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Communication Research, the Geopolitics of Knowledge and Publishing in High-Impact Journals: The Chronicle of a Commodification Process Foretold

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Abstract: The reforms in higher education that have been introduced on a global scale in recent years have gone hand in glove with the progressive imposition of scientific journal impact factors, all of which points to the rise of academic capitalism and digital labour in universities that is increasingly subject to the logic of the market. A diachronic analysis of this process allows for talking about, paraphrasing Gabriel García Márquez, the chronicle of a commodification process foretold. More than twenty years ago it was clear what was going to happen, but not how it was going to unfold. Accordingly, this article reconstructs that process, comparing the Spanish case with global trends and highlighting the crucial role that governmental agencies like the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation and specific evaluation tools like the publication of scientific papers in high-impact journals have played in it. In this analysis, Wallerstein's core-periphery relations and the concept of commodity fetishism, as addressed by Walter Benjamin, prove to be especially useful. The main research question posed in this article is as follows: What does the process of the commodification of communication research look like in Spain?

Keywords: academic capitalism, higher education, communication research, journal citation reports, impact indices

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1. Introduction

In 1981, Gabriel García Márquez, Colombian writer and journalist and Nobel Prize in Literature, published his novel, *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, in which he recounts the way in which Santiago Nasar was murdered by the Vicario brothers in revenge for having taken their sister's virginity. The novel can be classified as part of the detective genre (March 1982), since right from the start we know what is going to happen, and its interest lies in *how* it happens; that is, in figuring out the way in which the events unfold.

Following the reforms in higher education, which have gathered pace primarily in the past twenty years, something similar has occurred in communication research in

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Spain. At the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, a number of Spanish researchers voiced criticism in line with previous analyses performed in other countries (Aronowitz and Giroux 2000; Bousquet 2008), predicting the subjugation of universities and the knowledge they produced to the logic of the market under the onslaught of academic capitalism (Jessop 2018; Allmer 2018). The encroachment of academic capitalism, researchers asserted, would threaten one of the spaces in which, at least in some European countries, including Spain, universities had hitherto managed to resist the powerful processes of privatisation and commodification that could be observed in other regions of the world.

Those premonitory analyses were "harbingers", an expression alluding to authors like Walter Benjamin (Mate and Mayorga 2000) who predicted the foreseeable consequences: a commodification clearly foretold. Regrettably, what was going to happen was plain to all: but, at the time, not so the specific mechanisms, processes and instruments with which this intensive commodification of Spanish research in general, and communication research in particular, would be implemented in practice.

It is precisely at this point that the reference to the detective genre and García Márquez's novel becomes appropriate for enquiring into the way in which Spanish universities have arrived at that commodification foretold. In Spain, this process has been brought about by the introduction of an intensive "culture of evaluation" (Martínez-Nicolás 2020; Wouters 1999), channelled through the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (hereafter ANECA), which employs the number of high-impact papers published by Spanish researchers in the Journal Citation Reports index as its main evaluation tool. The consequences of these measures include, among other things, the hypertrophy of papers published in the field of communication, most of which lack sought-after levels of quality and have had a low or negligible impact on the international scientific community (Rodríguez-Gómez, Goyanes and Rosique 2018). All in all, this has led to a process of implosion in the field of communication in Spain (Marí and Ceballos 2019), owing to the lack of consistency and rigour with which this knowledge is usually constructed.

Thus, the aim of this article is to analyse the implementation of this culture of evaluation and *how* Spanish universities have become commodified, while highlighting the specific characteristics of the Spanish case in relation to the strategies adopted in other international contexts. In addition, an analysis is performed on some of the manifest shortcomings or lacunas in this rather inappropriate process for aiming to promote quality scientific production and its internationalisation in Spain. These include the lack of an analysis of scientific production on the basis of systemic core-periphery relations (Wallerstein 1974; 1991); and the absence of knowledge production policies that break with the impositions of mercantilist and neoliberal criteria. This theoretical work takes into account empirical data and analyses previously conducted by Spanish communication researchers enquiring into this object of study during this period (Costa 2017; Martínez-Nicolás 2020; Seoane, Martínez-Nicolás and Vicente 2020; Piñeiro-Naval and Morais 2019; Rodríguez-Gómez, Goyanes and Rosique 2018; and Soriano 2008, among others).

In this context, the main research question of our work is the following:

RQ: What does the commodification of communication research look like in Spain?

This question can be subdivided into the following sub-questions:

RQ1: What is the role of the culture of evaluation in the Spanish university system?

RQ2: What is the role of commodity fetishism in the academic publishing world?

RQ3: What contribution does Wallerstein's world-systems theory make to the analysis of the geopolitics of scientific knowledge?

