# Analysis of the journalism and communication degree programmes of the world's top-ranked universities. Competencies, objectives and subjects

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**Abstract**
**Introduction:** This article presents the results of a study that analyses 12 Communication and Journalism degree programmes offered by the world's top eight universities in the field of Communication, according to the QS World University Rankings. **Methods:** The study uses quantitative and qualitative methods to analyse these universities' degree programmes and 542 course units, focusing on their aims, competencies, thematic areas, modality, and curricular distribution, to identify good practices and tendencies in their curricular design. **Results and conclusions:** The study indicates that these universities prefer open study programmes that privilege elective courses or modules that guarantee students' basic humanist education and let students choose a large part of their educational track.

**Keywords**
Communication; journalism; competencies; university; education; curriculum.

**Contents**
1. Introduction. 1.1. Theoretical framework. 2. Methods. 3. Results. 3.1. Structure of the degree programmes. 3.2. Objectives and competencies. 3.3. Types of educational components: credits and subjects. 4. Discussion and conclusion. 5. References.

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## 1. Introduction

The current media landscape, marked by the Web 2.0, requires journalists to possess a new set of (professional, academic and specific) competencies that range from the mastery of technical skills for managing new instruments to the assimilation of content production routines marked by a transmedia logic (Scolari, 2013), among other aspects. These professional changes require important transformations at the educational level. Schools of communication face the challenge of renewing and updating their degree programmes and adapt the competencies of their curriculum to the new professional profiles demanded by the market (Tejedor, 2006).

Studies have detected the growth of online journalistic initiatives worldwide. A research study carried out by the Pew Research Center (2014) detected an increase in the supply of jobs linked to the internet. According to this study, about 5,000 jobs were created in 2014 in the sector of digital communication in the USA. This is reinforced by the preference of younger users for social networks and other internet platforms. Studies, such as those developed by Rideout (2015), warn of a significant increase in the hours that teenagers spend on social networks. However, the time invested does not guarantee mastery in the use of these or other platforms. Jones *et al*. (2010) detected significant differences in the mastery of technical skills and critical reading abilities among diverse groups of university students considered to be digital natives. These aspects highlight the importance of adapting the curricula to market changes and the need to reformulate the educational processes according to the new student (user) profile generated by the so-called network society (Castells, 2003).

The transformation of the media by the impacts of technology has affected different types of media platforms, professional profiles, messages, journalistic production routines and consumption habits. The curriculum of journalism degrees must be reformulated to adapt it to the needs and particularities of the current communication scenario (Salaverría, 2016). These changes, which affect both students and teachers (Roblyer *et al*., 2010), directly affect the design and conceptualisation of study programmes. This requires the lifelong learning and retraining of teachers (Silva *et al*., 2014; Tramullas, 2016), but also a continuous reflection on the skills, competencies and profiles required by the industry (Singh *et al*., 2015). This is a global phenomenon that affects all countries and, therefore, all the universities in the world. Different studies have focused on the importance of digital platforms for young internet users (Pérez Tornero *et al*., 2015). In Latin America, for example, Universia found out that for 37% of young internet users, social networks are one of the best ways for universities to promote their content and make contact with their audience (Universia, Trabajando.com, 2015). As new scenarios appear, new professional profiles emerge.

In the Spanish scenario, the challenges are very similar and also require changes. The study "Most wanted professional profiles in the field of digital content in Spain 2012-2017" concluded, with regards to the educational offer of the sector, that education in Spain "is more focused on developing technical rather than creative skills, which complicates the task of finding profiles that combine this last type of skills" (FTI-Ametic, 2012: 129). For its part, Spain's National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) published in 2005 the White Paper on Communication degrees, which defined the disciplinary knowledge, skills and professional profiles that should emerge from studies in Journalism, Advertising and Public Relations and Audiovisual Communication. The study establishes

that the main formative demands for journalism students are: analytical-critical capacity, good technical and professional training, capacity to reflect on journalistic work, innovation, ease to adapt to changes and the experience derived from work placements and lab-based practice (ANECA: 2005).

Currently, journalism studies, especially due to the impact of technology, require serious rethinking of the curricular plans, their approach, content and methodological aspects. Based on this situation, the article examines eight universities that offer degrees in journalism and/or communication and occupy the top positions in the QS World University Rankings. The study focuses on the type of competencies, curricular organisation (subjects), professional profiles on offer and the emergence of new trends in the sector. The study responds to the following descriptive research questions:

- What are the defining features of the curricular structure of the communication degrees offered by the best universities?

- What objectives and competencies appear in the educational offer of the main universities?

- What type of courses (in terms of credits and topics) predominate in the curricular plans of these degrees?

- What educational trends are detected in the curricular programmes under analysis?

## 1.1 Theoretical framework

Economic, political, cultural and educational processes have acquired a liquid essence (Bauman, 2002). Social networks have become a defining feature of the current media landscape, but their importance exceeds the strictly informative field (Akter & Nweke, 2016) and they reflect the professional and daily aspects of citizens (Quan-Hasse & Young, 2010). Education has been greatly affected by the transformation introduced by the digital revolution. For Pavlik (2005), technology has modified journalism studies in four major areas: the way of teaching and researching; the content of what is taught, the structure of the departments of journalism and communication schools, and the relationships between teachers and their publics (students, funders and competitors).

In 2005, UNESCO commissioned a group of education experts to design the guidelines of a curriculum for the teaching of journalism. The study concluded that university education or journalism should be organised around three curricular areas: a) The norms, values, tools, quality standards and practices of journalism; b) The social, cultural, political, economic, legal and ethical aspects of the exercise of journalism; c) The knowledge of the world and intellectual difficulties related to journalism (UNESCO, 2007). The proposal was originally created during a stage in which, despite the emergence of numerous online media, reflection on the proper application of technology in journalism was in a nascent stage of development and occupied, therefore, a minor role in the training of journalists. However, the need to transform the profile of the traditional journalist into a knowledge manager was already considered (Mellado: 2007). In 2017, twelve years later, the Nieman Lab of Harvard University and the Journalism, Media and Technology Trends and Predictions of the Reuters Institute indicated that, the main challenges and tendencies of journalism included 3D reality in mobile phones for

informative purposes, virtual intelligence, data journalism, the fight against fake news and new business models (Nieman Lab & Reuters, 2017).

