

**WHAT DOES JOURNALISM OWE TO PEACE? THE METAJOURNALISTIC
DISCOURSE OF MEDIA FAILURE AFTER COLOMBIA'S 2016 PEACE
REFERENDUM**

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Abstract

On Oct. 2, 2016, against all predictions, Colombian voters rejected a proposed peace deal with FARC rebels that would have marked the end of a 50-year-old internal conflict. Similar to what happened after the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's election in the United States that same year, the unexpected results of the Colombian peace referendum resulted in a wave of media criticism. This study examines this body of criticism in the Colombian case through qualitative, critical thematic analysis of published media criticism that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the vote and semi-directed interviews with Colombian journalists who personally covered the referendum. The findings show that a metajournalistic discourse of media failure materialized following the vote, with potential implications for the local journalistic culture. Three dimensions are identified in the journalists' responses to this discourse. They acknowledge that errors and poor journalistic habits were present in the vote's coverage; they push back by identifying external pressures to journalism that caused systemic media failures; and they speak with ambivalence about persisting journalistic practices and norms, showing willingness to revisit some of them in their own practice. A discussion based on the findings links theoretical scholarship on the Brexit and Trump's cases to the Colombian vote by showing that the experience of covering the referendum, and the ensuing criticism that the media sustained, opened the door for journalists to engage in a debate over the merits of objectivity, just like the two other cases did in their respective contexts. A situated analysis that takes into account the local context of Colombia's journalistic culture proposes new angles to this debate. It suggests that internal changes in that culture, such as the demise of an organization that used to champion peace activism in journalism, has resulted in changes to how journalists understand and apply the objectivity norm when covering matters of conflict and peace. This raises the question of whether material conditions in any given journalistic context may influence how journalists understand and apply objectivity, thus contributing new insights to the ongoing debate on the merits of this norm not just in the Colombian context but globally as well.

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Introduction

On Oct. 2, 2016, the Colombian electorate was asked to vote in a referendum to ratify or reject a proposed peace agreement reached between the government and armed guerrillas known as *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC). The deal would effectively dismantle the 50-year-old guerrillas who were partially responsible for a bloody internal conflict that directly victimized well over eight million Colombians, including 450,000 fatal victims (CIDH: Informe, 2022). It was the first time a complete peace process had been finalized between government and the FARC rebel forces, although not the first time the State had successfully dismantled a guerrilla force through dialogue. The armed group known as M-19 signed a peace deal with the administration of then President Virgilio Barco in 1990, in a process that was widely seen as successful. A previous attempt to negotiate with the FARC, however, had failed in 1999-2002.

In the days and weeks preceding the Oct. 2, 2016 vote, voting-intention polls and the majority of news reports predicted a comfortable win for the Yes vote (Caballero, 2016; “Opinómetro,” 2016). Most of the print press endorsed this option, too (MOE, 2017). Despite the widespread assumption that the peace deal would prevail, voters ultimately rejected it by a small margin of 50.23% against 49.76% (www.registraduria.gov.co). The unexpected results prompted an immediate reaction against the media. Critics accused news organizations and journalists for “failing” audiences, condemning them for several faults including their inability to predict the results, failing to mobilize people to support the peace agreement, and failing to capture the various reasons behind the high levels of apprehension towards the peace deal (Manga, 2016). They also accused some news organizations of sabotaging the vote (Rincón, 2016) and declared traditional media as “irrelevant” (“Los medios tradicionales,” 2016). At the

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time, many journalists responded to critics through public statements where they accepted some of the blame for the results. Among other admissions, they acknowledged that they were “arrogant” (Botero, 2016) and regretted their failure to capture the heterogenous nature of No voters (“Debate en RCN,” 2016).

The Colombian referendum¹ occurred in the same year as two other controversial national votes that yielded unexpected results and which also resulted in waves of media criticism, Brexit (on Jun. 23) and Donald Trump’s election as U.S. president (on Nov. 8). A significant body of literature in journalism and media studies has emerged from these two votes examining the news media’s performance, including their potential incidence—or lack thereof—in the results. Scholars have offered accounts of how the media covered the votes, for example in terms of how much attention Trump received versus Hilary Clinton (Faris et al., 2017; Patterson, 2016), or how British journalists favoured horse-race reporting in detriment of more nuanced coverage about the implications of leaving the European Union (Levy et al., 2016). Several scholars have examined social, technological, and cultural circumstances in which the media operated as they covered the votes, by observing the intersection of news with social media, the widespread use of misinformation, issues of anti-media populism, etc. (Hall et al., 2018; Kellner, 2016; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018). A set of more theoretical works have also emerged from the

¹ A note on the use of the term “referendum” throughout this thesis. My decision to refer to the Colombian peace vote as “the peace referendum” as opposed to “the peace plebiscite,” which would be the closer translation from the Spanish, is based on the following explanation by the scholars Molina and Chicaíza (2018): In English, the terms “plebiscite” and “referendum” are synonymous, both designating popular consultations through voting about important issues. The term *plebiscite*, however, has taken on a negative connotation throughout the years to describe popular consultations where free, fair, and competitive conditions have not been met. In Spanish and in particular in Colombia, legal definitions for *plebiscito* and *referendo* are distinct. A *referendo* is an appeal to the public to either approve or reject a proposed law or to support or eliminate an existing law. A *plebiscito* is a popular pronouncement in which the people may support or reject a decision made by the Executive branch. This distinction explains why in Colombia and therefore in most Spanish-language media the Colombian peace vote is referred to as “el plebiscito por la paz” while in English the vote is described as “the peace referendum” (Molina & Chicaíza, 2018, p. 131).

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Brexit and Trump votes, examining for example the rise of “post-truth” (Kurtz, 2018) and questions about whether media truly offer information rather than a sense of identity (Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018). Others have examined how these atypical campaigns marked by populism and incendiary rhetoric posed challenges to journalism’s adherence to balance and objectivity (i.e., Carlson et al., 2021; Zelizer, 2018a and 2018b).

In Colombia, a notable body of scholarly literature has also emerged from inquiries around the media’s role during the peace referendum. Most works have stemmed from large media-monitoring studies and subsequent content analyses of news items from traditional news organizations (e.g., MOE, 2017). The largely descriptive studies have provided insights into how the media covered the peace vote, including finding that most national and regional media endorsed the Yes vote (Alurralde, 2018); that journalists approached the vote with the same tools they usually apply to electoral races, favouring horse-race reporting (Gómez Giraldo & Cárdenas Ruiz, 2017); or that they over-relied on polls and on statements from official sources to build their stories (MOE, 2017). Several scholars have addressed external and inter-related factors that may have impacted journalistic work during the referendum campaign, including a lack of access to information about the peace process (MOE, 2017); active efforts by political actors to fabricate and spread falsehoods about the peace agreement (Sáenz de Miera, 2017; Gómez Suárez, 2016); and the intersection of the emotional vote with the force of social media and instant messaging apps (MOE, 2017). Few studies on the particular case of Colombia have offered theoretical insights into the media’s performance during the referendum, or examined how, or whether, the local journalistic culture might have experienced any form of profound change as a result of their alleged failure covering the peace vote. So far, scholars have not considered the outpour of media criticism that resulted from the peace referendum as a

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consolidated discourse, nor have they approached this discourse as an object of academic study. The literature also lacks works examining how journalists have responded to this particular criticism, despite the existence of multiple statements by journalists who actively responded to their critics at the time, showing a willingness to reflect on their performance. This thesis addresses these gaps by considering the negative reactions against the media that followed the peace vote as an object of study, and by providing space for journalists to confront such criticisms.

Scope and Terms

This thesis takes the Colombian peace referendum as a case study to examine media criticism as a phenomenon that occurs when national votes of historical importance yield unexpected results. While it does not constitute a comparative study with the cases of Brexit and Trump's election, this study proposes that the three cases share an important characteristic, the fact that their unexpected results caused an immediate anti-media backlash that amounts to a discourse of media failure. This study aims to examine the Colombian case in particular. Its questions are inspired in some of the research that has resulted from examinations of journalism's performance during the two other votes, particularly theoretical works exploring the impact of those experiences in local journalistic cultures (e.g., Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018; Carlson et al., 2021; Zelizer, 2018a and 2018b). Moreover, the findings from this study offer new insights into aspects of journalism that have not yet been explored in research about those two other cases and identifies avenues for potential comparative studies.

The present qualitative study is grounded on the understanding of journalism as a culture constituted by a common frame of symbols which journalists are socialized to follow and reinforce (Ryfe, 2012). As recent scholarship in the field of comparative journalism studies has

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shown, when this culture of journalism is examined in different contexts, and even different newsrooms, a complex picture of multiple journalism *cultures*—also sometimes referred to as multiple *journalisms*—is revealed (Hanitzsch, 2007).

Understanding journalism as culture means accepting that the boundaries of this culture are contingent on multiple elements that together sustain the limits of the journalistic field in any given context. The culture of journalism, and by extension journalistic production, are both contingent on contextual factors including social and cultural dynamics, material conditions, and, most relevant here, discourses about journalism (Carlson, 2017, Zelizer, 2009). Media criticism, and journalists' responses to it, have particularly shown to have the capacity to effect change in journalistic culture and practice, for example by legitimizing or delegitimizing certain actions, norms, and entrenched routines (Carlson 2016; Zelizer 1992). As Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) have noted, insofar as journalists are creators and disseminators of the news, they are critical “members of a discursive community” (Hanitzsch & Vos 2017, p. 8)—what they have to say about their profession, even in cases when they must defend themselves from critics, ultimately informs the discourse that shapes their field. This study also follows the notion that having journalists talk about their work is a powerful instrument for maintaining or redrawing the boundaries of journalistic culture (Ryfe, 2012). Journalists tend to perform work that they have learned to do “unreflectively” (Ryfe, 2012). When compelled to think about their performance, they are given an opportunity to access elements of their journalistic culture that may help them reconnect with their professional culture, providing either solace or cause for questioning what they do (Perdomo & Rodrigues-Rouleau, 2021). These opportunities for reflection remind journalists that they have at their disposal “the cultural elements that define

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journalism,” which amount to “a reservoir of meaning” to which journalists may appeal to render their actions sensible (Ryfe, 2012, p. 16).

The study is based on two principal objectives. First, to determine whether a discourse of media failure materialized following the Oct. 2 vote and if so, identify its principal discursive elements. And second, to provide space for journalists to confront and discuss such criticisms and reflect on their own performance covering the vote. A third objective derived from these two initial questions is to gauge whether the experience covering the peace vote, and the media criticism discourse that followed, may have impacted the local journalistic culture in any way.

The research is based on qualitative analysis of two sets of data. One is a corpus of 58 published pieces of media criticism published in the 29 days following the Oct. 2 peace referendum (until the end of the month). The second is based on interviews with 14 Colombian journalists who covered the vote. Through critical thematic analysis, or CTA (Lawless & Chen, 2019), I determine that a discourse of media failure materialized after the Colombian peace vote and investigate its principal discursive elements. Following Carlson’s (2017) theory of metajournalistic discourse, I argue that the display of media criticism that followed the peace vote amounts to a *metajournalistic* discourse of media failure, with potential to affect the boundaries and practice of the local journalistic culture. The study also examines how journalists who personally covered the peace referendum confront and engage with this discourse of failure and reflect back on their own performance, via face-to-face interviews with 14 Colombian journalists. The two data sets offer an opportunity to see for the first time how an organic reaction against the media following the unexpected results of a national vote of historic importance consolidated into a discourse of media failure, and how journalists discursively respond to it, offering clues about potential implications for the local journalistic culture. In

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response to the third objective—determining whether the local journalistic culture was affected in any way by the experience of covering the peace vote and the ensuing criticism—I propose a discussion about a potential normative implication of this experience. In the Discussion and Conclusions chapter, I draw a link between the Colombian referendum and scholarship about Brexit and the Trump election that has identified tensions within what Zelizer (2018b) calls the Anglo-American journalistic culture with respect to the merits of journalistic objectivity. Based on this study’s findings, I show how the experience of covering the peace vote, and the criticism that ensued, also opened the door to a localized debate on how journalists view and apply objectivity in their work. Two revelations are significant. The first is that, amongst the 14 journalists interviewed for this study, the most senior practitioners are clearly the most critical of objectivity compared to the youngest reporters, defying common assumptions of how this debate has played out in North America. The second is that their position vis à vis objectivity is informed by the shared lived experience of having worked through an era of peace activism in journalism in Colombia that ended in the early 2000s, which suggests a potential link between material conditions and how journalists interpret and apply objectivity.

Why the Colombian Peace Vote

A significant body of scholarly work has emerged in several academic fields, including journalism and media studies, as well as political science and others, that examine the media’s role in three national votes of historical importance that yielded unexpected results in 2016—Brexit, the Colombian peace referendum, and the U.S. presidential election—establishing them as impactful moments for journalism in both local and global ways. Yet many gaps in the literature remain, some of which this thesis addresses. While numerous studies have critically examined the role of the media in covering each of these ballots, scholars have yet to consider

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the negative anti-media reactions that followed any of these votes as consolidated media-criticism discourses worthy of academic study. By extension, there are no studies examining journalists' responses to such discourses. This thesis addresses both of these gaps by taking the Colombian peace referendum as a case study. In doing so, it contributes to journalism studies in at least five significant ways.

First, this study adds to ongoing scholarship on Brexit, Trump, and the Colombian referendum—the three controversial votes of 2016—by being the first (as far as I know) to consider the anti-media backlash that followed the results as a consolidated discourse of media failure, arguing that it amounts to a *metajournalistic* discourse with potential to impact the local journalistic culture.

Second, it is widely accepted that journalism plays a crucial role in informing the public during democratic processes, including referendums. Most academic studies have tended to focus on elections. Ridge-Newman (2018) notes that only recently scholars have started looking into the specific dynamic between the news media and referendums, with potential implications for how we understand this relationship. For example, referendums tend to be focused on matters of great complexity and historical significance that are nevertheless presented to voters through a Yes/No binary. In this sense, studying how the news media approach their coverage during the campaign phase matters in terms of news routines, editorial orientation, and media contributions to polarization, something that scholars have examined in the cases of the Scottish independence referendum (Dekavalla 2016), Brexit (Ridge-Newman, 2018), and the Colombian peace vote (Rincón Morera, 2018). This study thus contributes to the literature on the relationship between journalism and referendums.

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Third, as Cheruiyot (2022), Waisbord (2020) and others have recently argued, traditional journalism faces increasing cynicism and disinformation, intense anti-press rhetoric from different social actors, as well as personal attacks on journalists amidst a context of populist resurgence. As the vast majority of journalism occurs now online, the “digital discursive ecology” in which journalism operates is producing new forms of “digital hate,” posing potentially-existential threats to the field (Cheruiyot, 2022, p. 2). The lens of journalism-as-culture has established that journalism is a field dependent on discursive authority and legitimacy (Carlson, 2017; Vos & Thomas, 2018). It seems urgent, then, to examine the changing nature of press criticism and how journalists are rationalizing and responding to it. Indeed, amidst this new context of intensifying media criticism, recent research into anti-media rhetoric has openly encouraged journalists to defend their profession more vigorously (Koliska et al., 2020; Pingree et al., 2018). This study contributes to the literature on recent forms of intense anti-media criticism in the digital discursive ecology. Moreover, it also helps decentralize media-criticism research, which has tended to focus on American/Western European contexts, especially when it comes to journalist responses to criticism (e.g., Koliska et al., 2020; Krämer, 2018; von Krogh & Svensson, 2017), and these studies are sometimes accepted as having universal claims to applicability. As Cheruiyot (2022) notes, it seems urgent to decentralize this focus with studies offering perspectives from a variety of journalistic cultures in the face of the changing nature of criticism of traditional journalism in different contexts. This study contributes to this literature by offering an in-depth examination of media criticism in Colombia.

Fourth, in a context of increased media criticism, not all of which is constructive, providing opportunities for journalists to reflect on their work is especially necessary. This

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research opens an avenue for journalists to confront the discourse of media failure that followed the Colombian peace vote and reflect back on their own work. Asking journalists to justify a particular action allows them to “turn to the reservoir” of their journalistic culture to seek meaning and open up space for them to disagree on why certain things were done in one way or another (Ryfe, 2012). The results of this study show that Colombian journalists often disagree in judging how they and their colleagues covered the peace vote. That is a positive finding. As Ryfe notes, “disagreement is crucial for the culture of journalism because it provides journalists an opportunity to reconfirm the salience of the norms and practices that bind them together” (Ryfe, 2012, p. 16). In opening this space for disagreement, this study contributes to the literature on journalist responses to criticism.

Finally, traditionally media scholars and media sociologists in Latin America have tended to conduct “media-centric” studies, as both Claudia Mellado (2012) and Silvio Waisbord (2014) have noted. Most recent studies focused on journalism more precisely have provided a wealth of empirical data and descriptive analysis of the state of journalism—or journalisms—in the region. Those studies provide a solid base of information from which scholars may derive new theoretical perspectives. As noted, the body of literature that has resulted from examinations of the media’s much-criticized performance during the Colombian peace referendum have been largely descriptive, offering insights in terms of *what the media did*, such as dominant editorial orientation, news approaches, and sourcing (e.g., MOE, 2017; Alurralde, 2018, etc.). Few scholars have offered theoretical analyses that may shed light on how or whether the referendum experience and the ensuing discourse of media failure may impact the local journalistic culture. This study responds to Waisbord’s invitation to “produce innovative theoretical arguments that capitalize on the wealth of empirical lines of research and the unique intellectual tradition in the

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region” (Waisbord, 2014, p. 12). It does so by proposing in the final Discussion and Conclusions chapter that the experience of covering the referendum and the anti-media backlash that followed may have given way to a normative debate in the local journalistic culture about how journalists understand and apply the objectivity norm.

Methods

This study relied on qualitative methods for collecting and analysing two sets of data. One is a corpus of written pieces of media criticism published in the days following the vote, directly alluding to how Colombian media covered the referendum. The second is derived from face-to-face, semi-directed interviews with 14 journalists who covered the Colombian peace referendum, conducted between January and February, 2020, in Bogotá and Medellín, Colombia. For the corpus, a total of 58 articles containing media criticism were found through exhaustive online search conducted through Google and Google News in Spanish using relevant terms including “*plebiscito*,” “*medios*,” and so on. The corpus includes opinion columns, editorials, and analyses published between Oct. 2, 2016 (voting day) and Oct. 31, 2016, in different types of news media with online presence (e.g., newspapers, trade publications, student media, etc.). The specific time frame ensured my ability to establish whether the discourse of media failure indeed materialized immediately after the vote.

Although this corpus cannot be considered fully representative of the discourse of media criticism that emerged after the referendum—it lacks, for example, key elements such as criticism posted on social media—it nonetheless contains sufficient information to establish that a large wave of media criticism followed the results of the peace vote. It shows that critics published their arguments across popular media platforms with the largest-known audiences such as *El Espectador* newspaper, the weekly *Semana*, the websites of the largest radio stations

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such as RCN Radio and Caracol radio, and independent digital publications such as Las2Orillas, ensuring that a wide audience would receive such criticisms. All of those pieces of criticism were available—and remain available—online, and thus can be considered as part of what Cheruiyot (2022) calls the “digital discursive ecology.” Together, I argue that the articles constitute evidence of a metajournalistic discourse of media failure that materialized after the peace vote—a discourse containing key elements of current discussions in the local journalistic culture.

The interviews follow the format of semi-directed conversations with practitioners, a common qualitative method for learning about journalistic cultures (Mellado, 2019). They also provide an opportunity for journalists to talk about their work, which serves as a conduit for practitioners to reconnect with their journalistic culture as they reflect on practice, norms, and roles (Ryfe, 2012; Perdomo & Rodrigues Rouleau, 2020). The 45- to 60-minute interviews were conducted in person in Bogotá and Medellín, Colombia, and include 14 local journalists who personally covered the peace vote. Participants were selected through non-probabilistic convenience sampling. The sample was intentionally recruited to provide a range of diversity in terms of age, gender, seniority, and type of newsroom. The news outlets they work for differ in many ways including size, reach, format, and, to some extent, political orientation. The semi-structured interviews had four base components: They encouraged journalists to recall their personal reaction to media criticism that followed the vote’s results, reflect on specific criticisms, discuss their own performance covering the peace vote, and provide their thoughts on how Colombian media *should* have performed covering the peace vote. These conversations provide unique insights, reflections, and information about how journalists approached the peace vote and how they now make sense of their work and of the criticism that their field sustained

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following the results. Both the corpus of articles and the transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed through NVivo following critical thematic analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019), an enhanced form of thematic analysis that considers how “the patterned results are connected to larger social ideologies, linking frequency and forcefulness [of statements] to the influence of dominant social discourses” (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p. 95).

The data for this study is originally in Spanish. Conducting qualitative research in a language other than English for a study that is intended for an English-speaking audience presents particular challenges in terms of translation, as van Nes and colleagues (2010) have noted. The core of qualitative research is ultimately interpretation of meaning, and language is central to qualitative research, from the process of data collection to the ensuing analysis and interpretation of the textual data. Translation is also in itself an act of interpretation, and thus it is possible that meaning may be lost or altered in the course of translation. “Staying in the original language as long and as much as possible (van Nes et al., 2010, p. 315)” is a strategy for qualitative research that is conducted in non-English languages. Following this recommendation, the coding-as-analysis process for this study was conducted based on the original Spanish texts. The texts themselves were not translated in full. Throughout this paper, however, I provide quotes from the corpus of articles and from the interviews that I personally translated *after selecting them* to ensure readability in English. I also provide “fluid descriptions of meanings using various English formulations” (van Nes et al., 2010, p. 315) to ensure that the original Spanish content can be more fully appreciated and understood.

Structure

The thesis is organized into five main sections that follow the Introduction. The first section, *Literature Review*, explains the theoretical framework and offers an overview of the

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relevant literature, split into three principal components. The first gathers scholarship about journalism cultures in Latin America and Colombia, as well as research into the historical relationship between Colombian media/journalism and the armed conflict. The second introduces the literature on media criticism with particular attention to recent studies that have identified a new era of media-criticism scholarship (e.g., Cheruiyot, 2022; Waisbord, 2020). The third and final section of the *Literature Review* offers a brief account of works examining the media's performance during Brexit and the Trump election, and explores more in-depth existing research about the media's role in the Colombian peace referendum. The section ends with the research questions.

The second section, *Methods* explains in detail the methods of inquiry and analysis used for this research and the epistemological underpinnings sustaining this study. It explains how the corpus of articles was constructed into an object of study and how and which participants were recruited. Included here is a justification for using critical thematic analysis, or CTA (Lawless & Chen, 2019) as a method for coding, analysing, and organizing data into a detailed thematic framework for each data set (articles and interviews). The third and fourth sections are based on the thematic frameworks that resulted from coding and analyzing each the corpus and the interviews, respectively. *Results Chapter 1, The Metajournalistic Discourse of Media Failure*, shows how such a discourse arose immediately after the results of the Colombian peace vote were released. The thematic framework reveals three main themes in this discourse. First, the authors, fatalistically, express the view that the vote happened in a country incapable of transcending its violent past, implying that the media's failure was somewhat *expected*. Second, the articles paint the media as a tired institution indebted to financial and political interests, and therefore incapable of covering the vote appropriately. And third, the discourse implies that

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journalism is increasingly out of touch because the media offered an unbalanced account of the referendum by siding—mostly—with the Yes vote. Each of these themes is explored and analyzed in detail in light of recent literature on media criticism that proposes that journalists face “factionalised platforms, a diverse set of critics and, at the same time, highly polarised spaces” (Cheruiyot, 2022, p. 2). Among other findings, this chapter shows that, in particular with respect to the charge that journalists offered an unbalanced account of the vote, Colombian journalistic culture appears to be permeated by current debates about the norm of objectivity happening elsewhere and which are the subject of contemporary journalism research from around the world (i.e., Cushion & Lewis, 2017; Tandoc & Thomas, 2017), especially in similar contexts such as the Brexit and Trump votes (i.e., Carlson et al., 2021; Zelizer, 2018b).

Results Chapter 2, Interviews with Journalists, presents the results from coding and analyzing conversations with 14 Colombian journalists. The resulting thematic framework reveals three main themes. First, journalists admit that the media failed on multiple fronts in their coverage of the peace referendum. Second, participants push back against critics arguing that, despite systemic media failures, journalists were not responsible for most of the issues that arose during this coverage. And third, journalists show ambivalence when assessing their own performance and express being open to discussing practice and norms that may have been problematic during the referendum. Findings from this chapter provide a wholistic view of how the metajournalistic discourse of media failure that followed the peace vote may have impacted the local journalistic culture. They reveal that journalists think that common errors and poor practice habits persist in the local culture, and that they see change happening under pressure from external factors including deliberate operations to sow division through disinformation, in particular through social media and instant messaging apps. Moreover, this chapter confirms that

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the local journalistic culture is indeed permeated by current normative debates happening elsewhere, as participants organically engage in reflections about the future of objectivity in local journalistic practice.

The fifth and final section, *Discussion and Conclusions*, proposes a discussion on the norm of objectivity as a particular focus of criticism. By further exploring journalists' responses and reflections on this particular point, I show how the experience of covering the peace vote, and its ensuing criticism, may have impacted the local journalistic culture—and how these reflections may open new arguments in normative discussions about the future of objectivity in journalism more generally. The discussion draws inspiration from scholarship on the media's performance during Brexit and Trump that has revealed tensions with the interpretation and applications of objectivity. Instead of simply confirming that similar tensions were found in the study's findings, however, I propose a situated analysis that yields unique findings that are particular to the Colombian journalistic culture and therefore contribute to enrich this debate more generally. The conclusion also gathers the main findings of this study, its most relevant contributions, and identifies new avenues for future research.

Literature Review

The peace referendum of Oct. 2, 2016, in Colombia marked a moment of intense media scrutiny. Critics accused the local media for “failing” audiences for various reasons, from failing to predict the results to failing to mobilize people to vote Yes (Manga, 2016). They blamed them for their arrogance (Botero, 2016), accused some of them of sabotaging the vote (Rincón, 2016), and declared traditional media as “irrelevant” (“Los medios tradicionales,” 2016). At the time, many journalists responded to their critics through public statements where they accepted some of the blame for the results and offered reflections on their performance (e.g., Botero, 2016; “Debate en RCN; “Los medios deben reconciliarse, 2016; Restrepo, 2016, etc.).

A significant body of scholarly work has emerged following the peace vote examining various aspects of the media’s performance and its potential incidence in the results. Most works have relied on quantitative and qualitative content analyses of news items and have been largely descriptive of how journalists covered the vote. So far, scholars have not considered the outpour of media criticism that followed the October vote as a consolidated discourse, nor have they considered this an object of study. Also missing from the literature are considerations about how journalists have responded to this specific case of focused media criticism. This thesis addresses these gaps. It considers the discourse of media failure that emerged following the peace vote as an object of study, examines journalists’ responses to this particular form of criticism, and explores potential implications for the local journalistic culture.

The Colombian vote has been compared to two other national votes that yielded unexpected results in 2016, Brexit and Donald Trump’s election in the U.S. (Molina & Chicaíza, 2018). A wide variety of literature has emerged from these controversial votes of 2016 that consider the role of the media in shaping the results. Studies have arisen from multiple

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disciplines including history, political science, and media studies. Some of that literature is considered here to help illuminate the kind of journalism-studies scholarship that has been produced as a result. The studies that are particular to journalism span two categories, one descriptive, with studies examining *how* journalists and media organizations approached each of these votes; the other is more theoretical, with scholars looking into *why* journalists and media organizations operated in the ways they did.

This thesis is based on two principal concepts. The theory that journalism is a culture, or series of cultures that are context-bound and whose limits are open to contestation (Ryfe, 2012), and the theory of metajournalism, which proposes that discourses about journalism have the power to effect change in the culture(s) of journalism (Carlson, 2015).

Journalism as Culture

Journalism-studies scholars have conceptualized journalism as culture by examining the shared values, norms, and practices of journalists in different contexts. My study follows the works of David Ryfe (2012), who in studying American journalism has found that the “culture of journalism” comprises a set of principles, norms, and practices that journalists adhere to and live by. These “constitutive rules” of journalism include, for example, the act of bearing witness to report back to audiences, adhering to the norm of objectivity, or engaging in the routine practice of finding and verifying information. Ryfe argues that journalism fits the description of the word culture—from the Latin *cultis*, “to make things grow,” or to “cultivate”—because it is ultimately the sum of “the symbols that have grown up within and around (journalism) to define it as distinctive social field” (Ryfe, 2012, p. 8). This common frame of symbols that constitute the journalistic culture acts as a “gravitational force for journalists, pulling them together so that they are more similar to one another than they are to members of any other occupation” (Ryfe,

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2012, p. 11). They allow journalists to distinguish themselves from non-journalists and, even though they may vary greatly from newsroom to newsroom, or from employed reporters to freelancers, they are what delineate the contours of journalism as a culture. Although scholarship often treats journalism as a profession, journalists are not professionals in the same way that doctors or engineers are, as an extensive literature on the sociology of journalism has established (e.g., Schudson & Anderson, 2009). In this sense, Ryfe and others have argued that the culture of journalism is what makes journalists *become* journalists, as they are socialized to believe that journalism must be done a certain way and not another. The culture of journalism is, therefore, the series of constitutive rules that journalists are socialized to follow and reinforce, and a way to ensure that minimal standards of quality are met and that journalistic production can be recognized both by journalists and audiences as journalism. This understanding of journalism as culture follows a large line of scholarship, including the works of media scholar James Carey (2008), who argued in the late 1980s that journalism was a cultural way of expressing public life in the form of news. It is also based on the works of media ethnographers such as Leon Sigal (1973), Gaye Tuchman (1978) and Herbert Gans (1979), all of whom established that the culture of journalism is permanently constructed and maintained through unconscious routines, or what Tuchman (1978) called the “rituals” of journalism. The limits of what can be recognized as journalism are cultural too. Journalism looks a certain way, or has looked a certain way, for long enough as to be easily recognized as such. When journalism deviates too far from that form, then members of the field will flag it as foreign to the cultural form of journalism. As Ryfe puts it,

Suppose, for example that I scribbled a few lines from a dream I had last night and tried to publish them as journalism. My editor naturally might express confusion: *this* is news? The limits of journalism lie at my ability to justify my scribbles as news. (Ryfe, 2012, p. 17)

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Moreover, the culture of journalism is not just the sum of elements that allow us to recognize journalism as such, or that which makes journalists become socialized as professional journalists. It is also the reservoir from where journalists derive meaning and ultimately come to recognize *themselves* as journalists. When journalists are compelled to think about work that they usually perform “unreflectively” (Ryfe, 2012), they have at their disposal “the cultural elements that define journalism ... as a reservoir of meaning to which journalists appeal to render their actions sensible (Ryfe, 2012, p. 16).

Particularly relevant to this understanding of journalism as culture, especially in the sense that cultures are bound by context, hegemonic discourses, and material conditions in which they exist, are the works of the Latin American School of Communication, whose members embraced the notion of media (not only journalism, but all forms of media) as a culture whose output could never be considered in isolation from societal, economic, or material conditions of production, distribution, and consumption. As one of its most prominent members, Jesús Martín Barbero (1987) argued, the study of media would be better understood as the study of *mediations*.

For several decades, “media” as an object of study in Latin America referred to the mass media, encompassing film, radio, television, and, less prominently, the press. Scholars approached the subject of media as a need to unpack the cultural meaning of society’s interactions with the media (Waisbord, 2014). Martín Barbero’s *From Media to Mediations* (originally published in Spanish as *De los Medios a las Mediaciones*, 1987) and Néstor García Canclini’s (2005) *Hybrid Cultures* (originally “*Culturas híbridas*,” 1989) cemented the Latin American School’s cultural approach to media studies by prioritizing localized understandings of media dynamics in the region, including the production, distribution, idiosyncratic languages,

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and other elements particular to the Latin American context, and how they permeated all aspects of social life. As Martín Barbero proposed, media studies were not to be concerned with the study of the inner workings of media companies or media institutions, nor with media products themselves. Rather, scholars were encouraged to see media as a series of *mediations* that shaped culture and in turn shaped by it. As Waisbord (2014) suggests, Martín Barbero and García Canclini's theoretical force resided in that they created a theoretical universe where the people, far from passively watching the telenovela or the evening newscast, did things with media, entering into a dialectic relationship with mass culture (Scolari, 2017).

The works of the Latin American school of communication, as well as those of Carey (2008), Ryfe (2012) and others cited above have helped crystalize an understanding of journalism as a culture. Far from indicating that journalists share somewhat “universal” values and norms in different contexts, however, their work has demonstrated journalism is not *a single culture* but rather that multiple cultures of journalism exist (Hanitzsch, 2007), and sometimes several cultures co-exist in one single context (Waisbord, 2000). As early as the late 1960s, scholars began comparing journalistic cultures, starting with McLeod and Rush's (1969) examinations of Latin American and U.S. journalists. Comparative journalism studies deal with journalists' professional orientations, everyday practices, content journalistic content, professional routines, among others. There is a wide variety of methods and concepts within this branch of research. Some scholars have based their work on distinguishing “journalism cultures” (Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Hanitzsch, 2007; Zelizer, 2000). Others speak of “news cultures” (e.g., Deuze, 2002; Esser, 2008) or journalism's “professional” and “occupational cultures” (Golding & Elliott, 1979). Since the late 1990s, scholars such as Weaver (1998) began surveying journalists in different countries and regions to determine whether they share values, norms, and

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practices. Since then, the field of comparative journalism has flourished, as more researchers have sought to understand what makes each journalistic culture unique while still belonging to the broad field of “journalism.” The vast production of the Worlds of Journalism Study, which has since 2010 operated as a global collaborative examination of journalistic culture in over 66 countries, stands out in the subfield of comparative journalism (see for example Hanitzsch, Hanusch, Ramaprasad, & De Beer’s *Worlds of Journalism: Journalistic Cultures Around the Globe*, 2019).

From understanding journalism as a culture (or series of them), it follows that the act of producing journalism is also considered a cultural practice, and the product of journalism a cultural artifact. Journalism-studies scholars have conceptualized journalism as cultural practice to contest the idea of journalism “as an independent, fixed, and naturalized knowledge practice, even if this is the image of journalism its practitioners favor” (Carlson, 2015, p. 354). For decades now, scholars have supported the view that journalism practice is culturally situated and contingent on social, technological, and economic contexts. Carlson (2015) proposes that we take into account three premises that underline the nature of journalism as cultural practice. The first is that *journalism varies in time and space*. This entails examining journalism as a practice that is impermanent and varies within as well as across media organizations, countries, and time periods. Journalism might also take on different forms depending on variations across normative imperatives, material conditions of production, security, etc. The second is that *journalism is contextual*. Journalistic practice cannot be separated from the specific context in which it is produced and circulated, thus reasserting the notion that journalism is variable across time and space. The third is that *journalism is a set of social relationships*. This premise underlines the social nature of journalistic practice (and ultimately its authority), whereby journalists seek

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legitimacy through relational dynamics with actors both within and outside the journalistic field (Carlson, 2015, p. 354).

In sum, the consideration of journalism as cultural practice compels scholars to see that

... journalism cannot be reduced to only the practitioners that create it. Conceptualizations of journalism must also encompass the technologies that facilitate it, the sources that contribute to it, the advertisers that fund it, the corporations that run it, the audiences that consume it, the policymakers that shape it, and the critics that critique it. In short, journalism is not merely a form of information transfer or a set of insulated professional communicators. It marks an entire social context that far exceeds the isolated news text. Actors make cultures through action, and like any other cultural form, journalism is malleable and shaped from within and from the outside. Approaching the study of journalism culturally involves stressing connections between action and meaning, and emphasizing a systemic vision incorporating relations among diverse actors. (Carlson, 2017, p. 7)

Finally, understanding journalism as culture, or a series of cultures, implies that journalism as we know it is ultimately impermanent. The form of journalism that we are most familiar with today—the one that has for the past two decades faced multiple existential crises—is the culture of journalism that “congealed into a relatively cohesive culture” around the 1920s when most American journalists were employed in newspapers (Ryfe, 2012, p. 14). From that moment on, most newspapers performed journalism in similar ways, applying the same formats and worked for the same purposes. In so doing, “much like bread rising in an oven, a culture of journalism inflated into existence” (Ryfe, 2012, p. 14). This culture was largely based on rituals but also on discourse. As Chalaby (1996) has established, journalism as we experience it today largely originated in an “Anglo-American invention” dated to the 19th century. During this period emerged “a specialized and increasingly autonomous field of discursive production, the journalistic field” (Chalaby, 1996, p. 304). This is not to say that journalistic cultures across different geographies are today identical to one another. Far from it. As Eloisa Hercovitz (2004) noted, journalism in regions outside North America and Western Europe, particularly in Latin

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America, has evolved in the “interplay of local cultural norms with foreign influences in their profession” (Herscovitz, 2004, p. 71). In Latin America, she notes, “journalism is the dramatic result of conflicting forces, some internal and some external to the craft” (Herscovitz, 2004, p. 71).

The study of journalism as culture and the related notion that journalism is a cultural production contingent on context, space, and time, provide a theoretical framework from where we understand that the boundaries of the journalistic field remain open to contestation. The actors that may affect and push such boundaries in one way or another can live both within and outside the field (Carlson, 2017). This concept—that journalism is a site of contestation—is related to the second principle underlying this study, the theory of metajournalism.

Metajournalism

Metajournalism has been defined as “journalism about journalism” (Ogbebor, 2020; Wise & Brewer, 2010), or as “discussions by journalists about journalism practices” (Vos & Craft, 2018, p. 1510). These meta-discourses about journalism may be authored by practitioners in the field (Ogbebor, 2020) or by non-journalistic actors such as critics, government officials, historians, and educators when they engage in public reflections or discussions about journalistic work (Carlson, 2016). Metajournalistic discourses can also occur both in journalistic and non-journalistic sites. For example, they may appear in editorials or opinion columns for newspapers or magazines, but they can also occur in academic publications or social media. Metajournalistic discourses can be either reactive, for example in reaction to a news event, a journalistic failure, or attacks to the field, or generative, such as when actors proactively discuss the virtues of journalistic values, practice, or norms (Carlson, 2016).

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My study draws from Matt Carlson's theory of metajournalistic discourses, which he argues have the power to effect change in the journalistic field (Carlson, 2015; Carlson, 2016). Carlson's theory is based on seeing discourses about journalism as the source of shared cultural understandings of the journalistic field. Carlson notes that discourse about journalism is both "structured and structuring, for it is both determined by its social relations and affects them" (Carlson, 2015, p. 353). Journalism is a "field of discourse that continually constructs meanings around journalism and its larger social place" (Carlson, 2016, p. 350), and is therefore vulnerable to what various actors have to say about its meanings and practice. Because journalism is a social and cultural practice, its legitimacy can both arise and face contestation through discursive means. Carlson contends that "journalists alone cannot coerce acceptance of their preferred meanings... arguments for cultural authority require the cooperation of diverse actors inside and outside of journalism" (Carlson, 2015, p. 355).

Carlson (2016) argues that metajournalistic discourses can shape the contours of journalistic identity and practice by performing three distinct functions or processes that can overlap, and often do. The first is *Definition making*. Here metajournalistic discourses can impact how certain language that ascribes meaning to different news actors, practices, or products, is maintained or altered. As Carlson notes, journalism lives in a "complex discursive environment" where important questions such as "*who is a journalist*" can "reveal the degree to which definitions become points of contention among actors with differing perspectives" (Carlson, 2016, p. 359). In this sense, metajournalistic discourses can be the place where journalists can draw or re-draw discourse about their cultural language to maintain "definitional control" over the journalistic field (Carlson, 2016, p. 359). The second function is *boundary setting*. Here metajournalistic discourses hold discursive power over the limits of journalistic

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culture. These discourses can, for example, express who has “epistemic authority”—or “knowledge practices accepted by others as legitimate”—to remain within the journalistic field and who should be excluded from it (Carlson, 2016, p. 360). It is not only journalists but different actors who engage in boundary work through “interpretive labour” that can help stretch or shrink the contours of the journalistic field. The third function of metajournalistic discourses is *Legitimization*. This is the process through which metajournalistic discourses can help legitimize actors, forms, and norms of journalism. Here Carlson follows the work of Barbie Zelizer (1992), who established that journalistic legitimacy can be established through narratives that legitimate certain journalistic forms and actors. By the same token, metajournalistic discourses can also be the source through which forms and actors may be *de-legitimized*.

Because of the three functions identified above, metajournalistic discourses are integral to the construction of journalistic authority. In his theory of the relational nature of journalistic authority, Carlson (2017) argues that authority is not inherent to journalism but rather a relationship “between those laying claim to authority and those who accept it” (Carlson, 2017, p. 119). Through their work as well as through metajournalistic texts, journalists constantly engage in authority-seeking practices by which they intend to obtain authority from audiences and society’s institutions. In this view, the work of journalists is embedded with pledges to convince other actors that they are the best suited to “create legitimate discursive knowledge” about the world (Carlson, 2017, p. 13). Metajournalism is, in this sense, an important vehicle through which journalists may make claims to their authority by conveying their values, proving their credentials, and demonstrating that they remain good-standing members of the journalistic culture. Just like with the *legitimation* function, however, metajournalistic discourses may also present threats to journalistic authority by doing the opposite: challenging journalistic values,

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eroding trust in journalists' credentials, or questioning whether individual journalists can still belong in the field.

Journalism Cultures in Latin America

Multiple journalistic cultures co-exist within Latin America, a region with highly complex and hybrid media systems (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002), yet some common characteristics can be highlighted. In their study comparing Southern European and Latin American media systems with samples from Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, Hallin and Papathanassopoulos (2002) found five major characteristics in these systems:

Low levels of newspaper circulation, a tradition of advocacy reporting, instrumentalization of privately-owned media, politicization of public broadcasting and broadcast regulation, and limited development of journalism as an autonomous profession. (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002, p. 176-177)

On the question of advocacy reporting, the authors note that journalism in these regions tends to stray from the Anglo-American model of neutrality, as it emphasizes commentary and opinion, and newspapers are vocal about political-ideological allegiances.

Scholars have identified clientelism and political parallelism as two key concepts to understand media in Latin America. The two are linked to the fact that newspapers played a key role in supporting state formation during the region's wars of independence, and hence have evolved hand-in-hand with political parties that have led the shaping of republican governance (Ayala Osorio, 2006; Rincón, 2005). On the other hand, in the late 20th century, across Latin America an adoption of democratic governance following military dictatorships meant lifting censorship edicts, holding competitive elections, and notably transforming many political institutions, including the mass media (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2002). In the particular case of Colombia, though its last military dictatorship had ended in the 1950s, the permanent state of armed civil strife induced by conflict with armed guerrillas introduced a particular

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complexity to its democratic and media systems (Santos Calderón, 1989). With this change in relations between political, social, and economic institutions, new dynamics between the media and their counterparts were born, while some elements of old hierarchies persisted. Clientelism and political parallelism are contemporary forms of old ties between the media and the government in the region. Clientelism “refers to a pattern of social organization in which access to social resources is controlled by patrons and delivered to clients in exchange for deference and various kinds of support” (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2002, p. 184). As Latin American countries transitioned to democracy, a culture of clientelism took hold through the realization that in order to gain access to anything, from economic capital to social recognition, to political influence, a relationship of *quid pro quo* had to be established between parties. This has meant the persistent application of hierarchical social structures that remained from the old system, recognizing not the military as before but the state as the ultimate patron. Given its central role in controlling national economies, the state in these countries has maintained its place at the top, with clusters of economic elites orbiting around it. This has resulted in a handful of industrialists being highly involved in party politics, with the judiciary and administrative apparatus also highly politicized in most countries. The media, therefore, exists while navigating a clientelist relationship with governments at the local, regional and national levels (Matos, 2012), as well as currying favour to economic elites that remain in large part majority-owners of media conglomerates in the region. In turn, government and economic elites have traditionally sought to instrumentalize news output to advance their own specific agendas (Ayala Osorio, 2006; Caballero, 2018) and in response the media play to their own strengths by threatening to expose wrongdoing selectively (Waisbord, 2000).

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The culture of clientelism has had important implications for the practice—and criticism— of journalism in the region. Media sociologists have noted that, unlike in North America, the Latin American press evolved from a need to exert political influence over their public, which was largely concentrated in small political and industrialist elites. Especially in the case of the written press (newspapers, magazines), the news media has never found a mass market for its output in the region mostly because its audience is not intended to be the broad public but the controlling elites (Ayala Osorio 2006). In this sense, information has tended to be treated as a private resource “to be exchanged only within particularistic relationships. The service of providing patrons with information” (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2002, p. 188). This clientelist orientation of the media has operated in detriment of the public’s interest. Because media/state and media/power relationships have been mostly sieved through the demands of clientelist dynamics, particular interests have tended to dominate journalistic practice in the region, thus making it more difficult for journalism, as a culture, to focus on matters of truly-public interest (Mellado et al. 2017).

The concept of clientelism has continued to evolve and become more complex over the years in the literature. Some even argue that the relational dynamic of clientelism, combined with the neoliberal reforms that have swept Latin American media systems over the past two to three decades, may have benefited the media, allowing them to break free from political subsidies (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2002). In any case, the concept of clientelism remains a key concept for understanding media and journalistic culture in Latin America.

As for political parallelism, the concept refers to how in certain media systems partisan politics and the press work in parallel with each other, following the same organizational logic and aligning themselves along ideological/partisan lines against common opponents. The

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concept was first introduced by Seymour-Ure (1974), and Blumler and Gurevitch (1975) as a theoretical lens to study press/politics parallelism, and was narrowly applied to the written press (not including broadcast media) in certain Western European countries. In their seminal work *Comparing Media Systems* (2004), in which they analyzed media in 18 countries in Europe and North America, Hallin and Mancini relaunched the concept of political parallelism when they considered it one of the four analytical variables of their comparative framework. Mancini (2012) argues that political parallelism has now less to do with party structures than it does with political ideologies. In this sense, political parallelism today refers to media organizations that operate alongside ideological lines in the left/centre/right of a given country's political spectrum. In certain political models, “political parallelism may be observed in the specific history and origins of [a] newspaper and its journalists, in the content of the news and in the affiliation of the readership” (Mancini, 2012, p. 267). Whereas historical journalism studies have found that the lure of wielding political and ideological influence lies at the origin of most journalistic models across the globe (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), be it from religious, economic, or political elites, today political parallelism is a common descriptor of media systems in Latin America. Some scholars, among them de Albuquerque (2013; 2018), have questioned the applicability of the concept of political parallelism in contexts outside Western Europe, yet researchers of Latin American media models and systems continue to identify high levels of political parallelism in the region, using Hallin and Mancini's (2004) and Mancini's (2012) definition of parallelism as a form of alignment, more than a structural imitation of political parties.

As noted, the particularities of Latin America's media systems, and their relationship to the state, stem largely from the tight relationship that the press and political parties built from the wars of independence, as parties communicated their nascent ideologies to independentist elites

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through newspapers (Ayala Osorio, 2006; Rincón, 2010). Thus, the notions of political parallelism and clientelism are directly connected to the fact that countries in the region are hard-wired to maintain a certain level of trust in the state as the main defender of the public good, which has in turn shaped journalistic cultures and modes of news production in the region (Alves, 2005). Critical questions about the incidence of clientelism and political parallelism in the regions' journalistic cultures are by no means simple descriptors. These socio-cultural relationships are deeply rooted in the history's colonial culture and the very formation of its individual countries. In the case of Colombia, for example, political parallelism is also linked to actual familial links between the government and the press: presidents have often been media owners; regional economic elites with ties to government have founded and bought newspapers; and telecommunication regulations have tended to be handled in corrupt dealings favouring a handful of families and individual industrialists (Arroyave & Barrios, 2012; Caballero, 2018). Throughout the region, private media corporations have flourished under the legal, economic, and political protection of dictatorial and authoritarian regimes; they became even stronger with the wave of economic liberalization and political democratization in the mid-1980s (Fox and Waisbord, 2002). This path resulted in cementing the place of neo-conservative media elites that learned to benefit from negotiating their collusion and support for the status quo in exchange for economic benefits and government-advertising contracts or paid-for unacknowledged publicity (Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez, 2014; Mastrini and Bolaño, 2000).

Normative Approaches

Latin America's press cultures are not cohesively or consistently built around easily-identifiable norms, as the region's cultures straddle ambiguous traditions and remain tangled in rich and hybrid cultural contradictions, as well as in the political and economic boundaries of

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idiosyncratic local media industries (Waisbord, 1996). The two paradigms that have marked press models in Western democracies—The American “independent” model or Europe’s “partisan” model—have failed to accurately capture the organization of the press Latin America, as the media sociologist Silvio Waisbord (1996) has argued. Journalism’s normative approaches in the region have responded to three co-existing models borne out of local historical contexts according to Waisbord (1996). The first is a partisan press, which developed mostly in countries with well-defined political parties grounded in civil society. Colombia and Uruguay are cited as examples. The second is a press model emulating the American values of independence from party and government influences that tended to defend the “establishment”. Newspapers in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Peru marked the dominant presence of this model in those contexts. The third is a more partisan model that emerged out of resistance movements within cultural and social forces protesting against military dictatorships in Southern Cone countries such as Chile. In this model, journalism was more openly partisan and actively advocated for social justice. While some countries have shown each of these models more prominently, the reality is that the three have coexisted for decades throughout the region (Waisbord, 1996, pp. 3344-45).

