

Research lore and vanguard in communication studies

Tradição e vanguarda na pesquisa em comunicação

LETICIA CANTARELA MATHEUS^a

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação.
Rio de Janeiro – RJ, Brazil

MARIA CRISTINA GUIMARÃES ROSA DO AMARAL^b

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação.
Rio de Janeiro – RJ, Brazil

ABSTRACT

Review of the book *Comunicação e Método: Cenário e Práticas de Pesquisa*, launched in 2020, in which Marialva Barbosa suggests methodological trends in communication research, based on 109 theses defended in 2017 in Graduate Programs graded Capes 5 or higher. The author typifies four synthesis-models for these trends, advocates for an essayistic communicational writing, an intellectual work of interpretation and of transformation of social reality, and establishes a distinction between analytical techniques and the theoretical-methodological design of research.

Keywords: Methodology, communicational field, epistemology

RESUMO

Resenha do livro *Comunicação e Método: Cenário e Práticas de Pesquisa*, lançado no final de 2020, no qual Marialva Barbosa aponta tendências metodológicas na pesquisa em comunicação a partir de 109 teses defendidas em 2017 em programas de pós-graduação nota 5 ou superior. A autora tipifica quatro modelos-síntese para essas tendências, defende uma escrita comunicacional ensaística, um trabalho intelectual de interpretação e transformação da realidade social e estabelece a distinção entre as técnicas analíticas e o desenho teórico-metodológico de uma pesquisa.

Palavras-chave: Metodologia, campo comunicacional, epistemologia

^a Pro-scientist, professor of the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação of the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (PPGCom-Uerj), head of the Research Group "Linguagem, Acontecimento e Poder" (Linap). Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2860-2607>. E-mail: leticia_matheus@yahoo.com.br

^b Fellow of the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior, Capes, Doctoral Student at the Programa de Pós-Graduação em Comunicação of the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (PPGCom-Uerj) and Master's Degree in Media and Daily Life from the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF). Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6103-4808>. E-mail: cristina.gramaral@gmail.com

THE BOOK BY Marialva Barbosa, *Comunicação e Método: Cenário e Práticas de Pesquisa* simultaneously challenges two recent complementary myths that feed each other in the research on communication: the fetish of method and the taboo of essay. In the last ten years or so, it seems that graduate students have been increasingly distressed in face of the peculiar task of having to define their method *before* starting their research. In this sense, this book can either alleviate or worsen the distress of new researchers for the same reason, by showing that method is a unique construction carried out *during* the research process. If, on the one hand, the author's explanation allows relieving the distress of the most anxious ones, as they discover there is no need for guesswork regarding the technique they will apply, on the other hand it increases the pressure on those who miss creative or critical vocation.

This new obsession with a magical selection of method is often translated into mechanical texts reduced to mere descriptions, that fail in taking on the required risk of the whys, eager to meet an imaginary demand for scientificity borrowed from other fields. The fight for a logic unique to the area would firstly pass by advocating for the quality of the text, when the author states that essay is the superlative form of communicational writing. Here she refers to *essay* as a work that puts forward social interpretation and analysis, i.e., which considers the results of research rather than simply exposing data. The *essayistic* text that she advocates is far from speculative reflections or texts that freely approach given topics. Here, essay would be synonymous of a pleasant text that, nevertheless, presents empirical evidence. This concept, however, goes far beyond. Intellectual production requires more than beauty and evidence. It requires a unique interpretative gesture that is also expressed in the methodological architecture of the research, and in how the academic handles with data.

Having introduced the matter, let us move on to what the work *is not*. The book *is not* a manual. It does not enumerate, describe, and teach how to use the most prevalent techniques in communication research. On the contrary. By presenting examples and discussing methodologies, Barbosa elects creative approaches to emphasize how these methodologies were anchored in well-defined theoretical grounds. In fact, the book resembles a map that shows several paths, obstacles and safe places, tracks that have been tried and abandoned, detours, shortcuts, routes that have been transformed into others. Inspired by Martín-Barbero's (2004) methodological cartography, Barbosa draws a route that does not necessarily lead to a final destination. Rather, it depicts possibilities and devises communication as the great science capable of managing the human phenomena of the 21st century, as advocated by Sodré (2011, 2014).

Although professional researchers can identify much of the method of the research even in the absence of a description by the author, Barbosa seems to have intended to show her ideas more explicitly in this book, recording what she has been teaching her pupils and students since the 1990s. And that was not the first time (Barbosa, 2002, 2007). In other texts (Barbosa, 2005), she explained the origins of her history-based hermeneutic training, even though her attention by then was focused on journalism. Her vision is broadened in this work, especially after the impact of Sodr  (2014) on her mindset.