The media ecology affects the generation of new environments that directly impact the users of information and communication technologies (Scolari, 2012, 2013). This impact is widely observed in different elements that make up the educational institution (at all levels): competencies, curricular objectives, type of content, teaching methods, teacher profiles, evaluation systems and teaching resources. Furthermore, in a scenario marked by the logic of cyberculture (Lévy, 2007), university students fit the profile of the so called "millennial" or "Y" generation. They are college students and, in the case of journalism, future communication professionals, with very particular characteristics in the evaluation, use and consumption of the media, especially social networks and digital platforms. They are active consumers or prosumers (Toffler, 1980) of contents generated in cyberspace, they are multitasking, their attention is "floating" (Crenshaw, 2010), and have great skills to articulate networks of contacts on the web (Ruano *et al*., 2016). This profile is closely linked to the emergence of new opportunities for participation and development of projects (Clarke-Pearson, 2011), which makes this generation into potential digital entrepreneurs in the field of communication.

In this context, the curriculum of journalism degrees must be adapted to the demands that come directly from the industry, the peculiarities of the communicative landscape and the new profile of internet users, among others. Therefore, the challenges related to the updating of these university studies cover the entire educational process, from contents to competencies, teaching methods and the profile of the teaching staff. Marques de Melo (2007) stresses the need to reformulate pedagogical strategies in the teaching of journalism; while Piscitelli and Adaime (2010) have stressed the importance of redefining the educational logic, from school to university, to adapt it to the new student profiles and the new communication platforms and tools. In this scenario, social networks have acquired great importance. According to Papacharissi and Mendelson (2011), students are specially motivated in the professional use of social networks.

However, some researchers, such as Galindo (2010), define social networks as spaces that foster a culture based on what is accessible, fun and simple. In response, he raises the need to enhance the presence in the curricular design of digital media literacy (Pérez Tornero & Tejedor, 2016), which is conceived as the ability of users to use information and communication technologies critically, qualitatively and responsibly (Pérez Tornero, 2016). Del Campo (2013), in a study carried out in fourteen countries of the European Union (Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Sweden), points out that the inclusion of ethics is essential in a hypothetical curricular model for journalism degrees. The author points out that the exercise of journalism requires an ethical awareness that must be provided by the educational institution. In summary, curriculum of journalism degree programmes must be subject to a profound remodelling from a holistic approach that encompasses all the components and actors involved in educational process.

Next to the ethical component, the reflection on these studies has been characterised for a recurring debate between those who support instrumental training and those who support an approach that privileges theoretical dominance. Mellado (2010), after consulting 35 researchers and teachers of

journalism and communication from 16 countries, highlighted the existence of a division between two groups: those who see journalism as an occupation based on the mastery of technical skills and those who defended the professionalisation of the sector. The irruption of the Internet and its introduction in the editorial offices of the media generated divided the staff into supporters and detractors of technology. There is the danger of generating a scenario with "two-speed" journalists (Palomo, 2004: 14). Faced with this generational disagreement, some have proposed (Fidalgo, 2001) a formative process that combines the know-how of previous eras with the new instruments and routines of production of more current information contents through proposals that exploit experimentation.

The discussion on the type and approach of the curricula has followed a shared dynamic in different regions of the world. Vasallo and Fuentes (2000) pointed out the lack of a deep debate on the institutionalisation of communication studies, both at the teaching and research levels. These authors insisted on the need to address, from the academic field, the changes of the communication landscape with a global-ecosystem approach. A decade later, in the context of a research on the training of journalists in Brazil, Portugal, Puerto Rico and Spain, López (2010) pointed out that communication studies have been incorporated broadly into universities, but with different programmes and through very different modalities. Despite the improvement of the level of training of journalists, the author highlights the need to incorporate a permanent review of the curricula and to promote permanent education. Along the same line, Acosta (2016) warns about the little or non-existent correspondence between journalism studies and the new professional scenario due to the inability to adapt the curricula to the accelerated rate of transformations that occur in the industry.

## 2. Methods

For the study we had initially selected the world's 10 highest-ranked universities to compare the offer of journalism and communication degrees of these educational centres. For the selection of the sample we used the QS World University Rankings, which take into account a series of indicators, such as academic peer review (based on a survey applied to 70,000 academics), professional reputation, faculty student ratio (based on a survey applied to 30,000 professionals in the sector), citations per faculty and international student and staff ratio.

The sample was composed by the ten highest-ranked universities in the area of media and communications in the last report of the QS rankings. The selected universities are: University of Southern California (1), University of Amsterdam (2), London School of Economics and Political Science (3), Stanford University (4), University of Wisconsin-Madison (5), University of California-Berkeley (6), University of Texas, University of Austin (6), Goldsmiths-University of London (8), University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) (9) and University of Pennsylvania (10)

From these universities we selected all the degrees in communication and/or journalism studies. In the first selection, we detected that the University of Texas and the London School of Economics and Political Science only offered postgraduate and/or doctoral degrees in Journalism and Communication, but no bachelor's degrees in this discipline. Therefore, these two universities were excluded from the sample. The 12 degrees eventually analysed are listed in the following table (See Table 1):

**Table 1. Table of universities and degrees analysed**

| Name of degree | University | Country |
|---|---|---|
| **Communication** | Stanford University | USA |
| **Communication** | University of California- Berkeley | USA |
| **Communication** | University of Wisconsin-Madison | USA |
| **Journalism** | University of Wisconsin-Madison | USA |
| **Communication** | University of California-Los Angeles | USA |
| **Communication** | University of Pennsylvania | USA |
| **Communication** | University of Southern California | USA |
| **Journalism** | Universidad of Southern California | USA |
| **Communication Sciences** | University of Amsterdam | Netherlands |
| **Media and Information** | University of Amsterdam | Netherlands |
| **Media and Communications** | Goldsmiths-University of London | United Kingdom |
| **Journalism** | Goldsmiths-University of London | United Kingdom |

Source: Authors' own creation.

Of these degrees, 8 belong to American universities and 4 to European universities (2 to the Netherlands and 2 to the UK). These three countries have important differences in their curricular planning, but allow us to outline dynamics and trends of interest that are applicable to other scenarios, especially in the European territory.

