Media ethics in wartime: the code for the coverage of the colombian armed conflict

Yeny Serrano[1]

Abstract

By analysing the "code for the coverage of the Colombian armed conflict", this paper argues that journalism ethics needs to be understood not only as a matter of journalists. Ethics also depends on the context which journalists do their job. For example, in wartime, the reporting of news is influenced not only by the economic, symbolic and media constraints, but also by the strategic aims of the armed groups. Thus, ethics codes are more than documents in which journalists state how to do their job in a right way. Like the case of the Colombian armed conflict illustrates, ethics codes are documents in which journalists defend their independence, protect themselves from threats and claim for better work conditions. In this sense, ethics codes in wartime function more as political acts of communications rather than just training documents.

Key words: ethics, armed conflict, strategy, journalists, Colombia, news.

Introduction

The coverage of wars and internal conflicts by mass media is often criticized, as in the particular case of the Colombian armed conflict. Journalists are blamed because they disrespect victims and report news in a way which favours one of the parties to the conflict (Arias, Chacón, Cristancho, & Quebedo, 2003; Bonilla, 2002; García Raya & Romero Rodríguez, 2001). Journalists often reply that they do their best and blame the pressure put by sources and media rating requirements. They also accuse the manipulation by the armed groups (Giraldo, Roldán, & Flórez, 2003; MPP, 2006). In this context, one of the means that journalists have found to improve their job consist of writing ethics codes. Nevertheless, ethics in journalism are usually associated with ideas of how journalists should do their job (Sanders, 2010, p. 531). Moreover, discussions about journalism ethics are not new. Actually, Stephen Ward identifies five stages in the development of journalism ethics:

1. The invention of an ethical discourse during the seventeenth century.
2. The creation of a "public ethics" based on the idea that the press plays the role of a Fourth State.
3. The liberal theory of the press during the nineteenth century.
4. The development and criticism of this liberal doctrine resulting in a professional ethics of objective journalism.
5. A "mixed-media" ethics which lacks consensus on what principles apply across different types of media (Ward, 2009, p. 295).

In other words, since the profession began, journalists have worried about the right way to report news. Thus, ethics codes are documents which clarify principles and

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[1] Lecturer at the department of Information and Communication Sciences University of Strasbourg
yeny.serrano@unistra.fr

standards about what journalists should do in a specific situation in order to do "right" their job (Ward, 2009, p. 296). Nonetheless, a significant number of cases show that journalists constantly transgress their own professional codes, especially in wartime. As it has been said before, such is the case of the coverage of the Colombian armed conflict. While Colombian journalists commit to reporting truthful, accurate and balanced information in their professional and training documents (Castro, Villamizar, Restrepo, & Guerrero, 2005; CPB, 1990; El Colombiano, 2003; El Tiempo, 2003; Márquez González, 2003; MPP, 2006), the analysis of news reports has shown that news about the conflict are unbalanced and biased in a way which favours one of the parties to the conflict (Flores & Crawford, 2001; López, 2003; Serrano, 2012).

More specifically, this paper argues that "*The code for the coverage of the Colombian armed conflict*"[2] (Márquez González, 2003) is not a professional document addressed to journalists in order to tell them how to cover the conflict. The code is a political act of communication addressed to the audiences, armed groups (journalists' sources), media owners and managers. In fact, the analysis of the context in which the code was written along with its content suggests that the journalists' principles of accuracy, impartiality and neutrality are not compatible with the military strategic aims of the armed groups who also play a role of journalistic sources. Thus, this paper seeks to explain why the principles set in the code seem to be contradictory to the context in which journalists have to do their job. The paper also states that the strategy of the code is to claim editorial independence from media organizations and armed sources as well as to justify professional and ethical mistakes to various audiences.

