

Scientific Cooperation and Academic Associations in Communication Studies: AE-IC and the Construction of Horizontal Ibero-American Knowledge Networks

Cooperación científica y asociaciones académicas en estudios de comunicación: AE-IC y la construcción de redes horizontales de conocimiento iberoamericano

Cooperação científica e associações acadêmicas em estudos de comunicação: AE-IC e a construção de redes horizontais de conhecimento ibero-americanas

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Abstract: Academic associations play a key role in structuring international scientific cooperation in communication studies. This article analyzes the evolution and internationalization of the Asociación Española de Investigación de la Comunicación (AE-IC) as a case study of how scholarly organizations operate as infrastructures for transnational collaboration. Based on qualitative and documentary analysis of institutional materials and international initiatives, the study situates AE-IC within debates on scientific cooperation, epistemic asymmetries, and the geopolitics of knowledge. The framework combines network theory, decolonial approaches, and communication scholarship, emphasizing dialogic communication, epistemic justice, and collaboration. Findings show that AE-IC has evolved from a nationally focused association into an actor integrated into international networks, especially in the Ibero-American space. Its working groups and initiatives promote more dialogic, multilingual, and reciprocal cooperation, although structural asymmetries persist.

The article proposes a model of horizontal academic cooperation based on reciprocity, epistemic plurality, multilingualism, and open science.

Keywords:

Academic associations; scientific cooperation; communication studies; Ibero-American communication research; knowledge networks; epistemic asymmetries; scientific diplomacy; open science

Resumen: Las asociaciones académicas desempeñan un papel clave en la estructuración de la cooperación científica internacional en los estudios de comunicación. Este artículo analiza la evolución y la internacionalización de la Asociación Española de Investigación de la Comunicación (AE-IC) como estudio de caso de cómo las organizaciones académicas operan como infraestructuras para la colaboración transnacional. Basado en un análisis cualitativo y documental de materiales institucionales e iniciativas internacionales, el estudio sitúa a la AE-IC en los debates sobre cooperación científica, asimetrías epistémicas y la geopolítica del conocimiento. El marco teórico combina la teoría de redes, enfoques decoloniales y los estudios de comunicación, destacando la comunicación dialógica, la justicia epistémica y la colaboración. Los resultados muestran que la AE-IC ha evolucionado desde una asociación de ámbito nacional hacia un actor integrado en redes internacionales, especialmente en el espacio iberoamericano. Sus grupos de trabajo e iniciativas promueven una cooperación más dialógica, multilingüe y recíproca, aunque persisten asimetrías estructurales. El artículo propone un modelo de cooperación académica horizontal basado en la reciprocidad, la pluralidad epistémica, el multilingüismo y la ciencia abierta.

Palabras clave:

Asociaciones académicas; cooperación científica; estudios de comunicación; investigación en comunicación iberoamericana; redes de conocimiento; asimetrías epistémicas; diplomacia científica; ciencia abierta

Resumo: As associações acadêmicas desempenham um papel central na estruturação da cooperação científica internacional nos estudos de comunicação. Este artigo analisa a evolução e internacionalização da Asociación Española de Investigación de la Comunicación (AE-IC) como um estudo de caso sobre como organizações acadêmicas funcionam como infraestruturas para a colaboração transnacional. Com base em uma análise qualitativa e

documental de materiais institucionais e iniciativas internacionais, o estudo situa a AE-IC nos debates sobre cooperação científica, assimetrias epistêmicas e geopolítica do conhecimento. O marco teórico combina teoria de redes, abordagens decoloniais e estudos de comunicação, enfatizando a comunicação dialógica, a justiça epistêmica e a colaboração. Os resultados mostram que a AE-IC evoluiu de uma associação de âmbito nacional para um ator integrado em redes internacionais, especialmente no espaço ibero-americano. Seus grupos de trabalho e iniciativas promovem uma cooperação mais dialógica, multilíngue e recíproca, embora persistam assimetrias estruturais. O artigo propõe um modelo de cooperação acadêmica horizontal baseado na reciprocidade, pluralidade epistêmica, multilinguismo e ciência aberta.

