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Coming through customs at Cancun, Mexico, I noticed how streamlined the passage to Washington/Bogota-bound flights was. Plan Colombia, conceived as a US\$7 billion antidrug and antiguerrilla military aid since 2000 to grease US geo-strategic relations and clean Colombia of “subversive” presence, was evident in the ease with which I slipped into that country. This was one border post the Colombian National Army appeared not to need to police so vigorously. And just as well, for without a work permit my arrival as a foreign journalist intent on digging deeper into the conflict zones and Colombian media would have raised unnecessary interest in quarters responsible for that country’s reputation as one of the most dangerous places on earth.

On a Fulbright Fellowship to the University of Maryland, I was researching the viability of community media models in the US, but my investigation led me to the recognition of the very compromised nature of that media, and I was keen to identify examples of good practice.

The indigenous media of Colombia have survived an escalating conflict in the countryside. These media use a range of technologies and discourses to inform and mobilise an indigenous population of less than a million, a minority left over from 500 years of more-or-less systematic genocide perpetrated by colonial and neo-colonial occupation. And they also articulate their work with Afro-Colombian communities and other sectors of society opposed to government policies.

Indigenous media form an organising and mobilising voice co-ordinating the ideologies and activities of a resistance that has come to represent a thorn in the side of a government intent on plundering the social and raw capital of Colombia, often with the assistance and to the benefit of international interests.

Colombia is ruled by a broad neo-liberal consensus, firmly committed, on one hand, to a laissez faire capitalism that sees indigenous populations as mere hindrances to profit, and on the other, a cosy and lucrative relationship with the US (and its misconceived and ineffectual war on drugs).

Also, Colombia lives with the consequences of a 40-year-long conflict split between warring groups which include the National Army, assisted in an underhand way by private paramilitary groups, against the marxist-guevarist FARC, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, in a context of increasing narco-trafficking. As the military is constitutionally entrusted with providing security for transnational corporations, military action against FARC puts indigenous populations firmly in the cross fire.

*Los medios de comunicación indígenas en el fuego cruzado*, “indigenous media in the cross fire”, was then to become my primary research focus. Using video as a research tool to record interviews and to broker personal interaction with my case study participants, I was faced with a seemingly

insurmountable challenge: to communicate with them in Spanish. I turned to Laurence Mazure with whom I had worked extensively in South Africa in the 1990s. Working mainly in print for *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Mazure has been covering the Colombian story from Bogota for the last decade. She was ideally suited to tune me into the oppositional readings of a society depicted by the Colombian government as Latin America’s success story.

In the next few weeks we traversed the Andes, gathering material for Mazure’s print articles and my research documentary from the media projects which we felt would best describe the nuances of the Colombian mediascape.

Our research journey started in Bogota and moved over the Andes to the distant South West region of Cauca, to the cities of Popayan and Santander de Quilichao, as well as the rural town

of Belalcazar. This region hosts indigenous populations under military threat. Parts of Cauca, for example, have become no-go areas under control of the military in hot pursuit after FARC leader Cano, and killings in this region have escalated.

Our case studies included commercial community TV stations, rural and urban indigenous media projects, underground graffiti culture, ethnographic film-makers, alternative documentary film-makers and critical media academics.

We investigated political assassination of indigenous leaders and the court processes of their murderers, an in-depth analysis of traditional indigenous culture and political economy in the traditional indigenous strong-hold Belalcazar, and the role of indigenous Andean cosmology and its influence on the practice of community journalism.

In addition, practices of disaster management and their relationship to the problem of environmental degradation and the role of transnational corporations in that damage were used as a tangible example of indigenous media’s role in opposition to neo-liberalism.

A historical analysis of the indigenous peoples’ movement in terms of the phenomenon of the *minga* (non-violent protest marches and political mobilisation) forms a contrasting backdrop to patterns of neo-liberal market-driven media consumption in mainstream Colombian society.

Unanticipated and divergent perceptions and descriptions of the role of a journalist in Colombian society, and its relationship to the challenges of sustainable community media models were explored with the producers of these media products.

Finally, lessons we could learn for their applicability to African contexts were explored with a view to highlighting successful responses by media which habitually find themselves having to work in hostile environments.

Speaking to *comunicadores* (“communicators”), as indigenous community media workers call themselves, I found their stories ranged from the most basic difficulties faced in their work such as exorbitant transmission fees, the sabotage of transmitters by actors in the conflict, and the harassment of communicators in the field.

But their stories also cut deeper, with tales of murder and forced removal from their lands, always with the official aspersion that indigenous people collude with rebels, are not committed to a new Colombia and are in some way responsible for their own predicament. Because communicators see their media work as just another aspect of their communitarianism, they live an existence where the war on an independent media in Colombia is bound up in the circumstances of their lives in general, that of an incessant war.

One communicator spoke not only about her station’s transmitter being blown up by FARC, but also her fears for the safety of her family and community. A man crying over the displacement of his family following a rebel attack, was all the more distraught because he now stands accused by the National Army of collaboration with these same rebels.

A leading, outspoken and critical TV journalist awarded a Nieman Fellowship to Harvard explained how he was targeted by phone- and mail-tapping and death threats perpetrated illegally by the secret services.

An academic told of the frustration of teaching students from the elite who genuinely abhor critical thinking as unpatriotic, and of a society which uses news as justification of a national narrative bearing no resemblance to reality.

We saw full-scale police and army violence against peaceful indigenous marchers, their dead, and their wounded, while, in between the shootings, indigenous communicators challenged their actions with vox pops on the front-line, cameras rolling.

To capture research interviews and some of the contexts on video, has been a very powerful way of working. In the process I came to agreements with interviewees for the rights to include their media products in the documentary, so their images are used either for their explanatory value, or are subjected to analysis as media texts.

The research process captured in the 72-minute documentary production now continues in the editing and write up of these findings, as a process of self-reflection and analysis, where my own emerging understandings are constantly interrogated, and shaped.