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Conflict fields of journalistic praxis in Colombia

Kurzfassung: Die chronische Unsicherheit für Journalistinnen und Redakteure in der Ausübung ihres Berufes in Kolumbien speist sich aus vielerlei Quellen und ist nach wie vor gravierend. Aktuell sind es – neben den Indikatoren extremer physischer Gewalt (wie tätliche Angriffe, Misshandlungen, Entführungen und Morde) – in der internationalen Diskussion oft unbeachtete Problembereiche, wie mangelnde Ausbildungsangebote, unzureichende Infrastruktur am Arbeitsplatz, prekäre Lohnverhältnisse, fehlende Unabhängigkeit gegenüber Herausgebern und ein wenig ausgebildetes Verständnis der Berufsethik, die die journalistische Arbeit in Kolumbien prägen. Diese strukturellen Probleme führen zu qualitativen – speziell in der Konfliktberichterstattung. Aber statt Stillstand vollzieht sich ein Wandel. Kolumbianische Journalisten verändern ihr Selbstbild, entwickeln ein Problembewusstsein bezüglich ihrer eigenen Arbeit und gehen die Defizite aktiv an.

Abstract: The chronic uncertainty for journalists and editors in carrying out their professional work in Colombia has many sources and has been serious for decades. Currently – besides indicators of extreme physical violence (such as daily attacks, abuse, kidnappings and murders) – problem areas are strongly marking journalistic work in Colombia that are often neglected in the international discussion, such as inadequate training offerings, unsatisfactory infrastructure in the workplace, precarious wage situations, lack of independence in relationship to editors and a poorly taught understanding of professional ethics. These structural problems produce qualitative deficiencies – especially in conflict reportage. But instead of stagnation, change is occurring. Colombian journalists are revising their self-image, at the same time developing a problem consciousness in their own work, and are actively trying to correct the deficiencies.

1. An attempt to better understand the object of journalistic conflict reportage

The causes and thereby the actual beginnings of the multi-dimensional violent conflict that marks Colombian society today are deeply rooted in the history of this South American country. The often cited devastating civil war period in the 1950s, the so-called *Violencia*, and the subsequent rise of an armed opposition movement (guerilla)¹ against the established political exclusionary system (state)² in the 1960s, is certainly a decisive moment, but not the beginning of the Colombian conflict. Oligarchic power structures, violent suppression of social protest, as well as pressure to side with liberals or conservatives were already identifying characteristics of societal life in Colombia before the *Violencia*.³ To the initial primary conflicts, which reach far back into the past of this South American country, further secondary conflicts were added in the second half of the Twentieth Century. At its core, Colombia's internal armed conflict is the result of problems of socio-political exclusion, an extremely unequal distribution of wealth, the struggle for societal influence and participation, as well as for access to economic and ecological resources; these are core problems that up until today have remained largely untouched. Only the manifestation of the conflict has changed, driven by further developments and dynamics: newly arising violent actors (contract killers, paramilitaries and private security services), the drug trade and the resulting enormous revenues for all conflict parties, as well as continuing deficiencies in the state.

In attempts to conceptually grasp the current situation in Colombia, there is much debate over what terms – e.g., "fighting terror and drugs," "armed internal conflict," "internal war" – adequately describe the situation and thereby comprehend the political, social, economic and ecological reality in Colombia. There is no uniform terminology for the problems that confront national and international actors in the frame of their engagement in Colombia. We see that conceptions determine political argumentation and thereby legitimate actions from the use of the concept of "combating terror" (worldwide), employed to justify many actions that are controversial in terms of human rights. As well in Colombia there are such disputes over words, portraying the state as strong and competent to act (fighting terror and drugs), or weak and inadequate in its control of the monopoly of force (armed internal conflict), or inept and powerless to maintain the sovereignty in the state (internal war). Various concepts are chosen within the discourse on the Colombian conflict as synonymous, complementary, compensatory or diplomatic. A definition of the Colombian conflict must remain both open and flexible in regard to the country's social realities, and here I view the situation as a protracted, open, internal armed conflict on a scale similar to a

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1. The until now most important guerrilla organizations in Colombia are, for one, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Military Forces of Colombia, FARC) and, for another, the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army, ELN).
 2. The polarization of the populace between liberals and conservatives, which is characteristic of Colombia's history and is relevant even today, peaked between 1948 and 1958 in a civil war which is still referred to in Colombian history books with the term "violence" (*Violencia*). It was resolved by an agreement, the Frente Nacional (National Front), between the Liberal and Conservative parties, which divided power proportionally. According to this agreement, the two parties alternate in choosing the president every four years. A party plurality is avoided because all the political offices are divided equally between the two.
 3. For further information on the causes, origins and development of violent structures within Colombian society, cf. Palacios and Saford 2008, Palacios 2007 and Kalmanovitz 2006.

war.¹ This involves an accumulation of multi-causal violent processes – not only of a direct (physical), but also of a structural sort – that in their aggressive, multi-phenomenal and persistent form touch on or permeate all societal sectors of Colombian life. The foregoing discussion is intended to show the complexity with which journalists are confronted in their work in the conflict and which they must deal with and explain in the media.

Characteristic of Latin America's longest ongoing armed internal conflict is a confusion of difficult to grasp persistent processes of violence and changing constellations of violent actors and profiteers. The geography of the conflict displays several conflict centers that are not evenly distributed across the country and that are at different stages of development.

While previously no far-reaching changes had begun within the conflict and the underlying causal complexes, its framing conditions have changed constantly since the late 1990s – and with them also the object to be reported on, as well as the roles that media have assumed within the conflict. After four years of unsuccessful government negotiations with FARC, the largest guerrilla organization, in 2002 an aggressive military conflict resolution approach favored by President Álvaro Uribe Vélez (who served from 2002 until 2010) was launched that was first and foremost aimed at FARC, as well as the process of demobilizing paramilitary groups since 2003.² This was a conflict resolution approach that the conservative Juan Manuel Santos, elected president in June 2010, promised to continue. In addition, we have to consider the involvement in the conflict of external international (state and civil societal) actors, whose engagement bears various implications for the violent armed conflict.³

The resulting problems for journalists could not be more difficult. They must deal with two simultaneously occurring processes: *(i.)* an open armed internal conflict and *(ii.)* a process that is referred to, at least by the Colombian government, as a beginning "post-conflict."⁴ Both processes must be observed, explained and analyzed.

Along with this there are, on the one side, the continuing aggressive military conflicts among conflict actors (which makes it necessary for journalists to possess knowledge of newer and older actor constellations, changed dynamics and the still untouched conflict causes), as well as the effects on the civilian population, which is squeezed between the violent actors. On the other side, there are developments in the frame of the process through which former fighters are demobilized, as well as the implementation and application of the programs and laws formulated for this, which must be observed and analyzed. Reportage comprehends in addition the special role of victims and their situation in the reparations and reconciliation process, criminal trials against perpetrators, and also their adequate reintegration into society.

For a journalist whose development and structuring was marked for decades by armed conflict, understanding and reporting on elements of a – rightly or wrongly so-designated – post-conflict is a great challenge (Sierra 2008). Here there are additional themes, actors and factors which must be considered that differ from those found in an ongoing armed conflict.

