

A large, dense crowd of people at a concert or festival. Many people are holding up their phones to take pictures or videos. The crowd is diverse in age and appearance, and the atmosphere appears to be lively and energetic. The lighting is bright, suggesting an outdoor setting during the day.

PEACE:

A hot potato for the
communications media

A study by the Universidad del Rosario concluded that the journalistic coverage of the peace negotiations with the FARC guerrilla by the communications media was biased, since it focused on two broad trends: One positive and the other negative. Its neutrality timidly surfaced in a fleeting moment of the talks.

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Photos: Alberto Sierra, Leonardo Parra

For more than 50 years, Colombia dodged bullets coming from all sides. Many towns suffered from the onslaught of violence, especially in peripheral and remote regions where the FARC guerrilla (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) had a strong presence: Bombings, extortions, armed seizures of town and kidnappings monopolized the attention of the public. The conflict became part of daily life and almost obligatorily, featured in the headlines of newspapers and the lead stories of television and radio news programs.

However, the negotiations between the government of president Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC, which began in Havana, Cuba in 2012, imposed a new agenda on the communications media and, along the way, public opinion. Peace burst its way through in the midst of the bombs, and, in the wink of an eye, took over the front pages of the papers.

Nevertheless, changing the chip has been a troublesome job. The definitive peace agreement which was signed on November 24, 2016, has become a kind of hot potato for journalists, who, accustomed to the conflict for more than half a century, now face the challenge of talking about the reality of the country from another angle.

The researcher Carlos Charry, of the Sociology Program of the School of Human Sciences at the Universidad del Rosario, and Diego García and Germán Ortiz, professors at the Journalism Program of the same university, analyzed the way in which the communications media covered the peace talks with the FARC and the implementation of the agreements. This joint project, based on the analysis of the three researchers, was undertaken by the *Applied Ethics, Labor and Social Change Research Group* and resulted in two studies: *Tracking the peace. The communications media and the forming of public opinion about the*

peace negotiations in Colombia, written by professor Charry, and *The media's coverage of the peace agreements in Colombia at the start of the era of [president] Iván Duque. Between pessimism and negativism*.

These studies concluded that, for the most part, the journalistic positions were biased and the attitudes towards this important national concern broadcast on television, heard on the radio and read in print journalism permeated public opinion.

“The media began to organize the information which was broadcast about the peace negotiations in accordance with two trends: One positive and the other negative. Journalism is supposed to be neutral and objective, but only in a few cases was it like that,” professor Charry pointed out.

To start with, the communications media tended to associate the talks, initiated by the then president Juan Manuel Santos, with the failed ones at El Caguán undertaken by the government of former president Andrés Pastrana between January 7, 1999 and February 20, 2002, which were remembered for the failure of the guerrilla group to honor its commitments and the government's cession of a no-go zone which the guerrilla used to continue with its criminal activities. Hence, the polarization between the defenders and critics of the negotiations in Cuba became more acute.

It is worth noting that between February, 2013 and October 2014, the tendency to be neutral dominated coverage of the talks, that is, the news items which were published were impartial, above all. During those months, the media faced up to their responsibility to public opinion and, without any apparent subjectivity, reported on the course of the negotiations.

Between November, 2014 and July, 2015, there was a shift towards a positive slant, an interval of optimism, which tended to favor the talks between the government and the

FARC. It should be noted, however, that this honeymoon between the communications media and the peace negotiations was marked by strong and recurrent peaks of negativism, caused by cases like the kidnapping of general Rubén Alzate in the Chocó and the retention of two soldiers in Arauca, at the end of 2014. That episode was so tense and critical that the newspaper headlines predicted – and sometimes even advised – that the talks should be halted. The same pattern was seen when the FARC assaulted a number of towns, for example, the clash with the armed forces in Buenos Aires, Cauca, where eleven soldiers were killed by the FARC.

In July, 2015, following several disagreements and cold spells, the communications media's support of the negotiations in Havana was accentuated, a trend which lasted until December 2016: Thus their neutrality continued to shine by its absence.