In order to answer these questions, in the second section of this article an analysis is performed on the culture of evaluation behind the measurement of the scientific impact of papers indexed in Journal Citation Reports (hereafter JCR), among other indexing systems. Afterwards, this is reviewed employing Walter Benjamin's commodity fetishism theory. Then, in the third section, we identify the absence of a systemic analysis of academic production in Spain: a situation that reduces the problem and its proposed solutions to the individual level without taking structural factors into account. The limitations of such an analysis are examined using Wallerstein's world-systems theory. Finally, in addition to arriving at a number of basic conclusions, the last section introduces elements that may allow for designing alternative scientific publishing policies.

What follows is a reconstruction of the commodification process foretold.

2. The Culture of Evaluation

In the field of knowledge construction and evaluation, recourse is made to the terms 'nomothetic' and 'ideographic', both with strong Kantian connotations, to refer to two extremes of tension. Nomothetic evaluation involves a tendency to generalise, which is inherent to natural sciences whose judgements are based on 'objective' data that do not take history or contexts into consideration and which, in sum, conceive their scientific model as the only one worthy of being incorporated into other fields of knowledge. Contrastingly, ideographic evaluation appraises matters of context and elements specific to each case. These extremes lead to two radically different cultures of evaluation.

As regards educational evaluation, authors like Stake (1976) and Kemmis (1978) have critically reflected on the limits of applying the nomothetic model to evaluation. In this vein, de la Herrán and Coro Montanet (2011) consider that, in the Spanish case, the culture of nomothetic evaluation ends up being reflected in a "citation culture" (Wouters 1999) or impact culture.

In Spain, the nomothetic culture of evaluation had already been introduced before the aforementioned reforms in higher education, but this process has doubtless reinforced and amplified it. Martínez-Nicolás (2020, 338) establishes a series of stages in the development of this culture of evaluation in Spain: introduction (1983-1989), reinforcement (2001) and generalisation (2008), following an evolution aimed not only at toughening its criteria and their strict application, but in essence also at making scientific performance a determining factor for allowing researchers to pursue, consolidate and further their professional careers.

To this end, the ANECA, created in 2002, the ACADEMIA programme (by which all professors and researchers who wish to work at a Spanish university must be accredited) and the National Commission for the Evaluation of Research Activity (hereafter CNEAI), an agency linked to the ANECA, which evaluates the scientific production of Spanish professors and researchers, form a sort of 'Bermuda Triangle'. In that triangle, critical and quality research runs the risk of disappearing without trace in the frenetic pursuit of publishing works which, by and large, as Costa (2017) observes, are of poor or negligible quality and have little or no impact.

As a result of the work of those agencies and the logics introduced by them, Spanish research and scientific production have acquired a series of specific traits. Soriano (2008) talks about the "ANECA effect" to refer to the repercussions of this process, employing the name of the public agency that is chiefly to blame for the ruinous implications for critical research. The ANECA effect has fostered a specific type of scientific production that tends to satisfy the recognition requirements of the abovementioned agencies rather than promoting knowledge that is useful to society.

The Spanish institutional context and the culture of evaluation it promotes have had notable implications for communication research. It is true that, since the creation of those agencies, the number of faculties of communication, PhD theses defended and papers published in international scientific journals have, on the whole, increased in Spain (Martínez-Nicolás 2020). But, following the *leitmotif* of this article – whose intention is to pay greater attention to the *how* than to the *what*, to quality rather than to quantity – there is also a long list of negative consequences for communication research conducted in Spain, of which Rodríguez Gómez, Goyanes and Rosique (2018) offer an accurate snapshot, and which can be summarised as follows: "A large number of self-citations" (Fernández-Quijada, Masip and Bergillos 2013), "scant methodological transparency" (Martínez-Nicolás and Saperas-Lapiedra 2011), "an overabundance of underdeveloped works" (Piñuel, Lozano and García 2011), "the avoidance of a critical analysis of media companies" (Martínez-Nicolás 2006) and "the renunciation of the value and utility of research for society" (Quirós 2016). In some qualitative bibliometric studies, it has been observed that many of the cited works were not accompanied by sufficient indications that they had actually been read and understood as formulated by their authors (Marí and Ceballos 2019, 477).

The ultimate consequences of the introduction and spread of this culture of evaluation could be tied in with the reflections of Theodor Adorno in "Culture and Administration" (1991), insofar as his ideas allow us to glimpse the functionality of administrated and administrative logic in capitalism. Adorno begins his essay by suggesting that there is a mutual implication between the two terms in conflict:

> Whoever speaks of culture speaks about administration as well, whether this is his intention or not. The combination of so many things lacking a common denominator – such as philosophy and religion, science and art, forms of conduct and mores and finally […] the objective spirit of an age – in the single word 'culture' betrays from the outset the administrative view, the task of which, looking down from on high, is to assemble, distribute, evaluate and organize (1991, 107).

Further on, he states:

> The dialectic of culture and administration nowhere expresses the sacrosanct irrationality of culture so clearly as in the continually growing alienation of administration from culture – both in terms of its objective categories and its personal composition. […] For that which is administered, administration is an external affair by which it is subsumed rather than comprehended. This is precisely the essence of administrated rationality itself, which does nothing but order and cover over (1991, 112-113).