1. The adjectives used here, "open," "internal," "armed" and "warlike," are intended to emphasize the significance and intermeshing of the different levels of violence that are and have been present in Colombia. The guiding idea is the definitional distinction between war and armed conflict, which is sometimes made quantitatively (more than 1000 deaths per year = war), sometimes qualitatively (level of systemization of the activities, actor constellations, etc.). The term "war" points to a more extreme escalation of violence than does "armed conflict."
2. A process that began to be criticized even during the negotiations, not least of all because of the frequently demonstrated connections between state military forces, political decision-makers and paramilitary groups, as well as their continuing human rights violations – a clear violation of the preceding negotiation preconditions agreed on with the government (among others, disarmament on the side of the paramilitary groups). According to Uribe's goals, by the end of 2005 all fighting units of the paramilitary umbrella organization Auto Defensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, AUC) were to be disarmed. Even today this process cannot be regarded as completed. Old military units, regarded as disarmed, have rearmed; power structures and social control mechanisms in areas formerly controlled by paramilitary groups – in part with the same power holders – continue to exist, were further consolidated or have failed. For a deeper analysis of the paramilitary phenomenon in Colombia cf., among others, HRW 2005, Rangel 2005 as well as CNRR 2007.
3. The USA has stood out through its massive support (financially, with personnel, as well as with know how) of the Colombian government's "Plan Colombia," an aggressive military proceeding against the drug trade (among others with pesticide spraying of the jungles by private American security firms) and to suppress the revolutionary movement; the EU, in contrast, has distinguished itself through the installation of six so-called Peace Laboratories in the country's regions. For a comprehensive overview of outside engagement in Colombia, see Kurtenbach 2001, 2004. For a critical view of US engagement and the Plan Colombia, cf. among others, Kurz and Muno 2005, as well as the topical homepages of Human Rights Watch (<http://www.hrw.org/americas/colombia>) and the Colombia Program of the Washington think tank Center for International Policy (<http://www.ciponline.org/>).
4. Although critical voices at home and abroad regard the identification of a post-conflict in Colombia as government propaganda and not helpful for a deeper understanding or premature, for a number of years politicians, academics and representatives of civil society have been discussing the question of whether Colombia is in a beginning post-conflict and what this implies (cf. among others Cárdenas 2003, FIP 2006). The category of "post-conflict" developed in the frame of state efforts to achieve a process of disarming paramilitary formations; thus subsequently an instrument for conflict resolution began to be used that was developed for times when hostilities were suspended or peace was concluded.

Despite the violence-marked societal conditions of the past decades, which, among others, proved to be determining framing conditions for journalistic work (threats, violent encroachments, kidnappings, murders, etc.), journalists and editors assumed – above all in the country's large media enterprises – an increasingly more self-confident role within the conflict. The situations of journalists in rural regions remain to be sure very difficult.

2. Repositioning journalism in conflict

Only at first glance does the situation in Colombia often appear to be a *callejón sin salida* (dead-end street). One of the most comprehensive conflict studies of the past years bears a more optimistic title: "El conflicto, callejón con salida – Informe Nacional de Desarrollo Humano 2003" (The conflict, dead-end street with an exit). This study by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, in Spanish: PNUD) identifies in particular media work – besides the education of the populace – as one of the most important instruments for bringing about the necessary far-reaching changes in a society marked by violence as in Colombia (PNUD 2003). Journalistic work constitutes a major step in the search for a solution, because it can create new images of social realities and can thereby offer new orientation points for people living together in a society.

While proof of a causal connection between journalistic work in crisis areas, violent conflicts or wars and a beginning peace is hard to demonstrate indisputably, there are, however, several reasons to evaluate the media as significant in the area of peace building:

First: Media assume an intermediary connecting role between civil societal actors, on the one side, and the state and international organizations, on the other. Their engagement and work comprehends not only the participative horizontal, but also the hierarchical vertical dimension within a society. Media link societal groups across geographical and social borders and convey the standpoints and actions of political decision-makers to those affected.

Second: Through their work in conflict countries, journalists can exert a significant influence on the further course of conflict. They stamp the interpretations and ways of reading of decision-makers and strategists through their representation, portrayal and explanation of events. In the best case, their work opens a view to newly arising action options; in the worst case, it conceals them or legitimates the wrong ones.

Third: Through their reportage media provide the affected populace with information that is important for their lives, for example on routes to flee from regions where fighting has broken out, on water supplies and medical care or on their rights with regard to state institutions, as well as on the movements of armed illegal violent actors.

Fourth: Media perform a watchdog function as well in conflict situations. They observe the extent to which chosen political strategies can be put into practice which affect the life realities of the local populace. Or they bring experiences from other countries into the political debate about adequate problem solutions.

Despite the considerable difficulties to which Colombian journalists have been and are still exposed in their work, they have at the latest since the late 1990s played an ever clearer key role within the conflict, help to mark its course and contribute to its transformation.

To summarize the media's historical development over the past century in three phases, the already mentioned United Nations report distinguishes three different periods: that of the "sentido filial" (childlike understanding, 1950s to 1960s), that of the "síndrome del verde oliva" (olive-green syndrome, 1960s to 1980s) and that of the "guerra por las audiencias" (war for the audience, since the 1990s).

Originally the content of the dominant print media in Colombia resembled party leaflets, which in the first period, starting in the 1950s, was far from neutral reportage, and tried to persuade readers to join religious and political movements. This was true for all Colombian newspapers, regardless of whether they were liberal, conservative, communist or Catholic. They represented the conflict as distant – hard to link to their own life realities – and located it in the rural regions. Journalists suggested that after the end of a conflict, military repressive means were needed to keep the remaining factions of the conflict parties under control, which was described as an easy task.

Between 1960 and 1980, the "síndrome del verde oliva" was decisive for journalists working in the conflict. This syndrome originated at the time of the Frente Nacional, when military security forces in olive-green uniforms were assigned responsibility for maintaining public order.

"At the time, 'reporting on the conflict' meant informing the public on military operations against guerrillas. Expressions of the military forces' opinions became official pronouncements, neither controlled by Congress, the parties nor the media" (PNUD 2003: 428).¹

1. This and several subsequent quotations from the Spanish were translated by the author.

In the 1980s television became widespread and propagated visual images of previously rarely seen victim suffering (expellees, victims of torture, kidnapping victims, murdered persons, etc.). Along with this went the portrayal of paramilitary groups as a necessary evil that compensated for the state's inability to guarantee public safety.

In the frame of the "guerra por las audiencias", which has been going on since the 1990s, Colombian media tried to adapt to developments and demands for participation in the globalized market. Media workers, and above all editors and owners, concentrated on creating expensive technologies, the steady improvement of existing infrastructure, consumer behavior research, the development of improved market techniques and strategically advantageous alliances. A comprehensive re-thinking of own action or respectively of one's own role within the conflict was not undertaken.

"In addition to these changes, there were the economic recession and the privatization of television. Voters were replaced by consumers, more detailed narrative forms by news formats, ideas by emotions, party guidelines by competitions and petitions, as well as party membership by consumer behavior" (PNUD 2003: 429).

The topical spectrum dealt with by Colombian media and thereby also the information offering to the public definitely expanded beginning in the 1980s (cf. Rey 2007). At the same time, in the late 1990s the media's role within the conflict in the country came under critical scrutiny.

