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ABSTRACT:

Since peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the country´s leftist Farc guerrillas began in 2012, it is generally accepted in the country that journalism has a responsibility to nurture peace and that the media can positively influence reconciliation in the aftermath of violence. But a recent analysis of domestic news coverage of the conflict concluded that the voices of victims were distinctly absent and that the overwhelming majority of Colombian news coverage involved official sources. This paper argues that a journalism intended to promote peace and reconciliation must include a wider range of voices and more specifically speak to those who have direct experience of conflict and the suffering it can inflict. In particular, we argue that a deeper understanding of trauma may help to strengthen resilience in both individuals and society, and ultimately contribute to peacebuilding. Drawing on the authors' research project working with young people embroiled in Colombia's civil conflict, the paper explores an alternative and innovative approach to the retelling of the stories of others and to post conflict reporting. At a broad societal level, the project aimed to make a contribution to the process of reconciliation in Colombia, using an autobiographical approach to capture and re-construct the participants' first-hand experiences of the conflict and to highlight the challenges of re-integration. It presented their hopes for peace and reconciliation through animation and the creation of a short, animated documentary. At a journalistic level, the project set out to explore the efficacy of combining traditional methods of storytelling with animation technology to offer anonymity to vulnerable contributors of testimony. The paper describes the research project and reflects on the challenges of working with vulnerable children and of telling their stories in a way that can promote the reintegration of marginalised individuals and groups into society.

Key words: Colombia; conflict; peace building; trauma; voice; vulnerable people

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RETHINKING JOURNALISM PRACTICE THROUGH INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO POST CONFLICT REPORTING

Introduction

Since peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the country´s leftist Farc guerrillas[1] began in 2012, it is generally accepted in the country that journalism has a responsibility to nurture peace (Gehring, 2014: 6) and that the media can positively influence reconciliation in the aftermath of violence (Yamshon & Yamshon, 2006: 422). But a recent analysis of domestic news coverage of the Colombian conflict concluded that the voices of victims were distinctly absent and that the overwhelming majority of Colombian news coverage involved official sources from the Ministry of Defence and other state institutions (Serrano, 2014, 2015). This paper argues that a journalism intended to promote peace and reconciliation must include a wider range of voices and more specifically speak to those who have direct experience of conflict and the suffering it can inflict. In particular, we argue that a deeper understanding of trauma may help to strengthen resilience in both individuals and society, and ultimately contribute to peacebuilding (Howard, 2009; Newman and Nelson, 2012).

Drawing on the authors' research project working with young people embroiled in Colombia's civil conflict, the paper explores an alternative and innovative approach to the retelling of the stories of others and to post conflict reporting. The project, entitled *The Tree of Love*, involved a series of workshops with 25 children and young people between the ages of 9 and 24 from the remote indigenous Nasa community in Jambaló, Cauca, more than 500 km from the capital Bogotá. All of the participants had experience of conflict and some had direct involvement with the armed groups as combatants.

At a broad societal level, the project, funded by the UK government's Global Challenges Research Fund, aimed to make a contribution to the process of reconciliation in Colombia after 50 years of civil conflict that led to the marginalisation of countless communities and individuals. It used an autobiographical approach to capture and re-construct the participants'

[1] Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) was formed in 1964.

first-hand experiences of the conflict and to highlight the challenges of re-integration. It presented their hopes for peace and reconciliation through animation and the creation of a short, animated documentary. The film, in turn, aims to promote the social inclusion of children who have been exploited and marginalised. It is hoped this can be used widely as a tool for peace-building education and inter-generational dialogue and there was a significant first success when the film was accepted as audio/visual testimony by the Colombian Truth and Reconciliation Commission[2].

At a journalistic level, the project set out to explore the efficacy of combining traditional methods of storytelling with animation technology to offer anonymity to vulnerable contributors of testimony, while also building narratives of empathy and immersion. The intersections between technologies, modes of visual representation, documentary, and ethnographic research aimed to inspire academic engagement with new modes of documenting histories, lived experiences, and personal memory beyond the written word or photographic image.

It is widely acknowledged that peace-building occurs at the local level and is sustained through people-centred approaches. But the World Bank (2006) estimates that, on average, countries emerging from hostilities have a 40% chance of relapsing into conflict within five years and around half of all civil wars are due to post-conflict relapses (Brown et al. 2011). Peace-building strategies which promote social inclusion are therefore vital to ensure Colombia's path to peace. This paper describes the research project and reflects on the challenges of working with vulnerable children and of telling their stories in a way that can promote the reintegration of marginalised individuals and groups into society.

Post conflict Colombia

A report carried out for the Colombian government in 2014 concluded that the country's internal conflict killed 260,000 people between 1958 and 2012. Perhaps one of the most alarming facts about these statistics is that 80% of these victims were civilians. The number of people internally displaced by the fighting is 6.9 million, the highest in the world (UN, 2018; Centro Nacional de Memoría Historica, 2014).

[2] The commission was created as part of the 2016 peace agreement.