Paradoxically, the book *is neither* an epistemological discussion about methodology in the field of communication. As she makes clear in the beginning of the second chapter (p. 33), Barbosa does not claim this role of expert, and there is no proposal to disrupt the field. Quite the contrary. Her view on methodology is quite similar to that of Martino (2018) and Braga (2011), for example. Apparently, her contribution intends to enhance the fight for maintaining an epistemology unique to the field. It seems that such fight is threatened by excessively descriptive works which do not venture on social interpretations, or which are focused on the media rather than on mediations, devoid of any supportive philosophy.

The work is divided into two parts. In the first part it primarily approaches the theoretical field of communication, and how it is constructed as an academic area. It is a twofold approach: through reflection and through the rescue of practice. First, the author looks back over scientific knowledge throughout the centuries, forgoing the sterile goal of approaching the whole history of knowledge. Maybe that is why the first chapters may seem a little superficial. The journey, however, has a direction and exploration has a purpose: to discuss the historicity of communication processes; how the communication issue is considered under each epistemological perspective. And these perspectives follow one another in the quest to define the essential: whether the forms of knowledge belong to the subject, to the object, or to some kind of relationship between both.

Whether knowledge is a mere record of data by the subject, data that exist separately in the physical and ideal outer world or whether, on the contrary, the subject actively intervenes in the process and organization of the object that, in fact, does not exist in essence but emerges in the very process of production of knowledge. (p. 23)

The journey reaches up to the *linguistic turn* of the 1960s, which paves the way for skepticism and postmodern theories that “assert the discontinuity between narrative and reality, argue that organizing the text as a story imposes itself on the facts, the narrative always being the product of an imaginary construction, losing its aura of veracity (even when it relies on sources)” (p. 25).

Here the author once again breaks up with conventional writing in a book on research methodology and practices, by openly taking a stand and criticizing viewpoints and paradigms, especially the “shattering of knowledge” resulting from postmodern theories. But the reader is not taken by surprise. In the first paragraph of the introduction Barbosa warns that

there is no possibility, however much traditional canons of writing and the academia propose, of emptying the self when producing something that comes out of the one who writes, to be then included in the gaze of the one who will read it in different times. (p. 9)

This certitude permeates the book, ranging from incentive to the use of the first person in the text of theses and dissertations, to considerations about the need for struggling in times when science is being discredited, while “indifference, individualism, anesthesia in face of suffering have been frequent actions in this often not so admirable new world” (p. 31).

Establishing a communicational field, defining an object of study, defending an area of knowledge as belonging to communication is part of a debate that has been more heatedly waged since the 1990s. Among other obstacles, the author points to the fact that communication has always resorted to methodologies from other areas – which she does not see as a problem, on the contrary. She also emphasizes the disruption of conceptual certainties, a dilemma shared with other human sciences, which led to a thematic multiplicity in communication research, “often missing the rigor of a theoretical-methodological conceptualization” (p. 34). Quoting Rüdiger (2007) and Sodré (2011), Barbosa wonders if in a world ruled by communication, would not communication be “a place of amalgamation of social sciences knowledge where, under the aegis of communicational, dispersed knowledge would be condensed? In this sense, wouldn’t communication be the science of the 21st century?” (p. 35). This is argued in a review about Sodré (2014) published in the same journal (Barbosa, 2015). To the extent that the area would be in the process of overcoming media bonds, as the author says mentioning Braga (2011), it is about “unraveling the communicational of our objects” (p. 13). Likewise, as Martino (2018) teaches, communication should be found in our objects. The work brings no proposal of disruption. On the contrary, it aligns itself with these classical scholars of methodology in communication as a way of advocating for a traditional research standing that departs from empirics, and is not reduced to mere description, demanding thinking in any social research, i.e., grounds and a philosophical project. Of course, thinking is not only in a sub-item named *discussion of results*, but is found in the way

of thinking, which is the method. The method, therefore, cannot come before empirics that lead to different sites and obliges the researcher to come up with paths to answer their disquiets and ask new questions.

This is the starting point for Barbosa to study the praxis, by tracing a course of trends and research in the area. The timeline begins in the 1970s, a time that coincides with the regulation of communication courses in Brazil, and by 2017 had reviewed 109 theses defended that year. In addition to the consolidation of communication subfields acknowledged throughout the establishment of the field, research showed that works are gradually driven by the perspective that communication is concerned exclusively with media and media processes, in an attempt to think over deeper issues that cut across time such as discursive ethics, communication flows, and processualities of practices.

It is based on the understanding that the contemporary world is communicational and, therefore, comprehension and understanding of the human action are only possible contingent on looking at communication. Communication, in this sense, proposes breaking the boundaries between the disciplinary logic of the 20th century and the organization of knowledge around issues that go beyond the establishment of isolated fields of knowledge. (p. 60)

From this framework, she found that of the 109 theses studied, 82 still focused on media objects or sub-areas of knowledge, while 27 were already grounded in the idea of communication as “amalgam of knowledge in the 21st century” (p. 60), again under clear influence of Sodr  (2014). Those 27 theses are the baseline for her typology of methodological trends in the field, presented in depth in the second part of the book.