With this changing self-image of journalists, a critical dialogue arose on both the practical and the academic levels. Weaknesses in journalistic work skills were identified, action alternatives developed, and programs launched for eliminating or dealing with them. The conflict reportage in Colombian daily newspapers (among others PAN 2004, *El Tiempo* 2004) and on television was evaluated (PAN 2005), Handbooks were published that offered guidelines for reportage, for example, on assassinations (Restrepo 2002), internal refugees and forced expulsion (MPP 2005), as well as on children in armed conflict (MPP 2009). Other authors underlined the importance of the language chosen by journalists in the frame of their articles and contributions on armed conflicts and developed dictionaries for a more conscious use of a violence-free language (Abello, Baumann, Cárdenas et al. 1999).¹ Other publications taught how to deal with sources in reportage on armed conflicts (PAN 2005) and gave practical tips on self-protection for journalists (Márquez 2007). In addition, the role of Colombian media in the conflict was examined, for example, how they reported on decisive events of the past years, such as the negotiations between the government and FARC (López de la Roche 2006), the Plan Colombia (Ayala and Aguilera 2001), or what role they could play in the reparations and reconciliation process between demobilized fighters and the victims of their violent deeds (FIP and Semana 2008).

As well, scholars have studied the attitudes of conflict actors toward journalists' work. In interviews held in 2003 with representatives of FARC, ELN and the (then) paramilitary umbrella organization AUC, the authors of the book *Periodismo, guerra y terrorismo* tried to determine how the media were viewed by illegal violent actors (Giraldo, Roldán and Flórez 2003).²

From the start of the Twenty-First Century up until today, the work of journalists in the area of conflict reportage was further characterized by three different political processes: the negotiating process of the government with FARC under President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002), negotiations in the frame of the demobilization process with paramilitary groups under the Uribe government (2002-2003) and the still ongoing disclosures in the frame of the so-called "Parapolítica."³

In the first negotiating process, the conflict parties still pursued a policy of "apertura comunicativa" (communicative opening) with regard to the media, whereby journalists were so deeply integrated into the negotiations that their detailed daily reportage on the course of the talks and their results directly influenced the process (Bonilla 2002: 40). They were largely excluded from the paramilitary negotiations with a strategy of "cierre informativo" (information blockage) and only rarely and then very restrictively admitted. After these two experiences, Camilo Andrés Tamayo, a communication scholar at the Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular (CINEP), sees in the frame of the process of "Parapolítica" a third communication arrangement arising: "el equilibrio del péndulo" (equilibrium of the pendulum). After the media submitted to being rather passively positioned by conflict actors in the past, instead of themselves actively participating in decisive societal processes and reporting on them independently, they have re-thought some of their professional standards and attempted to apply them in their daily work. The pendulum, which previously oscillated sharply between the extremes of 'unlimited integration' of journalists or their 'absolute exclusion', is now gradually coming to rest in the center (Tamayo 2007: 2).

Colombian journalism has used the learning processes of the past few years and introduced them into its current work.

1. These endeavors occurred before the problematic background that journalists and editors continually uncritically repeated terminology from official sources (e.g., the designation of actors as "criminals" or "terrorists," the description of the conflict as "fighting a rebellion" instead of as a war, etc.) in their contributions and in this way had a conflict-legitimizing effect.
2. This is only a selection of conflict-specific technical publications on journalistic work in Colombia and makes no claim to comprehensiveness.
3. The extent of the massive and systematic permeation of the political landscape by paramilitary actors, who exercised control from 1999 to 2003 in 223 Departamentos of the country, has been uncovered in the past years – especially in the frame of the demobilization process. It coined its own problem concept: paramilitary politics (parapolítica).

Especially the print media have managed to continue to keep the relevant topics, independently of cyclical swings in politics, on the public agenda and to deepen the degree of reflection on ways of looking at the problem. A report published in June 2008 by the Latin American Educational Association, "The Other Half of the Truth Searching for Truth – Justice and Reparations for Colombia's Victims of Paramilitary Violence," underlines the role of the media in the parapolitical process and shows that the entanglement of politicians in paramilitary power structures was uncovered not through the efforts, e.g., of the Uribe government, but much more through the close cooperation of opposition politicians, journalists and human rights organizations (LAWGEF 2008: 4).¹ As well the annual report of the human rights organization Human Rights Watch 2008 underlines the positive role of the media in the current process (HRW 2008).

Beyond this, according to surveys the media enjoy a better reputation with the general public than in the past. And some of the large weekly and daily newspapers – above all the weekly magazine *Semana* – have adopted a policy of critical-investigative conflict reportage.² Thus *Semana*, together with the Fundación Ideas para la Paz (FIP), developed the conflict-specific homepage verdadabierta.com, which provides more in-depth information on actors (origins, organizational form, current development), dynamics, causes and new challenges in dealing with the internal conflict. The homepage, which was first made accessible in 2008, is for one thing used as an information source by interested parties, and for another also as a research aid for journalists in which reportage, articles and analyses are published, along with discussion forums for further intellectual exchanges.³ Another critical platform was established in 2009 with the founding of the news website lasillavacia.com. With critical background articles, current and topical blogs and forums, it offers a maximally comprehensive discussion space for current developments in the political landscape. Juanita León, the journalist and founder of the website, notes that instead of following the dynamics of daily news reportage and press conferences, the platform's contributions are meant to show how power is actually exercised in Colombia.⁴

Previous developments in Colombian journalism and its relationship to the conflict point to a step-by-step repositioning of journalism within conflict events and a changing self-image among journalists and editors. To be sure, there are also alarming developments. The latest restructuring of the second investigative weekly magazine, *Cambio*, in February 2010, indicates the extent to which critical reportage can put political decision-makers under pressure, and how they react to this. Again and again, *Cambio* uncovered controversial facts and connections: Politicians were shown to cooperate with the organized drug trade. Alliance formation by members of the government with paramilitary groups was uncovered, and the corruption of parliamentary members was proved. Officially for failing to fulfill profit goals, the publisher replaced the editorial staff, refocused the topical spectrum of reportage on entertainment, and fired not only the chief editor, but also the business manager. Representatives of civil society, journalists and government critics were outraged by the restructuring ordered by *El Tiempo's* publisher. They see here a further example of the "incestuous relationship between political power and the media," as Ignacio Gómez of the Fundación Libertad de Prensa explains (cited according to Dilger 2010). Since 2003, the *El Tiempo* house, the majority share of which belongs to the Spanish Planeta concern, has been publishing the newspaper.⁵ The Santos family, which is closely tied to the government, has great influence on the *El Tiempo* publishers.