During the years of internal conflict many marginal communities across Colombia were occupied by leftist rebels or ultra-right-wing paramilitaries. In 2017, Colombia's largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the Farc, demobilised and the Colombian government entered negotiations with the National Liberation Army, the ELN[3], the second largest guerrilla group in the country. These negotiations are currently suspended with disagreement over how to proceed.

There is no doubt that peace in Colombia faces many obstacles – violence is endemic and the peace process is fragile. Clashes between rival groups competing to fill the vacuum left by Farc are responsible for an increasing number of people being forcibly displaced, reaching a total of 18,000 by 2018, according to the UN.

Child soldiers

One of the characteristics of Colombia's conflict – and the subject of this research project – has been the recruitment of minors by armed groups. Estimates of how many children were actually recruited vary greatly, ranging from up to 18,000 (by the Farc alone) to some 37,000 (based on government figures) (Bjorkhaug, 2010). Child soldiers are defined as "...any child – boy or girl – under the age of 18 who is compulsory, forcibly, voluntarily recruited or otherwise used in hostilities by armed forces, paramilitaries, civil defence units or other armed groups."

Child soldiers are used for sexual services, as forced 'wives', as insurgents, messengers, porters or cooks (Machel, 2000). Although as a research team we have used the term 'child soldier' it does not fully take into account the lived experience of conflict by children living on the margins of society. Indeed, in a recent paper, Roshani (2016: 2) argues for expanding the current outlook on children's experiences in the Colombian conflict beyond child soldiering to include "informants, reporting, resource acquisition, forced migration/displacement, voluntary conscription, and a myriad other occupations" in order to successfully design and implement policies and practices for child protection and peace building efforts.

[3] The ELN, Ejército de Liberación Nacional, was also formed in 1964.

The recruitment of children into non-state violent armed groups has traditionally been divided into two types: those who are forced and those who join voluntarily. Normally children's recruitment into non-state armed groups has been viewed as a result of poverty, family violence and lack of education (Brett & Specht, 2004; Brett, 2003; Wessels, 2006; Burgess, 2009). The children are therefore described as passive victims of actions conducted by adults. In reality, most cases of recruitment take place in the "grey zone" between voluntary and forced recruitment, and the children make their choice based on the information available at the time of recruitment (Bjorkhaug, 2010).

Honwana (2006:4) argues that children affected by conflict, both girls and boys, do not constitute a homogeneous group of helpless victims but exercise choices that are shaped by their particular experiences and circumstances. In situations where people find themselves exposed to extreme situations, they still find the ability to contest and to negotiate within the social and emotional sources they have available and are therefore able to cope with the most dreadful circumstances (de Smedt, 1998). People living in conflict areas were in close contact with the guerrilla and the paramilitary. The children did not necessarily fear for their own safety as the armed groups acted as a protecting force within the communities they were in control of. After fighting near a village, Farc would visit the local schools and escort the children back to their homes in order to keep them safe. On other occasions the guerrilla or the paramilitary would arrange celebrations and festivals that increased their popularity. The Colombian government currently runs two separate demobilisation programmes for former child soldiers.

Journalism's controversial role in post conflict reporting

Journalism has a long history of interviewing vulnerable people caught up in natural disasters, conflict or tragedy and it is widely recognised that journalists have an important role to play in telling the stories of those traumatised by such events. The concepts of 'journalism of attachment' or 'peace journalism', often raised in the context of the Balkans conflicts of the 1990s or of the Colombian civil war, have frequently elicited a negative reaction in traditional Anglo-American journalistic circles. But it is important to note that in Colombia, away from the media world of the 'global North', views have been far more receptive.

In the West, such concepts appear to be at odds with journalism's normative values of objectivity and particularly those of detachment and impartiality. Indeed, as Richards and Rees have observed, these values still exert a powerful, almost talismanic influence (2011). BBC correspondent Martin Bell coined the term 'journalism of attachment' at the height of the Balkans conflict, speaking of a journalism that "cares as well as knows" (1996). He dismissed objectivity as an illusion and a shibboleth, complaining it produced "bystander journalism" (ibid: 16). With emotions in the war running high, Bell argued that journalism could not stand neutral between right and wrong or good and evil (ibid). In fact, such arguments have a long tradition, from the esteemed BBC reporter Richard Dimbleby's passionate coverage of the liberation of the Belsen death camp in 1945 to CNN's Christiane Amanpour. She also covered the siege of Sarajevo and does not go as far as dismissing objectivity *per se* but also posits that not every side in a conflict should be treated equally. In the case of Bosnia, she argued against setting up a moral equivalence between the aggressor and victim, saying the West had a duty to stop the Serbs (1996). At the heart of Amanpour's argument is the assertion that there is no contradiction between a journalist being objective and attached or 'caring.' Bell's reporting from the Balkans led to condemnation by some of his BBC colleagues, not least David Loyn who argued that abandoning the ideals of impartiality or being "liberated from the yoke of objectivity" risks becoming lost in moral relativism that threatens the whole business of reporting (2003).

