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## **When online commentary turns into violence: The role of Twitter in slander against journalists in Colombia**

*Kurzfassung:* Der 55 Jahre dauernde Konflikt mit der FARC Guerilla in Kolumbien endete 2016 mit der Unterzeichnung eines Friedensabkommens, in dessen Folge die Anzahl der Opfer sozial-politischer Gewalt substantiell zurückging. Paradoxe Weise hat dies die Sicherheit von Journalist(in)en nicht verbessert: Eine(r) wurde getötet, eine(r) zum Opfer sexuellen Missbrauchs (Medicina Legal, 2016) und 262 wurden bedroht (FLIP, 2017). In unserer qualitativen Fallstudie wurden 592 Tweets inhaltsanalytisch ausgewertet. Ziel war es, zu dokumentieren, wie Drohungen seitens eines einflussreichen politischen Akteurs zur Formierung eines Netzwerkes von verbaler Gewalt auf Twitter beigetragen haben. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass von einem legitimen Akteur ausgehende Angriffe auf die Pressefreiheit eine extreme und polarisierte Diskussion zwischen Partei ergreifenden Bürgern ausgelöst und weitere Drohungen und Anschuldigen provoziert haben. Versöhnliche Stimmen waren kaum zu finden.

*Abstract:* The 55-year long Colombian conflict with the FARC guerrilla movement ended in 2016 with the signing of a peace agreement, which resulted in a substantial reduction in the number of victims of socio-political violence. Paradoxically, this did not improve security for journalists, who were targeted: one was killed, another suffered sexual abuse (Medicina Legal, 2016), and 262 received threats (FLIP, 2017). In a qualitative case study, we content analyzed 592 tweets in order to document how threats from a political powerholder contributed to the formation of networks engaging in verbal violence on Twitter. Results showed that attacks on freedom of the press originated from a legitimate actor, caused an extremely polarized discussion among citizens who took sides, and provoked further threats and accusations. Conciliatory positions were hard to find.

### **1. Introduction**

The accord to end the longest-running internal conflict in a country in the Americas was signed twice in Colombia during 2016. After four years of negotiations between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia guerrilla movement (FARC), the war on civil society and the state infrastructure that terrorized the country for over 50 years officially ended in a public ceremony in the presence of victims, as well as several dignitaries and representatives of the international guarantor governments and institutions. Countries including Cuba and Norway served as long-term observers for the process, making significant peace-building efforts at the negotiating table, especially at times of high tension, when it seemed as though the entire process could have collapsed.

FARC and the President in office signed a deal that would grant the rebels a chance to rejoin Colombian civil society and participate in politics. In return for their commitment to lay down their weapons, the government would introduce rural reforms for a new agricultural sector benefiting victims, and the rebels would cease to cultivate, produce and market illegal drugs and profit from laundering assets derived from this activity. As well there would be several implementation and verification mechanisms. Since the accord was signed, official data from government institutions show a substantial reduction in the number of victims of socio-political violence (Medicina Legal, 2016; RUV, 2017), which public opinion has now taken as an indicator that the peace process is finally bearing fruit.

Paradoxically, it appears that while there is less violence against some targets, others have experienced increased attacks. In fact, while Colombian security specialists report a decrease in indiscriminate killing of civilians, journalists and media professionals are being selectively targeted. In 2016, one journalist was murdered, another was a victim of sexual abuse (Medicina Legal, 2016; RUV, 2017), and 262 were targets of threats and abuse (FLIP, 2017). In addition, impunity continues: 153 journalists were murdered from 1977 until 2017, whilst only 4 intellectual (those involved in planning the crimes) and 27 material perpetrators (those who committed the crimes) have been convicted. Regarding cases of threats against journalists, 100% remain unpunished. (FLIP, 2017). Authorities have attributed this worrisome situation to territorial disputes among criminal gangs, as there has been an increase in the amount of conflict over territory occupied by rebels before the peace agreement was signed. Hence, freedom of speech remains fragile in this post-conflict phase in the country.