However, Adorno offers a solution when noting that there is a way of understanding culture that escapes this administrative logic, a critical culture capable of surviving these destructive dynamics (Cabot 2011).

Therefore, we are witnessing a new chapter in the subsumption of critical research at the hands of administrative research, which Adorno was already criticising and suffering from in the flesh during his exile in the United States and in his discussions and clashes with Lazarsfeld (Mattelart and Mattelart 1995, 53). Thanks to a new functionalism, the culture of evaluation is now imposing itself on the current Spanish university system, undermining the material possibilities of promoting and propagating a communication research culture that is critical of capitalism.

In this process of reforming Spanish universities, it can observed that, of all the tools and procedures envisaged for implementing the culture of evaluation, one stands out among the rest: the emphasis on papers published in high-impact journals, especially those indexed in Journal Citation Reports (hereinafter JCR) (Web of Science, Clarivate). In the 'age of the ANECA', it is this aspect that serves as a definitive evaluation criterion when gauging the production of Spanish researchers, and also that which plays a decisive role when researchers with precarious and temporary jobs attempt to obtain more stable contracts.

This is the reason why prominent Spanish communication researchers such as Martínez-Nicolás (2020, 398) call this age of the ANECA the "triumph of the paper" or, more specifically, the imposition of a type of research dependent on the JCR (Reig 2014). Drawing from previous research (Piñeiro-Naval and Morais 2019), Martínez-Nicolás (2020) observes the progressive importance of this criterion – the publication of scientific papers in high-impact journals – in Spanish research in fields like communication and the social sciences, in which the book or monograph format has historically predominated as the main vehicle of dissemination of knowledge and research. In this process, an important turning point was reached in 2008, when the publication of papers in journals of this type in the field of communication in Spain experienced a year-on-year increase of 40%. The influence of the ANECA on the progressive relevance of papers is there for all to see.

In connection with this it is possible to observe similarities and differences in other countries. Prioritising and evaluating the publication of papers in high-impact journals is certainly a global phenomenon. Nevertheless, the intensity with which these criteria are applied varies from country to country and, in this diverse landscape, Spain is among those countries that have become most firmly committed to the widespread and dependent incorporation of these systems for measuring scientific production, together with the consequences that it has had for objects of study, research and teaching staff and scientific policy-making in general.

To offer just one example, the CNEAI – as already noted, an agency linked to the ANECA, whose task is to evaluate the scientific production of Spanish university professors, lecturers and researchers – is key to this process of commodification. In the progressive modifications that this agency has introduced in evaluation criteria over the past few years, the publication of papers in journals indexed in JCR (preferably) or in Scopus (as a second option) has gradually imposed itself as a prerequisite for obtaining a positive evaluation in the field of communication. This has displaced other evaluation criteria such as the publication of papers in other quality journals not included in those databases, and even of books or book chapters with reputed publishing houses. The rigour with which these norms (foreign to the research culture in the field of communication in Spain) are adopted and applied is not exempt from a fair dose of the zeal of the new convert. These measures also contrast, for example, with

those adopted in France, where a panel of experts elaborates a list of reference publications, taking into account quality criteria other than the metrics imposed by the major academic publishing houses.

Against this backdrop, publishing in these journals is for many researchers a personal challenge, as if they were competing against the rest of the world. As occurs in other fields of human activity, research is thus seen from a perspective that tends to individualise issues and problems that have a systemic and collective dimension (Bauman 2013).

Several analytical keys are sufficient to reveal the pitfalls of this modern version of the myth of Sisyphus, in which researchers are condemned to rolling the immense boulder of academic production up the steep hill of accrediting institutions. In light of the data on the publication of Spanish communication research in high-impact journals, it can be seen how the top positions are occupied by those researchers linked to the first faculties of communication to be opened in Spain: those of the Complutense University of Madrid, the University of Navarre, the Autonomous University of Barcelona and, slightly later on, the University of the Basque Country (Gómez-Calderón and Roses 2015, 502). In other words, those universities that were the first to position their faculties of communication in the academic market have managed to gain a competitive edge on those that later followed suit.

In a similar vein, de Filippo (2013) has confirmed the fact that the Spanish universities with the greatest volume of production in the communication journals included in the Social Science Citation Index (SCCI) are the four mentioned above, to which should be added the Pompeu y Fabra University (Catalonia) and the James I University (Castellón de la Plana, Valencia). Therefore, there is an evident correlation between the level of wealth (gross domestic product) of the regions in which those universities are located and the highest levels of academic production; or, in other words, the influence that, at a national level, core-periphery relations (Wallerstein 1974; 1991) have on academic production in general. The classic triangle (whose corners are formed by Madrid, the Basque Country and Catalonia) within which wealth and industrial production is concentrated in Spain also occupies core positions as to scientific production.