Essentially, the BBC closed ranks and Bell's journalism of attachment was considered to be unacceptable and not compatible with its values. A similar fate befell what became known as 'peace journalism', a concept based on Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick's 2005 book of the same name. The authors argued that peace journalism "is when editors and reporters make choices – of what stories to cover and about how to report them – that create opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent responses to conflict." Traditional journalism or "war journalism", they argue, drawing on work by the peace studies expert Johan Galtung, has a bias towards violence. But for many journalists rooted in normative values, such a concept implies journalists becoming active participants in a conflict, reporting in a way that is designed to encourage peace making. Again, one of its fiercest critics was the BBC's Loyn, himself a veteran foreign correspondent steeped in the experience of reporting the conflicts of the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq. In a critique of Lynch and McGoldrick, Loyn wrote that journalists need to preserve their role as observers rather than players, adding (2007):

> "The peace journalism approach describes an active participation that is simply not the role of a journalist and is based on a flawed notion that the world would be a better place if we reported wars in a certain prescribed way, encouraging peace-makers rather than reporting warriors."

In Colombia, views on peace journalism diverge substantially from the dominant debate in the global North. As Jésus Arroyave and Marta Milena Barrios write (2012: 401), "there has been no such thing as an independent press in Colombia." The impartiality that has emerged did not give rise to the neutrality which at times has held sway in European schools of journalism. The development of objectivity has instead taken the form of balancing sources and accuracy and there is an acceptance that both personal and editorial preferences inevitably slant news (Waisbord 2000a, 2000b). Arroyave et al. argue (2007) that these can be seen as positive developments which distinguish the country's journalistic tradition. This honesty combined with the contribution of authors and poets to journalism in Colombia gave birth to a literary form of reportage in the country. This is the *cronica*, which is indeed a popular genre across Latin America and a regular feature of J-school curricula on the continent. This style has been able to more easily influence public opinion because it is "more carefully read" (Arroyave and Barrios 2012: 400), yet it has also resulted in the development of what they call "a special type of advocacy reporting":

> "Colombia's continuing struggle with large-scale social, economic, and cultural contradiction has led many journalists to develop a special style of advocacy reporting that goes beyond normal news coverage. Instead, journalists tend to take part in solving community problems, in some cases by pressuring public officials, and in other cases by asking the private sector for support."

In a 2014 survey of regional and local reporters in Colombia, 80% believed they should be promoting reconciliation, but only 61% said they were actually doing so. The President of Colombia´s Federation of Journalists (FECOLPER), Adriana Hurtado, believes that the reason many reporters are unable to promote reconciliation is because there is what she calls "an over-reliance on the state and its official sources" (Hurtado 2018). Hurtado concludes that local and regional journalists need to include a wider range of voices in their work if they are to truly promote peace. As if to address this problem, a 2014 manual for Colombian journalists on how

to promote reconciliation uses the work of Roberto Herrscher (2012) who defines five essential elements of "narrative journalism": (1) voice; (2) the vision of others; (3) the way in which the character's voice takes form; (4) revelatory detail; and (5) story selection (Morello Martínez 2014: 52). It also draws on Ryszard Kapuscinski's (2005) work, "The Five Senses of the Journalist", which he defines as: (1) to be; (2) see; (3) listen; (4) share; and (5) think. To this, Colombian investigative journalist Gina Morello adds a sixth sense: "feel" (2014: 50). The manual also stresses the importance of investigative journalism and the *crónica* as defined above. There is a sense that this form of longform journalism has greater potential to connect to the audience than straightforward news reporting.

Globally, across the North and South, the debate has also begun to encompass what could be termed more emotionally literate reporting, a concept that has been promoted by the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, a global charitable project now located at the Columbia School of Journalism in New York.[4] Dart's work focuses partly on how covering disaster, conflict and other distressing news stories can have a traumatic impact, including full blown Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), on journalists. It also explores how journalists can report responsibly and ethically on traumatic news stories and, as part of this, cover communities caught up in tragedy. One of the key principles fostered by Dart is that victims and survivors of violence can sometimes benefit from telling their stories to journalists but that this can also lead to re-traumatisation as an event or period is retold and thus reexperienced. Dart places emphasis on recognising the vulnerability of victims, especially children, stating: "When gathering information from children and/or youth, be aware that your interview and the published story could have a real impact on them." Dart is also clear that communities can recover from trauma. Ripley (2009) notes that a "community narrative" is often the very beginning of recovery but much work remains to be done in terms of understanding journalism's contribution. As Elana Newman, Dart's research director at the University of Tulsa, and Summer Nelson observe (2012: 31), there is a need to "systematically discover how news coverage can help or hinder a community´s recovery process."

Based on our long-standing experience of conflict reporting, both as journalists in the field and academics, and on our knowledge of the literature on peace reporting, we formulated the following research questions for the project:

[4] One of the authors of this paper, xxxx, is a trustee and chair of the Dart Center's European operations.

RQ1: Is there an alternative journalistic approach to telling the stories of vulnerable people?