Via social media, emails, and comments, online harassment occurs more often than in the past as an additional threat for media professionals, which can influence their decision to avoid certain topics or practice self-censorship (Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring, 2016). During Colombia's post-conflict phase, public debate has been plagued by cases in which the battlefield has been moved to these virtual platforms. We recognize the enormous challenges that Colombian journalism faces every day, especially in the period since the peace agreement was signed. However, we wanted to focus on a single case that had a great impact on society, considering that it

illustrates the magnitude of challenges that media professionals have to deal with now that social media have made their work and identity more visible. Legitimate social actors – such as a former President and current Senator – and their followers are generating new risk scenarios for reporters.

In the country, politicians and journalists alike are using Twitter more frequently to express their opinions, and at the same time, the audience is getting more involved in the news production process and consumption via social media. As a matter of fact, in Colombia, as in many countries around the world, “politicians have increasingly begun to use this venue as a privately owned publicity channel” (Lee and Shin, 2012: 515); but as Serrano (2016) states, the thin line between freedom of speech and human rights violations is not yet so clear in these digital spaces, with the consequence that multiple violations of others’ rights often occur.

In order to provide a detailed examination of how threats to journalists have been made in Colombia, a case study approach was chosen. This has proven an appropriate method of qualitative research to explore contemporary social phenomena like this. Through an in-depth description of the confrontation via Twitter between former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez and well-known journalist Daniel Samper Pizano, this study illustrates how threats against journalists take shape in social media within the context of Colombia’s current post-conflict phase. Due to the prominence of the political powerholders responsible for harassing the journalist, this is an unusual case: former Presidents are seen as leaders and legitimate social actors in a country’s political life. Therefore their opinions are highly valued by their fellow countrymen. Considering this, we seek to answer the following research question: How do threats by political powerholders against journalists take shape on Twitter in Colombia’s post-conflict period? In order to find answers, we formulated these sub-questions: who were the actors involved in the dispute between Alvaro Uribe and Daniel Samper?; how do Twitter users express their positions in messages exchanged in such disputes?; and what is the relationship between those positions and the networks they formed?

## **2. Colombia, a hostile country for journalistic practice**

The struggle for freedom of expression and information in Colombia has been a long one, in part because of authorities’ failure to take concrete, effective actions to protect journalists. According to the Foundation for Freedom of the Press – FLIP (2017a), to date no one has been charged for 76 murders of journalists in the country, including murders of four regional reporters in the 1990s, and the time limit for presenting evidence has expired. Relevant cases that still come to mind when discussing this issue include those of Norbey Díaz (killed in Girardot in 1996), Santiago Rodríguez (killed in Sucre in 1997), Freddy Elles Ahumada (killed in Bolívar in 1997) and Gerardo Bedoya (killed in Cali in 1997), whose murderers and the motives for their selective killing are still unknown. FLIP (2017a) points out that the lack of justice in these cases also concerns the right of society to be informed, since general conditions of impunity stir up fears that aggression against journalists and media might resume in the future. As the National Center for Historical Memory of Colombia affirms:

Journalists suffer for breaking the silence, for putting into words the truth of what happens, for reporting what happens, for believing that an informed society will not allow injustices to perpetuate or recur. But the armed and the corrupt are bothered by the word of the journalist; they want to take it away, shut it down, and take it off the air so that the only speech that prevails is that of war and corruption (CNMH, 2015: par. 3).

Verbal and physical aggression, threats and harassment are among the most common hostile actions against Colombian journalists. Garcés y Arroyave (2017) states that journalists in this country are in constant danger, especially those who are men, work in radio, have over 10 years of experience, cover structural violence and sensitive social issues, and report irregularities involving political and economic power elites. As records show, this profile is consistent with those of journalists who have been victims of violence in Colombia.

Corruption inside the National Unity of Protection, as well as in other State institutions, is identified as one of many factors that contribute to delays in providing aid specifically intended for journalists, making them easy targets for criminal organizations (Villafañe, 2016). In fact, there are many journalists in Colombia who go to work escorted by police officers or with state-provided security. However, not all who enjoy this privilege really need it, and some who report threats against their lives receive no special protection.

