate results liable to be accumulated and replicated as a way to achieve scientific knowledge advances (similar to our previous analysis, the four techniques mentioned represent 74.3% over all research techniques used in framing studies during the period of analysis), but also reveal some complexity in data collection and analysis processes. Therefore, we must emphasize at this point a certain level of maturity, sophistication and complexity in the analysis and methodological operationalization of the notion of framing, especially by making use of multivariate statistical analysis, and so, the data recorded seems to point out

a proposal to go beyond the mere descriptive and exploratory studies expected of initial stages of applied research.

Figure 5. Research techniques (observed up to three) in framing research. *Journal of Communication* (2009-2013).

Research techniques (observed up to three)		Frequency (N=82)	Percentage (%)
SURVEYS AND QUESTIONNAIRES	Panel survey	3	3,7%
	Telephone survey	1	1,2%
	Internet survey	1	1,2%
	Questionnaire: closed format question	5	6,1%
	Online questionnaire	5	6,1%
	Questionnaire: Likert scale	5	6,1%
	TOTAL: SURVEYS AND QUESTIONNAIRES	20	24,4%
CONTENT ANALYSIS		16	19,5%
STATISTICAL ANALYSIS	ANOVA. Factorial analysis of variance	6	7,3%
	Multivariate regression analysis	3	3,7%
	MANOVA. Multivariate analysis of variance	2	2,4%
	ANCOVA. Analysis of covariance.	2	2,4%
	ARIMA. Autoregressive integrated moving average	1	1,2%
	TOTAL: STATISTICAL ANALYSIS	14	17%
ORIGINAL DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF AN EXPERIMENT STUDY		11	13,4%
DOCUMENT ANALYSIS AND DESCRIPTION		4	4,9%
TEXTUAL ANALYSIS		2	2,4%
DISCOURSE ANALYSIS		2	2,4%
SECONDARY RESEARCH SOURCES		2	2,4%
QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW (STRUCTURED AND IN-DEPTH)		2	2,4%
LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS		1	1,2%
ETNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS		1	1,2%
META-ANALYSIS		1	1,2%
NETWORK ANALYSIS		1	1,2%
BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS		1	1,2%
OTHER		4	4,9%

Source: own elaboration.

3.4. Theoretical construction processes

As has been detailed in the methodological description, the analysis of the uses of theory seeks to discover the role played by the notion of framing in the theoretical construction for the studies that define the object of study, and also to find out the operational use given as part of their theoretical framework. In this regard, we distinguish two levels of analysis in the uses of the theory: on a first level we identify whether the term “framing” has or has not been used as a standard theory (“theory of framing”), while on a second level we attempt a more detailed study in order to determine, if so, the type of theoretical construct made or, if not, to distinguish whether “framing” has been used either as research lexicon (that is, as a technical expression incorporated to the academic jargon), or in regard to communicative processes or effects (“framing processes”, “framing effects”). Data are collected in Figure 6.

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Figure 6. *Framing*: theoretical construction processes. *Journal of Communication* (2009-2013).

Theoretical construction processes (¿Is framing used as a standard theory?)		Frequency (N=50)	Percentage (%)
YES: Framing is used as a standard theory	Framing is used as a standard theory: exclusive theory	16	32%
	Framing is used as a standard theory: principal theory	7	14%
	Framing is used as a standard theory: subordinate theory	7	14%
	Framing is used as a standard theory: generic use	4	8%
	TOTAL: YES	34	68%
NO: Framing is not used as a standard theory	Framing is used as research lexicon	9	18%
	Framing is used as a communication process	7	14%
	TOTAL: NO	16	32%

Source: own elaboration.

With regards to our first level of analysis, we can highlight a large majority (68%) of the analysed papers that use framing as a standardized and recognizable theoretical model. These outputs position this research, as we referred in the introduction, at a stage of theoretical maturity in which the concept of framing, with its own statute and identity, has been already incorporated to the catalogue of communication theories. That is, this data supports the conclusion that at present the concept of framing is, for the papers published by the *Journal of Communication*, mostly recognized as a theoretical framework itself in the disciplinary field of communication, and neither merely as an effect or communicative process (dependent or not upon other communication theories) nor simply as a research lexicon in scientific jargon.