RQ2: Can traditional methods of storytelling and new methods be combined?

RQ3: Can this approach form a more general tool for reporting on marginalised communities which could be used in the process of post conflict reconciliation?

Methods

In order to choose a site of study, the research team worked with a charity, the Norwegian Refugee Council (see below). They helped identify an indigenous community in Jambaló, home to the Nasa people where large numbers of former child soldiers were being re-integrated into the community. It is in one of the country's 125 priority zones in "post-conflict" or "post-peace agreement", areas identified by the UN as key to establishing sustainable peace and receive specific funding. Jambaló has had a presence of both the Farc and the ELN guerrillas, as well as paramilitary groups and the armed forces. For many years, it was caught in the crossfire. In July 1985, 200 guerrillas arrived in the town and killed 11 people in a massacre. Today social leaders and teachers are threatened by dissident Farc groups and criminal neo-paramilitary gangs. Officially there have been 64 cases of forced recruitment in Jambaló, but locals say the real figure is actually in the hundreds as most cases have never been reported.

In 2001, tired of being in the crossfire, the Nasa community formed their own community security force. Armed with nothing but *bastones de mando* — wooden sticks with green and red tassels — they have tried to force all the armed actors, including the military, out of their territory. The Indigenous Guard is comprised of community volunteers who, supervised by the cabildo (autonomous indigenous village council), patrol the village and maintain order at public events. They have become ubiquitous in Nasa communities. Individuals from all walks of life can and do become guards. Several of the young children participating in our workshop belonged to the Guard.

It was therefore important to understand that Jambaló is ruled by its own laws and customs. Indigenous territories, called *resguardos*, are distinct legal entities under Colombian law, and as a result, gaining access meant winning the trust of elders through a series of preliminary

meetings and working closely with three charities which had a track record of engagement in the community:

- The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), an independent humanitarian organisation helping people forced to flee. They have implemented several prevention schemes around Colombia.

- Fondación Fahrenheit 451 is an organisation that uses literature to promote human rights and engage with marginalised communities.

- Fondación Tyet is a charity that promotes the rights of indigenous communities, particularly women and children.

Once permission had been granted by the elders, and ethical approval had been secured from xxxxxxxxx University's research ethics panel (see below), the team's field researcher, xxxxx xxxxx[5], together with workers from the charities, were able to conduct three workshops in a local school.[6] There was a total of 25 participants in our project, aged between 9 and 24. Five of them had been directly involved with the Farc guerrilla, two of whom are currently involved in the official demobilisation programme. These five were aged between 13 and 19. The other 20 were made up of ten young people (aged between 16 and 24) interested in a media career and who had completed a diploma in animation, and 10 children from two nearby primary schools (aged between 9 and 12). All had grown up in a context of violent conflict. Only one had demobilised through the government's formal programmes. Most were demobilised with the assistance and support of the Indigenous Guard.

The team on the ground worked with the children and young people to capture and re-construct the participants' first-hand experiences of the conflict with the ultimate goal of them producing a short, animated film to help in the process of their reintegration into society. The first workshop, in September 2018, introduced participants to basic animation using Adobe Photoshop and After Effects. Participants also engaged in narrative and storytelling exercises. In the second workshop, held later in the same month, participants developed their final script

[5] Working at that time at xxxxxx University.
[6] The name has been withheld to protect the identity of the participants.

based on the initial stories from the first workshop and completed the storyboard according to the script. The third workshop in October 2018 focused on illustration and animation.

Issues of voice

In seeking to access the voices of the indigenous community, it was important to avoid the idea of 'giving voice' which, despite the nobility of its aim, can perpetuate hierarchies and 'top down' approaches to storytelling. Vietnamese film maker, Trinh Min Ha stresses the imperative of 'speaking nearby' rather than 'speaking about' as an ethical stance: 'an attitude in life, a way of positioning oneself in relation to the world' (Min Ha in Chen, 1992: 87). In this way, the life within an artefact (in this research project the animated film) is sustained by staying close to the source (the film's creators within the community) rather than the film being used 'an instrument of thought', a vehicle to 'speak about' their situation. Hence, the decision not to use interview as a methodological tool was key to this research aim – the participants told their *own* stories through production of artefacts: drawings, writing stories and poetry culminating in *their own* animation.

As Western observers, it was also crucial to avoid the dangers of 'othering' whereby we see 'others through the prism of our own background and our own cultural pre-conceptions and often through stereotype' (Keane, 2018). Questions of voice are complex and multi-layered; Sigal (2016) counsels a focus on listening rather than 'giving voice' to as wide and diverse a range of voices as possible. Consequently, in the animated film, teachers, psychologists and community workers all play their part, offering contributions in separate spaces to the children and young people, that provide context and deeper understanding. As a project seeking to promote peace and reconciliation, this inclusive approach focused on listening also contributed to the credibility and 'buy in' to the project - it was key to building trust between researchers and participants, as well as within the community. As journalists functioning as researchers, we were crucially aware that we are relied on to 'provide a fair and accurate account, but that we also have our own voice.' As for journalism 'the shibboleth of objectivity requires detachment, but audience engagement requires empathic, connected storytelling' (Jukes and Fowler-Watt, 2019: 19-20), so too for the output from the research project – in aiming to build reconciliation, it needed to connect people and required self-reflexive engagement throughout the production process

