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Conflict transformation through peace journalism in Colombia

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Abstract

Colombia is a country of contradictions. But perhaps the world saw its political polarisation reach its peak during the 2016 plebiscite to ratify the peace process where the "no" vote – opposed to a peace deal between the government and Colombia's largest guerrilla group, FARC (Colombian revolutionary armed forces) - obtained a slight majority (Telesur, 26 June, 2017). The dramatic vote brought to light some of the country's innermost socio-cultural conflicts: discussions on women's and sexual diversity rights, as well as indigenous, farmers' and afro-Colombian rights. The peace deal clause on allowing former FARC members to run for public office also brought back historical discussions on intolerance toward political diversity (Alerta Digital, 2016). While it is uncertain whether the updated peace process (ratified after the vote) (El País, 2016) will bring long-lasting peace to the country, journalists have an important role to play in conflict transformation as agents of peace. By portraying a pluralism of voices and following victim restitution processes closely, the Colombian media can play a positive role in this transition. Peace journalism aims to take a political stance on moral grounds when it comes to reporting on conflict. The peace process with FARC has brought international interest to Colombia and opened the airwaves to different conflict actors to speak out. In this panorama, peace journalism can flourish, presenting an opportunity for the country's conflict transformation phase.

Introduction: Colombia's media freedom panorama

The Colombian media has a recent history of censorship. In 1996, nine out of 10 stories were produced by two of the country's most powerful commercial families (Castillo, 2000). Colombian journalism is still recovering from a systematic series of blows that marked its history forever. During the years of narco-violence in the 1980s and 1990s, most journalists trying to report on the illicit drug trade became the targets of criminal organisations such as the Medellin Cartel, headed by Pablo Escobar, as well as of militias such as FARC (Colombian revolutionary armed forces) and later of the AUC (Colombian united self-defence forces) (Caballero, 2000), once the country's largest paramilitary army (Arias, 1995). Some of the saddest cases of suppression of freedom of speech in Colombia were the assassination of editor and publisher of the daily *El Espectador,* Guillermo Cano Isaza in 1986 in front of his newspaper, and the killing of comedian and political commentator Jaime Garzon, who was gunned down in a street in Bogotá in 1998. Both crimes have been left in impunity (Caballero, 2000).

By 1998, Colombia had earned the title of the world's most dangerous place for journalists. As the fighting escalated throughout the 1990s, the media began to be used increasingly as a tool to serve the interests of different factions of the war (Caballero, 2000). The 2017 peace agreement with FARC, Colombia's largest guerrilla army, brought hope to the country. In addition, the country is experiencing healthier socio-political conditions, which added to the international interest in the post-conflict process, and creates the ideal scenario for peace journalism to play a role in transitioning toward peace. If done ethically, peace journalism has an immense capacity for conflict transformation and peace-building. With its history of suppressing, harassing and killing members of the press, Colombia's "fourth

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state" needs innovative methods for reporting that will be able to play a significant role in the necessary building of peace. This can be done by portraying the voices of victims, following the trail of money during the victim reparation processes and highlighting issues of stigmatisation and discrimination toward victims, as well as by having a pro-peace agenda. However, challenges lie ahead.

History of harassment and killings of journalists

The indiscriminate and systematic killings of Colombian reporters who dug out facts and investigated corruption contributed to an overall quieting of the voices of the press, as many reporters decided to stop talking about contentious subjects and several top investigative reporters fled the country in the 1990s. In their efforts to control the media, groups such as FARC would often kidnap reporters and release them upon the promise that they would report "the truth" in their view (Caballero, 2000). Colombians lacked appropriate coverage of the conflict. The absence of balanced and accurate information was detrimental for the potential of conflict resolution. Media scholar Peter Loizos talks about the important role of conflict coverage in terms of nation-building. Focusing on visual media, he wrote:

"Through photography, war becomes personal and comprehensible - more than just grand patriotic schemes and unintelligible statistics." (Loizos, 1999, p. 103).

The absence of conflict-sensitive coverage of the civil war in Colombia resulted in a vacuum in the communal consciousness that rapidly became filled with political opportunism. Colombian nationalist ex-president Álvaro Uribe rose to power in 2002 after unifying public opinion against FARC, whom he deemed the public's greatest enemy. With this, he was able to promote a military campaign against FARC, which resulted in large-scale human rights violations and killings of innocent people (Roche, 2009).