Palavras-chave:

Associações acadêmicas; cooperação científica; estudos de comunicação; pesquisa em comunicação ibero-americana; redes de conhecimento; assimetrias epistêmicas; diplomacia científica; ciência aberta

1. Introduction

In recent decades, academic and scientific cooperation has become a central dimension of knowledge production in higher education. The increasing interdependence of research systems, the expansion of transnational scholarly collaboration, and the rise of global academic networks have transformed how knowledge is produced, circulated, and legitimized (Castells, 1996; Katz & Martin, 1997; Wagner, 2008). In this context, academic associations have gained renewed relevance as institutional actors that facilitate cooperation and the articulation of research communities across national and regional boundaries.

However, the globalization of academic cooperation does not occur in neutral conditions. It is embedded in persistent linguistic and institutional asymmetries that structure global knowledge production (Bourdieu, 2004; Galtung, 1971). Critical perspectives have highlighted how these asymmetries reproduce hierarchies between centers and peripheries of knowledge production, often privileging dominant academic traditions while marginalizing others (Quijano, 2000; Santos, 2014; Mignolo, 2000, 2011). From this perspective, internationalization processes cannot be understood solely as expansion or connectivity, but must also be analyzed in terms of power, inequality, and epistemic justice (Hill Collins, 2017).

Communication studies occupy a particularly relevant position within this scenario. The field has developed strong traditions of critical and dialogic thought, especially in Latin

America, where scholars have emphasized communication as a process of mediation, participation, and social transformation (Freire, 1970, 1996; Martín-Barbero, 1993; Beltrán, 1980). At the institutional level, academic associations play a crucial role in shaping these dynamics, operating as infrastructures of scientific cooperation that enable sustained interaction among researchers and support the circulation of knowledge across regions (Paulino et al., 2020).

This article focuses on AE-IC as a case study for examining how academic associations contribute to international scientific cooperation in communication studies. Founded as a national scholarly association, AE-IC has progressively expanded its scope through participation in international networks and the development of structured international relations initiatives, particularly oriented toward the Ibero-American academic space.

The article is guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1. How has AE-IC evolved from a national scholarly association into an actor of international academic cooperation in communication studies?
- RQ2. What organizational structures and initiatives have enabled AE-IC to strengthen cooperation with Latin American and global research communities?
- RQ3. What structural asymmetries characterize international cooperation in communication studies?
- RQ4. What principles can guide the development of more horizontal, dialogic, and sustainable academic cooperation in communication research?

Methodologically, the article is based on qualitative and documentary analysis of institutional materials, organizational structures, and international cooperation initiatives developed by AE-IC. The article proceeds as follows: the next section develops the theoretical framework; the third analyzes the institutional evolution of AE-IC; the fourth examines its international relations activities; the fifth proposes a conceptual model of horizontal academic cooperation; and the conclusion reflects on the role of associations in fostering more inclusive forms of scientific collaboration.

2. Academic Cooperation, Epistemic Asymmetries, and Communication Studies

Scientific cooperation has become a structural condition of academic life, particularly in disciplines that rely on interdisciplinary and cross-national exchange (Katz & Martin, 1997). From a sociological perspective, it can be understood as organized interaction among researchers, institutions, and knowledge systems aimed at producing shared intellectual

outputs (Bozeman & Boardman, 2014). These collaborative structures are increasingly embedded in global academic networks, supported by digital infrastructures, international conferences, and open science policies (UNESCO, 2021). However, the expansion of scientific cooperation does not eliminate structural inequalities within global academia; rather, it often operates within pre-existing hierarchies of visibility, funding, and epistemic authority (Bourdieu, 1988, 2004).

