

Reception studies: state of the issue and challenges ahead

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Daniela Schmitz

Elisa Piedras

Laura Wottrich

(Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Faculdade de Biblioteconomia e Comunicação, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação. Porto Alegre – RS, Brazil)

Lourdes Ana Pereira Silva

(Universidade de Santo Amaro, Mestrado Interdisciplinar em Ciências Humanas, Cursos de Jornalismo e de Publicidade e Propaganda. São Paulo – SP, Brazil)

Mônica Pieniz

Nilda Jacks

(Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Faculdade de Biblioteconomia e Comunicação, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação. Porto Alegre – RS, Brazil)

Valquíria John

(Universidade do Vale do Itajaí, Faculdade de Comunicação, Curso de Jornalismo. Itajaí – SC, Brazil)

Abstract

The researches defined as state of the art or state of the question, among several names used, apparently do not constitute a real concern among researchers in Communication. Based on the understanding that this work is not only necessary, but also urgent, this research focuses on the *stricto sensu* academic production about reception studies developed in the past two decades. Thesis and dissertations produced in the Graduate Programs in Communication from 1990 to 2009 were analyzed, aiming to map the theoretical and methodological scenario adopted by researchers who made efforts to understand this complex phenomenon of relations between “Media and audiences”. The results point

to a slow growth of these studies and several theoretical challenges as regards facing such theme.

Keywords: Reception theory. State of the art. Communication. Methodology. Literature review.

Introduction

This text is concerned with *stricto sensu* research within reception studies developed in the field of Communications in Brazil between 1990 and 2009, especially focusing on the production of the past nine years. It is the outcome of analysis performed in two books¹ whose goal was to touch on the state of the art of audience studies. Centring the analysis on students' production also reflects, to a certain extent, the work and the position of teachers-researchers who act within postgraduate programmes, even if indirectly. Therefrom also emerge traces of the education that new researchers have been hitherto given on the making of science as well as traces of the path that reception studies acquire in terms of theoretical propositions and empirical interests.

Thus, in general terms, this text aims at synthesising both developments and impediments of research on reception in order to contribute to discussions that question the place of theory and the theoretical framework brought about by studies in Communications. It is important to elucidate that the gaze often exceeds the theoretical treatment of objects for every theoretical problematisation is, in itself, methodological as well. Beyond the main theories which circulate within the scope of reception studies, we also wish to explore the way in which they have been activated and strained as a result of those concrete objects studied. We likewise wish to synthesise the major issues mobilising new researchers as well as to point to the path that the area of reception studies has taken in the past twenty years.

¹ JACKS (ed.), 2014 (forthcoming) and JACKS et al. (2008).

Analysed researches were categorised under three theoretical approaches: *sociocultural*, *socio-discursive*, and *behavioural*. The first being the one that

encompasses a broad, complex view of the reception process of media products, in which multiple social and cultural relations are considered. More than the study of the phenomenon of reception itself, it intends to problematise and research its social and cultural insertion either from a theoretical or empirical standpoint (ESCOSTEGUY, 2004, p.135).

The *socio-discursive* approach treats the subjects' discourses from theoretico-methodological foci which are dedicated to the analysis of social discourses emanating from the Media and its receptors, which include: semiotics, discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis, rhetorics, linguistics, theory of social representations, amongst other theoretical possibilities whose goal is to approach the subjects' discourses about their practices of reception and their relationship to Media content. Based on the anchorage of a social context, speech grants materiality to subjects' representations of their relationship with the Media and their content. Studies of a *behavioural* character, on the other hand, are understood as those studies of different impacts deriving from the Media, that is, Media products are considered as stimuli, which provoke diverse reactions in audiences (ESCOSTEGUY, 2004, p.135).

In light of the great number of studies which were analysed – 49 from the 1990s and 209 from the 2000s –, the following text is divided into main topics, highlighting the main Media (television, internet), genres (*telenovela*, Journalism, advertising), and perspective (identity) which were therein investigated.