This argument is consistent with literature advocating for a more comprehensive approach to ethics in journalism (Ward, 2005) and the definition of journalism ethics codes as documents framed by specific ideological, political and social influences (Wilkins & Brennen, 2004, p. 308). For this purpose, the next section describes briefly the context and the content of "the code for the coverage of the Colombian armed conflict". Then, the third section examines how the context of war influences the job of journalists and why the code cannot be a training document. The paper concludes by supporting the idea of the necessity of a holistic approach to journalism ethics and ethics codes as something more than professional training documents.
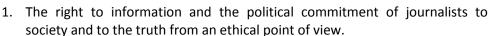
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The code for the coverage of the Colombian armed conflict
Before Colombian journalists wrote an ethics code specifically applied to the coverage of the conflict, they had written a more general code: "Code of ethics and responsibility of journalists" (CPB, 1990). The purpose of this code is to "point out to journalists a set of basic principles of behaviour based on rational principles of ethical and professional behaviour" (CPB, 1990). The code proclaims the ideal of the veracity of news, independence from sources. It is said that the main obligation for journalists is to inform in an accurate and comprehensible way. This code is taught in journalism schools and still functions as a reference for journalists concerning the main professional principles.

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[2] *Código para el cubrimiento del conflicto armado colombiano* (Márquez González, 2003), available at http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/media_standards/Codigo%20para% 20el%20cubrimiento%20del%20conflicto%20armado%20colombiano.pdf

Nevertheless, in 2003 a code for coverage of the Colombian armed conflict was written by the head of the *Centro de Solidaridad de la Federación Internacional de Periodistas*[3] and founder member of the professional association *Medios para la Paz*[4] (Márquez González, 2003). At that time, the situation for journalists in Arauca (one of the regions where the conflict has been the most intense) had become very difficult. Most of the journalists covering the conflict in Arauca had left because of threats from the armed groups. This was the reason why a code applying exclusively to the coverage of the armed conflict was published. The document is organised in three parts[5]: an outline of the issues, a list of standards that journalists commit to, and a conclusion. The first part states three considerations on which journalists base the code:

1. The right to information and the political commitment of journalists to society and to the truth from an ethical point of view.
2. Covering the armed conflict supposes that any message provided by an armed group, legal (the military) or illegal (paramilitary and guerrilla groups), may be propaganda which seeks to favour the particular interests of the group.
3. Journalists are citizens whose mission is to inform other citizens by working towards the common good. For journalists information is a social good. They condemn violence as a method of solving conflicts. They recognise that their duty is to cover war, without hiding or exaggerating its causes, consequences and context.

These three first considerations illustrate the ideal of accurate, truthful and balanced reporting. This approach to journalists' work is what Stephen Ward calls *the objectivity and social responsibility model* (Ward, 2009, pp. 298–299), which means that journalists adhere to "objectivity" as a dominant ethical idea. This ideal of objective news reporting includes the claim of independence from government and business influence and a strict distinction between news and opinion. This model corresponds to one of Ward's five ethics development stages: the development and criticism of the liberal doctrine during the 20th century resulting in a professional ethics of objective journalism (Ward, 2009, p. 295). These three considerations also show journalists' awareness of the manipulation exerted by the armed groups. Nevertheless, the code is a document written only by journalists. Audiences and actors involved in the conflict did not participate in writing it. Thus standards set in the code correspond exclusively to journalistic logic.

The second part of the code lists nine principles to which journalists commit. Five of them concern the relationship with sources (state, legal and illegal social groups):

1. "We will maintain a strictly professional relationship with our sources (...). We reject discrimination, coercion, intimidation or any privilege which could compromise our independence".
2. "We will not reveal the identity or location of sources if asked (...)".
3. "We will make a particular effort to verify information with different sources. We will compare and verify any statement provided during interviews, press

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[3] Centre of Solidarity of the International Federation of Journalists.
[4] Media for Peace.
[5] The author of this paper translates and summarizes the most important parts of the text. The original text in Spanish can be download at:
http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/media_standards/Codigo%20para%20el%20cubrimiento%20del%20conflicto%20armado%20colombiano.pdf.

conferences or through press releases. (...) If we have only one source, we will explain that the report is based on only one version".