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1. A report published by an organizational association, the Latin America Working Group Education Fund (LAWGEF), explains: It started with accusations by Gustavo Petro, a congressional representative belonging to the left-alternative party Polo Democrático Alternativo, who claimed that many congressional representatives were cooperating with paramilitary groups. In this way, the investigative proceedings taking place before the constitutional court against these politicians were given more attention. And media that hardly reported on this in the foreground took up the topic again more intensively and thus brought it to the public. The study of the *Parapolítica* phenomenon received further depth, because some human rights organizations also focused their energies on analyzing the ties between paramilitary groups and actors in local and national politics.
 2. Current survey results of the weekly newspaper *Cambio* show that 69.9 percent have a positive image and 21.3 percent continue to have a negative image of the media. More than two-thirds of the interviewees evaluated the information offered by the media as accurate, while 19.7 judged it to be rather unrealistic. The majority of the interviewees use television to obtain information on current news (67.2 percent). They feel that this medium is the most trustworthy (54.2), ahead of radio (8.1), the Internet (9.5) and newspapers (21.2). More than half (68.4 percent) agreed that Colombian media support the government, while only 15.6 percent do not share this opinion. The article in which the survey results were published can be accessed in the Internet under: http://www.cambio.com.co/portadacambio/778/ARTICULO-WEB-NOTA_INTERIOR_CAMBIO_4214051.html, last accessed on 20 February 2009. These results should be accepted here only with reservations as suggesting possibilities for future research, because a telephone survey with 700 interviews in the 13 largest cities – according to the sampling technique employed – is not sufficient to form a comprehensive picture of the opinions of the general public. Further information on the methods can be found in the article.
 3. The homepage can be accessed in the Internet under: www.verdadabierta.com.
 4. Cf. the explanations of Director León on how it was created and on the self-made demand of the Project – financed by the Open Society Institute (OSI) in New York – under the rubric "Who are we?" (*¿Quiénes somos?*) on the homepage www.lasillavacia.com.
 5. For a more detailed description of the structures of ownership within the Colombian media, cf. the discussion in the next section.

3. Determinants of journalistic-practical work in Colombia

At the same time, the difficulties for Colombian journalism remain urgent and in many ways have effects in daily practice. Although generations of journalists grew up in the midst of the armed conflict, learned their skill during it, and reportage on the conflict has been part of their work for years, as before many deficiencies are found in their manner of working that, for one thing, distort conflict perceptions within Colombian society, and, for another, make people fail to see many aspects needed for lasting conflict resolution – thus, e.g., new problem areas, responsibilities or causes of the conflict continue to be neglected. Álvaro Sierra, Colombian journalist and instructor at the University for Peace of the United Nations in Costa Rica, names as a current development in Colombian media conflict reportage that events and facts are increasingly being represented in an oversimplified way: “The media are increasingly reporting in telegram style: briefly, with ever fewer background articles and reportage. And the situation of the regions is reported very inadequately by the media in Bogotá.”¹

Current and topical media analyses of the reports on the paramilitary groups and the implementation process of the “Law for Justice and Peace” in print media and TV show that there is a deficiency in transparent dealing with sources – even if some were named (on the average one or two sources per article) –, in the contextualization of the information, breaking down of developments and precise use of language (Ronderos and Arias 2008: 28f).² Another study of 133 articles from the daily newspaper *El Tiempo*, as well as from *Semana* and *Cambio*, emphasizes how stereotypes are produced in reportage on reintegrated former fighters in connection with the peace process in Colombia (cf. Gutiérrez 2007).³ To be sure, technological innovations (cell phones, satellite transmission, Internet, etc.) have accelerated journalistic work in the last few decades and made possible conflict reportage in almost real time, but editors doing research at their desk and journalists interviewing with a cell phone display a tendency in their work to no longer embed their information in historical-societal relationships, and background information remains hidden from the public.

“Reporters – especially those from the print media – go less and less out into the street to talk with flesh and blood people. The reports tend therefore to become more and more alike: with the same sources, the same cool distance. A war appears in this manner not only pasteurized, but also homogenized. No one is touched by it” (Abello, Baumanns, Cárdenas et al. 1999: 9).

In regard to news reports, it can likewise be determined that information, topics and persons are not contextualized, complex conflict situations are thus scarcely to be understood (Barón et al. 2004: 15).

The above-mentioned 2003 PNUD report underlines that already in the past media worked more reactively than proactively, concentrated not on social responsibility to society, but instead on their own, profit-maximizing interests and in their conflict reportage drew on simplifying explanatory patterns.⁴

Colombian journalists continually make the mistake in their work that in their contributions, reportage, articles and news reports they often only use information from official sources like government representatives, the police and the military, instead of the voices of affected parties of civil society. Conflict perceptions are distorted, because government sources convey a different picture than what NGOs and human rights activists observe and experience in everyday life.

Arturo Guerrero, journalist, independent author and staff member of the journalist organization Medios para la Paz (MPP), regards, besides inadequate research, self-censorship as one of the decisive characteristics of Colombian journalism: “Self-censorship arises from fear of threats and reprisals by armed actors. In particular, corrupt politicians and office holders are

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1. The author interviewed Alvaro Sierra on the telephone on 19 December 2008.
 2. Over a period of ten days, the study examined reportage on statements by the paramilitary leader “El Alemán” in Colombian daily newspapers (*El Tiempo*, *El Colombiano*, *El Mundo*, *El Nuevo Siglo*), weekly news magazines (*Semana*, *Cambio*) and television news broadcasts (Noticias Caracol, RCN Noticias). The analytical criteria were: Type of sources employed, contextualization of the information, accuracy of the information and the selected prose style (Narración).
 3. Thus the text analysis of the selected articles showed that 54.4 percent advocated the same viewpoint, although the authors demonstrably employed several sources. In 41 percent of the cases, the sources used were not given (Gutiérrez 2007: 17). “The demobilized [fighters, author’s note] were linked with negative consequences in 19 of 30 cases mentioned (63%) with references like: the demobilization is losing force; we do not know what to do with the demobilizees; they have turned into a time bomb; while things are good for the demobilizees, they are bad for the victims; the criminal commanders of the demobilized persons have just been replaced; The integration of demobilized FARC members in the process is too great a risk” (ibid.: 22).
 4. “They too put their hopes on simplistic, improvised, short term solutions that oscillated between peace (negotiated, quick and cheap) and military victory (quick and easy). Depending on the situation, the armed actors were seen as ruthless killers or people who had chosen the wrong way of life; well-led and disciplined armies or disorganized groups of outlaws; protectors of agricultural colonizers or cartels of narco-traffickers. The peace talks were interpreted as noble solutions or clever moves by the guerrilla. The media assumed that the armed groups are compact, homogeneous and subject to personal whims or messianic leaderships. By not understanding the rationale of their agents, they interpreted terrorist acts as an expression of madness; the payment of ransoms as the only measure to deal with a kidnapping; paramilitarism as a lesser evil and conversations between a guerrilla comandante and a mayor as an act of treason. Coverage became disconnected from the economic, social, political and cultural developments that in reality govern the evolution and outbreak of violent deeds.” (PNUD 2003: 429).

among the main causes of self-censorship, threats and acts committed against journalists.”¹

The fear of being punished, threatened or even killed for critical reportage leads with many journalists – especially those who work in rural regions – to the “scissors in the head” (self-censoring) phenomenon. Consequently, information that risks physical threat is not used, details that uncover corruption are not published, and critical reportage is blanked out.²

In order to be able to find the causes of this inadequacy in journalistic conflict reportage, which should be taken into consideration in order to improve the work and the working conditions of journalists, the roots of Colombian media problems must be uncovered.

3.1. Structures of the media landscape

The Colombian media landscape is characterized by a centralistic structure in which just four business groups control more than eighty percent of the media market (König and Schuster 2008: 356). From an economic perspective, in its geographic coverage this landscape is strongly concentrated in the large cities.

“Among the media there is no competition, they lack variety,” affirms Omar Rincón, a communications scholar who works at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. This is especially apparent in newspapers: “There are to be sure strong print media, but only one strong medium per city. The media centralization is striking.”³

Thus in Barranquilla, on the Caribbean coast, there is the daily newspaper *El Herald*, in Medellín *El Colombiano*, in Cali *El País*, in Pereira *La Tarde*, in Bucaramanga *Vanguardia Liberal* and in Bogotá *El Tiempo*, as well as *El Espectador*.