Ethical challenges

These considerations of voice and building trust ran like a red line through the project and shaped its design. It presented a range of ethical challenges, which we sought to mitigate from the outset and throughout the workshops and post-production period, employing a dynamic approach involving regular conversations between Colombia and the UK, sharing of ideas and reviews within the research team. The ethical challenges fell into seven main categories:

1. Institutional: working with vulnerable young people and children required a particularly detailed and thorough submission to the university's research ethics panel. This project was approved by xxxxxxx University's Research Ethics Panel for Social Sciences and Humanities. All of the participants were asked for informed consent and were assured of anonymity.
2. Mutual understanding: it was crucial for us to seek to understand the needs of the community to build peace and re-integration. But how could we do this?
    a) By spending time and listening.
    b) On the ground support (for researcher and participants)
    c) 'Back at base' support
3. Direct relationships: researcher and researched could blur lines and incur the danger of friendship narratives' as they grew closer though the iterative workshops. This could toxify the final outputs, and also incurred potential issues of loss and guilt for the researchers[7] as they left the participants behind.
4. The immersive approach: Our mantra, '*Their voices. Their stories. Their animation!*' presents a range of ethical issues, particularly in editing and post-production. We also needed to be careful not to 'aggrandise' the participants' or - a particular danger with this project - to 'induce shame, narcissism' (Josselson, 2005: 335).

To mitigate the dangers of 3) and 4) regular Skype team meetings were supplemented and informed by written diaries from the researcher working on the ground. These comprised a detailed and self-reflexive journal and a field report reviewing the workshops. The team in Jambalo (NGOs, researcher, support workers) had a daily debrief. ~~These~~ This extract~~s~~ from the

[7] Journalist Janine Di Giovanni has written about the guilt she felt when she left Syria to join UNHCR, only to return as a reporter few years later, guilt that she had survived and had not succeeded in ending the war. See: Di Giovanni, J., 2016. *Dispatches from Syria: The morning they came for us* London: Bloomsbury

field report (xxxxx, 2019) highlights the importance of the system of mutual support and of the affordances of talking and writing about personal feelings and experiences:

> "Working with the children made me incredibly happy and even though I also often felt
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>
> "Working with the children made me incredibly happy and even though I also often felt incredibly saddened by their experiences, I miss the intensity, the humour and the closeness of the community we created. We became a family, if only for a short time."

5. Memory, trauma and reflection: we were acutely aware of the dangers of taking people back into memory and of its temporal quality, shaping and forming the stories that are recounted (Gudmundsdottir, 1996). This field report extract (xxxxx, 2019) illustrates the challenges faced by the team:

   > "We all found the stories of sexual abuse and forced abortion most difficult to handle, but these accounts created an overwhelming sense of responsibility among us, which somehow shadowed the distress. And frankly, if the children could share these experiences so eloquently and with such bravery, it dwarfs any pain and suffering we might feel by listening to them."

The researcher in Colombia was trained in trauma awareness and PTSD and refreshed these skills prior to the workshops. The participants were supported by a psychologist who was available to them throughout the research process.

6. Tensions between the aims of the project and participants: sometimes the research team had to intervene to deal with emotional issues, fits of temper etc. A key part of the informed consent process allows participants to withdraw and any interventions took place in this context.[8] Sometimes there were tensions between the NGOs and the

[8] Extract from Field report: *Initial divisions among the participants were overcome – we ensured the pairs were equally divided between the two groups of participants, and that everyone was able to comment and share their thoughts. At the end of the day, we had a discussion about the value of listening to others' experiences.*

research team, these also needed careful management and the regular reports 'back to base' were helpful here in ironing out issues.

7. Feelings of guilt and/or realisation: some of the participants were ex-combatants and the research project brought them face-to-face with the acts of violence that they had experienced and/or committed. These were also shared with the wider group, so the building of trust, mutual reliance and a focus on the key tenets of reconciliation were integral to the workshops

In seeking to stay as close as possible to the voices of the children, through employing deeply self-reflexive strategies, the research team also sought to avoid marginalisation. The children involved in the project were already marginalised by virtue of their lived experience, location and context and there were further issues of marginality and hierarchy within the group (some of the participants were ex-combatants, which caused tensions and division). On the ground the researchers sought to mitigate these through, for example, careful handling of the ways in which stories were shared (some of the participants were shocked and upset by the experiences of the ex-combatants), through a flexible approach to roles and levels of engagement and through finding a 'neutral' location outside for the drawing and script writing to take place (under the tree of love – see below). These constituted 'soft' approaches to intervention, (see 6 above) which fed into the key imperative of building trust whilst avoiding 'top down' or directive action.