In the United Kingdom, the higher education system is operated by universities, colleges and higher schools of art and music. In this sense, although the UK is part of the European framework, its universities do not adopt all the norms of the European Higher Education Area. Graduate students are awarded a Bachelor's Degree which can be of two types: Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Bachelor of Science (BSC). These degrees last for 3 to 4 years and are the equivalent to the *Licenciatura* degree awarded in Spain. For its part, the master's degree lasts one year and gives access to doctoral studies.

In the Netherlands, higher education is operated with a mixed system. On the one hand, there are universities of applied sciences or professional where a more practical teaching is taught. In these centres, the Bachelor's degree lasts 4 years and consists of 240 ECTS (European Credit Transfer System) credits. On the other hand, there are traditional universities that offer Journalism and Communication studies and also conduct research. In these universities, the Bachelor's degree lasts 3 years and consists of 180 ECTS credits. In these cases, the Bachelor's degree prepares students for the master's degree studies, which lasts 1 to 2 years and consist of 60 to 120 ECTS credits. After completing the master's degree, students can do a doctorate which is the second postgraduate level. However, the Bachelor's degree alone also allows students to enter the professional sector.

The American university system differs a lot from the European system, in general, and from the Spanish system, in particular. It has more than 4,500 accredited higher education institutions. However, there is no central ministerial curriculum, nor a central regulatory agency, since everything is managed at the state/regional level. Higher education institutions are basically divided in three types:

Liberal arts colleges, normally private; Community colleges, usually public; and universities and technical schools, which can be public (state) and private.

Liberal arts colleges are institutions that only offer undergraduate courses (equivalent to the bachelor's degree). For this reason, they do not appear in the rankings and, therefore, are not included in our sample, which focuses on universities, understood as institutions offering courses at all levels. Unlike many European countries, in the USA there are no schools/faculties. For this reason, during the first two years, students take courses from different disciplines, known as pre-requisite course (literature, art, history, science, etc.) with the aim of developing general culture. At the end of the second year (many universities expressly forbid it before), students can "declare their Major", that is, they can decide which discipline to concentrate on. An Academic major is the academic discipline on which the student decides to concentrate. There are interdisciplinary majors, which are jointly managed by multiple departments. Students also have the possibility of studying a double major, which is to study two careers simultaneously. Students may choose a minor, which normally requires three years of study and is a second academic specialisation that may differ greatly from the main one. The system enhances flexibility and students can change their selected major at any time and even, multiple times, throughout their career. Upon completion of the Bachelor's degree, students can continue studying a master's degree or a doctoral degree.

Regarding the methods used to answer our research questions, we developed an analysis table that considered the following aspects: a) data of the university and the degree; b) structure and credit system; c) Objective of the programme of studies; d) student profile; e) Competencies; f) Professional activities; g) general structure of the curriculum; and h) data of the courses. We found out that American and English universities do not publish information on the student profile and, therefore, this parameter was not considered in the subsequent analysis. In total, the analysis considered 12 degree programmes and 542 courses units/modules. In this way, the article performs content analysis (Holsti, 1969) on thematic groups of the main courses offered in the curricula of the journalism and communication degree programmes.

## 3. Results
## 3.1. Structure of degree programmes

This section describes the structure of the degrees offered by the sample of universities to identify the defining elements of their curricular structure and the predominant type of credits in each of the degree programmes they offer.

Goldsmiths-University of London (United Kingdom) offers a BA in Journalism and one in Media and Communications. The Bachelor's degree is equivalent to 360 ECTS (120 credits per year) and lasts 3 years. All subjects (modules) are compulsory for the first two years. Regarding the BA in Journalism, the first year consists of 4 practice modules, 2 theory modules and 1 mixed module. The second year consists of 2 theory modules and 5 practice modules. In the last course it is compulsory to present a portfolio of practice work or an essay and one theory module. The rest of the third year consists of elective modules that can be practical and include work placements; modules on advanced computing; theoretical modules that may include a thesis or dissertation project. Students can also choose modules

from other departments. For its part, the curriculum of the BA in Media and Communications consists of 50% theory and 50% practice. The first year is made up of five compulsory theory modules on general topics of the field of study, a module on media debate and a practice module where two specialisations are chosen (Animation, Journalism, Photography, Scriptwriting, Radio and Television). In the second year, the curriculum offers two compulsory theoretical modules and two compulsory practice modules, which follow the two specialties chosen in the first year, plus 30 elective credits. Finally, the third year includes 60 elective theory credits, a 60-credit compulsory practice module or the option of 45 compulsory practice credits (production) and a 15-credit work placement.

The University of Amsterdam (Netherlands) offers a Bachelor's degree in Communication Sciences, which consists of 180 ECTS and lasts 3 years. This programme is taught in Dutch and English and conceived as preparation to access the master's degree. The first year, which consists of 60 credits, involves two compulsory introductory modules (on communication theories and research methods). The modules are worth 6 and 12 credits, respectively. The rest of the modules are elective and theory-based. The second year offers 5 6-credit compulsory modules (two based on theory and three based on research methods). It also includes 30 elective credits that allow students to study other disciplines, in foreign universities, do a minor or choose modules that can be needed in the master's degree. The last year consists of 16 compulsory credits of internships, 12 compulsory theory credits (2 modules), a thesis or dissertation project (18 credits) and 2 electives 6-credit specialised-theory modules.

In addition, the University of Amsterdam also offers a Bachelor's degree in Media and Information, which is taught in English, lasts for 3 years and is allocated 180 ECTS. The first year consists of 60 compulsory credits covering 6 (6-credit) theory modules, 2 (6-credit) practice modules, and one (12-credit) research methods theory and practice module. In the second and third years (60 credits each year) students must choose between two specialties: "information cultures" and "New media and digital culture". Each consists of 66 to 78 compulsory credits; 42 elective credits; and an elective specific programme worth 2 to 18 credits. Students can opt to do a thesis or dissertation project (30 credits).

The private University of Stanford, located in California near Palo Alto, unlike the vast majority of USA universities, operates on a quarter system instead of two semesters per year. Its School of Humanities and Sciences offers a Major in Communication. The Bachelor's degree's degree consists of 65 credits, divided into five main modules: 1 in statistics, 4 elective modules and no more than 10 elective modules outside the school. There are no tracks, but students can specialise through the choice of elective modules in the communication field. The modules last approximately three years.

