

“The real problem is what kind of information we receive in Colombia”

Interview with Hollman Morris

José Antonio Gutiérrez D.

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To be a journalist in Colombia is not easy: over the last 30 years, more than 130 journalists have been killed because of their profession, 98 of them being killed in the period of 1992–2006. During that time, many more journalists were forced to flee the country. If there’s anything remarkable of the murder of journalists is the high level of impunity: of this 98 cases, only 3 went punished. Colombia, according to Journalists Without Borders, ranks 126 in a ranking of those countries with the least freedom of information, among a total of 175 countries. We had the following interesting dialogue on the situation of journalism in the complex Colombian reality.

Hollman Morris is a familiar name in Colombia, both for his TV programme **Contravía** (Counter-current), which he has been directing for many years and represents a unique window to glimpse into the realities of the Colombian conflict, and also for the accusations and harassment which he has suffered from the State intelligence agency (DAS) and by the very president Uribe. In February, he was denounced in TV by Uribe as an “*accomplice to terrorism*” because of his coverage of the unilateral liberation of hostages by the FARC-EP¹, while the then Defence Minister, Juan Manuel Santos, said what he had done was tantamount to “*endorsing criminality*”². After that, when the DAS phone tapping scandal broke out, it was discovered that the State intelligence was not only tapping phone conversations of the opposition, journalists, social movements, judges and human rights lawyers, etc., but also they had been followed, photographed and their personal lives were being scrutinised. Hollman Morris was among those suffering from this persecution, whose files were labelled “Puerto Asís Case”. “*Hollman Morris mail was intercepted, in a confidential report he is labelled ‘a belligerent journalist’ and his activities abroad were closely followed*”³. Apart from all this, Morris’ work is done under constant

¹ Ver ecodiario.economista.es the statement of the vice-president can be found at www.elespectador.com These statements were condemned both by the UN and the OAS (www.elespectador.com), to what Uribe replied demanding that the General Attorney prosecuted Hollman Morris www.elespectador.com

² www.elespectador.com

³ www.elespectador.com

threat and pressure from far-right paramilitary gangs that do not forgive him for his research on political violence in Colombia⁴.

The situation of Morris is not an exception, even though his international and national profile makes his drama more visible than most: what is happening within the DAS is symptomatic of this dim environment of persecution and stigma attached to those who are uncomfortable for the will of Uribe Vélez's government, a situation to which journalists are not immune, even less so when the strategy of the government towards the media has been so strong.

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In spite of the grandiose platitudes of the government about the improvement in the delicate situation of the press, claiming that during 2008 no journalist was killed because of his-her profession, we believe that the parameter to measure the freedom of the press in Colombia can't be only if journalists are killed or not. As it is clearly stated in a report of the the Committee to Protect Journalists:

*“Deadly violence in Colombia eased for the second consecutive year as no journalists were killed in direct relation to their work. Colombian authorities cited increased security throughout the country as the cause for the recent decline in news media deaths, **but journalists said widespread self-censorship had made the press less of a target.** Even so, intimidation and threats remained a serious problem. Repeated death threats against four provincial journalists forced them to flee their homes. Prominent journalists in the capital denounced government harassment that followed their criticism of the administration of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez.”⁷*

As another report from the Foundation for the Freedom of the Press (FLIP) states, threats, stigmatisation and economic pressures, are the preferred mechanisms to control journalism in Colombia⁸. However, this year at least 5 journalists have been killed so far⁹, an alarming number as it is the highest number of murdered journalists since 2004, year in which 7 journalists were killed. So the view from the government, that there is a “decreasing” tendency in the murder of journalists¹⁰, is just not credible, and the number of journalists killed seems to be rather in relation to factors such as self-censorship, coverage of scandals, etc.

We had the pleasure to meet recently Hollman Morris in Ireland during the launch of Juan José Lozano's documentary on Morris' journalism, called **“Unwanted Witness”** (Dolce Vita & Intermezzo Films, 2009). This is an interesting documentary that deals with far more than the life of a journalist in a society lacerated by an armed conflict, with all the tribulations and personal risks that it represents. Above anything else, this is a documentary on the conflict, on the thousand faces of violence in Colombia, on indifference as a mechanism of survival, on

⁴ www.rsf.org Page 8.

⁵ www.flip.org.co Complete report can be found at www.flip.org.co

⁶ www.rsf.org In a previous report (2007), Colombia ranked the same www.rsf.org

⁷ cpj.org Our emphasis.