Running the workshops

Through the workshops, the basis of a short, animated film emerged. It tells the story of a young boy and a young girl, both Nasa. The film tracks each of their journeys from pre-involvement with the guerrillas to their demobilisation. The script was voiced by two teenagers from Jambaló and one of the ex-combatants wrote a rap to accompany the film. The title of the film, *The Tree of Love*, refers to a very large tree, which sits on a hill behind the school. It is a focal point for the community, a place where friends and lovers meet, and where the students spend much of their free time when at school. It is a place where "friends share secrets", according to one of our participants.

The animation and illustration workshops took place in a dedicated classroom, away from the main school building, this provided some privacy. The narrative workshops usually took place outside under the Tree of Love. Our aim was to create a space in which we could build trust and confidence with the participants.

Participants experimented with various forms of animation and illustration from the outset. The idea was to explore different styles and choose the most appropriate. In the end, it was decided that a "collage" approach best suited our intended blend of fiction and non-fiction. Some of the work produced can be viewed here (link removed)

In the first workshop, it was important to bring all ages together, so the participants worked in pairs (10 primary schoolchildren paired with 10 older participants) to storyboard a 30-second short film that portrayed an issue, custom or tradition that was important to them. We asked them to take pictures of objects and the environment to use in their animations, but also to obtain visual and cultural references of where they live. Participants were asked to paint or draw important figures from their community. They painted their parents, the Indigenous Guard, but also soldiers, or at least men in uniform. The younger children did not distinguish between Colombia's armed forces and the guerrillas. Interestingly, one of the female ex-FARC combatants did not know the difference between the ELN (guerrilla) and the paramilitaries. They were simply "the enemy". She had little understanding of the ideology behind the conflict. This was in stark contrast to the male ex-combatants, who very articulately would attack neo-liberal values and multinational involvement in Colombia.

In the second workshop, participants were asked to design a cover or poster for the final film. This was intended to choose the design for our main object – The Tree of Love. Then all participants worked in pairs and divided up the scenes to create a detailed storyboard for each. A team of illustrators began to work on drawing the main characters. The second workshop ended with the production of the animatic.

In the third and final workshop, participants worked in pairs to illustrate and animate the scenes.

Storytelling and Narrative

The first narrative workshop began with a general discussion about the link between literature, peace and collective memory. Participants were given a letter from a former child soldier and

told to write a reply reflecting on their own experiences of conflict. These replies were shared with the facilitators, but not with the group as a whole. We felt it was first important for us to build a one-to-one relationship with them as facilitators before introducing a group dynamic. We did not tell them we knew they had experience of direct involvement with armed groups. We wanted this to come from them directly and from the trust, which we hoped to build. The children did not share this information on the first day. In fact, it was not until the human cartography exercise when this information was revealed (see below). Most of the initial stories recounted by the ex-combatants included narratives of "my friend" or "my neighbour", which we would later learn was in fact actually about themselves.

The girls opened up more quickly. They formed a bond with the female facilitators, but it would be a few days before they felt comfortable sharing their experiences with the male facilitators. The boys tended to open up more outside of the formal workshop spaces. They would seek out the male facilitators and strike up conversation to continue work, which had begun in the more formal setting. Often stories are told verbally and not written down. However, reading and writing are key elements in confidence building and empowerment. For those of us who read and write easily, writing down our stories can help clarify what we want to say. For others who find reading and writing difficult, writing their stories down, often with help from others, can be a way of learning new words and practicing writing, but more importantly, it can be a way of validating their thoughts and experiences. They too can see their own thoughts on paper, however simply expressed, and experience a sense of pride in communicating their thoughts through text.

Another of the principal exercises involved participants being asked to write about an object that was important to them. This exercise revealed themes of pain, loss, ambition and love. Such themes also emerged when participants were invited to write about their relationship with the environment and the world they live in. The ex-combatants among the group produced a life-size map of their bodies using human cartography methodology. They were asked to make links between their bodies and the armed conflict. They were then asked to present their maps to other members of their small group. This was the first time the students revealed their direct experiences of involvement with the guerrilla and in one case the paramilitaries. It was a very effective way of enabling the participants to draw on particular memories and experiences, without asking them to build a coherent narrative, which was often more of a challenge, especially within the time constraints. Human cartography embodies the "literacy friendly"

approach advocated by many civil society organisations, which have used storytelling as a method in contexts of conflict and violence in Africa. This exercise solicited tales of murder, imprisonment, sexual assault and slavery, among other themes.

All of the children and young people were given texts written by ex-combatants, which focused on death and loss. They were then asked to write their own short stories of how conflict has affected them personally. The ex-combatants often worked separately. They were asked to use the seasons to create a timeline of their lives. This helped participants share major events, but also to cluster or group their experiences against particular challenges, themes and periods of time. This was another useful exercise, which allowed participants to begin a coherent narrative of their experiences. This enabled us to identify five stages of recruitment:

- first contact with an armed group;
- involvement with the armed group;
- what happened when they were part of the armed group;
- the process of demobilisation;
- life today.