In comparative media literature derived from media sociology and political communication, critical studies of Latin American media have been set against the standards of American and Western European models of media/journalism. Hughes and Lawson (2005), for example, identified five barriers to the creation of media systems that are truly independent and pluralistic:

- (a) violence against journalists encouraged by a generalized weakness in the rule of law;
- (b) holdover authoritarian laws and policies that chill assertive reporting;
- (c) oligarchic ownership of television, the region’s dominant medium;
- (d) the continuing spottiness of professional journalistic norms; and
- (e) the limited reach of print media, community-based broadcasters, and new communication technologies. (Hughes and Lawson, 2005, p. 9-10)

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Studying Latin American journalism, Waisbord (1996) notes that “none of the factors that originated the emergence of professional and objective journalism in the United States can be found in South America” (Waisbord, 1996, p. 199). Market conditions were starkly different and, perhaps more importantly, “nor did any cultural movement determined to purify politics from partisan politics or to imprint journalism with a more impartial character ever surface” (Waisbord, 1996, p. 199). In his edited volume *¿Por Qué Nos Odian Tanto?* (in English, “*Why do They Hate us so Much?*”), Rincón (2010) reflects on the changing relationship between the state and the news media across Latin America at the turn of the 21st century. A pertinent question asked in the book is “Must we defend the media from the state, or the state from journalists and the media?” (Rincón, 2010, p. 236). With the rise of populist governments in the region, both on the left (i.e., Venezuela, Ecuador) and the right (i.e., Colombia and more recently Brazil) ends of the political spectrum, there has been a mounting pressure for journalists and media organizations to “cooperate” with the political visions of these governments, with leaders publicly denouncing those who fail to fall in line (Waisbord, 2009). In Colombia, individual journalists who have sought to maintain the government in check over the past two decades have been systematically persecuted and harassed by state-sanctioned security forces, with complete impunity (Martínez, 2010).

Scholars in the first decade of this century focused on clientelism and political parallelism as major characteristics of journalistic cultures in the region, but also noted that Latin American media were trending towards a more politically-independent press culture (Alves, 2005; Waisbord, 2000). In a study by Alves (2005), an analysis of the trajectory of five Latin American newspapers concludes that they contributed to democratization and acted as “driving forces of modernization of the rest of the media in their countries,” where an attitude of

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servitude had characterized a “lap dog” press (Alves, 2005, p. 181). In interviews with newspaper editors, Alves found that increasing independence from political interference and partisanship was a main feature. Scholars noted that economic factors, such as a wave of media conglomeration, had also attenuated some of the traditional political binds that had tied the media thus far, marking a transition from family-controlled media organizations to the emergence of large and diversified multimedia corporations (Peruzzotti & Smulovitz, 2002). Some changes appeared while other elements stayed the same. A more professionalized print media, nonprofit community outlets, and digital-news outlets provided a more pluralistic and independent ethos to local journalistic cultures. By contrast, broadcast television remains the dominant medium in the region and the most concentrated and controlled (Hughes & Lawson, 2005). More recently, several Latin American countries including Bolivia, Ecuador, Brazil, and Venezuela, have experienced a resurgence of radical and populist politics that have affected media-state relations, sometimes becoming antagonistic and volatile (Waisbord, 2013). Reforms to allegedly steer media systems towards a more public-service model have disguised state attempts to coerce or control journalistic content (Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez, 2014; Lugo-Ocando, 2008; Waisbord, 2013). Amidst the tensions between old and new ways to do journalism, Waisbord (2006) argues that in terms of normative approaches, the region’s journalistic culture continues to lack normative coherence:

In Latin America...persistent political instability reflected the lack of consensus among key social forces upon which a common set of norms could have existed. Nor were news organizations removed from political divisions. In fact, because they have been typically aligned with specific interests, the press actively promoted divisions, fueling recurrent political crisis. When news organizations neither pretend to promote distinctive political positions nor attempt to be above the political fray, there is no room for journalism to follow a set of coherent norms. Despite the consolidation of liberal democracy in the region, such dynamics have not disappeared. (Waisbord, 2006, p. 68)

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Overall, scholarship on the particular ways in which local journalistic cultures across Latin America emerged and have evolved continue to be the focus of media/journalism studies, and continue to yield a wide variety of perspectives. Two main areas of study are relevant for this study. On the one hand, the history of clientelism and political parallelism in journalistic cultures in the region has not only been established in the literature but also absorbed into public media criticism, as Rincón (2010) has shown. On the other hand, Wasibord (2006) and other's argument that there has been historically a lack of normative consensus across journalistic practice in the region show gaps in how we can better understand how journalists both interpret and apply journalistic norms in their work today—and how such negotiations may be permeated by ongoing normative debates happening in influential journalistic cultures such as in the Anglo-American culture (Zelizer, 2018b).

Journalism Studies

So far this literature review has mentioned works within the field of media/communication studies in Latin America. As Claudia Mellado (2012) and Silvio Waisbord (2014) have noted, traditionally media scholars and media sociologists in the region have tended to conduct “media-centric” studies. The sub field of journalism studies deserves particular attention now. It is only recently that scholars have taken a more granular look at journalistic production in Latin America. Since the beginning of this century, journalism studies in the region have in large part relied on quantitative and mixed-methods survey research, inspired by comparative studies such as Weaver's *The Global Journalist* (1998), and its updated version *The Global Journalist in the 21st Century* (Weaver and Willnat, 2012). These studies found similarities in how journalists conduct their work, while recognizing that cultural context and norms affect how they perceive their own performance and journalism as a craft.

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Comparative studies seeking to understand journalists' professional views have experienced a boom over the past decade (Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2017). The Worlds of Journalism project is notable, having deployed several large-scale surveys with journalists from around the world since 2007, gathering data from over 27,000 journalists in 66 countries (Worldsofjournalism.org). The comparative framework has provided new avenues to critically study local journalisms in the region. Moreover, as noted in the Theoretical Framework, these global comparisons of journalists and their work have led scholars to coalesce around the consensus that there is no single universal notion of journalism, but rather a plurality of journalisms with individual characteristics born out of a constant negotiation of local, regional, and global actors (Hanitzsch, 2007). There is widespread recognition today of the fact that, in Latin America, local media systems have been uniquely shaped by local contexts (Fox and Waisbord, 2002; Waisbord, 2013). These comparative studies have contributed to the field by "mapping differences and similarities across countries, supporting the argument of context-bound journalism cultures, particularly in developing countries and transitional democracies" (Mellado et. al, 2017, p. 1088). A large part of this literature has looked into how journalists perceive their individual and collective social roles, and how they navigate normative ideals while constrained by everyday realities. Mellado and colleagues (2012) were among the first scholars to analyze professional roles across countries, finding contrasting differences between Chile, Brazil, and Mexico. Comparing journalists' professional views in these three countries, the authors found that "epistemological and ethical views of the journalists seem to be trapped in contesting terrains of ambiguity, where organizational, media routines and individual factors override country differences" (Mellado et. al, 2012, p. 60). The Worlds of Journalism project has become a major source of data for empirical and theoretical analyses of journalism cultures and

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practice in different Latin American countries. The project has produced individual country reports about journalism cultures from Colombia (Arroyave & Garcés, 2017); Chile (Mellado et al., 2017); Brazil (Moreira, 2017); Mexico (Márquez-Ramírez & Hughes, 2016); and Ecuador (Oller Alonso, 2016). Across these countries, results show that the majority of journalists align with a positivist view of their role, stressing the importance of “reporting things as they are.” They also see promoting tolerance and cultural diversity as part of their professional role. To a lesser extent, journalists in these countries also agree that advocating for social change and providing analysis of current affairs are among their primary professional roles (Amado & Oller Alonso, 2017). Other works of comparative journalism include Herscovitz’s (2004) examination of journalist’s perceptions of media roles, ethics, and foreign influences on journalism in Brazil. She found that Brazilian journalists think they emulate the American model of journalism, but further interviews with local media critics suggest that “these journalists have developed a caricature of American journalism and lack a clear perspective on how to deal with foreign journalistic influences” (Herscovitz, 2004, p. 71). Depending on the country, some Latin American journalists are more “active”—seeking to alter government policies—and others are more “neutral.” Oller and colleagues (2017) found that countries of the Southern Cone – Argentina, Brazil and Chile— support a professional position of neutrality with respect to politics and policies, whereas those in Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador and Mexico, “are much more interventionist, both for and against the government and its policies” (Oller et. al, 2017, p. 20). The authors also found that in these latter countries journalists tend to perceive their role as having civic importance, highlighting the social value of journalism, and underscore the importance of monitoring the work of political and economic leaders. They also adhere to the notion that journalists should provide analysis of current affairs.

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Most studies in comparative journalism have relied on self-reporting surveys to assess journalists' professional views, based on the assumption that what journalists think of their work is reflected on the work they produce (Mellado et. al, 2017). Recently, however, scholars have challenged this position by comparing journalists' professional roles research with analyses of role performance. In Latin America, the work of Claudia Mellado is particularly notable (Mellado et. al, 2017; Mellado, Hellmueller, & Donsbach, 2016; Mellado, 2015). Mellado (2019) argues that, whereas surveys with journalists have generally yielded similar attachment among journalists to the same professional roles across Latin America, a more granular study of journalists' role performance reveals "patterns of multilayered hybridization in professional role performance worldwide, with journalistic cultures displaying multiple 'types of journalism' that do not fully resemble ideal typologies of roles or media systems" (Mellado, 2019, p. 4).

Journalism Cultures in Colombia

Loaiza Cano (1999) remarked at the end of the last century that academic literature about journalism in Colombia remained a catalogue of names and technical descriptions of media formats, but had yet to consolidate as the history of a culture and its role in constructing Colombian society. Since then, several academic works have begun to trace the outline of a journalistic culture that has evolved in a unique context marked by similar factors as those of neighbouring countries but also by a particular history of acute political violence. In *Colombia y sus oligarquías*, Caballero (2018) traces the historic links of Colombian media to the ruling elites that largely maintain control of the mainstream media today. Rincón (2010) has shown the deep-seated and culturally-rooted antipathy towards the media that has marked several countries in the region. On the other hand, several works of comparative journalism studies have

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highlighted that Colombian journalists in particular tend to have a positivist epistemology and that playing the watchdog role is not a priority for many (Arroyave & Barrios, 2012).

An extensive body of literature in media and journalism studies has helped shape our understanding of Colombia's journalistic culture(s). Hallin and Papathanassopoulos (2002) highlight that journalism's close ties to elite powers are particularly obvious in Colombia, where the origins of the press are traced back to families with political power. Others have noted that Colombian journalist served almost exclusively the interests of the two organized political parties that emerged during the wars of independence without having a clear, consistent, nor inclusive vision of the nation that they were helping into being (Loaiza Cano, 1999; Ayala Osorio, 2006). Early on, newspapers emerged as tools of the powerful. Before Colombia became independent in the 19th Century, the newspaper was identified by the society of New Granada as

A tool appropriate to unify interests, the point of departure to build political and cultural hegemonies; [society realized that] the printing press imposed a mode of work that promoted communion among intellectuals; that the reproductive and repetitive product of the printer could create awareness of a common past and future for a society. That, also, it was a fundamental medium to spread ideologies, to familiarize citizens with projects of social organization. In sum, that the tentacular function of the publisher could contribute to the construction of a nation's foundation. (Loaiza Cano, 1999, p. 67)

The genesis of Colombian journalism has shaped a media system that was constituted, and remains constituted, into the ideological arm of a small economic and political elite. This has resulted in a journalistic culture that is accustomed to propping up sitting governments, while audiences have come to expect political information that is "covered in a mantle of ideological sectarianism, dogmatic and inappropriate for a political culture based on the principles of plurality and respect for others" (Ayala Osorio, 2006, online). Structurally, the media have been hardwired to sustain the status quo because they have been "designed to trust the state as defender of the public good" (Alves, 2005, p. 199). The dominant media organizations remain

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focused on serving the powerful groups that sustain them, thus prioritizing their survival and supremacy over any potential competitors (Ayala Osorio, 2006).

As Ayala Osorio (2006) has noted, in the early days of Colombian journalism, society was divided into an “illustrated” minority and “the miserable crowds,” and newspapers were directed towards the illustrated community who was in charge of managing the populace (Ayala Osorio, 2006, online). Fonnegra (1984), Santos Calderón (1989) and several others have found that the Colombian media have remained the purview of a very small but powerful elite whose members have often worked in equal measure as journalists and politicians. Among the most prominent figures are Eduardo Santos, publisher of the national newspaper *El Tiempo* and President of Colombia representing the Liberal Party from 1938 to 1942. His great-nephew Juan Manuel Santos was also an editor at *El Tiempo*, a Liberal politician and minister for various administrations, and president of Colombia from 2010 to 2018. Over the past two decades, amidst the global plummeting of print-media revenues, several of the most traditional media companies such as *El Tiempo*, *El Espectador*, and *Semana* have transferred ownership from family-run companies into media conglomerates that are still nonetheless dominated by a handful of local industrialists (“¿De quién son los medios en Colombia?” 2015; “Sarmiento compró el 100% de El Tiempo,” 2012; Torrado et al., 2020). This has done little to dissipate the widespread perception that *los poderes tradicionales* (traditional powers) remain in command of national institutions, including the media (Ayala Osorio, 2006; Mellado et. al, 2017; Waisbord, 2009). Compared to other countries in Latin America, Colombia still displays high levels of media concentration and alignment, even collusion, with economic and political elites. It is worth noting, however, that independent media and some visible individual journalists do play an important role in diversifying the local media (Guerrero & Márquez, 2014; Hellmueller &

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Mellado, 2016; Garcés & Arroyave, 2016). Today, Colombian journalism is described as lacking in quality and heft, as there is little investigative work, features, and analysis. Formerly robust investigative units that produced powerful watchdog journalism from newspaper newsrooms in the late part of the 20th century have all but disappeared (Martínez, 2010).

These recent studies illuminate key elements in the Colombian journalistic culture, particularly within the mainstream, which is the focus of this study. They also may help explain why the level of media criticism sustained following the peace vote contained so many of these common assumptions about the Colombian press—their historical collusion with power, the general distrust that marks their relationship with their publics, and so on.

On the matter of characteristics distinguishing Colombian journalists in particular, recent studies contributing to the literature of comparative journalism have shed some light, in particular with respect to normative ideals. In their work within the Worlds of Journalism project, Arroyave and Garcés (2017) found that Colombian journalists are increasingly obtaining university degrees in their field, are more inclined to see the relevance and credibility of journalism in society, and are more likely to interact with audiences compared with other journalists in the region. Others have determined that Colombian journalists tend to adhere to a positivist epistemology and, like most Latin American journalists, do not see being impartial as a guiding principle for their role in society (Arroyave & Barrios, 2012). The matter of whether Colombian journalists adhere to some ideal of objectivity is not settled, however. Other scholars have shown that journalists in the country do, for the most part, adhere to objectivity as a guiding norm (Odriozola-Chéné et al., 2017). This point is of particular relevance for this study, as a principal criticism of how Colombian media covered the peace vote is that it lacked objectivity, hinting that public expectations of journalists being objective may be out of synch

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with how journalists view and interpret this norm. Moreover, as some of the findings will show, some journalists continue to adhere to principles of objectivity and its applications—neutrality, balance—while others are openly critical of it, which renders this generalization more complicated.

Waisbord (2000) has noted that a culture of watchdog journalism has been mostly absent from the local journalistic culture. The print press, radio, and television have not traditionally acted as counter-weight or watchdogs of established powers. Arroyave and Barrios (2012) found that being a watchdog is not a priority for Colombian journalists. On the contrary, as García Ramírez and Charry Joya (2019) have noted, the media have mostly worked as *cajas de resonancia* (sounding boards) of government and political-party interests.

In 2010, Martínez identified four risks facing Colombian journalists that remain relevant today: The economic and political interests of media organizations; abuse of power on the part of government with respect to the press; the capturing of freedom of information by way of advertising; and the continuous pressure from corrupt special-interests, the mafias, and criminal actors. Martínez (2010) notes that television, which she describes as a medium that is geared for *registering* information as opposed to providing context or analysis, maintains a hold grip as the principal medium in Colombia amidst technological and societal changes that have affected mostly the print press. The latter is “in freefall” in the face of these changes and facing dwindling power. “Colombia, with 44 million inhabitants, only has 32 newspapers and they don’t reach the one million copies per day” (Martínez, 2010, p. 172).

This rich body of literature, much of which has been produced within the past 15 to 20 years, has helped situate Colombian journalistic culture(s) that allow for more granular understanding of how and why journalism operates in the way it does. This level of deep

understanding is particularly relevant to this present study, as it seeks to capture the particularities of journalistic practice and norms in a way that considers the immediate context in which journalists operated while covering the referendum—and how they reflect on what transpired after.

Colombian Journalism and the Armed Conflict

The specific context of violence has shaped a unique journalistic culture in Colombia, where living in peace has remained but a hopeful illusion for generations (Ruiz Romero et. al, 2019). Throughout the 19th century Colombia experienced several civil wars, followed by the so-called period of “*La Violencia*” which saw heavy fighting in the name of the Liberal and Conservative parties. Starting in the 1950s, an armed conflict involving armed rebels emerged from a confrontation between peasant farmers and the state and mutated into a systematic display of violence under several modes and by diverse actors, eventually financed through drug trafficking. It is a violence so pervasive that Daniel Pécault (2001) once characterized Colombia’s war as “a war against society.”

As individuals, journalists themselves have been the target of violence. Between 2000 and 2015, 53 journalists were reportedly killed in Colombia (“La palabra y el silencio,” 2015). Assassinations are only a part of the story. As a report by the Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (CNMH) determined, Colombian journalists have faced multiple violences including censorship, physical and mental intimidation, arbitrary espionage and detentions, torture, kidnapping, and targeted assassinations (“La palabra y el silencio,” 2015). The CNMH argues that, beyond affecting individual journalists, their families, and particular news operations, decades of violent dynamics affecting Colombian journalism have resulted in “collective damage to communication” —in Spanish “*daño colectivo a la comunicación*” — (“La palabra y

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el silencio,” 2015, p. 256). The damage has been expressed in several ways, including a culture of fear and threats; the rupturing of communication networks or *tejido comunicativo* in certain geographical regions caused by the forceful displacement or censorship of a critical mass of journalists; the disturbance or disintegration of public opinion by way of sowing confusion or delegitimizing journalism instigated by different actors, including the government; and disrupting the social ties of journalists with their immediate communities, for example by way of false accusations or stigmatization (“La palabra y el silencio,” 2015).

This collective damage has posed unique challenges for the practice of journalism. Scholars have found that Colombia’s protracted conflict has generated a distinct type of reporting, where news about the conflict are presented in terms of combats and immediate events, lacking in broader historic and political context, which has had a desensitizing effect in the population and even within the journalistic field (Barón & Valencia, 2001). Television coverage in particular has been blamed for turning journalism into the hegemonic representation of official points of view (Pereira & García, 2000). In recent decades, the escalation of violence has pushed the limits of news towards the edge of melodrama, uncertainty, and even entertainment (Bonilla & Gómez, 2007). Local scholars have been critical of traditional media outlets for helping maintain the status quo. Rincón-Unigarro and colleagues (2020) found in their study of four mainstream news organizations—*El Tiempo*, *El Espectador*, Noticias Caracol (TV) and Noticias RCN (TV)—that Colombia’s long armed conflict has come to be seen as intractable, in the sense that society has become used to certain frames of mind that impede them from thinking in different ways that could help it overcome the conflict itself. As they argue, the media have played a hegemonic role in producing and reproducing a “rigid epistemic base” (in the original “*base epistémica rígida*”) that helps perpetuate violence (Rincón-Unigarro et al.,

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2020, p. 108). Several scholars have reached similar conclusions, determining that the media have perpetuated—if not helped intensify—the Colombian armed conflict (e.g., Jaramillo Correa, 2008; Ruiz-Romero et. al, 2019). Part of the work of sustaining the status quo has meant sustaining or contributing to “narrative violence” (Ruiz-Romero et al., 2019) and keeping certain voices at the margin of mainstream media.

What the mass media have done in Colombia, other than hiding information, self-censoring or serving the particular interests of those who own journalistic outlets, is to prefigure the quotidian, the rural and the urban, the Indigenous, the Black, placing in the outside limits, in the periphery, those groups who are politically active; these mass media have re-constructed the matters of ‘the Others’ in line with the Europeanizing gaze that the *criollo* elites recall since the 19th century and that today remains the lens that serves the eternal spyglass with which we look at poverty, at marginality and in general the affairs of the ‘Others’ who are not included (Ayala Osorio, 2006, online – my translation).

Rincón (in Arteaga Morales et. al, 2012) argues that the media have not supported peace-building efforts in the country because traditional routines and frames are difficult to overcome. Peace is not “newsworthy” and is “boring.” The media treat peace as an abstract concept understood only as the absence of an armed conflict, despite the fact that violence in Colombia comes from different sources and is embedded in culturally complex realities. Stories about peace could be done differently using other formats, but

Our media don’t dare tell [stories] in other formats, esthetics, or points of view... they make good business telling the present, and don’t want to do anything differently: With the formats that we have today, we are not good at telling peace (Rincón, cited in Arteaga Morales et. al, 2012, p. 32. The translation is mine).

While much of the literature in journalism studies has been critical of Colombian media’s role in upholding hegemonic powers, resisting change, and turning their back on peace-building roles in favour of commercial interests (Ruiz-Romero et al., 2019), some have also highlighted efforts in the local journalistic culture to support peace efforts in the country. Students in journalism schools are taught about journalism’s responsibility towards peace-building, and that

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they should play a role in raising awareness about peace efforts (Arteaga Morales et al., 2012).

Over the decades that the conflict has lasted, Colombian journalists have created different organizations to train reporters and sustain reporting that is committed to peace building, including the storied *Medios para la Paz* (Arteaga Morales et. al, 2012). In more recent years, particularly during and after the peace negotiations (2012-2016) and ensuing peace deal with the FARC rebel forces, empirical studies suggest that new frames oriented towards peace and reconciliation have begun to emerge in Colombian media (Rincón-Unigarro et al., 2020).

Historically, some news outlets have maintained an editorial stance in favour of achieving peace through dialogue and negotiations. This is the case with the newspaper *El Espectador*, one of two national newspapers, which has maintained a consistent position of supporting peace talks with respect to the armed conflict that continued throughout the peace negotiations with FARC rebels and during the referendum campaign (Grajales Sánchez & Martínez Arévalo, 2020). A critical discourse analysis of editorials published by *El Espectador* shows a newspaper its clear support for peace dialogues, negotiations, and opposing war. The authors found, however, that this editorial line is not always consistent and has at times been outright contradictory (Grajales Sánchez & Martínez Arévalo, 2020).

The previous section, *Journalism Cultures in Latin America*, provides an overview of journalism and media scholarship that has helped our understanding of the unique ways in which journalism emerged and continues to evolve in this culturally hybrid region, an understanding that is necessary to sustain the findings of this study. The following section outlines the literature on media criticism, another area of scholarship that is essential to situate this study. It shows how media criticism studies have transitioned from scholars asking for *more* of it in the late 20th

century to more recently scholars warning of its changing nature and how new and increasing forms of criticism may present particularly heavy challenges to journalism.

Media Criticism

Journalism-centric studies in media criticism in North America have a history of taking critical discourses about journalism in good faith (Cheruiyot, 2018), with scholars arguing that journalism and its role in society are well served by critics who point out mistakes, failures, traditionally-poor practices, and structural issues (e.g., Carey, 1974; Marzolf, 1991). Scholars have encouraged popular discourses that push for media accountability and increased press freedom (McQuail 2003), and celebrated the rise of critical publics who can play a healthy watchdog function over the press (Deuze, 2005). Scholars have also seen positively the role of audiences as critics who may help strengthen media literacy in society, with media consumers seen as potential “guides” to how the media works and interpreters of news processes for wider audiences (Carey 1974; Wyatt 2007). In Latin America, scholarship about the media in the latter decades of the last century also tended to encourage media criticism, especially of on the political-economic structures that shaped the mass media (e.g., Ayala Osorio, 2006; Martín Barbero, 1987).

In the past two decades, as journalism’s existence in a digital ecosystem has continued to evolve globally, the mostly benevolent position that scholars have taken towards popular media criticism has begun to change. Cheruiyot (2022), studying journalistic cultures in African countries, and Waisbord (2020), focusing on Latin America and the U.S., both argue that traditional journalism faces increasing cynicism and disinformation, intense anti-press rhetoric from different social actors, as well as personal attacks on journalists. Waisbord (2020) sees the rise of populism in countries from the U.S. to Latin America to Asia, where political leaders on

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both ends of the political spectrum have increased attacks on journalism, as a major challenge now facing the profession. Cheruiyot (2022) has found that increasingly the display of intense anti-media rhetoric in digital spaces amounts to a new “digital discursive ecology for journalism,” where “digital hate” is on the rise and could pose potentially-existential threats to journalism (Cheruiyot, 2022, p. 2).

Others caution that the rise of media criticism is not a phenomenon related only to the media’s performance or to an irrational anti-media sentiment. It is also related to a default orientation of skepticism towards the media that has become ingrained in society. “Criticizing journalism and displaying distrust becomes not only socially acceptable but perhaps necessary for presenting oneself as an appropriately skeptical citizen,” says Carlson (2017, p. 111). In this sense, the rise of media criticism should be understood not as a direct attack on journalism necessarily but as an acknowledgement that journalism operates in an increasingly complex cultural context.

Media Criticism as Metajournalism

Beyond considering that a robust presence of media criticism signals a healthy society and helps build better press cultures, or warning that press criticism can pose existential threats to the very legitimacy of journalism, scholars have also shown that discourses about journalism can have a direct impact on journalistic cultures in terms of practice, role orientation, and normative values. Insofar as journalistic cultures are discursively constructed, they remain vulnerable to discursive attacks. Particularly Zelizer (1993) and (Carlson 2016) have proposed theoretical perspectives through which we have come to understand how media criticism can constitute metajournalistic discourse with potential to affect the workings and boundaries of the journalistic field. Media criticism—whether originated within or outside the boundaries of

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journalism—can impact journalistic discourse and prompt different reactions by journalists that can ultimately help legitimize or delegitimize journalistic practice (Carlson 2016; Zelizer 1992). As Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) have noted, as creators and disseminators of the news, journalists are critical “members of a discursive community” (Hanitzsch & Vos 2017, p. 8), and what they have to say about their profession—and what is said that they must defend against—ultimately informs the discourse that shapes it. Indeed, recent research into anti-media rhetoric has openly encouraged journalists to more vigorously defend their profession (Koliska et al., 2020; Pingree et al., 2018).

Journalist Responses to Media Criticism

A string of media-criticism literature in the field of journalism studies has dealt with the way in which journalists respond to critics. A key foundation for this research is the media-accountability literature that engages with how media organizations and individual journalists respond to public critics by taking responsibility, engaging in public relations, and performing paradigm repair (Berkowitz, 2000; von Krogh and Svensson, 2017). The latter usually occurs when particular journalistic cultures respond to media scandals, for example with studies on how journalists in the US responded to criticism for their coverage of the death of Princess Diana or how editors and journalists reacted to the Jayson Blair affair at *The New York Times* (Berkowitz, 2000; Hindman, 2005). The scale of media criticism in these cases amounted to scandals that had the potential to threaten media paradigms and therefore concerted, elaborate responses were needed to persuade the public that journalism, despite major faults, maintained its relevance as a social actor. When such crises occur and journalistic paradigms are challenged,

Journalists re-present these paradigms anew to readers and audiences, in an attempt to re-acquaint these news consumers with what journalism really is and what role it plays in society. This is done by drawing expressed or implied boundaries between acceptable

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and unacceptable, legal and illegal, ethical and unethical journalistic practice. (Berkowitz & Eko 2007: 782-783)

Scholars have established that journalists tend to follow a pattern of typical responses when facing criticism. These fall within a defensive-accommodative continuum, a model inspired by crisis-management literature in business scholarship (Coombs, 1998). According to Groenhart and Bardoel (2011), when applied to journalists the continuum includes seven types of responses ranging from defiance to acceptance of blame. Through an empirical analysis of letters from editors-in-chief in the Netherlands, the authors found that journalists tend to respond to criticism with: 1) *Rejection*, or the rebuttal, sometimes aggressive, of any claims by critics. 2) *Refutation*, or a more tempered rebuttal to critics which recognizes the legitimacy of the claims. 3) *Evasion*, whereby journalists may recognize that there is a fault but evade responsibility for it, usually by blaming “other journalists” for it. 4) *Justification*, where a certain practice is both “admitted and approved,” justified under the circumstances, or explained as normal. 5) *Mitigation*, or playing down the severity of a fault by explaining the limits of journalism and the individuals who practice it. 6) *Confession*, where there is an admission of responsibility and an acknowledgement that the fault should not have occurred in the first place. And, finally, 7) *Alteration*, where admission of blame results in an offer to self-correct and seek remedies (Groenhart and Bardoel, 2011, p. 11-14). Since this study, other scholars have identified additional typical responses to criticism by journalists. Of note is Krogh and Svensson’s (2017), who in their examination of the Swedish podcast MattssonHelin, led by two newspapers editors who respond to media critics, found two more dimensions of media responses to criticism: Ambivalence, where journalists offer contradictory responses to criticism, and engagement, where journalists offer to engage in discussions with critics, showing willingness to enter an honest conversation with the public.

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As scholars express renewed interest in how journalists respond to negative comments, some are also recording the changing nature of criticism, noting that populist attacks against journalists and their work are on the rise (Waisbord, 2020). With more and more journalism occurring online, an increased volume of “evaluations and judgements of journalism” are also taking place in the digital space, prompting scholars such as Cheruiyot (2022) to consider “digital media criticism” as an object of study. Cheruiyot identifies the digital space as the ultimate locus in which metajournalistic discourses are both produced and disseminated for actors within and outside the boundaries of journalism. In a “chaotic digital discursive ecology,” he notes, “the foremost need of journalists is to grapple with factionalised platforms, the concurrent diversity of critics and the varied forms of criticism in these highly polarised spaces” (Cheruiyot, 2022, p. 16).

For a profession so dependent on discursive authority and legitimacy, it seems urgent to examine the changing nature of press criticism and how journalists are rationalizing and responding to it, something that the present study directly addresses. Also urgent is to decentralize media criticism studies with studies offering perspectives from a variety of journalistic cultures beyond the typical American/Western European axis, where the majority of studies originate from and which are sometimes accepted as having universal claims to applicability, as noted by Cheruiyot (2022). It is all the more pressing as the changing nature of criticism of traditional journalism in different contexts may be more damaging than ever, posing a potentially existential threat to journalism itself (Cheruiyot, 2022).

This study proposes to consider the Colombian peace referendum as a case-study of media criticism, insofar as it treats the vote as a moment in which media criticism followed the unexpected results of a national vote of high historical importance. The Colombian case is in this

way similar to what followed after the Brexit referendum and the Trump election, as the following overview of the literature on those votes illustrates.

Brexit, the Trump Election, and Colombia's Peace Referendum

The year 2016 marked a particularly difficult time for journalism, with three cases of intense media criticism. Following Brexit (June 23), the Colombian referendum (Oct. 2), and Donald Trump's election in the U.S. (Nov. 8), all votes of national importance that yielded unexpected results, public narratives of media failure rapidly consolidated and circulated in popular discourse. After Brexit, commentators spoke of the "tragic downfall of the British media" (Barnett, 2016) and said the vote marked a repudiation of the media's elite position (Greenwald, 2016). After the peace vote in Colombia, columnists declared a media "shipwreck" (Manga, 2016), called on journalists to "stop sharing their opinions" (Jaramillo Ortiz, 2016), and declared the end of traditional media as we know it ("Los medios tradicionales," 2016). Soon after, the Trump victory resulted in declarations about the "unbearable smugness" of America's media (Rahn, 2016) and characterizations of members of the "liberal media" as "dangerous idiots" (Smarsh, 2016) whose "epic fail" was fully warranted (Sullivan, 2016).

Among journalists who responded to criticism, there was a widespread recognition that failing to predict each of these results revealed a state of deep disconnection with their publics, heralding the collapse of media trust (Herrman, 2016). Many offered explanations for the Brexit and Trump results by turning their attention to the cultural and personal idiosyncrasies of the "Leave" camp in Britain and Trump voters in the U.S, while others were ready to accept some "culpability" for faulty coverage (Greenwald, 2016). Some called out American journalists for their elitism (Rahn, 2016), condemned their colleagues for their overreliance on polls (Vance, 2016), or accused journalists of "missing the story" out of wishful thinking (Sullivan, 2016).

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Similarly, veteran Colombian journalists called the media's performance "deplorable" and said they should "reconcile with the public" to regain legitimacy ("Los medios deben reconciliarse," 2016), condemned an overreliance on polls ("Periodistas colombianos," 2016), and admitted to having failed to predict the vote's results out of a combination of elitism and wishful thinking ("Debate en RCN," 2016). Others turned their reflections into calls for re-thinking journalistic practices and norms in two notable ways. On the practice side, journalists in all three countries have reflected on the limits of a dominant form of political reporting that favours horse-race storytelling, foregrounds political figures, and builds stories around official statements ("Debate en RCN," 2016; Folkenflik, 2016; Vance, 2016). On the normative side, journalists denounced media outlets that strived for balanced coverage for falling into false equivalencies, for example by giving equal air time to experts supporting the "Remain camp" in Britain and activists from the "Leave" camp who often misled the public on the perils of quitting the European Union (Preston, 2016), or by granting equal or greater weight to Hilary Clinton's email scandals than to accusations of sexual harassment against Trump (REF). Normative discussions in the case of Colombia revolved around issues of partisanship and objectivity, with journalists either denouncing or defending the right of news organizations to take a stand with respect to the peace agreement ("Debate en RCN," 2016).

In scholarly research, a large number of studies from different disciplines have examined the role of the news media in covering these three votes, either individually or by comparing the cases, through different empirical and theoretical approaches.

Journalism during Brexit and Trump

An extensive account of scholarship based on the Brexit and Trump votes is beyond the scope of this study, but a brief survey of scholarly production on the topic shows three large

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types of research. First, numerous studies based on media monitoring and subsequent quantitative content analyses of news items that deal mostly with *what the media did* (how much attention was paid to issues versus candidates, or what was the tone of coverage, for example). Second, a strand of studies examining the social, technological, and cultural circumstances in which the media operated as they covered the votes (including issues of social media, polarization, etc.). And third, a set of more theoretical works that have examined *why* the media covered these votes in the way they did, with particular attention to normative approaches.

Among the first type, studies suggest that coverage of the American election was overly negative, with journalists engaging constantly on criticism and attacking the two leading candidates, granting more attention to Trump, and disproportionately reporting on the Clinton email scandal (Faris et al., 2017; Patterson, 2016). Others found that the British press was overly negative in tone, over-relying on political sources, and scant on nuance and depth, with reporting focusing on a “game” of two opposing camps instead of explaining the issue to the British public (Levy et al., 2016). Some have looked at matters of media representation, such as negative/positive perceptions of the E.U. in the U.K. media (Alkhamash, 2020) and salient topics driving negativity, such as immigration in the U.K. (Watson, 2018; Walter, 2019), and animosity towards Clinton’s persona in the U.S. (Faris et al., 2017). In both cases, reporters oriented their stories towards horse-race narratives, with American reporters privileging voting-intention statistics (Cushion and Lewis, 2017) and British stories offering little complex reasoning beyond which camp was a head and which behind (Levy et al., 2016). Only a handful of academic studies have examined the news media’s own self-conscious attempts at making sense of the role they played in covering these votes (e.g., Wang, Napoli & Ma, 2017, in relation to Trump’s election).

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Within the strand of studies examining the social, technological, and cultural circumstances in which the media operated as they covered these two votes, studies in the U.S. have pointed at the news media's position of extreme commercialism, the proliferation of misinformation on Facebook and other social media, and the ongoing crisis of newspaper journalism (Pickard, 2016). Many of these studies have confirmed previous scholarship on how the news media, despite its alleged watchdog function, tend to work within and not against political institutions, for instance by showing that the media helped Trump earn the nomination (Azari, 2016; Wells et al., 2016). Scholars have paid particular attention to the role of social media and how the votes revealed the power of their intersection with traditional media. This was evidenced in particular by Trump's successful capitalization of journalists' constant need for content by providing endless fodder through viral posts (Lawrence & Boydston, 2017; Wells et al., 2016).

Among the more theoretical works that have been based on examinations of the Brexit and Trump votes, scholars have looked at how these votes exposed deep issues within journalism as a culture. Barbie Zelizer's (2018a and 2018b) work is of particular relevance. In her examination of journalistic coverage of the referendum and the election, she argues that the "Anglo-American imaginary" of news that emerged from an alliance in the early 20th century between Britain and the U.S. to support a shared goal of "building a liberal, democratic enterprise," and which consolidated in the Cold War era, continues to shape news coverage across the Atlantic "to the detriment of public understanding of current events" (Zelizer, 2018b, p. 140-142). This imaginary, which blends Britain's elitist orientation of the news with American journalism's "simple and direct language, play to solemnity, separation of fact and opinion, deference to officialdom, moderation and euphemism" (Zelizer, 2018b, p. 143),

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revealed its own limits by turning journalists' attention towards their method during two crucial votes during which journalists should have instead asked themselves "What is journalism for?" Zelizer argues that journalists responded to the unique challenges posed by the historic Brexit referendum and the presence of a deeply unusual candidate like Donald Trump by overthinking about objectivity, balance, and the obligation to report (and repeat) every statement uttered by a candidate—regardless of how incendiary or false—instead of "rising to the occasion," challenging statements, and capturing the complexity of voter's intentions. Coverage for both votes, Zelizer argues,

emblemized journalism's failure to serve the electorate by not providing necessary information. In both cases, this was exacerbated by a mechanistic fixation with method, collusion with power and an uncritical attempt to hide either behind reporting from nowhere or reporting too much from somewhere. The comparisons and contrasts across the Anglo-American alliance, where multiple kinds of journalism in both countries failed, go far: American coverage showed a surplus of experts (pollsters, big data), British coverage, their absence; Americans attempted an absence of perspective, British print media, an excess. Trump's coverage was helped by market pressures, Farage's by conventions of due impartiality and broad balance. Such comparisons, however, are like siblings fighting over dessert when there is no dinner. The very fact that there was a multitude of failed practices suggests that something deeper was awry. (Zelizer, 2018b, p. 148-149)

Like Zelizer, others have taken the votes of 2016 as pivoting points to consider questions about the very relevance of journalism in a context of media change, populism, and anti-establishment movements that transcend national borders (e.g., Carlson et al., 2021).

Overall, scholarship on the Brexit vote and the Trump election has offered several avenues to help understand both *how* journalists and news organizations covered those votes and *why* they operated the way they did. The Colombian peace referendum has also yielded a significant body of research related to the media's performance during the referendum campaign.

Journalism and the Peace Referendum

The short five weeks of campaigning that preceded the peace referendum were marked by intense and emotional political campaigning, with the government calling Colombians to vote Yes, in support of the proposed peace deal, and opposition leaders decrying the deal as a surrender to the guerrillas. Of note is that, in the four-year period preceding the referendum, the negotiating parties forging the peace deal had agreed to release information only when each point in a six-point agenda had been agreed upon. Scholars have noted that this cycle based on “information peaks” created a news vacuum that left journalists scrambling for content about the peace process. This inevitably led to fillers based on rumours, an overreliance on unofficial spokespersons who were available and willing to speak to the media, and eventually to opening the door to misinformation and disinformation (MOE, 2016)

Just like in the cases of Brexit and the Trump election, the Colombian peace referendum has inspired a significant body of academic research from various disciplines examining the news media’s role in the vote. Most of the literature from journalism and media studies has relied on content analysis of news items from traditional news organizations and has focused on *what the media did*, with largely descriptive studies that have looked into the media’s editorial orientation in favour or against the peace agreement, the type of approach that journalists applied in their coverage, and how journalists interacted with social media and specific cases of disinformation. Few studies have offered theoretical insights into *why* the media covered the peace vote in the way they did, with some exceptions such as how traditional narratives about the Colombian conflict impacted how journalists covered the peace referendum (Ruiz-Romero et al., 2019). So far, scholars have yet to examine how or whether the local journalistic culture might experience any form of profound change as a result of the referendum experience. The

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body of media criticism that resulted from the vote has not yet been considered as a consolidated discourse that can constitute an object of study. Also missing from the literature are examinations into the ways in which journalists have responded to critics in the specific case of the referendum, despite ample examples of public statements by journalists who responded to their critics at the time.

Orientation. Scholars have determined that Colombian news organizations largely supported the Yes vote by granting more space to sources supporting the peace deal in regular news stories (Hernández Cadena, 2017) and through editorials, opinion columns, and op-eds (Alurralde, 2018; Gómez Giraldo & Cárdenas Ruiz, 2017; Hernández Pérez, 2017; Valencia-Tello, 2017). A notable exception was the national network RCN TV, which stood out as the news organization with the most sources expressing support for voting No (Hernández Cadena, 2017). Like in the cases of Brexit and Trump, studies have highlighted a potential disconnection between journalists and their publics revealed by the peace vote's results, a distance that looks most prominent when considering opinion journalism. As Gómez Giraldo and Cárdenas Ruiz (2017) have noted, the vote highlighted an existing gap between “published opinion,” which largely supported the peace deal, and “public opinion,” which ultimately rejected it in the Oct. 2 vote (Gómez Giraldo and Cárdenas Ruiz, 2017). In their content analysis of opinion pieces published in mainstream print media in the weeks preceding the peace referendum, the authors found that news outlets appeared committed to treat the peace vote as a decisive moment in the country, dedicating significant resources to discussing the vote. While they found a wide variety of voices expressing their views on these pages, only eight per cent of authors were women.

News Approach. Journalism research has identified at least three issues in news coverage that echo some of the findings from how journalists approached the Brexit and Trump

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votes: Horse-race style reporting that undermined the significance of the historic peace vote; an overreliance on official sources, and coverage that amplified emotional propaganda and failed to stop disinformation flowing freely through social media. The three are inter-related. Horse-race style reporting meant that journalists approached the peace referendum similarly to how they would have an election campaign, emphasizing two main political leaders. This approach cemented the role of then-President Juan Manuel Santos as the political face representing the Yes vote and the role of his immediate predecessor and staunch opponent of the peace deal, Álvaro Uribe, as the “natural” spokesperson for No voters (Alurralde, 2018; Gómez Giraldo & Cárdenas Ruiz, 2017). A focus on the political horse race prioritized a binary frame often built on opposing statements, a strategy that worked to keep news production up amidst otherwise scarce news about the peace deal, to the detriment of more nuanced reporting. News items often ignored the voices of other actors who had been involved in negotiating peace such as victims of violence and forced displacement, numerous human rights organizations, Church leaders and social activists, and even women in general (Ferreira, 2017). In this sense, most news stories played the role of disseminating information from two types of spokespeople whose language was “ideologically slanted... more connotative than objective” (Alurralde, 2018, p. 698), and who spoke predominantly from a male perspective (Ferreira, 2017; Hernández Cadena, 2017).

As a major report based on media monitoring by multiple universities concluded,

For example, the High Commissioner for Peace, Sergio Jaramillo, or the head of the negotiating table, Humberto de la Calle Lombana, were often consulted as sources. And on the FARC’s side, [it was] Rodrigo Londoño Echeverri... we continue to highlight the absence of the victims, and of female victims, as sources of information (...) It is as if the news were covered from the most comfortable section, from where information arrives without even asking for it. (MOE, 2017, p. 66)

Journalists fell in line with political forces using the referendum as just another electoral race—a means to seek votes (Rincón Morera, 2018). By emphasizing political leaders and their

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agendas in news stories, journalists offered a limited form of discourse that was not conducive to acquiring greater knowledge or analysis of the matter in question but, to the contrary, alluded to a form of subjective knowledge that escaped questioning (Alurralde, 2018, p. 705). This approach also promoted voter stereotyping, where Yes and No voters were largely identified as homogenous groups and were often assumed to be either Santos or Uribe supporters (Rincón Morera, 2018), something that prominent journalists have publicly regretted (“Debate en RCN” 2016). In opinion journalism, where support for the peace agreement was most evident, researchers found that appeals to voters were often superficial and emotional; the conversation was vastly dominated by men, with only eight per cent of women identified as having penned opinion columns or editorials on the matter (Ferreira, 2017; Hernández Cadena, 2017).

The horse-race approach and an overreliance on official spokespersons has reiterated questions about the media’s relevance during the campaign. Ultimately, the media were not the protagonists in the campaign. Their presence went from being analysts or investigators of news themes to become “the spokespeople of their sources” (MOE, 2017, p. 66).

Related to this is how journalists interacted with highly emotional messages circulating on social media and falsehoods spread by powerful political actors, in particular the No campaign. Scholars who have examined the potential impact that social media may have had on the information environment during the referendum campaign have looked primarily at the role of emotionality, how traditional media and journalists interacted with social media, and the spread of disinformation. Audiences expressed themselves in emotional tones about the vote on social media, and these were primarily negative emotions (MOE, 2017). In turn, mainstream media outlets with large numbers of followers were found to have expressed themselves in “neutral” tones through their official social media accounts throughout the campaign. Scholars

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have determined that it was the general public, non necessarily the media, who were communicating in emotional tones, largely negative ones, about the peace vote.

From the media, institutions, the government, and even the FARC a positive conversation about the peace process predominated, [but] the same did not occur within the audience/voters in which emotionality associated to hatred and intolerance was a factor in the ballot results. (MOE, 2017, p. 47)

Others have also highlighted the centrality of emotions in news coverage during the campaign and how the media played a role in amplifying attempts to manipulate the electorate. Alurralde (2018) found that traditional news organizations, through their online portals, served as the conduit for an emotional discourse about the referendum as they presented official statements expressed through language that was shallow and propagandistic as news. Sáenz de Miera (2017) and Gómez Suárez (2016) both identify fear as the main force underlining political discourse and reproduced in news coverage. Emotional narratives originating from the Yes camp spoke of standing up to “the enemies of peace,” while the No camp warned that a Yes victory meant lawlessness and the advent of so-called “castro-chavismo”—a regime in the style of Venezuela and Cuba. Both claims were often replicated in news items and generally unchecked by journalists (Ferreira, 2017).

It is not just that the vote itself naturally marked an emotional moment, as the electorate—including journalists—faced the possibility of freeing their country from the grip of a five-decade-long war. Although difficult to measure, misinformation and disinformation were rampant on social networks and on instant-messaging apps such as WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger (MOE, 2017). Sáenz de Miera (2017) and Gómez Suárez (2016) have examined the use of disinformation as a deliberate weaponization of fear used to sway the electorate and note that the media were instrumentalized to help amplify false messages. A study by Gómez Suárez (2016) describes in detail how the No campaign, led by former president Uribe and his Centro

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Democrático party, was explicitly based on deploying a “discursive arsenal” aiming to provoke fear in voters by spreading lies about the proposed agreement. Fear was both *top-down*—generated by political forces—and *bottom-up*, replicated by those who believed the disinformation (Gómez Suárez, 2016). In between, individual journalists and media organizations were instrumental in helping spread these messages by replicating statements without questioning their veracity (Ferreira, 2017). The deliberate effort to stoke emotions of fear and paranoia through spreading falsehoods about the agreement was indeed corroborated by the No campaign’s general manager Juan Carlos Vélez only days after the vote, when he boasted that his team discovered the power of indignation and acknowledged leading a campaign based on wanting people to “go vote in anger” (Botero Cabrera, 2016).

Gómez Suárez (2017) notes that the Colombian peace vote, Brexit, and the Trump election share in common that the successful actors used strategies of “misleading the electorate by circulating scripts that simplify reality and shape emotional mindsets that are dominated by anger and fear” (Gómez Suárez, 2017, p. 463). Nonetheless, a report based on media-monitoring research notes that emotionality was high amongst the electorate but not necessarily in journalistic output. It also found that the bulk of negative emotions were originating in direct communications by and amongst audiences, not necessarily journalists:

Whereas, from the media, the institutions and the government, and even the FARC, a positive conversation around the peace process predominated, the same was not occurring in the voting audience, in which clearly emotionality associated to fear and intolerance was a factor in the electoral results (MOE, 2017, p. 47)

Gender Ideology. A particularly emotional and powerful fabrication by the No campaign and its allies alleged that the peace deal included plans to implement a “gender ideology” which would “promote abortion” and encourage sex and gender orientations that went against “natural or divine laws” (Hoyos, 2016). The claim was based on real-life discussions during the peace

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talks proposing a “gender-focused” lens to restorative policies that would take into account how the conflict affected women and LGBTQ2+ individuals differently. This intentional misreading of the peace accords created a link to global discourses led by religious and conservative leaders opposing challenges to traditional gender norms and family structures (Serrano Amaya, 2017). The falsehood was widely adopted and spread by Uribe’s CD party, Catholic politicians, powerful Evangelical churches and traditionally conservative sectors of society, whose media statements on the matter were seldom challenged by journalists (Esguerra Muelle, 2017; Gómez Suárez, 2016).

While many scholars have underlined the presence of disinformation and its disruption of media reporting as a factor in the results (Rodríguez Rondón, 2017; Serrano Amaya, 2017), others have cautioned against putting too much weight on this interpretation. On the one hand, by arguing that a more important factor might have been the misunderstanding—by institutions including the media—of the heterogenous nature of No voters (Bassett, 2018). On the other, by noting that, despite criticisms of shallow reporting, there is evidence that news organizations did engage in pedagogical efforts to explain the contents of the peace agreement and dispel disinformation for their audiences (Hernández Cadena, 2017).