However, with regards to the second level of analysis of the uses of theory, we emphasize that within that broad recognition of framing as a standard theory, it is also a majority the cases that make use of it as an exclusive theory in research theoretical frameworks. Thus, 32% over the studied cases respond to this exclusive use of the theory for which the concept of framing defines the theoretical framework. With respect to these cases we can find uses of the theory in which the notion of framing defines the theoretical framework in addition to other theories or solidary concepts, mostly in reference to other middle range theories such as agenda-setting theory, indexing theory and cascade activation model.

Within these cases of a combined theoretical construction, even though in equal proportion, we must distinguish on the one hand the 14% over the analysed cases in which the notion of framing appears as the dominant theoretical and conceptual component (other theories or concepts play a secondary role in shaping the theoretical framework) and, on the other hand, the 14% of cases in which the notion of framing serves as a subsidiary theoretical complement with regards to other communication theories, that is, when framing is used as a subsidiary theory. Finally, despite the minimal use of the theory recorded, we should also refer to the 4% of cases in which the use of framing as a theory is recognized, but in a generic and purely procedural way, without making full definitions, a detailed literature review or a comprehensive conceptual discussion.

This data allows us to hold that the framing theory is mainly recognized as a communication theory with an independent identity and statute on the papers published by the *Journal of Communication* during the period of analysis, that is, as something more than just a communication process or an academic lexicon in scientific jargon; and also that within this theoretical operationalization the most habitual uses are either as exclusive theoretical framework, either as compound theoretical framework with other solidary theories, equally dividing these cases in those which the notion of framing plays the primary and the secondary role. However, with respect to the uses of the theory of framing that

reveal an independent identity, we should also point out that there were 32% of cases in which the notion of framing was not used as a standard theory.

4. Conclusions and discussion

As we defined in our objectives, the general proposal for this research has been the analysis of the articles published by the *Journal of Communication* for the period 2009-2013 that use the notion of framing. Therefore, the expected contribution has been to carry out a systematic observation of the operationalization processes of a prominent concept in current communication research published by a major international journal. Consequently, the results presented above should be interpreted in this sense: taking into account the significance of the object of study, but without any ambition neither to achieve representative results for the whole of international framing research, nor to carry out a comparative study between the evolution and the operative development of framing. In future research we would incorporate a longitudinal perspective in order to implement a more dynamic analysis, so we could contrast past evolution and future tendencies in framing research, and also extend our object of study to a larger and more diverse number of journals.

In any case, even accepting these limitations of the study, all of them noted from the beginning, according to the aforementioned findings we can at least conclude, in general terms, that currently the concept of framing, in the studies published by the *Journal of Communication*, arouses great interest and consensus in the communication research community: at least for one of the preferred channels either for the dissemination of scientific knowledge and for the delimitation and the organization of the disciplinary field of communication during the last three decades, in academic and institutional terms. At this point we should emphasize, once again, the role played by the *Journal of Communication* as one of the head publications of the International Communication Association.

Specifically, we also notice some uniformity in the objects of study investigated by the concept of framing, particularly in relation to those considered "classics" in communication research: media coverage of current (political and non-political) events and the main role of news and information as primary objects of study; both of them are topics with a greater presence in our results, and they represent a significant continuity in relation to research areas with a long tradition in the field of communication. All of this considering the partial, but relevant enough to consider in future research, transformation of these classic objects regarding the changes occurred in a digital context, even though from a little problematic approach; that is, with no possibility to demonstrate whether framing research on news and media coverage questions the traditional approaches, with a conscious intention to contribute to the debate on a journalism professional activity in change: journalism 2.0, citizen journalism, the crisis of journalism, etc.

In terms of research topics and objects of study in framing research, we should also highlight the important but less relevant role of media reception and other related phenomena: persuasion in the media, selective exposure, interpretation of media contents. This relevance intensifies with the incorporation of an emerging object of study, such as health communication and information; a social communication phenomenon that remains focused on media effects of individual perception of sanitary risks and disease awareness campaigns (cancer, obesity) when it is investigated taking framing as theoretical framework. To this respect we should also express the significance of an individual approach as, up to a certain point, as a new perspective in media reception studies on framing (individual media reception). Compared to this individual approach, framing research on social groups - crucial in the early stages, in which it emphasized an interpretive approach connected to symbolic interactionism- reveals a small presence in our results. Thus, contextual

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components in media reception (society, culture, lifestyles, professional cultures of journalism, globalization, political change) are virtually absent in our sample, having found only a single case of comparative journalism research.