During Uribe's eight-year tenure, an informal war was also waged against political dissent and the marginal voices in the media, particularly the left. Using the national intelligence agency, DAS, Uribe's administration allegedly tapped the telephone conversations of reporters, human rights defenders and opposition party members in what became one of the most prominent scandals of his mandate, as reported by *Revista Semana* (2015). Uribe's popular mandate left a legacy that is now threatening the implementation of the peace accord with FARC. Major channels such as Canal Caracol constantly present Uribe's side of the argument by portraying the views of his party, Centro Democrático. These channels rallied against the peace process, land restitution for victims and the rights of the indigenous and afro-Colombian peoples. Their coverage avoids telling the stories from the point of view of the victims, and instead portrays them as "invaders of the land" during restitution processes. These channels also promote stereotypes about indigenous conflict victims, calling them drunk, violent and opportunists for taking part of peacebuilding programs (Llewellyn, 2015). The book "The Media of Conflict" talks about the implications of this type of coverage when it comes to achieving a long-lasting peace.

"In some circumstances, national news media coverage has had the effect of exacerbating conflict as a result of conscious political strategies by political activists…", wrote Allen-Seaton (p. 3, 1999).

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Peace journalism: an opportunity in conflict transformation

Since 2017, the country began to see hope for a more peaceful country. This feeling was aided by the development of Law 1448 in 2011, through which president Juan Manuel Santos made the first acknowledgement in history about the existence of a civil war in the country. This law grants victims protections under International Humanitarian Law (ABColombia, 2012). In 2012, began a second attempt for a peace process with FARC which attracted the interest and involvement of the international community, as Santos was eager to bring in foreign investment by promoting Colombia as a "post-conflict" country. As the peace agreements moved forward, mainstream international media such as *Al-Jazeera English* began to focus on Colombia (Al-Jazeera, 2015). This was an important change, as according to Allen-Seaton (1999), mainstream media outlets often set the agendas on the communal consciousness in the world's most powerful nations.

"To a large extent general recognition that a war is happening now is dependent on international news media coverage, and increasingly this means that they exist in a meaningful sense only if there are real-time pictures" (Allen-Seaton, 1999, p. 3).

Through this lens, it can be implied that international attention has the potential to produce positive change in conflict transformation in Colombia, particularly through reinforcing the acknowledgement of the conflict's existence.

The 2012 peace process and the subsequent agreement in 2017 also opened the doors to discourse coming from both the state and FARC for the first time in decades. An ideal role for the media in this context is to be the platform for both parties to converse and express their views to the Colombian public. This has the potential to influence the conflict for the better. The peace agreement allowed Colombians to receive access to the points of view of FARC combatants, which had been concealed for decades due to the group's anonymous location in the Colombian jungles and the violent suppression of their attempts to form political parties such as Unión Patriótica, whose members were persecuted and killed systematically because of their left-leaning political views. This political party was composed mostly by demobilised FARC members. These socio-political conditions can help peace journalism flourish. Moreover, in the current environment it is a duty for the local and international media to make journalism that helps build the conditions for long-lasting peace.

Peace journalism: The concept

Peace journalism, as defined by scholar Vladimir Bratic, is a revolutionary movement in conflict and international reporting that appeared as a result of the increasingly destructive nature of post-Cold War conflicts during the last decade of the 1900s. Ethnic conflicts, such as the Yugoslav genocide in the post-Cold War period caused many to challenge the until then sacrosanct ideas of press objectivity, which sustain that the media should never take a political stance. The term peace journalism became popularised when at the end of the 1990s, Martin Bell, a former BBC war correspondent, shocked the world by saying that a certain type of journalism should emerge that should no longer be purely objective. Instead, it should be engaged and attached (Bratic-Ross-Kang-Graham, 2008). In the case of Colombia, peace journalism needs to promote a pro-peace agenda.

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The ideal role of peace journalists in a conflict situation

In Colombia, peace journalism should highlight issues of conflict transformation, promote a cultural exchange among conflicting ethnic and socio-economic groups, and denounce and combat the discrimination and stigmatisation of those who have suffered the most during this civil conflict: the indigenous, the afro-Colombians and the "campesinos" or peasants. These populations are most of the 5.3 million internally displaced people in the country (ABColombia, 2012). As key actors in any conflict, as outlined in *Reporting the World*, it is not illogical to ask the journalistic profession to play a positive role even if it is political.

"The news is already involved, it is argued, as a factor in calculations influencing the behaviour of parties to a conflict, whether its practitioners welcome it or not. The choices are about the ethics of that involvement." (Lynch, 2002 p.6).

In the case of Colombia, both the national and international media should aim to portray accurately and sensitively the marginal voices that have been misinterpreted or censored for centuries. A 1984 UNESCO-funded MacBride Report, *Many Voices One World,* reminded the international media of its role in peacekeeping:

"… beyond national interests, there is the supreme interest of humanity in peace". (Carruthers, 2000, p. 27).

