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
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 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

NEGATIVE BIAS

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.

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.