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When Reporters Make the News: Narrated Role Performance During Colombia's Post-Conflict with the FARC Guerrilla Group

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ABSTRACT


Based on a qualitative analysis of 1,462 articles published during the six years of the signing of the peace agreement with the FARC guerrilla group, this study examines the roles that emerged from the journalist's narratives when their colleagues made the news. Specifically, we seek to understand how they redefined and negotiated their professional roles to survive in Colombia's complex and unsafe environment. The results of our analysis reveal four emerging roles: (1) resilient watchdog; (2) savvy expert; (3) crusader; (4) and community-embedded. The texts examined also reveal how journalists negotiated the agenda-building, since reporters were forced to limit on-site newsgathering, consult multiple sources, self-censor, and deal with the differential working conditions of metropolitan and local journalists as a consequence of risk. This study contributes to role theory by focusing on narrated roles of an insecure democracy from an inductive approach. It further introduces an innovative perspective to boundary work theory, since reporters' boundaries have been challenged in new, often menacing ways, due to the world's longest-running internal conflict and transition to peace.

KEYWORDS

Role performance; journalists; Colombia; FARC; post-conflict; boundary work

With the signing of a peace accord in 2016 with FARC, the country sought the end of the longest-running armed conflict in the Western Hemisphere. However, some are still reluctant to leave the violence behind: 1,166 social leaders and 267 former combatants have been killed (Indepaz 2021), around 3,000 fighters have taken up arms again, and hundreds have been displaced from their homes (Casey and Jakes 2019). Other left-wing guerrilla groups (ELN, FARC and EPL dissidents, and Gaitanistas Self-defense Forces) and right-wing gangs (paramilitary groups) threaten peace. The fighting ideology has dissipated and lost an appeal over time, mainly due to the involvement of the Mafia and drug traffickers. As the in-fighting to control cocaine-producing areas and drug routes continue, the hope for a stable and lasting peace in Colombia becomes more distant. Currently, the institutions guaranteeing Colombians' necessities and maintaining the public order have proven ineffective. Overall, Colombian conflicts have left a trail of more than 9 million victims, including one million murdered and eight million forcefully displaced (Unidad de Víctimas 2021).

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In addition, journalists in Colombia find themselves walking a treacherous path within this chilling scenario. According to the Foundation for Press Freedom - FLIP (2020), 162 reporters were assassinated over their reporting from 1938 to 2020. The latest victims were Abelardo Lis, an indigenous journalist murdered while covering public order issues in Cauca on August 13, 2020, and Felipe Guevara, a court reporter allegedly killed by gang members on December 23, 2020. Another 3,398 reporters have made the news as victims of a wide range of attacks over the last 16 years (FLIP 2021). Given the above, it should not surprise that Colombia ranks 130th out of 180 countries in press freedom. It is “one of the Western Hemisphere’s most dangerous countries for journalists” (Reporters Without Borders 2020). Moreover, dozens of corrupt officials and criminal organizations seek to curb reporters’ work.

For most Colombian journalists, security issues affect their daily work. Metropolitan and regional journalists endure pressures such as editorial constraints, intimidation via social media, source and advertising dependencies, and judicial harassment (Barrios and Miller 2020). Authors have even drawn up a profile of the journalists who are most at risk in Colombia: “men who work at radio stations, cover daily news as reporters, have 0–11 years of professional experience, and speak about socio-structural problems and the actions of political and economic elites of power” (Garcés and Arroyave 2017, 14). In pursuit of a safe work environment, news media carefully curate the informative agenda topics, reframe the stories, and handpick the journalists’ information sources.

A fearful and threatened press creates severe consequences for democracy and society: existential threats to reporters prevent the public from getting first-hand knowledge of the conflicts, affecting journalism quality (Høiby and Ottosen 2019). In Colombia, where the havoc of war is omnipresent, anti-press violence has become a tool to maintain the brutal insurgency deeply rooted in the country (Charles 2020). Moreover, decades of violence against reporters for “stepping out of line” has significantly diminished proper journalistic ethics and might have engraved a permanent trail on the journalistic practice.

However, society’s expectations of journalists’ role performance remain high. A “good” practice here may be laden with a series of contradictory prospects: to maintain a vital role in the pursuit of peace while keeping themselves safe without much support from the Government; to keep their autonomy while receiving editorial pressures, judicial harassment, and intimidation via social media; to maintain an optimistic view of the future of the country; and to support government initiatives while self-censoring sensitive topics. Additionally, voices from civil society are calling for their assistance in the joint effort to reconstruct the collective memory of the conflict by narrating historical events that had remained obscured by the war dynamics and communicating the victims’ side of the stories. They are urged to oversee the processes and unveil some rigorously investigated evidence of the crimes mourned by the country.

These expectations put tremendous pressure on journalists’ practice, forcing them to battle over their professional roles to a greater extent than they usually would. According to Hanitzsch and Vos (2017), four distinct analytical categories can be defined: (1) normative, (2) cognitive, (3) practiced, and (4) narrated. Scholars have widely studied these professional roles by focusing on journalists’ beliefs about society’s expectations of them (Christians et al. 2009; Donsbach 2012; McQuail 2000); reporters’ aspirations, ambitions, and professional goals (Löffelholz et al. 2003; Schudson 2001; Shoemaker and Reese 2013); or their behavior and the evidence of the roles in news content (Mellado 2015;

Mellado and Van Dalen 2014; Skovsgaard et al. 2013; Van Dalen, de Vreese, and Albæk 2012). However, studies that explore the subjective perceptions and reflections that journalists share with the public — the narrated roles — are scarce. Therefore, this study contributes to the narrated role theory (No. 4 above) by addressing journalists' distinctive roles amid this unsafe environment.

