

COLLABORATION ENHANCES THE STORY

The collaboration with Paul Hills for the research documentary on Colombia, *Media in the Cross Fire*, has been a unique opportunity to reflect more deeply on collaborative journalistic practices in the context of one of the worlds' most complex and under-reported long term conflicts.

We did not work within the usual hierarchical "correspondent/stringer" paradigm, but within the framework of a co-operative and reciprocal collaboration.

This was actually an extension of the type of work we had already done in South Africa in the early 90s when we ran a foreign correspondents' office on an alternative logic: journalists from different countries and types of media (some did print and radio, others, television, for both small and major channels) shared access to their primary sources of information together without the usual worry of petty individual competition, just as they shared logistics and costs, too. When, for example, a print journalist worked with a TV crew on a specific story, they shared travelling costs and access to various sources, while remaining obviously free to angle their respective reports without fear of interference or redundancy.

The shared logistics enhanced their way of being creatively complementary rather than pettily competitive towards each other: as a result, their shared dialogues also enriched their experience and understanding of "the story".

Our team in Colombia functioned like that again at the level of our two-person crew: Paul's focus on the political economy and discourses of Colombian community media, more specifically, indigenous media, was really an academic topic. His medium, television, is different from mine – print. I started the pre-production doing what is routine for me: contacts with a broad range of interlocutors, and gathering leads which I knew I could use to convince my own clients to take reports on some general interest topics. Being the only Spanish speaker of the two, my linguistic skills helped our team establish a valuable dialogue with our interlocutors and facilitate our mutual understandings and positions.

This co-operative and collaborative organisation of work also proved to be particularly appropriate to access, on the ground, the realities of community media whose equally co-operative and collaborative structures are re-enforced by the specifics of having to work in the middle of an armed conflict.

This has to do with the fact that, in Colombia, community and alternative media have the closest and most direct access to the situations causing the conflict as well as resulting from it: these media and their workers live and work in the marginalised urban and rural areas where the conflict unfolds its crudest militarised and economic manifestations.

When, for instance, (as reported by Pax Christi in the Tolima region <http://www.ikvpaxchristi.nl/files/Documenten/LA%20Colombia/Cajamarca%20rapport%20Spaans.pdf>), South African mining transnational Anglo Gold Ashanti does not fulfill environmental procedures, alternative and indigenous community media are there, reporting on and following up the alleged dirty tricks used by AGA along with the legal armed forces and paramilitary groups, to intimidate communities and forcibly access their land.

Our co-operative and collaborative way of working also helped equalise the playing field of the extensive dialogues and in-depth interviews we held with our interlocutors, thus strengthening crucial reciprocal trust in a context as delicate as that of the conflict. This mutual trust allowed us to push our investigation quite far, thus exploring the links between specific organisational forms of community/alternative media with their unique proximity with the armed conflict and its underlying macro-economics, and critical reflection produced by these media.

Apart from the collaboration with Paul for the documentary, the whole pre-production/production process also allowed me to file three major double-page stories on the destabilisation of Colombia by mining transnationals – for Belgium daily *La Libre Belgique* (accessed, with European Union institutions, by employees and civil servants of 27 countries), for Swiss daily *Le Courrier*, and for international monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique* which insures a translation into English of its original French articles. A confidential newsletter with which I have been collaborating for a long time, *Risques Internationaux – Nord Sud Experts*, also benefited from an economic angle on the same topic.

Colombia provides a good example as to why the political economy and the sustainability of alternative and indigenous community media is actually a strategic question. Beyond the specificities of Colombia, the status of alternative and community media might well provide an accurate insight on the strategic issues at stake in the daily lives of common citizens, and the level of willingness of governments and economic groups, to hear about them.