⁸ www.flip.org.co

⁹ www.p-es.org

¹⁰ Government Report, April 2009, on freedom of the press www.cancilleria.gov.co

the fragmentary reality of a society that has in itself parallel worlds, seen through the eyes of a witness that has gone to the depths of Colombia, where the conflict is actually fought. We had the following interesting dialogue on the situation of journalism in the complex Colombian reality.

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Please tell us about the current state of journalism in Colombia

The threat which is faced by Colombian journalism is stigmatisation. Colombian journalists have always been subject to the gaze of the intolerant, of the paramilitaries, of the guerrillas, of the corrupt politician, and now, subject to the stigmatising suggestions of the very President of the Republic, Alvaro Uribe Velez, who has been signalling in a systematic way that I am an “ally of terrorism”. It is the same with other journalists like Gonzalo Guillen, Daniel Coronell, and he has done the same with human rights defenders and even the magistrates of the Higher Courts.

The government claims that the murder of journalists in Colombia has been reduced...

The Colombian government says with pride that under this government the number of journalists murdered has dropped, which is true, but not because Colombia is more democratic or because we are more acceptant of dissident thought, or of criticism, but simply because this is occurring because journalists are self-censorship.

What is this self-censorship?

It is manifested, for example, in Colombian journalists ceasing to cover the zones of conflict in the country, the government having repeatedly suggested that journalists who cover these zones are “linked with terrorism”.

Could the concentration of the media in few hands in Colombia not also be considered a form of censorship?

Censorship is not in general direct, it is not something that is made public, it is not the shut-down of stations, of the media, but it is stigmatisation, the threats which arrive by mail, to your house, to your workers, or the public stigmatisation of the very President towards you, towards your work, ut also the stigmatisation of the government towards certain subjects. For example, the behaviour of the President, insults towards certain journalists, mean that journalists almost don't ask him about his past, about his family helicopters¹¹, about the paramilitaries.

There are unmentionable subjects. Like for example, the President's dubious friendships. Some of the print media have been involved in conducting these types of investigations, which contrasts with the terrible passivity of the television [media] whose private channels present a tremendously reverential attitude to President Alvaro Uribe.

On your programme, Contravia, made an excellent documentary on one journalist murder which awoke the conscience of the whole country. I am referring to the murder of Jaime Garzon. What do you think was the impact of this murder?

¹¹ Editor's note: a facility owned by the Medellin Cartel for the processing and trafficking of cocaine known as Tranquilandia, raided in 1984, where a helicopter belonging to the father of President Alvaro Uribe was discovered. This scandal has never been properly investigated.

I think the murder of Jaime Garzon was a message to critical journalism in Colombia, that we were not to interfere with certain powerbases in Colombian society, for me that was the message. From the moment of Jaime Garzon's murder, political criticism disappears from television, political satire disappears from television, and until today, ten years after his murder political satire does not exist on Colombian television.

Speaking about censorship and self-censorship, just like the role of the print media ... What do you think of the today's news of the firing of Claudia Lopez from El Tiempo for her questioning of the bias of the paper?

El Tiempo's attitude to Claudia Lopez is worrying. Firstly, her dismissal and secondly, the fact that forum comments were blocked on their webpage. This is not democratic behaviour. But said attitude speaks to the turn which the paper is taking in the hands of Grupo Planeta and to the terrible influence of people like Jose Obdulio Gaviria, close confidants of the government, a government which does not tolerate the slightest criticism. I would like to think that one person who must be terribly uncomfortable with this attitude is Enrique Santos, who today is today the President of the SIP (Inter American Press Society), and whose voice it would be interesting to hear in this debate. However, I think that at the heart of this incident is a debate for Colombian society, a debate about the quality of the information we are receiving on a daily basis. Colombian society, a country which is the second greatest human drama in the world, with "parapolitics" [ie. Alliance of politicians from the ruling coalition with paramilitaries], which is today discussing a questionable peace process with paramilitaries, which has gotten the freedom of hostages and discussions about peace, for this society; will it be healthy that there may be only one national newspaper? And that said paper is controlled by a group which doesn't hide its intimate ties with the current government? And which now to cap it all gets rid of Claudia Lopez, of their few dissident columnists. The heart of the debate, dear friends, is the quality of information that Colombians are receiving today, be it in press, radio or television. That is an urgent debate which Colombian society and its journalists must have, the strengthening or not of our democracy is to play for.