The University of Wisconsin-Madison is a public university that offers Majors in Communication and in Journalism. The first programme offers two possible mentions, "Communication Science and Rhetorical Studies" and "Radio, Television and Film." To earn the Bachelor's degree students must complete 120 credits, of which 90 must be of "general education" and 30, divided into 10 modules, specific to the Major. The major in Journalism, offered by the School of Journalism and Mass Communication (created in 1905) has two tracks: "Journalism" and "Strategic Communication". This requires 120 credits, but the 90 "General Education" credits must include 21 credits in Social Sciences,

while 30 the major-specific credits must include 8 or 9 track-specific credits. The duration of the courses, as in other American universities, is about three years.

The private University of Pennsylvania (UPenn) belongs to the prestigious Ivy League. UPenn offers a Bachelor in Communication with twelve mentions. To earn the certificate, students must pass 34 courses, of which at least 14 must be part of the Major. The curriculum conceives the study of communication as an interdisciplinary area that includes history, psychology, sociology, political science and economics, among others. Thus, the curriculum studies the media, communication and contemporary culture in their social, political and economic context.

The University of California - Los Angeles (UCLA) operates on a quarter system (4 quarters rather than two semesters) and "units", rather than credits. Most courses count as one unit, equivalent to 3 hours per week, so a unit of UCLA is equivalent to 3 credits in other universities. UCLA offers a Major in Communication. Students can focus on mass communication, interpersonal communication, technology and digital communication systems and politics. For the Bachelor's degree, students need 65 units, of which a minimum of 45 must come seven introductory courses and 10 advanced courses in different disciplines.

The University of California-Berkeley offers a Major in Media Studies with a theoretical and interdisciplinary vocation and an analytical and historical approach. Its mission is "developing in students the ability to assess the roles and impact of the major media on American life, rather than developing specific media production skills". To earn the Bachelor's degree, students must pass a total of 120 units, of which 36 must be specialised courses that delve into an issue, and of them, at least six must be chosen from disciplines not taught in the Major.

The University of Southern California offers a Bachelor in Communication and a Bachelor in Journalism through its Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. Journalism studies consist of 44 units, which include 32 compulsory courses and 12 elective courses. Required courses are based on theory and the electives are specialised in journalism practice. The Bachelor's degree in Communication develops over 6 semesters, or 3 years, and consist of 24 compulsory units and 24 elective units. Of the required courses, 12 have to be about fundamental and theoretical, 8 about research methods and 4 of practice in the school of journalism's own media.

### 3.2. Objectives and competencies

The analysis of the objectives of the 12 curricula of the Journalism and/or communication degrees of the eight selected universities allows us to identify 10 major curricular objectives in their teaching offer. Understanding the changes introduced by digital culture in the communication scenario is the most recurrent, together with the study of the fundamentals of communication and the production of informational messages in different genres and media (see figure 1). The objectives that have a greater presence in the sample of curricula are, from most to least important, as follows:

- **Digital culture:** Study the characteristics that define the so called digital cultural and understand the transformations this this technology has generated in the communication scenario.

- **Foundations of communication:** Analyse and understand the fundamentals of communication processes at the conceptual level and their evolution.
- **Content production:** Develop skills to design and generate diverse information content (in terms of formats and media platforms).
- **Media industry:** Identify the defining features of communication structures and policies at the national and international levels.
- **Critical capacity:** Acquire critical and reflection skills regarding today's news coverage, different media messages and production routines.
- **Creativity:** Develop the ability to create original messages, formats and communication projects that exploit the possibilities of each platform, sector or thematic area.
- **Humanist outlook:** Assimilate the fundamentals of different disciplines and fields such as philosophy, history and anthropology, among others.
- **Versatility:** Develop the ability to apply production routines from different media with solvency, rigour and professionalism.
- **Communication effects:** Understand the effects of communication and its processes in individuals and social groups.
- **Theoretical and practical mastery:** Assimilate theoretical concepts of communication and acquire practical skills to perform tasks related to communication processes.

**Figure 1. Main objectives of the curriculum (by keywords)**



Humanism
Versatility
Content production
Media effects
Digital culture
Theory and practice
Fundamentals
Specialisation
Media industry
Critical thinking
Creativity

Source: Authors' own creation.

Regarding competencies (also spelled competences), the examination of the curricula has identified the 11 most common competencies (see figure 2): basic knowledge, skills and attitudes that include both basic (also called key, essential or fundamental) skills and specific, professional and academic competencies. The ability to act critically, analytically and ethically is the most repeated competency in the curricula. On the other hand, communication skills (in general) together with the acquisition of self-reflection capacity, also play an important role in the study programmes. Academically, the need for student to know the basics of communication exchanges is highlighted. On the other hand, the development of a professional attitude, the development of research skills and the ability to assess communication processes are of medium importance in the overall curriculum. Finally, the programmes highlight the need to know the media structure, to develop skills to solve problems and direct and manage communication projects with different approaches and thematic focus. Teamwork is in this list of competencies with greater presence in the curricula analysed, but its importance is secondary.