Statistics show that over the last 10 years the number of victims of the armed conflict in Colombia has fallen from 497,443 in 2006 to 86,808 in 2016, according to the Unified Record of Victims (RUV, 2017). Consistent with this, Legal Medicine (2016) concludes that socio-political violence has declined significantly in Colombia. According to this institution, “socio-political violence is violence attributable – according to the circumstances of the issue and the occupation of the victim – to guerrilla actions, military, criminal gangs, armed confrontation and terrorism” (p. 206). At the same time, the number of victims of alleged forced disappearance has also declined during the past decade (Medicina Legal, 2016). Figure 1 refers to the issue mentioned above.

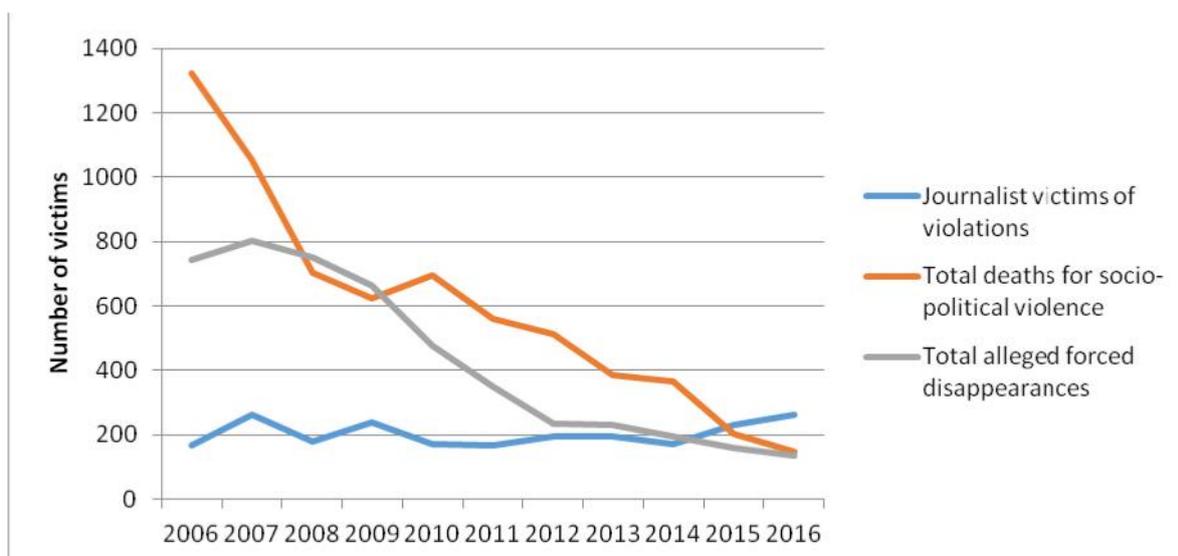


Figure 1: Comparative data of victims during the last decade. Source: Legal Medicine 2016, RUV 2017.

In contrast, even though journalists are listed as a vulnerable population group in previously given data, the number of journalists who were victims has increased, particularly in 2016, precisely when the peace accord was signed with the FARC guerrilla movement (FLIP, 2017a). That year, various different types of violence were committed against journalists: personal aggression, threats, attacks on media infrastructure, forced displacement, illegal detentions, stigmatization, and obstruction of journalistic work, kidnapping and inhumane or degrading treatment (FLIP, 2017a). The Foundation for Freedom of the Press in Colombia summarizes the situation:

attacks on the press are diverse, and they can come in the form of mild comments that insult and stigmatize, usually pointing to the media as an antagonist. But also, attacks can come in the form of more serious charges that link media professionals to illegal activities, criminal groups and political actors without any proof, or even as accusations of rape ... In the end, they decide to remain silent or retract their statements under the pressure of state officials who have institutionalism on their side (FLIP, 2017b: 6).

All these diverse forms of attack constitute violence to the press and can harm the practice of journalism. In fact, Hughes et al. found that journalists feel restrictions when covering the Government, political elites and criminal groups in Colombia, which means they feel less able to publish news about these groups, especially in local and regional media. According to the authors, "it seems the balance of extreme pressures on journalists has shifted away from guerrilla conflict and toward sub-national fragility in the rule of law and democratic accountability" (2017:16). In other words, the end of the armed conflict exposed weaknesses in the Colombian democratic system that were previously less apparent to the public.