The globalization of academic cooperation is intertwined with persistent epistemic asymmetries. Critical approaches in sociology and postcolonial theory have emphasized that global knowledge systems are marked by unequal power relations, where certain epistemologies are systematically privileged over others (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2011). These asymmetries are particularly visible in the dominance of English-language publishing, the concentration of high-impact journals in the Global North, and the unequal distribution of research funding. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014, 2018) has conceptualized this as epistemicide—the systematic devaluation of non-hegemonic forms of knowledge—and proposed an "ecology of knowledges" as an alternative framework for understanding cooperation as mutual recognition between diverse epistemological traditions. Galtung's (1971) center-periphery model provides a structural explanation of how inequality is reproduced within global academic systems, while Bourdieu (2004) emphasizes the role of symbolic capital in shaping academic recognition. Together, these perspectives argue that academic cooperation must move from models of knowledge transfer to models of knowledge co-construction, where different intellectual traditions engage on more equal and reciprocal terms.

Communication studies is a particularly relevant field for examining the relationship between knowledge production and epistemic diversity. In Latin America, the field has developed influential theoretical perspectives that challenge linear transmission-based models, emphasizing instead processes of mediation, participation, and cultural negotiation (Martín-Barbero, 1993). Paulo Freire's (1970) dialogic pedagogy proposed communication as a horizontal process grounded in reciprocity and co-construction of meaning. Luis Ramiro Beltrán (1980) introduced the concept of horizontal communication, explicitly challenging top-down models of information dissemination. Mario Kaplún (1998) further linked communication and education through participatory frameworks, while Raúl Fuentes Navarro (2015) has analyzed the institutional development of communication studies in Latin America, highlighting both its intellectual richness and its structural marginalization within global academia. These contributions collectively demonstrate that Latin American

communication theory offers valuable conceptual tools for rethinking academic cooperation in more dialogic and equitable terms.

Beyond individual research practices, academic associations play a central role in structuring scientific cooperation at the transnational level. They function as intermediaries between researchers, institutions, and regional networks, facilitating sustained collaboration across geographical and disciplinary boundaries (Paulino et al., 2020), and can be described as infrastructures of scientific cooperation capable of organizing epistemic communities and enabling long-term collaboration. Recent approaches in science studies have also highlighted the role of such organizations in scientific diplomacy—the use of academic networks as instruments for fostering international dialogue—whereby associations actively mediate between different academic cultures and geopolitical contexts, contributing to the governance of global knowledge systems (Nowotny et al., 2001). This theoretical framework allows us to analyze how AE-IC operates within broader dynamics of academic cooperation and epistemic asymmetry.

3. The Evolution and Institutional Consolidation of AE-IC

The Asociación Española de Investigación de la Comunicación (AE-IC) constitutes one of the central institutional actors in the development of communication studies in Spain. Since its foundation in 2008, the association has played a key role in structuring the academic field, fostering research networks, and promoting scholarly exchange among researchers and universities. Its evolution reflects broader transformations in the institutionalization and internationalization of the discipline within Europe and its articulation with Latin American academic traditions (Moragas Spà, 2011; Bustamante, 2011).

The emergence of AE-IC must be understood within the broader consolidation of communication studies as an academic field in Spain, marked by the creation of academic programs, research groups, and specialized publications. AE-IC emerged as a collective initiative aimed at strengthening the academic identity of communication studies, promoting research excellence, and fostering collaboration among scholars (Marzal & Garcia Galindo, 2021). Its establishment responded to the need for a formal structure capable of representing the growing community of communication researchers and facilitating dialogue across universities and research centers.

The consolidation of AE-IC contributed to the stabilization of the field by creating spaces for academic exchange through national congresses, thematic sections, and working groups. One of its defining characteristics is its complex organizational structure, articulated

through thematic sections reflecting the diversity of communication research—media studies, digital communication, journalism, audiovisual studies, political communication, among others. This internal diversity is not merely administrative; it reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the field and its openness to multiple theoretical and methodological approaches (AE-IC, n.d.-b). From an analytical perspective, this organizational plurality also functions as a precondition for international cooperation: the existence of multiple research areas facilitates the establishment of transnational thematic networks, enabling AE-IC to connect with diverse academic communities across Europe and Latin America.