Narrative Violence. Among the more theoretical examinations of the media’s role during the peace vote, the question of media narratives is prominent. Some have critically analyzed how Colombian media have perpetuated a form of “narrative violence,” whereby victims of the armed conflict—including for example former guerrillas or child soldiers—as well as grassroots and social organizations, have been largely silenced from mainstream journalism (Ruiz-Romero et al., 2019). In the context of a protracted armed conflict, scholars argue that Colombian media became used to the conflict and journalists became accustomed to being

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“market agents” with no impulse to actively seek peace (Ruiz-Romero et al., 2019). As others have noted, conflict-related news became entrenched in traditional forms of “war orientation” in coverage, even when faced with the possibility of peace (Bonilla Berríos, 2018). This type of war-journalism orientation has been characterized by privileging fast information, sensational headlines highlighting acts of violence, and an over-simplification of the conflict’s actors as good or bad. The superficial narrative has created information routines that have normalized both heinous acts of violence and the social roots that have fed the lengthy conflict (Bonilla Berríos, 2018). Newer forms of narratives and formats have been almost impossible to introduce (Rincón, 2010).

Altogether, scholarship about the media’s role or its performance during the Colombian peace referendum has been significant in volume though largely descriptive, dealing mostly with how journalists and news organizations covered the vote. This study fills some of the gaps here identified and contributes to our understanding of the nature and responses to media criticism that followed the vote.

Conclusions and Research Questions

Much like in the literature about the Brexit and Trump votes, most studies about the media’s role in the Colombian referendum alludes to an existing disconnection between journalists and their audiences. Whereas this has opened up normative discussions, in particular with regards to the credo of balance and objectivity in journalism in the cases of Brexit and Trump (e.g., Zelizer, 2018b), scholars have yet to theorize how or whether coverage of the peace vote in Colombia—and the deluge of media criticism that followed—may link to normative discussions in the local journalistic culture. This despite the fact that the type of popular criticism that the media sustained following the referendum was largely and directly related to

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allegations of imbalance, bias, and lack of objectivity on the part of journalists and news organizations. A major charge by popular critics against the media following the vote was that journalists had supported the peace deal *too much* and *too openly* (Botero, 2016; Jaramillo Ortiz, 2016). Some prominent journalists like Fidel Cano (“Debate en RCN,” 2016), Editor-in-Chief at *El Espectador* newspaper, have interpreted this overt support for the peace agreement on the part of the media as a potential failure to capture the nuances amongst publics who were hesitant to support the peace deal for myriad reasons, a similar position to what American journalists said of Trump voters following the U.S. election (Rutenberg, 2016). So far, no studies have examined how journalists in Colombia have responded to this and other criticisms levied at them after the Oct. 2 vote.

Following the premise that journalistic cultures are distinct and vulnerable to change under pressure from metajournalistic discourses, this research examines three specific aspects related to media criticism related to coverage of the peace referendum of Oct. 2, 2016. The first question asks:

RQ1: Did a metajournalistic discourse of media failure materialize following the Colombian peace vote in 2016? If so, what were its principal discursive elements?

A second question asks:

RQ2: How do Colombian journalists who covered the peace vote confront this discourse of media failure?

The third and final question explores both of these angles together:

RQ3: What, if any, are the potential impacts of this discourse of media failure in the local journalistic culture?

Methods

This research takes the Colombian peace referendum of Oct. 2, 2016, as a case study to examine two aspects: First, whether a metajournalistic discourse of media failure materialized following a vote of high importance that yielded unexpected results and, if so, what is the nature of that discourse. Second, how journalists respond to this type of metajournalistic discourse of media failure, potentially revealing important clues about the local journalistic culture. The qualitative study is grounded on the understanding of journalism as a culture—or a series of cultures—whose boundaries are permanently contested and reimagined through several means, including discourses about journalism (Carlson, 2017). It also foregrounds the idea that having journalists talk about their work is a potent instrument for maintaining or redrawing the boundaries of journalistic culture (Ryfe, 2012).

The research relies on qualitative methods for collecting and analysing two sets of data: a) Written pieces published in the days following the vote containing critical assessments of how Colombian media covered news related to the referendum; and b) Face-to-face, semi-directed interviews with 14 Colombian journalists who covered the referendum first-hand, conducted between January and February, 2020, in Bogotá and Medellín, Colombia.

Corpus of Articles

To answer the question of whether a metajournalistic discourse of media failure materialized following the peace vote, it was necessary to establish whether there was a significant volume of media criticism circulating in public discourse in the days after the ballot. To this end, I searched Google News using key words in Spanish with a combination of two types of terms: a) any terms related to media, such as “*medios*,” “*periodistas*,” “*líderes de opinion*,” “*periodismo*,” “*diarios*,” “*noticieros de televisión*,” “*la radio*,” and “*noticias*,”

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incorporating variations on these words such as plural/singular and feminine/masculine. And b) words referring to the peace vote, such as “*plebiscito*,” “*voto por la paz*,” “*voto del 2 de octubre*,” or “*voto del domingo*.” The search was exhaustive, using various combinations of the terms described. It was limited to pieces dated between Oct. 2, 2016 (voting day) and Oct. 31, 2016. This specific time frame ensured my ability to establish whether the discourse of media failure was indeed present immediately following the vote. There were no restrictions in terms of the type or name of publication, or the type of article. Any text that was available through the search and met the criteria above was initially retained. Upon reviewing all the pieces, only those that had something to say about the media’s performance during the referendum campaign were kept. The resulting corpus yielded a total of 58 articles comprising opinion columns, editorials, and analyses published in different types of news media (e.g., newspapers, trade publications, student media). While the corpus is restricted to material that was available online at the time of selection, the pieces are not limited to newspapers or to online news organizations only. They also include articles published on the websites of radio or television stations, and a wide array of publication types such as mainstream media at the international, national, and regional levels, student-led media, independent digital outlets, trade publications, and think tanks. The authors behind these articles include working journalists and editorialists, media critics, academics, citizen contributors, business leaders, and other professionals who communicated their criticism of the media through these channels. Remarkably, the discourse is vastly dominated by men. This is consistent with what others have found about the dominance of male voices in Colombian opinion pages in general (Gómez Giraldo & Cárdenas-Ruiz, 2019).

The articles show variety in terms of where they stand on a political spectrum. Some are more left-leaning (for example focusing on the social roots of the armed conflict and critical of

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neoliberalism) and others more outwardly right-leaning (for example extolling military power as the best solution to end the armed conflict, or critical of social programs for former guerrilla fighters). I have, however, intentionally left out any formal classification attempting to distinguish the political leaning of each article or the publication behind it, for three main reasons. First, media in Colombia are not as easily characterized along left/right binaries. More than partisan, traditional media have for the most part been considered “*gobiernistas*,” that is, usually aligned with sitting governments (García Ramírez & Charry Joya, 2019). Second, as Rincón (2010) has noted, assuming that individual journalists are politically aligned with their newsrooms might be wrongheaded in an era of ideological and occupational tensions between journalists and their employers. This might be especially flawed when considering opinion journalists, many of whom have penned the articles included here, since they are sometimes hired precisely to expand and even challenge a given newsroom’s traditional point of view. Third, political left/right categories have different connotations in locations outside North America. Colombian governments have historically oscillated between “Liberals” and “Conservatives,” but in practice their administrations could be described as a range going from centre-right to right-leaning. Political parties do not hold rigid or even clear ideological lines, which leaves the monikers of “left” and “right” open to fluid interpretation (Borda, 2018). Much like in other Latin American democracies, ideologies in Colombia are more strongly reflected in individual political figures.

The corpus of articles cannot claim to be representative of the discourse about the media’s performance covering the referendum in its immediate aftermath. It is limited by what could be found through the online search and does not include commentary aired live on radio and television, for example, or posted on social media. The sample is, however, a robust

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snapshot of the type of media criticism that was demonstrably circulating after the vote across popular media platforms with large audiences such as *El Espectador* newspaper, RCN Radio, and the popular news-and-analysis portal Las2Orillas (Monitoreo de medios, 2015). In this respect, the corpus is a sufficiently significant body of texts to consider the question of whether a metajournalistic discourse of media failure materialized after the peace referendum, and contains ample information to determine not only whether the discourse was present, but what was its nature. These articles are also valuable in that they contain the contours of a discourse of media failure that is both public and somewhat permanent. While this corpus does not capture the ephemeral conversations that were most likely taking place in the aftermath of the peace vote—where so many lamented the media’s “failure”—it does capture some of the main arguments that were likely informing, and continue to inform, such conversations. The fact that the corpus was retrieved from online, public sites that will probably stay on the internet indefinitely, also means that this discourse is to some extent permanent. This further demonstrates the importance of understanding the nature of a discourse of failure that has the potential to remain in place for an indefinite period of time, and to which people can easily have access to for the foreseeable future.

The following table shows the number of articles sorted by publication type, the original medium in which they belong (for example, if an article was posted on the website of a TV station, then the original medium was classified as “TV”), and the author’s gender. (For a more detailed classification table of these articles, see Appendix A).

Publication Type	Number of articles
Independent news	21
Mainstream - International	11
Mainstream – National	16
Mainstream - Regional	2
Think tank	3
Trade publication	2
University publication	3
Original Medium	
Online	28
Print	22
Radio	3
TV	5
Author's gender	
Female author	6
Male author	38
No author	14

Table 1. Article attributes

Interviews

Journalism scholars often rely on surveys and interviews with journalists for their studies (Mellado, 2019). Instances in which journalists talk about their work can be powerful in that

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they help members of the field reconnect with their journalistic culture by reflecting on practice, norms, and roles (Perdomo & Rodrigues Rouleau, 2020). In January and February, 2020, I conducted in-depth, semi-directed interviews in person in Bogotá and Medellín, Colombia, with 14 local journalists who were directly involved in covering the peace vote. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. The interviews complement the critical thematic analysis of the articles by examining the individual perspectives of journalists who personally worked covering the peace vote. These conversations provide a unique insight into how journalists process the meaning of their work as they reflect on their own decisions and actions—which are, ultimately, the target of the discourse of media failure examined here.

The participants were selected through non-probabilistic convenience sampling. This type of sampling is often used in case-study research in qualitative studies (Taherdoost, 2016). Non-probabilistic sampling is appropriate for studies that “tend to focus on small samples and are intended to examine a real life phenomenon, not to make statistical inferences in relation to the wider population” (Taherdoost, 2016, p. 22). The journalists who participated were selected based on two main criteria: they had personally covered the 2016 peace referendum and they had worked at the time for a recognized news organization². (In the end, the sample included one independent journalist, a documentary filmmaker who produced a film about the peace talks). Once a number of individuals expressed interest in being interviewed, I strived to ensure that the group would include a diverse range of participants in terms of gender, age, years of experience, and type of employer (newspaper, TV station, etc.). In some newsrooms, reporters are assigned stories by

² There are several ways to determine what constitutes a “recognized” media outlet. The news outlets represented in my study have already been considered legitimate news actors by other scholars (see for example the most recent Reuters Digital News Report, 2021, which included a Colombia survey).

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editors or senior producers who provide the news angle, so it was important to speak to a number of both reporters and editors and producers with different levels of work experience to allow for diverse perspectives. Each participant was assigned a level of seniority based on the number of years working as a journalist and their self-described role in their respective organizations. The journalists work in a variety of newsrooms including two newspapers, one print weekly, one digital publication, one radio station, two television networks, and one independent filmmaking operation. The news outlets they work for differ in many ways including size, reach, format, and, to some extent, political leaning. Whereas any attempt at classifying news organizations along political lines may be fraught, admittedly some perceptions of political affiliation are present in the local journalistic culture. For example, the newspaper *El Espectador*, where three of the study participants work, is generally known as a liberal and more generally progressive publication (Grajales Sánchez & Martínez Arévalo, 2020). The TV network RCN is known to lean right, and the digital news portal *La Silla Vacía* is often described as centrist (MOE, 2017). Given that political polarization was a factor in the discourse of media failure, as many critics accused journalists and news organizations of “taking sides” for either the Yes or No vote, it was important to select participants who worked in newsrooms of different political inclinations, insofar as that distinction could be made. Considering the political leaning of certain organizations was also a factor in deciding *where* to conduct the interviews. Bogotá and Medellín are home to the country’s largest and more wide-reaching news organizations (Monitoreo de medios, 2015). The principal news outlets in each of these cities endorsed opposite sides of the peace vote: while most Bogotá-based news media called upon their audiences to vote Yes, Medellín’s main outlets either endorsed the No vote or remained neutral, by simply asking people “to go vote.” Having a number of journalists from both regions was important to explore how their responses to criticism might align

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or differ. With this in mind, the political leaning—or the *perceived* political leaning—of the news organizations where the participants work was considered as a factor in recruiting a diverse sample of participants.

Participants were recruited by relying on my personal connections with journalists in the country to obtain the names and contact information of journalists who had personally covered the peace vote in 2016. Individuals were then contacted through WhatsApp—the preferred way of communication for the vast majority of professionals, including journalists, in Colombia—and requested an interview following the recruiting message previously approved by the University of Ottawa’s Research Ethics Board. Prior to each interview, participants signed an agreement to participate. All participants agreed to the use of their first name in this document and in any subsequent publications. (See Appendix B, *Recruitment text*, and Appendix C, *Consent form*). The following table shows the main attributes of the participants:

First name	Age	Gender	Medium	Seniority	Organization	Political orientation of the organization
Dora	41-50	Female	TV	Senior producer	RCN TV	Right
Fidel	50+	Male	Print	Senior editor	El Espectador	Left
Germán	25-30	Male	Print	Mid-range reporter	El Espectador	Left
Ignacio	50 +	Male	TV	Senior producer	Noticias Uno	Left
Jorge	31-40	Male	Print	Mid-range reporter	Semana	Centre
Juan	31-40	Male	Digital	Senior editor	La Silla Vacía	Centre
María José	25-30	Female	Print	Junior reporter	El Espectador	Left
Margarita	4-50	Female	Documentary	Senior producer	Self-employed	N/A

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Maritza	31-40	Female	TV	Mid-range producer	RCN TV	Right
Milena	50+	Female	Print	Senior producer	Semana	Centre
Nelson	31-40	Male	Print	Junior reporter	El Colombiano	Right
Olga	31-40	Female	Print	Junior reporter	El Colombiano	Right
Ricardo	31-40	Male	Print	Mid-range reporter	El Colombiano	Right
Yolanda	50 +	Female	Radio	Senior producer	RCN Radio	Centre

Table 2. Interview participants

The semi-structured interviews followed four main prompts that encouraged journalists to a) recall their personal reaction to the wave of media criticism that followed the peace referendum’s results—including whether they agree that such a wave existed; b) comment on specific criticisms extracted from the corpus of articles analyzed in this study; c) reflect on their own performance as journalists who covered the peace vote; and d) think about what, in their view, was the role that Colombian media *should* have played during the referendum campaign (see Appendix D – *Interview protocol*).

Handling of Data and Analysis

Both sets of data—the corpus of articles and the transcribed interviews—were uploaded into NVivo for coding and analysis. Chowdhury (2015) states that analyzing qualitative data is more than just the coding, sorting and sifting of data. The process is valuable for its ability to “retain and foreground contextual factors,” a method that is both systematic and flexible “where researchers make conclusions on the basis not only of a robust research methodology, but also of a sensitivity to the changing contexts and situations in which the research takes place” (Chowdhury, 2015, p. 1141). Analysing media texts and qualitative interviews is a well-

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established practice in journalism studies (Trilling & Jonkman, 2018). These analyses may take the form of manual or automated content analysis, discourse analysis, or thematic analysis.

My study employs a form of enhanced thematic analysis known as “Critical Thematic Analysis” (Lawless & Chen, 2019). CTA is a specific application of Thematic Analysis (TA), as defined by Braun & Clarke (2006), which is an umbrella term to describe methods that involve “identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). TA asks the researcher to get familiar with the data; generate initial codes; search for themes; review themes; define and name themes; and produce a report (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87). While not all scholars identify TA as their method in qualitative research, it is in fact widely used and can produce trustworthy and insightful findings (Nowell et al., 2017). For its part, CTA follows the basic principles of TA while also seeking to incorporate attention to larger societal and structural issues. CTA considers “how the patterned results are connected to larger social ideologies, linking frequency and forcefulness [of statements] to the influence of dominant social discourses” (Lawless & Chen, 2019, p. 95). In all qualitative research, the researcher becomes “the instrument for analysis” as she must judge how best to code, sort into themes, and contextualize the data (Nowell et al., 2017). Indeed, when conducting qualitative interviews, the researcher becomes “the primary instrument” as she guides the conversation by actively listening and pursuing ideas conveyed in the participant’s various responses (Galletta, 2013, p. 104). This is certainly also applicable when the researcher is coding textual data. CTA in particular requires that the researcher has as much previous knowledge of the issues at play as possible, so that her analysis and interpretations of the data are plausibly connected to wider social discourses and dynamics. In my case, several aspects of my Colombian identity placed me in a privileged position to conduct this study. Other than my intimate knowledge of the language, my past

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experience as a television reporter and print columnist embedded within Colombia's journalistic culture meant that I could conduct this study with an acute sensitivity to local cultural dynamics. I was able to rely on the credibility that I had previously established as a working journalist in the same context as my study participants, which helped them feel comfortable and likely more open to share their thoughts with me, something that not all researchers can rely on. My inside knowledge also meant that I could easily ask follow up questions or understand the participant's answers more closely and empathetically than most scholars would be able to. This proximity, combined with my academic knowledge in the field of journalism studies, provided a solid ground from where I could conduct this study with credibility and authority. On the other hand, the fact that I am no longer a practicing journalist in Colombia and that I have embarked on a path of scholarly study mean that my position as a researcher, though one of close knowledge of the subject at hand, remains appropriately distanced so that I can maintain a critical stance with respect to the object of study. My unique position for conducting this study allowed me to code and analyze the data in a way that I could strive to "understand individual and shared experiences of participants while being acutely aware of economic, social, historical, and political contexts, social and hegemonic structures, institutional power, and ideological impact," as Lawless and Chen (2019) propose of studies employing CTA, while also being able to keep an arms-length positionality as a researcher.

Articles

In total, 58 articles were retrieved and captured with NVivo's NCapture extension for Chrome for coding within NVivo (versions 12 and up). The coding process was conducted directly on the original articles written in Spanish. Only the quotes that appear on this document are translated into English (all translations are mine). The codes themselves were labelled in

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English. Following an inductive approach to Thematic Analysis, as per Braun and Clarke (2006), coding was open and cyclical, meaning that there were no preconceived codes or themes. An exhaustive first round of coding resulted in 240 codes. Each sentence and paragraph received full and equal attention, and codes were labelled based on the main idea or salient word (for example, “government failure,” “media were biased,” etc.). In subsequent readings, new codes emerged, were deleted or merged with others, or were renamed. Some sections of text were coded in multiple categories. Then, I sorted the codes into larger categories. For example, all the articles that used the word “failure” were separated into “media failure” and “government failure” depending on their meaning. Those that directly used words ascribing “blame” for the results were grouped under “media responsible for results” or “lack of education,” etc.

Following Braun and Clarke (2006), accounts that departed from the dominant story in the analysis were not ignored when coding. Following the principles of Critical Thematic Analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019), contextual elements contained in the articles themselves were taken into account, such as socio-historical facts or perceptions, and incorporated into the themes—these were never forced or imposed upon the codes, but simply considered if revealed during the process. For instance, several articles mention former Colombian President Álvaro Uribe using metaphors or indirect allusions. I was able to discern in these cases who was the person in question. Throughout the coding process, I created descriptive categories that were subsequently refined and regrouped until a thematic framework was finalized (see *Results Ch. 1* for full thematic framework).

Interviews

Once the interviews were finalized, they were transcribed using Trint, an audio transcription software, and carefully reviewed by me personally to ensure accuracy. The full text

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for each of the 14 interviews was then uploaded to NVivo for coding. The coding process was conducted on the original Spanish transcriptions. Only the quotes that appear on this document are translated into English (all translations are mine).

As noted, the semi-structured interviews followed four main prompts that encouraged journalists to recall their personal reaction to the criticism that followed the vote, respond to specific criticisms, reflect on their own performance, and consider an ideal scenario where Colombian media played its best role covering the vote (See Appendix D – *Interview protocol*).

The interviews were not expected to offer an exact number of responses to an exact number of questions. Rather, they provided an opportunity for journalists to respond to the criticism that the media sustained after the vote, and to reflect back on their own performance. This allowed each subject to offer spontaneous commentary and address topics that a more rigid interview or survey might have missed. In this sense, the study adheres to a constructivist approach where the subjects actively take part in re-constructing their recollection of events. My role as a researcher was to ensure that the interview was “a repertoire of possibilities” (Galletta, 2013, p. 24). Just as with the corpus of articles, I followed an inductive approach to TA, starting with open coding and maintaining a cycle where codes and themes would organically emerge. There were no preconceived codes or themes. An exhaustive first round of coding resulted in 164 unique codes. As with the articles, each sentence and paragraph received full and equal attention, and codes were labelled based on the main idea or salient words (for example, “RCN TV crossed the line,” or “media operated within a bubble,” etc.). The coding process sought to see if any common themes arose across the interviews. In subsequent readings, these commonalities were coded as new codes (i.e., “disagrees with media criticisms,” or “polling was an issue”); other codes were deleted or merged with others, or were renamed. Some sections of

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text contained overlapping codes. Descriptive categories were created as the process advanced, ultimately revealing the thematic framework that makes up the basis of Ch. 2 (see *Results Chapter 2* for complete thematic framework of the interviews). Some of the codes were created taking contextual knowledge into account. For example, each time a participant was critical of RCN TV's performance, it was clear that they were referring to the network's apparent activism in favour of the No camp, even if the participant was not explicitly saying so. These indirect allusions were possible to code thanks to my privileged position as a researcher who knows the context intimately, and were included in the coding process following Lawless and Chen's (2019) approach to CTA.

Language

The data for this study is originally in Spanish. All the articles gathered in the corpus of media criticism were originally published in Spanish, and the interviews were conducted in Spanish as well. Van Nes and her colleagues (2010) have identified challenges of language differences in qualitative research, in particular in cases where the research is conducted in a language other than English for a study that is intended for an English-speaking audience. The authors underline that language is central to qualitative research, from the process of data collection to the ensuing analysis and interpretation of the textual data. The process of interpreting meaning lies at the core of qualitative research. For its part, translation is also in itself an act of interpretation, and in this sense adds another layer to qualitative studies in which it becomes possible that meaning may be lost or altered. Van Nes and colleagues propose that researchers in these cases, "to avoid potential limitations in the analysis... stay in the original language as long and as much as possible (van Ness et al., 2010, p. 315). Following this recommendation, the coding process for this study was conducted based on the original Spanish

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texts to ensure not only maximum accuracy but also to avoid “thinking in English” (van Ness et al., 2010) and thus avoid straying for the meanings originally intended either by the article authors or the interview participants. Throughout this paper, quotes taken from the corpus of articles or lifted from the interviews were first considered in Spanish and only in the end translated by me personally. Understanding that literal translation is not enough to capture meaning, I provide “fluid descriptions of meanings using various English formulations” (van Ness et al., 2010, p. 315). This is to ensure that the original Spanish content can be more fully appreciated and understood, and add a layer of protection to the validity of the research. Only whenever deemed appropriate or necessary do I include the original phrasing in Spanish.

Results Chapter 1 - A Metajournalistic Discourse of Media Failure

In this chapter I show how a *metajournalistic discourse of media failure* materialized in Colombia immediately after the results of the Oct. 2 vote were released. I do this by showing the results of extensive coding and analysis of 58 written pieces that directly criticize how the Colombian media covered the peace vote. The articles considered originated from a variety of media organizations and were published in the 29 days following the vote (until the end of October, 2016). Together, the articles demonstrate a consensus that there was at least a partial “media failure” in the coverage of the peace vote on the part of Colombian media outlets. The discourse is *metajournalistic* insofar as it is made up of *journalism about journalism* (Ogbebor, 2020). While Ogbebor (2020) and others have categorized metajournalism as “journalism about journalism” intending to mean that these are journalistic texts in which journalists talk about their work, I consider that all the articles in this corpus, including those not written by journalists but by a variety of authors ranging from media critics to political scientists to citizen contributors, can still be aptly referred to as metajournalism. This is because they are circulated through traditional news media channels and are therefore inseparable from media content, regardless of who the authors are. Approaching this corpus as a metajournalistic discourse has implications for the analysis, considering that metajournalistic discourses have the power to effect change in the journalistic field, as they help shape the contours of journalistic identity and practice (Carlson, 2016). The potential impact of this discourse on Colombia’s local journalistic culture will be discussed later in this chapter, and then in the Discussion chapter after considering how individual journalists responded to the criticism.

The metajournalistic discourse of media failure was constructed by different actors including working journalists and editorialists, as well as media critics, academics, citizen

contributors, business leaders, and other professionals who communicated their criticisms across a variety of media platforms, effectively entering a public dialogue over the shortcomings of Colombian media in their coverage of the peace referendum. I reconstruct this dialogue in this chapter. With some variation, the arguments exposed throughout the corpus reveal a consensus that journalists and/or media organizations made mistakes and even played a negative role during the referendum campaign. For the most part, the discourse is built on the assumption that the media were at least partly to blame for the No victory, which most authors view as a historic loss for the country. In the few cases where the authors celebrate the No victory, the media remain a target of criticism, where the No emerged victorious not thanks to the media but *despite* them.

Corpus of Articles

The selected articles for this corpus originate from different types of publications and media platforms. They include mainstream international, national, and regional media, as well as student-led media, digital-news outlets, specialty trade publications, and think tanks. While they were all retrieved online, the pieces originated from a variety of news platforms including radio and television networks, print newspapers and magazines, and digital publications. The discourse is vastly dominated by men. The following table shows the main characteristics of these articles. (For a full description of the article's attributes, see the *Methods* chapter).

Type of Publication N= 58		Medium		Author's gender	
Independent news	21	Online	29	Male	41
Mainstream - National	16	Print	20	No author	13
Mainstream – International	11	TV	6	Female	4
University publication	4	Radio	3		
Think tank	3				
Trade publication	2				
Mainstream – Regional	1				

Table 3 Articles - Characteristics

As noted in the *Methods* chapter, the articles are also distributed across the political spectrum, from more left-leaning to more outwardly right-leaning, but I have intentionally left out any classification that would distinguish the political leaning of these publications (please refer to a full explanation as to why included in the *Methods* chapter). That said, I do make note of certain news organizations' political affiliations throughout this chapter, insofar as they are relevant to the discourse of failure. For example, the television network RCN TV is often accused of acting as a mouthpiece for the Colombian right-wing, which coalesces around the figure of former president Álvaro Uribe (Rincón, 2016). In contrast, the national newspaper *El Espectador*, which openly endorsed voting Yes in support of the peace agreement, rests on a long-standing tradition of supporting liberal governments and more politically progressive policies (Grajales Sánchez & Martínez Arévalo, 2020).

This chapter reveals that a metajournalistic discourse of media failure indeed materialized after the vote took place. The discourse itself has three dimensions, which guide the structure of this chapter. The first relates to context and the theme, *The vote happened in a country incapable of transcending its violent past*. This section shows how the corpus of articles that make up the discourse of media failure also reconstruct the image of the country as a place of institutions, socio-cultural structures, and people who appear to be doomed to live in violence. The second relates to media and the theme, *The media is a tired institution indebted to financial and political interests*. This section reveals common perceptions about Colombian media as a far-from-ideal institution that is rooted in traditional power dynamics and therefore is unworthy of trust. The results show a discourse that perceived media instrumentalization by the two opposing camps during the referendum campaign, and the notion that traditional media were unprepared for the disruptive power of social media. I make an express point in separating comments about “the media” from more specific mentions to journalism and journalistic practice, which are the subject of the third and final section, related to journalism and the theme, *Increasingly out of touch, journalists offered an unbalanced account of the vote*. In this instance, journalism is defined throughout the corpus in terms of its social roles, traditional journalistic habits, and particular mistakes that the authors think contributed to the media’s failure during the referendum. Each of these three sections contains a set of subsections organized around themes and subthemes, followed by a brief analysis at the end. A more in-depth analysis of the implications that the metajournalistic discourse of media failure may have on the local journalistic culture is found in the Discussion chapter, which follows the second results chapter based on the interviews with journalists. The diagram below illustrates the thematic framework guiding this chapter.

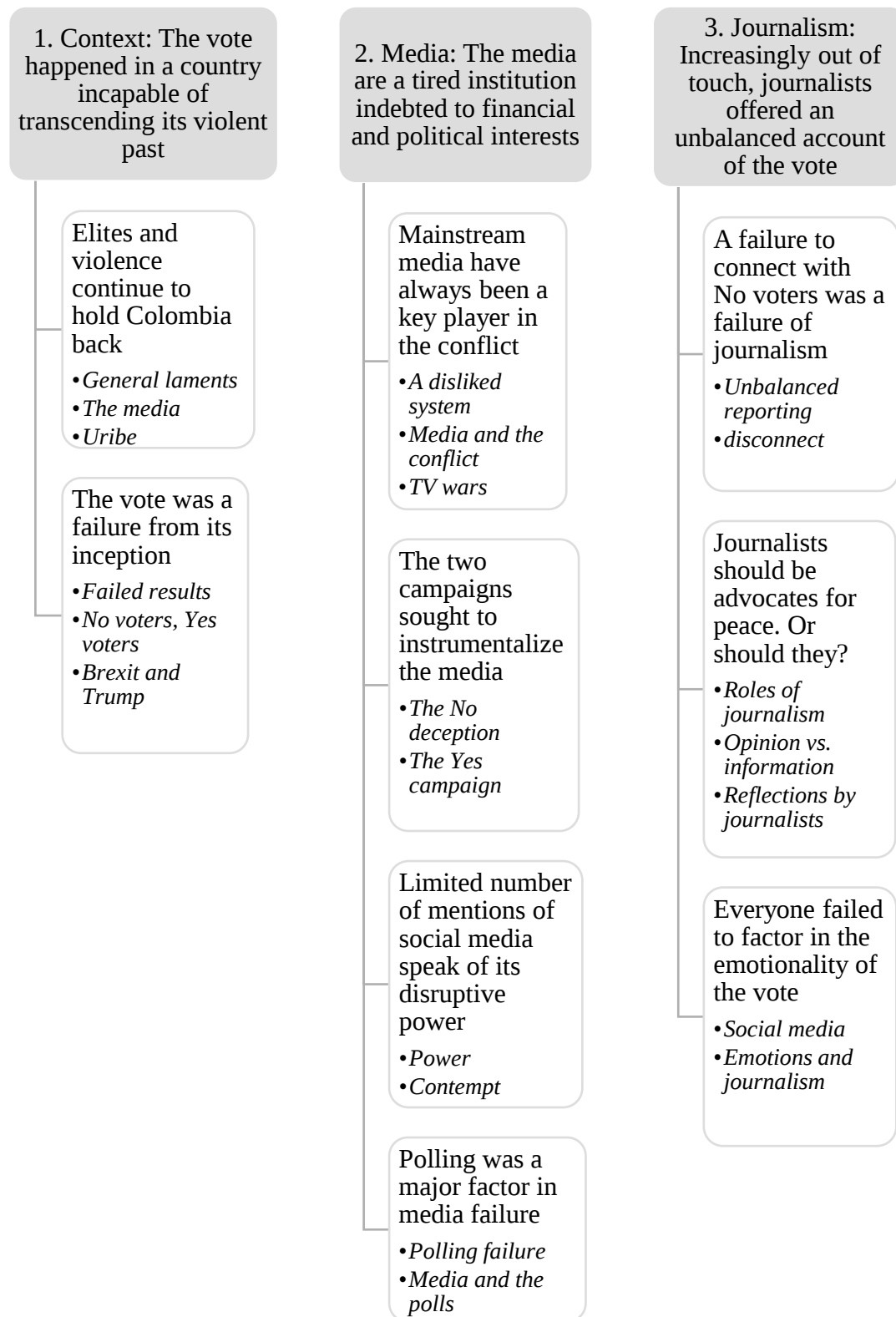


Figure 1. Results Chapter 1, Thematic Framework

1) Context: The Vote Happened in a Country Incapable of Transcending its Violent Past

The Context category shows how authors rationalize both Colombia and the special vote, providing contextual elements that allow us to reconstruct how they think about them. There are two large themes in this category. The first is: *Elites and violence continue to hold Colombia back*. Here, coding reveals mentions, in this case predominantly negative, about idiosyncrasies of the local culture and politics-as-usual, traits of the national traditional media, and former president Álvaro Uribe as a towering and defining figure in the country's recent history. The second theme is: *The vote was a failure from its inception*. This theme shows how the authors tried to make sense of the vote and why they consider it a failure. They include revisiting who the Yes and No voters were; comments about the No campaign's deceptive tactics, including the mischaracterization of a gendered approach to the peace deal as an attempt to impose a so-called "gender ideology;" and comparisons to the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's election in the U.S. The model below illustrates the themes and subthemes included in this category.

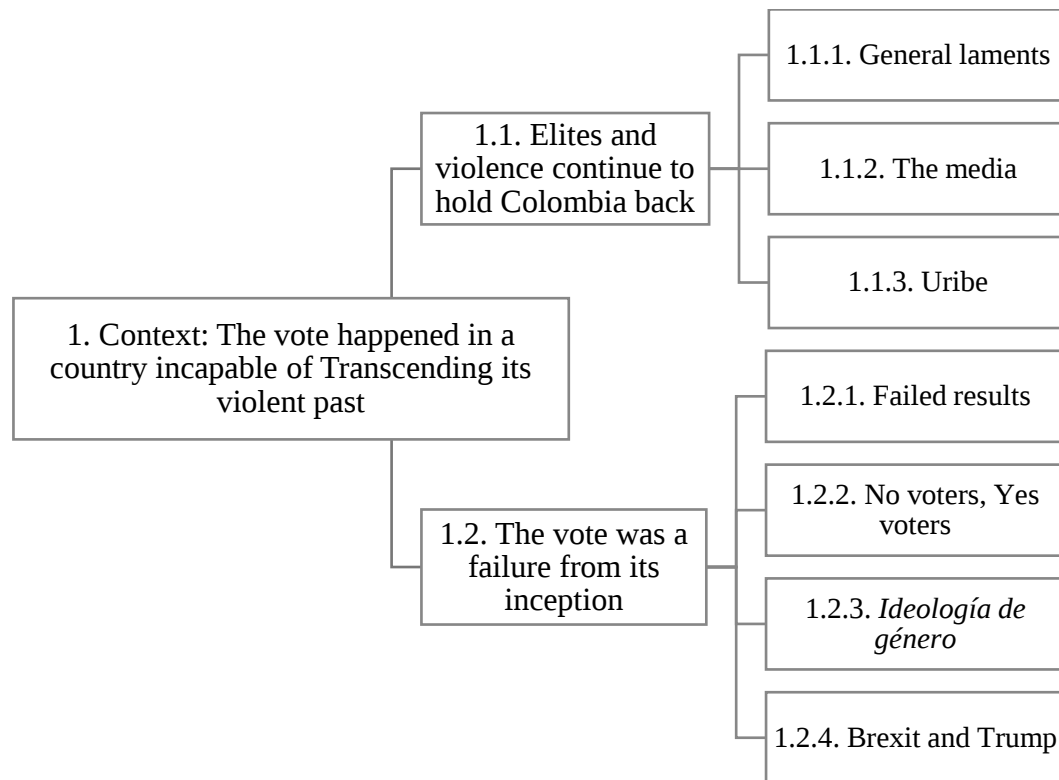


Figure 2. Results Chapter 1, Context

1.1. Elites and Violence Continue to Hold Colombia Back

In this theme, sentences and paragraphs that provide context about Colombia were coded and divided into three subthemes: Laments about Colombia, The Media, and Uribe. These subthemes paint a picture of generalized despair about the state of affairs in the country and offer a sense of fatality *vis-à-vis* the referendum’s results, which are blamed on a societal inability to transcend “business as usual.” There is a lamentation quality to recurrent utterances about Colombia and its culture, highlighted in mentions to endemic corruption, entrenched elites, a history of violence, and poor levels of education. Several articles contribute to a sense that *the media*, as a general concept, are to blame for the vote’s results, and are treated as a tired institution that owes its existence to personal, financial, and political interests. The third and perhaps most significant element that helps construct this somber contextual picture of Colombia

is linked to the figure of former president Uribe, whose name serves as a symbol of the country's recent history. Uribe's name features heavily throughout the corpus, with almost every article mentioning his name. The following table summarizes the subthemes included in this first contextual theme:

1.1.1. General Laments	General laments about Colombia and its culture.	Elites
		Education
		Neoliberalism
		The media
1.1.2. The Media	General perceptions about the media as a national institution.	Elitist, beholden to special interests
		Poor quality journalism
		Losing power
1.1.3. Uribe	Mentions of former President Alvaro Uribe's looming figure in recent Colombian history and his fateful role in the referendum.	Natural leader of No camp
		Manipulation
		Personal battle against Santos

Table 4. Results Chapter 1, 1.1.1, 1.1.2., and 1.1.3.

1.1.1. General laments. Laments (in Spanish “lamentos”) are treated here as negative comments charged with emotional weight. Throughout the corpus, authors utter general laments about Colombia and its culture, including complaints about a traditionally corrupt governing class made up of familiar elites, an entrenched culture of violence that has spurred a business of war, the country's deficits in education mixed with poor and erratic public participation in democratic ballots, and the consequences of neoliberalism. They also include several specific mentions of typically negative traits of the Colombian media, which are seen as part of the country's entrenched elites. This is consistent with perceptions of the media in Latin America, as

Mellado et al. (2017) have found. (More specific mentions about the media will be discussed in further detail below under the *Media* subtheme.)

A recurrent mention of Colombia's governing elites and the social groups that sustain them are tied to the perception that they opposed the peace deal to protect their own interests. The paragraph below captures the tone of frustration—even rage—that several authors employ to speak of the status quo:

There are sectors that have financially gained from this war who resist losing this excellent business. In these sectors are the elites: the politicking, military, drug-trafficking, land-owner elites, some sectors of the Church and of the media, morbid scavengers, who have built a great brotherhood as the oppressing class and who have benefited historically and economically from the war. (Article 25)

The tone of the commentary above is not unique to this piece. Several others boast similarly broad and hyperbolic generalizations of the governing elites: “With the referendum, the peace agreement was left trapped in the same excluding system of clientelist machines and restricted elections” (Article 18), says one author. Another declares that “traditionally powerful economic sectors: cattle farmers, landowners and *narcos*,” joined forces against the peace agreement and, in the end, “the old regime of tradition, family and property has expressed itself with all its might” (article 4). Together, the articles build the general assumption that certain powerful sectors of the population are fighting to maintain the armed conflict alive in Colombia. Many mention particular social and economic groups as factors in the referendum's results. The words “*ganadero*” (which I translate here as “cattle farmers”) and “*terratenientes*” (“landowners”), are mentioned in six articles (Articles 4, 13, 25, 29, 43, & 50). Expressions like “the elites” and “the oligarchy” are found in eight articles (Articles 9, 13, 22, 41, 43, & 50). The “private sector,” “the industrial sector,” and “traditional economic sector” feature heavily in the

corpus, with mentions in 13 articles (Articles 3,4, 5, 10, 12, 13, 16, 25, 28, 36, 40, 43, & 50).³

Speaking of “the landowners’ oligarchy,” one author states that,

The war, for them, is a very profitable business. They have created a paramilitary army of mercenaries, destined to displace *campesinos* to take ownership of their land, that ‘business’ model, typical of the landowners’ oligarchy, has worked well for them during the last century, so much so that they are not willing to renounce violence and this is the real reason why they oppose the peace agreement. (Article 43)

This general consensus over how certain elites profit from the war informs the idea, somewhat fatalistic, that Colombia’s entrenched culture of violence is almost impossible to overcome. In several articles, the peace vote is seen as another reminder of this fatal cultural trait. As one of the authors puts it, voter apathy and the No victory can be partly explained by “adherence to a culture, which has permeated from the top down all layers of society, of solving problems through violence and extermination” (Article 50). This, he says, goes hand in hand with a sense of “learned despair” that comes from low levels of trust in social institutions (Article 50).

Another common lamentation relates to the state of Colombia’s education. Several articles link the vote’s outcome to low levels of literacy, a lack of training in critical thinking, and generalized ignorance about politics and the workings of political institutions. In one opinion piece authored by an educator, the debates during the referendum campaign “evidence that we are far from forming critical thought in a great portion of the population who passes through the country’s educational institutions” (Article 35). Others regret that few people took the time to read the full proposed peace agreement—a heavy document written in legalese—and

³ These results are based on text queries conducted in NVivo. Each search was done based on specific words such as “ganadero” or “oligarquía” and also its variations (i.e., the plural “ganaderos” or the noun “oligarcas”).

blame the referendum results on apathetic voters who were either unwilling or incapable of reading and digesting the technical information included in the accord. In the harsh words of a contributor to an independent news site:

...our people don't read; our people watch television. It would have been advisable to take the agreement like the script of a soap opera, maybe in this way the majority would have become aware of what the agreement said and the path of the nation today would be another, more promising and optimistic, all thanks to a soap. (Article 43)

Aside from laments about the composition of Colombian society, with landowner and industrial elites at the top as sectors accused of profiteering from the war, and the sense that poor levels of education played a role in the referendum results, several authors bring up economic neoliberalism as a key element explaining Colombia's recent history. The term "neoliberalism" and associated words appear 12 times in the corpus, in five separate articles (Articles 13, 18, 25, 41, & 50). Authors consistently link Colombia's governing class and what they call "the ruling elites" to this economic model, one that has been "arbitrarily and violently" imposed on the population (Article 50). In one article published by the left-leaning website *Las2Orillas*, the author chastises analysts who have commented on the referendum's results for not having "considered the effects of neoliberalism in the people's conscience." He decries that "the cultural hegemony of neoliberalism" has resulted in the contradiction of having strong indicators of economic growth and "immense sections of the population that are totally excluded economically, socially, and politically" (Article 41). The perception that neoliberalism in Colombia has created a society of winners and losers in which a handful of social actors at the top refuse to let go of the lucrative business of war is echoed in several pieces. "Neoliberalism has turned everything into money, democracy has disappeared," states one commentator (Article 25). This complaint adds to the general feeling that there is little trust in politics and the country's institutions. One author notes that political parties "don't promote participation, don't

care about people who don't vote" and only aspire to receive the minimum number of votes required "in a political race in which they apply the type of competition proper of the neoliberal economic system" (Article 18). Others approach the issue of neoliberalism as a reason for people to distrust the government that sought to sign the peace agreement with the FARC. In one article, the author argues that abstaining voters refused to cast their ballot in protest against President Santos's "neoliberal policies" (Article 50). Those who mention neoliberalism consider its incidence in transforming Colombian culture into an individualistic, violent, and apathetic society, as one author laments: "Neoliberalism created a mediated society by the *Me*, by the *Mine*, by the envy of the *Other*" (Article 25 – italics mine).

1.1.2. The Media. A major element of Colombian culture is, of course, its media. This section illustrates how the authors in the sample think about the media in general terms. (Further below I delve deeper into the topic, under the *Media* section). This subtheme includes general characterizations, sweeping statements, quips, or expressions referring to Colombian media—"los medios"—as seen by these authors⁴.

Together, the articles paint a picture of a national media environment that is, on the one hand, elitist, beholden to special interests, and close to centres of power and, on the other hand, of poor quality, losing its influence over the population, and threatened by social media. General characterizations depict a system that works to maintain the status quo. The media's "officialism" has "characterized the big media" in Colombia, says one contributor to an

⁴ Like in English, in Spanish the term "los medios," short for "los medios de comunicación," is often used to refer to the news media, but can also mean "the media" more generally, including all forms of audiovisual media. Much like in English, it can be a challenge to determine whether an author is referring to the news media alone or to the wider combination of media that includes advertising, entertainment, film, etc. For the most part, the articles in the sample appear to refer specifically to the news media, and in particular to the Colombian news media. That is how I have interpreted here.

independent news site about the tendency of news organizations to align themselves with sitting governments regardless of who is in charge (Article 15). Articles from two separate think tanks argue that the Colombian media tend to serve the interests “of the power that controls them” (Article 58). The country’s reality, they say, is “intertwined with the churches, the hegemonic media and territorial politics led by the same [people] as always” (Article 4). An author from the regional left-leaning think tank *A la Orilla del Rio* is blunter, calling the media a part of Colombia’s “oppressor class” (Article 25). This kind of commentary is not reserved to authors contributing from more left-leaning publications. One analyst whose right-of-centre column is self-described as a counter balance to the otherwise more liberal newspaper *El Espectador*, writes that the Colombian media are a dependent institution that receives “favours and promises” from the government (Article 1). Often, mentions of the intimate relationship between media and political elites are used as insults and as proof of the media’s lack of independence. Journalists are accused of “being in the same mud” as politicians (Article 39).

The question of media ownership and how it may shape journalistic production surfaces as a salient theme throughout the corpus. Several articles mention ownership structures as reasons for media corruption or at least as a factor contributing to a distorted information environment. One author regrets that the media could play a positive role in society, but instead “what they inform is not always what people want or need or can be useful. They tell us instead what is of interest to the powers that control them” (Article 58). Heavily concentrated media ownership, says one analyst, has resulted in homogenous information with respect to covering the armed conflict:

This hegemonic [information] matrix has kept a unanimism [when it comes] to knowing and interpreting national affairs in a way that, independently of which medium is consulted, the facts and conclusions are consistently the same. (...) the big mass media in

Colombia, a source of information for the majority, are owned by the three largest economic conglomerates. (Article 15)

Beyond defending the status quo or serving special interests, the Colombian media are also blamed for fostering a culture of violence. Mentions of TV in particular are notable in this respect. One author includes *telenovelas*—especially those featuring *narcos*, which have proliferated in recent years—and “frivolous” news broadcasts as belonging in the same bag of “misinformation mass media” (Article 43). In most articles, there is a clear assumption that the media have played a central role in shaping Colombian culture way beyond their potential role in promoting certain opinions or influencing particular electoral decisions. As one author puts it, Colombia’s “lacklustre” political culture has been “built through the media” (Article 18).

This portrayal of Colombian media as a powerful branch of elite powers, capable of influencing the population and shaping the local political culture, stands in contrast with voices who see it as an increasingly irrelevant source of information that is poor both in quality and reach (Article 55). This points to a major tension throughout the corpus, as media are seen as the source of many societal issues, yet the perception that they have lost influence and are out of touch with the people is also widespread—Are they so powerful that they ruined the vote, or were they so irrelevant that their work did not matter? The senior editor of *el El Espectador* admits in an interview that the media “have lost power” (Article 21). A colleague from his newsroom concedes in the same article that the vote’s results are proof that the country’s “opinion leaders,” most of whom supported the Yes camp, are out of touch with the people (Article 21). Another senior journalist, convinced of the chasm between the news media and the population, calls for the media to seek “reconciliation” with the public (Article 38), while one columnist concludes that the peace referendum made it clear that the media are just one of several institutions whose power of influence over the population has dwindled (Article 49).

Social media are a significant element in this perceived growing distance between the media and their audiences. Several authors treat the peace vote as a breaking point for the hegemonic power of traditional media. One analyst notes that the results will force the media to look for “new niches” of information, “perhaps more modest and less generalist” to survive facing competition from social networks (Article 40). Another notes that, right before the vote took place, messages in favour of the No vote were trending on social media, while the bulk of the traditional press were issuing editorials endorsing the Yes option, taking this as a sign of disconnection between mainstream media and the people (Article 37). One article entitled “The Media Shipwreck” (“*El naufragio de los medios*”) evokes an image of the Colombian media as a sinking ship, pushed down by the tidal wave of social media (Article 23). (More on social media under the *Media* section below).

An interview with a media critic in the popular literary magazine *Arcadia* offers some nuance on the question of whether all news media are becoming irrelevant. In recent years, notes the interviewer, independent, digital-first news outlets have won most of the local journalism awards and accolades usually allotted to the more traditional press. While the critic admits that “there is a journalism that smells of gutter... and which is one of the most shameless contributors to the banalization and homogenization of society,” there is also hope in the work of independent, “small journalism collectives who research and make use of the tools offered by technology” to produce great work (Article 40). The comment marks a rare concession in highlighting a more positive aspect of the Colombian media. For the most part, the articles in the corpus contain sweeping negative statements about the local media, not just in relation to coverage of the peace referendum but also more generally.

1.1.3. Uribe. A subtheme dedicated to former Colombian president Álvaro Uribe is inescapable under this section dedicated to context. The name Uribe has dominated national headlines for the entirety of this century and this was no different during the peace referendum campaign. Uribe served two terms as president, from 2002 to 2010, and later served as an elected senator representing the political party he founded, the *Centro Democrático*, from 2014 to 2020. During the referendum campaign, Uribe was seen as the natural spokesperson for the No camp, having been a vocal opponent of the peace process with the FARC over the previous four years. The articles in the corpus confirm the dominance of Uribe as a key element in how people perceived how events unfolded before and during the 2016 vote. The vast majority think Uribe bares responsibility for the vote's results. The name is so dominant and so significant that it is mentioned in the corpus 196 times, in 38 articles. In two additional articles, Uribe's name is only mentioned as if in code, once simply as "The ex-president" (Article 55) and another time, more ominously, as "The lord of the shadows" (Article 34)—a sort of he-who-must-not-be-named.

Mentions of Uribe centre around three key aspects: His role as the natural political leader of the No campaign; his tactics of manipulation and disinformation; and his emerging as the victor in a battle against his political nemesis, then-president Juan Manuel Santos⁵.