Carlson (2016) states that journalists establish the legitimacy of their practice through social-relational dynamics. Reporters alone cannot build or reshape their profession's boundaries; it is a process involving various social actors. Hence, we believe much can be found about their narrated role performance and how they establish such boundaries by analyzing, through an inductive approach, the news pieces they wrote about their colleagues and shared with their audiences.

As such, this case study sought to understand how Colombian journalists redefined and negotiated their roles in public opinion during the six years surrounding the negotiation to end the armed conflict with FARC. Our goal was to describe in detail for the first time, the journalistic roles that emerged from the news pieces they wrote about their colleagues and shared with their audiences. In those texts, they shared their reflections, observations, and sometimes their critique about their practice and their colleagues' work with a broader audience, mainly when their safety, integrity, or reputation were under siege. Despite the importance of these reflections about journalists working under tremendous stress, this approach has not yet been studied. This exploratory study of journalists' narrated role performance within a protracted conflict is one of the first –if not the first– empirical-based research of the modified patterns of behavior and attitudes that Colombian journalists have used to narrate the post-FARC era: a crucial stage in the country's history.

When Journalists' Roles are Put into Words

Roles are about expectations, behavior patterns, attitudes, and values that guide us in certain social situations while performing a given task (Montgomery 1998; Polzer 2015; Turner 1990). In the specific case of journalism, Hanitzsch (2019) defines roles as “the way journalists perceive, articulate, and enact generalized expectations as to how journalism is serving society, both in normative and descriptive terms” (1). The concept refers to the compilation of normative and cognitive beliefs that guide journalists and through which they put these models into practice. That means that roles are flexible, context-dependent, and change according to given social circumstances, which is why studying the roles that emerged from the work of Colombian journalists amid the violence and pressures from powerful social actors becomes crucial.

Roles are constructed within discourse, continually (re)created, (re)interpreted, appropriated, and contested in discussions among journalists, other professionals of the field, and the broader society (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). They are taught during a reporter's training at universities and in newsrooms and negotiated with audiences in the different public spaces. Scholars have mainly approached the study of roles from two analytic levels: (1) role orientation: the institutional values, attitudes, and beliefs about journalism and their place in society (Belair-Gargnon, Zamith, and Holton 2020; Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez 2018; Tandoc and Peters 2015); and (2) role performance: the analysis of roles as executed in practice or as observed and narrated by the

journalists themselves (Hallin and Mellado 2018; Mellado 2015; Mellado et al. 2020; Raemy, Beck, and Hellmueller 2019). Most of the above-cited authors have focused mostly on roles in stable democracies, leaving a gap in the study of roles in insecure democracies with protracted conflicts, especially from the Global South. This study aims to contribute to filling this gap.

Roles possess a sort of circular structure “where normative, cognitive, practiced and narrated roles are connected through processes of internalization, enactment, reflection, normalization, and negotiation” (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017, 115). According to these authors, normative roles refer to what a journalist ought to do according to society’s expectations; cognitive roles encompass what journalists want to do, their collective aspirations, and ambitions; practiced roles entail journalists’ behaviors: what they regularly do; and narrated roles relate to the observations, reflections, and narrations of journalists about their practice: what they say they do. Narrated role performance contains “journalists’ perceptions on how they can perform their role conceptions in daily work” (Raemy, Beck, and Hellmueller 2019, 769). It integrates the antecedent steps –normative, cognitive, and practiced roles– and emerges from a reflection of how journalists’ role orientations are carried out in practice (Belair-Gargnon, Zamith, and Holton 2020). They are produced from a reflection, in which journalists observe, interpret, and categorize their practices and put them into a narrative form. The process involves evaluating their performance from the perspective of normative and cognitive roles (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017), as it happens when journalists write articles about their colleagues’ performance, our subject of study.

Previous research has found a link between the roles journalists assume in their practice and the level of risk they face (Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez 2018; Prager and Hameleers 2018). Investigative reporters and journalists covering crimes, human rights, and dangerous environments are frequent targets. While studying the challenges of Mexican journalists in their insecure democracy, Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez (2018) revealed that watchdog or monitorial reporters are the most vulnerable to threats; analytical and change agent journalists face a moderate level of threats; while propagandists deal with the lowest risk. The Colombian context is very similar to the Mexican one in terms of drug trafficking, political corruption, and the State’s weakness. However, in the Mexican study, authors surveyed journalists to disclose their normative roles, while our research analyzed reporter’s texts during the negotiation period to unveil their role performance. The advantage of the unobtrusive research used herein is that it allows observation without the researcher’s intervention, unlike the survey.

Similarly, while studying journalists’ role orientations through in-depth interviews, Prager and Hameleers (2018) found that Colombian journalists associated the watchdog role with putting themselves at risk when, for example, they cover stories of corruption. Additionally, for these journalists, “in the context of war, it was not possible to stay detached as a watchdog but that active participation in the public debate was necessary” (8). In their study, reporters tended to identify themselves with the public mobilizer role, meaning they considered their primary goal was giving a voice to everyone, as opposed to focusing on the elites. They highly value telling stories of ordinary people by shedding light on their realities to mobilize the public towards a collective shaping of the country’s future. It would thus be worthwhile to compare these results with our research to see

whether the social mobilization undertaken by the journalists was similar to or different from their study.

The literature review above has triggered the need to broaden the scope of the role performance studies through empirical evidence of the unique aspects of the practice amid Colombia's long-running political conflict and the peace process. Therefore, it is worth knowing RQ1: What journalistic roles surfaced from journalists' narratives about their colleagues surrounding Colombia's peace process with FARC?