A second analytical key involves identifying Spanish scientific production in communication, in order to gauge the repercussions that the ANECA effect has had on the topics that researchers choose so as to consolidate their position in the university system. In this respect, taking the journals indexed in Scopus as a reference, Carmen Costa (2017, 11) singles out the line of research relating to teaching in communication, a topic that may be regarded as transversal and not specifically linked to objects of study inherent to the field of communication. For their part, Rodríguez-Gómez, Goyanes and Rosique (2018) point to an increase in empirical research, above all employing techniques like content analysis. Piñeiro-Naval and Morais (2019) confirm this trend, before adding that, even though social media and information and communication technologies (ICTs) have become more popular in recent years, traditional media continue to be the most prominent object of study in Spanish communication research.

Therefore, the first consequence of these institutional policies has been the loss of importance of theoretical studies and those addressing structural or systemic issues, such as those performed in the field of the political economy of communication (Marí 2012; Martínez-Nicolás 2020). This is no coincidence. To achieve the hyper-productivity required by the system, researchers mainly resort to the most profitable topics and methodologies, in a context of the McDonaldisation

(Ritzer 1992) of scientific production (Hayes 2017): the study of the conventional media (the press and television) employing simple quantitative methodologies such as content analysis. Additionally, this yearning for high academic productivity has led, in many cases, to the proliferation of logics that are pernicious to quality research, including so-called "salami slicing" (Jackson et al. 2014; Tolsgaard et al. 2019). This involves artificially and profusely fragmenting the same (usually quantitative) research, which, in comparison with other more laborious qualitative methodological approaches, offers researchers a more favourable cost-benefit relationship.

In this way, Spanish communication researchers manage to inflate their scientific production, which, albeit constituting a legitimate survival strategy, often negatively affects the quality and international impact of their publications (Costa 2017) by lowering their h-index (Costa 2017; Túñez-López et al. 2014) or by disconnecting Spanish research from prominent trends at a global level (Seoane, Martínez-Nicolás and Vicente 2020). This underscores a major contradiction: a public agency concerned with research quality (i.e. the ANECA) has adopted measures aimed at enhancing it (the publication of papers in high-impact journals), which have ultimately achieved the exact opposite: lower quality, and negligible or non-existent impact and significance on the international stage. Simply put, the greater the emphasis on quality communication research, the lower its quality.

In sum, a measure such as that of encouraging the publication of papers in high-impact journals – which is by no means negative and which, if it were properly contextualised, would yield positive results – has proved a perverse logic in the culture of evaluation promoted in Spanish research.

Therefore, it could be claimed that behind this process there is a commodity fetishism revolving around "high-impact papers", at least as this phenomenon is understood by authors of critical theory like Walter Benjamin. The German philosopher himself authored a brief but substantial text entitled *Capitalism as Religion* (1921), which has a very important bearing on the topic at hand.

Commodity fetishism is an expression employed by Marx to reveal the type of social relations to which commodities give rise in capitalism. In *Capitalism as Religion*, Benjamin's aim is not only to demonstrate how religion conditions capitalism, but, more to the point, to show how capitalism is essentially a religious phenomenon (Zamora 2009a, 59). It is a special type of religion focusing on a ritual practice of continuous worship, without let-up, inasmuch as the production and consumption cycle is uninterrupted and knows no rest. Lastly, another of its characteristics is that it is a type of worship that produces guilt and debt. In this regard, Zamora (2009a, 59) recalls that the German concept of guilt/debt (*Schuld*) has a dual meaning, economic and religious, which is lost in translation into other languages. This is a very striking coincidence, given the confluence between the moral (guilt) and economic (debt) subjugation that capitalism is capable of generating simultaneously.

The commodity fetishism to which Benjamin alludes in *Capitalism as Religion* is related to another term, namely, the commodity as phantasmagoria, which he addresses more specifically in his *Book of the Passages (The Arcades Project)*. In her reinterpretation of the concept of phantasmagoria in Benjamin, Paloma Martínez Matías (2021) suggests that this refers to a certain self-image, representation or comprehension that a society producing commodities generates when forgetting or eluding the condition that defines it in its productive sphere (Benjamin, GS V 822, in Martínez Matías 2021, 112). She goes on to claim that Marx describes the fetishist character of the commodity as "the phantasmagorical form"; thereby the social relationship of whoever exchanges commodities appears in their eyes as a relationship

between those very commodities (Martínez Matías 2021, 112). This is why the commodity "becomes an authentic fetish or object of adoration which the more it conceals its status as a product of work, the more it will attract possible buyers" (2021, 114). So, the destructive relationship with the fetish gives rise to a fateful proportional rule: the greater the adoration, the greater also the exploitation/subjugation and, simultaneously, the greater the concealment of the material conditions of production in which this economic relationship is framed.