**Figure 2. Key competencies identified in the curriculum**
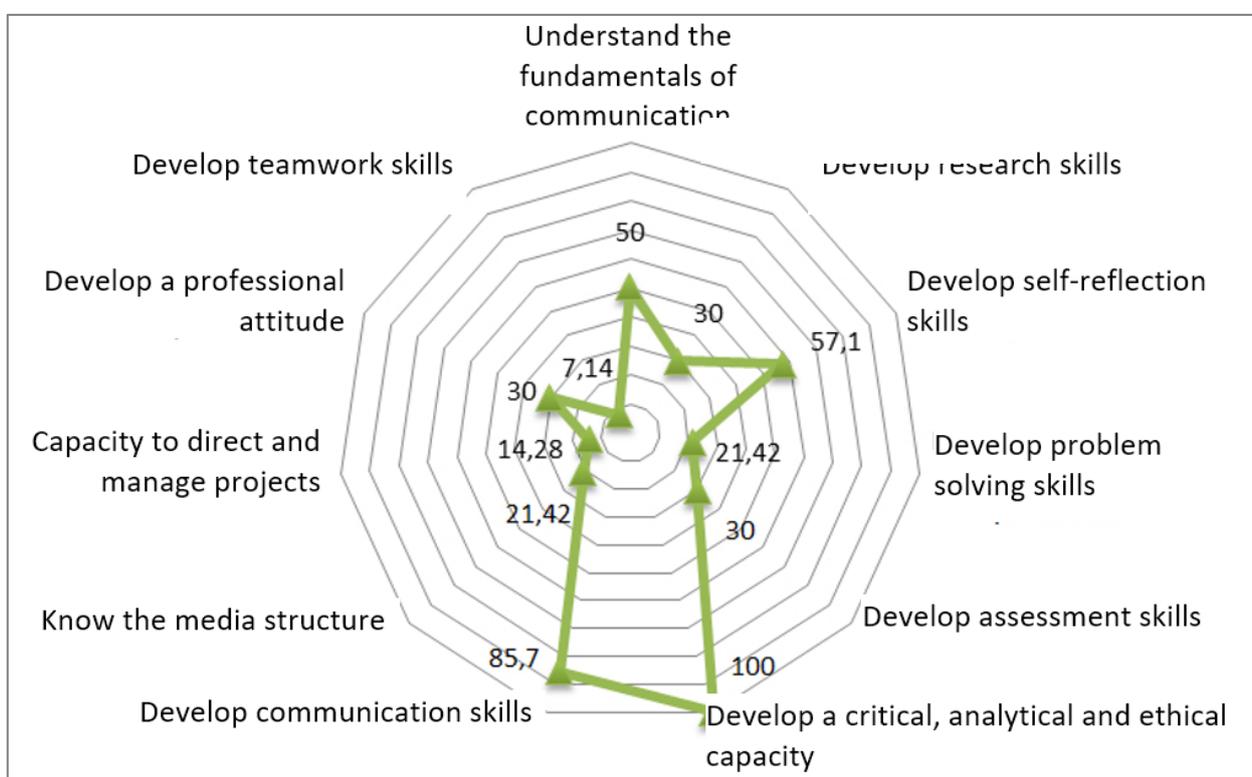


Source: Authors' own creation.

It is also important to note that beyond these 11 competencies that are common in the sample of study programmes, each university has a comprehensive and varied list of its own competencies that is therefore not shared with the rest.

### 3.3. Types of educational components: credits and subjects

The study has analysed a total of 542 courses/modules to determine their modality (compulsory or elective), credits and subject area. As Figure 3 shows, the offer of compulsory courses (399) far exceeds that of electives (143). This feature, which is shared in all universities, denotes a commitment to flexibility and at the same time, greater responsibility of the students to design their own academic track.

**Figure 3. Number of courses by type (Compulsory / Elective)**
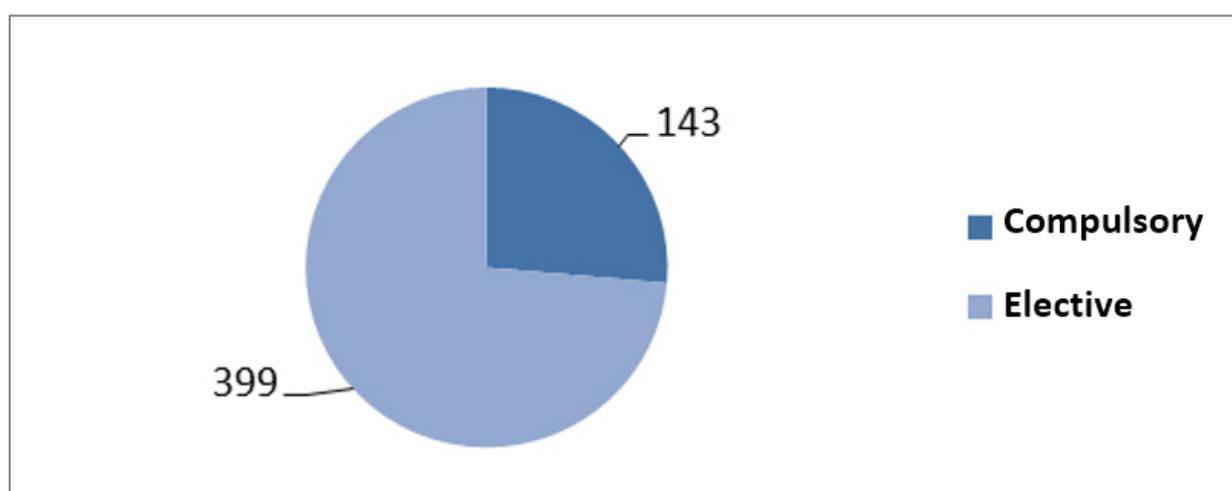


Source: Authors' own creation.

However, with regards to the modality of the courses, the study reveals that American universities tend to be much more flexible and limit further the number of compulsory courses. Thus, students can define their curriculum according to their interests and needs. This is reinforced by the trend to encourage students to take a number of courses outside the chosen subject area.

In Europe, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) calculates credits based on the time a student needs to achieve the intended learning outcomes. It is based on the convention that 60 credits measure the workload of a full-time student during one academic year. Meanwhile, in the USA, there is no unified credit system (since, as mentioned, there is no central regulatory institution). Thus, each university can calculate credits differently. However, as a rule, American credits, tend to measure the number of teaching hours needed for a subject. The large majority of courses are usually worth three or four credits. Based on these premises, it is difficult to compare two systems with different credits and different measurement parameters. However, it can be said that three ECTS credits equal approximately 1.80 of USA hour credits. In this way, based on a 2:1 ratio, we can make some observations on the number of credits. In this regard, as shown in Figure 4, most required courses are allocated 3, 4 or 6 credits (6 European credits being technically equivalent to 3 USA credits). In Europe some electives are allocated 12 or 15 credits, especially to thesis, work placements and mobility modules (which are part of the electives in some degree programmes).

**Figure 4. Number of credits allocated to compulsory course units (Percentages)**
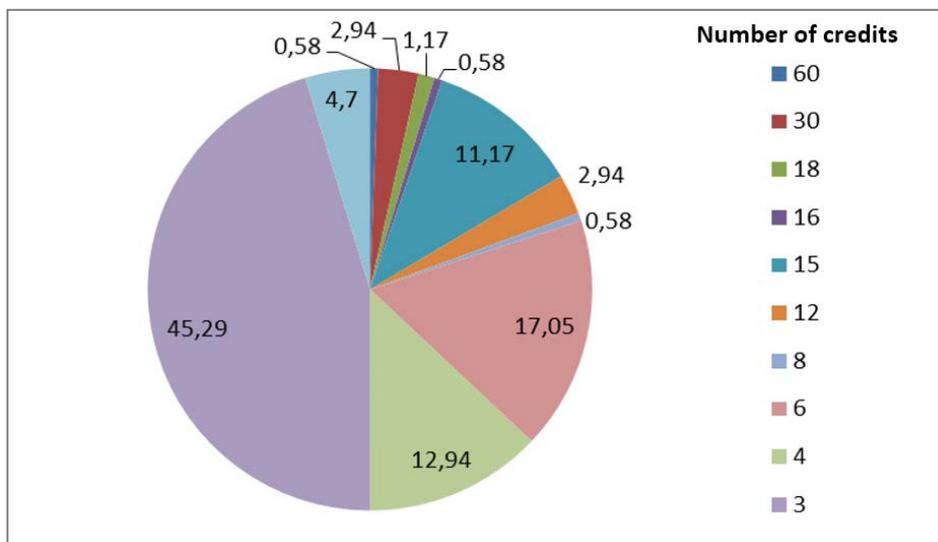


Source: Authors' own creation.