Public expectations, journalistic norms, and social and political context outline what journalism should be. These values shape reporters' aspirations and ambitions, which are later confronted and negotiated in practice. As Carlson (2016) states, the nature of journalism varies in time and space, meaning that it is "an activity prone to modification and variety within and across outlets, communication media, national contexts and periods" (354). In this regard, understanding how journalists discuss and reflect on their professional roles in the context of Colombian conflict may shed light on how journalistic boundaries expand or stretch when facing extreme and protracted violence and fear. Moreover, the specific period of this study –which covered the negotiations, signing of the peace agreement, and extended two years after– represents a significant timeframe to comprehend how crucial social and political changes could impregnate journalistic values, norms, and practices.

Furthermore, journalists negotiate their roles with other actors within society, including their audiences. Carlson (2016) affirms it is a mistake "to assume that journalists maintain control over the processes of meta-journalistic discourse, instead of seeing them as one set of factors among a diverse universe of actors making public statements that shape understandings of journalism and how this relates to practice" (354). Therefore, we believe that journalists can show us how they normalize or negotiate their professional roles and challenge the professional consensus and the traditional journalistic norms.

Besides, Hanitzsch (2019) states that the narrated roles can be analyzed "by extracting them from professional discourse" (4), as in this study. Discourse carries myths and tales about "good practice" and "good journalists," which are inherited by successive generations of journalists (Zelizer 1993). That is why our research aims to find traces of those reflections and evaluations around the journalistic practices in the texts reporters published to narrate their colleagues' stories around the end of Colombia's protracted internal conflict. In this sense, a second research question arises, RQ2: How were journalistic practices reinforced, negotiated, or normalized during Colombia's conflict and post-conflict with FARC?

Method

The literature on journalistic culture is extensive and predominantly uses a quantitative methodology –mainly surveys– to inquire about journalists' normative, cognitive, and narrated roles (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Mellado et al. 2013; Raemy, Beck, and Hellmueller 2019; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996; Weaver and Willnat 2012). Similarly, research has used content analysis of journalists' news production (Mellado 2015; Tandoc, Hellmueller, and Vos 2013) to evidence their practice and explore their role performance.

However, in this case study, we decided to use qualitative data analysis (QDA): "the non-numerical examination and interpretation of observations, to discover underlying

meanings and patterns of relationships. This is most typical of field research, and historical research” (Babbie 2016, 382). Following this tradition, the case was the Colombian journalists’ self-representation through their narrated roles during the four years of the peace negotiations between the Government and FARC, until two years after the signing of the Havana Accords. Due to the complexity of Colombian social reality, theories that come from other contexts, e.g., from the Global North, may not be sufficient. Thus, we preferred to undertake this study from an inductive approach, which allows us to discover patterns and social relations from journalists’ context and construct theory. This is possible thanks to the researcher’s involvement throughout each stage. Since patterns usually occur over time, the researcher’s broad knowledge of the subject must allow for a rich interpretation of the phenomenon.

Babbie (2016) mentions some advantages of text analysis: unobtrusive research enables the researcher to study social behavior without affecting it, that is, “learning about human behavior by observing what people inadvertently leave behind them” (323). The content analysis starts from a theory using a deductive process: the researcher’s gaze is focused. Meanwhile, hermeneutically oriented qualitative data analysis (QDA) explores the text to make sense of it in an inductive process that progresses according to the researcher’s growing understanding of the text.

We thus analyzed 1,462 news pieces and opinion texts regarding the Colombian conflict and peace process, each found according to one search criterion: the word journalist(s). These stories were extracted from a more extensive database¹ of 64,512 news articles dealing with the topics mentioned above, published between 2012 and 2018 in the four most visited digital news outlets: El Tiempo, El Espectador, Las2Orillas and Pulzo (Alexa 2018).

All four are national reach newspapers. The first two are mainstream media and the latter are digital native media. El Tiempo, a 110-year-old, family-owned newspaper, features the largest circulation in Colombia. El Espectador is the country’s oldest newspaper, with 134 years of existence. It has continued to circulate despite threats from different sources, including the bombing of their main headquarters by Pablo Escobar in the ’80s. In 1994, *Le Monde* considered it one of the best newspapers in the world. Las2Orillas is a digital outlet committed to independent and citizen journalism, published for the first time in 2013 by a group of experienced journalists. It seeks to show all stories and views from all corners, as stated on its website. Pulzo is the digital native media with the largest audience in the country. Since 2014, it has served as a content aggregator that contextualizes, elaborates, simplifies, and contrasts other national and international media publications.

While recognizing it as “a field in the making,” QDA theorists define this narrative inquiry as a meaning-making activity that shapes or orders life experiences, a way of understanding one’s own or others’ actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time (Chase 2011). Data analysis in this field means “to break down a whole into its constituent parts” and establish a relation between the codes or categories (Schwandt 2015, 57).

Paragraphs containing the words journalist(s) and reporter(s) were chosen as the unit of analysis for a latent coding process in which coders made overall assessments of the content (Babbie 2016). Excerpts referred to the roles attributed to journalists by their

colleagues and those containing evaluations or reflections on the profession's practice were chosen. They were retrieved using the *Keyword in Context* tool included in the QDA Miner & Word Stats software, which found common characteristics among the 19,090 paragraphs studied to analyze them further.