The reception of television

As in the 1990s, this is the most studied process (111 pieces of work), accounting for more than half of the *corpus* analysed in the 2000s. Of the total, 72 have a *sociocultural* approach; nine, a *socio-discursive* one; and 30 have a *behavioural* approach.

The *behavioural* approach still stands out, which might mean at least two things: the persistence of either the interest in effects, influences, and impact of certain television discourses or, which is more problematic, the persistence of quantitative research to evaluate audiences' behaviour without, however, assuming a statistical character, able to highlight tendencies. There is no a priori denial of this focus since it might bring important data for the evaluation of specific aspects of the relationship of audiences to television. It is furthermore customary to quantify cultural and Media consumption² in order to reach reception analysis even though there are criticisms concerning the epistemological incompatibility of the complementation of qualitative and quantitative data. The crucial question has to do with the reach and the trustworthiness of data, which are, in general, the outcome of small studies, developed during the learning experience of master's degrees (59 researches), whose aggravation is the scarcity of time.

The *socio-discursive* approach attempts at understanding those discourses in circulation though having an incipient presence in the *corpus*. It promotes an approximation to discourse theories in any of its perspectives and is, in general, used as an analytical rather than a conceptual tool, which should necessarily be articulated with reception theories. Yet, this represents an advancement considering that it had been absent throughout the past decade when it would only be used to analyse the TV text in search of a presupposed receptor, departing from production strategies (JACKS et al, 2008). It is important to highlight it for the receptor's discourse on her or his relationship to television, or to its content, starts to be treated as social discourse, which includes the necessary technical procedures for analysis on top of the descriptive form, or worse, the illustrative form of phenomena which researches wished to emphasise. Nevertheless, studies from this decade were only small essays that did not touch the heart of the matter, as many authors, such as Jensen (1990), have argued:

² See Toaldo and Jacks (2013).

it is necessary to articulate a theory of social structures to locate Media and audiences; a discourse theory to account for the content of Media in relation to the receptor's discourse thereon; and a theory of sociocultural and sociopsychological disposition to understand the relationship between receptors and Media.

In that sense, subjects treated as receptors have not yet been given, in most cases, due attention when it comes to the constitution of their social identities so that they can be related to their discourses, although the topic of identity has been prioritised in the *corpus*.

In the *sociocultural* approach, there is an increase in the number of accounts on reception, dealing more substantially with this practice rather than its observation, as was chief in the 1990s. Topics include violence, religiosity, and social issues; studies on identities are not restricted to rural, regional, and local identities as in the previous decade. The problematisation of gender is still shyly represented.

Research relating reception and *representations* starts to appear, focusing on youth, family, social movements, the elderly, and racial relations, which were absent questions and problems in the 1990s, more accustomed to traditional identity questions, discussions possibly engendered by the preoccupation with the process of globalisation.

Journalism studied in a representative form represents a renovation of issues and modes of theoretico-methodological approach, displacing the study of identity processes through journalistic programmes and discourses as well as the incorporation of procedures which are traditional in the area as discourse analysis. *Talkshows*, *series* and *soap operas*, *videoclips*, *cartoons*, *docudramas* and *varieties* are studies that do not pervade the interest of the field, remaining as singularities to be explored by forthcoming research.

The analysis of *various* genres constitutes a new effort which can implement the understanding of flows constructed by television and, in its turn, identify those flows weaved by receptors. In that sense, there is still work to do in that which Jensen (1995,

p.136) calls a super flow, that is, the analysis of flows emanating from all TV channels and, therefrom, verify how the receptor takes the offer for her or himself, verify how she or he constructs her or his flow and gives meaning to it³.

Another aspect is the increase of effort in entering viewers' everyday lives, overcoming studies which are merely descriptive and quantitative based on the answers collected by formal instruments. That includes facing interaction processes, which do not encompass only the web, but especially television, one of the Media that is adapting the most intensely to its logic, following a process of convergence. Much is said of Collaborative Journalism, even on TV. However, this preoccupation is still scarce, to comprehend exactly how the appropriation, the elaboration, and the insertion of journalistic content in Brazilians' lives happen as well as if they effectively act as important spaces of mediation, including that of their social life.