To a certain extent, this tendency to see everything in black and white explains the polarized result of the plebiscite by which the Colombian government called on the electorate to endorse the peace agreements: They were rejected by a narrow margin: 50.23% of the voters opted for “No”, while 49.76% opted for “Yes”. “Since the talks went on behind closed doors, when information about them was divulged, it was not sufficiently ample for the media to say what the consequences might be. Some media even published sections in which everything was a matter of choosing between “Yes” and “No”, as the titles of those articles clearly showed, as though all of the information had to be reduced to a favorable or negative opinion, without regard to the nuances, the many grey areas there might have been,” Charry explains.

And how do we change the agenda now?

One of the conclusions of the study is that, in the face of the challenges posed by the coverage of peace, some journalists have chosen an incendiary approach, professor García believes. “There are no longer wounded soldiers in the Military Hospital, there is no longer any fighting, so the question arises of how we measure the peace accords. Thus, many professionals resort to the clashes between politicians who do not agree on this topic,” he points out.

On the basis of that thesis, professor Charry thinks that journalism turned into a window on the talks with the FARC and remained indebted to its public because it did not give an in-depth explanation of the points on the agenda of the negotiations. In his view, its coverage focused on the “tug of war” between those who supported and those who opposed the peace agreement. Its audience was forced to witness



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Diego García believes that people look for information which confirms their beliefs rather than changes their opinions. Along that line of thought, if one of the communications media makes its political orientation clear, public opinion would know, beforehand, where it should look.



a tug of war waged on microphones between one side of the debate and the other.

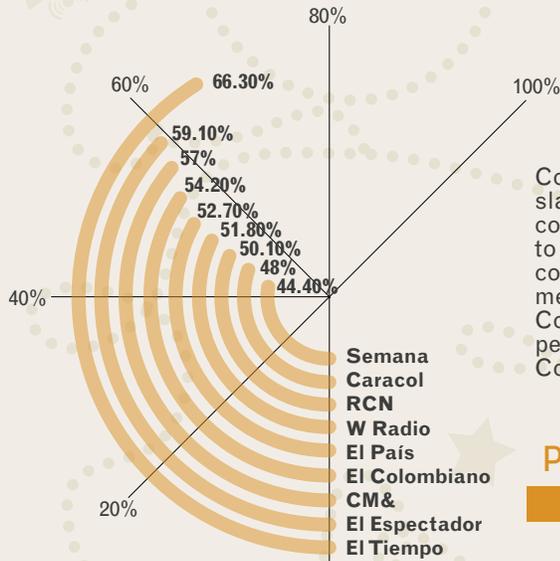
“When the information about an agreement on some point of the agenda was broadcast, there was no enquiry into what its consequences, good or bad, might be for Colombian society, but everything was focused on the view the political parties had of that agreement. There was little effort to consult opinions that were more technical or neutral,” he says.

It was precisely when it analyzed the themes on the agenda of the peace negotiations that the study showed specific biases. On points like lands, narcotics-trafficking and victims, the view of the media was slightly optimistic. In matters like political guarantees, electoral participation and others, the media tended towards a neutral position, while aspects like the post-conflict stage and the peace talks were regarded in a positive manner, with percentages of 70% in the first case and 60% in the second.

In the case of news items about International Humanitarian law, the media were divided between optimistic and pessimistic positions. According to the findings of the researchers, out of the 9 media which were chosen, the ones with the strongest positive slant were *El Tiempo*, *El Espectador* and *La W Radio*, while a negative slant was most noticeable in *Noticias Caracol*, *El Colombiano*, *El País* and *Noticias RCN*.