The procedure was as follows: the three authors coded the data to find the recurrent topics. Next, they reviewed and selected the paragraphs using the software's keyword in context tool. Associations were made to better understand journalists' safety by constructing a typology of the roles attributed to them by their colleagues on the news involving journalists. Then: 1) news pieces corresponding to each of the keywords were read through; 2) coders extracted the most semantically charged statements that were reviewed, discussed, and categorized; 3) each one of the coders grouped the excerpts that better represented a role; 4) after reaching a consensus, the different roles were identified, named and defined using the existing literature on roles and the Oxford Dictionary of Journalism (Harcup 2014); 5) excerpts that better represented the different roles were selected and classified to form the typology, and when categories were different from those referenced in the existing literature, a new classification was required; 6) the typology was validated with two journalists and two scholars of the field; 7) the social reality events that had motivated the journalistic stories, the context, was reviewed to better understand their significance; (8) finally, the texts were read once again to understand how journalists reinforced, negotiated, or normalized the traditional journalistic roles to keep themselves safe in the turbulent Colombian reality. The results of these analyses are presented in the following section.

Journalistic Roles During Post-conflict Coverage

This study shows that news production processes included four distinctive journalistic roles during the six years surrounding the signing of the peace agreements in Colombia. These were: (1) resilient watchdog, a reporter who highly values the importance of investigative, combative journalism, even if it means overcoming fear and adapting their practices to remain safe; (2) savvy expert, a senior journalist who becomes an expert in the Colombian conflict by extensively reporting about it from the field, and is consulted to explain, analyze or contextualize it; (3) crusader, a journalist who actively promotes and supports a human rights' cause; and (4) community-embedded, a reporter who prioritizes victims and ex-combatants perspectives, empowering and training them to tell their own stories to the public. Despite creating an emerging typology, described herein, we should highlight that these four roles frequently overlapped.

Resilient Watchdog

Within the news content studied, we could retrieve several traditional characteristics of watchdog journalists: reporters in the study confronted people in power and made them accountable for their actions, asked uncomfortable questions, and conducted extensive research in their stories. However, the Colombian watchdog journalists studied herein showed a distinctive stamp of their own: they rise above fear. The texts narrate that "the authorities persecute whoever dares to question them" (El Espectador, December 13, 2015); "the vast majority of the country's politicians are enemies of

freedom of the press and freedom of opinion” (Las2Orillas, June 7, 2017); and “freedom of the press does not exist and we reporters are still the enemies of the cops” (Pulzo, August 28, 2017). The texts also evidenced that when reporters questioned power on behalf of the citizens, they did it with a combative, antagonistic style. The truth they communicated and the evidence they reported tended to have the purpose of defending themselves and pointing the finger at whoever attempts to take away their freedom of expression. They believe “public people have an echo, which can incite others to lash out against journalists” (El Espectador, June 16, 2014).

Many of these articles described the difficulties of those delving into the arduous social reality of the post-conflict period. Journalists sometimes had to pay a high price due to the insecure conditions: their own lives. That was the case of the three Ecuadorian journalists from the newspaper *El Comercio*, kidnapped and murdered on the job by an ex-FARC group engaged in drug trafficking on the Southern border of Colombia. During a public event, “reporters from both countries agreed that the best tribute to the Ecuadorian reporters is to continue their work.” From the Ecuadorian newspaper *La Hora*, Gabriela Vivanco added that “journalists working in critical areas of both countries should feel supported and share experiences on handling information and the security protocols in conflict zones” (El Tiempo, April 14, 2018).

In other excerpts, journalists narrated that they were exiled from big cities, leaving everything behind. In many insecure territories, “reporters have been intimidated and threatened. Not only the newly arrived, but also those who live there.” (El Tiempo, August 29, 2017). Metropolitan journalists preferably assumed the watchdog role while locals were silenced, such as Francisco Pérez, a TV correspondent who admitted:

I am not going back there. Not until the situation is normalized. I have lived in Remedios for 30 years, but I have felt no guarantees to return. They [the criminals] have not threatened me directly, but they have insulted me and even threw stones. It is not just me; there are many journalists in the area (El Tiempo, August 29, 2017).

For many Colombian reporters, embodying this watchdog role means facing judicial harassment from public servants who want to silence their investigations. In a country where corruption is generalized, “a journalist snooping around is a potential danger. Nothing annoys a corrupt politician more than investigative journalism” (Las2Orillas, June 7, 2017). Journalists feel pressures coming from the highest level:

For example, one of the country’s worst enemies of press freedom, Álvaro Uribe, has mercilessly attacked any journalist who dares to criticize him, his political allies, or his party. The now senator has vilified María Isabel Rueda, Mauricio Vargas, and Yamid Amat for their criticism of Zuluaga for the Odebrecht case. He exposed Julián Martínez, journalist of *Noticias Uno*, to the country, calling him a “pro-FARC journalist.” He called Daniel Samper Ospina a clown. He also accused Daniel Coronell of being a drug trafficker’s ally and threatened to extradite him (Las2Orillas, June 7, 2017).

However, despite apologizing to Coronell² following a Supreme Court order, he attacked the journalist once again, calling him a “professional slanderer” (Pulzo, July 3, 2018). That is the reason why journalists continue to make appeals to public opinion. “The illegal surveillance and interception of several journalists is a direct act of intimidation against our democracy. We hope that the Attorney General’s Office will continue with its diligence and soon find the culprits. The country cannot return to the panic of knowing

that the authorities are persecuting anyone who dares to question them” (El Espectador, December 13, 2015).

Texts studied herein show that threats uttered by different social actors in Colombia could have a dangerous effect on reporting. Being an investigative journalist in Colombia could mean becoming a victim of a war crime, harassment, threats, or violent attacks to silence them. Despite this, journalists resist and adapt their practice to keep safe. In sum, in Colombia, we could find a resilient watchdog role that tends to fulfill one or some of the following conditions: being an exiled journalist; confine oneself to the relative security of large cities and learn to coexist with risk; or defend one’s reputation in court. Their distinctive qualities are resistance, resourcefulness, combativeness, adaptability, an unwavering determination to recover from misfortune, and a foolproof passion for the profession.