Meanwhile, Figure 5 shows the number of credits allocated to electives, which allows us to conclude that almost all of them are allocated 3 to 4 credits. This result reveals that in European universities electives are allocated less credits than to compulsory courses, while in America there are usually no large variations in the allocation of credits between elective and compulsory course units.

**Figure 5. Number of credits allocated to elective courses units (Percentages)**
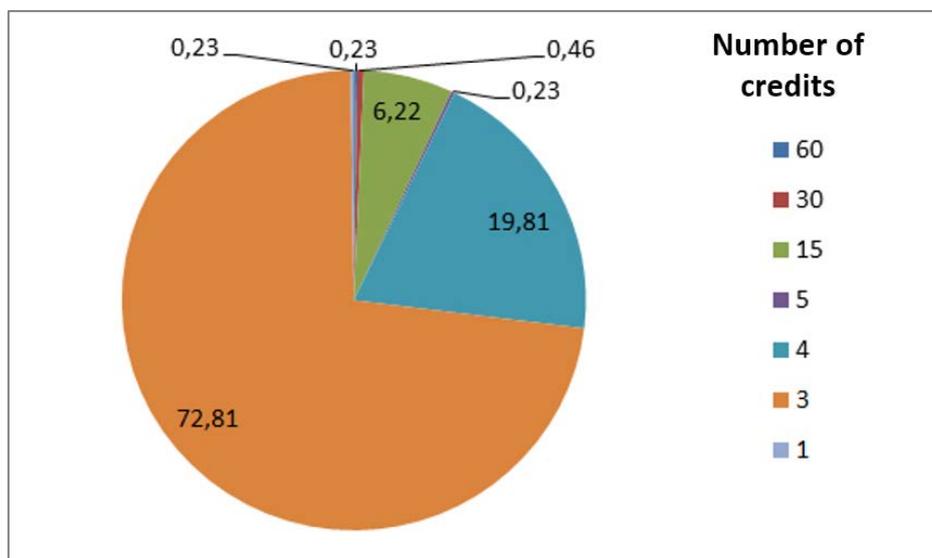


Source: Authors' own creation.

With regards to the subject matter of required courses (see Figure 6), almost 30% corresponds to subjects related to theory, structure and history of communication. These subjects along with research methods (with 18.18% of the total) and general knowledge (14.3 %) add up to 61.85% of the set of subjects. These data indicate that the compulsory subjects aim to consolidate a predominantly theoretical education.

**Figure 6. Subjects of compulsory course units**
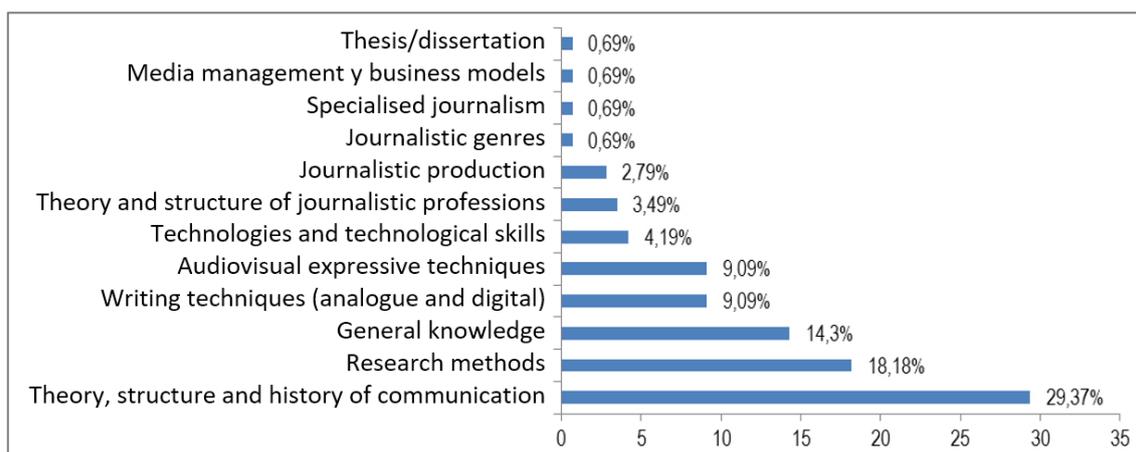


Source: Authors' own creation.

The subject area titled "theory, structures and history of communication" includes courses about classical communication theory, which aim to provide the theoretical basis of communication, such as "Introduction to communication", and "Communication in the social sciences", but above all curses that aim to cover the media landscape from a more sociological perspective, such as the module "Media, culture and society", which is present, with different denominations, in all universities ("Effects of the Media" and "Media, modernity and social thought", for example); as well as courses about the legal framework, communication policies, and the ethical aspects of communication (such as "Ethics of communication" and "Media, law and ethics"). On the other hand, a considerable number of subjects focus on digital culture and digital media, from the point of view of communication ("Theory of new media"), history ("Media culture in transformation") and sociology ("Media and information: analysis of digital culture" and "Navigating the media and the news on digital culture").

The role granted to courses associated with basic research methodology (18.18%) is striking, since virtually all universities include at least one subject about methodology in their compulsory offer, except for the University of California-Los Angeles and the University of Pennsylvania, where the number of compulsory courses is very limited to favour the flexibility of the curriculum, and offer these subjects as electives. It is noteworthy that the Communication degree of the University of Amsterdam devotes an important part of the curriculum to various general and specialised methodological subjects. In addition, the University of Stanford considers the "Statistics" module as a compulsory prerequisite to start the degree. In this sense, the University of Southern California and

the University of Wisconsin offer subjects such as "Empirical communication research" and "Introduction to quantitative research in communication", while the University of California-Berkeley offers "Research Methods for media studies".