The radio sector is today dominated by two private broadcasters which resemble each other greatly in their media content, as well as in the manner of reportage: the broadcaster Caracol and Radio Cardena Nacional (RCN). These two simultaneously operate the most frequently viewed private television broadcasting stations in the country.

The leading medium, television, no longer functions as an information source today, but rather offers primarily spectacles, gossip and scandal, and predominantly serves the entertainment of the populace (from an interview with Rincón: 20/12/2008). To be sure, there are investigative programs on television, such as the show “Contravía” by journalist Holman Morris or the news magazine “Noticias Uno” by Daniel Coronel, but they have far too few viewers to exert a significant influence on the public discourse: “Although people do not read much,” according to Rincón, the print media are “very important, because they influence the decision-making of powerful political and economic figures” (ibid.).

Referring to the centralistic media structures and their broadcast contents, the journalist, who writes for *El Tiempo*, notes that the population living in the regions has grown tired of big city reportage. Citizen or community radio broadcasters have greater significance for the local population. In the country overall, there are in the meantime more than 800 of these communal radio stations. The newly created media culture is leading to a greater identification of the populace with media contents and permits cautious democratization tendencies outside the large cities.

Besides urbanization, geographic determinants and the presence of illegal or legal armed actors characterize the Colombian media landscape and reportage. Not only must the media take into consideration the nearly inaccessible areas with inadequate infrastructure or difficult terrain – for journalists with the appropriate broadcasting equipment or transmission wagons, etc. –, but also the local power constellations among the violent actors dominant in the regions. Productions for radio, television and newspapers – live transmission, reportage from the distant regions of the country, more extensive research trips for focus topics – require expensive logistics (also of a technological type) that can cost millions and are thus beyond the means of smaller media enterprises (Floréz 2008: 77).

The four business groups that largely divide up the Colombian media market among themselves are: Santo Domingo, Ardila Lülle, Casa Editorial El Tiempo and the Spanish Prisa Group, whereby this degree of concentration in the media sector is not unusual in comparison with other Latin American countries (Mastrini and Becerra 2006: 198). The tendencies to monopolization that have effects not only on information for the populace, but also on the political landscape, are due to a lack of strict media legislation.

“The concentration of the media, which – for want of political will on the part of the current governments (whose campaigns are financed by economic interest groups) – took place without regulating state intervention, has had the effect in Colombia that media owners, informants, advertising customers, the public and state have abdicated their responsibility for the right to information. This has led to an increasing entanglement with particular interests in such a manner that the ‘fourth estate’

1. The author interviewed Arturo Guerrero on 11 December 2008 in Bogotá.
2. MPP encourages journalists to offer their reports to editorial staffs in the large cities or to the international media – as a counter-strategy so that the articles can be published without risking harm to the authors (from an interview with Guerrero: 11/12/2008).
3. The author interviewed Omar Rincón on 20 December 2008 in Bogotá.

is still only a simple illusion" (cited according to Mastrini and Becerra 2006: 179), thus comments María Teresa Herrán, among others a media analyst and researcher at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, on the effects of media sector concentration.

What Darío Acevedo Carmona, a historian at the Universidad Nacional sede Medellín, has termed journalism "walking hand-in-hand" with politics in Colombia – "in our country journalism and politics went very closely hand in hand ..." (Acevedo 2003: 283) – is still today a serious problem for the media landscape. Particularly at the time of liberal market opening in the 1990s the till then more traditional family enterprises transformed themselves into large media concerns closely tied with political circles.

"There is no independence; the large media are generally closely linked with political interests. Due to this, there is also no independent conflict reportage," states Rocío Castañeda, coordinator of the working area "Opinión Pública" of the CINEP peace program.¹

A clear example of the ties between politics and media is the case of the Casa Editorial El Tiempo, over 50 percent of which belongs to the Santos family, which on the political stage at the same time chooses the vice president and defense minister. The enmeshment of politics and media also occurs, however, in a smaller frame. Thus Eduardo Márquez, Director of the Centro de Solidaridad de Colombia de la Federación Internacional de Periodistas (CESO-FIP), reports that political influences are also clear from an examination of the list of the owners of the "Vanguardia Liberal" group, which publishes ca. ten newspapers.²

3.2. Working conditions of journalists

In addition to the structure of the media landscape, which is problematic for independent reportage in any case, there are the complicated working conditions for journalists. There are deficiencies in the provision of equipment, travel and research costs, and also in regard to financial and social security. Journalists' "condiciones laborales" (working conditions) vary greatly between city and countryside, as well as between regions.

The economic crisis that began in Colombia at the end of the 1990s (1997-2001), as well as growing privatization in the media sector, above all in the television sector, resulted in the dismissal of 590 journalists from television, radio and newspaper editorial staffs – not counted here are journalists who worked on a free-lance basis.³

The critical and investigative reportage of the liberal daily newspaper *El Espectador* on the drug economy and the corruption that accompanies it led to an economic crisis for the second largest daily newspaper of Colombia and brought with it a wave of dismissals in the editorial staff, through which the staff was reduced by 67 percent. Because the editorial staff refused to print the ads of corrupt businesses, *El Espectador* suffered massive financial losses. In addition, drug dealers often attacked the newspaper's editorial rooms and employees. Despite attempts to help the newspaper get back on its feet with injections of money, the newspaper, which had been published daily for 115 years, still had to be reduced to a weekly format appearing only on Sunday.⁴ Thereby *El Tiempo* was left as the only daily national newspaper with a similar political weight.

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1. The author held an interview with Rocío Castañeda on 29 December 2008 in Bogotá.
 2. The problems that arise for journalists from this intermeshing of economy, politics and media are clear to Márquez, with whom the author held an interview on 20 November 2008 in Bogotá: "It is absolutely obvious that the journalists and editors affected here go through a first type of self-censorship. Naturally the journalists hired by *El Tiempo* attack neither the vice-president [Francisco Santos, author's note], because he is a shareholder, nor the defense minister [Juan Manuel Santos, who resigned from his office at the end of 2009 and will foreseeably be a presidential candidate in the 2010 elections, author's note]. Nor can they energetically attack his policy of democratic security, because he is also a shareholder of the newspaper published by the Casa Editorial house. Another case is RCN. A journalist working there cannot show solidarity with the sugarcane cutters, who demand full recognition as workers. For then he will be sure of losing his job. For one thing, self-censorship is determined by the business or political interests of the media themselves, and for another, journalists follow these lines without anyone telling them to" (from Interview Márquez: 20/11/2008).
 3. In 2001 the private television broadcaster Canal RCN, founded in 1997, and Caracol received 85 percent of the public advertising budget. Through privatization and the generally stressful economic situation in this period, a "reducción de voces y opiniones" came about in this manner (López de la Roche 2005: 29). Of 15 news broadcasters in 2001, only two continued to operate: Noticiero CM& and Canal Uno. As well the cultural and educational broadcaster La Señal had to discontinue its operations (Fundación Guillermo Cano Isaza 2006: 16).
 4. Since mid-2008 *El Espectador*, which was acquired by the Santo Domingo group, is again appearing on a daily basis. On the occasion of its first new edition as a daily newspaper, *El País* featured the article '*El Espectador* regresa como diario', which can be found in the Internet at: http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/Espectador/regresa/diario/elpeuint/20080512elpeuint_4/Tes, last accessed on 19 February 2009.