Savvy Expert

Many of the articles analyzed portrayed several senior journalists who, after years of reporting the conflict’s reality and witnessing its havoc, learned the specifics of the conflict. Their peers regarded them as experts in the field and legitimized them as reliable sources. That means they considered journalism itself could provide expertise. That is the case of Jesus Abad Colorado, a photojournalist often referred to by his colleagues as the “the journalist who has best portrayed the conflict in Colombia.” Since 1992, he “has narrated the evolution of a conflict that persists and is accentuated” (El Espectador, August 13, 2013). When consulted by a colleague about the role of journalism in the Colombian conflict, Abad reflected:

To report clearly about the war is difficult. If I speak ill of the guerrillas, they say I am a governmentalist; if I speak ill of the Government, they say I am a terrorist. However, journalism is to see [reality] with both eyes, listen to it with both ears, and make the information clear (El Espectador, August 13, 2013).

Savvy Experts usually hold leadership positions in news organizations and have a group of reporters under their command. Their seniority in the complexities of the Colombian armed conflict allowed them to evaluate the riskiest situations, seek news coverage alternatives, access reliable sources in crucial areas, and maintain security. That is the case of Juanita León, lawyer, and Director of the digital media company La Silla Vacía, whose opinion was often consulted about the risk faced by journalists while covering war territories. Speaking of a public statement of ELN guerrilla group that labeled some media as “functional to the army,” León declared: “This press release, coming from an armed organization with such a poor human rights record, makes us think twice about whether to send a journalist to cover what is happening in Arauca or Catatumbo” (Pulzo, March 30, 2017).

Some are also lawyers or political science professionals, but also practice journalism. The articles showed how their peers highly valued savvy experts’ opinions and their analytical and contextualized perspectives on what is happening in the country. They are often invited to public events as keynote speakers or moderators, e.g., Alfredo Molano, a journalist, writer, and sociologist, is frequently consulted on the Colombian conflict, anti-press violence, and press freedom. In the texts, his expertise is highlighted: “Molano explains in detail the various forms of colonization of Meta and Guaviare,

showing the rapacity and violence with which the territory was built.” The knowledge of “territorial anthropologists” as Molano is regarded as “essential to prevent failure in the implementation of the Accords and to understand what is happening in the territories” (El Tiempo, April 12, 2017).

In many articles, these journalists have also appeared as guest speakers at academic and cultural events related to the armed conflict. For example, in an article regarding journalist Claudia Palacio’s TV show “Mejor Hablemos” it was mentioned that journalist Salud Hernández, one of the guest speakers, “would analyze, along with experts, the future of the Government’s negotiations with ELN” (El Tiempo, December 5, 2017). Therefore, we have called Savvy Experts those senior reporters whom their peers frequently consult as sources of knowledge about the protracted Colombian conflict and the peace process.

Crusader

In the texts, we identified some journalists who became the news when becoming defenders of peace and other victims’ rights and spent their free time volunteering for it without reward. They have raised money or managed social programs, led campaigns, organized public events, rallies, or community activities. Referring to former abductee Herbing Hoyos’ remarkable career, their colleagues wrote:

Fighting against kidnapping became his life’s cause, and he has accompanied thousands of people through their pain. His rage and contempt for the kidnappers, especially the FARC guerrillas, is not only undeniable but his driving force for action (Las 2 Orillas, February 6, 2918).

Journalists committed to this role, who at times represented the victims of the war –that is, becoming an example while supporting them–, are acknowledged by the latter as comrades, leaders of their communities, and frequently received public recognition, awards, or other distinctions for their social work. That is the case of Jineth Bedoya, a journalist who was abducted, drugged, and raped in 2000 when she was called by a prisoner “for a meeting at the Modelo prison of Bogota to supposedly give her an interview about her investigation on firearms trafficking and disappearances inside that prison” (El Tiempo, August 8, 2017). The case involved state officials and the AUC paramilitary group.

Despite what Bedoya has been through, she has been one of the most resilient journalists. She claims to be afraid for her life but is still brave enough to face constant fear while continuing to do her job, currently working as sub-editor at El Tiempo. After making her case public, she created the initiative “No Es Hora De Callar” [“No Time to Remain Silent”]. It is a campaign that, “in addition to raising awareness [on women’s rights] and working with women victims and survivors of sexual violence, commemorates the National Day for the Dignity of Women Victims of Sexual Violence” (El Tiempo, May 18, 2018). The journalist states: “as long as we remain silent about violence, we allow them to mistreat us and violate our rights. Women have dignity, women are important, and we cannot allow ourselves to be humiliated by anyone” (El Tiempo, September 18, 2017). Her case, *Jineth Bedoya Lima and Other vs. Colombia*, is currently on trial at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights since the journalist has considered that justice has not been served during this time. In an unprecedented turn of events, Colombia abandoned the hearing, denouncing the lack of objectivity of the judges.

Nonetheless, being an active defender of human rights can sometimes be a death sentence for journalists. “The Foundation for Press Freedom, FLIP, warned of the imminent risk faced by human rights defender and Colmundo Radio journalist Ricardo Ruidíaz, who has been the victim of three harassments in the last week” (El Espectador, November 15, 2018). Ruidíaz has been the victim of several threats by ELN guerrillas and drug-dealing groups for exposing cases of child sexual exploitation on his radio show.

Hence, journalists who perform the Crusader role are intensely devoted to fighting for peace and human rights in Colombia. From their position in the media, they make intense and sustained efforts to foster social and political changes. The vocation of these journalists as Crusaders has allowed them to forge alliances with other organizations to support vulnerable people who may need as much security as they do. These journalists go above and beyond. Their commitment to the cause is so powerful and their motivations so profound that they surpass their media activities, adopting a proactive role by jumping into action.