In general, universities aim to give students notions of social sciences, from history to political science, from economics to psychology, through anthropology, literature and linguistics. However, it may be noted that each university has a unique and differentiated approach to the disciplines included in the catalogue of compulsory subjects. The European universities do not offer many subjects of this type in their catalogue of compulsory courses; while in American universities courses of general knowledge in many cases exceed in number courses on specific issues of communication. In the University of California-Berkeley, for example, students must choose at least one compulsory course in each of the social sciences (political science, history, sociology, economy, anthropology and psychology). From this set of disciplines, American universities privilege political science and rhetoric (and the connections between these two disciplines). Thus, the University of Stanford offers "The dialogue of democracy"; the University of Pennsylvania "The media in the 2016 election" and "Political Communication"; the University of California-Berkeley offers up to two compulsory political science courses ("Government and Politics" and "Political Science"); the University of Wisconsin offers 3 compulsory courses on rhetoric ("Introduction to rhetoric in politics and culture", "Great speakers and great speeches", "Campaign rhetoric and revolutions"), and the University of Southern California offers among its compulsory courses one specific subject ("Rhetoric and the public sphere") and a package focusing on expressive techniques related to public speaking.

In fourth place (with 9.09%) are courses on writing (analogue and digital) and audiovisual expressive techniques involved in the specialised production of informational messages. The other categories appear to be minimal: 4.19% of courses are related to technology and technology skills ("Web Programming", "Design of digital interactions" and specific computer skills), and 3.4 9% are focused on journalistic professions ("Understanding journalism", "Journalism in context"). Finally, it is important to note that thesis or dissertation projects only exist in the University of Amsterdam, which follows the Bologna process. Neither the American universities nor Goldsmiths-University of London establish dissertation/thesis as a requisite to earn a bachelor's degree.

In the case of elective (see Figure 7), courses on general knowledge and theory, structure, history of communication occupy almost 75% of the catalogue, with 51% and 23%, respectively, of the sample. Thus, as with compulsory curses, the tendency is to provide a more critical and humanistic view instead of training on technical aspects and practical skills.

The qualitative analysis indicates that in American universities, electives present high specificity on a set of issues that often coincide with the faculty's research work. Thus, there are courses on very specific topics such as, for example, "Animal communication", "Pornography and evolution", "French Cinema", "Japanese Cinema", "Soviet Film" and even sub-themes relating to very specific research lines, such as: "Globalisation and music videos", "Careful! Obscene content: political cartoons and comics and uncensored artistic mind", "The 100 days", "Gulf countries and the Arab spring: long live the revolution or the counter-evolution?", "Alfred Hitchcock's films", "Tired and mocked: the disease of humour and how it keeps us healthy", among others.

**Figure 7. Subjects of elective course units**
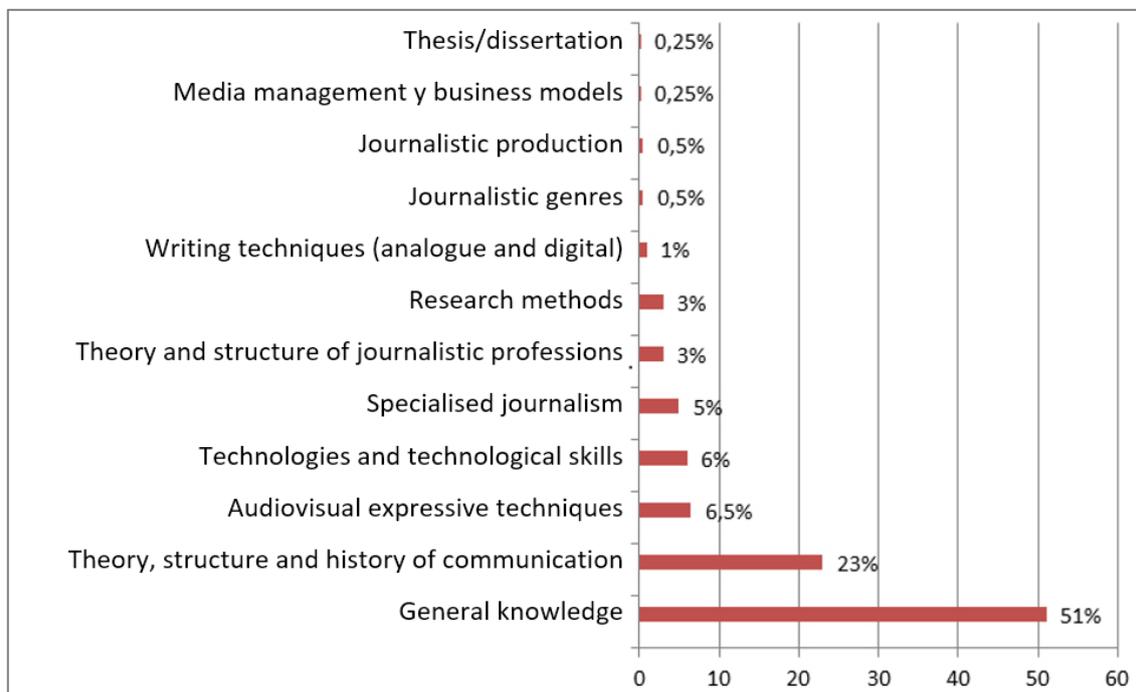


Source: Authors' own creation.

## 3.4. Trends in the curricular design of curses

At the level of trends, we confirmed the findings in compulsory courses, as in most American universities the number of courses about political sciences and politics in general is higher than the rest. The University of Stanford offers different courses that reflect on democracy and its operation ("Deliberative democracy and its critics", "Campaign, votes, the media and elections", "Psychology of political communication in America", "Political campaigns in the era of the Internet", "Control of information on authoritarian regimes", "The spirit of democracy"), the University of Pennsylvania offers "Communication and Presidency", "New media and politics", "The Arab Spring: local and global Representations", "Studies in media activism" or "Political Science", "Public opinion, vote and participation". Rhetoric is the other great pillar, especially in the University of Wisconsin, with various courses such as "Classic rhetorical theory", "Contemporary Rhetorical theory", "The rhetoric of globalisation and trans-nationalisation", "Principles of critical rhetoric" and specialised topics in rhetoric and public discourse". Among the courses on communication skills, public speaking, conceived as the practical application of rhetorical theories, dominates in its different forms. There are technical courses such as "Argumentation", "Negotiation", "Theory and practice of group discussion", "Introduction to interpersonal communication", "Rhetorical issues in communication science". Another interesting fact is that the electives if American universities offer one or more courses relating to freedom of expression, such as "The First Amendment, freedom of expression and the press", "Theories on freedom of expression or the press", "freedom of expression at work" and "History and

theory of freedom of expression". This trend is attributable to the peculiarity of the American constitution, represented by the First Amendment, and its importance at the social, political and labour levels.