Due to the economic crisis at the beginning of the Twenty-first Century, many originally permanently employed journalists became freelancers. They received an average of 70,000 pesos (ca. 30 €) for each published contribution and – because personnel were reduced – had to work between 12 and 15 hours per day (MPP 2004: 9f). Today 51 percent of all Colombian journalists have a “vinculación laboral” (secure employment) through a permanent employment contract (Mastrini and Becerra 2006: 180). The others are so-called permanent freelance employees with a one year contract (21 percent), or they work entirely freelance and are paid only for individual contributions, articles and reportage, without any social security (12 percent). A further group lives merely from the advertised advertising budgets of political actors and commercial undertakings (16 percent). Reporters place their clients’ activities and products in their broadcasts or articles and are rewarded for this.¹

The changes in the Colombian media landscape also had effects on the personnel structure in the editorial staffs. The editorial staffs became younger, which, according to Omar Rincón, entailed a loss of professional experience. Today 84 percent of the journalists registered and working in Colombia have certified training, the remaining 16 percent are so-called – qualified by long experience in their profession – “periodistas eméricos” (Mastrini and Becerra 2006: 180).

“The so-called ‘empirical’ journalists are yielding to the rising number of professional journalists who were trained in journalism schools or departments of communication science. Others stem from various disciplines, but with university degrees and media experience” (Rey 2007: 34).

Within the media a strong hierarchy has developed between directors or respectively directing editors and the other large share of the editorial staff, whose salaries are not firmly set.²

“The first-named are media actors with enormous power, high salaries and a high public profile who are criticized because of their star behavior and their excessive drive for recognition. Through this they approach in a dangerous manner the power centers, which they ultimately themselves become part of” (ibid.).

The lack of reform of these disparate wage structures in journalism, the lack of financial and social security that goes with it, combined with a reward system for performed work that is problematic from the perspective of journalistic ethics, ultimately leads today to a dependency of journalists in their work which strongly influences freedom of the press and freedom of expression. In exchange for contributions placed in newspapers, radio and television freelance journalists receive (without other contractual stipulations) as a “wage” broadcasting time or space in a print medium, which they can sell as “cupos” (capacities) to advertising clients. Sometimes they additionally receive a minimum wage that at present is just 491,000 pesos (ca. 186 €) – or nothing at all. In particular, the importance of “pautas publicitarias” (advertising contracts), on which the livelihoods of many media workers depend, has risen sharply. All the experts interviewed for this study evaluated this tendency as one of the currently gravest problems in Colombian journalism and emphasized that such a “reward system” is widespread, especially in rural regions. Particularly here the budgets of private enterprises are relatively small, while state institutions dispose of higher advertising budgets – the sums amount to in all 50-60 percent of the public advertising contracts (ADC 2008: 58). This situation clearly increases the potential danger of political influence being exerted on journalistic reportage. Carlos Cortés, who was in 2005-2009 the Director of the Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa (FLIP) and a communications scholar, emphasizes:

“The local authorities exploit public advertising contracts arbitrarily. The media entrepreneurs do not guarantee acceptable working conditions, which inevitably endangers journalistic independence, not only related to the survival of journalists, but also to possible research and the in-depth treatment of topics” (Cortés: 7/01/2009).³

The radio journalist Fernando Carvajal Díaz from the state of Popayán reports: “The news reporters live mostly from public advertising receipts, whereby they [journalists, author’s note] first offer advertising space to mayors and public institutions. They start with them, because they pay the most” (cited according to ADC 2008: 58).⁴

1. The figure of 16 percent last given by Mastrini and Becerra seems questionable in view of the fact that there is no national, comprehensive, recognized journalist organization or labor union, and thereby the sampling of the working conditions and total numbers of journalists active in Colombia can only be regarded as a tendency.
2. This is reported by Paola Valderrama, until 2009 the project coordinator of the Organisation Proyecto Antonio Nariño (PAN), in an interview with the author on 3 December 2008 in Bogotá. “There are no rules regarding wage stipulations for journalists or how to decide that, for example, a TV moderator earns 30 million pesos [c.a. 11,380 € per month, author’s note] and a reporter 1 million pesos [c.a. 380 € per month, author’s note]. I believe that till now the criteria have been oriented more to advertising, ratings and the arising dynamics of these two factors, instead of to work standards like achievement and training (from Interview Valderrama: 03/12/2008).
3. The author interviewed Carlos Cortés on 7 January 2009 in Bogotá. On 23 April 2009 this problematic was reported on by Cortés to the Organization of American States (OAS) in the frame of the “Sesión Especial sobre el Derecho a la Libertad de Pensamiento y de Expresión y la Importancia de Medios de Comunicación.” On the global and intentional employment of these dependency relationships as an instrument of “soft censorship” by governments against journalists and media, cf., among others, Podesta 2009.
4. The receipts that journalists can earn when they sell the free capacities in their broadcasts to dealers, businesses, firms, etc. are far below the sums that political institutions and actors pay (ibid.).

Mabel Morales, for more than 20 years the directing news editor at Radio RCN in Barranquilla, points out that her salary is barely enough to live on, and that she is dependent on concluding advertising contracts – it has almost always been like that since she started in radio (ibid.: 57).¹

That in addition working conditions in rural areas differ strongly from those in the cities is emphasized by Fabio López de la Roche, historian and media scholar at the Instituto de Estudios Políticos y Relaciones Internacionales (IEPRI) of the National University of Colombia in Bogotá. While in the capital and in other large cities there are relatively good conditions for journalistic work – in regard to intellectual, institutional and financial resources – in the regions the picture is different. The learning processes of journalists that take place in regard to their role in conflict reportage and in the peace process vary greatly. In poor, remote regions of the country most journalists are “empíricos”, and there is a lack of the opportunities that their colleagues dispose of in the large cities (De la Roche 2005: 40). The journalistic learning processes with topics such as systematic research, professional ethics, and the mastery of various stylistic means, internalized work norms and further education are thereby very diverse in the respective regions (ibid.).

A further economic factor particularly hampers qualitatively high-value reportage on conflict events. Logistically expensive productions are not adequately financed by editorial staffs and publishers, so that reporters in conflict zones are often dependent on the cooperation of fighting forces (military transports by helicopter, etc.) or must reach inaccessible regions in other ways.

