



From the editor

## Colombia and the fine art of censorship

by Adriaan Alsema | June 10, 2019

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The government of Colombia's President [Ivan Duque](#) seems to have stepped up efforts to censor free press. This is increasingly affecting foreign journalists.

Colombian journalists have long been worked with the knowledge that critical reporting is likely to have consequences, either for their job or their physical security.

Like our local colleagues, foreign journalists are increasingly confronted by the often refined methods that prevents us from adequately informing the public about what happens with their tax money, why Colombia seems unable to progress and why "nothing ever changes."

**“** Censorship is not how we tend to imagine it; journalists tied to trees with their mouth gagged and their notebook stained with blood. Censorship uses methods that are more elegant, sophisticated and subtle that usually go unnoticed. This is not just an issue for debate between our journalist colleagues in Chapinero. Censorship should concern us all because it silences the voices who reveal what is hidden, and when they are silenced this allows people to walk around with their eyes closed, and stories about how we live in paradise make the rounds while everything is ablaze.

Columnist “La Pulla”

### Colombia’s history of state censorship

State censorship, the politicization of news media and violence have severely limited reporters’ ability to do their work without fear of reprisal since the 19th century when Colombia became a republic, press freedom foundation analyst Emmanuel Vargas highlighted in a recent op-ed on news website Pacifista.

**“** The press, above all, requires sustained vigilance, so that under this pretext of freedom of thought the old tendencies of disrespect and poignancy with which mercenary pens seek the path of the progressives will not reappear.

Three-time President Rafael Nuñez between 1880 and 1886

**“** It is prohibited to publish information, news, comments, caricatures, drawings or photographs that, directly or indirectly, imply disrespect for the President of the Republic or for the Head of State of a friendly Nation, or seriously compromise the normal development of Colombia’s international relations.

President Gustavo Rojas in 1949

**“** Despite my immense affection with the freedom of expression, this very night censorship will be imposed on radio.

President Alberto Lleras in 1970

**“** I am saddened because these terrorists continue to summon journalists to cover their actions.

President Alvaro Uribe in 2008

Press freedom foundation FLIP found that also last year state officials engaged in more acts of aggression to media workers than all the country’s drug traffickers and guerrillas combined.

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**Colombia’s state: more than twice as aggressive against press than all narcotics and guerrillas combined**

## The traumas left by violence

The murders, sacked colleagues, death threats and judicial harassment that became common during the armed conflict have traumatized journalism and continues to serve as a constant reminder of the risks that come with doing a job that often doesn't even pay well.

Those who have dared to speak truth to power, be it in government or outside the law, have lost their jobs or have had to give up their private life and live with bodyguards while their families are in exile.

**66 Gonzalo Guillen:** *I have nine bodyguards and two armored cars.*

*The killing of journalists in Colombia became so common that the state was forced to commit itself with the international community to protect unionists, journalists, human rights defenders, etc.*

**Interviewer:** *What is the cost for your family to live like this?*

**Gonzalo Guillen:** *It's terrible. Let's put it like this. I live by myself. My family isn't in Colombia and I'm also not telling where they are.*

**Interviewer:** *But they had to leave the country for their security?*

**Gonzalo Guillen:** *Basically, yes.*

### Interview with senior journalist Gonzalo Guillen

The ongoing murders, death threats, judicial harassment, spying and other criminal activity have virtually silenced the news media in Colombia; more than half of the country doesn't have access to local news, mainly because it's too dangerous to simply inform the communities.

**See nothing, hear nothing: more than half of Colombia left without local news**

## Corporate corruption

This climate of censorship is worsened by Colombian media publishers' family and business ties to politicians, political parties, economic powerhouses and criminal activity whose power journalists are supposed to monitor.

To make matters worse, Colombia's media are largely dependent on advertising that is largely coming from government propaganda budgets and has often come from businesses later dismantled as criminal organizations.

Fortunately, this has never been an impediment for foreign journalists and media, who are increasingly reliant on their readers or corporations that have little to do with the dirt in Colombia.

**More than half of Colombia's media reliant on state propaganda funds**

## NEW: Targeting the foreign press

With Colombia's press largely coerced, and journalists in general no longer able to freely speak truth to power, foreign journalists and media have become increasingly important in informing Colombians about current events.

It was the Washington Post that put the mass killing of civilians by the military on the public agenda in 2008.

The past month alone, the New York Times revealed the army's controversial orders to double the number of combat kills and captures and the Associated Press revealed again how army chief Nicacio Martinez is linked to homicide investigations.

One day after publishing his article, The New York Times bureau chief and the photographer accompanying the reporter left the country after far-right supporters of Duque began a vile stigmatization campaign that in the past too often has led to death threats and even murders.

Foreign Minister **Carlos Holmes Trujillo** accused the American newspaper of being "tendentious, biased and distorting" the government's work.

Spanish newspaper El País added further evidence of Martinez' links to extrajudicial executions.

The bureau chief of El País received a letter from an unknown soldier demanding that his article be removed after which W Radio reported that "this is one of many demands that will come on behalf of members of the army to this and other international news media."

Gonzalo Guillen, the journalist who is forced to live without his family, was told by prosecution officials that foreign journalists are targeted in illegal wiretapping operations.

These latest incidents come little more than half a year after multiple foreign journalists denounced they were unable to have their visas renewed.

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**Press freedom foundation accuses Colombia of 'collective censorship' of foreign journalists**

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Fortunately, foreign journalists are well organized and can count on strong support from press freedom foundations, international organizations and our embassies who do support free press and have and will protect us. All efforts to obstruct our work have failed.

However, it is clear that the Duque administration has turned hostile on both local and foreign media and our job to inform you as accurately as possible is going to be a tough job for the coming years.

So be it. We never expected our job to be easy.

Journalists have a thick skin and are relatively stress-resistant. We'll just have to adapt to this revival of Colombia's traditional culture of state repression of free press, which is considered a basic human rights by the United Nations, and continue doing what we've always done.

PRESS FREEDOM