4. "We will enrich the agenda about the war by allowing any citizen to expressing their opinion and peace proposals. We think that peace is the most important outcome (...)".

5. "Under no circumstances will we assume the functions of any legal state institution or an illegal centre of intelligence or any humanitarian organization (...)".

A second group of principles involves the format of news:

1. "We will use an adequate lexicon which avoids qualifying expressions and adjectives used by the groups in conflict. We will respect the right to the presumption of innocence and refer to a person suspected of have committed a crime as a "suspect" until the issuing of a final and appealable conviction. For no reason should a journalist be an instrument of war".

2. "We are not responsible for the final news outcome because professional practice determines that journalists are only responsible of the coverage and writing of news. The titling, editing and broadcast or publication of a news report are the responsibility of media owners and managers".

The last principles involve victims of the conflict, and the journalists' role with regard to the media and the state:

1. "We will respect the privacy of citizens involved in or affected by the armed conflict provided that this silence will not compromise the public interest. In all cases we will respect the grief of the victims".

2. "We will fulfil our duties of loyalty and availability as media within the framework of journalism ethics, which requires truthful information and sets aside any economic interest, within the limits of security [for journalists]. In order to ensure our independence, we need sufficient and adequate salaries (…) and also means of transport which are not owned by parties to the conflict."

The code concludes by stating that "when an armed group thinks that they have the right to use, manipulate or intimidate a journalist, they do so because they think that reason comes from weapons. For journalists, reason comes exclusively from truth" (Márquez González, 2003).

In other words, this code allows journalists to respond to the threats they had received by blaming the manipulation of the armed groups and the use of weapons. At the same time, they state how to do their job in this context: by making a commitment no to rely on the lexicon of war of armed groups, by contrasting sources, respecting legal institutions and civilians. However these particular commitments result from a particular context which is explained in the next section.

Ethics in wartime

In order to understand what the code for the coverage of the Colombian armed conflict means in the context of the Colombian armed conflict, it is necessary to remember that news reports are not only a matter for journalists. Previous research has shown that the form and content of the news produced and broadcast are influenced by media, journalistic and war communications considerations. These variables also play a role in journalism ethics, as this paper seeks to show.

Media and journalistic variables refer to the obligation for journalists to follow the demands imposed by media organisations including political bias, formatting constraints and rating requirements – while taking care to maintain credibility and dealing with the pressure exerted by sources (Berkowitz, 2009; Carlson, 2009; McQuail, 2010, Chapter 11). Thus, when journalists state in their code that they will keep an independent relationship with sources and verify information provided by them, they are setting principles which underestimate the context in which they produce news. For instance, in Colombia, news production and broadcasting is the function of private media owned by the richest families in the country who also have relationships with the government. The current president is a member of the family who owns the most important newspaper, *El Tiempo*.

Moreover, some media owners have decided to support the state and put pressure on their employees (journalists) to favour official sources when they cover the conflict. In other words, current working conditions are in contradiction to the ethical principles claimed by journalists. In their ethical code, journalists acknowledge that good salaries and resources for covering the conflict are indispensable. However, economic constraints lead media owners to reduce human and technical resources allocated to covering conflict zones. In order to respond to the pressure exerted by the armed groups, journalists have created some professional myths. For example, they prefer to quote the position of the Church because it should be neutral. Journalists also think it is better to voice the opinion of official sources because they must take responsibility for whatever is said (Rincón & Ruíz, 2002a, 2002b). The main problem with this is that official sources, government, military and state representatives are also parties to the conflict and are therefore not impartial.