Beyond national consolidation, AE-IC has progressively developed a strong orientation toward international academic cooperation, including participation in global scholarly associations, collaboration with international research networks, and the promotion of joint academic initiatives. This process reflects broader trends in higher education, where academic associations increasingly function as nodes within global research networks. AE-IC's engagement has been particularly significant in its relationship with Latin American academic institutions and associations—a relationship grounded in shared linguistic, cultural, and intellectual traditions that have historically shaped communication studies in both regions (Fuentes Navarro, 2015; Martín-Barbero, 1993). The Ibero-American space thus constitutes a privileged context for developing more dialogic and reciprocal forms of academic cooperation.

However, this internationalization is not free from structural tensions. Global academic cooperation is shaped by persistent asymmetries in resources, visibility, and institutional power (Santos, 2014; Galtung, 1971), influencing agenda-setting, publication circuits, and research recognition. In this context, AE-IC's international trajectory can be interpreted as an attempt to navigate and partially reconfigure these dynamics through more structured and sustained cooperation mechanisms.

Taken together, the institutional evolution, organizational structure, and international engagement of AE-IC suggest its transformation from a nationally oriented scholarly association into an emerging platform of transnational academic coordination. This transformation does not imply the disappearance of its national anchoring, but rather its articulation with broader regional and international networks of communication research. AE-IC can thus be understood as an intermediary institution that connects multiple academic spaces, facilitating dialogue between European and Latin American traditions and contributing to the construction of shared epistemic spaces where collaborative research practices can develop.

4. International Relations, Ibero-American Cooperation, and Structures of Academic Mediation in AE-IC

The international projection of AE-IC constitutes a key dimension of its contemporary institutional identity. While initially consolidated as a national academic association, its international relations activities have progressively positioned it within broader networks of communication research, particularly in the Ibero-American academic space. This process reflects both the increasing internationalization of higher education and the growing relevance of scholarly associations as mediators of transnational cooperation (Paulino et al., 2020; Wagner, 2008).

International relations within academic associations are increasingly central components of their institutional function. In the case of AE-IC, structured international relations reflect a strategic effort to expand scholarly dialogue beyond national boundaries and to integrate Spanish communication research into global and regional networks. This aligns with the idea that academic associations operate as infrastructures of scientific cooperation enabling sustained interaction among research communities (Nowotny et al., 2001): international relations are not only diplomatic functions, but epistemic practices that shape the conditions of knowledge production. Within AE-IC, the International Relations area has sought to strengthen collaboration with communication research associations and academic institutions in Latin America, given the historical and linguistic connections that provide fertile ground for more dialogic and reciprocal academic exchanges.

The international cooperation promoted by AE-IC has taken multiple forms: participation in joint academic events, co-organization of conferences and panels, collaborative research initiatives, and engagement in international scholarly networks. These activities contribute to creating transnational academic spaces where researchers from different institutional contexts can interact, reflecting broader transformations in academic life where knowledge production increasingly occurs through networked and collaborative structures (Castells, 1996; Wagner, 2008). A key dimension of these practices is their reliance on shared linguistic and cultural frameworks enabling more fluid interaction between Spanish and Latin American communities. However, this apparent proximity should not obscure the structural asymmetries that continue to shape academic cooperation, including differences in funding capacity, institutional infrastructure, and publication systems (Galtung, 1971; Santos, 2014).

Despite shared intellectual traditions and linguistic proximity, academic cooperation between Europe and Latin America is characterized by persistent asymmetries expressed in

unequal access to research funding, disparities in academic recognition, and the dominance of certain publication circuits (Bourdieu, 2004; Santos, 2018). International cooperation cannot therefore be understood as a purely horizontal process; it is shaped by structural constraints that influence agenda-setting, authorship dynamics, and the circulation of knowledge. Critical perspectives emphasize that overcoming these asymmetries requires more than increased collaboration; it demands a reconfiguration of the principles governing cooperation, including recognizing epistemic diversity, fostering multilingual publication practices, and promoting more equitable forms of exchange (Mignolo, 2011; Quijano, 2000).