Community-Embedded

This role of Colombian journalists, focused on communicating the victim’s and ex-combatants’ stories, was crucial for clarifying the facts and truths of the war. It was fundamental for helping to establish the circumstances of time, manner, and place where the victimization of civilians occurred: a step before the necessary reparation of victims by the justice system on the one hand and the State and FARC on the other. One journalist described the situation: “like ants, about 500 journalists crawled into every nook and cranny of this huge place to gather testimonies from actual inhabitants who are preparing for peace after being headfirst into war” (El Tiempo, September 25, 2016). Entering former “guerrilla territory” was of great significance. Reporters felt like “everything was new [because] no one had ever been able to be there before” (Las 2 Orillas, September 17, 2016).

After the signing of the peace agreement, the closeness of journalists to communities that had been victims of combat severity was a dominant feature, as the following story shows:

During a boat trip on the Sinú River, this farmer sings of his and his people’s tragedy, the same suffered by more than 8’400,000 victims of the armed conflict in its more than half a century of duration. These stanzas full of truth can only come from someone who has lived through the Colombian “holocaust,” from a person like Don Ávaro, who, if he could wave a magic wand, would put an end to the violence that has haunted him since he was a boy (El Tiempo, May 31, 2017).

Community-embedded journalists tended to live long periods in challenging, risky, and remote conflict zones or attend reconciliation acts in victims’ communities. Here are two headlines: “Chronicle of the Long Journey to the 10th FARC Conference” (Las 2 Orillas, September 17, 2016); “The New Life of the FARC Guerrillas” (Las 2 Orillas, September 26, 2016). They gave voice to the victims, farmers, ex-combatants, or locals to show different story perspectives. To do so, they spent time with the communities, consulted unofficial sources, and understood the specifics of the conflicted areas. Mostly, they wrote feature articles or human-interest stories. Here are two more examples:

While the authorities coordinated their work in the area, which was sealed off, people entered the home of Nonata Castillo, a 68-year-old woman who turned her home into a shelter. Journalists, humanitarian aid agencies, family members, friends, and residents all arrived there. (El Espectador, June 25, 2017)

The teacher Doris Mosquera, a professional psychologist, hired by the Government, comes two or three times a week. The teacher will say that these ex-combatants are ashamed of their illiteracy. It is common for them to walk to the classroom with their primers hidden under their clothes. There is a tremendous disparity between their expertise in the practical trades and their limitation in academic matters. (El Tiempo, January 20, 2018)

Journalists even tried to encourage active citizenship by facilitating more involvement of regular citizens in their stories. As a contribution to the victims' reparation processes, some reporters empowered victims and citizens of these communities to "use a camera to take pictures or make videos as journalists do" (El Tiempo, August 10, 2017) to tell their own stories, as a means of healing or catharsis. Reporter Luis Fernando Achicanoy trained kids from 8 to 15 years old –whose families had been victims of the conflict– as journalists. For him, "it is vital to not focus on the violence that for many years reigned in San Carlos, but rather on what the children, through gamification, could do to build their future" (El Espectador, March 21, 2015). In their articles, journalists highlighted how the community could "develop journalistic projects, of the kind that pulls at heartstrings, without the need to work in a media outlet, to be supervised by an editor-in-chief or have professional equipment" (El Tiempo, February 12, 2018).

The community-embedded journalist described in this emerging role addressed such topics as ex-combatants' lives after the agreements, victims' reconciliation processes, and the joys and struggles of their communities. These journalists tried to engage more active citizens by involving them in their stories through their practice. Therefore, this role was mainly established after signing the Peace Accords, more prevalent in the narratives beyond November 2016.

Journalistic Roles Within a Political Conflict

In a context as intricate as Colombia's during the end of the armed conflict, the practice of journalism leads to the ongoing challenge and adjustment of journalistic roles. The analyzed texts revealed that journalists reinforced the highest principles of their profession, such as their commitment to the truth. However, their agenda was negotiated and adjusted depending on the journalist's context for security reasons.

Before the peace agreements with FARC, they primarily had to report from the media's headquarters, challenging on-site reporting and balance since most of the stories used official sources.

First, the traditional selection of content for the news agenda was challenged and adjusted. The articles revealed prominent differences in reporting between metropolitan and local journalists during the six years studied. While the former made constant calls to their colleagues to engage in watchdog journalism, the latter tended to emphasize the need for a safer environment to honor the shared values of their profession. A local media director commented:

We admit that doing real journalism –watchdog journalism, independent of power– requires courage and a pinch of existential irresponsibility to confront power regardless of its origin: right-wing, left-wing, civilian, paramilitary, guerrilla, religious, financial, ethnic, or military (Las 2 Orillas, September 2, 2015).