What do you think about the legal pressures being applied to journalists involved in uncovering the links between the mafia and elements of the political and business classes? I am referring to the processes faced by Alfredo Molano, Daniel Coronell, Rodrigo Pardo, Maria Jimena Duzan etc.

I say again, we are seeing a government and its circle which refuses to tolerate the slightest criticism. These are criticisms which have been made through detailed journalistic investigations, argued, which however, immediately are delegitimised by members of the government. Remind yourself how the President called the director of the magazine Semana, Alejandro Santos, a liar when the irregularities in the administration of Jorge Noguera as director of the DAS (the Colombian secret police) are in the public domain as are his links with paramilitarism.

The figure of Uribe in the press, however is ubiquitous. There has never been a more media-centric President than Uribe; the media are full of Uribe, morning, noon and night. What role, in your opinion, has the media played in this saturation?

Let me see, there is also worthwhile journalistic work, as in the case of the magazine Semana and El Espectador. Through the magazine Semana, Colombia came to learn about the subject of parapolitics and of the illegal phone-tapping performed by the DAS. The opinion pages in El Espectador present many different ways of analysing the reality of Colombia. However, I continue to be worried by the role played by the large TV stations, who do not raise the slightest

criticism or questioning of President Alvaro Uribe, and at times it can appear as if they may be working as his press secretary. The complex Colombian reality demands that these channels generate spaces for debate, opinion, and that the return to the documentary and reportage as forms of executing the journalistic profession. Ignoring these journalistic genres in Colombia today, makes a mockery of the winds of blowing towards a strengthening of our democracy.

An even still you keep Contravia going, in spite of the winds and swells, as the name of your show indicates; what are the difficulties you face?

We have said that Contravia is returning to the air in the knowledge that there is no guarantee [of the quality of] our journalistic work. We were and we believe we will continue to be hunted by the DAS, by the President and we know that there are circles of people directed from the presidency, trying to mount a campaign to delegitimise us, trying to delegitimise our work.

The very same President called it an “ally of terrorism” in public. What impact has this characterisation had in you professional and personal life?

The Colombian people should know that a characterisation such as this, coming from the President and spread by TV during primetime, live and direct, and also, without questioning by the journalists who were there at the time, in Colombia is equivalent to a death threat. It has generated dozens of threats against our lives and against the journalistic project I direct. It has meant that time I should have been dedicating to journalistic investigation has been spent denouncing these acts which, I insist, put my life in danger. It has meant that I spend an amount of time trying to block the propaganda campaign generated by said accusations. That is without going into the details of the damage it has caused my family, the psychological effects etc. What I can tell you is that payback is coming down the wire.

What do you think about the DAS surveillance of you and of well-known human rights defenders, leaders of the political opposition and other people that make the government’s life uncomfortable?

It is incredible that a President who doesn’t miss the slightest detail, who knows how many kilometres of paved roadway there are between Bogota and Medellin, who knows the names of local government figures in Puerto Rico, Caqueta, and who is known for keeping an iron grip on security matters, would not have known that his secret police, the DAS, was following us, listening to us and intimidating us over the last few years. I wasn’t brought up a fool.

Why then continue in critical journalism in spite of the risks?

For a number of reasons. Because it is difficult travel through the country and see the conditions of thousands of peasants, arrive [home] and as a journalist to keep quiet, remain silent. Secondly, because this is not the country I want to leave to my children. I believe, for example considering these practices and these attacks against the ’91 Constitution, that if we allow this to happen we will not be able to guarantee a good future for my children or for the next generations of Colombians. Those of us who lived through the end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s, those of us who had our dreams killed with the murder of Luis Carlos Galan, Camilo Pizarro, Jaime Pardo Leal and Bernardo Jaramillo, and beforehand, with the murders of Andres Escobar and Jaime Garzon, we know, and so confirm the courts and the public prosecutor’s office that the intellectual and material author [of these murders] was the monster called paramilitarism and that this same force, with said murders, took us back in future years. It inundated us in war and in polarisation, and for this reason my generation invented and realised for itself the dream of the Constitution of ’91. the paramilitary project has won out in Colombia and now it is going to claim its trophy, to pick apart and attack the Constitution of ’91, which is to condemn our

country to another one hundred years of solitude and there are people like me — and there are many of us — who do not want to let that happen. For that reason we keep going against the grain with Contravia.

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