Within this framework, AE-IC can be analytically understood as an emerging mediating infrastructure for academic cooperation. Its international relations initiatives contribute to creating sustained channels of dialogue between European and Latin American communication research communities, enabling the articulation of shared research agendas and collaborative practices. AE-IC functions not only as a national association with international connections, but as a node within a broader ecosystem of epistemic exchange—a mediating role particularly relevant in the Ibero-American context, where historical, linguistic, and cultural ties provide both opportunities and tensions for academic cooperation.

Importantly, this mediation should not be interpreted as a neutral process. Academic associations operate within structures of epistemic inequality that shape the conditions of collaboration (Bourdieu, 2004; Galtung, 1971), but they also possess the capacity to partially reconfigure these conditions by fostering more dialogic, inclusive, and sustained forms of cooperation. In this sense, AE-IC contributes to what may be described as a horizontalizing tendency in academic cooperation, even if such horizontality remains partial, contested, and structurally conditioned. The experience of AE-IC suggests that sustainable academic cooperation requires more than episodic collaboration or institutional agreements: it demands long-term infrastructures that support continuity, reciprocity, and epistemic pluralism, including stable networks of researchers, recurring collaborative initiatives, and institutional mechanisms that facilitate multilingual and cross-regional exchange.

5. Toward a Model of Horizontal Academic Cooperation in Communication Studies

The analysis of AE-IC's institutional evolution and international relations allows for the formulation of a broader conceptual reflection on the conditions and principles of academic cooperation in communication studies. Building on perspectives related to epistemic asymmetries (Santos, 2014; Quijano, 2000), dialogic communication (Freire, 1970; Martín-Barbero, 1993), and scientific collaboration (Wagner, 2008), this section proposes a

preliminary model of horizontal academic cooperation. This model does not seek to describe an existing reality, but to articulate normative and analytical principles guiding more equitable forms of transnational academic interaction.

A first principle is *reciprocity*. Unlike traditional models of internationalization that often reproduce asymmetrical flows of knowledge from dominant to peripheral institutions, reciprocal cooperation implies mutual recognition of intellectual contributions and shared responsibility in research agendas. Cooperation is not understood as assistance or transfer, but as co-construction of knowledge among equals—consistent with Freire's (1970) conception of dialogue as a horizontal process and Santos's (2014) notion of cognitive justice. In institutional terms, reciprocity requires mechanisms that ensure balanced participation in collaborative projects, shared authorship practices, and equitable access to research resources.

A second principle is *multilingualism as a condition for epistemic justice* (Hill Collins, 2017). The dominance of English in global academic publishing limits the visibility of non-Anglophone scholarship and reinforces epistemic hierarchies (Mignolo, 2011; Bourdieu, 2004). In the context of Ibero-American communication studies, linguistic proximity between Spanish and Portuguese offers a significant opportunity for developing more inclusive academic spaces. However, multilingualism should not be reduced to translation but understood as a broader commitment to epistemic plurality: recognizing that different linguistic traditions carry distinct conceptual frameworks, theoretical genealogies, and modes of academic expression (Martín-Barbero, 1993; Fuentes Navarro, 1992, 2015).

A third principle is *institutional sustainability*. Many international collaborations remain episodic, dependent on individual initiatives or temporary funding. Horizontal cooperation instead requires stable institutional infrastructures capable of ensuring continuity over time. Academic associations such as AE-IC play a central role by providing organizational stability, recurring academic spaces, and structured networks of collaboration. As Wagner (2008) argues, scientific knowledge increasingly depends on sustained collaborative infrastructures rather than isolated research efforts; institutional sustainability also implies the development of long-term partnerships between associations, universities, and research networks across regions.

A fourth principle is *epistemic diversity*—the recognition of multiple intellectual traditions within communication studies. This principle directly challenges homogenizing tendencies in global academia and aligns with decolonial critiques of knowledge production (Santos, 2018; Hill Collins, 2017; Quijano, 2000). In communication studies, epistemic diversity is particularly relevant given the coexistence of European critical theory, North

American empiricism, and Latin American dialogic approaches. Rather than privileging one tradition over others, horizontal cooperation seeks conditions for dialogue and mutual enrichment among them, strongly informed by Martín-Barbero's (1993) notion of mediation as emphasizing the hybrid and culturally situated nature of communication processes.