This point is related to the third group of variables involved in the production of news, war communications variables, because armed groups and official sources involved in the conflict are interested in winning the war rather than informing citizens (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2010; Maltby & Keeble, 2007; Maltby, 2012). When they talk to journalists, their motivation is to make journalists talk about the war from their own point of view, that is to justify their violence and discredit the adversary. In the particular case of Colombia, the military requires the unconditional support of journalists (Bonilla, 2002; Rincón & Ruíz, 2002a). The government does not accept that journalists should give the same treatment to legal armed forces and guerrillas. The Colombian state has made arrangements to prevent journalists from using members of illegal groups as sources (CNTV, 1997; Giraldo et al., 2003; López, 2005). In this sense, when journalists say in their code that armed groups use them to disseminate propaganda, they are recognising that news is not only their preserve but that other social actors play a role in the reporting of news. One might therefore ask why journalists then set standards as if news reporting depended exclusively on them. Given that they are not allowed by the state to interview all the actors involved in the conflict, they are not able to respect the plurality and balance of sources. In this sense, the context of war interferes with journalists' ethical principles. However journalists mainly adopt an internal approach in their discussions and initiatives regarding ethics. Actually, as Stephen Ward argues, the "efforts to reform news media practices are polarized between two inadequate approaches, an 'internal' approach which considers journalism ethics the exclusive domain of journalists, and an 'external' model that believes reform requires the imposition of external regulations and regulators on news media" (Ward, 2005, p. 315). The problem with these kinds of approaches is that they neglect the fact that journalists'

jobs depend not only on what journalists do. What journalists do depends on the context and other social actors.

Discussion

Looking for better understanding the role of the ethics codes in the reporting of news about wars and armed conflicts, this paper examined the case of "the code for the coverage of the Colombian armed conflict". The aim was to argue that the constraints of mass media (symbolic and economical constraints) as well as the strategic aims of the armed groups cannot be compatible with balanced, neutral and accurate report of wars. Actually, by examining the context in which the code for the coverage of the Colombian armed conflict was written and the kind of principles set in it, one can ask:

- Why should journalists set in their ethics code principles they know in advance they will not be able to follow because of the constraints resulting from the context of war?
- What is the reason why journalists establish a code in which they commit to reporting truthful and balanced information when official sources are directly involved in the conflict and have the legitimacy to prevent journalists from verifying information with sources who do not agree with their point of view?

The argument of this paper is that the way in which scholars and journalists have studied news reports and journalism ethics in wartime need to be discussed in a more comprehensive way. First, news reports on war result not only from journalists' work and media organizations' constraints. In times of war, media is one of the "weapons" used by the parties to the conflict in order to communicate their legitimizing discourses (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2010). In this sense, there is no reason for ignoring this fact when discussing journalism ethics in wartime. Second, concerning the code for the coverage of the armed conflict, Colombian journalists wrote this because of the threats they had received from armed groups and therefore the code was not created with the purpose of professional training or as a guideline for journalists.

More than a document telling journalists how to cover the armed conflict in a responsible way, the targets of the code are media owners and managers, armed groups and media audiences. In this sense, the code is a "political act of communication" (Ward, 2009) responding to a particular context (Wilkins & Brennen, 2004). With the code, Colombian journalists are telling the armed groups that their motivations and aims are not the same, that they defend different principles and that they disapprove of the coercion exerted by the armed groups. Journalists are also telling their audience that their margins for manoeuvre are limited because of the pressure of the armed groups, which could explain their "mistakes". Thus if they publish information which is inaccurate and biased it is not their fault, but that of the armed groups who manipulate them and of the media owners and managers who do not provide them with appropriate working conditions. Finally, Colombian journalists are also demanding editorial independence from media owners and managers. In this sense, this study supports Ward's proposal (Ward, 2005) regarding the need to adopt a holistic ethical approach in order to take into account the role of sources and audiences in the making of news reports by journalists. This holistic approach to journalism ethics would allow journalists to establish clearer codes for training in how to respond to the constraints of a context of war.

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