3. The Manifest Absence of a Systemic Interpretation of the 'Process of Commodification Foretold'

Up until this point, the analytical focus has been placed on the process of commodification implemented in communication research in Spain in recent years, paying special attention to those elements that have promoted it, such as the fresh impetus given to a specific culture of evaluation which, although long-standing, has gained a new lease of life during this period. In Spain, this has led to the excessive relevance acquired by the pressure to publish papers in high-impact journals.

In this section, the intention is to analyse this process of commodification foretold from perspectives and categories that have been side-lined or directly ignored by both the academic authorities and the majority of Spanish researchers, not only when diagnosing Spanish research, but also when putting forward solutions.

To cut straight to the point, what has essentially been neglected is a systemic analysis of Spanish scientific production in general, and that of the field of communication in particular, that considers the geopolitical dimension of research (Demeter 2019) from a world-system perspective and from those of structurally determined core-periphery relations (Wallerstein 1974; 1991). This theoretical approach allows for incorporating the idea of social totality in order to contextualise single developments and, at the same time, to frame them in specific social and historical contexts. For the authors of critical theory the departure point for fathoming social phenomena has to be that of antagonistic totality (Zamora 2009b). This is the case of Theodor Adorno, whose theory of society is a dialectic one that decries all attempts to take specific cultural forms or social developments as an absolute departure point and not as something mediated by the process of production and reproduction of social life.

In this respect, the comments on the concept of totality in Wallerstein's *oeuvre* made by Chamsy el-Ojeili (2014), four decades after he had proposed his world-system analytical framework, are relevant to the issue at hand. In the words of el-Ojeili,

> It is good perhaps to follow Jameson (1989) and ask why it is that at certain moments the category of 'totality', once thought fundamental for any analysis seeking to liberate us from the immediacy of common sense, suddenly becomes prohibited, connecting this, paradoxically, to a moment at which capitalism has become more totalizing than ever (2014, 695).

And, indeed, the confluences between postmodernity, which welcomes an unequal and unjust present, and rampant neoliberalism tend to discredit the analyses of capitalism as a totality, in a context paradoxically characterised by the totalitarianism inherent to capitalism.

Based on this theoretical framework, let us now return to the thematic thread of this analysis. After reading the aforementioned scientific literature in this respect it is possible to observe an overrepresentation of individual efforts in the field of research,

an emphasis that coexists with a contradictory phenomenon: the underrepresentation of the systemic logics that have given rise to this situation. Historically, Spanish research in general, and communication research in particular, have occupied a marginal position in structural terms at a global level. Therefore, it would be extremely naïve and frivolous to believe that this historical and systemic trend could only, or preferentially, be reversed by the individual endeavours of researchers.

It seems obvious that to meet the desired objectives it is not enough to foster a culture of evaluation that prompts Spanish researchers to compete individually in the global scientific field. In order to dispel this ingenuous voluntarism, there is a need, for example, for a scientific policy that, as a prerequisite, is underpinned by a strong financial investment in research. And it is here where some of the principal systemic problems of Spanish research emerge. According to Eurostat, Spain lags behind even some of the European countries with the lowest levels of investment in research, such as Greece, Poland and Portugal.

Moreover, in view of the level of state investment in public universities – in Spain, the public sector is the main and fundamental source of investment in research, since the vast majority of research is conducted in the country's public universities – it can be observed that, over the past eight years, the budget item for higher education has decreased by 14.7%, while funding for research programmes and projects have been slashed by 31% (MINECO 2018, 19, quoted in Rodríguez-Gómez, Goyanes and Rosique 2018, 233). Going into further detail, Carmen Caffarel (2018, 294) notes that the area of social sciences obtains approximately 30% of the budget for funding research projects in Spain and, within that area, barely 1% is devoted to communication research. This increase in expenditure is an insufficient prerequisite, as will be seen in the final section.

In light of the foregoing, an analysis of research in Spain cannot ignore the existence of a geopolitics of scientific knowledge. From decolonial approaches, and following on from the proposals of Mignolo (2000) and Walsh (2020), authors like Slater (2008) have stressed the way in which geographical location affects the production of culture and knowledge. This being a crucial aspect, it should be supplemented by a systemic and economic approach, grounded in political economy, so as to frame the phenomenon in a more global context. In this sense, for Demeter (2019, 80), "The main difference between decolonial and world-systemic approach is that while decolonial critiques of the academy focus on the epistemic violence of coloniality, this analysis of the world-system of knowledge production examines how this violence is perpetuated through the contemporary political economy of higher education". Demeter's research has allowed him to assert that a "very characteristic center-periphery structure exists in global social sciences, with a few hegemonic countries and distinctly peripheral world regions" (2019, 75).

Both Demeter (2019) and Canagarajah (2002) suggest a dual approach to analysing knowledge production from a systemic perspective. On the one hand, the horizontal approach takes geographical characteristics into account, which allows for talking about Western – more specifically, Anglo-Saxon – hegemony and geographical peripheries in knowledge production. And, on the other, as a classification criterion, the vertical approach uses the existence of marginalised communities (due to ethnic, class or gender reasons) in the centre of the system, subjected to the interests of the dominant groups in their societies.