Reflecting on this issue, we are reminded of Hannah Arendt's study *On Violence*, which concluded that "peace is the continuation of war by other means" (1970:9). In that regard, some types of conflict seem to have ended with the peace agreement in Colombia, but violence continues, finding other ways to express conflicts within society. Interactive means, such as social media, are most likely to become the new public sphere, providing unlimited space to express both constructive and destructive criticism.

### 3. Censorship with just a click

The estimate of 31.3 million Internet users in 2018 (EMarketer, 2015) and the fact that 76% of Colombians own a smartphone helps to explain why social media use has increased and is one of the main activities of Colombians with Internet access. Colombia's government has created partnerships with international NGOs such as Internet.org, headed by Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, in order to provide widespread Internet access to the poorest population groups. For this reason, many Colombians, even those who own smartphones using only very basic technology, have free access to social media and other online content related to health, finances, employment and climate information. According to figures of the Ministry of Communications and Technology, 59% of Colombians use social media at least 10 times per day (MinTic, 2016), and 75% of smartphone users have downloaded the Twitter app (comScore, 2016).

Just focusing on that last figure, it is easy to see why the many options for participation via Twitter attract social actors to use it not only as an app to get news updates and engage in private conversations, but also as an outlet

for public commentary and political discussion. The widespread adoption of social media for political communication creates unprecedented opportunities to monitor the opinions of large numbers of politically active individuals in real time (Conover et al. 2011: 192-193). People tend to go to these forums, as Yardi and Boyd mention, to argue instead of agreeing with the content they find online: "Deliberation and argumentation online are particularly salient around political, emotionally charged, or controversial issues" (2010:318).

Consequently, scholars have recognized Twitter as a social media outlet where political polarization occurs (Yardi and Boyd, 2010; Small, 2011). Conover et al. found that Twitter allows "people to be exposed to individuals and information they would not have been likely to choose in advance" (2011:89). The authors did a network analysis of this social media and found structures formed by politically motivated individuals. They observed that online communities were formed by like-minded individuals and radicalized because of the number of similar viewpoints shared by members.

In the case of Twitter, studies use interactions between users (retweets, likes, and mentions) and identify the position of each tweet in order to analyze networks within the debate they are investigating. Research on other popular social media such as Facebook confirms the usefulness of these interactions to shed light on their distinctive meanings and contributions to online debates (Quattrocchi, Scala and Sustein, 2016).

As Yardi and Boyd (2010) point out, although Twitter exposes people to multiple points of view, it lacks reasoned discourses and debate. In their study, the authors discovered the formation of extreme views in a short period of time regarding the shooting of a pro-abortion doctor. They concluded that even though people are more likely to interact with others who share their positions, they also exchange opinions with persons holding contrary views. This is consistent with Quattrocchi, Scala, and Sustein's conception that an echo chamber is created in social media, "where users are highly polarized, but they tend to interact and connect with like-minded people, reinforcing their views and becoming extreme around them" (2016: 11).

Thus, while Twitter has the potential to stimulate political participation (Small, 2011), it can also be used without regulation to express and promote hate, anger and other destructive emotions. One important question that arises from the constant availability of violent content in social media is how it affects real life decisions and can actually threaten journalistic practice.

Studies of exposure to violence in social media can be related to studies of violence in traditional media. As Reynolds (2009) concludes, excess of violent content is a growing problem in modern society, and exposure to it causes viewers to behave more violently. Since language is one of the mechanisms through which violence spreads, it shapes ways people perceive and understand events, and when "one discourse gains the upper hand and stifles alternative voices, the danger of violent escalation is greater" (Buyse, 2014:788).

With this in mind, many attempts have been made to define violent speech, which is no easy task. Recent research on social media, however, has dealt with the concept of hate speech, which according to Silva, Mondal and Correa can be understood as an offense motivated, in whole or in part, by the offender's bias against an aspect of a group of people (2016:688). Concerning this concept, Gagliardone, et al. from UNESCO conclude that hate speech is located in a complex nexus with freedom of expression, group rights, as well as concepts of dignity, liberty, and equality. In the authors' words, "hate speech relies on tensions, which it seeks to reproduce and amplify. Such speech unites and divides at the same time. It creates 'us' and 'them'" (2015:11). Commonly tied to violent speech against particular groups, Gagliardone, et al. state, hate speech goes beyond targeting people based on their characteristics:

...however defined, the notion of hate speech is not about abstract ideas, such as political ideologies, faiths or beliefs – which ideas should not be conflated with specific groups that may subscribe to them. Hate speech concerns antagonism towards people (2015:11).