Metropolitan journalists enjoyed greater freedom to include or discard sensitive topics in their agenda than regional and local reporters. From the journalists' testimonies, it is clear that journalists had to censor themselves in order to stay alive during a good part of the conflict and the negotiation of the peace accords. Many regional and local journalists were driven to abandon in-depth research and hard news production around sensitive issues to focus on soft news instead, a practice that was normalized:

Letting yourself be overcome by fear is a form of survival; some journalists in Montería call it "healthy journalism," journalism that does not disturb anyone, dedicated to praising and social photos. Anyone who has breathed the fear at Arboletes would know that this is the only possibility. (Las 2 Orillas, January 3, 2018)

Second, traditional journalism reinforces on-site newsgathering and the use of multiple sources in their articles. Nonetheless, the security problems journalists faced during the negotiation process, and even after the Peace Accords were signed, challenged their everyday practice and forced them to work from secure places with second-hand observation. These adjustments were, however, not constant throughout the entire period studied. During the negotiation process, a tense period characterized by violent attacks and pressures from both parties, the interaction of reporters and their sources was limited. They lacked access to crucial sources to balance the information provided by public servants, guerrilla negotiators, and other authoritative news sources. The practice of balanced newsgathering had to be negotiated, as shown here:

This gap in the coverage of rural areas was because the rifles sowed seeds of fear among reporters in hundreds of villages and municipalities. This argument is irrefutable because the journalist's life, safety, and integrity must precede any job. This forced them to report not from an independent investigation but an official discourse, either from the Presidency or a military source. (El Espectador, May 31, 2017)

On several occasions, reporters who ventured to visit the so-called "silent zones" ended up kidnapped, threatened, and even murdered. In the following excerpt, a reporter reflects on the implications of the ELN guerrillas' announcement about how a colleague's kidnapping was due to her strong and very public condemnation of this guerrilla group's war acts.

If this stance is accepted, only those who think like the guerrillas can interview them. The information about the conflict that would reach us would be that of ELN apologists. That would mean the abandonment of a fundamental principle of journalism: independence from sources. (Las 2 Orillas, May 27, 2016)

The generalized violence against journalists in this country has led them to normalize a professional practice where fear is widespread. The texts studied here show that journalists were well aware of the importance of reporting from the regions instead of narrating the war from the comfort of their desks.

In contrast, after the signing of the Peace Accords, "the time has come for national journalism to travel to the territories that the State has abandoned, such as Chocó. And

explain why the country's rainiest territory does not have 24-hour electricity and drinking water service. Without a doubt, Colombians will understand why it was not difficult for the FARC rebels to take control" (El Espectador, May 31, 2017). There is a sense of hope and change in the narratives published between 2017 and 2018 due to new possibilities of sharing local and regional stories from conflict zones.

In general, the accounts of how journalists described their colleagues' performance allowed us to reveal the tensions that a turbulent, conflicted context could place on their perception of professional roles. Reporters reinforced traditional practices, challenged them in light of risk, and adjusted them to fulfill their mission while staying safe. The texts showed a major struggle for power to influence public opinion among the warring factions and other social actors in authoritative positions. Meanwhile, journalists remembered that their "first loyalty is to the citizens" (Las 2 Orillas, August 28, 2017) and attempted to raise awareness of the most pressing needs of the communities and victims of the conflict by including those issues in their agenda.

Discussion

This study sought to understand how Colombian journalists redefined and negotiated their roles with public opinion during the crucial negotiation period with FARC. We believe this is a significant development contributing to role performance theory because narrated roles are a recent theoretical strand and lack more empirical support.

Furthermore, to our knowledge, this case study is the first to examine journalists' reflections in the context of a protracted political conflict. Unlike previous studies, we used an inductive method to analyze the texts. It allowed us to order, into a meaningful whole, the discussions of professional practice that journalists themselves chose to share with their public, making emerging categories spring up. Moreover, we believe the unique social setting in which the research was conducted has been a golden opportunity to study the narrated roles since the journalists worked under extreme pressure conditions and had to negotiate and challenge traditional norms and practices.

Our first research question sought to identify the roles that emerged from journalists' narratives about their colleagues. Results revealed four predominant patterns of behaviors and attitudes: resilient watchdog, savvy expert, crusader, and community-embedded.

Even though the watchdog role has been widely discussed by scholars (Hanitzsch and Vos 2018; McQuail 2000; Mellado 2015), we argue that it has some distinctive features in the Colombian context. Our data show that amid the everlasting risk journalists face, they did not stop their investigative work but imbued it with a combative style. We found empirical support for a relationship between being a watchdog journalist in Colombia and becoming a victim of violence, threats, and judicial harassment. This result is consistent with Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez's (2018) study on Mexico. It corroborates Prager and Hameleers (2018) findings regarding Colombian journalists' perceptions of the risk of being a watchdog reporter in the country. Additionally, texts studied herein reveal that judicial harassment became routine to exert pressure over the press. Barrios and Miller (2020) also noticed this anti-press violence and considered it a factor that triggered self-censorship.

Unlike the resilient watchdog –a variant of the traditional and well-documented watchdog role–, our crusader, savvy expert, and community-embedded roles emerged from the journalists' narratives while reporting the Colombian conflict as native constructs.

Regarding the crusader role, we found some interesting differences from previous literature. In their work, Hanitzsch and Vos (2018) mentioned that when journalists performed the roles of advocate, adversary, and missionary, their "participation is limited to the discursive realm" (6). Advocate journalists are often described in the literature as spokespersons (Janowitz 1975), campaigners, or "lobbyists" of civic organizations (Pintak and Nazir 2013). Meanwhile, journalists studied herein moved from discourse to social action. They lead, organize, fundraise, and coordinate civic initiatives to contribute to peace and human rights in addition to their professional tasks, sometimes to fill the gaps left by the country's institutions, such as supporting citizens' calls for safety and better health services. For them, the struggle is profoundly intimate because it is related to their quest for justice. Most of them seem to draw its encouragement to bring about social change from their personal experience as victims of violence. Our results reveal that journalists in Colombia feel their sustained efforts for equity in their guts, and their texts are overwhelmed with emotions.