In this context, a possible solution to the existing imbalances would be to migrate from the peripheral areas of scientific knowledge production towards the centres of the system, as occurs in other sectors of the economy. In the scientific and academic

diaspora (Seoane, Martínez-Nicolas and Vicente 2020), which is gathering steam as academic capitalism prospers (Jessop 2018), many researchers are being forced to emigrate from the periphery to the centre to accumulate capital, in the purest Bourdieusian sense of the word. Following Boatcă (2006), for Demeter this diaspora is

> almost exclusively the privilege of upper middle-to upper-class students, and the international mobility of students and junior researcher not only reflects but also reinforces class-based social inequalities. It is obvious from the above-delineated categorization that a very clear center-periphery structure is characteristic to global academy with semi-peripheral regions (2019, 78).

This is a personal and legitimate measure, but it does resolve the structural position of peripheral countries and regions as regards knowledge production. In this sense, the Argentinian researcher Daniela Perrota (2017) has verified the consequences that these policies for evaluating scientific production have for the current context of the geopolitics of knowledge at an international level. She has suggested that the evaluation criteria designed in the North and disseminated globally "challenge not only the internationalisation policies of universities, but also their dimensions and missions, perverting their very meaning" (Perrota 2017, 50).

This process is not only affecting the academic peripheries of Latin America, Africa and Asia, but also academic semi-peripheries (Boatcă 2006) including countries like Spain. The globalisation process of higher education (Robertson and Dale 2015, 159) is "a witting attempt by a range of national and transnational organizations to bring about a set of interventions around the globe aimed at extending the role of the market and reducing the role of national states". The acritical introduction of these global criteria into national science, knowledge and higher education policies reduces, as in the case of Spain, the capacity to find a way out of the structural positions of dependence in which they have been historically placed.

On the other hand, Spain's semi-peripheral position would theoretically offer the country the opportunity to attract part of the academic talent that, in the peripheries of the Global South, integrates the academic diaspora migrating towards the centres. But this potential has not been harnessed, at least in the case of PhD researchers in search of stable employment, since the specific requirements for occupying research and teaching positions at public universities in Spain (which are the majority and the most important) include a highly bureaucratised accreditation process that serves as a deterrent.

Connected to this, Afonso (2016, 819) posits that academic labour markets in Spain, as in France and Italy, are

> characterized by high barriers to entry for outsiders and highly regulated labor markets. The most common obstacle to internationalization is the prevalence of endogamous recruitment based on contacts rather than research or teaching performance, besides centralized systems of 'accreditation' designed to control the labor supply by insiders.

This is also the conclusion reached in recent studies of the Spanish university system's endogamous character, which is impervious to attracting talent (Seoane, Martínez-Nicolás and Vicente 2020). Thus, Spain currently finds itself in a curious and by no means rational situation in which it shares some of the negative aspects of being semi-peripheral, while failing to take advantage of some of the potential benefits of being partially central.

Continuing with the issue of endogamy, Afonso (2016, 820), citing Spain's flagship newspaper *El País*, remarks, "Reports from the Spanish Ministry of education indicate for instance that 73% of all faculty obtained their PhD at the university where they are appointed, and 95% of professors obtaining new positions already had a position in the same institution". The local power wielded by Spanish universities continues to allow them to exert considerable influence on the selection of candidates for the most stable research and teaching positions, despite the advances in the establishment of more open selection criteria increasingly subject to accountability systems.

Something similar occurs with Spanish flagship publications in the field of communication, far removed, for instance, from the US model in which the International Communication Association (ICA) galvanises and coordinates the activity of the publications associated with it. The Spanish model has followed a different course and, notwithstanding the good work of the Spanish Association for Communication Research (AE-IC), the scientific publication context that has taken shape in Spain in recent years is far from ideal.

The endogamy and powerful influence resulting from the local power of universities have their own idiosyncrasies in Spain and, by extension, in Latin America. These traits are blindingly evident in García Márquez's novel, with which we began our article and to which we will now return. This phenomenon receives the specific name of "*caciquismo*",[1] namely, "a distorted form of local government in which a political boss (in this case, an academic boss) wields absolute power over a rural society, expressed as political clientelism". The term stems from the Taino word *cacique*, the name given to the chiefs of the tribes found in this region of the world, which, later on and by extension, was applied to those who lorded it over rural areas in Spain.

Bossism and, in turn, the reflection on the ways in which political and economic power is structured are a *leitmotif* of *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. Bossism is characterised by the abuse of power over the weakest, and by the ostentation of economic superiority, two aspects that are constants throughout García Márquez's novel. Be that as it may, the work's despotic ambience is most distinctively expressed in the characters of Santiago Nasar (the owner of the hacienda El Divino Rostro) and Bayardo San Roman (an engineer).