The No campaign's ultimate success appears inextricably linked to Uribe's persona and his tactics, as reflected in several analyses (Articles 17, 24, & 32). The referendum, as one author notes, "lent itself to 'personalism' and Uribe played it like that: although not everyone in

⁵ It is worth noting here that Santos had been Uribe's minister of defense and later his hand-picked successor to the presidency. The two men's relationship soured when Santos officially engaged in peace talks with the FARC, which Uribe firmly rejected, having styled his two mandates as president around seeking a military defeat of the guerrillas, which he considered illegitimate and referred to as "terrorists."

favour of No are *uribistas*, he knew how to appropriate the No vote” (Article 9). The No coalesced naturally around Uribe gave it an advantage over the government-led Yes campaign, whose supporters were perceived to be “all over the place” (Article 17). Uribe and his *Centro Democrático* party, says one author, “did do it well because they centralized the No campaign and sent out messages that exploited feelings and passions” (Article 22). Several authors echo the argument that Uribe’s tactics were emotionally manipulative, based on fear-mongering over what would happen after an eventual Yes vote (Articles 2, 19, 22, 24, & 55). The No campaign is deemed to have been effective because it was “based in the visceral rejection to the peace agreement” promoted by Uribe and his followers (Article 24). It was “based on fear,” whereas the Yes campaign, in contrast, was based “on reason” (Article 55). Uribe’s emotional and hyperbolic style of communicating is noted by several authors. He “...told many lies that even he doesn’t believe: That communism will take power, that the wolf of *castrochavismo* is coming, that he is against impunity for terrorists” (Article 2). Others argue that,

In his rush to boycott the negotiations with the FARC, Uribe stopped at nothing and used all the tools he found in his way to mine the credibility of his former minister of defense and sow pessimism around the dialogue, [an] objective that crowned with the referendum result. Again, fear triumphed. (Article 19).

The trope of the menace of *castrochavismo*—that Colombia would become a communist heaven like Cuba and Venezuela if the Yes won—widely spread by the No campaign and its supporters, was particularly successful:

Uribe—who is a very intelligent person—knows that his statement is a fallacy; that is, a lie with the face of a truth. Even so, he repeated it one and a thousand times, because he also knows that all wars and dictatorships feed off the manipulation of fear and rage, something easy to achieve in a people that has received such a bad-quality education. (Article 26)

The figure of Uribe as an all-powerful force—for good or bad, depending on the article—is reinforced throughout the corpus. His persona is so strong, that a *New York Times*

editorial published in both English and Spanish singles him out as “The Man Blocking Peace in Colombia” (“*Álvaro Uribe, el hombre que está bloqueando la paz en Colombia*”) (Article 5). Mentions of Uribe often intersect with mentions of other powers in the military, political, and media circles. Uribe’s name is linked with conservative Catholic and Evangelical leaders, who falsely accused the government of wanting to impose a so-called ‘gender ideology’ through the ministry of education, by promoting a curriculum that “encouraged children to change their gender identity,” and through the peace deal, which would impose this so-called ideology by force (Articles 30 & 31). (More on this topic under “*Ideología de género*” below). Uribe, recalls one author, “motivated Colombians to protest against the ministry” and encouraged his political allies to support anti-ministry protests around the country right during the referendum campaign (Article 30). The former president is also seen as a natural ally to well-known economic groups that financed the No campaign, including his own family’s business group, Grupo Uribe (Article 36), and powerful media conglomerates such as the Ardila Lülle Group, owner of the RCN Television network (Article 44). His name evokes much more than the idea of an influential political figure. To some authors, Uribe as a strongman, Uribe as a political, social, and personal leader, embodies an “extreme and fascist right” (Article 41), and a form of right-wing populism (Article 19) that continues to weigh heavily in Colombian culture (Article 41).

Amongst the leaders of these movements of the political-religious-economic-military ultra right-wing a psychotic attitude predominates: That of a self-proclaimed saviour who imagines that his interior law is The Law for the entire world. (Article 50)

The third axis of Uribe’s presence throughout the corpus is related to his political victory over his former *protégé*, President Santos (Articles 7, 49, 52, 53, 54 & 57). In these pieces, Uribe is treated with a dose of awe and admiration. The vote is treated as “a clash between the two

most powerful figures in Colombian politics,” Santos and “his nemesis” Uribe (Article 8), its results marking “a stormy day for President Santos” and “a refreshing shower for former president Uribe” (Article 52). The vote was Uribe’s “triumph” (Article 47) and a “spectacular victory” (Article 57). One commentator declares simply that “Uribe can do anything” (Article 49). There is a general consensus around the notion that the No campaign would not have succeeded without Uribe, whose political capital was “underestimated” by the opposition (Article 32). The personal war between the two political giants overshadows the magnitude of what the historic vote would eventually mean for Colombians:

Santos and Uribe want the same: To be them, each one, the protagonist of the deal, and that the protagonist not be their political adversary. It is a human affair, too human, of pure vanity. ‘Peace, yes, but I sign it.’ (Article 2)

1.2. The Vote Was a Failure From its Inception

The second theme in the Context category deals with contextual information about the peace vote. The theme is divided into three subthemes: “Failed” results, summarizing how for the most part the results were seen as a failure; No voters/ Yes voters, which shows how different analysts revisited and attempted to make sense of the identities of different voters; and Brexit and Trump, where authors link the peace vote to these other ballots that also took place in 2016. The figure below illustrates the four subthemes in this section.

1.2.1. "Failed" Results	The vote's results as a failure, be it of politics, of the media, or of Colombia as a whole.	Shock and pain
		Santos's failure
1.2.2. No voters, Yes voters	Characterizations, analyses, or broad descriptions of who made up the two groups of voters.	Urban vs. rural
		Victims vs. out-of-touch urbanites
		Misunderstood No voters
1.2.3. Brexit and Trump	Mentions and analyses of how the Colombian peace vote compares to two other 2016 votes, Brexit and the Trump election.	Making sense of odd votes
		Disinformation
		Global trends
		Polling

Table 5. Results Chapter 1, 1.2.1, 1.2.2., and 1.2.3.

1.2.1. “Failed” results. Throughout the corpus, there is a general consensus that the peace vote yielded dramatic and surprising results, with 321 references to this element of surprise. For the most part, the authors share their shock and pain from the results, and see the No victory as a failure. To some, the failure is all encompassing. “In the most tranquil elections in history,” says one of them, “Colombia took the most painful decision of our democracy, to submerge us in a dark tunnel of which we don’t know how to exit,” writes one author (Article 19). The sense of disbelief runs deep in the commentary. The No victory is characterized as “pyrrhic” and as an absurdity. How could “an important part of the Colombian population vote against peace?” asks one author (Article 13). One article boasts the headline “Explaining the Failure” (“Explicar el fracaso”), offering insights into the “frustrating results” (Article 22).

Others ponder how a “perfect referendum” could fail so spectacularly (Article 52), and how “the failure of the [peace] referendum” may compare to cases of “failed votes” in other parts of the world (Article 6). In some cases, the results are seen as a personal failure of President Santos. “Juan Manuel Santos has harvested a thunderous failure,” says one commentator (Article 17). “The failure leaves Santos politically paralyzed” (Article 8), and “his mandate is liquidated” (Article 49), say others. The results marked “another failure in a long list of frustrated reforms by President Santos” (Article 1), and the president was “the biggest loser” in the vote (Article 41). Santos’s personal failure is also explained through his insistence on holding the referendum on the peace deal, going against several warnings that the vote was not legally necessary and could potentially backfire—as it did (Articles 4, 6, 9, 13, 18, 22, & 52). It was because of Santos’s “arrogance,” says one article, for wanting to use the vote as a mechanism to boost his own popularity and seek affirmation for his administration’s record, that the results marked such a personal failure for the president (Article 32).

1.2.2. No voters/ Yes voters. Throughout the corpus, authors engage in a dialogue about the identities of Yes and No voters, offering generalizations, data-based analyses, and broad descriptions of the two camps of voters who participated in the peace referendum. The conversation revolves around questions of whether the country has become polarized along political and geographical fault lines. Some articles place voters in two opposing sides, such as urban vs. rural, or victims vs. out-of-touch urbanites. Others attempt to dispel these apparently neat divisions. Many authors, especially journalists, recognize that they might have misunderstood the motivations that led some voters to support the No option.

Broadly, Yes voters are characterized as rural, direct victims of the armed conflict, and concentrated in the periphery—far removed from large and more developed urban centres. A

significant group of Yes supporters, however, belongs in large cities like the capital, Bogotá, where most analysts remark that the Yes option won by a wide margin. No voters, on the other hand, are seen as mostly urban, people whose contact with the full wrath of the conflict was mostly lived through the news, and who are largely concentrated in more developed and wealthier enclaves. There is a notable conversation centred around *who* were those No voters who took the media, and most of Colombian society, by surprise. Most articles bring up the rural vs. urban division as a matter of fact, based on regional analyses of voting results:

The more in the periphery, the more [people] voted Yes... while in municipalities where the Yes vote did well are mostly in marginalized areas, such as in the Pacific Coast or the Amazon, those that had fewer Yes votes are mostly closer to the more populated areas. (Article 14).

The regions where the Yes option was more popular are marked by rural settings, high levels of violence and poverty, and low levels of institutionalism, argues one analyst (Article 50). “In places where the violence was most ardent,” people voted Yes, says one journalist commenting on the results, while people “in the centre” are those who can afford “the luxury of analyzing, condemning, proposing other alternatives” (Article 46). This notion that No voters were mostly out-of-touch urbanites is often linked to the idea that the war was a televised affair for a significant proportion of the country (Article 24). “To our shame before the world,” says one author, No voters were “those who watched the war on TV, the residents of the major urban centres—except Bogotá” (Article 19). In many cases, No voters are cast in negative light, vilified for turning their back to the plight of the most vulnerable victims. No voters, argues one author from a left-leaning think-tank, were concentrated in certain municipalities where there is “illegal mining and coca fields controlled by the paramilitary and the ultra-right-wing” (Article 4). They were the people who have “suffered the least” in the conflict, concentrated in the

country's centre, away from the more suffering periphery (Article 46). This analysis is echoed elsewhere:

There, where the horrors of war were experienced without mediations and in the flesh—mainly agricultural and *campesino* regions—the Yes option triumphed in a decisive manner. That is the case in Cauca, with 68% voting Yes; Chocó, with 80% for Yes; Putumayo, 66% for Yes; Vaupés, 78% for Yes. In turn, in those urban districts where the war was barely a piece of news that the media divulged, implacably demonizing the insurgency, those who went to the ballot box did it to manifest their rejection of the peace deal. (Article 24)

Despite the widely accepted notion that Yes and No voters were divided along regional lines, several analysts reject the hypothesis that the two types of voters were so neatly divided between centre and periphery, or between those directly and indirectly victimized by the armed conflict. No voters included “lots of ordinary people,” not just out-of-touch urbanites, as one journalist notes (Article 49). “Where the war is lived, [people] voted Yes and No,” says one article from an independent online news site entitled “This is the Country that Voted No” (“*Así es el país que votó No*”).

When we review the municipalities that were most affected by the conflict... we find that the country that suffers in general voted Yes more, but not unanimously... The Yes won in rural places but also in big cities: Although it is often said that the Yes vote was more rural and closer to the conflict, in various large cities like Bogotá, Cali or Barranquilla the Yes won. (Article 14)

Responding to analysts who paint Yes voters as direct victims of the war and No voters as having a “mediated” experience of it, some authors offer more nuanced studies that show high proportions of No voters in regions affected by violence (Articles 14, 29, & 48). One in particular attempts to dispel this notion by interviewing cattle farmers, many of whom were victims of the FARC's violence and rallied around the No vote:

...a cattle farmer from Florencia manifested that, contrary to what public opinion says, the regions most affected by violence rejected the Havana agreements. ‘This is not about choosing between war and peace. Caquetá pronounced itself against a set of agreements

that were poorly elaborated, damaging to the population,’ [a cattle farmer] said. (Article 29)

A separate hypothesis present in the corpus is that many No voters cast their ballot as a way to reject President Santos and his economic policies (Articles 22, 32, 55, & 57).

Considering the No vote as homogenous “is false,” as these voters included taxi and truck drivers, as well as agricultural communities, who voted as “a condemnation of Santos and not necessarily the Havana agreements” (Article 22). “Colombians don’t love President Santos,” and many expressed it by rejecting the referendum’s goal, states an editorial from *El Universal*, Esguerra conservative regional newspaper (Article 32).

In the dialogue about the puzzling nature of No voters, some analysts bring up another common mischaracterization of their identity as Uribe loyalists, commonly referred to as *Uribistas*, as “not all of those who voted No identify fully with *uribismo* or with Uribe’s personal figure” (Article 15), and “the fact that Uribe capitalizes that [No] vote today doesn’t mean that all voters are *Uribistas*” (Article 57). Yet some of these arguments seem only to reinforce the former president’s political and cultural capital over a large swath of the electorate. A conservative media critic argues that No voters coalesced around moral and political values rather than along allegiances to Uribe as their political leader. Rather, identity and group cohesion revolving around a rejection of “impunity and drug trafficking” was a defining trait—a rejection whose banner Uribe held on to as a main talking point during the campaign (Article 23). People voted No driven by “rage against the FARC, the weak image of the government, fear [and] the Evangelical vote,” says a political scientist. He adds that “not all who voted No are *uribistas*” (Article 9), only to quickly concede that Uribe’s political clout did play a determining role in the No victory:

If you analyze the *uribista* vote in the last national elections... you can see that the *uribista* vote is very stable. What the Yes supporters didn't take into account is that the *uribismo* has a strong electoral pull. (Article 9)

1.2.3. Brexit and Trump. This subtheme completes the set of contextual information about the peace referendum. The following are references to two other votes that yielded surprising results in 2016, the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. At the time when the articles in the corpus were published—from the peace vote on Oct. 2 to Oct. 31, 2016—the Brexit vote had already occurred, in June, but not the American election, which took place on Nov. 8. There are 13 references to the Brexit vote and seven to Trump's election in the corpus, in nine different articles (Articles 1, 2, 7, 8, 15, 19, 22, 54 & 57). Overall, the authors who reference Brexit and Trump use these two events as analytical tools that may help their audiences, and themselves, make sense of the events that unfolded on October 2nd in Colombia. The comparisons range from underlining common factors, such as the sheer sense of surprise with the results, to the use of misinformation and how it may have affected—or would eventually affect, in the case of the U.S. election—the vote's outcome.

Some of the mentions assume an easy comparison of the Colombian vote with these other two events, based on several common factors “beyond a general bewilderment,” as one author puts it (Article 15). These factors include the thin margin of victory, “little information for citizens about the consequences of the decision,” the profound political and economic impact of the results, and an opposition campaign “based on lies and misinformation” (Article 15). The question of misinformation is recurrent, in particular comparing the No campaign in Colombia and the Leave campaign in Britain.

Same as with the British referendum, the Colombian vote was a dispute ‘between a simple lie and a complex truth,’ as the columnist Andrew Cooper of *The Guardian* newspaper in London summarized it, after his fellow countrymen allowed themselves to be seduced by the lie. (Article 19)

In an interview with a political analyst, the expert calls the No victory in Colombia “an immobilizing triumph, the same as Great Britain with Brexit,” adding,

In the case of Brexit something similar happened: simplistic messages won, such as ‘Muslims are invading us and they will finish with English culture’ and ‘a million Syrians will arrive in the next year,’ facing rational arguments of why it was necessary for the country to stay within the European Union. (Article 22)

In some cases, commentators interpreted the Colombian referendum as a harbinger of what would occur in the U.S. a mere few weeks later, noting that the three events may be local expressions of global social and political trends. In a column entitled “Explaining the Failure” (*“Explicar el fracaso”*), the author alludes to the rise of “populists and demagogues” around the world as a driving force for the rejection of the peace agreement:

And thus we have to witness the trending topic of global foolishness: #letTheDemagogueWin, #AllButPolitics, #InFavourofWhoeverisAgainst. In sum, the spirit of history. The countries that have already tried it are starting to emerge from it with a horrible hangover (...) Great Britain got its Brexit hangover the next day, but it doesn’t know how to avoid the nightmare that the majority voted. What will we do in Colombia? We are like the United States would be the day after Trump’s victory: astonished, inconsolable and without knowing what will happen. (Article 2)

The comparisons between Brexit and Colombia’s peace referendum are also related to the level of polarization that was either caused or revealed by their respective campaigns. “Every referendum inevitably generates polarization, inevitably divides the country, as it was seen in England with Brexit,” says one author (Article 7). “If anything is clear,” says one editorial,

is that [in Colombia] there is more distrust, more uncertainty and more polarization than before. It is not exaggerated to affirm that this result is comparable with Brexit... the only surprise the world has left is that in November Donald Trump wins. (Article 57).

Only one columnist attempts to put these “easy” comparisons into some perspective. “The inevitable commentary of the day,” notes the columnist, misses the gravity of the Colombian vote’s results, because “in Colombia there are weapons involved” (Article 54).

Finally, the comparisons with Brexit or Trump are also related to the role of voting-intention polls in shaping each campaign. In Colombia, the polls had predicted a victory in favour of the Yes option by a margin of two to one, but voters “rejected the peace deal, in a reaction that nobody expected and that recalls that of Brexit” (Article 8). One analyst refers to the “silent vote” phenomenon, in which poll respondents might have lied about their voting intentions for fear or shame of going against the socially acceptable option (Article 2). In the U.S., the silent Trump vote was a topic of discussion after the election. In Colombia, the phenomenon was nicknamed “*voto vergonzante*” to refer to voters who secretly planned to cast a ballot for the No option. “People answered with lies,” states one columnist. “They were ashamed of voting No, but they did. Just like they are ashamed to say that they will vote for Trump, but they will” (Article 2).

Analysis

This first section focused on context shows that the metajournalistic discourse of media failure is built on commonly held assumptions about Colombia as a fatally violent nation ruled by entrenched elites. With this, the sense of failure felt by most with respect to the peace referendum’s results appears as an extension of a long-held perception of Colombia as an eternally failed nation. The results show that, like in other Latin American nations, people continue to think that elites, or what in Spanish is referred to as “*los poderes tradicionales*” remain in command of national institutions, including the media (Ayala Osorio, 2006; Mellado et. al, 2017; Waisbord, 2009). In the particular case of Colombia, elite-rule is oligarchic in nature and sustained on neoliberal economic views (Caballero, 2018). Combined with the realities of violence, this context has created especially difficult conditions for optimism about how society can transcend and transform its institutions to become a post-conflict nation. As García Duarte et

al. (2018) have stated, “Colombia is a country excluded by the armed conflict” (p. 25) trapped in a liminal space between “the war that is leaving and peace that hasn’t arrived” (p. 11).

The sense of fatalism is perhaps more pronounced on the articles of this corpus because, as Rincón Morera (2018) argues, the peace referendum marked a sharp turn from hope in the lead up to the vote to “new uncertainties” once the results were known. Much like with Brexit and Trump, the sense of bewilderment gave way to fundamental questions about how this could have happened, exposing (or re-exposing) old truths about the country and its institutions, and how people feel about them (Gómez Giraldo & Cárdenas-Ruiz, 2019; Molina & Chicaíza, 2018). The towering figure of former president Álvaro Uribe and specific characteristics of Yes and No voters, whether cultural, demographic, regional or other, occupy significant space in these conversations. The two major themes of this section—Colombia as a failure, and the peace vote as a failure—set the tone for how each of these authors ultimately judge the performance of the media covering the referendum.

2) Media: The Media are a Tired Institution Indebted to Financial and Political Interests

The articles in the corpus were selected because they addressed the media’s coverage of the peace referendum. While the previous section focused on contextual information about Colombia and the peace referendum, including some references to the media, this second section focuses on articles that mention media explicitly. The section is divided into four main themes that show how the metajournalistic discourse of media failure is built around assumptions and perceptions of Colombian media as a tired institution that is indebted to financial and political interests. The first theme deals with analyses and comments about the role that Colombian media have played in the duration of the the armed conflict. The second highlights that, for many, the media were instrumentalized by the Yes and the No campaigns. The third theme deals with the

few but significant mentions to how social media affected the media ecosystem during the referendum campaign. The fourth and last theme highlights the media's use of voting intention polls. These themes are all centred around mentions of the media as an institution and a system, and a key part of Colombian culture. (Comments more specific to journalism and its practice are the focus of the third and last section of this chapter). The figure below illustrates the themes in the Media category in detail.

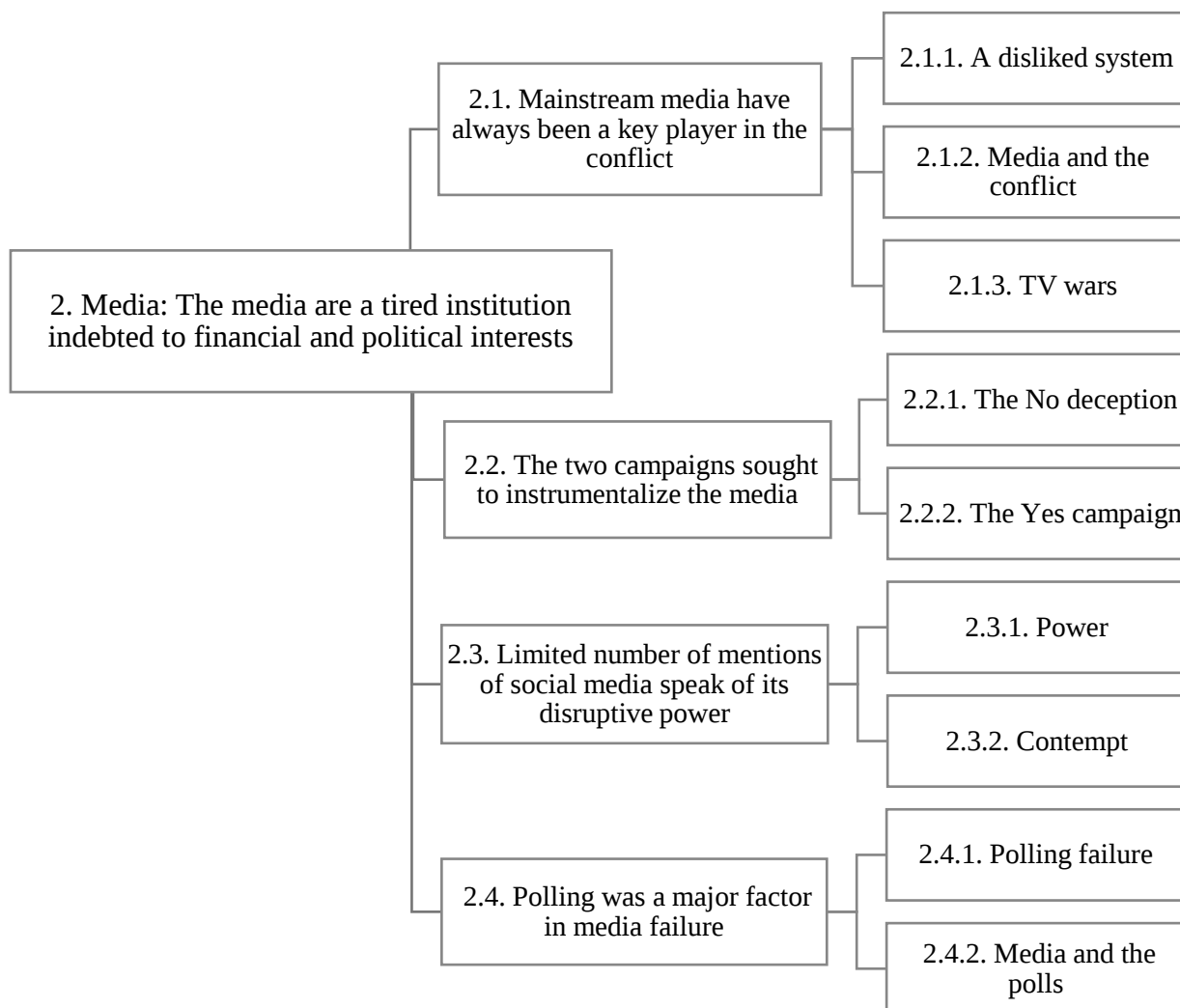


Figure 3. Results Chapter 1, Media

2.1. Mainstream Media Have Always Been a Key Player in the Conflict

The codes in this theme include commentary, analyses, quips, and any mentions of Colombian mainstream media (see “footnote 2” for how the expression “the media” is interpreted here). The theme is organized into three subthemes, as illustrated in the figure below.

2.1.1. A Disliked System	Most authors speak ill of Colombian media as an elitist, self-serving, and broken institution.	Status quo and oppressive elites
		Media ownership
2.1.2. Media and the Conflict	Comments and analyses about how the mainstream media have approached coverage of the 50-year-long internal conflict, creating particular frameworks.	Obtuse reporting
		Dominant narratives
		Loss of collective memory
2.1.3. TV Wars	Specific mentions to how the country's top two television networks—which draw the largest media audiences—covered the peace vote and how this may have affected the outcome.	Mediocrity
		RCN Television's intentional pro No activism

Table 6. Results Chapter 1, 2.1.1, 2.1.2., and 2.1.3.

2.1.1. A Disliked System. The generally negative tone displayed throughout the themes above extend and even expand when authors refer directly to the country’s media. Mentions of the country’s traditional media, in particular, revolve around how this institution supports the status quo and even belongs with the “oppressive” elites. Several comments raise questions about how media ownership may affect journalistic output. A particularly damning paragraph

illustrates the level of animosity against Colombia's media system expressed in many of these articles:

...the urbanites, whereas they don't suffer from the devastating effects of the armed conflict, are victims of the media war paid for by sectors of a corrupt oligarchy committed to big transnational interests, cattle farmers, feudal landholders that benefit from the armed conflict, including drug trafficking and the fortunes that this business generates for diverse economic sectors, amongst them the financial [sector], large commercial and industrial [groups] to whom, linked to influential segments of the corrupt political class financed by those obscure economic interests, a solid and long lasting peace is not convenient. (Article 13)

This intricate paragraph exemplifies the type of negative assumptions about Colombia that prevails across the corpus. The lengthy tirade paints a picture of a media system that is fully controlled by special interests and assumes the existence of an urban audience that is in its thrall. This type of broad generalization about the media's entrenched position within powerful, "oppressive elites" is recurrent. "In a neoliberal environment," writes one commentator for a left-wing regional think tank,

There are sectors enriched with war who resist losing this excellent business. In these sectors are the politicking, militaristic, drug-trafficking, land-owning elites, sectors of the churches, of the scavenger and morbid media, who have built a great brotherhood as an oppressive class and who have benefitted historically and economically from war, appropriating international aid. (Article 25)

Both excerpts above depict a media system that is compromised by its proximity to economic, political, and military powers. In other words, that the media here *are* the embodiment of the status quo. The perception is widely echoed, from comments about the media lacking independence because they receive "gifts and promises" from the State (Article 1), to how the information they provide "is not always what people want or need or what can be useful. Instead, they tell us what is of interest to the power that controls them" (Article 58).

The question of media ownership is salient. It is worth noting here that the Colombian media system is based on a mixed, public/private model currently dominated by private,

commercial organizations across all platforms. National television, which remains the largest source of news for the majority, is largely dominated by a duopoly made up of RCN Television and Caracol Television (García Ramírez & Charry Joya, 2019). State-owned and state-run media, though existing, are not significant players in the national media landscape. In some regions, they do have well established programming (MOE, 2017). Print media, especially newspapers and current-affair magazines, have traditionally been owned and controlled by a handful of influential families. Over the past decades, however, many of these have been sold to conglomerates. Now the largest TV, radio, and newspapers—and some online news sites—are owned by media conglomerates, some of them international, with holdings in other industries (MOE, 2017). It is against this backdrop that the negative disposition towards Colombia's media must be understood.

The articles raise questions about the media's independence when their ownership and leadership structures remain, in some cases, intimately attached to traditional elites. Two pieces mention Alejandro Santos, the nephew of President Santos who at the time of the peace referendum was Editor-in-Chief at the influential weekly *Semana* (Articles 7 & 53). They question whether *Semana*'s open endorsement of the peace deal was at least in part due to these familial ties⁶. There is a general suspicion about a media system that is dominated “by the country's top three commercial conglomerates,” as one analyst says, who have historically toed the official line and provided a largely homogenous coverage of national affairs (Article 15).

⁶ The Santos family has deep roots in both journalism and power in the country, having owned and operated the largest national newspaper, *el Tiempo*, for decades, and counting with two elected presidents amongst its lineage. Most recently, during the term of Juan Manuel Santos as president, his brother and notorious journalist Enrique Santos played a key role in the peace negotiations with the FARC. His cousin, Francisco Santos, was vice-president of President Álvaro Uribe and later appointed ambassador to the US. Alejandro Santos is the son of Enrique Santos.

Some articles raise the question of whether RCN Television's coverage of the vote, which was openly critical of the peace process and the resulting peace deal, was linked to the special interests of its parent company, the Ardila Lülle group, which was reportedly a donor to the No campaign (Articles 36, 43, & 50). One commentator refers to the group's alleged financing of the No campaign stating that this "leaves no doubt how far they [economic elites] are willing to go to maintain war" (Article 43). It is worth noting, however, that the organization later rectified the information, claiming that it had donated to the Yes campaign but had facilitated advertising space for the No campaign in its network programming (Article 28).

Overall, mentions of Colombia's mainstream media are negative and centre around arguments that go beyond a mere preoccupation with the political economy of the local media system. They suggest that the media, insofar as they are perceived as a hegemonic power, are actively drawing power, authority, and profit from the business of war, and are therefore incapable of serving the public.

2.1.2. Media and the Conflict. For the most part, these articles criticize the media's performance during the peace referendum specifically; some comments extend to how the media generally covered the four-year peace process with the FARC in Havana. In only two cases, the articles discuss how the Colombian media has traditionally approached coverage of the decades-long armed conflict with the FARC. Here, the view is that the media's approach to the referendum coverage was an extension of a historically "obtuse" reading of events, largely informed by the standpoint of the state (Articles 15 & 58). This narrow approach to conflict reporting has resulted in dominant narratives that support the status quo. One analyst argues that these frames have resulted in the loss of collective memory. For decades, the Colombian media

helped construct a “hegemonic matrix of information” about the conflict that was marked by the media’s problematic proximity to traditional powers:

A general understanding of the armed conflict was constructed that responds to one particular, incomplete, skewed and biased way [of reporting]. In this process specific imaginaries have been built, mobilizing passions that have ended by imposing themselves as the frame of analysis of reality and as [the frame] of the construction of political thinking that today is difficult to dismantle. For example, an internal enemy was created... that incarnated evil and the root of national problems; an enemy lacking humanity or any bit of political legitimacy. (Article 15).

This author is amongst those who think that the media “bear some responsibility for the referendum results”:

As long as the logic of war (the distinction friend-enemy, the discursive negation of the other) is not superseded, and a more judicious, critical and reflexive understanding of what has occurred to us is not made possible, peace and reconciliation will not have a resolute echo in the electorate. (Article 15)

As a conduit of collective memory, states one analyst, Colombian media have traditionally offered a limited understanding of the armed conflict by aligning itself with dominant narratives, ultimately providing a skewed version of events. “Media and power unite to tell the official memory, the one that ignores *the other* and pretends that everyone ignores them” (Article 58). By elevating “the memory of power,” says the author, educational institutions and the media have contributed to a loss of historical memory (Article 58).

2.1.3. TV Wars. Several articles are particularly critical of television news and how the dominant networks, RCN Television and Caracol Television,⁷ approached coverage of the

⁷ A brief note about RCN Television and its main rival Caracol Television. These two private companies dominate Colombian media, including entertainment and news. There are other, smaller players, but largely these two main networks compete for audiences in radio and TV regionally, nationally and internationally (García Ramírez & Charry Joya, 2019). They share many characteristics. They both have a long history in Colombian media. They operate multiple radio stations covering a variety of subjects in entertainment, sport, news and talk radio. Each of them has a TV channel offering 24hr programming and have expanded to international broadcasting as well. Nationally, top audience ratings come from soap operas and several newscasts a day. They both belong to large economic conglomerates with interests in several other sectors aside from telecommunications including

referendum. References to TV range from general assumptions about its flaws as a news medium to specific accusations, particularly against RCN Television, for its what is largely perceived as an activist stance against the peace deal. The conversation about TV journalism's performance during the peace vote goes from perceptions of TV news as mediocre at best to warnings about the corrosive power of intentionally militant networks. Latent in all these references is the common knowledge that TV remains the predominant medium for news consumption in the country and therefore the behaviours of broadcasters deserve special attention. In the words of one commentator, for many Colombians the decades-long conflict "happened only on TV" (Article 19).

TV is largely seen as a mediocre source of news coverage. The media's tendency to prioritize "the spectacular and the negative" is exacerbated in this medium, where there is "a clear tendency to put violence ahead of any other information" (Article 58). Noting that "according to polls, the average Colombian spends more than four hours a day in front of the television," one author sarcastically suggests that the referendum should have been a soap opera, that way voters might have paid closer attention to the contents of the agreement. "We need the *telenovela* of the referendum," he declares (Article 43).

Yet, there is a tension between portrayals of a certain benign mediocrity and the apparent intentionality behind some of the coverage about the peace vote. Several articles mention RCN Television for its apparent decision to "maintain a position contrary to the government" (Article

sports teams, soda drinks, beer, sugar cane, plastics, and others (Media Ownership Monitor, 2018). Their television networks have developed particular characteristics. While RCN Television has aligned itself with conservative *uribismo* over the past two decades, Caracol Television has attempted to remain somewhat more critical of the political right wing. This editorial alignment applies only to their television operations. RCN Radio and Caracol Radio are independent and operate along their own editorial lines. (MOE, 2017).

15). A media critic and scholar goes as far as to say that RCN Television was a victor in the peace vote.

RCN television won the referendum in the media, as it bet all-in for the No. RCN is a transparent channel, since it assumes publicly that it is not interested in peace, that it hates Juan Manuel Santos and the FARC and that it loves Álvaro Uribe. And that editorial clarity won. (Article 44)

This one analysis implies that the television network was not simply aligned with forces opposing the peace deal but put its coverage directly in service of their natural leader. “RCN won because it never concealed that it was a speaker for Uribe” (Article 44). Some comments address directly the network’s news director, Claudia Gurisatti, who is depicted as “one of the principal critics of the agreement and a compulsive promoter of the No campaign” (Article 50). Gurisatti’s motives are questioned beyond her vocal opposition to the peace deal. Several commentators raise the issue of whether the interests of the network’s owner had sway over how she and other journalists covered the peace vote (Articles 50, 43, & 36).

For its part, Caracol Television, the other half of the national TV duopoly, is accused of “getting everything wrong: tone, agenda, data and reports,” says the media critic (Article 44). Overall, the perception from several articles is that, compared with most of the national print media, which largely supported the peace deal through their editorial pages, the TV networks were not on board with the agreement.

Television, which is the big medium through which Colombians form their opinions, was not aligned with the peace process. While Caracol was very agnostic and cold towards the process, RCN was openly against [it]. (Article 9)

2.2. The two Campaigns Sought to Instrumentalize the Media

Throughout the corpus, there is a conversation about the effectiveness and adequacy of the communication strategies used by each of the two campaigns. This theme shows that the metajournalistic discourse of media failure includes a reflection on how each campaign

instrumentalized the media for their own gain. This theme is divided into two subthemes. One centres on the No campaign's blatant use of deception to convince voters, as admitted to by their own campaign manager, and how a strategy of misinformation played out in media and social media platforms. The second theme gathers mentions about the strategies and flaws of the Yes campaign, which had many faces and promoters, from the Santos government to civil organizations working to support the Yes vote.

2.2.1. The No Deception	The No campaign's strategy of misinformation	Admission of deception: Castrochavismo and other fallacies <i>Ideología de género</i>
		Uribe's hold of the media
		Social media power
2.2.2. The Yes campaign	The Yes campaign strategy as a fractured approach to communication that was more rational than emotional.	Political miscalculation
		Scattered communication
		The "Us vs. Them" trap

Table 7. Results Chapter 1, 2.2.1 and 2.2.2.

2.2.1. The No Deception. As noted earlier, the general perception that the No campaign was largely based on spreading misinformation to confuse the electorate was confirmed by the head of the No campaign, Juan Carlos Vélez, in a media interview on Oct. 4. admitted that his team spun information about the peace agreement to get “people to vote in anger” (Ramírez Prado, 2016). The “cheapest campaign in history,” he said, relied on two elements. One was

fabricating images that would cause outrage, such as showing a FARC commander wearing the presidential sash, to spread widely on social media and instant Vélez messaging services like WhatsApp. The second was using media interviews with spokespersons from the No camp who made wild claims about what would happen if the peace agreement were to be implemented. The messages changed depending on the audience, confessed Vélez. For example, claiming that the agreement “promoted abortion” targeted conservatives, while low-income seniors were the target of messages about government subsidies that would be supposedly transferred into the hands of former FARC soldiers:

In middle- and upper-class radio stations we talked about impunity... while in radio stations aimed at lower income [audiences] we focussed on government subsidies... On the Coast we individualized the message that we would turn into Venezuela. (In: Ramírez Prado, 2016)

A total of 28 articles are critical of the No campaign’s strategy of deception. The campaign was “advanced on the basis of lies and disinformation” (Article 15), “excessive and deceiving” (Article 12), marked by “lies, fear and threats” (Article 50), and “hyperbolic and deceiving” (Article 5). One fallacy was the tale of “*Castrochavismo*,” an efficient trope to scare voters into thinking that signing the peace deal would align Colombia with the brands of socialism espoused by Fidel Castro’s Cuba and the Venezuela of Hugo Chávez. As one analyst notes, other lies were added to the mix:

Telling low-income seniors that if the Yes won their pensions would be taken away to subsidise demobilized FARC soldiers. They also spoke of massive expropriations and the cancelation of subsidies that were never contemplated in the agreements, but that Uribe and his followers preached as the truth. (Article 19)

Another, perhaps much more powerful and damaging element that many, including scholars, believe influenced the outcome of the peace referendum was the fabrication of the so-called ideología de género (Esguerra Muelle, 2017; Rodríguez Rondón, 2017; Serrano Amaya,

2017). The topic is raised in several articles. I offer in the Introduction chapter an explanation of what the term means and why its impact on the vote outcome was so significant. Here I briefly summarize the issue again before proceeding to show the coding results to highlight the prevalence of this issue in the corpus.

The No's campaign of disinformation proposed, among other things, that the peace deal went against family values, as it "promoted abortion," and contained measures related to sex and gender that went against "natural or divine laws" (Hoyos, 2016). This latter claim stemmed from discussions held among parties during the peace talks in which gender would play a factor in designing post-conflict policies, such as how to re-socialize former guerrilla members into mainstream society. This "gender-focused" approach—"*enfoque de género*" in Spanish—would recognize that women and members of the LGBTQ2 community had been affected in particular ways by their participation in the armed conflict and therefore would require special attention in the post-conflict era. The No campaign, alongside members of some of the most conservative Evangelical Christian churches and a number of Catholic leaders, took to referring to this gendered approach with the pejorative "*ideología de género*" or "gender ideology," a term already widely used by conservative activists around the world (Esguerra Muelle, 2017). The discussion around the peace deal's gender-focussed approach was conflated with a completely separate matter occurring at the Ministry of Education just weeks before the start of the referendum campaign. The ministry, led by the openly-lesbian Gina Parody, a former Uribe ally turned Santos supporter, issued a set of educational guidelines about gender identity and gender expression to be used in schools across the country as a tool to prevent bullying. Uribe and his party led a series of protests against the ministry, accusing Parody of "promoting homosexuality" among children (Esguerra Muelle, 2017). Alejandro Ordóñez, a conservative Catholic and

known ally of former president Uribe, who was then head of the Public Ministry, declared that in designing the guidelines the same government that had “negotiated a bad peace deal with the FARC” was creating “an institutional instrument that seeks to indoctrinate our children in gender ideology” (Ordóñez, 2016). Against this backdrop, the false claim that the Santos government was on a crusade to implement the so-called “gender ideology” not just in schools but through the peace agreement became an instantly effective tool to capture conservative voters, helping millions to close ranks against what they saw as a poisoned peace deal.

Throughout the corpus, there are several references to the so-called *ideología de género* (Articles 4, 15, 27, 30, 31, 41, 50, & 55). The comments address how the No campaign successfully politicized the question of gender, galvanizing voters around religious and political lines. The term “*ideología de género*” was “an initiative that despite lacking in truth mobilized thousands of volunteers against the government” (Article 15). It was an effective tool for the No camp that brought “the ultra-Catholic country” and Evangelical Christian churches into the anti-peace-agreement tent:

Uribe and principally Ordóñez positioned the idea that there was an ‘*ideología de género*’ in the peace agreements that finished the concept of family. With that matrix, they went on to say that the country was being delivered to the devil. (Article 4)

The message, for many voters, meant that the peace deal was about destroying the very concept of “family” (Article 41), which remains a strong cultural symbol in Colombia. One analyst concludes that a significant portion of the No vote can be directly related to “Christian churches and families of conservative leanings who associated the peace agreement with gender ideology” (Article 30). As others note, the use of the term ‘*ideología de género*’ effectively became one of the biggest challenges in terms of misinformation, because powerful political and

opinion leaders were quick to adopt the lie and spread it widely. An influential Christian pastor was quoted as saying during the campaign that,

The global manipulation of gender ideology that they want to implement in Colombia, the one that we didn't allow the Ministry of Education with [Minister] Gina Parody to do with our children, they want to impose on us through the [peace] agreement. (Article 31)

Critics of the No campaign think that the media was effectively utilized to enact their strategy of deception. As one columnist argues, the No's "defamatory campaign" and its exaggerations about the peace deal "were in essence the main ideas planted by a good portion of Colombia's mass media" (Article 13). The No's "disgusting strategy," invested in lies, disinformation and manipulation, says one author, were "vomited by their media allies" (Article 34). Another claims that the media "and the political actors of Colombia's right-wing" are to blame for "gutting and silencing the contents of the agreement from any discussion" for the purpose of getting voters to vote "moved by hatred and ignorance" (Article 45). Others are more precise in singling out certain media organizations, such as RCN Television, for amplifying the No's deceptions, spreading their "messages of indignation" (Article 44). The figure of former president Uribe resurfaces here as one of the reasons behind the media's role in amplifying the No's manipulative messages. "It is known that society," says one analyst, that "the media and the government fear him so much, like children fear the most aggressive and authoritarian fathers" (Article 26). Uribe was able to instrumentalize the media because "he knows that, due to their fear, his voice will not be silenced" (Article 26).

In an opinion piece, a journalist offers a counterpoint to the notion that the No campaign was the sole to instrumentalize the media to spread disinformation. The author recalls a conversation with a colleague who complained about the lies spread by the No campaign, to

which the author replied that the government's own publicity was at times deceiving: "We all lied" (Article 51).

The infamous Vélez interview proved revealing on another important level. The campaign manager stated that he also owed his success to the fact that his team "discovered the viral power of social media" (Ramírez Prado, 2016). Vélez recounted how he tested sharing provocative messages and saw them go viral. Several authors comment on this aspect of the No campaign. One calls it "black propaganda" based on "the combination of disinformation and manipulation... through social media and instant messaging services" (Article 15). The combination of media instrumentalization and direct communication via social media and instant messaging services proved to be a powerful weapon for the No campaign, as described by one analyst:

On social media and through hegemonic media, thousands of lies about the peace process were mobilized that could not be explained or dispelled by the Yes supporters... With false messages, but with efficacy, the No pushed out fear saying that the country would fall into the hands of the rebels, that the agreement would [result in] implementing abortions and that a state of impunity would be imposed (Article 4).

The No strategy was successful not only in connecting with everyday voters on a personal level, but "efficient in its connection with the ultra-Catholic country and the so-called Evangelical churches" who mobilize large numbers of voters (Article 4). Moreover, its success also lies in effectively constructing the perception that the peace agreement "as something that was left-wing" (Article 57). A key component of this construction was former president Uribe's constant comparing of President Santos to Venezuela's late president Hugo Chávez, no matter how far fetched the image could be.

...there is nothing more absurd, for Santos and Chávez are nothing like each other: Not in their origin, not in their education or in their governing style. But Uribe compared them so many times and with such consistency that people ended up believing him. (Article 19)

As noted in various publications, the No campaign's adherence to the truth was not a priority. Instead, "the efficacy of the campaign [was] based on a visceral rejection of the agreements promoted by the *uribismo*" (Article 24). The naked attempts at stoking fear and loathing were widely visible. It was a "terror campaign orchestrated by the right," notes one contributor to a left-leaning news network, that produced "ominous caricatures" (Article 24). In the words of a seasoned political analyst,

The agreements were very complex and the contrast between the simplistic but impactful messages of the *uribismo* primed. When a regular Colombian comes home tired after a day of work and has to decide between the pedagogical arguments [in favour of the agreements] and the simple message of "total impunity for the FARC criminals," it is obvious that they will go for the easiest form. (Article 22)

Certainly, profiting from a proximity to select media outlets, exploiting the viral nature of social media, and appealing to raw emotions were not possible without some level of discipline. The figure of Uribe is once again recognized as the central axis of the No's success. A journalist remarks that, "The No campaign practically had Uribe as its a single spokesperson—who, it must be said, is a monster when it comes to tuning in with people" (Article 19).

2.2.2. The Yes Campaign. Often, the efficacy of the No's deception campaign is contrasted with the communicative failures of their counterparts. This section shows how the metajournalistic discourse of media failure relates to the perception that the government's communication strategy failed as it played out in the media. I also highlight the limited number of mentions of how the FARC themselves failed to communicate their own messages about the vote. Largely, comments about the Yes campaign's failings centre around a political miscalculation on the part of the government for putting the peace agreement to a vote; an unfocused communication strategy that failed to capitalize on friendly editorials and widespread

international support; and criticism for building the vote through a binary lens of “us vs. them” that fed into inadequate horse-race style of news reporting.

Various articles raise the argument that the referendum’s failure amounted to a self-inflicted wound. At least seven authors raise the point that, in legal terms, the vote was unnecessary, as the signed peace agreement was already legally binding. The vote was therefore seen as merely political—and fraught from the start. The FARC themselves were reticent to hold it, fearing a popular backlash against the group, argues one analyst who adds that asking people to ratify the agreement risked repeating past mistakes elsewhere:

The main peace processes in the world, even with insurgencies stronger than the one in Colombia... were done behind locked doors... The problem here was to have generated a kind of happy-go-lucky *participationism*, without limits or a strategy to face difficult challenges, like the one posed by the *Uribismo*. (Article 9)

One columnist calls the referendum an “absurd bridge between polarization and fanaticism!” telling President Santos, “You are playing with fire in a country whose fanaticism is ancestral” (Article 34).

Several articles paint the Santos administration as arrogant and unprepared to secure support for the peace deal. The No camp prevailed over an “officialist tsunami in favour of the Yes [vote]” (Article 47) and “an excessive amount of confidence” on the part of the Santos administration (Article 15), which “believed its own propaganda that a vote in favour of the peace deal was inevitable” (Article 6). The government made a tactical mistake by relying too heavily on “the institutional and communicative supremacy of the State,” says one analyst (Article 52). Its “triumphalist attitude” was fed in great part by this unfettered access to communication channels. It was certainly also boosted by polls consistently calling for a Yes victory and by the vocal support of the country’s top editorialists, particularly in the print press and radio news networks (Articles 18, 22, & 23). The campaign was so optimistic, it veered on

being “arrogant” (Article 24). The overconfidence backfired, says a columnist who supported the No vote, by projecting “airs of superiority” and a “bullying” attitude over those who had reservations about the peace deal (Article 51). President Santos bares the brunt of this criticism for his “smugness,” and one author contemplates whether he should resign for his “catastrophic failure” (Article 53).

Another conversation revolves around a perceived failure on the government to inform and educate the public on the contents of the peace agreement. President Santos is blamed for surrounding the Havana peace talks in secrecy, ignoring calls to help people better understand what the parties were negotiating (Articles 13 & 24). This silence created an information vacuum, as one author notes, which the No campaign successfully capitalized on (Article 13). The missing pedagogy was made worse by the fact that the referendum campaign was too short—only five weeks. While the government’s negotiating team “made a great effort to change the language of war,” says one article from a student publication, the speed at which it established the political agenda around the referendum “led Colombians to perceive the agreements as an ultimatum or an imposition” (Article 55). There was “little time for debate and for decanting ideas and positions” (Article 6).

In contrast, others offer the opposite assessment of the government’s communication strategy as relying *too much* on pedagogy. The campaign was “too rational” and ill-served by a final agreement that was “excessively long and complex,” which created a disadvantage with respect to the No’s highly emotional appeals (Article 55). Some say the Yes campaign was marked by an overload of information. The government’s well-intentioned focus on the contents of the agreement was in fact a miscalculation of the challenges posed by “the political culture of the country, characterized by prejudice, apathy, and chronic mistrust towards political

processes,” and generally the fact that “most people in the country don’t read” (Article 15). The final agreement, heavy with legal jargon, proved too much for a “politically ignorant” population who was unable to process it (Article 50). The biggest failure, according to an impassionate analysis regretting the vote’s outcome, was the Yes campaign’s inability to convey the message that “those who were fighting for impunity were the strategists and beneficiaries of paramilitarism, leaders of the No campaign” (Article 4).

There is a general sense that the failed communication strategy played out in the media through scattered and unfocussed messages that stood in contrast with the centralized, efficient running of the No campaign, whose disciplined messaging offered a stark contrast to the Yes camp’s “cacophony of voices” (Article 9). Certainly, this was in great part due to the fact that a wide range of sectors supported the peace deal and organized their own media strategies to communicate so. The Yes campaign became “dispersed and each party of the platform that defended the peace process built their own tent and the messages were never consistent” (Article 19). The No side succeeded at least in part “because of the mistakes and difficulties in the heterogenous block that was in charge of leading the Yes vote” (Article 4).