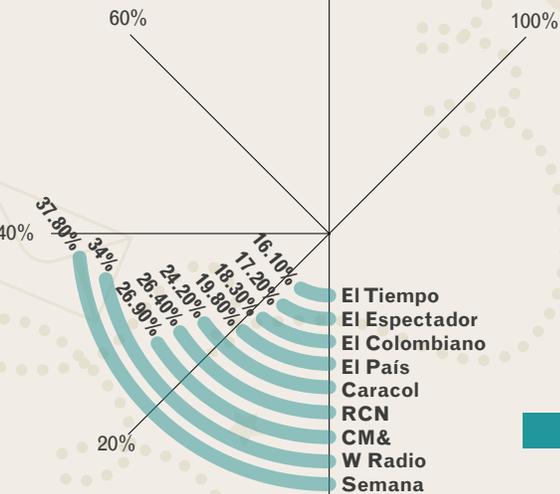
The weight of the language the media used

Another fundamental feature which the study looked at in order to spot the tendencies of the media was an analysis of

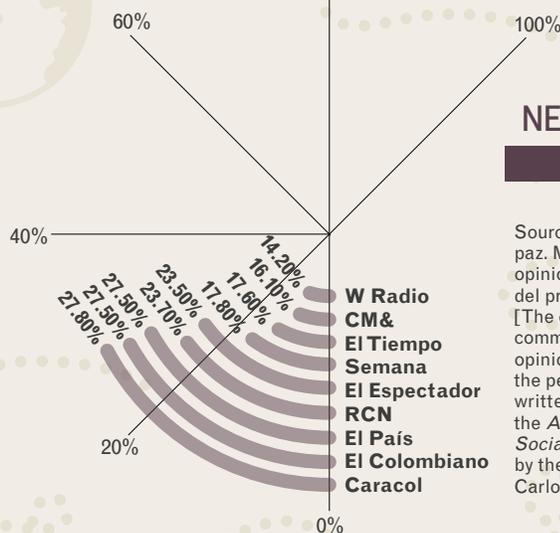


Comparison of the slanting of news coverage, according to the respective communications medium. Coverage of the peace talks in Colombia 2013-2016

POSITIVE BIAS
High



NEUTRAL APPROACH
Middling



NEGATIVE BIAS
Low

Source: Las encrucijadas de la paz. Medios de comunicación, opinión pública y el cubrimiento del proceso de paz en Colombia, [The crossroads of peace. The communication media, public opinion and the coverage of the peace talks in Colombia], written in the framework of the *Applied Ethics, Labor and Social Change Group*, financed by the Universidad del Rosario, Carlos Charry, Bogotá 2018.

the language used to describe a news item which reached the public. The study found that the word most used by the pessimists was “FARC”, while the one most used by the optimists was “peace”. In addition, the words “arms”, “no” and “Álvaro Uribe” (the former president of Colombia, who led the opposition to the peace talks in Havana) were used with more assiduity by the negative media, while the ones used by those who were positive were the words “Santos”, “conflict” and “yes”.

Both researchers agree that the problem is not that a news outlet fails to be objective and expresses a given opinion on a subject. The real core of the problem is that they do not openly make their position clear to the public.

“Objectivity may be a matter of acknowledging the difficulties I face and explaining them, clarifying that my positions are reflected in the information I publish. I am not referring to the fact that a certain newspaper or television station is affiliated to a political party, but the existence of a political orientation which is found in the editorial rooms or the editorials when they place an adjective on a headline. The effect which this has on the public is enormous,” Charry says.

This clarity would enable the public to be freer to choose the outlet which it prefers, adds García, who thinks that people look for information which confirms their beliefs rather than changes their opinions. Along that line of thought, if one of the communications media makes its political orientation clear, public opinion would know, beforehand, where it should look.

He also warns that the social networks are strengthening this polarization of the citizenry even more and that, in the end, it is difficult for the consumer to avoid a biased account of the news or find a true neutrality.

“There is a concept which is known as the filter bubble. That is, if we turn to Twitter and Facebook for information, the algorithms those networks use make an effort to ensure that contents which ratify our preferences reach us. Thus, it is very difficult for us to accede to information that is different from the kind we like to consume. We wind up navigating around the same circle, we put ourselves into a bubble,” García remarks.

In the face of this panorama, society faces an uphill struggle. So long as journalism assumes the enormous responsibility of being honest with its audience, public opinion will face up to the challenge of filtering, discerning, contrasting and choosing in the midst of the avalanche of information which has flooded the contemporary world. ■