On the other hand, in a country of continental proportions and with such a great presence of television, there are still few comparative researches of national, or even regional, reach, precluding problematising and analysing macrosocial phenomena concerning a larger segment of society (JACKS et al., 2011, p.97). Through this type of analysis, it is possible to understand the appropriations and re-elaborations that make sense in the everyday and, above all, it is possible to establish comparisons which help to understand the different social and cultural strata in their relationship with television.

Internet studies

The 1990s included the first five years of commercial internet in Brazil, a period during which it was not yet popular and, probably because of that, there were no studies about receptors on the internet (JACKS et al., 2008, p.208). It was then that reception studies themselves began and research concerning traditional Media was also incipient. Thus, it was only in the

³ Some studies from the *corpus* attempted at that but did not take Jensen's recommendations into account.

2000s that the bases for research about the internet were launched whilst reception research connected to more traditional Media became established.

Only 31 of the studies involved the internet (15% of the total analysed from the second decade). Of those, 20 had a *behavioural* approach; eight, a *sociocultural* one; and three of them had a *socio-discursive* approach – 26 master's dissertations and five PhD theses. Topics privileged by authors treat the setting of subjects with those possibilities arising from the internet, involving use, inclusion, consumption, and participation.

The theoretical framework, when seen as a whole, reveals the choice of different authors. On the top of the list is French philosopher Pierre Lévy – a key author when concepts such as cyberculture and collective intelligence are used. Besides him, there are also three Brazilian theorists: André Lemos and his idea of cyberspace; Alex Primo with the debate on the forms of computer-based interaction; and Eugenio Trivinho, who discusses punctual issues connected to the internet, relating them to the national scenario. The reference to Henry Jenkins should be also noted, which indicates a preoccupation with Media convergence.

Within Cultural Studies, there lies the major presence of Jesús Martín-Barbero and, especially, his concept of *technicity* in correlation to other mediations and concepts. Amongst others, there are also references to Manuel Castells and the idea of network; to Stuart Hall and to cultural identity and the encoding/decoding process; as well as to John B. Thompson with reflections on the Media.

The theoretical framework reveals the choice of different authors, who blend cultural and cyberculture issues, even if introductorily. In methodological terms, both qualitative and quali-quantitative methods are present in 12 studies each. The quantitative method, strongly associated with a *behavioural* character in the *corpus* analysed, was used in seven researches. The largest expressivity of quali-quantitative, associated with the quantitative perspective, reiterates the importance of the *behavioural* approach in the study of reception on the internet in this first period.

The excess of empirical data and of theoretical points of view – in contrast to superficial analyses and argumentations – indicated a certain incipience in this type of research. On the other hand, the diversity of authors shows the blend of frameworks and the attempts to address the complexity inherent to this object through a ‘theoretical spraying’. Resuming studies from cyberculture and reception perspectives, it is clear that only one of them is not enough to account for all problems raised. It is, therefore, necessary to establish denser connections between the different theoretical strands.

The reception of telenovelas

The 1990s produced ten *stricto sensu* researches within the scope of reception studies. Amongst those from the 2000s, reception studies came up to 24 studies (21 *sociocultural*, three *behavioural*, and no study with a *socio-discursive* approach). In this past decade, studies about *telenovelas* exceed matters of entertainment due to the countless transformations through which the sphere of production and reception has gone, placing identity as a central topic in the *sociocultural* approach. Many studies within this approach have, thus, tried to study identity as a phenomenon, verifying its elements and its construction processes. Identity was studied as constitutive mediation of interaction between audience and television/*telenovela*.

Studies approaching this topic proved heterogeneous in terms of identity denominations, showing that cultural processes are linked to social relations – above all, to relations concerning class, gender, sex, race, and generation, much the same way that cultural processes involve power as well.