The government’s media strategy was both set out as a simple binary—do you support peace, Yes or No—and caught up in the media’s approach to the vote as a horse race, which retained its focus on the Santos vs. Uribe dynamic. “It was an anachronistic campaign,” says one media critic,

Like the presidential [campaigns] of old times—focused on the intensive presence of negotiators and government bureaucrats in traditional media, tours, events, and publicity, especially on television and radio. (Article 23)

The Yes campaign’s strategy was “based on tours, media [appearances] and a discourse against former president Uribe and the Democratic Centre [party],” as one analyst notes (Article

16). This created the division between “friends and ‘enemies of peace’” that would eventually backfire (Article 17). Paradoxically, argues one analyst, a campaign that was to earn support for a peace deal and a new era of healing was “not formulated from a standpoint of reconciliation... but from the political confrontation between *santistas* and *uribistas*” (Article 23). For some authors, this binary frame indicated that the Yes camp either underestimated the opposition or misunderstood the No electorate.

Here the commentary diverges significantly. Among those who think the Yes campaign misunderstood No voters, the root of the misunderstanding lies in that it was wrong to think that “those who campaigned for the No [vote] want war” (Article 6). One commentator, a journalist, criticizes colleagues who were advocating for a Yes vote for routinely omitting that, “among critics of the [peace] process were hundreds of independents” (Article 39). The obtuse binary frame deprived the government of some potential votes. By “reducing the No to the *uribismo*,” says one author, “some sectors were left on the margins that, had they received truthful and audacious responses, they would have given a positive vote” (Article 55). On the other hand, several authors argue that the government’s failure rested not on misunderstanding the No electorate but rather in underestimating the political power and sway of the No camp’s political leadership (Article 9). A combination of “excessive optimism” and an overreliance on polls resulted in the Yes campaign underestimating “the pull of the ‘enemies of peace’ and the effectiveness of their campaign based on the visceral rejection to the agreements promoted by the *uribismo*” (Article 24). Santos, blinded by his own success, may have “underestimated the opposition, the Democratic Centre and the capacity of Uribe himself” (Article 32). A “flawed” communication strategy on the part of the government failed to tailor its messaging to constituencies in different geographical regions—precisely the key to the No campaign’s success

(Article 9). In any case, the sin of misreading or misunderstanding the No electorate, according to one commentator, included miscalculating the power of other sectors pushing for a No vote. “The Yes underestimated, for example, the influence and importance of massive groups like the churches... the military and police forces” (Article 23).

Finally, it is worth noting that few articles address the FARC’s role in supporting or hindering the Yes campaign. It is the common perception throughout the corpus that whatever failings the Yes campaign had they were largely the responsibility of the government, not only because it had the advantages of being the official and legitimate party with access to all possible communication tools at its service, but also because the FARC had accepted the mechanism of the referendum only reluctantly. In short, they as a group did not appear to have a concerted strategy to promote a Yes vote and are seen as “a very passive” actor in the campaign (Article 41). Only seven articles mention the guerrilla group at all (Articles 1, 22, 41, 50, 52, 54, & 55). They reject the FARC’s “cynical and arrogant” appearances in the media, giving them an air of insincerity that played into the hands of the No campaign (Article 1). At least three articles refer to the FARC’s offering of a public apology for their past crimes, which took place only a week before the vote, as “contrived” and ill-timed (Articles 1, 22, & 55).

2.3. Limited Number of Mentions of Social Media Speak of their Disruptive Power

Remarkably, there are relatively few mentions of social media and their potential impact on the referendum campaign, with only 18 out of 58 articles addressing the topic at all. This small subsample is still important. There is a sense that social media contributed to media failure because of its disruption of traditional media. In this respect, social media becomes an important element in the construction of the metajournalistic discourse of media failure. As shown below, two subthemes here revolve around the notions of power—in terms of the growing power of

social media— and contempt—which speaks to how most commentators hold negative perceptions of social media in general.

2.3.1. Power	Comments that highlight the disruptive power of social media, especially with respect to social dialogue and traditional media.	Disruptive power, good and bad
		Social media more in tune with audiences
2.3.2. Contempt	Mentions of social media are largely negative, focussing on its supposeldy corrosive nature.	Viral misinformation
		Polarization
		Exploited emotions

Table 8. Results Chapter 1, 2.3.1. and 2.3.2.

2.3.1. Power. Most authors highlight the power of social media to disrupt traditional media—for better or for worse. For many, this power is linked to traditional media’s increasing disconnection from the public and their loss of influence over public discourse. A columnist celebrates the referendum results as proof that “social media and our citizens’ critical opinions have the capacity to defeat the demagogy of central powers,” including traditional media (Article 1). While some ask whether “social media [have] really displaced television in the mass formation of public opinion” (Article 11), others assume this as the new reality: “The power and influence of traditional media [are] diminished in the face of new possibilities to share opinions, interact and decide” (Article 23). There is in all these comments an underlying call for journalists to pay attention to this rearrangement, because news is now intertwined with “a network whose members trust in each other more than in big media” (Article 31). An article

from a liberal-leaning literary magazine dedicated to the question of whether traditional media have “become irrelevant” addresses the issue:

The rise of technologies has generated an enormous fracture in the power of traditional media that were used to [their] hegemonic power, with almost no limits. Immediate access to information, to the controversy—however unruly and frequently disproportionate—of opinions, the irruption of unknown actors, the planetary circulation of humor and irony are some of the traits that have caused such a fracture. A good part of the No circulated through social media, and individual points of view... had a viral and immediate impact that surpassed [traditional] media strategies. (Article 40)

Some comments urge journalists to redouble their efforts to earn back public trust in the face of increasing access to social media. They must “show people that journalism is necessary and that when you produce solid, well-crafted information, this also has a proven effect in society” (Article 21), says a newspaper editor. Some commentary centres on the dissonance between newspaper editorials and opinion pages with ordinary people as a symptom of the troubled relationship with traditional media. Most “opinion leaders,” as they are commonly referred to in the country (*líderes de opinión*), were supportive of the Yes vote. Yet, as one analyst notes, in the few hours preceding the referendum “No [vote] messages were trending on Twitter and Facebook,” suggesting that social media acted as a closer predictor of what was to happen than traditional media outlets, where journalists were assuming the Yes would win (Article 37). The source of this disconnect may help explain why social media became an important forum for voters in the first place. It is possible that what one columnist calls the media’s “almost complete unanimity” in supporting the Yes vote could have “helped grow distrust in media and fuelled social media, the great platform for the No campaign, which complained of the lack of plurality in traditional media” (Article 16).

Comments on the disruptive power of social media are somewhat tempered by other analyses. Beyond the information-sharing platforms, larger social forces were at play that

contributed to the referendum's results. "Outside Facebook and Twitter," says one political analyst, there is a reality that intertwines in the churches, the hegemonic media and regional politics led by the same [people] as always" (Article 4). This brings one journalist to exhort colleagues to "study the channels through which people are accessing information: social media, small communities, neighbourhoods, the Church" (Article 27).

2.3.2. Contempt. Aside from recognizing their disruptive power, there is a generally negative tone that accompanies most mentions of social media throughout these articles. The reigning feeling is one of contempt for social media's capacity to turn falsehoods into viral content, stoke political polarization, and exploit and amplify people's most basic emotions. While the wide access that social media grants citizens to express their opinions is a reason for celebration, says one author, the public debate occurs "in the middle of conflictive, untrustworthy or insidious communication that day after day saturates social media" (Article 23). The platforms are spaces where "lies shared in a network whose members trust each other more than the big media take the appearance of truth" (Article 31). Whether this is a problem with the platforms themselves or a mere reflection of existing societal flaws is part of the discussion. In the only article fully dedicated to the role of social media during the referendum campaign, entitled "Colombians, Trapped in the Social Network of Polarization" (*"Colombianos, atrapados en la red social de la polarización"*), a communication expert argues that social media "reflected a fractured country" where people were exposed to extreme positions and widely spread misinformation (Article 20).

Contemptuous comments about social media come from authors from a range of political leanings. Two authors contributing to *Las2Orillas*, a largely left-leaning digital publication that invites citizen contributions, dispute just how social media could have impacted the vote. One

sees social media as the place where the No camp's deceptive messages thrived, and therefore gained decisive influence over the electorate (Article 15). The other claims the opposite—that Yes messages “widely won on the deceiving social media” but were ultimately defeated in “the real world” at the ballot box (Article 53). The general contempt for social networking sites appears to be based on the notion that social media represent a degradation of public discourse, and provide an inadequate form of citizen engagement. One analyst, an educator, is critical of supporters from both camps for their superficial debates “based on memes” (Article 35). Another argues that the No campaign capitalized on social media's capacity to reach people at an emotional, rather than rational, level, by spreading “black propaganda⁸ based on the combination of disinformation and manipulation of emotionality” (Article 15). A well-known novelist and columnist sums up well the salient perception that social media represents a contemptible element of contemporary society, noting that the current “spirit of history”—as the German philosopher Georg Hegel would have called it, he notes—today carries “a much more vulgar name, ‘the trending topic’” (Article 2).

⁸ The term “black propaganda” (*propaganda negra*) requires context here. Generally, the concept of black propaganda originates from tactics deployed by the Nazis during World War II. It is “a form of propaganda intended to create the impression that it was created by those it is supposed to discredit. Black propaganda contrasts with gray propaganda, which does not identify its source, and white propaganda, which does not disguise its origins at all. It is typically used to vilify or embarrass the enemy through misrepresentation” (Doob, 1950). In the context of the articles examined here, however, it is more likely that the term *propaganda negra* is being used as a synonym of “black campaigns” (*campañas negras*), which refers to negative campaigning tactics used during elections. As explained in an article by *Forbes Mexico* (Vega, 2017), black campaigns are campaign strategies that seek to attack opponents. They tend to be created and deployed by unidentified third parties or “specialized teams, different from the people responsible for the conventional campaigns, and they must be impactful and move emotions, and at the same time deploy negative information” about the opposition. They are especially effective when deployed through social media.

2.4. Polling Was a Major Factor in Media Failure

Similar to the section above, comments about the role of polling during the referendum campaign are limited to about one third of the articles (18 out of the 58), but they constitute a significant theme in the metajournalistic discourse of media failure. The range of comments related to voting-intention polls go from simply mentioning the fact that polls unanimously, and mistakenly, predicted a Yes victory, to more pointed criticism about the influence that such polls might have had on media coverage and potentially on the vote's outcome.

2.4.1. Polling Failure	Dismay at the performance of polling companies, which had unanimously predicted a Yes victory.	Unanimous mistake
		Potential impact on voting
		Polling flaws
2.4.2. Media and the Polls	Comments and analyses of how the use of polling data may have affected news coverage of the peace vote.	False sense of confidence
		Journalism's overreliance on polls

Table 9. Results Chapter 1, 2.4.1. and 2.4.2.

2.4.1. Polling failure. Polls had consistently predicted a comfortable victory for the Yes option and were one of the main reasons for which the results came as a big surprise to most, especially all the actors involved (Giraldo & Cárdenas Ruiz, 2017). The link between voting-intention polls and the shock delivered on voting day is addressed in several articles (Articles 8, 9, 17, 18, & 47). The majority of comments express dismay at the “regrettable” performance of polling companies. The criticism includes noting the unanimous failure of pollsters to predict the

vote's outcome, the potential impact that voting-intention polls may have had on the results, and certain comments about the structural and technical issues of voting surveys. Most comments chastise polling companies and even question their relevance, treating them as "the other big losers" of the referendum (Articles 44 & 57) who are now suffering a "credibility crisis" (Article 46). For some, the failure to predict the vote's outcome only confirmed existing concerns with the way surveys are conducted in Colombia. "Polls in Colombia are a disaster," says one political analyst, because pollsters have "failed to understand the heterogenous nature of the country's various urban centres" (Article 9). The problem might be more than technical, however, and it strikes at the core of questions about the limitations of voting-intention polling in general. Some analysts think that polls could never have achieved accurate results because it was possible that many people were being discreet about their doubts with respect to the peace deal, and felt culturally pressured to support it outwardly while planning to vote No (Article 6). "It's not that pollsters failed by predicting the Yes triumph," notes a popular columnist. "What happens is that people answered with lies: They were ashamed to vote No, but they did" (Article 2). Other, more benign comments suppose that pollsters were just as blindsided as anyone else with the vote results. "Nobody, not the polling companies, nor the media or political leaders, could have predicted such disconcerting results" (Article 54).

2.4.2. Media and the Polls. The question of how polls were used and amplified by the media are central to this discussion. Without journalists reporting on the polls, the public would not have consumed such a significant amount of voting-intention data. Several authors argue that polls had a significant impact on the vote's outcome by providing a false sense of confidence for the Yes campaign and its supporters, many of whom stayed home on voting day. "They made the Yes [camp] take victory for granted and relax their efforts...and provoked a massive

reinforcement in the No campaign,” says one analyst (Article 15). Polls caused an “imprudent confidence” on the part of the Yes supporters and strategists (Article 24), an effect felt particularly by President Santos himself (Article 22). In a few words, “polls induced voters to error, demobilized the Yes and called the No to action” (Article 44). One commentator calls pollsters to “dedicate themselves to selling *arepas*” because they are “largely responsible for [the referendum’s] failure” (Article 22).

Three articles feature journalists commenting on the relationship between the media and polls. “Polling results cannot be taken as facts, only indications,” says one of them. “This is a good opportunity to revise how polls are being used. You get the impression that they are being used more like propaganda than like information” (Article 46). A senior newspaper editor recognizes that journalists failed “to read well what was happening on the streets” because “we allowed ourselves to be convinced by polling results” (Article 21). A third journalist argues that coverage of the referendum campaign was “anachronistic,” a campaign

that seemed to fly on its own every time that polling results were published, a game in which reputable media fell into frivolously, becoming echo chambers, dedicated to promoting, proclaiming and comparing truisms that in the end turned out to be fantasy. (Article 23)

Analysis

The media criticism compiled in this section shows characteristics of what Waisbord (2020), Cheruiyot (2022) and others have identified as a rising form of anti-media discourse that borders on the cynical and personal, with potentially serious consequences for the viability of news media in general. The corpus reveals a level of animosity against traditional media that is particularly visceral when it relates to how Colombian media have historically approached coverage of the armed conflict. The same sense of fatalism that underlies general perceptions about Colombia as a nation seen in the first section permeates the discourse of media criticism.

As evidenced above, this sense of fatalism is further inflamed by two important elements. First, with the realization that the No campaign relied on a strategy of misinformation, cynicism about the media was exacerbated, as people realized that the No campaign had easily instrumentalized the news and generally the information ecology for its own benefit. This particular element of the peace-vote campaign—that is, the significant circulation of misinformation—puts the Colombian peace referendum on similar footing with the Brexit vote and Trump’s election in terms of how people perceived media failure. Ruiz-Romero et al. (2019) aptly note that the Colombian vote “became the perfect scenario for the materializing of post-truth in the country” (p. 1208).

Second, as Rincón-Unigarro et al. (2020) propose, Colombia’s long armed conflict has come to be seen as intractable, in the sense that society at large has become used to certain frames of mind that impede them from thinking in different ways that could help it overcome the conflict itself. Historically, the local media have played a role in reproducing frames that perpetuate violence (Rincón-Unigarro et al., 2020; Ruiz-Romero et al., 2019), although evidence suggests that new frames oriented towards peace and reconciliation became more present from the moment that peace negotiations started in Havana in 2012 (Rincón-Unigarro et al., 2020). With this in mind, it could be argued that the metajournalistic discourse of media failure that stems from this corpus of media criticism ultimately amounts to an accusation against Colombian media for failing, despite some of its efforts, to transcend its own epistemic approach to the armed conflict.

3) Journalism: Increasingly out of Touch, Journalists Offered an Unbalanced Account of the Vote

I have made a distinction between references to “the media” and specific comments related to the practice of journalism in the coding to allow for a more granular analysis. This distinction allows me to separate general commentary about the media as a system and an institution—in this case largely specific to Colombian media—from comments that address the specifics of journalism and its practices. This third section considers comments that refer particularly to perceived failures of journalism linked to journalistic practices and norms, such as access to sources and adherence to neutrality; comments about ideal forms of journalism including desired roles in building peace, the role of opinion journalism in shaping national conversations; reflections by journalists; and comments about emotions, both linked to the practice of journalism and to social media as an amplifier of emotionality that pulls audiences in and away from traditional reporting. The main theme running through this section is the perception that coverage was imbalanced. I highlight three dimensions of perceived imbalance as revealed in the coding. The first perceived imbalance is caused by an apparent disconnection between journalists and their audiences. Here, that lack of connection results in journalists either ignoring or misunderstanding the reasons why many Colombians voted No in the referendum. The second perceived imbalance is related to the overwhelming editorial support for the peace deal seen in traditional media outlets during the campaign. For many critics, these endorsements amount to journalists “taking sides” in a ballot that, many say, journalists should have covered with neutrality. The third dimension of perceived imbalance is linked to emotions. Critics perceived an imbalance created by the emotionality of social media, but also think some

journalists were too emotional in their own coverage of the vote. The following model illustrates the themes and sub-themes addressed in this section.

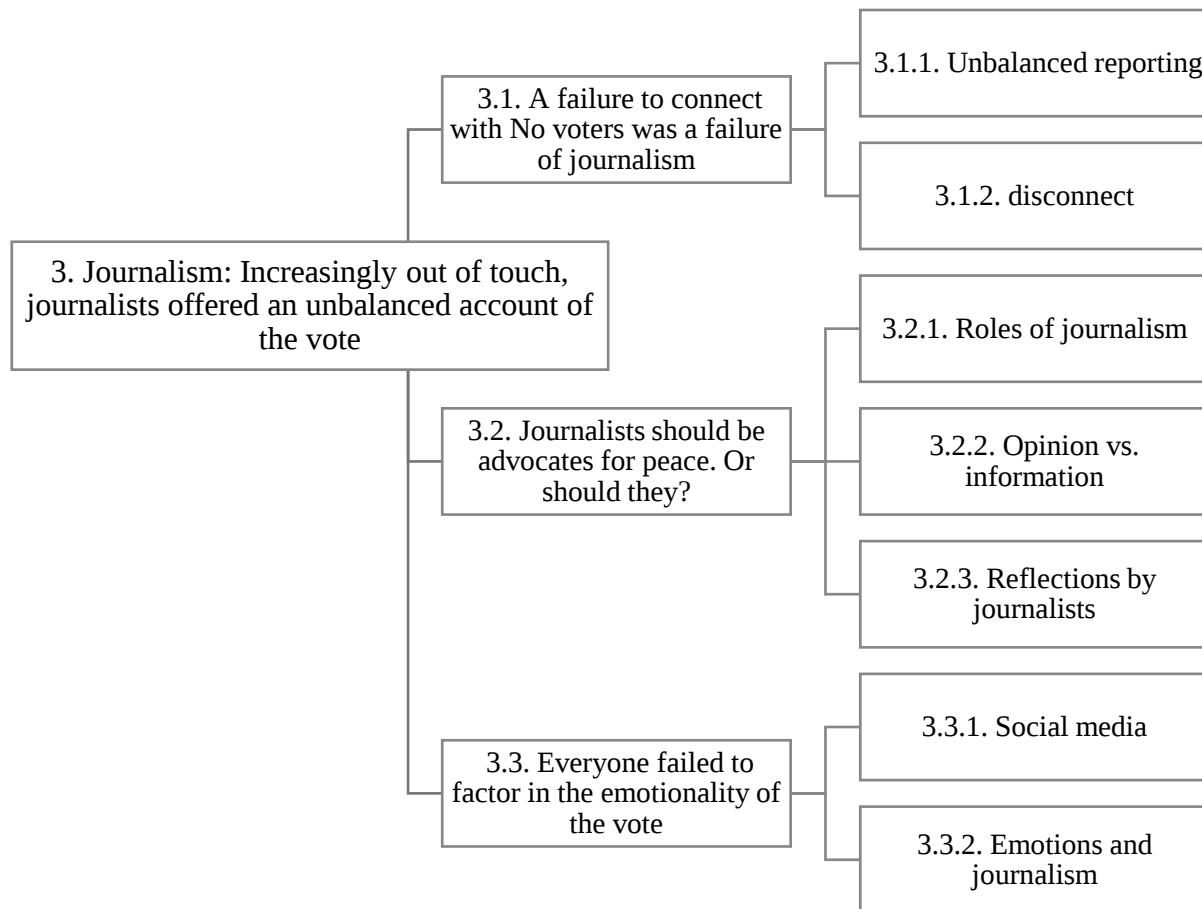


Figure 4. 3) Journalism

3.1. A Failure to Connect with No voters was a Failure of Journalism

Most of the results shown below are criticisms directed at journalists in particular. The biggest accusation here is that reporting on the peace vote was unbalanced. Some of the bluntest assessments of how journalists approached coverage of the referendum come from journalists themselves, such as this quote by veteran newsman Juan Gossáin, who declared that “the role of

the media in general terms [during the campaign] was deplorable” (Article 38). This first theme is broken down into two sections, as follows:

3.1.1. Unbalanced reporting	Accusations of bias, unbalanced reporting, and renouncing the ethics of neutrality.	The perils of endorsing the peace deal
		Against taking sides
3.1.2. Disconnection	Comments and analyses about an apparent rift between journalists and the publics that they are supposed to serve.	Journalists in a bubble
		Misunderstanding the No vote

Table 10. Results Chapter 1, 3.1.1 and 3.1.2.

3.1.1. Unbalanced Reporting. As mentioned, a key element in the metajournalistic discourse of media failure is the claim that the media’s reporting of the referendum was imbalanced. In total, 22 articles contain mentions about unbalanced reporting. There are repeated criticisms against journalists who were “blinded” by their conviction that voting Yes was preferable (Articles 39 & 51). The referendum campaign is often seen as a moment where journalists lost control, blowing past traditional norms of journalistic practice, especially norms demanding that journalists remain neutral parties in the events that they report. There is, however, variation in how this perception of imbalance is described. The comments range from impressions that journalists offered skewed versions of events, to stating that they failed to provide context, to accusing them of aligning with political interests by “taking sides” for or against the peace deal.

It has been widely established that the vast majority of traditional media outlets in Colombia and elsewhere, especially the national newspapers and major radio stations, were outspoken in their support for a Yes vote (MOE, 2017). The articles in the corpus align with that assessment, and indeed these endorsements in favour of the peace deal are the source of much criticism. For the most part, the argument is that journalists abandoned their ethics of balance by “taking sides” in favour of the peace accords. Some characterise the endorsements as “without any nuance on their front pages, in their news reports and in their editorial pages” (Article 16). There is a sense that closing ranks in favour of the peace deal caused a sense of “unanimity” from which some audiences felt excluded (Articles 7, 16, & 52), and some even see it as a form of “media propaganda” that eventually backfired. A “more balanced coverage of the vote” might have resulted in “better voting,” says one political analyst (Article 6). In a column entitled “How Much did the Press Lose?” (“¿Cuánto perdió la prensa?”), a journalist exhorts media directors and “influential journalists” who supported the peace deal to offer their *mea culpa*, for they “went all in, either out of conviction or corruption, and ended wanting to influence public opinion by force, forgetting that their role is to inform with adherence to the truth” (Article 51). For several commentators, endorsements and favourable reporting of the peace deal was just another form of political adherence, an “abandonment of the ethics of information” (Article 53) where journalists simply “joined in the mud with politicians” (Article 39). Their coverage, as one columnist states, was marked by “absurdist reductions... precipitous generalizations, dubious causalities, false analogies, and all sort of fallacies” (Article 39). One article singles out the weekly *Semana* for endorsing the peace deal on its front page, calling it an act of “opportunism”: “Grave mistake, taking sides like this... [it] lacked tact and respect for the sensibility of the majority of readers” (Article 53).

A media scholar writes in a national magazine that, in covering the referendum campaign, journalists ignored best practices for conflict-based reporting that encourage them to provide context and analysis. The author appears to take issue with journalists adhering to either side—against and in favour of the peace deal: “Here we saw very important media and journalists who strayed from this mission, entered the arena and took sides, with great and perhaps irreversible damage to their credibility. (Article 23). Along the same lines, a veteran journalist regrets that colleagues “took sides on the matter of the referendum, knowing well that media must inform and form and not the reverse, disinform and deform” (Article 38).

3.1.2. Disconnect. The theme of disconnection—the idea that journalists are out of touch with their audiences—is significant and runs throughout the breadth of the corpus. The sense that there is a growing divide is assumed to be generally true. With respect to the peace vote, some general comments include wondering if the rise of social media played a role in further disconnecting journalists from their audiences (Articles 16 & 40). As most news organizations endorsed the peace deal, it is possible that many people rejected “a lack of pluralism” in traditional media and were instead seduced by the more personal social networks (Article 16). Several articles focus on the matter of disconnection particularly while considering opinion journalism. One author wonders why there was “that gap between editorials, opinion leaders, and the results” (Article 9). Among journalists in particular, a discussion on the question of disconnection appeared to be urgent after the vote. Juan Gossáin, a well-known veteran journalist, states in one interview that the relationship between journalists and the public is so strained that “the media must reconcile with citizens” (Article 38). One article describes a gathering of senior journalists who were “forced to reflect about the apparent disconnection between opinion leaders and the people’s perspectives” (Article 21). Often, the theme of

disconnection is expressed in criticism accusing journalists of misunderstanding the No electorate. As shown in several examples under the subtheme named “No Voters, Yes Voters” under the theme “The Vote was a Failure from its Inception,” above in the first section of this chapter, many critics think that journalists failed to understand the no electorate as a heterogenous group. A common argument is that journalists were operating in a bubble; that their majority endorsement of the peace deal was the result of an inability to connect with citizens who were critical of the pact, and who would eventually drive the No option to victory. A senior newspaper editor acknowledges this criticism. He is quoted as saying in one of the articles that his colleagues made mistakes and “failed to read what was happening on the streets,” which meant that they failed to gauge how regular people felt about the peace accords.

Remarkably, only one article offers a counter argument to the thesis of disconnection and instead proposes that journalists played a positive role during the campaign (Article 22). Writing for a university-based publication, an analyst states that journalists were instrumental in galvanizing voters to cast their ballot on Oct. 2, therefore fulfilling an important democratic role. Responding to what many commentators assumed about the referendum’s apparent low voter turnout, this author explains that turnout actually reached the same levels as the preceding presidential election, a hard feat to achieve in an atypical vote such as a referendum. Not only were journalists not disconnected from the public, he says, but “in general, the media played a very constructive role” during the campaign. It “mobilized [its] readers, there was interest, there was political mobilization” (Article 22).

3.2. Journalists Should be Advocates for Peace. Or Should They?

The widespread perception, as noted above, that journalists lacked balance in their reports and editorials, is intimately linked here to debates over what journalism *should be*.

[RESULTS CHAPTER 1]

Across several articles, authors engage in conversations about journalism's existing and desired roles in society. This section shows salient comments and reflections about the roles of journalism in particular with respect to achieving peace, pronouncements on the matter of opinion journalism, plus a series of reflections by journalists who offer critical assessments of their own work and that of their colleagues during the peace vote campaign. The theme is organized as follows:

3.2.1. Roles of Journalism	Reflections about what the role of journalism is and should be.	Idealized roles
		Journalists as social actors
		Journalists and peace
		Journalism and memory
3.2.2. Opinion vs. Information	Comments and analyses about the role of opinion in journalism, and its potential effects on the vote's outcome.	Too much opinion
		Opinion and manipulation
		Opinion as a necessity
		The widening gap between opinion leaders and 'regular people'
3.2.3. Reflections by Journalists	Comments drawn from op-eds, interviews, and other formats where journalists express their own ideas about 'what went wrong' with coverage of the peace vote.	On supporting the Yes vote
		Misreading the electorate
		The press lost

Table 11. Results Chapter 1, 3.2.1., 3.2.2., and 3.2.3.

3.2.1. Roles of Journalism. Across a variety of articles, authors make pronouncements about the roles of journalism in society often in idealized terms—contrasting the wish of *what journalism should be* with the lived reality of press coverage during the peace vote. Several of these pronouncements are made by working journalists.

The role of journalism, says Alejandro Santos, then Editor in Chief at the weekly *Semana*, is to show “the grey tones” of Colombian society, providing nuance and illuminating the country’s rich diversity (Article 7). In the context of conflict, he says, journalists are gifted with “the weapon of language,” which they must wield to “disarm the spirits,” dissipate polarization, and help steer society toward peace (Article 7). Often in the corpus journalists are treated as social actors whose role is to steer society towards the right direction while also helping shape cultural meanings. This perception is widespread across the corpus. “Those who inform and opine... give meaning to the world that surrounds us,” says one analyst (Article 39). As social actors, journalists have an active role to play in pushing public debate to sometimes uncomfortable corners. In the words of Alejandro Santos, again, journalism, especially opinion journalism, should strive to be an “ethical beacon,” always maintaining a critical spirit and adhering to intellectual honesty (Article 7). For some, being a social actor in the context of the referendum meant taking an active stance in favour of ending the country’s armed conflict. In an article that gathers editorials from a variety of newspapers, Fidel Cano, top editor at the national newspaper *El Espectador*, is quoted as stating that “We cannot dodge the responsibility to support the Yes [vote]” (Article 42). Two other editorials from regional newspapers, *Vanguardia Liberal* and *La Patria* defend their decision to support the peace deal because they trust that the parties created “the best possible deal” and the country “deserves a different future” (Article 42).

The treatment of journalists as social actors considers the role of journalism as not only defined by how it covers the present, but how it comes to contain the stories of the past, serving at once as reservoir and builder of collective memory. It is up to society to exhort journalists to play this role more fairly, says one media analyst:

Herodotus condenses an important part of what we must demand from the media when it comes to building memory. They must not obscure the deeds, or the simple narratives of ‘the barbarians’ because they are one of their own. They must not talk only about the battles of the victors, but also of the defeated. Because what is not told does not exist for the rest, remaining archived in individual memories of those who don’t make part of history. (Article 58)

Sometimes, the debate over the desired roles of journalism stays on the surface, offering vague prompts for journalists to “do better.” A senior reporter, for example, says that journalists must approach news coverage about peace and conflict based on the country’s common goal of reaching peace. Journalism must stand above the fray to serve “the common good,” he says, and approach coverage based on the elements of “reconciliation, understanding and respect for the other, something that historically we [journalists] have not done” (article 46). This deficiency is clear for another analyst who chastises the media’s performance during the referendum. Instead of acting as peace-builders, the author argues, the majority of Colombian media “polarized the country between friends of peace and its enemies” and “stigmatized those who exercised constructive criticism” of the peace deal (Article 39).

3.2.2. Opinion vs. Information. In several articles, authors raise questions about the role of opinion journalism in society. On the one hand, some see opinion taking too much space in the local journalistic culture, often at the expense of more impartial and fact-based information; some even question whether opinion journalism can be equated to manipulation. On the other hand, journalists defend the role of opinion journalism as a necessity, but do wonder whether there is a widening gap between opinion leaders and ordinary people.

Articles speaking of the role of opinion journalism as a factor in the referendum results range from generally questioning the practice as superfluous to equating opinion pieces with outright manipulation. Writing for the website of a Latin American think tank, one analyst observes that “the campaign was fought in various terrains of opinion, with few arguments and appealing to elements of subjectivity that are unpredictable” (Article 4). One analyst observes that Colombia’s big media organizations have traditionally, “through a strategy of mixing and subordinating content to their own opinion,” come to impose “their own view of reality” (Article 15). The protagonism of personal opinion and press editorials was so widespread during the campaign, that “the media, bureaucrats and citizens manipulated and were manipulated in some way or another” (Article 56).

There are those who think that someone should put a lid on too much opinion. In the words of a veteran journalist, opinion journalism is contributing to a climate of confrontation, and so “it will be necessary to put aside [our] editorializing and sermons, to allow facts to be displayed in all their potential” (Article 46). In one piece fully dedicated to chastising the media’s performance during the referendum, a commentator declares that “it is high time our opinion leaders stop” sharing their thoughts, for they are having a “negative impact on democracy” (Article 39). The author targets well known columnists by name, among them several from the weekly *Semana*. The columnists, all of whom had openly supported a Yes vote, are accused of self-righteousness and compared to Girolamo Savonarola, an activist friar from 15th century Florence:

Three of *Semana*’s permanent columnists, María Jimena Duzán, León Valencia and Antonio Caballero constituted themselves as direct heirs of Savonarola in the 21st century, harassing and threatening with eternal fire anyone who dared not fold into their convictions. (Article 39)

Semana, which is home to several high-profile columnists, is elsewhere accused of “opportunism” for endorsing the peace deal (Article 53). The weekly’s top editor, Alejandro Santos, offers a defence of his choice of columnists and his publication’s traditional support for opinion journalism in an interview with an independent online publication. “I have tried to do a good journalism, surround myself with the best journalists in the country, the most critical,” he says, striving to maintain “a critical spirit” (Article 7).

On the other hand, there are those who think the vote’s outcome shed light on the media’s dwindling power to command the opinions of the majority. Some worry about the trend, others do not. An academic and media critic offers a blunt statement: “Columnists demonstrated that those who vote don’t read them” (Article 44). Amongst journalists, however, the reflection is more subdued. The vote results prompted “a deep reflection about the apparent disconnection that opinion leaders have with the people’s perspectives,” says one article about a gathering of senior journalists who convened to discuss their role during the campaign (Article 21). Some express a certain sense of nostalgia for olden times when journalists seemed to exert greater influence over people’s opinions. “What should traditional media do to become opinion leaders again?” a journalist is asked in a literary magazine (Article 40).

3.2.3. Reflections by Journalists. The previous sections have included some comments made by journalists about the role the media played in covering the referendum campaign. This section shows in greater detail the kind of reflections that journalists engaged in following the surprising results. Most of these thoughts centre around the question of how media organizations and individual journalists handled their vocal endorsements for the Yes vote, questions about whether No voters were misunderstood, and reflections about what the press potentially lost in the referendum.

One article reports on a debate between two senior journalists who spoke about their role in covering the referendum on national radio: Fidel Cano, Editor-in-Chief at the national newspaper *El Espectador*, and Alejandro Santos, Editor-in-Chief at the weekly *Semana* (Article 21). Cano defends his newspaper's editorial support for the Yes option while recognizing that there was a level of disconnection with the electorate. "There was a mistake and it was to have misread what was happening on the streets and allowing poll results to convince us" (Article 21). His reflection touches on the newspaper's journalistic approach to the vote, and the preceding peace process, as a political horse race:

Perhaps we have framed this entire process into a political thing and possibly in all of this there are nuances that we were incapable of finding with our reporting on the street, and didn't give sufficient importance to what people had to say and their misgivings about the content of the agreements. (Article 21)

Santos, of *Semana*, disagrees with the idea that journalists are disconnected from their public, and instead emphasizes the role of voting-intention polls in creating "an atmosphere where the country believed that the Yes would win" (Article 21). Like Cano, Santos defends his publication's vocal support for a Yes vote not only as a right under free speech but as "a duty and a responsibility of the medium that must be done through arguments and intellectual [rigour]" (Article 21). Media organizations not only can but should share their editorial lines, says Santos, "and must have character to defend with honesty and transparency certain values that are more important every day for Colombian democracy, even if they are in a minority" (Article 21).

In a separate article where Santos is asked about *Semana*'s independence vis a vis the peace process and the referendum—given that he is the nephew of President Santos—the journalist appears to offer a contradictory comment, stating that

Journalists cannot be apologists of peace and irrational militants of peace. If something characterises journalism is its critical spirit, and... part of its fundamental duty is to assume critical positions before the [peace] negotiations and before what comes next for Colombia. (Article 7)

Other seasoned journalists are invited to comment across several articles. The veteran journalist Javier Darío Restrepo, interviewed by a think tank dedicated to journalism ethics, is asked to reflect on what the role of journalism should be in a “moment of uncertainty” (Article 46). Restrepo joins the ranks of those who disagree with the practice of media endorsing the Yes vote, regretting that

Colombian media tend to always lean on an adhesion. In this case now that adhesion was evident. It was evident that great part of the media was on the side of the Yes [vote] and it was a minuscule section that was favouring the No [vote]. (Article 46)

Despite condemning his colleagues’ endorsement of the Yes camp, the journalist goes on to suggest that, from now on, Colombian journalists should “centre all their informative efforts towards... the common good. In this moment, the common good is peace,” but he suggests that to do so the balance between opinion and information should be re-calibrated. Journalists, he says, must put aside “editorialization and sermons so that facts can be displayed in all their potential” (Article 46).

On the day after the vote, the journalist Robert Posada Rosero published a scathing column on an independent website entitled “How Much did the Press Lose?” (“¿Cuánto perdió la prensa?”). The journalist calls the media’s performance a “deplorable” spectacle where the press went “in the same mud as the politicians” (Article 51). Posada Rosero declares that the media’s performance, not the results, should be regretted. “The country won but we the journalists lost, and with us the listeners, readers and television audiences who were left without someone to trust.” He continues,

Let's sit for a moment of silence... and think that we failed as the Fourth Estate...over the past weeks, to listen to the radio and watch the news became a torturous exercise...I was exhausted, saturated and even indignant watching the spectacle of colleagues on campaign mode. Accusing everyone of being passionate, warmongers and insensitive, without stopping to revise their own actions. And what of the leading stories, interviews and headlines? Even the sections at the end of newscasts spoke of peace and the referendum. It was without a doubt the most important moment in the last 52 years of Colombia. But, was it necessary to forget the fundamental role of the press? (Article 51)

Two journalists reflect on the issue of an apparent disconnection between the media and the public. In an interview, another veteran of the field, journalist Juan Gossain, urges the media to "reconcile with citizens," arguing that "it is necessary to coat the media again with that character of independence, impartiality, ethics and pure handling of the truth" (Article 38). Restrepo, the other veteran journalist consulted for comment on the media's performance, as seen above, also sees an important gap between journalists and their publics, which he links to a question of social class. Restrepo concedes that he "also believed that the Yes would win" but that he, as his colleagues, missed something that was evident: "There was a lot of people in the grassroots for the 'No,' as much or more as there were 'fine people' in the 'Yes'" (Article 46). One senior newspaper editor worries that journalists were "incapable" of recording some nuances about people's attitudes toward the peace deal in the days before the vote took place (Article 21).

Few journalists reflect on the referendum's coverage beyond the issues of endorsements and the apparent rift between journalists and the public. A notable exception is a comment by Alejandro Santos, of *Semana*, who reflects on the "privilege" that is to be able to "report in such a complex country..."

Colombia is a country of grey hues, and that is where us journalists must stand, understand that it is a culturally diverse country, a country of regions, and until we understand ourselves in [our] diversity and pluralism and in respect for [our] differences then it will be very difficult to build a modern Colombia in the post-conflict. (Article 7)

3.3. *Everyone Failed to Factor in the Emotionality of the Vote*

The last theme of the Journalism section deals with the role of emotion and how it relates to the type of reporting seen during the referendum campaign. As mentioned in previous sections, the matter of emotion underlies much of the elements in the metajournalistic discourse of media failure. To avoid repetition, here I highlight only mentions to emotionality focussed on two axes, social media and emotional reporting, as illustrated on the table below.

3.3.1. Social Media	On social media's capacity to stir emotions and galvanize voters.	Social media as a space for reaction and emotion
		The No camp's viral strategy
3.3.2. Emotions and Journalism	On the role of emotion in reporting on a sensitive topic such as the peace referendum.	Failure to see emotion
		Too much emotion
		Journalism's "rationality" vs social media's emotionality

Table 12. Results Chapter 1, 3.3.1. and 3.3.2.

3.3.1. Social Media. As mentioned above, most articles in the corpus mentioning social media agree that the No campaign exploited the viral nature of social networks to appeal to voter's emotions (Article 15). In several instances social media are characterized as a space of emotionality which stands in contrast with "serious" media as a space of rationality. Social

media are seen as a “reactive space” where people share their views without much reflection or vetting, which ultimately worked against the “rational” proposition of the peace accords, as one author argues (Article 37). Voters, says one article, argued their positions about the peace vote “through memes” and “half-baked arguments” (Article 35). A communications expert writes that extreme and passionate arguments were the daily diet on social media during the referendum campaign, where opinion leaders, including many journalists, were “belligerent” and contributed to widespread polarization (Article 20). Social media became a “battle field” of “extreme tales,” he says. The same author shares a study of social media posts during the campaign, noting that emotionally charged words were dominant in posts about the peace vote. His analysis shows that Yes voters used language such as “hope” and “future for the children,” whereas No supporters spoke primarily of “victims, lies, and Venezuela” (Article 20). Notably, he states, most of the viral content about the campaign originated from individual citizen accounts and those of politicians, while only seven per cent came from journalist accounts. On the other hand, a journalist ponders in a separate piece the question of how journalism can offer a counter-weight to the emotionally charged space of social media to inform public debates. “Showing people that journalism is necessary and when you create solid information, well honed, it also has a proven effect on society” is the only way forward, he states (Article 21).

The clearest link between social media and voter’s emotions is provided by the No campaign manager’s own admission that the purpose of his strategy was precisely to stir people’s emotions. His admission that his team “wanted people to go vote in anger,” and that he “discovered the viral power of social media” to spread incendiary comments and photos, further underlines the perception that the media environment in Colombia during the referendum campaign was highly emotionally charged (Articles 23 & 15). Others also underline the negative

emotions that characterize the space of social media. Social media are inundated with “shared lies” (Article 31), says one commentator. Another states that he took a break from posting because the environment of “hatred” on social networks “transcend the personal and end up disappointing and draining any desire to share an opinion” (Article 10).

3.3.2. Emotions and Journalism. The comments shown above illustrate concerns over the emotional pull of social media as a potentially corrosive agent affecting public conversations, and how some commentators, in particular some journalists, think that their colleagues sometimes treated their coverage with “too much emotion.” Here, I show how other articles raise the argument that the vote itself marked an emotional moment in Colombian history, and that journalists failed to approach it adequately. Comments about emotions in relation to journalistic coverage of the peace vote range from accusations that journalists failed to see and comprehend the emotional nature of the vote, to the contrasting argument that journalists treated the vote “too emotionally.” Others raise the question about whether journalism’s supposed rationality was insufficient to combat the emotional pull of social media.

In the words of one political analyst, the media’s efforts to report on and educate the public on the details of the peace agreement were commendable, but “when there are important subjects at play in a referendum, pedagogy is always insufficient because the final decision ends up being very emotional” (Article 22). It is not clear whether the comment invites journalists to be more emotional, or simply to adjust their reporting to be more in tune with the public’s emotionality. A similar argument by an educator implies that journalists should understand that “a country where three of every thousand people know how to read critically is not moved by ideas, but by primary emotions like fear, rage or revenge” (Article 26). Social networks are natural spaces for such emotions, but also offer “immediate access to controversy,” opinions,

humour and irony, which proved to be more successful than traditional journalism during the referendum campaign (Article 40).

On the contrary, a reflection about how the media has traditionally approached conflict reporting in Colombia is critical of appealing *too much* to people's emotions. Dominant media players have

Built a generalized understanding of the armed conflict that responds to one particular, biased, and slanted way. In this process specific imaginaries have been built and passions have been mobilized that have ended being imposed as the frame of analysis of reality and the formation of political thought that today is difficult to dismount. For example, an internal enemy was built... that incarnates evil and the root of all national problems; an enemy devoid of human condition and of any speck of political legitimacy. (Article 15)

It appears as though the problem with emotionality in journalism both precedes the social media era, as suggested in the quote above, and succeeds it. Social media, says one critic, has provoked a trend towards including too much emotion and too little rigour in new approaches to journalism. "Those limits have been transgressed and we have, for example, television newscasts where facts are emotional exercises" (Article 40). Overall, there appears to be clear tensions between those who desire to distance—and privilege—journalism's *rationality* from the less sophisticated entanglements of emotion, as personified by social media activity.

Analysis

David Cheruiyot (2022) tells us that traditional journalists are increasingly facing "an unfamiliar terrain of digital criticism," and that "the foremost challenge to journalists is how to cope with factionalised platforms, a diverse set of critics and, at the same time, highly polarised spaces" (p. 2). This last section highlighting criticisms to journalists and journalistic practice in the corpus shows that journalists who covered the peace vote indeed faced "a diverse set of critics," of whom some of the harshest sit within their own ranks. The main theme running through this section, a perception of imbalance, touches on three dimensions: The apparent

disconnection between journalists and their audiences, the overwhelming editorial support for the peace deal, and the emotionally charged nature of the vote.

These different dimensions of perceived imbalance reveal important clues about the metajournalistic discourse of media failure. First, they show that there is an assumed crisis of disconnection between journalists and their audiences, which is linked to assumptions about Colombian journalism as elitist and out of touch as seen throughout the previous two sections of this chapter. Second, it reveals that Colombian journalistic culture is not immune to current debates about the norm of objectivity in journalism that are the subject of much contemporary research from around the world (i.e., Cushion & Lewis, 2017; Parks, 2021; Tandoc & Thomas, 2017), especially in similar contexts such as the Brexit and Trump votes (i.e., Zelizer, 2018b). Third, they confirm that a perception of media failure is related to the highly emotional context of the peace vote, as several studies have highlighted (Alurralde, 2018; Gómez Giraldo & Cárdenas Ruiz, 2017; Hernández Pérez, 2017; Molina & Becerra, 2018; Valencia-Tello, 2017).

Overall, this chapter has shown how, indeed, a metajournalistic discourse of media failure materialized following the Oct. 2, 2016 peace referendum in Colombia. I have shown how the discourse was built on overwhelmingly negative and fatalistic perceptions of Colombia as a country incapable of transcending its violent past, widespread categorizations of Colombian media as a tired institution owing its existence to political and financial elite interests, and the perception—shared by critics and journalists alike—that journalists failed to offer a balanced account of the vote during the campaign. The following chapter shows the result of the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of face-to-face interviews with journalists who covered the peace referendum. The analysis reveals how these journalists received the metajournalistic

discourse of media failure. Later, the Discussion and Conclusions chapter will connect the themes discussed here and the responses that journalists gave during the interviews.

Results Chapter 2 - Responding to the Discourse of Media Failure

This chapter is based on the coding of 14 in-depth, semi-guided interviews with journalists conducted in person in Bogotá and Medellín, Colombia, in January and February, 2020. The interviews were structured around four main prompts asking journalists to do the following: 1) Recall their personal reaction to the wave of media criticism that followed the peace referendum's results—including whether they agree that such a wave existed. 2) Comment on specific criticisms extracted from the corpus of articles considered here on Chapter 1. 3) Reflect on their own role(s) as journalists who covered the peace vote. And 4) think about what, in their view, was the role that Colombian media *should* have played during the referendum campaign (see Appendix D – *Interview protocol*).

Profile of Interview Participants

Participants come from various media platforms and organizations, different age ranges, and occupy different levels of seniority. They all identify as working journalists, and all of them worked covering the 2016 peace referendum. The group is split equally between men and women. While most respondents work at a print outlet, some diversity within this category should be noted. The group includes employees from *El Espectador*, a national daily based in Bogotá traditionally aligned with liberal/ progressive values (Acosta, 2017); *El Colombiano*, a regional daily from Medellín, traditionally a conservative region, with a history of endorsing conservative politicians (Rincón, 2010); and *Semana*, an elite national weekly based in Bogotá that was until recently considered as mostly centrist (Rincón, 2010)⁹. The table below shows the

⁹ These general descriptions of political leanings should be taken with the understanding that each of these news outlets are complex entities with rich histories and variations in their political positions. For example, *El Espectador* has maintained an editorial position of pacifism and liberal politics, yet it is often accused of catering to rich elites and conservative politicians. *El Colombiano*, though conservative and usually aligned with the military,

participants' attributes. Only first names are used here to maintain a moderate level of privacy, as agreed with each participant during the interview process (see Appendix C - *Consent Form*).

Participant	Age	Gender	Seniority	Medium	Organization
Dora	41 to 50	Female	Senior	TV	RCN TV
Fidel	50 and over	Male	Senior	Print daily	El Espectador
Germán	25 to 30	Male	Mid-range	Print daily	El Espectador
Ignacio	50 and over	Male	Senior	TV	Noticias Uno
Jorge	31 to 40	Male	Mid-range	Print weekly	Semana
Juan	31 to 40	Male	Senior	Digital	La Silla Vacía
María	25 to 30	Female	Junior	Print daily	El Espectador
Margarita	41 to 50	Female	Senior	Documentary	(Independent)
Maritza	31 to 40	Female	Mid-range	TV	RCN TV
Milena	50 and over	Female	Senior	Print weekly	Semana
Nelson	31 to 40	Male	Junior	Print daily	El Colombiano
Olga	31 to 40	Female	Junior	Print daily	El Colombiano
Ricardo	31 to 40	Male	Mid-range	Print daily	El Colombiano
Yolanda	50 and over	Female	Senior	Radio	RCN Radio

Table 13, Participant Attributes.

boasts one of the most progressive teams of human rights reporting in the country; the paper surprised many during the peace referendum by abstaining from endorsing the No option. Its editorial simply asked people “to go out and vote.” *Semana* was historically independent, certainly often aligned with sitting governments as has been usual of mainstream media in the country (Caballero, 2018). Recently, however, under a new ownership structure, it has taken on a more aggressively right-wing agenda, firing many of its most popular columnists and openly aligning itself with the country’s most staunchly conservative politicians.

Results and Analysis

This chapter's structure follows the themes and subthemes that emerged from the interviews, organized thematically after several rounds of open and cyclical coding. Following Critical Thematic Analysis (Lawless & Chen, 2019), the coding took into account contextual information based on knowledge of existing social and cultural structures and the local journalistic culture.