Additionally, the community-embedded role unveiled some distinctive characteristics. In the narratives studied here, journalists normalized the priority of the victim's voices, but they went further: when security conditions allowed it, they immersed themselves within the communities to better narrate the stories of their daily struggles, thus challenging balance. A similar result was found by Prager and Hameleers (2018). They identified a public mobilizer role among Colombian journalists, stating that reporters found it impossible to remain detached during the war and therefore prioritized giving a voice to the citizens as their patriotic contribution. In a country where there has been a massacre every seven days and a social leader murdered every 72 h during the last year (JEP 2021), such a solid commitment to the community is essential since it reflects the journalists' courage and compromise to build peace. Taking sides towards a particular political or social party is a routine previously included in the literature. Interventionists (Mellado 2015) side with the people, interpret the facts, and include proposals or demands in their stories. We found that journalists even trained some community members in the use of technological tools to transmit messages. This empowered them. Our results are consistent with the shift recognized by scholars in the media representation of the Colombian conflict's victims. Henao (2017) affirms that from 2005 onwards, the victims are no longer hidden or portrayed from a sensationalist point of view. Meanwhile, Tamayo and Bonilla (2014) state that this change in coverage occurred in 2008.

Meanwhile, the role of the savvy expert was dedicated to understanding and communicating the intricate legal and social paths leading to the conflict's end. Although it may seem close to the analyst role (Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman 1972) in their intention to understand events, trace causes, or predict consequences, it differs since the analyst role emphasizes subjectivity and opinion. On the other hand, journalists in our emerging savvy expert role framed their stories within the information parameters and privileged objectivity in their texts. Future studies could verify whether these roles are present in other countries' news coverage when facing protracted disputes.

Our second research question unveiled the journalistic norms and practices reinforced, negotiated, or normalized in the articles where journalists were protagonists. Results

disclosed that balance is an unrealistic goal when covering a protracted conflict and a complex peace process such as the Colombian. Journalists had to negotiate their independence to access information, whether in the newsrooms or while accessing dangerous areas. As Høiby and Ottosen (2019) state, these limitations on the coverage of social reality could diminish the quality of journalism. In Colombia, these limitations differ across the country. The relative anonymity of big cities and mainstream media and a stronger police force with more significant presence and control allow metropolitan journalists greater freedom to fulfill their duties. They are offered security measures such as limited access to them and their telephone numbers in the media offices; sometimes, even the State provides them with bodyguards.

In contrast, local journalists feel more vulnerable because the media do not have the same organizational capacity to support their security. In the regions, people have more access to reporters both in their offices and in their homes. One common security strategy used for metropolitan and local media alike is not having print-media journalists sign their stories or TV journalists appear on camera when dealing with sensitive issues. The media assumed the responsibility of the reporting.

Yet, when safety conditions allowed it, local journalists were embedded with the communities, making the victims the protagonists of their stories, as mentioned above. Also, the texts studied herein revealed that the criteria of what quality journalism means are written daily, based on what reporters consider appropriate to best cope with the risks they face.

Furthermore, as Carlson (2016) notes, the boundaries around the profession are constantly rethought, redefined, and renewed. By sharing their reflections around their colleagues' practices with their audience, Colombian journalists studied herein legitimized the profession's boundaries and the acceptable practices, such as moving away from objectivity. Our results demonstrate how these boundaries varied across the six years studied, depending on the limitations, obstacles, and realities reporters faced. For instance, as the signing of the peace agreement drew nearer, we observed a shift in the narrations they shared with the public. The tone changed from fear to hope. Journalists felt some freedom to raise their expectations about their contributions to peace and social fabric construction, as happened in Burundi, Central Africa (Frère 2017), where reporters could widely express the community's needs through public radio news programs.

In sum, Colombian journalists in our study expanded the boundaries of the traditional practice of the profession to survive within this violent and demanding context. They did so by assuming a formal role in the peace process, confronting people in power, entering the territories, and giving voice to the previously silenced, empowering the victims, or actively advocating for their rights. The emerging roles revealed that journalists preferred to sacrifice neutrality and balance to side with the victims when faced with tremendous pressures from social actors in authoritative positions.

Finally, fear and other extreme conditions faced by journalists resulted in priceless insights about their job. Not only do these journalists reported the news while shaping their profession every day to meet the challenges of reporting on Colombia's post-conflict, but they also shared the concerns and sacrifices of the public.

As a QDA, this study focused on the reflections, evaluations, and narratives about the profession journalists shared with the public when their colleagues made the news. These findings may be corroborated from a deductive orientation in future studies. Also, it could be worthwhile to compare our results with other countries with similar protracted

conflicts, using a deductive orientation, and further explore differences between metropolitan and local journalists, considering its relevance to role performance and safety.

Notes

1. One of the authors created the database as part of her dissertation research by searching in each media outlet the words more closely related to the peace process (e.g., *conflict*, *FARC*, *accords*, *combatants*, *peace*, *etcetera*). The *Manual para desarmar la palabra: Diccionario de términos del Conflicto y de la Paz* [Manual to Disarm the Word: A Dictionary of Conflict and Peace Terms] (Corporación Medios para la Paz 1999) helps choose and specify the words for the study. Then, the whole text of each of the 64,512 news pieces was extracted to form the database, including media outlet, headline, publication date, URL, news section, and the complete text of the piece.
2. Daniel Coronell is a Colombian journalist and one of the most widely read columnists in the country. He has been news director of well-known mainstream media in Colombia, such as RCN and Noticias Uno, and President of Univision, the Hispanic network in the United States. Coronell has uncovered some of the biggest political scandals of recent years in the country. His watchdog approach to journalism has made him the victim of multiple attacks, forcing him to live in exile since 2005. He has won the Emmy Award (news), the Simón Bolívar award seven times, and the highest award granted by the Fundación Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano [New Ibero-American Journalism Foundation]. He has been Senior Research Fellow of the Knight Fellowship at Stanford University, researcher, and visiting scholar at the University of California.

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