Another noteworthy aspect has to do with those theorists who have been used the most, repeating that which was registered in the previous decade: Martín-Barbero, followed by García-Canclini, Orozco Gómez, and Hall. Reception studies of *telenovelas* adhere mainly to the thought based upon Latin-American theories – no Brazilian authors were incorporated.

The most-adopted theoretico-methodological model or, at least, the dimension in which it was used, was not always made explicit. It is notable, nevertheless, that the most-used model is that of mediations, of which Martín-Barbero is the main theoretical reference. These researches, in general, lack theoretical elaboration conscious of the methodology used. It is, therefore, urgent to theorise methods, techniques, and research instruments; to evidence the analytical and interpretive procedures, considering that they are fundamental to constructing the object and contribute to solving the problem. That gap becomes evident both in the general structure of most researches as well as in the lack of specific references to methodology.

The plurality of foci in these studies bespeaks how an object can reconfigure itself continuously, given the dynamism of contexts and issues mobilising, energising, and subverting it with its inevitable historical character. In that sense, it seems essential that reception studies of *telenovelas* start to consider some aspects⁴, such as Media convergence. To all appearances, it is no longer enough to study the reception of *telenovelas* only from the medium which is television, as has been the case throughout the 2000s.

An outlook onto studies analysed indicates that, concerning the 1990s, in quantitative terms, there has not been great advancements in the production of reception studies of *telenovelas*. In other words, data remained the same when the proportion of studies per decade is considered. In qualitative terms, it was evident that most studies adopt the *sociocultural* approach, meaning that they have analysed the phenomenons from social, political, and cultural aspects, allowing for the effective study of the receptor as the subject of a cultural process.

The reception of Journalism

In the 1990s, none of the 49 reception studies highlighted by Jacks et al (2008) was dedicated to studying magazines, radio, or television in terms of journalistic content. Only two researches

⁴ Beyond those researches of a historical natural characterising the 1980s or those dedicated to studying identities in the 1990s and 2000s.

touched on Journalism, both about newspapers made for children. Between 2000 and 2009, on the other hand, 54 studies were dedicated to Journalism, that is, 27 times as many as the previous decade, representing a growth of 2,700%.

Approaches adopted by these 54 studies were as follows: *sociocultural* in 21 cases, *socio-discursive* in 17, and *behavioural* in other 16 cases. The analysis of television prevails, accounting for 22 pieces of work. However, contrary to the 1990s, newspapers and magazines were prominent in that they respectively accounted for 12 and eight studies. Internet studies arose during the same time, accounting for six of them. There also emerged studies which, even without necessarily establishing discussions related to the scenario of Media convergence, debated reception of more than one journalistic content.

As for the issues emphasised, the production of meaning appears in 15 researches in its various dimensions, especially the production of meaning about news, featured in five studies. There was also emphasis on the study of identities in 12 investigations of various specificities. Other prominent issues were the participation of the audience — featured in seven studies — through the analysis of letters, emails, online communities, and posts from their various angles (criticism of the Media, the production of pieces and topics, emotional connections).

Qualitative methods were extremely relevant for this group of studies. From a total of 34 studies, only six of them opted for a quantitative approach. Furthermore, methods were combined in 4 of those studies. The only approach not to use the quantitative method is the *sociocultural* approach, as well as the predominance of quali-quantitative methods was mainly in the *behavioural* approach in eight studies.

Regarding theoretical frameworks, it is interesting to note that most references were to Martín-Barbero (19 studies) considering that his discussion is not focused on Journalism *per se*. Hall came in second, accounting for seven studies. Brazilian inputs were especially through the work of Maria Immacolata Vassallo de Lopes (4 studies), José Marques de Melo and Wilson da Costa

Bueno (3 references each), as well as Maria Aparecida Baccega and Lucia Santaella (2 references each). There are practically no references to the field of Journalism itself in understanding the relationship of receptors with this genre, except for Marques de Melo and for the Portuguese researcher Nelson Traquina. It was mainly through the work of authors consecrated in other areas of Communications that the reception of Journalism was dealt with.