I argued in the previous chapter that the discourse of media failure that emerged after the Colombian peace vote should be considered a metajournalistic discourse of failure. This means that it has power to effect change in the journalistic field, as it can impact how journalists rationalize their alleged failures and, in doing so, may help reshape the contours of journalistic identity and practice (Carlson, 2016). This second chapter reveals precisely that, given a chance to reflect on the accusations of failure levied at the Colombian media following the vote, journalists engage in reflections that have potential to effect changes in the local journalistic culture. The following chapter identifies three major findings: First, journalists admit that common errors and inadequate habits of journalistic practice persist. In this sense, their responses align with typical response-patterns by journalists found in media criticism literature, where journalists show self-reflexivity as a way to restore legitimacy in the eyes of the public, otherwise known as paradigm repair (Klocke & McDevitt 2013; Hindman, 2006). Second, journalists identify external factors putting pressure and causing changes in the local journalistic culture. Here, their responses go beyond paradigm repair and into boundary work (Carlson & Lewis, 2015), as participants go past accepting shortcomings into identifying external factors posing threats to the boundaries of journalism itself. This finding, where participants acknowledge that self-interested parties may be successfully disrupting journalism, puts the

responses of Colombian journalists in line with journalists who have responded to media criticism in the contexts of Brexit and the Trump election (Wang et al., 2017). Third, participants show ambivalence about their work and an openness to admit that changes are already occurring in the local journalistic culture both in terms of practice and norms. Their responses echo recent studies identifying “new” types of media responses to criticism: ambivalence and a willingness to engage with the public (Krogh and Svensson, 2017).

These findings guide the structure of the chapter, which comprises three corresponding sections. The first is: *The Media Failed on Multiple fronts*. Here results show how most participants agree that failures in the coverage of the referendum are linked to common errors and habits that persists in the practice of journalism. The shortcomings are linked to issues of failing to connect with audiences; revisiting journalistic habits and routines; and a shared perception, amongst most participants, that RCN Television overstepped a journalistic boundary by acting as a mouthpiece of the No campaign. The second section is: *There was a Media System Failure, but it Was not the Journalists’ Fault*. Here participants identify external pressures to journalism. They push back against critics to point that they were working against major societal forces that induced the media to failure. These include the circumstances of secrecy that surrounded the peace process, which left an information void ripe for manipulation, and the presence of a concerted campaign to inundate the media ecology with disinformation¹⁰, aided by social media. The third section is: *Journalists are Ambivalent and Open to Discuss Changes in*

¹⁰ The use of the word “disinformation” throughout this chapter is intentional and justified on two grounds:
a) There is no word in Spanish to distinguish disinformation and misinformation. The term in Spanish is “desinformación,” and it was widely used by participants so I have decided to translate it as “disinformation.” And
b) The type of lies that were spread by the No campaign and allies can certainly be categorized as disinformation according to current definitions of the term: “False information which is intended to mislead, especially propaganda issued by a government organization to a rival power or the media” (Oxford Languages, n.d.).

Practice and Norms. Here participants show that there is room for reconsidering both practice and norms of journalism—In other words, that the metajournalistic discourse of failure may already be having an effect in the local journalistic culture. Journalists display ambivalence about their performance covering the vote and are willing to engage with critics on matters both related to practice, such as election reporting, and norms, particularly the merits of objectivity. This section addresses an element unique to Colombia's journalistic culture through mentions of “Medios para la paz,” a now-defunct organization that used to congregate journalists under a banner of advocacy for ending the war with guerrillas through peaceful means. A reflection on what the organization meant for journalists who covered matters of war and peace reveals important reflections on how journalists understand what it means to be objective when reporting on matters of war and peace.

The figure below illustrates the full thematic framework that resulted from coding the interviews. Each section ends with a dedicated analysis.

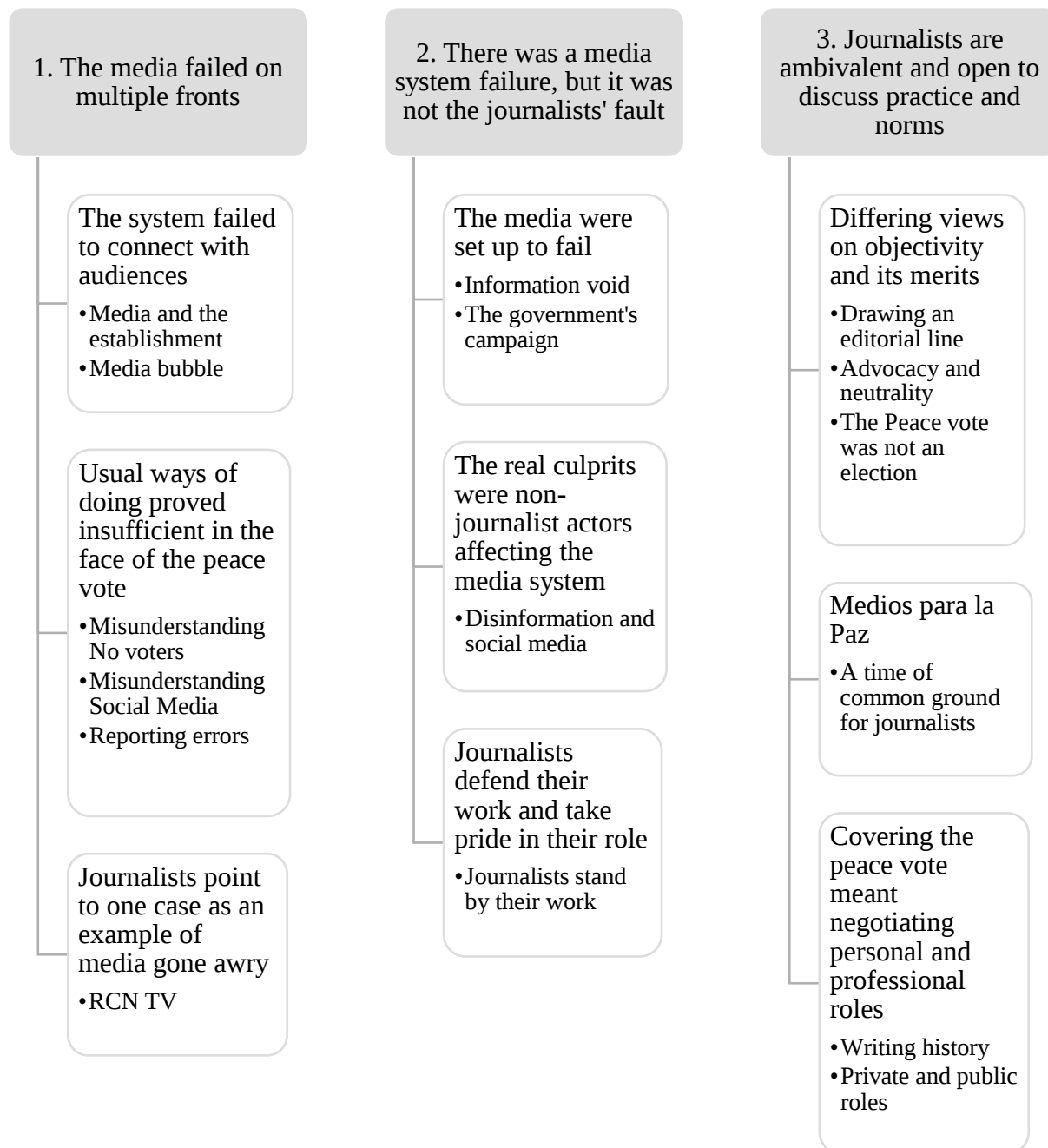


Figure 5. Results Chapter 2, Thematic Framework

1) The Media Failed on Multiple Fronts

The 14 journalists who participated in the interviews recognize, to some extent, that there was a level of failure in the way Colombian media covered the peace vote, yet not everybody

sees failure in the same way. In this section, three major themes emerge around the topic of media failure: The first, *“The system failed to connect with audiences,”* shows a shared sense that the referendum highlighted existing gaps between the local media and their publics, reminding journalists that they can sometime operate in a bubble. The second theme, *“Usual ways of doing proved insufficient in the face of the peace vote,”* is a recognition that entrenched journalistic habits and routines, especially the usual ways in which journalists cover electoral processes, were inadequate in the face of the historic peace vote. This resulted, among other things, in journalists misunderstanding part of the electorate, and miscalculating the power of social media. The third theme, *“Journalists point to one case as an example of media gone awry,”* reveals that several participants judge the performance of one single news organization, RCN Television, as an example of what journalists *should not* have done while covering the referendum. Many express concerns about the network’s apparent editorial slant against the peace deal, siding with the No camp. The figure below illustrates the themes and subthemes addressed in this first section.

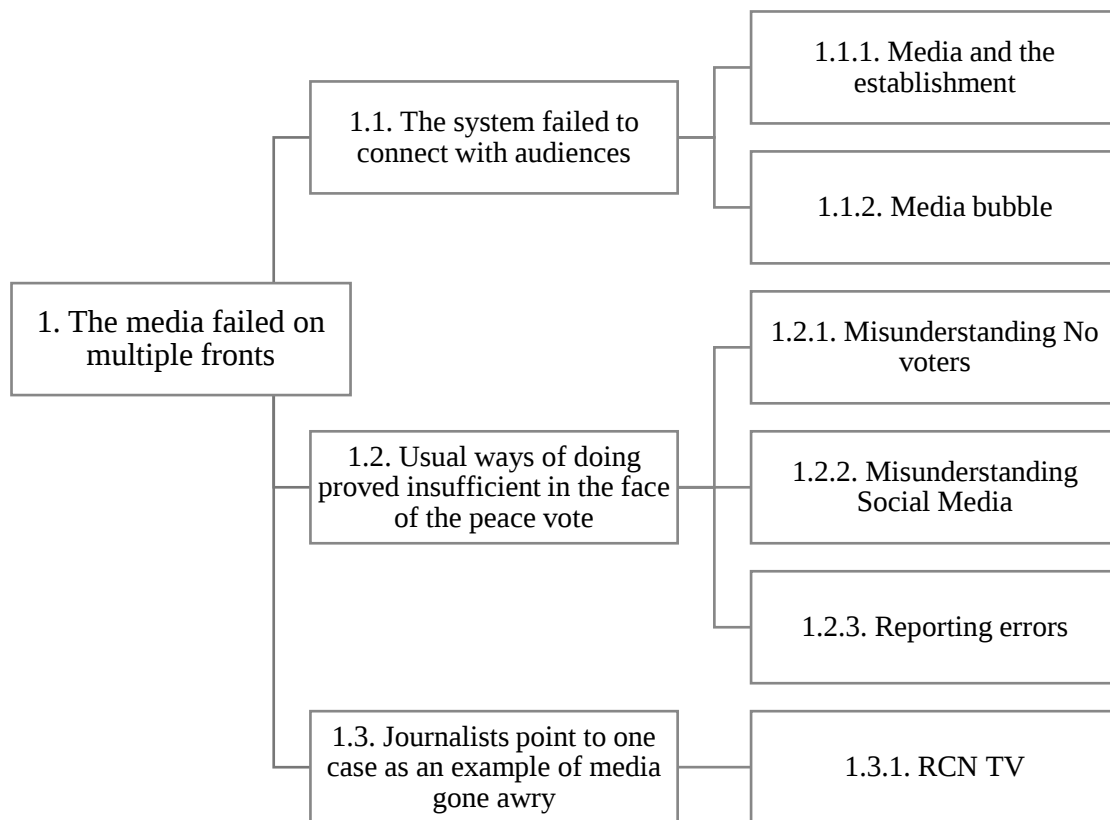


Figure 6. Results Chapter 2, The Media Failed

1.1. The System Failed to Connect with Audiences

The theme of disconnection emerged unprompted in most of the interviews. These conversations centred largely around two lines. On the one hand, participants talk about the traditional proximity of media organizations to the country's political and financial elites as a factor that could have affected the media's coverage of the peace vote. On the other hand, some reflect on the divide between journalists based in Bogotá, where the national-reaching media is based, and those operating from elsewhere in the country. This is thought to be a factor contributing to insulate journalists and news outlets based in the capital city from understanding the realities of life outside its borders. This theme is divided into two subthemes, as follows:

1.1.1. Media and the Establishment	Journalists reflect on how their proximity to elites may affect their work	Media remain a part of the establishment
		Elite reporting vs. talking to people on the street
		Social media distorts the notion of who "the people" are
1.1.2. Media Bubble	The media system functions in a bubble that is increasingly distanced from everyday people	A feeling that journalists are sitting "outside of reality"
		A failure to "take the pulse" of the people
		The bubble was a barrier to understanding who No voters were

Table 14. *Results Chapter 2, 1.1.1 and 1.1.2*

1.1.1. Media and the Establishment. Journalists repeatedly mention the Colombian media's traditional ties with the local establishment as a source of journalistic failure during coverage of the referendum. Fidel (*El Espectador*) admits that coverage that he was largely responsible for during the campaign relied too heavily on "the power elites" instead to listening more closely to what was happening on the street. It is not only that traditionally journalists in Colombia have deferred to elite figures, such as political leaders, impresarios, and top military personnel as primary sources for their stories, says Fidel. News routines determined by accessing information through computer screens have replaced the practice of having reporters go out to speaking with people on the street. This reality of news production, he says, means less time spent outside seeking sources in person, and fewer opportunities for serendipitous encounters that could lead to new story angles or even new stories altogether. On the other hand, many

journalists have come to see social media as the space where they establish those personal connections with audiences, “taking the pulse” of the population on the news of the day. As Fidel notes, however, social media represents a skewed version of “the people,” because only certain types of people are active on these networks—and because journalists’ news feeds, like everybody else’s, are shaped by invisible algorithms that determine the kind of content they see. In this sense, “taking the pulse” of society through social media offers a limited scope and may result in mistaken interpretations for journalists about what “the people” are talking about. Ever since the referendum, Fidel says that he has reflected on this mediated interaction with audiences, which he calls a kind of “connected disconnection” that journalists may have only come to realize after the surprising vote results.

On the other hand, Juan (*La Silla Vacía*) thinks the vote simply highlighted an existing disconnection between journalists and their publics. Like Fidel, Juan thinks this is also a question of traditional news routines that have led journalists to over-rely on the powerful to build their news stories. What may be new, however, is that “power is now diffused across the world,” says Juan. Traditional power brokers are simply not as influential as they used to, a reality that he thinks journalists have been slow to catch on. Had reporters spent more time with people on the streets, he says, they would have realized that their thinking on the referendum was not aligned with what most people in elite power circles, including the media, were feeling. Fidel and Juan’s reflections are not unique. Several journalists mention in their interviews that there was a failure to connect with “every day people” during the referendum campaign, such as cab drivers or mall shoppers. This had tangible consequences on the type of reports that were ultimately aired and published. Yolanda (RCN Radio) recognizes that this disconnection with

the people meant that most of the media failed to understand the “legitimate” feelings of fear that the peace agreement was generating for some sections of the population.

1.1.2. Media Bubble. Most participants agree that Colombian journalists were operating in a sort of bubble, insulated from what some voters were “truly thinking” and feeling about the vote. In the days preceding the vote, convinced that the referendum would successfully seal the peace deal with the FARC, many journalists felt empowered by their endorsements of the Yes vote, and confident that their coverage was in tune with the national sentiment—until the results proved them wrong. A sobering quote from Fidel (*El Espectador*) encapsulates how many journalists felt after the surprising results: “It was a really hard blow for me. And not because the Yes lost. That’s part of democracy. But to feel... to feel outside of reality, outside of understanding the country in some way” was the hardest realization once the results came in.

Juan (*La Silla Vacía*) thinks there were signs of warning that many journalists ignored. He recalls an anecdote that gave his newsroom pause with respect to the media’s general assumption that a Yes victory was inevitable. On Sept. 26, 2016, only six days before the referendum, the government and the FARC held a ceremony in the coastal city of Cartagena where they publicly signed their agreement. It was a lavish event, with international dignitaries and celebrities in attendance. According to Juan, his digital-start-up newsroom did not have the means to send a reporter to cover the event, so editors dispatched reporters to different spots in Bogotá to gauge how people were responding to the ceremony. Juan says that “nobody was watching this on TV,” as you might have expected of the highly symbolic ceremony. In the lounge of a posh country club, he says, the TV was tuned into a different channel until a journalist asked to watch the ceremony. “Nobody flinched,” says Juan. In shopping malls, only a handful of television screens at dining courts were broadcasting the event but people did not

seem interested at all. As Juan recalls, “we realized then that the environment [around the peace deal] was cold.” His newsroom talked about it, sensing that something was amiss, but even then, they did not grasp what this might mean for the upcoming vote.

For many respondents, being in this media bubble meant that journalists were either unable or unwilling to understand a portion of the population who had legitimate doubts about the terms, or the political consequences, of the peace agreement. Fidel, whose own public reflections about the press’s failings after the vote resonate with most respondents (his reflections are included in one of the articles studied in the previous chapter - Article 21), thinks that arrogance played a role. “We belittled the concerns” over the peace pact, he says, adding that journalists didn’t understand that there were still open wounds that generated strong reactions against the peace process, independent of the specific items contemplated in the actual agreement. Fidel thinks that many journalists, especially those in editorial and higher-up positions, saw opposition to the agreement only in terms of political alignment, and fell into the government’s trap of labeling any criticism against the peace vote as an irrational act of loyalty towards the political forces led by former president Álvaro Uribe. Several respondents think, again, that this simplistic framework could have been prevented by simply talking to more people on the streets. Juan (*La Silla Vacía*) thinks his own newsroom’s coverage of the campaign was condescending towards voters, with journalists taking a position of “cyphers” helping the populace “crack this mysterious thing” called the peace agreement. María (*El Espectador*) says that groupthink and a shared desire for the country to move on from its decades-long conflict created a serious blind spot for her and many of her colleagues. “We wore the peace flag so close to our hearts that we forgot that there was a different world to the one we were living and feeling,” she says. In her case, her bubble was made up of young, well-educated

progressives who make up a large portion of the staff reporters at the large daily. Yolanda (RCN Radio) captures this common sentiment in simple terms. “What did we miss?” She says, simply, “What people were saying on the street.” Echoing María’s words, Yolanda also thinks that some media organizations got carried away, operating under wishful thinking and “stopped looking at what was happening in the country.”

The bubble had many boundaries. Age was a factor according to María, who remarks that most newsrooms are predominantly populated by young reporters. The question of routines also played a role in shaping the boundaries of the local journalistic bubble. As Fidel and several others acknowledge, journalists tend to reach out to top political figures as sources and commentators to shape their news stories, often at the expense of other sources, including social justice advocates and members of the general public who might offer different and sometimes more direct perspectives. The bubble was also bound by ideology. Like María, Germán also works at *El Espectador*. He says his Bogotá-based newsroom of mostly educated young people were incapable of understanding how some voters could side with critics who were making arguments against the peace deal on religious grounds. He admits that he and his colleagues failed to grasp that Colombia “is a very Catholic and Christian country, that believes in God, and that this affects people’s senses.” As Germán sees it, this failure meant that his newsroom was slow to understand how the matter of the so-called gender ideology eventually helped rally voters against the peace deal. The ideological fault lines ran parallel to national politics as well. Fidel (*El Espectador*) recognizes that more progressive newsrooms like his own tended to dismiss critics of the peace agreement simply as Uribe loyalists, who are generally older or more rural types with a penchant for authoritative views. This meant that multiple voices who tried to warn about the shortcomings of the peace agreement were all painted with the same ideological

brush, their concerns placed in a large bucket with Uribe's name on it. The bubble also was, and remains, geographical. In a stubbornly centralist country where national media continue to be produced primarily from the capital city, there is bound to be a gap between what urban journalists and populations away from the capital see and experience on a daily basis. This is especially true in terms of the armed conflict, which was primarily experienced in the regions outside the capital. The limitation is exacerbated by well-founded concerns over the safety of conflict reporters. Dora (RCN TV) says that very few reporters reach the areas where the conflict is most alive, creating real barriers for connecting with actors and victims, and resulting in a warped, distant understanding of the consequences of the war on specific population. In her own newsroom, Dora says she is one of the few reporters to have personally interacted with both victims and perpetrators, which she says has deeply informed her commitment to a negotiated end to the long war. To this point, Yolanda (RCN Radio) and others highlight that, whatever shortcomings the media had during the referendum, these were most likely to come from news outlets and journalists based in the capital city. She highlights examples of excellent news coverage produced by journalists in rural and urban regions outside Bogotá. Ultimately, however, she acknowledges that most national news about the vote remained in the hands of urbanites who may have had a very different understanding of the conflict from someone experiencing it much closer; several other participants, including Dora (RCN TV), agree with her.

Like Juan (*La Silla Vacía*), Yolanda (RCN Radio) sensed some cracks in the bubble in the days preceding the peace vote. She warned her colleagues at the radio station that, in a cab ride, the driver had told her that he would vote No. Two or three more people on the street had said the same. This made her fear that journalists were out of tune with voters. "We made a bet

and I said the No could win,” she says. Few of her colleagues took her warning seriously, but Yolanda knew something could be amiss “because people on the street were talking bout it.” In her poll in the newsroom, “nobody else bet that the No could win.”

1.2. Usual Ways of Doing Proved Insufficient in the Face of the Peace Vote

Throughout the interviews, participants reflect on how habits and routines of journalistic practice may have exacerbated the already palpable disconnection between journalists and their audiences. Three dimensions to this topic emerge under this theme. The first is that such usual practices are thought to have affected how journalists “read” or “misread” the electorate, in particular No voters. The second relates to how journalists conducting “business as usual” were suddenly faced with the full disrupting force of social media. The third is more specific to habits and routines of political reporting and how adopting traditional approaches to covering elections for an atypical and historic vote such as the peace referendum proved to be inadequate. The figure below describes the themes and subthemes in this section.

1.2.1. Misunderstanding No voters	Habits and routines of journalism led to an inability to understand the motives driving the No vote	"Rational" journalists failed to see how much emotion played a role in the No vote
		Ignoring "the fringe" backfired
1.2.2. Misunderstanding social media	Journalists think the media were unprepared for the full force of social media's impact on the campaign	"The first great battle" lost to social media
		From distributing to creating and sourcing content on social media
		Amplifying disinformation
1.2.3. Reporting errors	Failures of journalism are ultimately interpreted as failures to follow basic rules of reporting	Journalists need to diversify sources, listen to everyday people
		Overrelying on political and official sources
		Horse-race reporting

Table 15. Results Chapter 2, 1.2.1, 1.2.2., and 1.2.3.

1.2.1. Misunderstanding No Voters. There is no doubt that the peace referendum was an emotional, as much as a professional, challenge for reporters. Several journalists speak about their own personal feelings about the peace vote and its emotional toll. In most interviews, however, participants often reflect on their own performance as the job of rational reporters who, in the end, miscalculated just how emotional the referendum was for voters. In the same vein of Juan (*La Silla Vacía*), who regrets his newsroom's cold and formalist approach to dissecting the

text of the peace agreement for a supposedly unenlightened audience, Fidel (*El Espectador*) admits that in his newsroom most reporters dismissed No supporters as being “a little crazy” and “gullable.” Reporters were encouraged to ignore them, to a certain extent. This position was in part a response to the presence of large amounts of mis- and disinformation that circulated across several media platforms during the campaign, including wild claims that the final agreement promoted homosexuality in children (Esguerra Muelle, 2017). Journalists dismissed the viral information as exotic and unimportant, and also consciously attempted to keep it out of the national conversation by not engaging with it, lest they become instrumental in amplifying it. Yet the mistake, in Fidel’s view, was to assume that people critical of the agreement were to be dismissed as simple fools who believed the outlandish claims. Germán (*El Espectador*) recalls that he simply did not understand “how people could believe those lies,” and so he chose to focus more intently on his own reporting. Now, however, he thinks that he should have paid more attention to why those rumours were finding an echo amongst large swaths of the population.

Amidst the media’s majority consensus in support of the peace deal, and the certainty that the Yes option would win—bolstered in great part by voting-intention polls—many journalists simply found it hard to fathom that most people could vote No. Fidel states that any concerns about the vote’s outcome were usually tempered by the question of “Who would vote against peace”? The problem, he says, was precisely that, in aligning themselves with the government in the common goal of achieving peace, many journalists fell unquestioningly into the Santos administration’s mantra for the campaign, which drew a line between two camps, “the friends of peace” and “the enemies of peace.” Surely, from a journalist’s perspective, he says, a country living under the tyranny of a 50-year-old war would have many more of the former than

of the latter. As Fidel puts it, however, there was a wide range of emotions that people were feeling towards the final agreement, and depicting every individual who had qualms about it as an enemy of peace was a disservice to the complexity of the historic moment. “We weren’t capable of reaching those who were not seeing it [the vote] as an opportunity but as a surrender,” he says.

Olga (*El Colombiano*) describes her newsroom’s efforts to cover the peace vote through exhaustive explainers, using “diagrams, summaries,” and “pros and cons columns” about the final agreement. She now wonders if it would not have been better to tune into the emotionality of the moment instead. It is possible, she says, that reporters needed to understand the emotional reactions to the peace deal more than audiences needed to understand the minutiae of the final document. Juan (*La Silla Vacía*) recalls reading a controversial opinion column days ahead of the vote where the author begged people “not to read the agreement” and instead vote with their hearts. He initially dismissed it but now wonders if the columnist was right.

There is a flip side to these reflections where journalists self-describe as rational recorders of events who missed the emotional clues of the population. Throughout the interviews, some participants are also self-critical, or critical of colleagues who were “too emotional” in their vocal support for the peace agreement. María (*El Espectador*) now thinks that her newsroom’s defense of the peace deal was “too impassioned.” Nelson (*El Colombiano*) was uncomfortable watching colleagues express their views about the vote in emotional posts on their personal social media feeds. He thinks there needs to be a movement to make journalists “less passionate.”

1.2.2. Misunderstanding Social Media. Whereas many respondents admit to falling short in understanding the heterogeneous nature of the No voters, another factor proved to be a

major challenge for journalists, especially those working at traditional media organizations—where most respondents in this study belong. In the words of Jorge, a seasoned reporter for the weekly *Semana*, the peace vote marked “the first great defeat” of Colombian journalism against social media. Juan notes that traditional media in Colombia were unprepared for the power of viral mis- and disinformation that circulated primarily through Facebook and Twitter. A third, perhaps more unexpected vehicle for spreading information related to the vote was the WhatsApp application, a ubiquitous instant-messaging app supporting private group chats whose forward function proved enormously effective for sharing information during the campaign. From most respondents, the surprising vote results revealed that audiences were largely circumventing the established media system to seek out information elsewhere. Or, rather, that the speed at which people were passively receiving unsolicited information, via their social media feeds and personal WhatsApp contacts, ensured that viral mis- and disinformation reached their eyes and ears before they could seek out any news through more traditional channels. Jorge (*Semana*) thinks journalists were caught off guard by the sheer level of viral information circulating through these social channels, and many simply did not know what to do about it. Olga (*El Colombiano*) recalls a running joke in her newsroom about how everyone has “a typical aunt” who buys into the “fake news” that she receives through WhatsApp. “Well, the aunts are not interested in reading *El Colombiano*,” says Olga, “they don’t read it and that’s why they believe in fake news.”

Dora (RCN TV) was doubling her duties during the referendum campaign as the co-founder of a small independent website conducting fact-checking of news related to the peace process. The concept of fact-checking was very new to Colombian journalistic culture at the time, and she admits that her small team was quickly overwhelmed. “Nobody expected this

degree” of mis- and disinformation, she says. It is not only that the volume appeared to be of unprecedented proportions during the campaign. For Juan (*La Silla Vacía*), journalists in most newsrooms, even within his digital-first organization, had not yet understood how news were shared and utilized on social media. With a large middle class, the proportion of Colombians using social media had reached 71% by mid 2015 (Martínez Anaya, 2015). Most media organizations, however, still were unsure of how to operate within such networks. “For us [the media], social media remained a place for content distribution and not a place where things occurred directly,” says Juan. The problem, he says, is that most journalists thought it was enough to have a presence on social media but failed to capture that news were also emerging from the flow of individual connections and conversations. Journalists failed to understand — and some still do, he insists— that social media is not a place “where you park yourself,” but “a place where we need to go” to connect with people.

A major consequence of this general unpreparedness was that journalists were instrumental in amplifying false or distorted information. In the barrage of viral information that everyone, including journalists, received daily, the media did nothing but “replicate, replicate, and replicate,” as Germán (*El Espectador*) says. A clear example he recalls is related to the lie about the peace agreement including a so-called gender ideology that would subvert traditional gender norms. (A detailed explanation of the gender ideology controversy is found in the previous chapter). The fabrication was circulated by the leaders of the No campaign, including the conservative Alejandro Ordóñez, then-head of the Public Ministry. Journalists, says Germán, failed to confront the deception. “I don’t think anyone, or almost anyone, took the trouble of questioning where the supposed gender ideology was in the peace agreement,” he says. “We simply replicated it” through headlines such as “There is a gender ideology: Ordóñez.”

Overall, most participants agree, unprompted, that the peace vote was a wake-up call for journalists and media organizations with respect to the power of social media and instant-messaging systems to spread mis- and disinformation.

1.2.3. Reporting Errors. Margarita, a documentary filmmaker who spent four years in Havana, Cuba, witnessing the peace negotiations, is blunt when asked what, if any, is surprising about the anti-media discourse that followed the referendum. The criticism did not surprise her. Instead, she says, “the surprise is always the lack of reporting, isn’t it?” By this, she means that journalists usually arrive at the same conclusion when reflecting back on their own work; that what they missed was following through with the basic tasks of reporting a story. That is, consulting various sources, digging up obscured information, reconstructing the facts, and, perhaps most importantly, talking to different people in and outside circles of power. Margarita’s sentiment is echoed through several other interviews. Most participants speak of a general culture of superficial reporting that tends to favour prominent sources at the expense of regular people. Dora (RCN TV) laments that young journalists are either incapable of or unwilling to follow a story to its origins, especially when covering the conflict, when personal risk is involved. Instead, she says, they build their stories through interviews with political leaders or subject-matter experts, which impacts how they ultimately tell their stories. The same rings true for Fidel (*El Espectador*), who admits that reporters rely too heavily on spokespersons and voting-intention polls to build their news stories, rarely venturing out to look for the principal actors or how a story might affect people directly. This results in what is known as horse-race reporting—what Yolanda (RCN Radio) calls “*la pelea de gallos*,” the cock fight. Stories about votes become stories about the people fighting to win such votes, leaving the consequences of the results neglected from the news. As several participants note, in the case of the referendum,

the relentless amplification of the cock fight was the product of journalists who defaulted to reporting on who was ahead and who was behind, regularly building their stories on the statements and strategic movements by the two most visible faces of the vote, President Juan Manuel Santos and his predecessor and leader of the No campaign, Álvaro Uribe.

Many participants admit that, at the best of times, there is a lack of rigour and quality in journalistic practice in the country. Journalists in Colombia are used to delivering “precarious” and unsubstantial news, says María (*El Espectador*). “We all play that game of speed, have the quick scoop or post [the story] quickly and forget about it, get on to the next thing,” she says. There is no room for consideration on how reporters might want to approach a story. “That doesn’t exist. It could, but it doesn’t,” says María. For several respondents, the feeling that their profession fell short at a historic juncture where their work was vital is widely shared. In Yolanda (RCN Radio)’s words, despite some exemplar efforts by news organizations and individual reporters, journalists ended up “owing the country a much more profound debate” about what was at stake in the peace referendum. Fidel (*El Espectador*) reflects on the common practice of basing stories simply on what some important political figure says, especially because in the current context certain names drive up online traffic. Reporters, says Fidel, go looking for

Certain characters... and any statement is valid, any statement by Uribe, or before it was [Hugo] Chávez, or Piedad Córdoba... any statement by these polemic [people] would go on a headline, you would use that, and then of course, immediately your online traffic would go through the sky and we were all ok with it, as if we were not contributing to disinformation.

1.3. Journalists Point to one Case as an Example of Media Gone Awry

When considering if journalists fell short in their referendum coverage, the question of whether some news organizations or individual journalists became advocates for the Yes or the

No vote is salient. Generally, participants agree that it was natural for the majority of the media to supported the Yes option, though some worry that a few organizations and individual journalists may have gone too far in their endorsements. In contrast, respondents are clearly more troubled by the possibility that some media organizations advocated against the peace agreement. Eight out of the 14 interviewees spontaneously brought up the question of RCN TV as an example of reporting that was intentionally negative against the peace deal with the FARC. The comments range from an attitude of resignation before RCN TV’s “obvious” attempts to steer people toward a No vote, to accusations of corruption against the network.

1.3.1. RCN TV	Some dispute accusations of media bias, but most agree that one news outlet appeared to cross a line	Defending the peace deal was granted for many journalists, but actively opposing it created a different problem
		Ownership, editorial control lead to clear efforts against the peace agreement at the TV station
		A senior political reporter at RCN TV defends the network's "critical" reporting on the referendum

Table 16. Results Chapter 2, 1.3.1.

RCN TV. For some respondents, including Dora, who personally supported the peace deal and works at the TV station, it was “clear” that RCN TV was toeing the line “of the right-wing” against the agreement. Margarita (filmmaker) says RCN TV’s attitude throughout the peace negotiations and until the peace vote was not a surprise. The network has aligned itself with the political force of former president Uribe, known as *Uribismo*, since the former president first came to power in 2002. In some way, says Margarita, the peace vote was the culmination of

this relationship, with the newsroom throwing its full force behind Uribe's opposition to the peace deal. Four journalists from different news organizations note that RCN TV's advocacy against the deal was evident in how the news were presented over the course of the campaign. Dora notes that, instructed by their editors, many of her colleagues intentionally filled the newscast with images highlighting the trail of violence and devastation that the FARC had left across the country over the course of the decades-long conflict. Though she admits that the footage depicted the reality, she saw this intentional focus on past violent acts as a way to remind voters of the government's intentions to sign a peace deal with a group who had inflicted so much pain and suffering on the population. Even Olga (*El Colombiano*), who works in a traditionally conservative newspaper with a history of supporting Uribe and his policies, remarked on RCN TV's "slanted" coverage. Showing all the horrors that the FARC had committed, as terrible as they were, she says, was not about telling anything new to the public. It was about manipulating the narrative, ensuring that the visceral hatred against the FARC that so many Colombians still feel towards them was kept alive, and to make people think of the referendum as a vote about the FARC instead of the agreement that the government had signed with them, precisely to ensure that such violence would never occur again. Jorge (*Semana*) brings up the same point about RCN TV intentionally flooding the airwaves with past footage of the FARC's violent acts. He adds that the network willfully lent itself to help the leaders of the No campaign to "spread disinformation," by airing questionable statements by their spokespeople without offering context or pushback. Jorge and others note that the network's news director, Claudia Gurisatti, was openly against the peace deal. Ignacio (*Noticias Uno*), who works at direct competitor of RCN TV, agrees that the network's ideological slant was

communicated through subtleties, not just in terms of content but of positioning within the structure of each newscast. He says that,

If you look at how they positioned their stories about the peace deal—what came before, what came after—they wanted to create the impression that in fact the country was about to surrender to the group of [former Venezuelan president] Chávez, or that it was going to be given away to some terrorists, as Uribe was concretely proposing.

Some respondents appeared resigned to live with RCN TV's apparent alignment with the *Uribismo*. Asked about her thoughts on a media critic's sarcastic celebration of RCN TV's "triumph" for the referendum results (Rincón, 2016), Dora admits, with a tone of resignation, that at least her employer "showed who they are and how they operate." Milena, an experienced conflict reporter for the weekly *Semana*, says half-jokingly that, at RCN TV, "at least they had the honesty of never hiding and it is true. That was an editorial line. We are *uribistas* and we like it." Germán (*El Espectador*), however, argues that this alignment went well beyond the limits of an editorial stance and into the realm of militant activism. For him, it is clear that Gurisatti's personal advocacy against the peace deal, which arguably she was entitled to as a private citizen, had a tangible effect on the network's coverage of the peace vote.

Whether such a transparent alignment was purely ideological is up for discussion. As Milena (*Semana*) notes, Colombia's two dominant television networks, RCN TV and Caracol TV, are owned by prominent impresarios with commercial holdings spanning several industries, from telecommunications to food staples such as rice and beer, to essential construction materials, including cement. "Control and stability are key" for these industrialists, notes Milena. They have bolstered and benefited from the political force of the *Uribismo*, which sought to gain back control of productive land from the FARC through ruthless military force—sometimes in partnership with illegal militias—since the turn of the century. Milena argues that decoupling from that mutually beneficial relationship was not an option. It is possible, says Milena, that

RCN TV's "clearly slanted coverage against the peace deal" was the product of manipulation coming from the highest echelons of the network's ownership structure. Dora, who looks at the situation from the inside as a journalist with RCN TV, admits to having her own suspicions on the matter.

Only one participant was ready to defend RCN TV's performance during the referendum campaign. Maritza, a young but well-seasoned political reporter with the network, categorically refuses the criticism against the station as being slanted against the Yes vote. RCN TV adopted a "critical" position with respect to the peace deal, says Maritza, but "it never engaged in political activism in favour of the No. That is absolutely false," she says. For Maritza, the network was one of the only outlets that responded to and connected with the many Colombians who had misgivings about the agreement, and who wanted to see news coverage that was not *a priori* rooting for a Yes vote. In her view,

We were critical in the sense that we conducted a rigorous investigation, contextualized, with evidence. Why critical? Because we do believe, just like many Colombians, which was reflected in the referendum results, that a better agreement could have been achieved.

The generalized perception that RCN TV was actively seeking to influence the electorate to vote No, says Maritza, was the result of "a campaign to stigmatize" the news outlet as being friendly to Uribe that was sanctioned "and even promoted from the [country's] institutions; from the office of the President," she says. Maritza contends that the government's depiction of some media outlets as "enemies of peace" might have silenced certain organizations and individual journalists to report more critically on the peace deal. She defends her newsroom's decision to focus on the FARC's history of violence on the days preceding the vote. "We focused a lot on the victims," she reflects, admitting (unprompted) that maybe that focus was too narrow. Ricardo (*El Colombiano*) holds a similar view as Maritza on the question of RCN TV's emphasis on the

FARC's victims. "[It] sided with a portion of the victim population who did not want to forgive and forget. It was an intentional choice for them," he says. For him, the network was consistent with its critical stance with respect to the deal, and there was room for a news outlet to play that role. "It's valid," he says. "We cannot forget that many people were victims [of the FARC's] and that not all victims wanted to take the step [towards adopting a peace deal]." He says that "Every victim has a right to live their story as it is."

Analysis

When journalists reflexively admit to mistakes and failures, they are seeking to restore the legitimacy of journalism in the eyes of the public by engaging in paradigm repair (Klocke & McDevitt 2013; Hindman, 2006). The journalists' responses to media criticism in this first section of the chapter reveal a group willing to speak reflexively and admit to mistakes. This first section reveals the first dimension of the journalists' responses to criticism: that existing habits and common errors persist in journalistic and organizational practices.

Participants address three specific shortcomings. First, that the local media system is indeed failing to connect with audiences. Most agree that the system remains stubbornly entrenched in social, demographic, and geographic elites, a status that is indeed confirmed by extensive scholarship on the topic (e.g., Caballero, 2018). Second, just like Gaye Tuchman (1978) found about American newsrooms in the 1970s, journalists admit that the question of habits and routines, *the usual ways of doing*, played a role in shaping their coverage of the peace referendum. A major problem, as seen above, was that many defaulted to covering the special vote as they would have any another election. By cultural habit, as Ryfe (2006) would say, they adopted a "master narrative" (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). In this case, the narrative told them that the vote was an election and therefore it should be covered as a horse race—the "cock fight" that

Yolanda (RCN Radio) identified. The third, and perhaps clearest, admission of failure is that several participants spontaneously offer that RCN TV's coverage of the vote might have crossed a journalistic boundary, as some critics suggested in the corpus analyzed on Chapter 1. Scholars have established that negative coverage of the agreement with the FARC was indeed more salient in RCN TV compared to Caracol TV and two other regional competitors (Cárdenas Ruiz et al., 2017). The spontaneous recognition that a major actor in the local journalistic culture might have transgressed an ethical boundary suggests a work of paradigm repair in that the participants show willingness to engage with critics by not hiding, but rather confirming, some of the media's most egregious shortcomings.

The findings in this first section show further parallels with discourses of media failure that emerged after the Brexit and Trump votes (e.g., Greenwald, 2016; Zelizer, 2018b). A feeling that journalists are sitting "outside of reality," like Fidel (*El Espectador*) noted, is a common thread in the interviews, as is the concern that many journalists misunderstood, because of their distance from it, a portion of the electorate. These insights reveal a strong connection with the cases of Brexit and the Trump victory in 2016, in that similar concerns were expressed about why the media had "failed."

Barbie Zelizer (2018b) has noted that journalism in those two contexts displayed tendencies that were elitist, insular and filled with "false confidence" (Zelizer, 2018b, p. 142). What participants say here about their potential misreading of No voters in the Colombian context resonates with Zelizer's characterization of how journalists covered Brexit and Trump:

...Coverage of Brexit and Trump unfolded by shrinking the imagined public to its smallest possible size. Whether it was the post-industrial towns of Northern England and the poorer parts of Wales or the Rust Belt and so-called flyover zones of the United States, journalism in both countries failed to reflect the public – with its multiple variations, complexities and contradictions. The combination of these failings – not serving and not reflecting – is enormous. (Zelizer, 2018b, p. 150).

Finally, the parallels with the Brexit and Trump cases extend beyond anxieties over “not serving and not reflecting.” They are also related to how journalists and audiences interacted with social media, a major element in media criticism after Brexit and Trump (e.g., Hall et al., 2018; Hänska & Bauchowitz, 2017), and to how journalists reflect on emotional vs. rational approaches to reporting. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2018) notes that, in the context of media coverage of Donald Trump, “understanding the circulation of anger in public discourse around the rise of Trump is, in fact, vital to understanding the phenomenon” (p. 768). She also notes that “the organisation of anger is vital to the construction of political narrative” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018, p. 769). The journalists in this study recognize that part of their failure to properly cover the peace vote was precisely that they misjudged how much emotion—anger and resentment, in particular—was a factor both in the No campaign’s political strategy and in the minds of voters ahead of the ballot.

2) There Was a Media System Failure, but it Was not the Journalists’ Fault

The notion that Colombian media failed in covering the referendum is not fully shared among participants, and admissions of responsibility take on different shades, as seen above. While many do identify failures of journalism, including poor reporting practices, arrogance, or failures of judgement, several also condition those failures by factors external or adjacent to journalism that interfered with the media system and, in a way, set them up for failure. Respondents identify two major such factors: Adverse circumstances such as little access to information during the peace negotiations, directed propaganda campaigns, and even fear of media stigmatization; and actors, especially those within or with links to the No campaign, spreading disinformation through social media and instant messaging systems. Now, in recognizing these challenges, most participants feel compelled to stand by their work and

express feeling proud of their role in covering the referendum. The diagram below illustrates the three themes and subthemes that make up this section of the chapter, which reveals a significant level of pushback against the metajournalistic discourse of media failure.

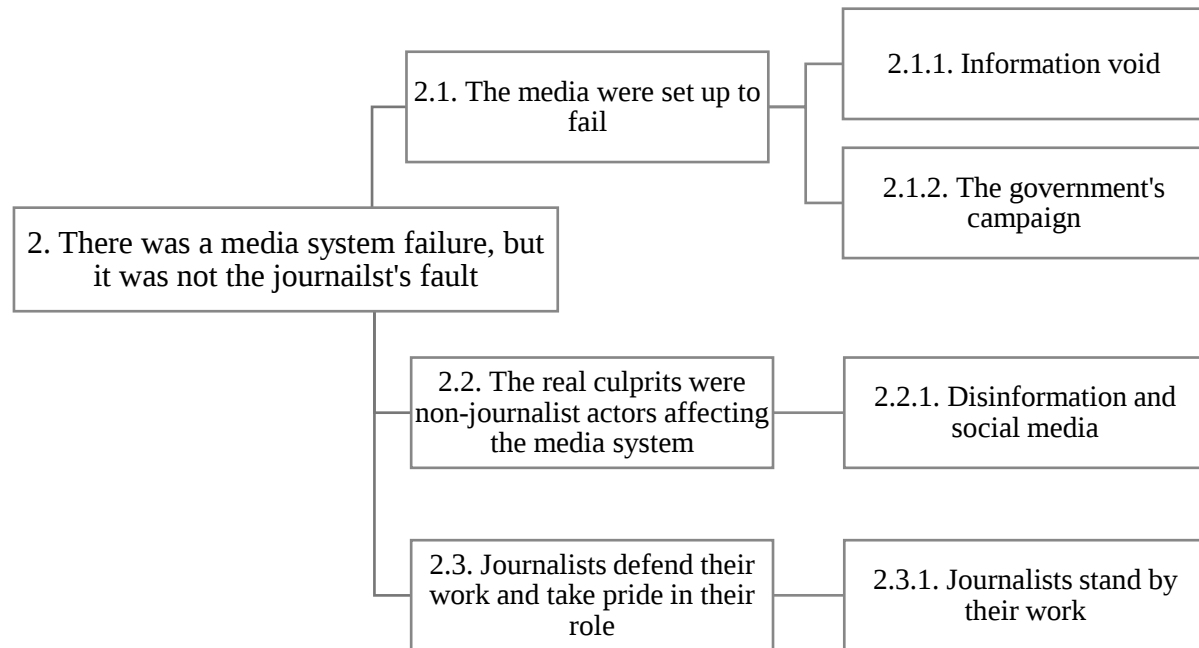


Figure 7. Results Chapter 2, Not the Journalists' Fault

2.1. The Media Were Set up to Fail

Participants cite several ways in which Colombian media was set up for failure during the referendum campaign. Beyond the obvious challenge of time constraints (the full text of the agreement, well over 1,000 pages long, was released only two weeks before the vote), several other factors posed challenges to reporting. One major element was the question of access to information, not only during the campaign period but over the course of the four-year negotiation with the FARC guerrillas. The peace talks took place in Havana, Cuba, where access for journalists was both expensive and highly restricted. Many journalists note that their work

was conducted in an emotionally-charged context, where political leaders were stoking polarization, many times singling out media outlets for their alignment or their opposition to the peace deal. Two subthemes reveal how journalists felt about the information environment before and during the referendum campaign, as illustrated here:

2.1.1. Information void	For four years, the negotiating parties controlled and shared little information about the details of the peace agreement	The void left journalists hamstrung
		The government and the FARC bear responsibility for creating an adverse information environment
		Opponents of the peace deal capitalized on the information gap
2.1.2. The government's campaign	From the way the referendum question was formulated to how the government promoted the Yes vote, journalists are highly critical of the Santos administration's handling of the vote.	The question imposed a binary logic that led to polarization
		The Yes promoters were scattered and unfocused

Table 17. Results Chapter 2, 2.1.1 and 2.1.2.

2.1.1. Information Void. Margarita (filmmaker) had privileged access to the negotiating table in Havana as an authorized documentarist. She sees the lack of access to information as a major hurdle for newsmakers. “The context was one where the negotiations needed confidentiality and at the same time the public was not getting information about them,” she notes. Under these circumstances, “The void was filled by the opposition,” she says. At the same

time, Margarita remarks that while government officials sitting at the negotiating table were careful not to divulge what was being talked about and rarely shared any substantive information with journalists, the FARC were holding daily press conferences that often devolved into ramblings about everything and nothing. For the filmmaker, this was

...a very difficult balance. I always felt that there was a big responsibility, not of the media but of the parties carrying the peace process. They allowed rumours to grow and even fed them. Look, sometimes the FARC would get up and sing “Today, commander Hugo Chávez!” the next day they would talk about women, the next day something else. So, people were wondering, what on earth is it that they are negotiating over there? People would ask in good faith. Those acting in bad faith just took advantage of that.

This information void, and its resulting capitalization by forces opposed to the deal, was felt across newsrooms in Colombia. Olga (*El Colombiano*) says that, by and large, the criticism against the media should be re-directed towards the negotiating parties. Government officials provided little information in the sterile forms of press releases and short statements. The lack of access pushed the media “to reach out to the people who were willing to come to the microphones,” she says, even if those were the people who sought to fight their political battles in public. While the government was mum, the FARC and the voices of those who radically opposed not just the final agreement but the entire peace process took prominence in the news.

Once the peace process ended and the agreement was finalized, many respondents note that the government lacked a proper strategy to promote a Yes vote, perhaps counting on the apparently logical rationale that nobody would cast a ballot against peace. Yolanda (RCN Radio) recalls asking a government official, “Where was the marketing for peace?” One might not think that it is necessary to sell people the idea that peace is better than war, she says, “but politics is about perception, and perceptions are built on those messages.” In contrast, as Yolanda points out, the No campaign waged a coherent and powerful propaganda war against the agreement. Unlike the government and various promoters of the Yes vote, the No campaign made itself

widely available to the media, feeding them enough information—and plenty of disinformation, as it has been established—to work with. In the end, the information void was ripe for rumour and disinformation to circulate freely.

Several respondents bring up the same point. In the absence of official news, journalists were left to scramble to fill the news hours, which in many cases resulted in amplifying extreme or simply untrue views. Ignacio (Noticias Uno) remarks that clear information about the peace deal was difficult to come by, while neatly packaged lies such as the so-called gender ideology were easy to tell and thus spread easily and widely. Just like many critics considered the impact of this falsehood on the referendum results, as seen on Chapter 1, here journalists often refer to the so-called gender ideology as a confounding element—almost a poison pill—that derailed reporting on the vote. (More results on this topic are addressed below under section 2.2.).