In the second part, one can understand a distinction that is often a great challenge for entry-level advisor professors: explain to their students the difference between method – the thought-form that a thesis, for example, takes on – and the multiple techniques of analysis. The steps of a scientific research project are systematized in there: problem formulation; theoretical model building; relationship between theory and methodology; construction of the corpus and interpretation. What is more intriguing is that this is done by showing the pathways in practice, making use of the students’ production, providing concrete examples of methodological paths previously run by researchers. To that, in the book the author inverts the in-class method used in methodology courses. In the absence of actual students to speak their ideas, she takes a sample of theses and takes the opposite path: she reduces their methodological designs to retrospective project forms in order to illustrate what, for her, would be the trends in the field.

Once again, emphasis is attached to the need for deriving methodology from theory: a research problem cannot be built neither methods can be conceived without electing a theoretical referential belonging to the same lineage, to the same theoretical place, despite the possible divergences between different authors. Theories build the methodological paths, and thinking on methodology exclusively as a tool that enables building a scientific relationship with the empirical object is an error that leads to many others (p. 10).

For this, communication research should not be cast in stone. On the contrary, in the sixth and last chapter Barbosa presents creative works in the analysis of empirical materials, “dissonant movements around the possibilities of analysis in immersive attitudes” (p. 113). Reader is then introduced to the detailed description of methodological perspectives that Barbosa typifies as: 1) mode of disarray; 2) writings of interstices; 3) constellations; and, finally, 4) wandering.

The first one corresponds to the mode of cartography, according to which the researcher would not be concerned with presenting a strict description, a record of a phenomenon, but would approach it from multiple concepts, not focusing on a single concept or theory. According to the author, in this method the object would speak through the set of experiences and sensations it provokes in the researcher that is then *disorganized*. The second perspective works on features to be observed in a voluminous empirical corpus with comprehensive focus, and whose characteristics comprise interstices that connect, separate, and form the corpus itself. These characteristics are elected by the researcher themselves. The logic of these variables is perceived precisely in the gaps between objects. The third aspect, which the author calls “constellations”, is the construction of a corpus grounded in heterogeneous objects, so that the very arrangement of the empirical material is configured in an analytical gesture. Finally, “wanderings” refers to ethnography.

In the author’s opinion, wanderings would be the four methodological architectures in line with Sodr  s (2014) proposal on communication for the 21st century. Therefore, it is not aimed at a representative diagnosis of the area, but at a selection of those theses that, in her understanding, more autonomously overcome the focus on media, going through the processes of Mart  n-Barbero (2003) and moving towards a philosophy of the common, as proposed by Sodr   (2014).

Barbosa also explains that semiotic-discursive, ethnographic and cartographic proposals have stood out (p. 93). The author, however, does not neglect the techniques of analysis – questionnaire, film analysis, text analysis, interviews, field observation, documentary analysis – as well as the preferred choices of the empirical corpus. It is clear that talking about method demands precision: we are referring to the theoretical-methodological construction that materializes the researcher’s thinking, or to simple tools.

The author's interest for innovation is not for chance and it pursues an epistemology of its own to achieve communicational knowledge and doing. To them would correspond: why not? – a writing of its own, a communicational writing. Barbosa explains that when she speaks of communicational writing, she is referring to “a becoming rather than to what we build today as textualities in projects” (p. 109). However, she brings from Sodr  the notion of communication as the science of the common, as “the place where life is established, related, and organized” (p. 108). According to the author, in that place there is no room for a scriptural plot governed by the discursive parameters of a science that does not match the contemporary dimension of human action, i.e., a communicational dimension.

Marialva Barbosa's book draws from her more than 40 years of experience as a professor – many of these teaching methodology – but *Communication and Method: Scenario and Research Practices* does not rule out reading other more structured works on the history of communication theories or methodology. On the contrary, readers will profit from previous theoretical baseline that allows identifying biases in the author's writing. For example, she points to immersion as a forefront research trend, and disregards quantitative techniques, which did not appear in the sample.

Finally, one could say that the book rescues the intellectual *step-by-step* in a specific case and generally fulfills its ambition: “to share processes and reflections accumulated in decades of teaching the discipline, so as to continue supporting young researchers who, newcomers to the research field, are faced with methodological issues” (p. 9). She understands science as a transformative power since, according to the author, “thus scientific practice is always political and revolutionary, insofar as it proposes changes to make the world more understandable and, therefore, more livable” (p. 73). At the end of the reading, the student or novice researcher is left with the notion that theoretical ground is the cornerstone of any scientific method; that communication is the superb science of the 21st century, and that the researcher must develop intellectual autonomy. ■

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