Finally, in this decade, was print press – so prominent in research in Journalism – approached from the perspective of reception. That can be interpreted as an advancement in the area even if an extremely-emergent topic in the field of Journalism, such as the growth of popular newspapers in all of the country, has not been problematised from the standpoint of subjects consuming those products. Moreover on print press, only two studies focused on women's magazines, a segment which has been, for two decades, propping the publishing market. The introduction of studies in web Journalism (mainly from a *behavioural* approach) is positive but, at the same time, remains a challenge to be faced by research in Journalism, especially in terms of approximating and articulating theories of reception, theories of cyberculture, and theories of Journalism.

It can be said that the 2000s represented an advancement, possibly the very emergence of research in the reception of Journalism. Perhaps precisely because of that there are still many gaps to be overcome in the following decades.

The reception of advertising

Research about advertising in Brazil has an incipient history, marked by the emphasis on approaches to adverts and language. In this scenario, reception studies of advertising have had a significant increment between the 1990s (three researches, two of which have a *sociocultural* approach and one, a *behavioural* approach) and the 2000s, when 21 researches were done (11 studies had a *behavioural* approach, seven had a *sociocultural* one, and three had a *socio-discursive* approach).

That has not, however, guaranteed significant theoretical advancements in relation to the object of study. Advertising is approached as a mean of Communication which is characterised by (the attempt of) persuasion, often from dichotomous regards, either economic and functional or critical and denouncing. In both approaches, the social world appears to be uniquely determined by the actions of advertising, oblivious of other conditionings.

Most reception studies, nevertheless, understand such a process as a set of complex practices of constructing meaning, transcending the contact with the Media and interweaving with everyday life. The receptor is seen as an active subject in the process of Communication and, despite being pressured by the producers' strategies, is able to negotiate it according to values, ideas, attitudes, cultural traits.

The prevailing topic in such studies throughout the 1990s and the 2000s is consumption, emphasising the perception of advertising as a tool of persuasion in favour of consumption of certain goods, even in researches with a *sociocultural*, procedural perspective. Those studies miss, however, the view that advertising is a product of culture and the Media, whose reception involves aspects that go beyond persuasion by a commercial strategy.

Television prevails amongst those Media used by advertising which have been studied. Some researches, however, did not choose one medium as an advertising platform, aligning themselves to the theoretical perspective of advertising as a flow of adverts, whose nature lies in the appropriation that the receptor has of offers strategically exposed by advertisers.

It can be stated that there have been advancements for such a quantitative leap reveals that the strong presence of advertising in the everyday has finally echoed in academia. The character of such growth, nevertheless, is highly contradictory given the diversity of approaches and, especially, the change of direction between the two decades: from the supremacy of *sociocultural* studies in the 1990s to the predominance of *behavioural* studies in the 2000s. In terms of theories of Communication, it is suited to question the direction of reception studies within advertising, originally

deriving from the *sociocultural* legacy of Cultural Studies to a *behavioural* perspective, emphasising individual and psychological conditionings as effects and influences.

Indeed, in terms of these researches' theoretical foci, authors from Cultural Studies (Martín-Barbero, Orozco Gómez, García Canclini, and Hall) constitute the main body of references, especially in *sociocultural* and *socio-discursive* approaches. Their ideas are then complemented by authors of a French cultural strand (Bourdieu, Foucault, Baudrillard, and Maffesoli), amongst others who bring subsidies to *socio-discursive* studies (Charaudeau), besides a variety of names cited in *behavioural* studies (Freud, Piaget, Eco, Ferris, Wolton, Kotler, Jakobson, Berlo, Schiffman, and Lazar). Such a diversity is nothing less than impactful and it provides a good debate about the theoretical scenario in the field.

In that sense, a theoretical gap which has to be filled are the scarce references to authors who are dedicated to specifically investigating advertising, not necessarily from the perspective of reception. That certainly keeps many studies from theoretically grounding important aspects of such a genre of Communication, which would contribute to qualifying the empirical observation of the phenomenon.

Even though some studies still lack concepts and methodologies allowing to significantly develop the understanding of this important phenomenon in the contemporary world, many steps are taken in terms of envisaging the complexity of the process of advertising.