2.1.2. The Government's Campaign. With respect to how the government handled the peace vote, respondents agree with several points raised in the discourse of media failure analyzed on Chapter 1. They stress the fact that the vote was unnecessary, that the question itself stoked polarization, and that the Yes campaign lacked a clear focus and suffered from having too many spokespeople. The vote presented the media with a difficult challenge. As Ignacio (Noticias Uno) says, “asking people to vote for peace was a bit absurd.” He thinks the government was wrong to submit the peace agreement to a vote, echoing a common criticism found in the articles from the previous chapter. Putting peace down to a question might have backfired. “Peace is something you either reach or you don’t, says Ignacio. “It’s like gold. You don’t vote to find gold in a mine. You extract it if you find it. And if you find it, you apply it.” The wording of the question was also a catalyst for polarization in the eyes of several respondents, and put the media in a difficult position. The question read: “Do you support the

‘Final Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Durable Peace’?” – “¿Apoya usted el ‘Acuerdo final para la terminación del conflicto y la construcción de una paz estable y duradera’?”¹¹ (Pregunta Plebiscito, 2016). The binary logic imposed by the government (Do you support peace, yes or no?) created a climate of “sectarism” says Dora (RCN TV), where everyone, including journalists and news organizations, had no choice but to take sides. Nelson (*El Colombiano*) notes that the two sides were not about who wanted peace and who did not. It came down to *santistas*, whose position was pro-peace-deal, and *uribistas*, who opposed an agreement with the FARC. The Santos government played a role in stoking an already significant level of polarization in the country. “Even though we had been saying that our society is polarized,” says Nelson, “never before had we see the effects of that polarization as with the referendum.” Ignacio (Noticias Uno) is especially critical of the Santos administration for championing itself as the face of peace. The peace agreement, says Ignacio, was constructed over decades by social organizations, victims, and different members of the civil society. By presenting the deal as “Santos’s peace,” he says, for which indeed he won the Nobel Prize, “there was nothing left of that peace as a collective construction, but as a personal thing between Santos and Uribe.” It is in that sense that Ignacio deems the government’s campaign for the vote as “a losing campaign.”

2.2. The Real Culprits Were Non-Journalist Actors Affecting the Media System

While there is a shared sense among participants that journalists did fall short in covering the vote, there is also a sense that no matter how much better the coverage could have been, the real reasons to consider that the media system failed were beyond the control of journalists. Two

¹¹ The text within the inner quotation marks is the title of the peace agreement (Pregunta Plebiscito, 2016).

inter-related elements are salient in the interviews in this respect: disinformation and social media. These two issues are much more prominent in the interviews with journalists than in the published criticism of the media analyzed in the previous chapter. The two subthemes here reveal a journalistic culture still coming to terms with the intersection of targeted disinformation and the power of social media to disrupt traditional journalism. This theme merges two issues into one, as seen on the table below.

2.2.1 Disinformation and social media	Some journalists cite a concerted campaign to inundate the media environment with disinformation to deceive voters into voting No	A poisoned well
		Instrumentalized media
		An organized attack against the media ecology, led by a former president

Table 18. Results Chapter 2, 2.2.1.

2.2.1. Disinformation and Social Media. Only few media critics, as seen in the previous chapter, mention social media as a factor for the media’s failures during the referendum. Here in the interviews the opposite is revealed. There is a shared sense amongst journalists that social media played a key role in how people obtained and shared news about the peace vote. Several participants link the issues of disinformation and social media, and how these intersected with the work of journalists, as key elements in how audiences engaged with news about the referendum. Noting that most news organizations endorsed the Yes vote, Jorge (*Semana*) thinks that “traditional media gave their all for peace but lost the war to disinformation.” Many are convinced that a targeted campaign of deception was responsible for the vote’s results against

the peace agreement. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Luis Carlos Vélez, manager of the No campaign, revealed soon after the vote details of his plan to deceive the public and cause outrage so that people would cast a vote against the peace deal (Ramírez Prado, 2016). Olga (*El Colombiano*) thinks “the No won because it used deception.” In her view, “the No campaign was a dirty campaign that deceived the electorate. For me, the responsibility [of the results] lies with those who spread fake news.” For his part, Germán (*Semana*) takes the view that “there were lies on both sides,” but agrees that the level of deception stemming from the No campaign “was brutal.”

Of note here is that two of the most seasoned participants, Ignacio (Noticias Uno) and Milena (*Semana*), both investigative journalists, argue that the No campaign’s deception strategy was much more intentional than most people would think—even bordering on the criminal. Ignacio says the disinformation campaign went beyond a simple communication strategy to cause outrage amongst the electorate.

I think there was an attack. And the media are not organized for wars...here you had content farms, people sending messages on WhatsApp, sending messages on Facebook, that could not be controlled. I mean, you cannot control that anywhere and it has nothing to do with the news media. On the contrary, this has to do with the substitution of the news media, which was their purpose.... people voted wrongly not because of the media but because they didn’t go to the media... We, the media, are not responsible for a fraud that some criminal organizations committed.

Drawing a direct link between what happened in Colombia and Brexit and Trump, two other votes that were also disrupted by disinformation and social media in 2016, Ignacio says, “I think Cambridge Analytica explains very well how it is about targeting people who are [most likely] to share messages faster and with less verification.” Milena (*Semana*) raises similar points, alluding to the existence of a concerted effort to undermine the country’s media during

the referendum. She rejects the charge that journalists are to blame for the vote's results and points to former president Uribe as the mastermind behind the No's deception campaign:

I would not say that it was the media's [fault]. No. It was a political opposition from a party that would go on to win the presidency two years after. And headed by the most popular politician in a generation (...) He has a proper name and everybody knows who he is. He [worked to] divide, divide and divide everyone. His work was perfect. He was impeccable. The guy is absolutely consistent and knows what he wants. That's why he does well.

Several participants explain how disinformation permeated the news cycle. Dora (RCN TV) sees 2016 as the moment when disinformation truly "entered the scene" in Colombia. "It was terrible, what was done," she says. "For example, with the gender ideology which comes in great part from the [political] right and the churches." Dora admits that, in her news room, which was known to be friendly to the opposition, journalists didn't push back against the gender-ideology lie. "There was no pushback. On the contrary, we [the newsroom] did stories about gender ideology. I didn't do them. I didn't participate in any of that." Jorge (*Semana*) also points at RCN TV, specifically its news director Claudia Gurisatti, for "helping [spread] disinformation." He says reflections on media failure must include questions about "what happened with those journalists, big influencers like Gurisatti, etc., who, because of their ideological position, lent themselves... to a work of disinformation."

Disinformation flew freely across other newsrooms too, not only in the opposition-friendly RCN TV. Jorge (*Semana*) reflects on how journalists lost perspective amidst a deluge of lies.

There was a news war and false information that arrived from one side and the other, and the only thing we [journalists] did was replicate, replicate, and replicate... I don't dare to say that nobody did, but there was no judicious exercise of questioning, for example, where was the gender ideology in the peace agreement. Questioning [Minister] Ordóñez to say, exactly where in the agreement is what you are saying that there is a gender ideology that seeks to impose an LGBTQ ideology in schools?... Nobody questioned that in that moment. We simply replicated.

Overall, most participants share the notion that the information ecology during the referendum campaign as a well poisoned with disinformation. As noted, amongst the most veteran journalists there is also the suspicion that there was a concerted—even criminal—attempt to inject the news cycle with lies to steer the electorate against the peace deal. In this strategy, social media and instant messaging services were the key vehicles for that intentional campaign of deception to succeed.

2.3. Journalists Defend Their Work and Take Pride in Their Role

In acknowledging the existence of major societal forces that played an apparently decisive role in how the peace vote turned out, all journalists also speak proudly of their own work. When prompted to evaluate their own performance covering the ballot, regardless of their rank or level of experience, all participants feel good about the work they personally produced. Most of them defend their news organizations’ overall editorial approach to the peace vote as well. The figure below summarizes the main points in this theme:

2.3.1. Journalists stand by their work	Journalists produced high quality work during the campaign that the barrage of criticism has obscured	High-standard journalism was available, but was either hard to access or ignored
		Journalists defend their personal work
		Most, but not all, defend their newsroom's coverage of the vote

Table 19. Results Chapter 2, 2.3.1.

2.3.1. Journalists stand by their work. As noted, most participants at least partially accept the criticism levied at the media in the aftermath of the vote. Yet, many argue that there

was a high volume of good quality reporting that has been forgotten amidst the deluge of criticism. Dora (RCN TV) worked in a separate news organization with reporters in regions outside of Bogotá and praises the caliber of their work. This was journalism that did not make the pages of the better-known national dailies or the top TV networks on which critics tend to focus their observations. In that same vein, many feel that the general public sometimes lacked access to quality work, or perhaps actively ignored coverage that was rigorous and of high quality. Milena (*Semana*) feels especially proud of her production during the campaign, which provided a visual account of events through photography and video. Yet she is acutely aware that her weekly circulates mainly in Bogotá and a handful of other cities and is mainly targeted to the elites, making her work invisible to large portions of the population. Olga (*El Colombiano*) says the work she and her colleagues produced for the Human Rights section of her newspaper was rarely amongst the “most read” on their website. This makes her skeptical of sweeping anti-media criticism, because she knows how some of the best journalistic work can be buried by high volumes of more immediate, sometimes lower-quality work, not to mention loose information circulating through social media and instant messaging systems. Nelson, a colleague of Olga’s, says he anticipated an anti-media backlash following the vote, not so much related to the content that the journalists produced but to how that information was disseminated. While Nelson is proud of the work he and his colleagues produced, he admits that their main shortcoming was failing to deliver that information to more people. “Our transmission of our message wasn’t as efficient as the fake news on social media,” he says.

Several participants recall working longer hours to put out innovative and high-quality pieces in the days leading to the unprecedented vote. Jorge (*Semana*) coordinated a team of journalists who produced a special issue of the magazine highlighting the main events of

Colombia's five-decade long conflict and anticipating what a future era of "post-conflict" would bring, starting with what they thought would be the pivoting moment of the referendum's success. He was personally crushed by the vote's results, not just because he wanted the Yes to win but because his work was immediately rendered irrelevant. "It was frustrating," he says. "But I did a good job and I would do it again."

Much of the criticism that was raised against Colombian media following the vote was directed at "the media" in general, and sometimes to news organizations with apparent ideological biases, like the case of RCN TV discussed above. As is usually the case with sweeping criticism, the stories of how individuals performed their roles are obscured. Some participants would urge people to look closer to recognize the work that many journalists produced over the campaign period, some of them defying pre-conceived notions with respect to particular news organizations. Maritza (RCN TV), for example, defends her work and that of her newsroom. "I am convinced that we did a very good job here, a very rigorous job," she says, adding that,

If people looked beyond the veil that has been imposed upon [RCN TV], that stigma of the last name that has been imposed on us... they would say this is truthful, concrete information; it has one part and a counterpart, they are showing us something more about this story that I don't know about.

Within the same newsroom, Dora remains critical of her organization's editorial direction during the entire peace process and the peace vote in particular, but she defends her own work. She approached the vote with a conviction that people should consider supporting the peace agreement and worked on in-depth pieces of explanatory nature. She is also proud of the work she did at her other organization, a website focused on fact-checking news related to the referendum and publishing stories from smaller towns. At *El Colombiano*, which is based in Medellín, Colombia's second largest city, reporters also defend their work within an

organization with a history of supporting conservative governments and values. Despite the newspaper's history, Ricardo is proud to belong to a team of journalists who were dedicated to covering the peace process and the referendum from a "rigorous, non-partisan" approach focused on human rights. As he recalls proudly, his team's work was nationally recognized as having some of the best coverage during that time.

Throughout the interviews, there are plenty of mentions of journalism qualified as sound, rigorous, and of the highest quality. Though many are willing to accept some faults, the notion that the media failed is certainly rendered more complex through these conversations.

Analysis

This section reveals the second dimension of journalists' responses to criticism: that things are changing under pressure from external factors. Here journalists push back against critics by explaining contextual factors that affected their work, such as the information vacuum resulting from a secretive peace process and clumsy government communication; by identifying the "real" culprits responsible for disrupting the media system, mainly social media and disinformation; and by defending their own work and the work of their employers. Existing studies have shown that journalists generally stand ready to defend their profession when questioned or attacked, be it at the individual, organizational, or institutional level, engaging in boundary work and paradigm repair (Waisbord, 2013; Carlson and Lewis, 2015). In fact, recent scholarship has noted that journalists *should* defend their work more assertively in the face of mounting and more aggressive forms of criticism (Carlson, 2018; Cheruiyot, 2022; Pingree et al., 2018). Yet defending *good journalism* may prove insufficient in the face of increasingly antagonistic contexts. Acknowledging that self-interested parties may be successfully disrupting journalism is essential (Carlson, 2018). In the American context, Carlson (2018) notes that

“journalists need to recognize and acknowledge that the adversarial context they operate in has resulted from the sustained partisan attack” (Carlson, 2018, p. 1884). The parallels with the Colombian context are apparent. Indeed, on the matter of identifying the “real” culprits of media failure, the themes in this section again suggest strong links between the Colombian peace vote, Brexit, and the Trump election. Following Trump’s victory, Wang et al. (2017) found that American journalists who reflected on their potential failures covering the Republican nominee also blamed social media and disinformation. “Critics blame social media which made it difficult for ordinary users to distinguish ‘fake’ news from ‘real’ news, and which encouraged a lucrative market for fake news makers” (Wang et al., 2017, p. 1251). As noted above, Ignacio (Noticias Uno) argues that a criminal operation was in place to disrupt the media ecosystem during the peace vote, echoing investigations conducted after Brexit and the Trump vote that revealed the Cambridge Analytical scandal involving the illegal use of Facebook user profiles to target messages to American voters (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018). Scholars have also studied how journalists can fall prey to the tactics of politicians who successfully weaponize a hybrid media system, a key point raised by participants in this study. Wells et al. (2016) note that Trump successfully exploited the hybrid of conventional and digital media to inundate the news cycle with a mix of official and controversial statements, offering endless news hooks for journalists hungry for stories.

Most studies looking into how journalists and news organizations respond to criticism have focused on public responses, and noted that most tend to focus on acknowledging errors and defending their work (e.g., Pingree et al., 2018; von Krogh & Svensson, 2017). The interviews conducted here reveal that, given the opportunity, journalists are also able to

articulate which external factors may be disrupting their information environment, which provides an opening to further reflect on potential ways to address such challenges.

3) Journalists are Ambivalent and Open to Discuss Changes in Practice and Norms

This last section shows the third dimension of how journalists respond to media criticism. It reveals a sense that certain elements of the local journalistic culture may be shifting—or, at the very least, that they are up for debate. This is expressed in how journalists speak with ambivalence about how they and their colleagues assumed their own professional roles while covering the referendum. There is an openness to debate whether certain practices and norms of journalism are worth revisiting given the widespread criticism that the media sustained following the peace vote. As shown in the figure below, participants engage in reflections about three key points related to how journalists approached the vote from a professional standpoint. The first is a debate on the merits of objectivity which emerged, unprompted, from reflections on whether news organizations ought to have endorsed the peace deal, whether journalists should have stayed neutral in their reports, and whether traditional approaches to covering democratic ballots were inadequate in the circumstances of the peace vote. The second is a reflection on how the absence of a now-defunct organization called “Medios para la paz,” which used to provide common ground for how journalists approached reporting about peace, has affected contemporary understandings of what it means to be objective when covering news about war and peace. The third comprises personal thoughts on how covering the peace vote meant

negotiating professional roles with personal convictions and emotions about the country's future.

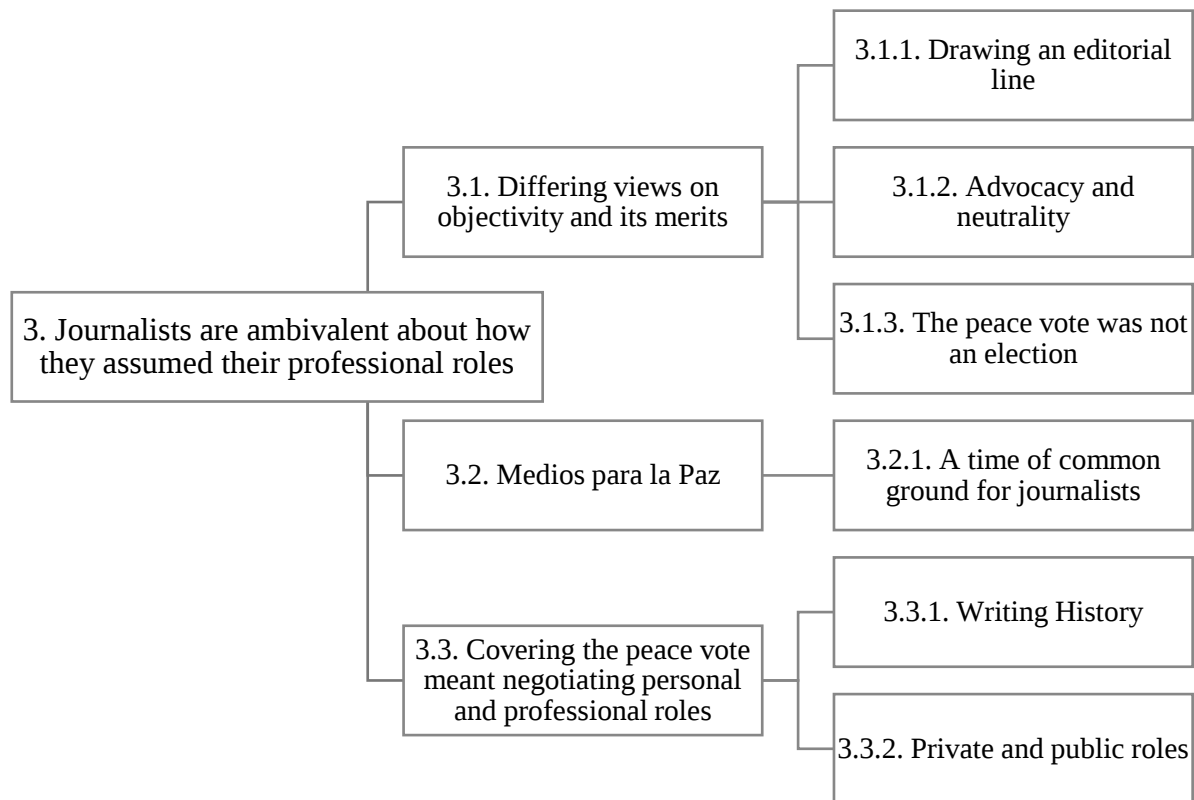


Figure 8. Results Chapter 2, Journalists are Ambivalent

3.1. Differing Views on Objectivity and its Merits

Several journalists engage in reflections about the norm of objectivity in journalism, including thoughts on the merits of neutrality, the demands to take distance from the object of reporting, and the place of activism in journalism. These reflections emerged unprompted. They flowed from conversations about how each participant responded when confronted with excerpts from the criticism studied in Chapter 1, and when asked about how they reflected back on their own performance covering the peace vote (see Appendix D, *Interview protocol*). The conversations around objectivity are divided here into three sub-themes, as shown below. They comprise reflections on whether news organizations should have drawn such clear editorial lines

in favour and against the peace deal; a debate on the role of advocacy in journalism; and reflections on whether there was a confusion with how journalists applied the norm of objectivity during the referendum because they were treating the special vote as an electoral race.

3.1.1 Drawing an editorial line	Journalists debate whether editorial endorsements of the peace deal went against the journalistic norm of objectivity	Stating a commitment to the peace deal was an ethical imperative
		Editorials should have remained neutral and let people decide how to vote
3.1.2. Advocacy and neutrality	A related debate on whether individual journalists should behave as advocates	Reporters were blinded by hope
		There is "no room" for advocacy in journalism
		There was room for advocacy given the circumstances
3.1.3. The peace vote was not an election	The confusion with objectivity stems from treating the peace vote as a regular election	Horse-race reporting requires neutrality, but here peace was on the ballot, not candidates

Table 20. Results Chapter 2, 3.1.1., 3.1.2., and 3.1.3.

3.1.1. Drawing Editorial Lines. As seen in the previous chapter, a significant criticism against the media following the referendum centred around the fact that many news outlets, particularly the vast majority of newspapers, endorsed the Yes vote. Confronted with this criticism, the respondents engaged in a reflection over whether it was wise for news outlets to endorse the peace agreement so openly. These reflections are ultimately tied to how journalists interpret the norm of objectivity and how they think news outlets should apply it. Jorge

(*Semana*) is convinced that his weekly made the right call by endorsing the Yes vote. “To set an editorial direction in front of the reader is a super valuable ethical commitment,” he says. For Jorge, not having a clear editorial line amounts to “deceiving” the audience. In his view, this doesn’t mean that the work the magazine puts out should attempt to convince their readers to follow its line. Instead, it is a question of letting people know that there is an institutional preference, in this case supporting the peace deal, while allowing differing views and debate within its pages. His opinion stems from an understanding that “the tale about objectivity, of not putting yourself on the line, of not taking a political stance because of objectivity, is to me the most detestable [aspect] of a supposedly objective journalism.” Yolanda (RCN Radio), who heads the radio station’s news division and has her own opinion section, holds a similar view to Jorge’s. She argues that “objectivity doesn’t exist” and defends having editorial lines. Yet, she notes that

The editorial line has a point, and it is the point when you have an editorial line but you recognize that there are other ways of seeing the world and you register them and you put them at the service of your listeners or viewers.

Fidel (*El Espectador*), as an Editor-in-Chief, is largely responsible for setting editorial lines at his newspaper. He explains that it was natural for the daily to endorse the Yes vote, because his newspaper has always advocated for achieving peace through dialogue. *El Espectador* went beyond publishing editorials in favor of the peace agreement. It dedicated significant resources and space to the peace process, including launching a parallel publication called “Colombia 20:20” that focused exclusively on covering the negotiations in depth, with a special focus on rural communities. Fidel did not consider this to be “non-objective” journalism. If anything, he feels that the paper showed its true commitment to the peace process mostly through its parallel publication, and regrets that its regular reporting failed to raise to the

momentous occasion. Fidel admits that news content found on the regular sections of the newspaper—away from the editorial pages and the special publication—was similar to coverage in other news outlets in the sense that it favoured immediacy and featured mostly political leaders. He regrets that news were about “what was happening in Havana and [about] the leaders, the State representatives and the FARC’s representatives,” adding that the negotiation “was ultimately a dialogue between elites and that is how the coverage was being done.”

Not all journalists agree that a news outlet ought to express an editorial line. Olga (*El Colombiano*) is pleased that her newspaper opted to remain neutral on the referendum question. While the front pages of other publications urged voters to mark Yes on their ballots on voting day, *El Colombiano* asked people simply to exercise their right to vote. As Olga says, “the idea was to get people to go vote. Get informed and decide for yourself, but go vote,” she says¹². Other participants occupied more complex spaces, where they disagreed with their employers’ editorial lines. Dora (RCN TV) holds the view that media organizations should be neutral but “within that,” she says, “they must be on the side of the victims.” She says that not all media organizations operate with this clear guideline in mind, not least her employer. In her case, Dora was a journalist who deeply believed in the peace agreement while working for a newsroom that, she argues, was actively opposing it. She says she tried to remain neutral in her news coverage, which focused mostly on providing context and explanations on the legal viability of some of the points in the peace agreement. In her personal life, however, she expressed her full support for the deal through her social media networks.

¹² It is worth noting here that *El Colombiano* is a traditionally conservative newspaper with a history of endorsing conservative candidates (Martínez, 2010). The paper has deep roots in the Antioquia region, home of former president Uribe, who remains highly popular there. It was, to many observers, remarkable that the newspaper did not endorse a No vote. A decision to remain “neutral” was already a bold move considering the paper’s history.

3.1.2. Advocacy and Neutrality. Several journalists engage in a reflection over whether individual reporters should have adopted a stance of activism favouring or opposing the peace deal. Again, there is a range of opinions on this matter. María (*El Espectador*) says the vote results prompted her to reflect on the role of activism in journalism, since she and many of her colleagues had actively expressed their support for the Yes during the campaign. “It has been a beautiful reflection,” she says, adding that she now thinks that “there should be no activism at all in journalism.” Still, she recognizes that different journalistic cultures around the world have different approaches to activism. “An editor at *The Washington Post* said ‘journalists cannot be activists.’ Period. Activism in journalism doesn’t work. But some strands of journalism do accept it. In Spain, for example, it is like that.” María and others like Yolanda (RCN Radio) think that many Colombian journalists were “blinded by hope” and some toed a thin line between professionalism and activism by openly advocating for the peace deal. Nelson (*El Colombiano*), also among the younger participants, shares María’s view that journalists should refrain from activism. In his case, he says remaining neutral was a matter of making an effort to avoid falling into repeating the messages that his newsroom was “constantly bombarded with” from both campaigns. Nelson tried to “inform [his readers] about concrete facts, concrete decisions and documents so as not to sell smoke to my readers,” he says. “Smoke from the side of ‘peace is coming’ or from the side of ‘we are giving away the country to the FARC.’” It is notable that the younger reporters in the group of participants tend to display a common reticence, at least in theory, to engage in activism. A third young journalist joins María and Nelson in their view that reporters should not be activists. Olga (*El Colombiano*) believes that audiences are not looking to be told what to do or what to vote for. “*El Espectador* [endorsed] the Yes, right?” she says. “And that is not what people are looking for. It is not what a journalist

should give to people. You have to give them the two [sides] and let them make an informed decision.” Olga’s colleague Ricardo (*El Colombiano*) explains that their team of reporters had a very clear intention to remain neutral covering the referendum.

This is what we always do. We establish what is the problem, I mean, what is going on, and from there we don’t put our opinion but rather we consult three or four sources who are qualified to give their opinion. And maybe those people can lean more to one side or the other, but we always balance it out. ‘Look, this person is more in favour of the peace vote, then let’s put another person who can argue against it.’

Yolanda (RCN Radio) defends the right of news organizations to express an editorial line but she takes issue with activism, or what she calls “militance.” Militant journalism “is different, because it marries one single lookout, it goes beyond an editorial line. I am married to this [point of view] and this is what I put out” to audiences, she says. Without naming names, Yolanda thinks that some news organizations crossed the line towards militance during the referendum. For other participants, it was important to play the role of advocates for peace in the historic context of the referendum. Germán (*Semana*) had some personal misgivings about the peace agreement, yet he says the most important thing for him was “that we get to make peace with the FARC,” and in that case he argues that his own activism in favour of a Yes vote, within and outside his job as a journalist, was granted.

3.1.3. The Peace Vote Was not an Election. Ignacio (*Noticias Uno*) brings up a point that complicates the views expressed above. To speak of neutrality, or even to bring up the need for “balanced” reporting with respect to the peace vote, was irrelevant, because the referendum was not an election, he says. In other words, the discussion of balance is only relevant when you think about the referendum as being the same as an election campaign—when you must follow who is up who is down in the polls, who represents which side and weather, as a reporter, you are being fair to both “sides.” Ignacio underlines that the peace vote was not an electoral

campaign, and is proud that Noticias Uno understood this difference. The goal of his newsroom was to help Colombians reflect on the potential end of a decades-long armed conflict, he says.

I don't think our work was to cover a campaign. We tried to give short tips of what the agreement was, about its advantages, and focus on that the war was coming to an end. And so, it was about telling, re-telling, and revisiting the war that was going to end. (...) It was not about following a candidate and getting his smile and his wife and all that, but about getting the viewer to really reflect on the matter of the end of the war.

The referendum demanded that journalists assumed that the Colombian population wanted to live in peace, says Ignacio. It was not about staying neutral with respect to the political factions behind the Yes or No camps. For him, his newsroom's approach to covering the referendum came "from an ethical conviction about what must be done in a moment like this." Fidel (*El Espectador*) agrees that many of the reporting mistakes that admittedly his own newsroom fell into while covering the vote were precisely driven by the confusion that the referendum was just another election. He thinks the newspaper's approach should have stayed away from reporting on the tactics and statements of the campaign managers and the government, and over-relying on voting-intention polls. The kind of distance that objectivity demands of journalists was inadequate for the momentous vote, he says. Instead of aspiring to show "two sides," Fidel thinks that journalists should have understood that this was, above all, an emotional and historic moment for the country. If he had the chance to revisit this approach, Fidel would

Send more journalists to the churches, send them to feel a bit what is happening on the street with the people. Not with political leaders... [focus] on people's feelings. I think the referendum, more than a political dispute, was a matter of the soul, that was stirring a lot of strong feelings in people.

3.2. Medios Para la Paz

Throughout the interviews, it is remarkable that only the more senior journalists bring up in their reflections the question of whether news organizations ought to be committed to peace.

Ignacio (Noticias Uno), Dora (RCN TV), Jorge (*Semana*), and Fidel (*El Espectador*) see the role of seeking peace as the natural role of a news organization and a key commitment of conflict reporters. Seeking peace, in the Colombian context, means supporting attempts to end the decades-long war through peaceful means such as negotiations, instead of through military action. Ignacio, Dora, and Jorge, all of them unprompted, each pointed at the existence of an old journalism organization “Medios para la Paz,” as a key factor in their conviction that journalists ought to actively work for peace. The group, which operated between 1998 and 2008, was an association of journalists that trained hundreds of conflict reporters and news organizations to better understand the conflict’s history, international humanitarian law, the mechanisms of the Red Cross, and other important knowledge about how to approach conflict reporting (Maya Llano, 2016). The training also included getting journalists to think critically about their own reporting and to question official sources in the military and sitting governments, who have traditionally controlled conflict-related narratives, by seeking out sources amongst community leaders, victims, and other social actors. Medios para la Paz was widely respected and was a major actor in the local journalistic culture. This section delves into reflections about what the organization meant to those participants who experienced the era of Medios para la Paz and what they think its demise means for current practices and approaches to conflict reporting.

3.2.1. A time for common ground for journalists	The most senior participants reflect on the now defunct Medios Para la Paz, and how its disappearance has affected conflict reporting in the country.	A time of pacifist activism within journalism
		The undoing of peace activism and a road to misunderstanding objectivity

Table 21. Results Chapter 2, 3.2.1.

3.2.1. A Time for Common Ground for Journalists. Among those participants who remember the work of Medios para la Paz, there is a shared sense of loss for a time when Colombian journalists were united in their commitment to peace-building. The group was instrumental in creating specialized reporting units with trained journalists who could cover the long internal conflict critically and in depth. At one point, says Ignacio (Noticias Uno), every major news outlet, from newspapers to TV stations, had specialized “peace units” or “human rights units” with trained reporters, signaling their commitment to helping Colombian society strive for peace. For Ignacio, Dora (RCN TV), and Jorge (Semana), Medios para la Paz had a major impact on how journalists and news organizations approached the armed conflict. One of them was building the consensus around the role of journalism as a social actor that was proactive in peace-building. Ignacio thinks that new generations of journalists who have not benefited from the kind of training offered by Medios para la Paz, coupled with the related loss of most specialized peace and human-rights units in newsrooms, lack the kind of clarity of purpose that previous generations had with respect to covering conflict-related news. He notes that,

We had been through an era in Colombia in which the media self-identified as peace builders. The era of Medios para la Paz; of... a pacifist activism within journalism that was considered legitimate. But we arrived to another... an environment of confrontation for the vote on the referendum, in which defending peace was interpreted as taking sides on the part of a news organization, when before this was a common factor. (Ignacio, Noticias Uno)

This became evident during the peace referendum, when, as noted above, most journalists approached the campaign as just another electoral race, misunderstanding or underestimating the bigger picture of what was at stake. Throughout the peace negotiations that culminated with the 2016 referendum, Ignacio (Noticias Uno) says that he “never saw a preoccupation to save peace” on the part of the Colombian media. “And that militance for peace

by the media had been cut. Now it was a question of ‘Castro-Chavista’ and ‘Uribista,’ nothing else.” Dora (RCN TV) echoes Ignacio’s point. She notes that Medios para la Paz provided a framework and a certain sense of clarity from where to report about war and peace. She takes issue with how journalists generally understand objectivity and neutrality now:

Here being objective or neutral has become ‘let’s put on [camera] one from the Left and one from the Right... I mean, let’s put Uribe and [left-wing senator] Iván Cepeda.’ And done. The task is done. (Dora, RCN TV)

Dora’s job at RCN Television is based out of Bogotá but she also works independently with reporters in rural areas most affected by violence. She thinks the legacy of Medios para la Paz is mostly lost in urban-based newsrooms but remains alive in more rural regions. Dora notes that many journalists in those areas maintain a tradition of commitment to peace, perhaps because their experiences with the conflict have remained so intimate. The reporters working for her independent website (Colombiacheck.com), for example, produced remarkable work as a result of “a long process of education that comes from Medios para la Paz, of people who have been training for years around how to handle the conflict, what to do, what are the real consequences of the conflict.” Dora thinks that reporting from hard-hit areas such as Tumaco, Catatumbo, Bojayá and Cúcuta reflects “a new look” from these communities that had been sorely needed.

For his part, Jorge (*Semana*) recalls covering previous peace negotiations during a time where the media were committed to their role as peace-builders, even before Medios para la Paz was established. He recalls when the government engaged in peace talks with the M-19 guerrillas, which culminated with an agreement in 1990. “There was a kind of national consensus around that ‘we have to negotiate with the M-19,’” he says. “We negotiate and move forward, you know?” Jorge admits that, during the 2012-2016 peace process with the FARC, he

was pleased to see that journalists were more open to being critical and debating the contents of the peace accords, but he worries that the debate was tarnished by political ideologies. Instead of debating the accords with the purpose of achieving the best possible peace, says Jorge, journalists fell in line along marked political allegiances, some of them never engaging with their role as peace-builders at all.

For Ignacio (Noticias Uno), the end of the era of Medios para la Paz is related to the rise of former president Uribe as an unmatched political figure whose focus has been on defeating the guerrillas by military means¹³. His policies and rhetoric caused a shift in how people viewed the conflict, and journalists were not immune to this change. A change in the local political-economy of the media is also a factor, says Ignacio. “The language changed,” he says. When before we could imagine ourselves in a role as journalists, now we see ourselves in a role that is much more corporate about [providing] information about peace.”

3.3. Covering The Peace Vote Meant Negotiating Personal and Professional Roles

In the context of a vote that was so consequential, and so highly emotional in nature, several participants speak about balancing personal and professional roles during the peace vote. This last section shows two themes related to negotiating such roles. On the one hand, participants reflect on their role as history-writers, and feel privileged to have been witness to the historic juncture. On the other hand, some think back on the difficulties of covering a vote whose results had real impacts on the future of their own country.

¹³ During his two terms as president, Uribe promoted the narrative that there is no “armed conflict” in the country. Instead, he took to calling guerrilla groups as “terrorists” to be defeated and confronted by military means alone (“Uribe da 10 razones para no hablar de conflicto armado,” 2011).

3.3.1. Writing history	A sense of great responsibility imbued the work of those who covered the vote	Journalists and the first draft of history
		Having a role in the historic moment meant dealing with a lot of pressure
		Business as usual was not enough
3.3.2. Public and private roles	Negotiating the emotional vote as citizens and journalists was an added burden of reporting on the referendum	The results were devastating for some
		Leaving heart and soul in your reporting
		Private wishes, public performances of professionalism

Table 22. Results Chapter 2, 3.3.1. and 3.3.2.

3.3.1. Writing History. Looking back at their own work covering the peace vote, many journalists describe feeling privileged for having witnessed a historic moment. Asked what they think their role was covering the referendum, Olga (*El Colombiano*), María (*El Espectador*), and Margarita (independent filmmaker) use the expression “writing history.” Olga was a junior reporter at her newsroom when the vote took place. She recalls feeling “the emotion for the historic moment that we were living through” and says it was a great feeling to participate of it “and, in a way, be writing history.” María, who, as shown in previous sections, has reflected on the need to be more neutral as a journalist, offers a detailed account of the exuberant environment at her newsroom in the lead up to the peace vote. She notes, sarcastically,

Well, I was writing history! I thought I was Christopher Columbus here, [writing] the *Crónicas de India*. In truth, it was a beautiful time for journalism. At least here. I was in my first years [as a reporter], so I thought it was the best. Every time that a new point [of

the peace agreement] was reached and they announced a press release in Havana it was the best. We would turn on all the televisions really loud, we would print out the agreement and we would all read it. We all reviewed it and started thinking, what is the context? Ok, then you do this, you do that. It was the best... I remember the laying down of arms [by the FARC]. That issue was beautiful, the front page... we all felt so proud and we clapped; we clapped for our senior editor because the headline was beautiful. And it was that emotion that we all felt, [because] this thing was going in the right direction... we had all those human reflections about what was really happening. I think it is one of the most important experiences I've had in journalism. Even the referendum, with all its sadness, was an important lesson in journalism.

Margarita turned to documentary filmmaking after years of working as a conflict reporter. She says she always felt that her role in producing a documentary about the peace deal was to bear witness to a historic event. In her capacity as one of the only journalists with full access to the negotiating table in Havana, Margarita says that,

[at that moment] I feel that I am registering history. Look, if I had known how difficult this was going to be, I wouldn't have gone there... I said, I have to push through the boredom, the exhaustion, with perseverance, so that in one moment I get a chance to physically register some of the history that is in the making here. And I think if I hadn't been a war reporter, I wouldn't have been able to bare it. I wouldn't have had the perspective [to know] the transcendence [of this moment]. The end of the FARC is something so important that I am going to swallow it all.

3.3.2. Public and Private Roles. The referendum results were emotionally difficult for most participants. Dora (RCN TV) says “it was devastating” for people like her, “who know the conflict zones and understand the difference between living there and hearing about it.” She says achieving peace was personal for her. She had cried with the victims in many occasions while covering the news from their communities in the lead up to the vote, showing how many of them were willing to forgive the guerrillas and move on to a new chapter, free of violence. María (*El Espectador*), Milena (*Semana*), Ricardo (*El Colombiano*), and Olga (*El Colombiano*) all recall the feeling of desolation and despair when they realized the No vote would win. They felt “deflated,” as Ricardo says, and extremely sad. Milena watched the results come in on TV and “as a simple spectator I felt very blue, and I cried and cried because I couldn't believe that

people would want war so much and would not want peace.” Olga also cried over the results, and felt devastated on a personal level. Professionally, she also felt saddened that the No campaign had emerged victorious, and that it fell on her to reflect on what she could have done better as a journalist to help people believe that peace was possible.

Yolanda (RCN Radio), with decades of experience covering Colombia’s war, has doubts about the way in which many journalists and news organizations embraced the peace agreement, both personally and at the institutional level. She describes herself as someone who “has always been pro-negotiation” with respect to ending the war, yet she wonders if openly endorsing the peace deal was an emotional reaction on the part of many journalists who are tired of witnessing the country’s internal war.

I even think that we, the journalists who covered [the conflict], and even the news outlets that were endorsing the deal, were aligned with a negotiated end to the conflict because those of us who have been in this field for 30 or 40 years have had to cover this war since forever. And in one way or another we hope that we will stop covering the war one day, and we are still doing it, you know?

Yolanda thinks that at a certain point the majority of the media, not all, were engaged in “wishful thinking” (“*pensamos con el deseo*”), a sentiment echoed by some of the other journalists, both young and more senior. María (*El Espectador*) also thinks there was a kind of “blinding hope” that disrupted the way in which journalists should have worked during the vote. “We kind of put the flag of peace so close to our hearts,” she says, “that we forgot that there was a different world to the one we were living in. That many people were not in the same discourse as us.” Maritza (RCN TV) lived through this experience from a newsroom that was openly critical—some have said militant—against the peace agreement. She confides that, at a personal level, she was in favour of the Yes vote, but she was comfortable being part of a newsroom that did not openly endorse the deal. “Many news outlets avoided questioning” the peace process, she

says, “putting first that hope for peace... I think the media ignored at the time that it was important to be watchdogs.”

Germán (*Semana*) sees it differently. While it is true that news organizations siding with a Yes vote amounted to being aligned with the Santos government, the commitment came from “individual positions within journalism [circles] that agreed with having a peace accord in place.” For Germán, “it was preferable to have an imperfect peace than a perfect war.” His colleague at the magazine, Milena, offers a similar reflection. She is “a devotee of peace” and she has no regrets about her vocal support for the Yes vote, which she shared in numerous occasions through her personal social media and through her work as a journalist. Milena says she was in favour of voting Yes because she “has the context” that she has acquired through her many years visiting conflict zones and speaking to top-level sources from different political stripes. Her conviction that the peace deal had to be implemented, she says, is in no way at odds with her being a journalist. On the contrary, she thinks this is part of being consistent as a journalist. For her part, Yolanda (RCN Radio)’s reflection on how she negotiated her personal and professional roles at the radio station illustrate the kind of dilemmas that the journalists were facing as they covered the emotionally-charged event. Despite her open and consistent support for seeking a negotiated end to the conflict, she says she “always maintained a distance from the government and raised questions like journalists are supposed to do.” In several occasions, says Yolanda, “They were botching things and I said so.”

Analysis

This section has shown that journalists articulate a sense that elements of the local journalistic culture maybe shifting. This marks the third and final dimension of how journalists respond to media criticism found in this study, following the first and second dimensions (that

common errors and habits persist, and that things are changing under pressure from external factors).

As a culture that is ever-shifting, however slightly or largely, journalism has always been a site of contestation (Carlson, 2018). Here participants recognize that certain elements of their local journalistic culture, including common reporting practices and habits, as well as normative imperatives, have become open to challenges. Krogh and Svensson (2017) found in a study about media responses to criticism that journalists are now displaying two “new” types of responses to critics that previous studies had not identified: “ambivalence,” or contradictory responses that both accept and deny responsibility, and a willingness to engage with the public, whereby “being transparent and encouraging a discussion is, in itself, perceived as the solution to the problem, and therefore discussion can be seen as both a response type and a strategy” (Krogh and Svensson, 2017, p. 59). The participants in this study have clearly displayed both ambivalence and a willingness to open both practice and normative imperatives for discussion. On the practice side, journalists challenge having news organizations set clear editorial lines, in this case in support or against the peace deal, but also more generally. They also question the habits and routines of covering electoral ballots as horse races, as noted before. On the normative side, participants reveal themselves as critics of the norm of objectivity in journalism, insofar as they discuss the merits of neutrality vs. advocacy journalism in the context of covering the peace vote. As several journalists respond to accusations of imbalance in their work, like Dora and Jorge, for example, and many, too, regret what they see as their own sins of imbalance, as Maria does, they are ultimately engaging in a debate over the adequacy and merits of objectivity and its applications—impartiality and balance.

Objectivity has long been identified as a strategy or appeal for journalistic legitimacy (Carlson, 2018; Schudson & Anderson 2009). As Carlson (2018) notes, it is an important tool that journalists use to navigate “the contradiction between being central and external to political power” (Carlson, 2018, p. 1883). In the specific context of Colombia, studies have shown that journalists for the most part adhere to objectivity as a guiding norm (Odriozola-Chéné et al., 2017). With this in mind, the responses in this section suggest that there is palpable movement—if not turmoil—in the local journalistic culture, as journalists respond to criticism by challenging the norm and showing openness to discussing its merits.

Finally, this section reveals an original link between this apparent shift in the journalistic culture and the absence of Medios para la Paz as an organization that provided common ground for journalists to report on the local conflict. Critics of objectivity have noted that stripping journalists of their individual views and lived experiences results in journalists having “a view from nowhere” (Rosen, 2010; Zelizer, 2018b). What the respondents have suggested here is that the material presence of Medios para la Paz in the local journalistic culture had the effect of providing a clear standpoint from where to approach war and peace journalism—a departing point *to report from somewhere*. This marks an original contribution of this study, linking understandings of objectivity to local elements of a journalistic culture. This finding will be further analysed in the following section, Discussion and Conclusions.

Discussion and Conclusions

The two previous chapters showed how a metajournalistic discourse of media failure materialized immediately following the results of the peace referendum, and that Colombian journalists who faced this criticism respond to it with a wide range of insights into their performance and their work environment. The first results chapter revealed three dimensions to the metajournalistic discourse of media failure: 1) *The vote happened in a country incapable of transcending its violent past*. This dimension revealed how the discourse contains widely-shared, fatalistic assumptions about the inability of Colombians—and their media—to operate in a context where peace and peaceful living are a possibility. These assumptions present specific obstacles to even imagining what a culture of peace would be like, and by extension how the media would operate, if any differently, in such a context. 2) *The media is a tired institution indebted to financial and political interests*. This dimension underlines how the metajournalistic discourse of media failure repeats common perceptions of Colombian media as being unable to transcend historic ties with ruling political and economic elites. Furthermore, it reproduces common criticisms of Colombian media's epistemic approach to the armed conflict, which has tended to favour war-journalism tropes and has been unable construct new narratives to support peace. 3) *Increasingly out of touch, journalists offered an unbalanced account of the vote*. In this dimension, the discourse's themes more closely related to journalistic practice show how critics perceived "imbalance" as journalism's top failure during the vote's coverage. This imbalance was expressed through reporting that showed a disconnection between journalists and their audiences, particularly because No voters were either ignored or mischaracterized; an overwhelming support for the peace deal across media editorials that proved to be unreflective of

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popular sentiment; and the critics' perception that some journalists were overly emotional about the vote.

Chapter 2, based on the interviews with journalists, revealed a more complex picture than the one painted by the metajournalistic discourse of media failure of the media's performance during the peace referendum. Three dimensions are expressed in the themes that emerged from the semi-directed conversations with journalists who personally covered the peace referendum in various capacities (editors, reporters, producers). 1) *The media failed on multiple fronts*. Here there is an admission that common errors and habits persist. Journalists show an openness to admit faults and engage reflectively with critics, thus engaging in a form of paradigm repair (Klocke & McDevitt 2013; Hindman, 2006). They recognize that journalistic practice remains entrenched in social, demographic, and geographic elites. They also admit that *usual ways of doing*, or the routines of doing journalism, may have been inadequate to cover the special and historic vote. Here many journalists also openly condemn the actions of some of their colleagues, especially those leading coverage at the television station RCN TV, for so openly opposing the peace deal. 2) *There was a media system failure, but it was not the journalists' fault*. This theme reveals that journalistic practice may be under pressure from external factors. The interviews provided a valuable counterpoint to the discourse of media failure by pointing out to factors that may have jeopardized the media's coverage of the peace vote but were beyond journalists' control. Here journalists speak of the difficulties of filling an information vacuum created by the negotiating parties, as well as to the levels of viral disinformation that circulated through social media and instant messaging apps during the campaign, which the journalists felt they were unprepared to challenge. 3) *Journalists are ambivalent and open to discuss changes in practice and norms*. This last theme reveals that journalists share the sense that some elements of

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the local journalistic culture may be shifting. They are open to challenges to practice such as the tradition of political endorsements in editorials and also question the habits of horse-race reporting. On the normative realm, journalists are ambivalent but also open to discussing the merits of objectivity, by engaging in discussions about the role of neutrality vs. peace advocacy in the context of Colombian journalism.

Discussion

The results from this study are rich enough as to allow for several avenues of discussion, anywhere from questions about how journalists respond to criticism, to media instrumentalization, to the role of emotion in coverage of historic votes. Certainly, the study raises questions about public expectations of journalism and how practitioners respond to them, and also offers glimpses into how journalists are currently negotiating external pressures to practice, including social media and organized attempts at flooding media systems with disinformation. These are only some of the potential avenues for discussion that this data could support. For the purpose of this *Discussion and Conclusions* chapter, I have chosen to focus on one normative element that connects both data sets and that has already been recognized as relevant in scholarship about the Brexit referendum and Trump's election. That is, the discussion over the merits of objectivity in journalism in circumstances where an "asymmetrical" situation "fries the circuitry" of a mainstream press that is dependent on balance as the "key to political coverage" (Zelizer, 2018a, p. 13). The Colombian peace vote can certainly fall under this description, as has been shown here.

Brexit, Trump, and the Discussion around Objectivity

In 2018, the journalism scholar Barbie Zelizer wrote about how the Brexit referendum and Trump's election had thrown journalism "into disarray," highlighting how "mindsets of the

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past undo contemporary journalism's ability to cover events of the present" (Zelizer, 2018b, p. 141). Zelizer's main argument was that British and American journalists approached these two atypical and historic votes with the same (failed) lens that they had adopted during the Cold War, "closing ranks around norms of deference and moderation, objectivity and neutrality, balance and impartiality, where journalists cowered behind a reporting from nowhere" (Zelizer, 2018b, p. 145). Instead of answering the call to question "what journalism was for," Zelizer argues, American journalism

...shrank to the smallest possible version of itself. Particularly in response to McCarthy, journalists focused on sustaining the mechanics of news relay—how journalism would look—without remembering to ask why it mattered. (Zelizer, 2018b, p. 145)

Zelizer is not the only scholar to have raised the question of how the media's performance during the Brexit and Trump cases revealed deep-seated issues with the role of objectivity in journalism (others include, but are not limited to, Faris et. al, 2017; Sambrook, 2016; Wang, Napoli & Ma, 2017). The argument has tended to be that journalists needed to more boldly condemn the lies spread by the *Leave* campaign in the case of Brexit, for example, and to call out more strongly the misogyny and xenophobia expressed by then-presidential candidate Trump in the case of the U.S. Instead, scholars have found that journalists, insofar as they were trying to adhere to norms of objectivity and its applications —neutrality, balance— failed to capture the imbalances inherent in those two particular votes.

The Peace Referendum and The Discussion around Objectivity

In the context of the Colombian peace vote, scholars have yet to examine how media coverage of the referendum may reveal similar issues with local interpretations and applications of objectivity. My study shows that, just like in the cases of Brexit and Trump, in Colombia too news coverage of a unique and historic vote that yielded an unexpected outcome resulted in a

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particular phenomenon of media criticism. It also reveals that here, too, the criticism that the media sustained and the ways in which journalists have reflected on it has opened the door to discussions around the merits of objectivity, as shown in the thematic analysis. Now, whereas discussions around objectivity in scholarship about Brexit and Trump have largely revolved around condemning journalists and media organizations for failing to serve the public by stubbornly adhering to this journalistic norm, my study shows a new angle to this debate. Below I provide a situated analysis that takes into account the particularities of the local journalistic culture to reveal how Colombian journalists are debating the merits of objectivity as a result of the experience in covering the peace vote.