For many Spanish researchers, the survival strategy for pursuing an academic career in this context – terribly hostile and highly competitive – involves collaborating with some of the bosses monopolising local academic power. It seems rather contradictory that the cycle of reforms in higher education implemented at the beginning of the twenty-first century have not only been incapable of eradicating endogamy or the power quotas of local bosses, but, on the contrary, have to some extent exacerbated them.

4. Conclusions

Certainly, with the introduction of the aforementioned reforms, the process of commodifying communication research in Spain and, by extension, the Spanish university system as a whole, was something that was regrettably foreseeable: but *how* this process would be implemented was not so predictable. The scope of the capitalist university and knowledge project is such that it may give the impression of impotence when attempting to voice any criticism or when proposing alternatives. Far from any

[1] A Spanish term normally translated as "chieftainship", but which in the contemporary world would be equivalent to "despotism" or "bossism", especially in the political sense.

inhibition, theoretical work is now more inescapable than ever when attempting to survive in such an adverse context and, at the same time, when following a line of work that may lead to generalisable alternatives in the mid and long term.

In relation to this, the adaption of our objects of research to the analyses performed by Woodcock on the digitisation of academic labour processes (Woodcock 2018, 137, Table 1) allows for further specifying three dimensions around which our reflections have revolved, which, in turn, may serve to propose other future lines of work. Academic and digital capitalism bring about far-reaching transformations in: (1) the object of study, in this case in the field of communication research; (2) the highly precarious academic work of lecturers/researchers; and (3) the outsourcing of tools for measuring research performance, designed by major academic publishing houses and blindly assumed by academic authorities and bodies. There is an interrelation between these three dimensions that is not always envisaged in a comprehensive fashion in analyses of academic work or the commodification of universities, and which, in our case study, we believe will enable us to glimpse other nuances that the fragmentation would have concealed.

One of the false solutions to the problems posed here currently involves open access (hereafter OA) publishing *per se*, as if this were the only magical solution to the problems and contradictions of the publication of academic papers in high-impact journals we describe. At this late juncture, we cannot address this issue comprehensively, but we can offer some food for thought. For instance, with his critical analysis of publishing house business models in the sphere of OA publishing, Manfred Knoche (2020) has highlighted the fact that, notwithstanding the benefits of the OA publishing option, when it does not include a critique of the commodification of knowledge, it results in the reproduction of the existing relationships of power and domination in the academic publishing world. In the words of Knoche, therefore, "Through commodification, the publishing houses that are declared as renowned 'brands' not only obtain the intellectual property rights of academics as creators in order to valorise capital, but also control the organisation of academic quality management by selectively controlling access to the publication market" (2020, 522).

This problem with functional OA models as regards the commodification of knowledge is being exacerbated by the practices of new actors in the publishing world. A striking case in the past few years is perhaps that of the MPDI group, a for-profit open access publisher. In relation to the theme of this article and the publishing and payment models implemented by this group, a Spanish researcher analysed two highly illustrative examples. In a paper entitled, not without a certain degree of irony, "Yes, all your colleagues are publishing in Sustainability or the International Journal of Environmental Research"[2], this author noted how in these journals there were an significant number of papers written by Spanish researchers. For instance, of the 9,568 papers published in *Sustainability* in 2020, 13.05% were authored by Spaniards.

There are indications that Spain is the country with the second largest share of authors publishing in the journal *Sustainability*, surpassed only by China. *Sustainability* imposes high article processing charges (APCs). The example indicates that the

[2] Further information at: http://unnombrealazar.blogspot.com/2020/11/si-todos-tus-companeros-estan.html. As the paper was published on 26 November 2020, it does not offer the overall number of papers published in the two journals in question during that year, which would be 10,591 in the case of *Sustainability* and 9,473 in that of the *International Journal of Environmental Research*.

commodification of academic knowledge in the form of for-profit open access plays an important role in Spanish academia.

Sustainability is an open access journal owned and operated by the Swiss company MDPI. It makes a profit from APCs. In *Sustainability*, the APC is currently set at approximately €1,750 (1,900 Swiss Francs[3]). In July 2021, MDPI published 352 open access journals.[4] According to its own data, MDPI makes a surplus of 284 CHF out of an APC of 2000 CHF. This indicates a profit rate of 284 / 2000 = 14.2% per 2000 CHF of APC income, which is in general a very high level. A discount model is used where authors get discounts on the APCs by reviewing other papers. If they do this, in having their article published they enter into a waged-work-like relation as reviewers with the company whose paying customers/clients they are, which may create contradictions.

The other strategy implemented by functional OA for promoting the commodification of knowledge involves passing on the cost of publishing papers in OA to publicly funded universities and bodies. Although this practice is not exclusive to Spain, the truth is that it is currently being promoted more intensively here than in other countries, with little debate and practically no organised criticism. In 2021, the Spanish Conference of University Chancellors (CRUE), the vast majority of whose institutions are public, signed an agreement with major publishing groups, by virtue of which their researchers will be offered discounts in exchange for the payment of large sums of public money.[5] Accordingly, this only shifts the focus of the problem, with the state defraying the cost instead of individual researchers, without questioning the type of knowledge being disseminated, the rules under which it is publishable or the debatable expenditure of the scant public funds available for research for this purpose.