Identities in reception studies

Identity has been a minor element in reception studies in the 1990s, accounting for only five researches, all with a *sociocultural* approach. In the 2000s, on the other hand, there have been 51 researches, a significant growth which also reflects on the diversity of approaches. If, in the 1990s, 90 of all investigations opted for the *sociocultural* path, in the 2000s, besides the *sociocultural*

perspective (43 studies), there are six *socio-discursive* and two *behavioural*.

The main transformation under which studies of this time have gone is in terms of their diversity of topics. In the 1990s, what was mostly discussed was the configuration of regional/local identities in their relationship with the Media. In the next decade, debate is widened onto gender, ethnic, regional, community, rural, youth, immigrant, national, border, and family identities – to name only a few. That diversity is in accordance with the growth of the number of Postgraduate Programmes in Communications and with the need to comprehend the multiple identities in face of a complex scenario of medium, genre, and format hybridity.

The guiding inquiry, since the 1990s, is the role that the Media have in configuring identities. Concomitantly, the idea of identity as mediating reception processes grows. What seems to have changed is the view on the relationship between audiences and Media: in the 1990s, receptors, although active, were seen as subordinate to the action of the Media in the process of negotiating their identities; in the 2000s, discussions turn to the processes of negotiating meaning in reception in its various crossings.

The theoretico-methodological maturation becomes a challenge for research in the interface between reception and identities, which is also indispensable for the field of reception as a whole. An index of that scenario is the poor incorporation of Brazilian authors in the discussions about receptions, despite the significant growth in the field during that time. Authors mobilised in the 2000s remain the same as in the previous decade (JACKS et al, 2011): Martín-Barbero, García-Canclini, and Hall.

In specifically observing the theoretical discussion about identities, the effort to mobilise different authors to discuss the topic is noteworthy. Hall is consolidated as a reference; his work being discussed in 27 studies. Besides Hall, authors such as Woodward and García-Canclini stand out. Identity as diaspora (Hall), as decentering (García-Canclini), and the relationships between identity and subjectivity (Woodward) are significantly-mobilised perspectives.

As for the possibilities of investigation for the next years, it is fundamental to strengthen links between identity studies and research about the internet – which account for only three in the decade. Likewise, the need for deepening the understanding of traditional Media and genres is not to be undermined considering that few of these have been so far studied. Investigations can aim at comprehending identities within Media convergence, within the transformations of reception nuanced by the new social technical status (LOPES, 2011, p.412) in society. It is also needed to do comparative research, broader ones, in order to help to understand the practices of receptors situated in different contexts.

Concerning the decade's advancements, there is the solid contextualisation of objects of research, deepening the discussion about identities, multi-methodological approach, and exploration of empirical scenarios little or not-at-all known. Aspects that make it possible to state that the field of reception has evolved in terms of the understanding identities, cementing the bases for future research.

Final remarks

About the panorama herein designed concerning research developed in the past 20 years, it is possible to say that great part of studies seem to disregard the results and the theoretical advancements of previous studies, leaving an impression of a constant will to 'reinvent the wheel' which hinders the next steps towards a more substantial growth.

The joint advancement departing from existing production, giving sequence to topics, problems, foci, methodological explorations, etc., especially in research at a master's-degree level⁵, would forge a more organic, quicker, and more intense knowledge

⁵ At this level, one of the main recommendations by CAPES Agency is the dominion of the production of the field by master students, whose compliance would result in the aforementioned proposition since this is the opportunity for researchers in training to achieve that goal, dialoguing with other researches through the critique and overcoming of gaps, as well as sharing and deepening advancements.

in the field of Communications. On the contrary, what is noted in the *corpus* analysed is, to a great extent, the production of research which totally lacks dialogue with existing production, often treating similar objects which could be complemented or contrasted in order to reveal different sides of the phenomenon. The simple and necessary procedure of searching for the state of the art of studies would have an important reflective function in the area through the visibility gained by articulating preceding studies.