Medios Para la Paz

The results from this study show that the metajournalistic discourse of media failure that emerged after the vote was largely based on the perception that coverage of the referendum was unbalanced. Journalists were accused of being out of touch with the electorate, which some critics argued resulted in the media ignoring or mischaracterizing No voters. Many critics decried the practice of media-endorsements of the peace deal, accusing news organizations and journalists alike of displaying a pro-government bias. Others decried some organizations, such as RCN TV, for their apparent lobbying for a No vote. These accusations of imbalance are linked to public expectations that journalists cover the news in a balanced and objective way, for example by giving equal weight to sources from “both sides” and by abstaining from “taking sides” on any given issue. As shown in the journalists’ responses for this study, many Colombian journalists adhere, at least in theory, to the norm of objectivity and its applications of neutrality and balance. There is, however, a palpable ambivalence towards what it meant to be objective in the special circumstance of the peace referendum, as revealed both in some of the articles

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included in the corpus of Chapter 1, where news editors in particular defended their endorsement of the peace deal, and in the interviews, where some participants expressed their critical views on objectivity.

The interviews are particularly revealing of this ambivalence, and they contradict common expectations of how this debate has usually been presented thus far. It is common to see debates around objectivity follow generational fault lines. New generations of younger reporters appear to be the ones pushing for scrapping the norm from traditional newspapers, for example, and facing resistance from “the old guard,” as illustrated by Ben Smith (2020) in his *New York Times* piece “Inside the revolts erupting in America’s big newsrooms.” My interviews with journalists in Colombia reveal the complete opposite. The younger reporters in the sample appear to be the *most* inclined to support adherence to objectivity. María (*El Espectador*), for example, regrets having been so vocally in favour of the peace deal, and vows to become more neutral in the future (“journalists should never be activists. Not even in this case”). Maritza (RCN TV), for her part, defends her work as an example of “rigour” and “balance,” where she maintained what she sees was an objective lens towards the government’s position on the peace deal and the opposition’s campaign to reject it. The most senior and seasoned reporters, on the other hand, are the most critical of objectivity. Ignacio (Noticias Uno), Dora (RCN TV), Milena (*Semana*), and Jorge (*Semana*) refer to objectivity as unattainable and think of it as an obstructive journalistic norm, at least in the way it is applied. “Being neutral or objective became, let’s have one [source] from the Left and one from the Right, and that’s it” says Dora. “Neutrality doesn’t exist... journalists are part of civil society,” says Jorge. For Milena, “journalism is never objective... the people who run the media are... human.” As shown in Chapter 2, what these veteran journalists have in common is their lived experience of a bygone

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era of Colombian journalism where most news organizations shared the common goal of sustaining peaceful avenues of conflict resolution. To repeat a quote from that chapter,

We had been through an era in Colombia in which the media self-identified as peace builders. The era of Medios para la Paz; of... a pacifist activism within journalism that was considered legitimate. But we arrived to another... an environment of confrontation for the vote on the referendum, in which defending peace was interpreted as taking sides on the part of a news organization, when before this was a common factor. (Ignacio, Noticias Uno)

These two revelations—that, at least in this small sample of journalists, it is the most senior practitioners who are most critical of objectivity, and that this position is informed by the shared lived experience of having worked through an era of peace activism in journalism—are both significant. The first indicates current debates on the merits of objectivity in journalism may play out in distinct ways in particular journalistic cultures, and therefore scholars should take care not to treat such debates as they are occurring in North America as being representative of universal debates. My study suggests that it is important to take into account local contexts when exploring how these debates are evolving in particular journalistic cultures (and recognize, indeed, that this small sample of journalists working for traditional newsrooms in Colombia's largest cities should not be treated as representative of other, co-existing journalistic cultures in the country or region). The second revelation raises several important questions that may be both locally and more globally formulated: Are current understandings of objectivity in Colombia's journalistic culture, with respect to coverage of conflict and peace, informed by the absence of organizations such as Medios para la Paz? In other words, did the demise of this umbrella organization and other similar structures cause confusion in the local journalistic culture in terms of what it means to be objective when covering matters of conflict and peace? This leads to a question that could be asked in any other context: Could local interpretations of objectivity in particular journalistic cultures be linked to material and contextual conditions? Insofar as

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scholarship has tended to treat objectivity as a norm that is learned from journalistic education, or by way of socialization into the journalistic culture (Schudson, 2001; Ryfe, 2012), this question prompts us to reconsider what, if any, material and contextual conditions may affect the way in which journalists both understand and apply this norm.

There is a link between the reflections by the more senior journalists in this sample, those most critical of objectivity, and what the scholar Barbie Zelizer found in her analysis of journalism during Brexit and Trump. Zelizer's (2018b) criticism that journalists opted for *form* rather than for answering the question of *what journalism was for* in those important historic junctures, and therefore provided "a reporting from nowhere," echoes the preoccupation expressed by the senior journalists in my sample. Dora's pointing to the farcical use of sources from "both sides" as the standard of sufficiently objective reporting, or Ignacio's point about critics misunderstanding a commitment to ending the war with "taking sides" in favour of the government, speak precisely to this "reporting from nowhere." In turn, the fact that three veteran journalists in the sample, unprompted, referred to Medios para la Paz as an anchor to the consensus over journalism's role in supporting peace is a revealing and explicit reference to that potential "somewhere" from which conflict and peace journalists could stand to serve their publics. In the specific context of Colombia, it may be that having those explicit, material anchors from which journalists may derive some normative clarity are all the more important in a context already devoid of strong normative foundations. As the media sociologist Silvio Waisbord (2006) has argued, Latin American journalistic cultures have evolved in a context where "news organizations neither pretend to promote distinctive political positions nor attempt to be above the political fray" and therefore "there is no room for journalism to follow a set of coherent norms" (Waisbord, 2006, p. 68).

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Overall, this discussion is by no means an attempt to answer any of these important questions. It does, however, contribute significant new insights to the ongoing debates on the merits of objectivity in journalism, providing a situated analysis and actionable information upon which future research could be based. Ultimately, what this work of research does is provide an encounter between critics and practitioners (and many critics are also practitioners) to reflect on the question of *what journalism is for* in historic junctures such as the peace vote presented.

Conclusions

This study sought out to examine the media criticism that followed Colombia's peace referendum of Oct. 2, 2016. A first question asked whether a metajournalistic discourse of media failure materialized following the peace vote and, if so, what were its principal discursive elements. The second question asked how Colombian journalists who were responsible for covering news of the peace vote confront this metajournalistic discourse of media failure and reflect back on their professional performance. A third and final question explored the first two together—the elements of the metajournalistic discourse of media failure and how journalists responded to it—to find potential normative implications for the local journalistic culture. As seen in the *Discussion* above, one of such implications relates to how Colombian journalists are engaging in debates over the merits of journalistic objectivity that have also emerged, and continue to be present, in multiple journalistic cultures around the world.

The study contributes to the field of journalism studies in at least five significant ways. First, it adds to scholarship that has considered Brexit, Trump's election, and the Colombian peace vote—either together or separately—as particularly surprising votes that merit examination of the media's role in them, as well as of criticism of their performance. As far as I know, this study is the first to consider the anti-media backlash that followed the Colombian

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vote as a consolidated discourse of media failure, arguing that it amounts to a metajournalistic discourse with potential to impact the local journalistic culture. Second, the study adds to the scant body of literature on how journalists cover referendums, as most scholarship has been devoted to coverage of electoral races (Ridge-Newman, 2018). Third, the study contributes to studies on journalist responses to media criticism by confirming recent findings suggesting that journalists sometimes respond with ambivalence (Krogh and Svensson, 2017); it also addresses more recent examinations of the changing nature of media criticism occurring amidst what Cheruiyot (2022) calls the “digital discursive ecology” in which most journalism now operates, by providing insights into how journalists are responding to new and increasingly critical public accusations of failure. The study helps de-centre journalism studies and in particular media-criticism studies from the dominant contexts of North America and Western Europe (Cheruiyot, 2022). Fourth, this study opened an avenue for journalists to confront the discourse of media failure that followed the peace vote and reflect back on their own work, allowing them to “turn to the reservoir” of their journalistic culture to seek meaning (Ryfe, 2012) and express their disagreements. Finally, in particular through the discussion proposed above, this study contributes to what Waisbord (2014) calls “innovative theoretical arguments that capitalize on the wealth of empirical lines of research and the unique intellectual tradition in the [Latin American] region” (Waisbord, 2014, p. 12). It does so by situating theoretical arguments in the specific contexts of Latin American media/journalism, granting importance to developments that may not always mirror theoretical debates occurring in dominant research locations.

The study had some limitations. The first is that I did not consider authorship of each individual article considered in the corpus for Chapter 1 as an element of analysis. Having done so may have provided a more precise and rich insight into how and why the metajournalistic

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discourse of media failure developed after the peace vote, and would have added hints as to whether this discourse would have any weight in the local journalistic culture. The second is that this corpus was derived only from permanently-available online sources. There is reason to believe that the media criticism that followed the vote may have had a strong presence elsewhere, for example on social media. An initial attempt was made to gather Twitter data to add to the corpus, but the task proved to be too onerous and difficult at the time. A third limitation is that only journalists working for traditional news organizations, with the exception of Margarita, the documentary filmmaker, were interviewed for this study. Adding journalists from smaller, less centralized regions and from a larger variety of news outlets would have proven immensely enriching for this research.

Overall, however, the study stands as an original contribution to the field of journalism studies and to scholarship on Latin American media/journalism scholarship, and provides ample avenues for future research. A next step could be a comparison of the three similar votes mentioned here, Brexit, Trump, and the Colombian vote, to examine similarities and differences in the metajournalistic discourses of media failure that, I argue, followed each one of these votes. The study also lays the groundwork for a more in-depth theoretical development around the findings related to how journalists are currently debating the merits of objectivity, especially with respect to how material and contextual elements may affect such debates in specific contexts. Other studies could also examine existing and ongoing efforts to reformulate journalistic habits and approaches to war-centred journalism towards more innovative, peace-centred reporting both in mainstream and independent news media, not only in Colombia but across other journalistic cultures as well.

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Altogether, this study provides a rich set of findings that, with hope, will lead to further research into questions of how metajournalistic discourses of media failure may impact particular journalistic cultures, as opposed to an abstract “journalism” overall. As mentioned above, what this study intended to do was to provide a space where metajournalistic discourse and journalists would meet to reflect on the question of *what journalism is for* in historic junctures such as the peace vote presented. In this particular moment of reflection, the question all along seemed to be, simply, what does journalism owe to peace?

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Appendices

Ethics Certificate

Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

18/10/2021

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE | CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number

S-09-19-4461

Titre du projet / Project Title

Discourses of Media Failure After
Surprising Vote Results and
What Journalists Think of Them:
The Case of Colombia's 2016
Peace Referendum

Type de projet / Project Type

Thèse de doctorat / Doctoral
thesis

Statut du projet / Project Status

Renouvelé / Renewed

Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

24/10/2019

Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

23/10/2022

Équipe de recherche / Research Team

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Researcher**

Affiliation

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Investigator

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Communication

Superviseur / Supervisor

Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments

Corpus – Search and Notes

This unaltered document contains research notes on the original search for articles for the corpus. Its original date is November 5, 2018.

“Thesis_Media fail news and commentary”

Corpus for phase I: content analysis of news and commentary about the role of the media (mostly negative) in the referendum.

Total items: 78

Search criteria: Gathered documents between October 25 and November 5, 2018.

Search method:

- 1) Google.com.co — news-specific.
 - a) Spanish
 - b) Date range Oct. 2 to 31, 2016.
 - c) Search words “plebiscito + medios”
 - d) Pieces saved must speak specifically about the media in relation to the vote. I searched for the words “medios, mediático/a, periodista, información” to ensure relevance
 - e) Saved all relevant pieces. Discarded a few that were simply news about the referendum taking place (mostly the ones on Oct. 2) , or couple that were not about Colombia
 - f) Google came back with 18 pages of results. I looked at all of them.
- 2) Google.com.co — general web search
 - a) Spanish
 - b) Date range Oct. 2 to 31, 2016.
 - c) Search words “plebiscito + medios”
 - d) Discarded stories not specific to Colombian vote (ie, about the Chile referendum)
 - e) Many stories were repetitions from the news feed, in the previous search
 - f) This search allowed me to find pieces in alternative/independent organizations that may not be indexed as news outlets so would not have appeared on the news search
 - g) Pieces saved must speak specifically about the media in relation to the vote. I searched for the words “medios, mediático/a, periodista, información” to ensure relevance
 - h) Total 8 pages of Google results. I looked at all of them.
- 3) Google.com.co — general web search with different terms

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- a) Spanish
- b) Date range Oct. 2 to 31, 2016.
- c) Search words “debate + medios + plebiscito,” “fidel cano,” “plebiscito + debate,” “plebiscito + reflexión”
- d) Realized I had reached saturation. All relevant stories seem to have been gathered in the previous two searches

Twitter: how did I search?

NOTES:

- Should I include videos? There are some youtube items
- Should I look at people’s comments on web stories? There are a few that refer directly to the media’s role in the vote
- What should I do with news about conferences/ debates on the matter? Analyze the news pieces only? Or should I try to find more info and analyze the material of the conference itself? (my inclination is to do the news item only, since it was what appeared in the broader, public conversation about it)
- I should include pieces that I knew about or that I had gathered before but that did not appear in my search this time (ie, El Espectador mea culpa, etc)
- Should I analyze social media comments?

Original Corpus – Google Search

This list includes all original pieces that resulted from the extensive Google search. In the end, 20 pieces were removed because they were either irrelevant or duplicated.

	Publication	Author	Title	Link	Date
1	Semana		“Colombia optó por dar un salto al vacío”: 'El País'	https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/plebiscito-por-la-paz-prensa-internacional-no-comprende-decision/496624	2016-10-03
2	El Pais		El triunfo de Uribe y del ‘no’ silencioso	https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/10/03/colombia/1475451626647968.html	2016-10-03
3	El Tiempo (personal blog)		Cómo explicar el NO desde este lado del charco	http://blogs.eltiempo.com/de-canas-por-madrid/2016/10/03/como-explicar-el-no-desde-este-lado-del-charco/	2016-10-03
4	Swissinfo		¿Por qué no pasó el plebiscito para la paz en Colombia?	https://www.swissinfo.ch/spa/democraciadirecta/opini%C3%B3n-por-qu%C3%A9-no-pas%C3%B3-el-plebiscito-para-la-paz-en-colombia/42508378	2016-10-11

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5	CNN Espanol		¿Es Álvaro Uribe el principal obstáculo para la paz en Colombia como dice el 'New York Times'?	https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2016/10/14/es-alvaro-uribe-el-principal-obstaculo-para-la-paz-en-colombia-como-dice-el-new-york-times/	2016-10-14
6	Las 2 orillas		Álvaro Uribe: El señor del NO a la paz	https://www.las2orillas.co/alvaro-uribe-senor-del-no-la-paz/	2016-10-12
7	Proceso.com.mx		Las claves del “no” en Colombia	https://www.proceso.com.mx/458483/las-claves-del-en-colombia	2016-10-12
8	El Espectador		La cuestionable estrategia de campaña del No	https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/politica/cuestionable-estrategia-de-campana-del-no-articulo-658862	2016-10-23
9	Colombia plural		Pastor Alape: “Los partidarios del No se han debilitado”	https://colombiaplural.com/pastor-alape-los-partidarios-del-no-se-debilitado/	2016-10-28
10	CNN Espanol		Opiniones encontradas en Venezuela por resultado del plebiscito en Colombia	https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2016/10/04/opiniones-encontradas-en-venezuela-por-resultado-del-	2016-10-04

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				plebiscito-en-colombia/	
11	Semana		Uribe: ¡qué triunfo!	https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/gana-el-no-en-el-plebiscito-el-triunfo-de-uribe/496668	2016-10-03
12	Las 2 orillas		Balance del plebiscito	https://www.las2orillas.co/balance-del-plebiscito/	2016-10-18
13	Semana	Germán Manga	El naufragio de los medios en el plebiscito	https://www.semana.com/opinion-online/articulo/german-manga-columna-el-naufragio-de-los-medios-en-el-plebiscito/498605	2016-10-10
14	Telesur (blog)	Atilio Boron	El plebiscito en Colombia: una oportunidad perdida	https://www.telesurtv.net/bloggers/El-plebiscito-en-Colombia-una-oportunidad-perdida-20161003-0002.html	2016-10-03
15	El Tiempo	Omar Rincon	RCN, por fin, ganó / El otro lado	https://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-16722556	2016-10-09
16	Kien y ke		La victoria de RCN y la derrota del NO en el plebiscito	https://www.kienyke.com/historias/antonio-caballero-daniel-	2016-10-10

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				<u>coronell-omar-rincon-hablan-sobre-el-proceso-de-paz-plebiscito</u>	
17	Univision	Vladimir Flórez	Colombia: La manipulación del miedo	<u>https://www.univision.com/noticias/proceso-de-paz/colombia-la-manipulacion-del-miedo</u>	2016-10-03
18	El Pais	Javier Lafuente	Colombia busca un nuevo rumbo para salvar el proceso de paz	<u>https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/10/03/colombia/1475506860941206.html</u>	2016-10-04
19	El Heraldo	NA	El papel que jugaron cuatro poderes en el plebiscito	<u>https://www.elheraldo.co/colombia/el-papel-que-jugaron-cuatro-poderes-en-el-plebiscito-292093</u>	2016-10-09
20	Las 2 orillas	NA	Cinco caras visibles a las que no les salió el Sí	<u>https://www.las2orillas.co/5-caras-visibles-a-las-que-no-les-salio-el-si/</u>	2016-10-03
21	CNN Espanol	Víctor Solano	Colombianos, atrapados en la red social de la polarización	<u>https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2016/10/03/colombianos-atrapados-en-la-red-social-de-la-polarizacion/</u>	2016-10-03
22	El Espectador	Héctor Abad Faciolince	Explicar el fracaso: el análisis de Héctor Abad sobre el plebiscito	<u>https://www.elespectador.com/opinion/explicar-el-fracaso-el-</u>	2016-10-04

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				<u>analisis-de-hector-abad-sobre-el-articulo-658417</u>	
23	Libertad digital	NA	Colombia da al mundo una lección de dignidad	<u>https://www.libertaddigital.com/opinion/editorial/colombia-da-al-mundo-una-leccion-de-dignidad-80175/</u>	2016-10-03
24	El Espectador	NA	Jesucristo contra la paz con “ideología de género”	<u>https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/economia/hay-mirar-optimismo-el-resultado-del-plebiscito-empresa-articulo-658274</u>	2016-10-03
25	Semana	NA	“La estrategia del Sí tuvo muchos desaciertos”: Francisco Gutiérrez	<u>https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/francisco-gutierrez-habla-de-la-estrategia-del-si-en-el-plebiscito/498218</u>	2016-10-08
26	Semana	Julián De Zubiría	El triunfo del NO y el fracaso de la educación colombiana	<u>https://www.semana.com/educacion/articulo/implicaciones-del-no/497863</u>	2016-10-06
27	El Espectador	Laura Dulce Romero	¿Dónde estaban los medios en la campaña del plebiscito?	<u>https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/paz/donde-estaban-los-medios-campana-del-plebiscito-</u>	2016-10-06

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				articulo-658886	
28	Arcadia	Germán Rey	Los medios tradicionales, ¿irrelevantes?	https://www.revistaarcadia.com/agenda/articulo/los-medios-tradicionales-plebiscito-victoria-del-no-german-rey/55420	2016-10-03
29	Semana	NA	Gina Parody renuncia como ministra de Educación	https://www.semana.com/educacion/articulo/renuncia-de-gina-parody/497734	2016-10-04
30	RCN Radio (web)	NA	"Los medios deben reconciliarse con los ciudadanos", dijo Juan Gossain	https://www.rcnradio.com/colombia/caribe/los-medios-deben-reconciliarse-los-ciudadanos-dijo-juan-gossain	2016-10-16
31	Telesur	NA	Las empresas que financiaron el No a los acuerdos de paz en Colombia	https://www.telesurtv.net/news/Las-empresas-que-financiaron-el-No-a-los-acuerdos-de-paz-en-Colombia-20161006-0048.html	2016-10-06
32	Pulzo.com	Guillermo Franco	Financiación del Sí y el No: plebiscito en el lugar equivocado	https://www.pulzo.com/opinion/financiacion-del-si-y-el-no-plebiscito-en-	2016-10-06

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				el-lugar-equivocado-PP136456	
33	Aporrea.org	Carlos Luis Rivero	Los resultados del plebiscito en Colombia, sus efectos en Colombia y en Venezuela	https://www.aporrea.org/internacionales/a235214.html	2016-10-08
34	El Español	NA	Timochenko, dispuesto a "rectificar" los acuerdos de paz	https://www.elespanol.com/mundo/amERICA/20161003/160234632_0.html	2016-10-03
35	Las 2 orillas	Fabio Arévalo	Renuncia de Santos ¿lo más saludable para la paz del país?	https://www.las2orillas.co/renuncia-de-santos-lo-mas-saludable-para-la-paz-del-pais/	2016-10-03
36	El Espectador	Hernán González Rodríguez	El plebiscito del dos de octubre	https://www.elespectador.com/opinion/opinion/el-plebiscito-del-dos-de-octubre-columna-658971	2016-10-06
37	Semana		"En el plebiscito a todos nos faltó humildad": Catalina Botero	https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/plebiscito-para-la-paz-catalina-botero-habla-de-marchas-estudiantiles/498010	2016-10-06
38	Las 2 orillas	Álvaro Efraín Contreras Báez	Necesitamos la novela del plebiscito	https://www.las2orillas.co/necesitamos-la-novela-del-plebiscito/	2016-10-24

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39	El Espectador	Janira Gómez Muñoz	Los motivos por los que ganó el No, según catedráticos y analistas políticos	https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/paz/los-motivos-los-gano-el-no-segun-catedraticos-y-analist-articulo-658689	2016-10-05
40	Brecha.com	Mariana Cianelli	La guerra pudo más	https://brecha.com.uy/la-guerra-pudo-mas/	2016-10-14
41	Panam Post	NA	Plebiscito en Colombia: no todas las zonas afectadas por el conflicto votaron sí	https://es.panampost.com/panam-staff/2016/10/03/plebiscito-zonas-afectadas-conflicto-votaron-no/?cn-reloaded=1	2016-10-03
42	Las 2 orillas	Angel David Esguerra Tache	La motosierra del plebiscito	https://www.las2orillas.co/la-motosierra-del-plebiscito/	2016-10-13
43	Colombia informa	NA	Victor De Currea-Lugo presentó ‘Metiéndole pueblo a la Paz’ en la UIS	http://www.colombiainforma.info/victor-de-currea-lugo-presento-metiendole-pueblo-a-la-paz-en-la-uis/	2016-10-13
44	El País	Miguel Angel Bastenier	Uribe puede con todo	https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/10/03/actualidad/1475479205_520127.html	2016-10-03

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45	Colombia plural	Paco Gómez Nadal	Jesucristo contra la paz con “ideología de género”	https://colombiaplural.com/jesucristo-la-paz-ideologia-genero/	2016-10-11
46	Kaosenlared	Horacio Duque	Colombia: Del Plebiscito al Paro cívico popular y la Constituyente por la paz	http://kaosenlared.net/colombia-del-plebiscito-al-paro-civico-popular-y-la-constituyente-por-la-paz/	2016-10-18
47	El Universal	NA	La arrogancia, el principal error que marcó la derrota política del Gobierno	http://www.eluniversal.com.co/colombia/la-arrogancia-el-principal-error-que-marco-la-derrota-politica-del-gobierno-236885	2016-10-02
48	El Mundo	Salud Hernández Mora	Colombia vota "no" al pacto de paz con las FARC	https://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2016/10/02/57efc78246163fb62c8b458a.html	2016-10-03
49	Pulzo	NA	Es un fracaso de Santos y un salto a la incertidumbre, dice prensa mundial	https://www.pulzo.com/nacion/prensa-mundial-registra-como-estruendoso-fracaso-plebiscito-colombia-PP133333	2016-10-02
50	UniMedios (Universidad Nacional)	NA	La campaña del plebiscito y el cubrimiento de los medios	http://unradio.unal.edu.co/nc/detalle/catu/un-analisis/articulo/lunes-de-	2016-10-24

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				politica-44.html	
51	Razón Pública	Fabio López	La comunicación, la televisión y el plebiscito	https://www.razonpublica.com/index.php/conflicto-drogas-y-paz-temas-30/9783-la-comunicaci%C3%B3n%2C-la-televisi%C3%B3n-y-el-plebiscito.html	2016-10-09
52	ética segura	NA	Periodistas colombianos debemos crear un clima de paz: Javier Darío Restrepo	http://eticasegura.fnpi.org/2016/10/04/plebiscito-paz-colombia-periodismo-javier-dario-restrepo-entrevista/	2016-10-04
53	El Español	Carmen Beatriz Fernández	Por qué fracasó un plebiscito 'perfecto'	https://www.elespanol.com/mundo/20161003/160353964_12.html	2016-10-03
54	Afacom	NA	Conferencia "Medios, televisión y plebiscito: balance y perspectivas" en Univalle	http://www.afacom.org/secciones/ultimas-noticias/3086-conferencia-medios-television-y-plebiscito-balance-y-perspectivas-en-univalle	2016-10-26
55	Univalle	NA	Medios de comunicación y plebiscito	https://www.univalle.edu.co/universidad-y-region/medio	2016-10-25

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				<u>s-de- comunicacio n-y- plebiscito</u>	
56	UTadeo	Jorge Hernández	Seguimiento de medios a la Firma del Acuerdo Final de Paz	https://www. utadeo.edu.c o/es/noticia/ monitoreo- de- medios/obser vatorio-de- construccion- de- paz/117956/s eguimiento- de-medios- la-firma-del- acuerdo- final-de-paz	2016- 10-03
57	Celag	Javier Calderón Castillo	¡Se impuso la caverna!	http://www.c elag.org/se- impuso-la- caverna/	2016- 10-02
58	Contexto Ganadero	NA	Ganaderos explican porqué sus regiones dijeron No en el plebiscito	https://www. contextogana dero.com/pol itica/ganader os-explican- porque-sus- regiones- dijeron-no- en-el- plebiscito	2016- 10-05
59	14 y medio	NA	Los colombianos rechazan el acuerdo con las FARC con un 50,2% frente al 49,8%	https://www. 14ymedio.co m/internacio nal/Plebiscito = Colombia_D ecide-No- FARC- Santos_0_20 182991693.ht ml	2016- 10-02
60	WACC	Ignacio Chávez	La memoria en los medios	http://www. waccglobal.o rg/articles/la- memoria-en- los-medios	2016- 10-24

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61	Desde abajo	Libardo Sarmiento Anzola	Plebiscito por la paz, antagonismo traumático	https://www.desdeabajo.info/suplementos/item/30073-plebiscito-por-la-paz-antagonismo-traumatico.html	2016-10-26
62	Indepaz	Camilo Gonzáles Posso	Los problemas del sí en el plebiscito	http://www.indepaz.org.co/los-problemas-del-plebiscito/	2016-10-19
63	Pulzo	NA	Los dos principales diarios del país invitan a votar por el 'sí'	https://www.pulzo.com/nacion/medios-colombianos-plebiscito-paz-PP133145	2016-10-2
64	Las 2 orillas	Robert Posada Rosero	Plebiscito: cuánto ¿perdió la prensa?	https://www.las2orillas.co/plebiscito-cuanto-perdio-la-prensa/	2016-10-5
65	La silla vacía	Daniel Morelo	Así es el país que votó No	https://lasillavacia.com/hagame-el-cruce/asi-es-el-pais-que-voto-no-58201	2016-10-5
66	ibe.tv	NA	Javier Darío Restrepo: "Los periodistas colombianos debemos crear un clima de paz"	http://www.ibe.tv/es/canal/elportalvoz/2543/Javier-Dar%C3%A1-Do-Restrepo-Los-periodistas-colombianos-debemos-crear-un-clima-de-paz.htm	2016-10-4

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67	A la orilla del río		El por qué del voto NO en el plebiscito	http://alaorilladelrio.com/2016/10/08/el-por-que-del-voto-no-en-el-plebiscito/	2016-10-8
68	<u>Actualidad.RT</u>	Fernando Reyes	Acuerdo, Plebiscito y Nobel de la Paz en el Ocaso de la Guerra	https://actualidad.rt.com/opinion/fernando-reyes/220856-santos-colombia-premio-nobel	2016-10-10
69	Palabras al margen	Libardo Sarmiento Anzola	Colombia: plebiscito por la paz, antagonismo traumático	http://palabrasalmargen.com/edicion-91/colombia-plebiscito-por-la-paz-antagonismo-traumatico/	2016-10-15
70	UniMedios (Universidad Nacional)	NA	Se perdió el plebiscito, pero no la paz	http://agenciadenoticias.unal.edu.co/detalle/article/se-perdio-el-plebiscito-pero-no-la-paz.html	2016-10-4
71	Caracol	NA	Organización Ardila Lülle niega haber financiado campaña por el No al plebiscito	http://caracol.com.co/radio/2016/10/06/nacional/1475779262_843124.html	2016-10-6
72	Pacifista	NA	Grandes sorpresas en la financiación del plebiscito. Estas son las cuentas parciales	http://pacifista.co/grandes-sorpresas-en-la-financiacion-del-plebiscito-estas-son-las-cuentas-parciales/	2016-10-27

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73	Cero setenta	Laura Pedraza Rodríguez	Eduardo Pizarro: “La gran derrota del 2 de octubre puede ser un gran triunfo para el país”	https://cerosetenta.uniandes.edu.co/eduardo-pizarro-la-gran-derrota-del-2-de-octubre-puede-ser-en-un-gran-triunfo-para-el-pais/	2016-10-26
74	Palabra Maestra		La necesidad de formar el pensamiento crítico: a propósito del debate del plebiscito	https://compartirpalabramestra.org/columnas/la-necesidad-de-formar-el-pensamiento-critico-proposito-del-debate-del-plebiscito	2016-10-3
75	RCN Radio (web)	NA	Debate en RCN Radio concluye que resultados del plebiscito obligan a los medios a reflexionar	https://www.rcnradio.com/podcast/debate-rcn-radio-concluye-resultados-del-plebiscito-obligan-los-medios-reflexionar	2016-10-4
76	Univalle	NA	Medios de comunicación y plebiscito	http://socioeconomia.univalle.edu.co/noticias-y-eventos/366-medios-de-comunicacion-y-plebiscito	2016-10-26
77	Las 2 orillas	Juan Daniel Jaramillo Ortiz	Los medios en el fango	https://www.las2orillas.co/los-medios-en-el-fango/	2016-10-10

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78	The New York Times	Editorial Board	Álvaro Uribe, el hombre que está bloqueando la paz en Colombia	https://www.nytimes.com/es/2016/10/14/espanol/opinion/alvaro-uribe-el-hombre-que-esta-bloqueando-la-paz-en-colombia.html	2016-10-14
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Final Corpus - Articles

Article Number	Article Title	Author gender	Publication type	Publication Name
1	El Plebiscito del 2 de octubre	Male	Mainstream - National	El Espectador
2	Explicar el fracaso - El Espectador	Male	Mainstream - National	El Espectador
3	Hay que mirar con optimismo el resultado del plebiscito	Male	Mainstream - National	El Espectador
4	¿Se impuso la caverna!	Male	Think tank	Celag
5	¿Es Álvaro Uribe el principal obstáculo para la paz en Colombia como dice el 'New York Times'?	No author	Mainstream - International	The New York Times
6	¿Por qué no pasó el plebiscito para la paz en Colombia?	Male	Mainstream - International	Swiss Info
7	¿Qué tan independientes son Alejandro Santos y 'Semana' frente al proceso de paz?	No author	Independent news	KienyKe
8	“Colombia optó por dar un salto al vacío”	No author	Mainstream - National	Semana
9	“La estrategia del Sí tuvo muchos desaciertos”	Male	Mainstream - National	Semana
10	Acuerdo, Plebiscito y Nobel de la Paz en el Ocaso de la Guerra	Male	Mainstream - International	RT
11	Afacom - Conferencia "Medios, televisión y plebiscito, balance y perspectivas"	No author	University publication	Univalle
12	Álvaro Uribe, el hombre que está bloqueando la paz en Colombia	No author	Mainstream - International	The New York Times
13	Álvaro Uribe: El señor del NO a la paz	Male	Independent news	Las2orillas
14	Así es el país que votó No	No author	Independent news	La Silla Vacía
15	Balance del plebiscito	Male	Independent news	Las2orillas
16	Cinco caras visibles a las que no les salió el Sí	No author	Independent news	Las2orillas
17	Colombia vota "no" al pacto de paz con las FARC	Female	Mainstream - International	El Mundo
18	Colombia: Del Plebiscito al Paro cívico popular y la Constituyente por la paz	Male	Independent news	Kaos en la red
19	Colombia: La manipulación del miedo	Male	Mainstream - International	Univision
20	Colombianos, atrapados en la red social de la polarización	Male	Mainstream - International	CNN

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21	Debate en RCN Radio concluye que resultados del plebiscito obligan a los medios a reflexionar	Female	Mainstream - National	RCN Radio
22	Eduardo Pizarro: La gran derrota del 2 de octubre puede ser un gran triunfo para el país	Female	University publication	Cerosetenta
23	El naufragio de los medios en el plebiscito	Male	Mainstream - National	Semana
24	El plebiscito en Colombia: una oportunidad perdida	Male	Independent news	TeleSur
25	El por qué del voto NO en el plebiscito	Male	Independent news	A la orilla del río
26	El triunfo del NO y el fracaso de la educación colombiana	Male	Mainstream - National	Semana
27	En el plebiscito a todos nos faltó humildad	Female	Mainstream - National	Semana
28	Financiación campaña del No plebiscito: Organización Ardila Lülle niega haber financiado campaña por el No al plebiscito	No author	Mainstream - National	Caracol Radio
29	Ganaderos explican por qué sus regiones dijeron No en el plebiscito	Male	Trade publication	Contexto ganadero
30	Gina Parody renuncia como ministra de Educación	No author	Mainstream - National	Semana
31	Jesucristo contra la paz con “ideología de género”	Male	Independent news	Colombia plural
32	La arrogancia, el principal error que marcó la derrota política del Gobierno	No author	Mainstream - Regional	El Universal
33	La guerra pudo más	Male	Independent news	Brecha
34	La motosierra del plebiscito	Male	Independent news	Las2orillas
35	La necesidad de formar el pensamiento crítico: a propósito del debate del plebiscito	Female	Trade publication	Palabra Maestra
36	Las empresas que financiaron el No a los acuerdos de paz en Colombia	Male	Independent news	TeleSur
37	Los colombianos rechazan el acuerdo con las FARC con un 50,2% frente al 49,8%	No author	Independent news	14ymedio
38	Los medios deben reconciliarse con los ciudadanos, dijo Juan Gossaín	Male	Mainstream - National	RCN Radio
39	Los medios en el fango	Male	Independent news	Las2orillas
40	Los medios tradicionales, irrelevantes	Male	Mainstream - National	Revista Arcadia
41	Los resultados del plebiscito en Colombia, sus efectos en Colombia y en Venezuela	Male	Independent news	Aporrea

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42	Medios colombianos sobre el plebiscito por la paz	Male	Independent news	Pulzo
43	Necesitamos la novela del plebiscito	Male	Independent news	Las2orillas
44	Ómar Rincón: RCN, por fin, ganó	Male	Mainstream - National	El Tiempo
45	Opiniones encontradas en Venezuela por resultado del plebiscito en Colombia	No author	Mainstream - International	CNN
46	Periodistas colombianos debemos crear un clima de paz: Javier Darío Restrepo	Male	Independent news	Ética segura
47	Plebiscito en Colombia: El triunfo de Uribe y del 'no' silencioso	Male	Mainstream - International	El País
48	Plebiscito en Colombia: no todas las zonas afectadas por el conflicto votaron sí	Male	Mainstream - National	El Nuevo Siglo
49	Plebiscito en Colombia: Uribe puede con todo	Male	Mainstream - International	El País
50	Plebiscito por la paz, antagonismo traumático	Male	Independent news	Desdeabajo
51	Plebiscito: ¿cuánto perdió la prensa?	Male	Independent news	Las2orillas
52	Por qué fracasó un plebiscito 'perfecto'	Female	Think tank	IQ Latino
53	Renuncia de Santos ¿lo más saludable para la paz del país~ - Las2orillas	Male	Independent news	Las2orillas
54	Resultados plebiscito: Colombia busca un nuevo rumbo para salvar el proceso de paz	Male	Mainstream - International	El País
55	Se perdió el plebiscito, pero no la paz	Male	University publication	Unimedios
56	Lunes de política	No author	University publication	Unimedios
57	Uribe: ¡qué triunfo!	No author	Mainstream - National	Semana
58	La memoria en los medios	Male	Think tank	WACC

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Interviews – Recruitment Texts

Email for interview recruitment

[ENGLISH VERSION]

Dear [Name and Last Name]

My name is Gabriela Perdomo Páez and I am a Colombian PhD Candidate at the University of Ottawa's Department of Communication, in Canada. I am currently looking for participants for my doctoral research project, which looks at media criticism after the 2016 peace referendum and what journalists make of it. I understand that you covered the 2016 referendum for [MEDIUM]. I am contacting you because I would like to interview you for my project. The interview would take place in person in [CITY] and would last between 60 and 90 minutes.

The purpose of the study is to better understand the reasons behind the criticism against Colombian media following the referendum, and to give journalists such as yourself the opportunity to reflect back on their coverage of this vote and provide insights into how professionals have dealt with the criticism. My research project has been approved by the University of Ottawa's Ethics Review Board. Since I intend to record the interview for my own records, we will go over a process of informed consent before we start. (The audio is just for my own notes; it will not be published. All participants will remain anonymous in the final thesis).

Participants will be selected on a first come, first served basis. I hope you will consider participating in my study and that we can coordinate the details of the interview soon.

I really look forward to hearing from you. Thank you,

Gabriela Perdomo Páez
PhD Candidate
Department of Communication University of Ottawa

[SPANISH VERSION]

Buenos días [Name and Last Name]

Mi nombre es Gabriela Perdomo Páez y soy estudiante de doctorado en el Departamento de Comunicación en la Universidad de Ottawa, Canadá. Estoy buscando periodistas para que participen en mi investigación para la tesis de doctorado, que tiene como tema explorar las

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críticas a los medios colombianos que surgieron después del plebiscito por la paz de octubre de 2016, y lo que los periodistas piensan de estas críticas.

Según entiendo, tú trabajaste como reportero para [MEDIUM] cubriendo el plebiscito por la paz, así que te contacto porque me interesaría entrevistarte para mi proyecto. La entrevista sería en persona en [CITY] y duraría entre 60 y 90 minutos aproximadamente.

El propósito de mi estudio es tratar de comprender las razones detrás de las críticas a los medios que surgieron después del plebiscito, así como darle la oportunidad a periodistas como tú de reflexionar sobre el papel que jugaron durante el cubrimiento de este voto y contarme cómo la profesión ha manejado esas críticas del público. Mi proyecto cuenta con la aprobación del Comité de Ética de la Universidad de Ottawa. Antes de la entrevista, cada participante deberá firmar una carta dando su consentimiento para participar en el estudio ya que la conversación será grabada. (Esto sólo con el propósito de tomar notas; el audio no será publicado y ningún participante será identificado con nombre propio en la tesis).

Los participantes se irán aceptando a medida que se reciban las respuestas. Espero que te interese participar en esta investigación y que podamos coordinar los detalles de la entrevista. Quedo muy atenta a tu pronta respuesta.

Muy cordialmente,
Gabriela Perdomo Páez
Candidata al Doctorado en Comunicación
Universidad de Ottawa Canadá

Twitter message

[ENGLISH VERSION]

I am looking for journalists in Bogota or Medellín who would want to tell me about their experience covering the 2016 peace referendum for my PhD thesis. DM me if you are interested or if you know someone who could speak to me. Thanks!

[SPANISH VERSION]

Estoy buscando periodistas en Bogotá o Medellín que me quieran contar sobre su experiencia cubriendo el #plebiscitoporlapaz de 2016 para mi tesis de doctorado. DM si les interesa o si conocen a alguien que quiera hablar conmigo. Gracias!

Consent Forms

*The original consent forms were printed in uOttawa letterhead.

[ENGLISH VERSION]

Researcher:

Gabriela Perdomo Páez, PhD Candidate,
Department of Communication, Faculty of Arts
University of Ottawa

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the study named above. The research is led by Gabriela Perdomo Páez. This interview is in Spanish. The researcher is hereby authorized to transcribe and translate this interview into English for the purpose of her study, which is a doctoral thesis.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the research is to study the discourse of media failure that followed the October, 2016 peace referendum in Colombia and what journalists think about it.

Participation: My participation will primarily consist of an interview session lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, during which I will answer questions from the researcher about my experience and my role covering the referendum as a journalist. The interview will be audio recorded.

Risks: There are minimal risks associated with participation. I understand that my participation in this research requires that I provide information on my experience as a journalist covering the news about the peace referendum, as well as my personal opinions about the coverage. It is possible that I may feel anxious when recalling the events of 2016, or when talking about my peers or supervisors. It is also possible that I will recall feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or anxious about the role that I played as a journalist during the vote. Or that I may recall hurtful situations where politics may have affected personal relationships.

Benefits: My participation in this research will effectively contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field of media and journalism studies.

Data Retention: Audio data collected will be transcribed into computer files. Paper and electronic documents will be kept safe in a secured cabinet for a period of minimum five years in the home of the Principal Researcher.

Voluntary Participation: My participation in this research is voluntary and I

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am free to withdraw at any time during the interview, and/or refuse to answer certain questions without negative consequences. If I withdraw, I will be given the option of withdrawing my data.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I consent to having my first name being used in the thesis, and on any publications or presentations deriving from this interview. [YES] [NO]

If NO: I understand that my responses will remain confidential. The researcher may identify me only using generic terms, such as “a reporter for XX newspaper.” However, I recognize that I might be recognizable through the information I will be sharing or the combination of the name of the news outlet where I was working and the topic of my reporting.

Acceptance: I, _____, agree to participate in this research led by Gabriela Perdomo Páez of the Department of Communication, Faculty of Arts, University of Ottawa, and grant permission for the interview to be recorded.

For additional information about this study, I may contact the researcher or her thesis supervisor, Dr. Kyle Conway, Associate Professor, University of Ottawa.

For information on ethical aspects of this research, I can speak to the Head of Research Ethics, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154; Telephone: 613-562-5387; Email: ethics@uottawa.ca
There are two copies of the consent form; I can keep a copy.

Signature of Participant:

Date:

Signature of Researcher:

Date:

[SPANISH VERSION]

Formulario de consentimiento

Investigadora Principal:

Gabriela Perdomo Páez, Candidata al Doctorado en Comunicación,

Department of Communication, Faculty of Arts

University of Ottawa (Canadá)

Invitación a participar en el estudio: Estoy invitado/a a participar en el proyecto de investigación aquí mencionado que lleva a cabo Gabriela Perdomo Páez. Esta entrevista será en español. Autorizo a la investigadora a transcribir y traducir esta entrevista para su uso en su tesis de doctorado.

Propósito del estudio: El estudio tiene como propósito investigar el discurso de que los medios fallaron que surgió después del plebiscito por la paz de octubre de 2016, así como entender lo que los periodistas piensan de este discurso crítico.

Participación: Mi participación en este estudio consiste en otorgar una entrevista de 60 a 90 minutos máximo en la cual la investigadora me hará preguntas sobre mi experiencia cubriendo la noticia del plebiscito por la paz en mi calidad de periodista. La entrevista será grabada en audio.

Riesgos: El riesgo es mínimo. Entiendo que tomo el riesgo de otorgar información sobre mi experiencia cubriendo la noticia del plebiscito, así como mis opiniones al respecto. Es posible que pueda sentir ansiedad al recordar los eventos alrededor del plebiscito, o al hablar de mis colegas y de mis superiores. También es posible que recuerde haber sentido estrés o ansiedad por el papel que jugué cubriendo este voto, o que recuerde situaciones dolorosas relacionadas con posibles diferencias políticas con mis allegados.

Beneficios: Mi participación en este proyecto será una contribución a la investigación de medios y en particular a los estudios de periodismo.

Retención de datos: El audio de la entrevista será grabado y transcrito. Todos los documentos en papel y electrónicos serán guardados por un periodo de cinco años en una caja fuerte ubicada en la residencia de la investigadora principal.

Confidencialidad y anonimato: Autorizo a la investigadora a usar mi nombre (sin apellido) en la tesis o en presentaciones o publicaciones que deriven de

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esta entrevista. [SI] [NO]

Si NO: Entiendo que mis respuestas serán confidenciales. Autorizo a la investigadora a identificarme sólo de manera genérica, por ejemplo como "un/a reportero/a del diario XX". Sin embargo, reconozco que existe la posibilidad de ser identificado como resultado de la combinación de mis respuestas, el nombre de mi empleador y el tema que cubría.

Participación voluntaria: My participación en este proyecto de investigación es voluntaria y soy libre de retirarme del estudio o de rehusarme a contestar cualquier pregunta sin temer consecuencia alguna. Si me retiro, tendré la opción de retirar mis respuestas también.

Autorización: Yo, _____, accedo a participar en el proyecto de investigación de la Sra. Gabriela Perdomo Páez, candidata al Doctorado en Comunicación del Departamento de Comunicación, Facultad de Artes, de la University of Ottawa (Canadá).

Para información adicional sobre este estudio, puedo contactar a la investigadora o a su supervisor de tesis, Dr. Kyle Conway, Profesor Asociado, University of Ottawa.

Para información sobre los lineamientos éticos de este proyecto puedo contactar a la Oficina de Ética de la Investigación (Office of Research Ethics and Integrity) de la Universidad de Ottawa. Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154; Tel: 613-562-5387; Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

Existen dos copias de este formulario. Yo puedo guardar una.

Firma del o de la participante:

Fecha:

Firma de la investigadora principal:

Fecha:

[APPENDICES]

Interview Guide

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Gabriela Perdomo Páez, University of Ottawa,

PRELIMINARY MATTERS: Before the interview begins and before any audio device is turned on, I will give the participant the informed consent form and discuss its contents. I will answer any questions the participant may have. Once the form is signed and collected, recording can begin.

NOTE ON QUESTIONS: Note that interview is semi-structured. This document shows the main themes guiding the conversation and prompts for general thoughts; these could result in further follow-up questions or unprompted responses.

[ENGLISH VERSION]

A - DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. Age range (18-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55+)
2. Gender
3. Level of education
4. Degree in journalism? Undergraduate or graduate?
5. Years have you been working as a journalist
6. What organization did you work for in 2016, when you were covering the referendum?
7. What position or rank were you in at the time?

B - MEDIA CRITICISM

- 1) Immediately after the vote on Oct. 2, many opinion columnists, commentators, and even journalists criticized the role of the media in covering the vote. What do you think, in general, of this criticism?
- 2) Overall, how would you say Colombian journalists reacted to the criticism?
- 3) What is your own assessment, overall, of how Colombian journalist covered the vote?
- 4) I'll read you some direct quotes from people who spoke up against the media after the vote [READ QUOTES]. What do you think of these quotes?
- 5) After all these years, do you think anything has changed in Colombian journalism after what happened in 2016?

C - JOURNALIST'S ROLE

- 1) Thinking back to 2016, what did you think was your role as a journalist going into the referendum?

[APPENDICES]

- 2) Now, overall, what do you think was the role that Colombian journalists should have played in covering the referendum?
- 3) [IF SOCIAL MEDIA HAS NOT COME UP] Let's talk about social media. Do you think they had an impact on how journalists covered the referendum? If so, what kind of impact?
- 4) Final thoughts: Is there anything else that you would like to add that we haven't talked about here?

Thank you very much for participating in my study. I truly appreciate your time and insights.

[SPANISH VERSION]

A - DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. Edad (18-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55+)
2. Sexo
3. Nivel de educación
4. ¿Cursaste estudios universitarios en periodismo? En pregrado o postgrado?
5. ¿Cuántos años llevas trabajando como periodista?
6. ¿Para qué medio trabajabas cuando cubrías los temas del plebiscito por la paz?
7. ¿Cuál era tu posición en ese momento?

B - MEDIA CRITICISM

- 1) Inmediatamente después del voto el 2 de octubre, muchos columnistas de opinión, comentaristas, e incluso algunos periodistas criticaron el papel de los medios en el plebiscito. ¿Qué piensas en general de estas críticas?
- 2) En general, ¿Cómo crees que los periodistas colombianos reaccionaron a las críticas?
- 3) ¿Cuál es tu impresión general de cómo los periodistas colombianos cubrieron la noticia del plebiscito por la paz?
- 4) Voy a leerte unas citas directas de críticas que se le hicieron a los medios colombianos por su cobertura del voto. [LEER CITAS] ¿Qué piensas de estos comentarios?
- 5) Después de estos años que han pasado, ¿tú crees que algo ha cambiado en el periodismo colombiano después del plebiscito?

C - JOURNALIST'S ROLE

- 1) ¿Cuál pensabas tú que era tu papel como periodista con respecto al plebiscito por la paz?
- 2) ¿En términos generales, ¿Cuál crees que era el papel que los periodistas colombianos debían haber jugado en el plebiscito por la paz?
- 3) [SI NO HA HABLADO DE REDES] Hablemos de redes sociales por un momento. ¿Tú crees que tuvieron algún impacto en el manejo periodístico del plebiscito?

[APPENDICES]

- 4) Finalmente: ¿Hay algo más que te gustaría añadir que no hayamos cubierto durante la entrevista?

Muchas gracias por participar en esta entrevista. Aprecio mucho tu tiempo y tus reflexiones.