“I often had to hear my boss say: ‘Ah, no ..., if the military does not take you along ..., there is no money’. It is very hard to make a neutral and objective report when you travel with the military forces” (MPP 2004: 25).²

Research teams that travel into the regions in order to gather information and make interviews were reduced in the course of time (Floréz 2008: 76). If the editorial office pays the respective costs, the pressure to publish is increased for some journalists. To be able to justify their editor’s investment, they sometimes invent sensational reports or stories and send them to the home editorial office (MPP 2004: 25).³

Although poor working conditions are a fundamental structural problem for Colombian journalism and directly influence and determine the quality of conflict reportage, they are seldom dealt with. Eduardo Márquez, from CESO-FIP, the support organization for journalists, criticizes: “It does not please any NGO [nongovernmental organization, author’s note] to deal with these topics – in fact no one does this either –, for this means directly taking on the media entrepreneurs and employers” (from Interview Márquez: 20/11/2008).⁴

3.3. Journalistic Training

Forty Colombian universities and technical institutions offer training for journalists. Inadequate analytical ability, lack of knowledge of the history of their own country and therefore serious problems in historically embedding current events, as well as a very limited understanding of the political system, its structure or its tasks and problem areas – the participants and reporters made these criticisms at the “IInd Conferencia Internacional – Estrategias de apoyo al periodismo y los medios en Colombia” in November 2008 in Bogotá to Colombian students in the communication sciences and journalism. This situation is also noted by Ana Lucía Duque, a teacher at the Escuela de Redacción de El Tiempo, where journalists who are already working are further trained. She calls for changing journalism programs into Postgrados (programs of further studies). It has been shown, according to Duque, that editors and reporters who have already completed another technical course of studies are not only more capable of critical analysis and explaining complex material, but also of doing journalistic work (research, use of sources, using the Internet, etc.), and in addition they dispose of a more comprehensive general education. Omar Rincón, who among other things serves as a journalism professor at two universities, likewise sees structural problems in training; however, that is not the fault of the students, but rather first of all of their teachers:

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1. The “pautas publicitarias” problem can be observed in many Latin American countries. Cf. on this ADC 2008.
 2. The quotation is taken from a study by Medios para la Paz (MPP), a journalist organization. Thereby interviews were held with 120 journalists and editors for radio, television and newspapers who lived and worked in conflict zones or were endangered due to their work there. The aim was to analyze how information about the conflict is produced. Beyond this, it was intended to uncover the relationship between journalistic work and the threats or other risks that journalists continually experienced.
 3. Of one case a journalist from Bogotá reports: “After we had already traveled with the army for a week without anything happening, we journalists made a pact. We five asked: What will we do in order that we have something to report to Bogotá? We have no dead, only abandoned camps and not one guerillero. ... With this [little, author’s note] information they would have thrown us all out. The agreement consisted in reporting the headlines ‘A hundred guerilleros killed in the largest military offensive of all time’. That was strong and appeared on the first page of the newspapers. And it was a scandal. Naturally ... afterwards our colleagues said that we were journalists paid by the military” (MPP 2004: 24). Of course cases like this are exceptional, but they do happen.
 4. The sole exception is the Federación Colombiana de Periodistas (FECOLPER), which was founded a few years ago with the aid of the CESO-FIP. Further information on this follows in the final section of this article.

"I believe we have thereby failed to teach communication scholars and journalists to think with their own autonomous head. We teach them to repeat the theoretical texts of communication science and politics, but not to regard the world from the logic of communication, which would mean thinking with their own head. They are journalists who have nothing to report. They have no relationship to the world. They know many journalistic techniques such as how to give interviews or write reportage, but they have nothing to tell. They do not do much research, cannot captivate the public or readership, because they do not deal with society and its perceptions. But that is fundamentally important for journalism" (from Interview Rincón: 18/12/2008).

Many universities are privately financed and charge tuition, which seems problematic in view of the great poverty in the country.¹ Beyond this, Rocío Castañeda from the CINEP, criticizes the teaching contents: "In the university there is a failure to deal with the topics of ethics, to teach professional and practical routines in everyday journalism, as well as to aid in responsible production" (Castañeda: 29/12/2008).

These deficiencies in training are greatly exacerbated in rural regions where there are few universities or technical institutes. German Rey, Professor for Communication Sciences at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, emphasizes this as well. The offerings are also concentrated in the country's large cities (Rey 2007: 35). The problems in the training area continue to be great, but he can generally point to a professionalization of Colombian journalism in the past twenty years.

3.4. The security situation

"Because the principle of neutrality toward the civilian populace – to which journalists also belong – is permanently negated, they [journalists, author's note] are exposed to constant risk within the armed conflict. Often conflict parties (state security forces, paramilitaries or guerilla groups) force journalists who want to continue to report from a combat zone to commit themselves to provide propaganda for their [the armed actors, author's note] respective cause. And this is only in the best cases so"²

Thus does Andrés Monroy, until October 2009 legal counsel at CESO-FIP and expert on the topic of freedom of information in Colombia, describe the situations of reporters who want to focus on conflict as a topic. In addition, society is so polarized that many people only still make a distinction between the "friends or enemies of the state." Journalists very quickly come into the crosshairs of the violent actors, state and non-state, when they criticize "military actions like extralegal executions – called in a trivializing manner 'false success reports' (falsos positivos) –, when they attempt to report on the conflict in an independent and objective manner or when they investigate serious human rights violations" (from Interview Monroy: 4/2/2010).³

Current figures show that the cases of physical violence against journalists and media workers in Colombia have leveled off in the past few years. Neither a significant decline nor a correspondingly strong increase has been observed, as FLIP notes in its current situational report. Aggression against journalists ranged from humiliating treatment to physical attacks committed by officials and state security forces. In 2009, 157 cases of "violaciones a la libertad de prensa" (violations of press freedom) were registered, which in comparison with the previous year means an increase (in 2008 129 cases were recorded). In a comparative view of the last few years, we see a persistence of the insecure situation for journalists (in 2006 there were 140 registered cases; in 2007 there were 162).⁴ In 2009, 74 journalists were threatened and 30 were abused in one form or another. The difficulty in quantifying physical violence becomes clear when it is a matter of the current murders of journalists. While in 2008 none were registered, in 2009 FLIP confirms the murder of a journalist which was demonstrably connected with the victim's profession. "Reporters without borders" additionally registers the murder of

1. In 2001 the semester tuition fees ranged from US \$500 to \$2000, which only members of the upper and upper middle classes can afford (Schumacher 2001: 53).

2. The author held this interview with Andrés Monroy on 4 February 2010.

3. The term "falsos positivos" refers to those systematic murders by state military forces of civilians that in past years have been uncovered and documented in Colombia by human rights organizations and international media. After killing innocent citizens, mostly men, the perpetrators put uniforms on them and claimed they were guerrilla fighters. The reason: in this way the success balances for the government's military measures to end the conflict were improved. There were, among others, final lists of killed guerrilleros, whose murder was rewarded with money or holidays for soldiers. At this point there is insufficient space to go more deeply into the events and backgrounds connected with the extralegal executions. Interested readers should read the general reportage of the national and international media.

4. Under "violaciones a la libertad de prensa," the Fundación Libertad de Prensa (FLIP) subsumes the following indicators: Aggression (inhumane and demeaning treatment) committed against journalists, kidnappings, impeding journalistic work, media representatives injured in the fighting, attacks on media infrastructure, murders, illegal arrests and threats. The concept of freedom of the press used in this connection is oriented in its form to the right to the free expression of opinions, which represents an adequate mixture between free opinion, the possibility to openly mediate or convey this, free access to sources and their unrestricted promulgation (Vivanco 2007: 11). For further information and definitions of the indicators employed by FLIP, cf. the information on the organization's homepage, which can be accessed in the Internet under: <http://www.flip.org.co/secciones/rap/definicion.html>, last accessed on 30 December 2009.

the journalist Diego Rojas Velásquez on 22 September in the vicinity of Caramanta in Northeastern Colombia. And the Colombian journalist association Federación Colombiana de Periodistas (FECOLPER) assumes there were six murders of journalists in 2009.¹ Responsible for the different estimates are the various filter systems, points out Andrés Monroy. While FECOLPER records all murders of journalists and media workers, FLIP employs a filter: it regards as relevant for the statistics only murders for which proof of a direct connection with the victim's profession can unquestionably be obtained. The fact that journalists and editors often additionally practice a second profession in order to earn a living and are sometimes murdered while performing in a non-journalistic role often obscures the connection of the murder to their journalistic profession. In all, over the past thirty years more than 130 journalists have been murdered in Colombia because of their work, i.e., an average of 4 to 5 annually.