The 10 youngest children were asked to read a short poem by a child based on their experiences of living with violence. This provoked a discussion about what the children feared, and what they did to be happy and have fun. They were then asked to write short stories about the world in which they live. They were asked to write four short sentences to identify key points or key words. These were then read aloud and discussed in a "literary circle" before the children wrote another four sentences. This method was used to create short stories, which they then illustrated. This exercise solicited tales of grief, fear of dying and of how their school would be regularly caught in the crossfire as the Farc guerrilla clashed with the armed forces.

Together we read the poem *The Good Wolf* by Juan Goytislo. Then in pairs (one older participant with one child), the participants were asked to write their own version of the "upside down world", which was essentially aimed at exploring what they would change about their lives and the world in which they live. This was one of the more emotional workshops. Participants wished for a world "where cars had wings so they could escape and make new friends in a better place". Others wanted a world "where daddy didn't get drunk and hit mummy" or where they could "study and not have to work".

The pressures of the writing workshops began to show after three days. The ex-combatants began to withdraw slightly. We had to find them every morning and re-invite them to join us. Obviously, we never forced them, but participants (and facilitators) were tired and emotionally drained. We worked for shorter periods as a result.

In the second workshop, participants were asked to check that they were satisfied their contributions were anonymous. They were also asked to verify details of their stories and given the opportunity to edit and make changes. But their stories had been merged with those of the other participants and they were asked (for the first time) to read aloud texts that had not been written by them. This, surprisingly, provoked another flurry of writing, illustrating how hearing other people reading our stories can help us see our experiences from a different perspective and spark new memories. It became clear to us that storytelling can be valuable in comforting those who are mourning the departed or other kinds of loss, but also those who conceal episodes of suffering. The storyteller can benefit from feeling they are not alone; that others have "heard" their experiences. The listener can hear a story and understand events through someone else's eyes and ears. The participants wanted to add more detail. The reading aloud helped them make stronger connections between the individual contributions.

The children shared with us stories they had never shared with anyone. One participant said she had confided more in us than with her best friend and family. But such openness obviously brings risk. We needed to ensure that teachers, friends and families would not be able to learn this detail from our script or from our film. This is why we mixed experiences and stories. We placed contributions under the umbrella of two characters in order to protect our participants.

The participants chose typical Nasa names for the two characters: Sek (Sun) for the boy and A'te (Moon) for the girl. The production of the film was co-ordinated by one of the Co-Is in partnership with the principal animator. The work of the participants was reviewed and any corrections or changes were made in partnership with those in the community over the course of several months. It

was decided that additional "talking head" interviews would make a valuable addition to the film in terms of providing more context, but also in terms of emphasising the factual narrative. Creatively, these interviews produced by rotoscopy further blur the traditional boundaries of fiction and non-fiction, but perhaps more importantly, they also show evidence of the wider picture in relation to forced recruitment. It became important to show the children and young people, who participated in our project that their experiences belonged to a broader narrative of the Colombian conflict. Many of them would question why it happened to them or their community in particular and they felt alone. Indeed, in the film, A'te asks children from other regions not to "judge" them because of what has happened to them.

Collaborative narratives and storylistening

Working collaboratively on the film project with the participants from this indigenous community in the observational ways that we have described led to the development of a different approach to documenting lives and experiences. This approach emerged throughout the workshops and shaped the final production process: it embodies our commitment to stay as close to the participants' voices and stories of lived experience as possible, so that the film represents their stories, their voices, their animation. We have termed this approach to creating shared narratives of lived experience, 'storylistening'. It draws on Herrscher's (2012) five essential elements of "narrative journalism" and the views of Kapuscinski (2005) and Morello (2014) on the senses of journalism (including "feel") cited earlier in this article. The research project showed that longform narratives produced by the storylistening approach, where the researcher (or journalist) works alongside the participants (interviewees) so that their voices can be heard, could potentially engage audiences more than straight news reporting.

If translated to journalism practice, 'storylistening' could offer a more inclusive and 'bottom - up' approach to telling the stories of others. It is participatory, founded on the importance of listening and, most importantly, hearing the voices of marginalised communities and people who are disenfranchised or excluded from mainstream media narratives. This chimes with an imperative to produce journalism that listens and cares; journalism that, according to Molly de Aguiar (2018):

> "must pair trustworthy facts with trust-building practices. This means moving beyond the often extractive "community engagement" practices and toward "community collaboration."

'Storylistening's' immersive approach is in purely practical terms less suited to news journalism, with the deadline pressures of the 24/7 news cycle and the drive to create 'byte-size' stories. Certainly, short animated snapshots could illustrate and enhance a mainstream news story, but they would most likely have been created within a lengthier piece of storytelling, such as the Tree of Love film. However, the researchers do make a tentative suggestion that storylistening could transform long form storytelling and documentary journalism practice. (see reflections).

Commented [A1]: Response to Reviewer 2: re: the uses of storylistening approach within mainstream journalism and longform.