The analysis of the *corpus* herein discussed also indicates that, despite new articulations between authors, theories, and approaches having brought novelties into reception studies, great part of the studies still explore the same solutions presented in the 1990s, departing from renowned authors in the field such as Martín-Barbero, García Canclini, Orozco Gómez, and Hall.

Those authors' importance is obviously not the point here for they still contribute, at various degrees, with new propositions to the development of research in the area. It is important to highlight, though, that, in most cases, the lack of effective incorporation of Brazilian authors, who already have a broad and consistent production in reception studies. In that sense, the dialogue with national production would bring advancements in understanding social, cultural, and Media reality in Brazil, already analysed in the dialogue with aforementioned Latin-American authors.

There are substantial studies developed in Brazil, which problematise the national reality, thus being important that future researches, as has been the case in other areas within Communications, start taking accumulated knowledge as a reference. In the late 1990s, Martín-Barbero (1995) already stated that Brazil has a lot to contribute to Latin-American research, especially to the critical appropriation of theories coming from other countries in the region, which, after over a decade has gone by, is notable in terms of empirical results supporting the unveiling of local and regional realities hitherto studied.

Besides that, it is important to give theoretical and analytical density to studies on internet receptors and their diverse

possibilities of transmediation, in audiences which are inherently considered *cross-media* (SCHRODER, 2011, p.5) and have access to spaces with a certain possibility for production. Researching in this environment denotes entrepreneurial aspects, which demand audacity in facing the risks of hybridising theories, methods, and techniques.

In the current Communicational condition foregrounded by Orozco Gómez (2011, p.391), empirical research, with theoretical updates, focusing on quantitative and qualitative scopes, needs to continue without, however, losing the depth required to comprehend this diverse and complex scenario. Generalisations must be avoided at the same time that they must enable the confrontation of the complexity of the field in reconfiguration from dense methods and theories which are committed to the current scenario.

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Daniela Schmitz

She holds a doctor's degree in Communications from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul as well as a master's degree in Communications and a bachelor's degree in Advertising from the University of Vale do Rio dos Sinos. Post-doctoral student at the Faculty of Librarianship and Communications at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul. Email: danischmitz@ymail.com

Elisa Piedras

She holds a doctor's degree in Communications from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul, author of the book “Fluxo Publicitário”. Professor of Communications at the Postgraduate Programme at Faculty of Librarianship and Communications at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul. Email: elisapiedras@gmail.com

Laura Wottrich

She is a PhD student in Communications at the Postgraduate Programme in Communications at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul. She holds a master's degree in Communications from the Federal University of Santa Maria. Email: lwottrich@gmail.com

Lourdes Ana Pereira Silva

She holds a doctor's degree in Communications from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, with dozens of articles published in journals, as well as joint book chapters. Professor at the Interdisciplinary Master's Degree Programme in Human Sciences at the University of Santo Amaro and professor of the degree courses in Journalism and Advertising at the same institution. Email: lourde_silva@hotmail.com

Mônica Pieniz

She holds a doctor's degree in Communications from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, having studied for a period at Roskilde University (Denmark). She holds a master's degree in Communications and a bachelor's degree in Public Relations from the Federal University of Santa Maria. Professor at the Department of Communications at the Faculty of Librarianship and Communications at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul. E-mail: moni.poscom@gmail.com

Nilda Jacks

She holds a doctor's degree in Communications. She is a Research Fellow Level 1 at the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq). Amongst her publications, she edited the book *Análisis de la recepción en América Latina: un recuento histórico con perspectiva al futuro*, published by CIESPAL, as well as *Meios e Audiência I - Emergência dos estudos de recepção no Brasil*, and *Meios e Audiências II - A consolidação dos estudos de recepção no Brasil*, both published by Editora Sulina. Email: jacks@ufrgs.br

Valquíria John

She holds a doctor's degree in Communications from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, with dozens of articles published in journals, as well as joint and single-authored book chapters. Professor of the degree course in Journalism at the University of Vale do Itajaí (Univali). Email: vmichela@gmail.com

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