Intimidation and threats, insofar as they are reported and registered, continue to be the most common form of violence against journalists.² They are communicated, according to statements by the press foundation FLIP, for example, on the telephone, as text messages or through the post. Furthermore, the police or other state authorities do not take this problem seriously enough (FLIP 2009: 17). In fact, officials and state security forces were responsible for approx. 40 percent of the reported injuries in 2009 (FLIP 2010: 20), while in the previous year the figure was 31 percent (FLIP 2009:12). As well here there is a clear difference between city and countryside, as Carlos Cortés Castillo reports:

"In Colombia there are strong institutions. To be sure they are found in a very centralized manner only in a few cities or in Bogotá. Those zones of the country in which there is a weak state attorney's office, where local administrative organs are controlled by armed groups, where drug trade businesses have become established and in which a general climate of violence prevails, those are regions where the work of journalists is definitely made difficult" (from Interview Cortés: 07/01/2009).

The states that are the most strongly affected are Valle del Cauca, Atlántico, Antioquia, Caldas, Tolima and Huila. Abuse of press representatives, and thereby freedom of the press, occurs most often in the capital city. This is because the media concentration is the strongest in Bogotá, where many journalists work.

Dealing with the problems of corruption and internal armed conflict clearly raises the risk for journalists to be threatened or to suffer physical violence. Especially reportage on the concerns of public order (armed confrontations, clashes between demonstrators and security forces, reportage on murders, etc.), according to Mauricio Durán, responsible at FLIP for protection and monitoring, has elicited the greatest number of violent attacks on journalists.³

State protection programs, which in 2009 were financed by the government with more than 85,000 million pesos (ca. 32.2 million €), continue to be deficient. Until today the practical implementation of the program, that was already initiated in 1997 by the Interior Ministry, among others for threatened journalists, has shown serious conceptual, personnel, as well as financial inadequacies. Thus bodyguards from the Colombian secret service, which was assigned responsibility for the protection program, spy on journalists instead of adequately protecting them. In addition, according to participants in the program, the bodyguards are not well trained, are inadequately prepared and clearly have too little previous experience. The capacities of the program are overburdened by the number of requests for protection. Consequence: The number of participating journalists who receive protection is falling due to a lack of resources – from 10,716 (2008) to 10,000 (September 2009). In the meantime, there is a lack of sufficient funding to pay for additionally needed bodyguards, airline tickets or gasoline for transport. To be sure improvements have been made, but planning uncertainty remains.⁴

The long-term psychological consequences of fear that can arise in journalists in Colombia through the permanently precarious security situation and personal threats to life and limb and their social effects are hard to quantitatively and qualitatively determine. There are no adequate approaches on the state and civil societal side to do justice to the important topic of the mental burdening of journalists and media workers.⁵

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1. In all of Latin America there were reportedly 30 murders of journalists in 2009, whereby Colombia, after Mexico (with 13 murders) occupies second place ahead of Guatemala (4), Honduras (2) and Brazil (2), according to FECOLPER in a press report of 17 December 2009. For further information on FELCOPER, as well as relevant documents, cf. the homepage of the organization CESO-FIP, which cooperates with it: www.fipcolombia.com.
 2. For various reasons, according to FLIP's 2009 report, violations of press freedom often go unreported. The reasons include, among others: the importance of such a crime is not adequately assessed, fear of the consequences of reporting or lack of trust in state representatives, lack of support by the medium in which the affected persons work or ignorance of how to file a complaint (FLIP 2009: 17).
 3. The author interviewed Mauricio Durán by telephone on 26 December 2009.
 4. A good, up-to-date overview of the government protection program, as well as of its problems is offered by Andrés Monroy's article "La otra cara del Programa de Protección del Gobierno," from which the figures cited here stem, on the news website lasillavacia.com. It can be located in the Internet under: <http://www.lasillavacia.com/historia/4726>, last accessed on 30 December 2009.
 5. An exception here is a handbook published by FLIP in 2007, *Manual para el apoyo emocional del periodista*, explaining how to recognize psychic burdening in journalists, as well as how to deal with it. It can be downloaded on the organization's homepage.

4. Change instead of standstill

Neither can it be said that Colombian media and the journalists and editors working for them have it easy, nor that they accept this. Despite difficult structural and socio-political conditions, especially in the regions, since the end of the 1990s an ever clearer change in the self-images of Colombian journalists can be detected. They have changed their rather passive-reactive attitude into a tendency toward playing a more active role in conflict reportage. Among journalists and reporters a lively debate on their own actions and their own roles in Colombian society prevails – as well in regard to problems that result from monopolistic media structures and in regard to how to deal with them. Furthermore, upon closer examination it is harder to see what situation actually prevails in the country (war, armed conflict, post-conflict). There is also disagreement on this among journalists, and some are of the opinion that it is a matter of a process of internal armed conflict with post-conflict structures. Finally, it is apparent that many Colombian media (above all the print media) have developed from “lapdogs” to “watchdogs” of politics – this holds at least for those who have advantages in the centralized media landscape because they work for a well-established editorial staff with sufficient resources and also dispose of the required analytic ability and sensitivity. A change in Colombian journalism and its repositioning is likewise also revealed by growing local engagement. In the course of time various specialized organizations have been established in Colombia that attempt with respectively different thematic emphases and methodological approaches to support journalists and editors in their everyday and conflict-specific work. The respective offerings, accompanying analyses and projects are subsumed under the concept of “media assistance.” Colombian media assistance organizations include, among others, the Fundación Nuevo Periodismo Iberoamericano (FNPI, founded in 1994), the Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa (FLIP, 1996), Medios para la Paz (MPP, 1996), the Centro de Solidaridad de la Federación Internacional de Periodistas Colombia (CESO-FIP, 2000), the Proyecto Antonio Nariño (PAN, 2001), as well as Reporteros de Colombia (2005). Their engagement is increasing, becoming more concrete and manifesting itself. In 2007, the Federación Colombiana de Periodistas (FECOLPER) was founded, which, as noted above, is today the only national journalistic association in Colombia. It unites the forces of 1300 journalists and editors from 21 of in all 32 Departamentos. The aim of FECOLPER is to improve the working conditions of journalists in order to thereby increase the quality of information that is made available.

The area of media assistance has until now, however, not yet been consolidated. This is also confirmed by the employees of the Proyecto Antonio Nariño (PAN) who have now taken on this problem. Besides their declared aim of furthering press and information freedom, they additionally have recently committed themselves to improving the coordination and cooperation of journalistic support programs. This coordination of local engagement is an important starting point in order to better exploit the potential of “media assistance.” Only the cooperation of the various organizations can make it possible to adequately deal with the complex problem situation of journalistic work.

“Media assistance” as an approach for transforming or respectively coping with structures of violence will of course not alone transform violent processes such as those in Colombia into peace furthering relationships. But it is an important and enduring instrument of conflict management and unfolds its effects only over the long term. It thereby is not subject to cyclical political oscillations.

“Media Assistance” can aid journalists in their reportage to make the media into what they can be in a peace-building process – important vehicles on the path to peace.

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