A fifth principle is *open science*, understood as a framework for enhancing accessibility, transparency, and collaboration in research (UNESCO, 2021). Open science contributes to horizontal cooperation by reducing barriers to access and enabling broader participation in knowledge production. However, from a critical perspective, open science must also address structural inequalities in publication systems and digital infrastructures; without such considerations, openness may reproduce existing asymmetries under new forms. Therefore, open science should be integrated with principles of epistemic justice and institutional equity.

Finally, horizontal academic cooperation requires recognizing the role of *academic associations as enabling infrastructures* that sustain transnational dialogue. As demonstrated by AE-IC, these organizations are not merely administrative entities but active mediators of epistemic exchange and scientific collaboration (Paulino et al., 2020). They facilitate the formation of epistemic communities, the organization of collaborative events, and the development of shared research agendas—functioning as key actors in what may be described as *dialogic scientific governance*, in which knowledge production is organized through cooperative rather than hierarchical logics (Nowotny et al., 2001).

These six principles—reciprocity, multilingualism, institutional sustainability, epistemic diversity, open science, and dialogic governance—constitute a preliminary model of horizontal academic cooperation in communication studies. Rather than replacing existing forms of academic internationalization, this model seeks to reorient them toward more equitable, inclusive, and dialogic forms of cooperation, particularly within the Ibero-American academic space.

6. Conclusion

This article has analyzed the evolution and internationalization of AE-IC as a case study for understanding the role of academic associations in contemporary scientific cooperation within communication studies. By combining institutional analysis with theoretical perspectives on epistemic asymmetries, communication theory, and scientific collaboration, the article has shown how AE-IC has progressively evolved from a nationally

oriented scholarly association into an actor embedded in transnational academic networks, particularly within the Ibero-American space.

The findings suggest that academic associations function as epistemic infrastructures that actively shape the conditions of knowledge production and circulation. In the case of AE-IC, its organizational structure, thematic diversity, and international relations initiatives have contributed to fostering more sustained forms of academic exchange, enabling the development of collaborative networks across Spain, Latin America, and broader international contexts (Paulino et al., 2020; Wagner, 2008). At the same time, the analysis highlights that these cooperative processes are embedded within broader structural asymmetries in global academia—differences in institutional resources, linguistic hierarchies, and recognition systems that condition the possibilities of international collaboration (Bourdieu, 2004; Castells, 2009; Galtung, 1971; Santos, 2014).

In this context, the article has argued for the relevance of rethinking academic cooperation in terms of horizontality, reciprocity, and epistemic plurality. Drawing on traditions of communication theory (Freire, 1970; Martín-Barbero, 1993) and contemporary debates on open science (UNESCO, 2021), a conceptual model of horizontal academic cooperation has been proposed, emphasizing multilingualism, dialogic exchange, institutional sustainability, and epistemic diversity as foundational elements for more equitable collaboration.

From this perspective, AE-IC can be understood as a mediating infrastructure that contributes to the gradual construction of more dialogic and inclusive academic networks. Its international relations activities illustrate both the potential and the limitations of current forms of academic cooperation: while significant progress has been made in fostering collaboration, structural inequalities continue to condition the possibilities of truly horizontal exchange.

Ultimately, the article suggests that strengthening international cooperation in communication studies requires moving beyond conventional models of academic internationalization toward more reflexive and dialogic forms of knowledge production—forms in which academic associations occupy a strategic position as mediators of epistemic exchange and potential catalysts for more equitable and sustainable scientific cooperation (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000).

Future research could further explore comparative experiences of academic associations in different regions, as well as the concrete institutional mechanisms that enable or hinder horizontal cooperation. The case of AE-IC offers not only an empirical example,

but also a conceptual entry point for rethinking the role of scholarly organizations in the governance of global knowledge systems.

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