In co-creating *The Tree of Love*, we sought to avoid words such as 'enable' or 'facilitate', preferring the notion of a 'shoulder-shoulder' collaboration that "speaks nearby" (Minh-ha, 1992) to avoid marginalisation and promote inclusivity. Early reflections on the animated film, its reception in the wider community, and the sense of ownership expressed by the young film makers indicate that this mode of conveying direct testimonies had high impact.

Reflections and feedback

The project received positive media coverage in Colombia but most importantly, during a series of subsequent dissemination events in Bogota, the film was accepted as official evidence by the Colombian Truth and Reconciliation Commission.[9] It was also well-received at a preview screening in a public cinema in Bogota, where the Colombian senator for indigenous peoples, Feliciano Valencia stated that he would draw on the film in his political lobbying.

[9] After viewing the film and hearing the testimonies of some of the participants from Jambalo in September 2019, the Truth Commission published this blog post: https://comisiondelaverdad.co/actualidad/noticias/ninos-y-jovenes-relatan-sus-vivencias-en-el-conflicto This is the first audio-visual testimony they have accepted. Previously they had said that they would only accept oral or written accounts.

Un corto animado de niños que vivieron la guerra

ÁRBOL DEL AMOR" da cuenta de las violaciones a los derechos humanos perpetrados por grupos ilegales y estatales a la infancia en el Cauca. El reclutamiento, acoso, abortos forzados y jornadas extenuantes siguen siendo las realidades de decenas de menores indígenas.

The first research question we posed was whether there might be an alternative journalistic approach to telling the stories of vulnerable people. Clearly such an elaborate project conducted over a year plays a different role to ~~can be no substitute for~~ normal day-to-day news reporting. However, the project was able to bring in a wider range of unheard voices which can, in turn, be built into mainstream news reporting – particularly online -and draw attention to issues of re-integration (see above). This was evidenced shortly after completion of the animated film as the project made the front page of one of Colombia's main daily newspapers *El Espectador, 19 August 2019* (see left). The project also showed that traditional methods of storytelling could be combined with new methods such as animation. Oral story telling (arguably the oldest form) and writing were foundational to the animation project in building confidence and relationships which was essential for creation of the 'community narrative'. Diving straight into visual/pictures and animation and using these as a sole method would not have resulted in such a rich and deep piece of work. These ideas were explored further in a piece for Rising Voices section of the participatory website, Global Voices.[10]

We had also asked if this approach could form a more general tool for reporting on marginalised communities and one which could be used in the process of post conflict reconciliation. The film production workshops and the subsequent dissemination events demonstrated at first hand that the children and young adults were extremely resilient and articulate, finding their voice and listening to each other in our workshops. They were not always the fragile beings as they are sometimes portrayed. Instead they showed themselves to be adaptable and resilient in the face of great adversity. Throughout the week of dissemination events in Bogota, it was evident that the young people 'owned' their film. They presented it in

[10] See: https://rising.globalvoices.org/blog/2019/11/01/the-story-behind-el-arbol-del-amor-an-animated-documentary-from-colombias-indigenous-nasa-community/

a range of settings from the Truth Commission and a public cinema to a university seminar and a children's refuge; they engaged in workshops and educational activities to raise awareness about the dangers of falling back into the cycle of violence. Here, the themes of resistance and persistence were clearly evident. One unintended consequence of the project has been that the community, drawing on equipment and training provided through the project, has set up its own media production company and begun to secure its first contracts.

Viewed within the context of Colombia's media culture, the project offers a model that could counter the criticism that reports of the conflict rely too heavily on official sources, which, it has been argued, can propagate a biased 'war journalism' (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2007). Within a news ecology of vibrant alternative media and a 'post-conflict' scenario, the storylistening approach can provide an innovative and valuable way of communicating the stories of marginalised communities. It highlights the value of an immersive environment when working with vulnerable people in long form journalism. The research team and participants, as noted in the field notes cited earlier, created a close-knit community that became a sort of family, if only for a brief period of time. The trust that was built up through this approach allowed the participants to share deeply personal and distressing stories, engendering a sense of responsibility in the research team. We found that storytelling can enable someone to speak their truth for the first time and to recognise the pain with which they have been living. Perpetrators of violence can also gain from storytelling, enabling them to voice their actions, how they feel about them and often the pressures they felt they were under at the time. Listening to others' stories, allows them to see that others are struggling with similar challenges on a daily basis, perhaps flashbacks, nightmares or the inability to visit a particular place. In relating to others and their stories, the listener may begin to feel less isolated or guilty and start a process of healing.

Leaving the field has been a challenge for the whole team given the close bonds forged with the children. They had shared stories and the team had shared with them. The relationship was more than the researcher and the researched. It had to be to be able to produce the deeply personal content, which provides the foundation for the animated film. The team not only worked with the children in school, but lived in their community, and became their neighbours. As the field notes recall:

Those that lived close by would also visit in the evening. Sometimes, they would bring hot chocolate or other gifts to make sure we were comfortable. We would also go swimming with them in the river. This helped us build trust quickly, but there is no doubt our departure has left a void in all of our lives.

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