Meanwhile, in European universities, electives touch more general topics ("Strategies of World Cinema", "Media, rituals and contemporary cultures", "Culture and promotion"). Sometimes the thematic specificity is greater, as in courses such as "Music as communication and creative practice", "Archaeology of moving images", "The city and the culture of consumption"). In all cases, however, they are more closely related with communication and culture than with politics. Expressive techniques are granted a striking importance and tend to focus on oral expression and aspects of rhetoric ("Speech and body", "Group communication"). Also important are courses on writing ("Report writing", "Writing"), technology-related skills ("Data Mining", "Computational journalism"), and methodological aspects ("Research and survey design", "Experimental research methods"). Finally, there are "classic" courses on specialised journalism, such as "Journalism and public affairs", "News correspondents", "Sports Journalism", "Investigative Journalism", among others, which account for 5% of the total.

Finally, a last observation refers to the branding of the courses. In European universities the name of the course refers to the discipline or the specific content ("Political Communication", "Media, memory and conflict", "Archaeology and moving image"). In the US, meanwhile, courses have more attractive names that sound more like the title of a book or a lecture instead of a classic university course, but sometimes they share very similar content "Bubbles, Booms and Busts", for opinion public; "Becoming a Watchdog", for investigative journalism; "Freaks and Geeks", for sociology of social networks.

## 4. Discussion and conclusions

The study has corroborated the findings of Singh (2015) and Salaverría (2016), who highlight the need to reformulate the curricula based on the transformations, especially technological, that have occurred in the field of journalism. However, the analysis of the curricula of the selected universities concludes that curricula should give more importance to theoretical reflection, the study of the foundations and communication processes, and especially to the critical view on the new communication scenarios. It is, therefore, necessary to design curricula that combine the technical or instrumental use of platforms and tools with the ability to analyse, contextualise and reflect on the causes and essence of the changes introduced by technology. The profile of the communication professional established in the analysed study programmes alludes to a professional who is capable of understanding and managing the transformations provoked by digital culture, capable of analysing and understanding the conceptual basis and evolution of diverse communication processes and, finally, a professional who is capable of producing diverse information contents in different platforms.

This more humanistic approach is also detected in the competences that have greater presence in the curricula and identify the ability to cope critically, analytically and ethically in the communicative stage as one of the key aspects. Therefore, the curriculum is characterised by its focus on a solid general education (in different fields and disciplines) and the capacity to research, evaluate and generate

quality content. This educational commitment coincides with Pérez Tornero's proposal (2016) to bet on digital and media literacy to ensure a critical and responsible use of media and communication tools. Regarding the courses, the study detected a tendency to increase the catalogue of elective over compulsory units. The importance of developing a critical capacity in students becomes once again decisive to the extent that they will have to largely define the track of the programme.

The analysis and subsequent comparison of the educational components of the degrees offered by the sample of universities reinforces López's proposal (2010) of conducting the constant review and updating of the curricula in the field of communication due to the particularities of this professional field. Moreover, to achieve this goal it is necessary to undertake a series of transformations that, as Roblyer (2010), Silva (2014) and Tramullas (2016) have pointed out, cover different areas of the learning process and, in this regard, the permanent training of teachers is a crucial challenge. The diagnosis derived from this set of universities in the US, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom reinforces the assertion (2016) that warned of the difficulty of adapting the curricular offer to the rapid changes in the journalistic industry.

As a conclusion, we could outline a decalogue with useful guidance for the design and configuration of future curricula in the field of journalism. What follows are assertions that should be taken as general guidelines and not as closed instructions:

1. **Theoretical basis and critical thinking:** The design of the curriculum should ensure that students assimilate a solid theoretical education based on concepts, theories and authors that enable them to understand the processes and transformations that occur in the sector. It is recommended to insert this type of subjects in the first modules.

2. **Enhance critical thinking:** Curricula should influence students to be able to develop an approach and a critical view of communication content and processes. Based on a theoretical basis, students must be able to critically examine the different subjects linking communication and society. This critical view should be directed especially towards the new communication scenarios.

3. **Generate context:** The different modules of the curriculum must, among other things, give students the ability to contextualise the processes and transformations that are introduced by technology.

4. **Understanding of digital culture:** The curriculum design must ensure the solvency of students to understand and analyse the changes introduced by digital culture.

5. **Mastery of technology and its processes:** Despite the speed of changes and constant upgrades in technology, it is recommended that curricula grant great prominence to the technical or instrumental management platforms and tools. Student shall be trained within the framework of different courses, with the main tools of the media sector. In this regard, the curriculum will cover the use of specific software applications and devices together with the understanding of a process that can be applicable in the future to other devices.

6. **Content production:** The curriculum should ensure that students are trained in the design, production and distribution of diverse informative contents for different media platforms. To do this, it is recommended that the curricula include practice modules that allow students to design and create messages from a transmedia logic.

7. **The importance of ethics:** the curricular offer must, through autonomous and transversal modules, confer a decisive role to the ethical component.

8. **The need for digital and media literacy:** The so-called media literacy plays a crucial role in the training of students and, thus, in curricular design of the degree programmes. The aim is to promote a critical and responsible use of communication processes, especially in the digital ecosystem of the new media.

9. **Increase of electives:** One of the trends identified in the study is the increase in the number of electives offered as part of the curriculum. Thus, the tendency is to generate more specialised thematic profiles and to require greater capacity and autonomy from students in the construction of their curricular track.

10. **Constantly updated curricula:** The speed of the changes in the industry demand great flexibility in the curricula to adapt to changes in the industry. This raises the need to continuously review the contents of the curricula. Similarly, the retraining of teachers becomes a very important goal.

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