In addition, regarding the theoretical and methodological operationalization processes, we stress a significant standardization in framing research studies, at this maturity stage, published by the *Journal of Communication*. This can be justified taking into account the broad recognition of framing as standard theory with an own identity and statute, and also considering its main empirical character, by means of quantitative and experimental research modalities with high analytical complexity through elaborated statistical analyses and digital research instruments: original design experiments, online questionnaires, internet surveys, digital polls. Therefore, we can conclude that framing research published by a major journal such as the *Journal of Communication* can be currently defined as an empirical program in terms of quantitative and experimental analytically sophisticated research, with a clearly delimited theoretical framework.

Figure 7. The operationalization of the concept of framing. *Journal of Communication* (2009-2013).

Objects of research	Uses of framing as a standard theory	Principal research technique				Total
		Surveys and questionnaires	Content analysis	Experiment	Other	
JOURNALISM AND NEWS COVERAGE	No	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Yes	2%	18%	4%	4%	28%
	Total	2%	18%	4%	4%	28%
POLITICAL INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION	No	2%	0%	0%	8%	10%
	Yes	6%	8%	0%	2%	16%
	Total	8%	8%	0%	10%	26%
MEDIA RECEPTION AND CONSUMPTION	No	0%	0%	4%	0%	4%
	Yes	0%	2%	6%	4%	12%
	Total	0%	2%	10%	4%	16%
HEALTH INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION	No	4%	0%	2%	2%	8%
	Yes	0%	0%	4%	4%	8%
	Total	4%	0%	6%	6%	16%
OTHER	No	4%	0%	0%	6%	10%
	Yes	0%	2%	2%	0%	4%
	Total	4%	2%	2%	6%	14%

Source: own elaboration.

With all these observations, the study carried out with this work allows us to draw a complete picture of framing research conducted in a stage of empirical production. This picture reveals the principal processes of operationalization of framing in terms of theoretical construction, methodology design and objects of study, carried out in the papers edited by *Journal of Communication* during the period of analysis (Figure 7). Considering a combination of the three variables defined to study the operationalization of the concept of framing, we can observe that framing studies in journalism and media coverage of current events shapes the most usual type. More specifically, with a presence of 18% over the analysed items, all the cases observed on journalism and media coverage have been carried out through content analysis and using framing as a standard theory. Hence these cases shape the majority profile of framing research studies, in a combination of the three operationalization levels mentioned above. With regards to framing research on political information and communication, the results also indicate a major use of framing as a

standard theory, being content analysis, and surveys and questionnaires the most usual techniques implemented. Framing research on media consumption and reception stands out especially for its experimental character (10% over the total of the analysed papers), albeit with some more dispersion in theoretical construction strategies, while research in health information and communication –the "less" classic among the objects of study in framing research– reveals greater dispersion both theoretical and methodological.

With this, and as a final consideration, our study has allowed us to point to a context in framing research defined for a wide cohesion, which is especially evident in three aspects: (i) the usual use of framing as a standard theory, (ii) the centrality of content analysis for the study of journalism and media coverage, and (iii) the centrality of experimental techniques for the study of media persuasion, media reception and media effects in both short and medium term. These major profiles in the operationalization of the concept of framing would take us to the original dual perspective of framing research that started in the seventies: on the one hand, the psychological perspective, although oriented, at present, to an individual approach compared to the traditional approach of social psychology; and, on the other hand, the sociological perspective (in our case, sociology of journalism in its broadest sense: political information and communication policy, political opinion, journalism professional activity).

Thus, the theoretical fragmentation, high applicability and methodological diversity – even multiparadigmatic– expected in framing research when taking into account the descriptions found in previous research (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Reese, 2001 and 2007; Reese Gandy & Grant, 2001; Amadeo, 2002; D'Angelo, 2002; Koenig, 2006; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007), would contrast with the findings reached in this work for the papers published by the *Journal of Communication* at this stage of empirical production: quite conservatism in the topics and objects of study, an almost unique proposal for methodological design, and certain modesty in sample selections in the most cases studied, unambitious and with no representative intention. Our observations regarding the important cohesion and standardization of framing research would seem to point to a new stage of scientific *normalization* in the publications in the ICA's environment; a stage defined by going beyond the theoretical debate usual in previous research studies and by channelling the methodological dispersion and fracture to a predominant empirical program, theoretically unambiguous, quantitative and experimental in methodological terms, and based on a model of scientific knowledge advances by means of methodological replication, data accumulation and comparative results with a pretension of objectivity and generalization.

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