In line with Knoche's suggestions about the need for other OA models are the theses of Fuchs (2021) on how necessary it is to promote the so-called "digital commons", which would allow for advancing towards the digital public sphere and digital democracy. To his mind,

> In capitalist open access, digital content is de-commodified, i.e. the articles and books are published as Creative Commons, but the principles of capital accumulation, commodification, valorisation, and profitability are not given up, but transformed. The opportunity to get published is commodified while the published content is a commons. The digital commons thereby are subsumed under and colonised by digital capital (2021, 20).

Together with his criticism of capitalist OA and digital commons models, he points to the need for promoting so-called "radical open access" as an alternative "to the conservative versions of open access that are currently being put forward by commercially-oriented presses, funders and policy makers" (Fuchs 2021, 20), as an evolution of the ideas revolving around the diamond OA model which he developed, together with Sandoval, some years ago (Fuchs and Sandoval 2013).

The example of OA highlights, once again, the voracity of capitalism when subsuming assets, which in principle are third-party, under commodity logic and the domination inherent to these processes. The commodification of universities in general and impact factors and metrics in particular involves a large dose of coercion

[3] See MPDI (n.d.(b)).
[4] See MPDI (n.d.(a)).
[5] Further information at: https://www.ibercampus.es/los-rectores-avalan-el-refuerzo-de-crue-al-oligopolio-de-los-41008.htm

and disciplining (Arboledas-Lérida 2021): domination that increases the more it is concealed under commodity fetishism.

In sum, we have attempted here to analyse the impact factors and metrics of academic journals on the basis of the category of commodity fetishism or the commodity as phantasmagoria, as proposed by Benjamin. This idolatrous relationship reinforces the logic of domination of factors and metrics of this type by concealing the process of alienating academic work, which exploited lecturers/researchers are expected to perform within core-periphery relations that are also hidden from view.

In light of the foregoing, it is necessary to escape from this commodity as phantasmagoria and break with the logic of capital (Zamora 2009a). For the moment, this would involve severing the fetishist link to impact factors and metrics and incorporating analytical categories and design alternatives to Wallerstein's core-periphery relations.

There are a number of ways of accomplishing this long-term goal. As well as introducing other OA models, there is a need for scientific, publishing and education policies employing differing criteria to the dominant ones, promoted by semi-peripheral countries (Boatcă 2006) like Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece, among others in Europe, by groups of scholars and associations in northern countries and by countries of the Global South which are also marginalised by the dominant logics.

This is, at least, the path that has been taken in some Latin American countries. As Perrota (2017, 50) indicates, in peripheral and dependent contexts, regional solutions grounded in solidarity allow for configuring alternative models for internationalising universities, which have breathed new life into the debates on the role of science and universities in the promotion of development. In a similar vein, for Hebe Vessuri (Vessuri, Guédon and Cetto 2014) there are other ways of expressing scientific excellence and quality than those currently being disseminated and imposed by global agencies. Vessuri proposes the design of a research policy that seeks to improve levels of science in Latin America – and, by extension, in other peripheral regions of the world – while contemplating the possibility of resolving the region's burning issues. She proposes establishing strategic relationships with other nodes of global scientific networks that are also interested in promoting alternative initiatives to the dominant ones, above all in the field of scientific publications, inasmuch as this is a strategic space in which, as has been seen above, debates on the quality, excellence and internationalisation of research and science are ultimately generated.

The commodification of universities foretold has exacerbated the job insecurity of university teaching and research staff, which is more evident on the system's peripheries and the lower rungs of the academic ladder. For Rodríguez-Victoriano, the university reforms have given rise to a state of affairs that is "increasingly more precarious, in which a growing number of teachers self-exploit themselves until suffering burnout. Obliged to compete in the piranha-infested river of the ANECA or the shark-infested ocean of international rankings, their professional teaching and research projects have proven to be a double-edged sword" (2017, 101).

How can these problems be resolved? The Latin American researchers Perrota (2017) and Vessuri et al. (2014) have stressed that the solution would necessarily involve the design of national and regional scientific policies that offer viable alternatives and that, in one way or another, allow for recuperating, as noted by Bustamante (2018), the scientific sovereignty yielded to the major multinationals that establish the benchmark indicators. As these imposed factors and metrics have disrupted the university system as a whole, the necessary changes in them on the basis of the aforementioned alliances should aim to reformulate the entire university system, its ob-

jects of study and its labour relations. This change is by no means easy and there is still much work to be done. One of the first steps that should be taken is probably that suggested by the Chinese proverb: “if you find yourself in a hole, stop digging”. On the contrary, we fear that, in a few years’ time, we will be obliged to write a similar article in which the metaphor is not borrowed from García Márquez’s *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, but from another of his bestsellers: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

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