A pro-peace attitude by the media is particularly important if the country is to effectively move toward a post-conflict sphere. Despite the hope that the peace agreement brought, many challenges remain. New armed groups are emerging in the margins of the peace process, such as the right-wing Army Against Land Restitution (Movice, 2015). One of the main issues in the Colombian conflict has been the lack of accurate historical accounts about what has happened during the 50 years of the conflict. This has been in part due to the harassment and killings of reporters who touched the subject of the war. There are particular gaps in Colombia's official history about the role of the government in the war and its historical collaboration with paramilitary armies and narco-traffic groups. Reporting on these issues is of utmost importance. Lynch (2002, p. 11) outlined the important role of the media when he wrote:

"… every time a reporter reports the facts, it adds another layer to the collective understanding of how reporters are likely to report similar facts in the future. That understanding in turn feeds into the actions of parties to a conflict, concerned to hold the public's interest on their own terms and prepared to calibrate their policies in order to do so". Lynch (2002, p. 11).

The peace agreement and the international interest it brought to Colombia may be the shield Colombian reporters had been missing in the past. Instances of adequate historical recollection are beginning to take place in areas of Colombia in which the fighting has subsided. In Trujillo, a town in Valle del Cauca that rose to public notoriety for the terrible massacres that took place there throughout the 1980s, a victims' association named AFAVIT, created a museum to honour their lost love ones (AFAVIT, 2010). Their efforts are joined by national initiatives that seek to honour the memories of survivors, such as the Centro Nacional de Memoría Histórica. In today's context, the survivors have gone from being casualty numbers that the national audiences had grown insensitive to, into becoming actors of change. However well or badly, the media at a national level is beginning to cover issues about the peace

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process, land restitution and victim reparation (El Tiempo, 2014). This is a positive development considering the decades-long denial that a civil conflict was taking place.

Trujillo, Valle del Cauca, Colombia. Photo by: Maria Assaf. January, 2015.

Memorial tree for assassinated community leader Alba Mery Chilito in the AFAVIT (Association of family members of the Trujillo victims). Photo by: Maria Assaf. January, 2015.

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Ossuaries of victims of the Trujillo massacres in the AFAVIT foundation. Photo by: Maria Assaf. January, 2015.

The ideal role of Colombian peace journalists during the post-conflict process is also to make sure that the government complies with International Humanitarian Law when it comes to delivering restitution aid and implementing adequate conflict transformation programs. Some positive signs in the direction of a conflict reporting renaissance in Colombia can be seen in the coverage made by *Vice Colombia*. Owned by *HBO*, this magazine chain ran by Canadian editors has taken a special interest in Colombia's peace process. One of its products is the magazine *Pacifista* (Pacifista, 2015)*.* In one of its editions, the publication featured interviews with Colombians from all walks of life and social classes, from campesinos to businessmen. They were asked what they thought about peace. Their responses showed people who were tired of the fighting and of expressing hatred toward any specific groups such as FARC combatants. Projects such as these can help promote ideas that foment peace and unity around the cause of peace.

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Colombian farmer in Floridablanca, Santander. Photo by: Maria Assaf. December 2014.

Political movements also emerged as part of this renaissance of pro-peace voices. After the agrarian strikes of 2013, several Colombian peasant political organisations formed, realising that power lies in unity. This led to a greater awareness of rural culture, promoted and shared through radio stations in former guerrilla strongholds such as the town Natagaima, in the south of Tolima. Community radio in many of these areas has proven to be a way of uniting war survivors who are trying to maintain peace in their land by promoting positive messages that give hope to their community. Through these radios, the voices of Colombia's most marginalised peoples – the indigenous and rural inhabitants – can finally be heard and positive change has become visible. However, media outlets are still commonly seen as tools for the elites. *Vice Colombia,* is criticised for defending Santos' pro-peace process agenda. On the other hand, community radios such as Natagaima radio are often stigmatised and considered tools of the guerrilla.

Conclusions

Colombia still has a long way to go until hard-hitting investigative reporting of its public institutions and historical war lords can take place without journalists and activists facing murder for their work. However, publications such as *Pacifista* are setting the basis for the country's emerging conflict media. The media in its ideal form should have a duty of care toward those suffering the most. While peace journalism should focus on positive aspects of conflict transformation, it should not leave aside its primordial mandate of unearthing the truth. This is a difficult task, particularly in a country where the public is apathetic and cynical after years of corruption and false stories shown in a monopolised media

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panorama. Ideally, media outlets should play the role of investigators, focusing on land and victim restitution and reviewing that it is done according to the law. A culture of instilling fear through violence has left deep roots in Colombian society, and it is common knowledge among reporters that scrutinising issues related to the war is a potentially mortal task. Security for journalists and community activists continues to be a problem and many people, especially in rural areas, still have to rely on silence as a surviving mechanism. Although peace journalism pioneers are emerging in Colombian soil, such as *Vice*, local rural radios, and community initiatives presenting the views of victims, many changes need to happen before these outlets can also play the role of being the watchdogs of the powerful.

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