In sum, hate speech, which we take as equivalent to the notion of violent speech, has the potential to lead to violent actions. When such violence is elicited by leaders or groups that have many followers, it can shut down other types of speech, thus opening the possibility to provoke further verbal violence and a climate where opposing views are diminished or discredited.

As Gagliardone, et al. (2015) suggest, when perpetrators make use of a social platform online to disseminate messages charged with hatred, they not only target victims but also break the terms or conditions agreed upon for the use of that platform. In the case of Twitter, the network has a Hateful Conduct Policy as part of its Rules and Policies. According to it, the site does "not tolerate behavior that harasses, intimidates, or uses fear to silence another person's voice" (Twitter, 2018). The policy goes further and typifies the kind of online behavior that harasses individuals or groups of people, including "violent threats; wishes for the physical harm, death, or disease of individuals or groups; ... and repeated and/or non-consensual slurs, epithets, racist and sexist tropes, or other content that degrades someone, among others" (Twitter, 2018).

However, the implementation of rules and policies of use does not guarantee appropriate behavior by media users. Social media provide a new setting where violent content in the form of violent speech and threats seem to

have multiplied. In fact, Douglas (2008) affirms that there are various forms of “antisocial communication” online that essentially bear an intention to harm; among them is online harassment, defined as an overt act of aggression. In that context, due to their desire to perform their role in society, journalists are under constant threat and therefore must often endure being the target of online violent speech and harassment. Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring state that the digitalization process, along with the transparency of journalistic work “has opened up new possibilities to intimidate and harass journalists for those who are dissatisfied with the properties of public discourse” (2016:889). And although the increase of digital access among audiences has provided new opportunities for journalism and news production, this can have several consequences: exposure to violent speech on social media increases the risk of self-censorship. In fact, authors have found that violence significantly shapes how journalists perceive their work environment (Hughes et al., 2017). It can be said that those heated debates, therefore, can amplify negative consequences when a large number of people get together to attack, for example, journalists or social actors, and then make them feel a need for restraint in expressing their ideas through these channels.

According to Jungblut and Hoxha, self-censorship can be defined as “the individual self-restriction of one’s freedom of speech” (2016:227). This means that when journalists realize something could harm them or others, they decide to stop covering a particular event. Self-censorship is especially important in post-conflict societies, because they are in a delicate state of transition from a situation where direct physical threats are being made to a non-conflictual life. This process keeps presenting many risks for journalists as well, because post-conflict societies can potentially always regress into violence (Jungblut and Hoxha, 2016). In a digital age that means that violence against individuals can easily change into violence against ideas.

In a practical sense, a single tweet or comment can make journalists feel threatened and consider eliminating some themes from their agenda. For instance, as Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring (2016) found, when Swedish journalists were targets of harassment for dealing with subjects such as immigration or feminism, it discouraged their dealing with such issues in the public sphere. Reflecting on this, if Swedish society finds public speech threatened on such progressive issues, the case of Colombia is particularly delicate, since the post-conflict era is just starting after half a century of structural and civil chaos.

As Serrano (2016) states, media professionals have evidenced such changes more than other social groups: aggression against those who defend truth does not discriminate between times of peace or war; whether they are professional journalists or private citizens, and not even through which channels they broadcast their messages. For some time now, the Internet has not been free from the violence that until just a decade ago affected only conventional media, radio and television.

In that scenario, harassment of journalists is a problem for democracy because it affects journalistic autonomy (Serrano, 2016). In other words, targeting media professionals has consequences for freedom of the press, which in turn affects daily journalistic practice and its purpose: “to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing” (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2004: 24).

#### **4. The case**

In order to provide a detailed examination of how threats have been made against journalists in Colombia’s post-conflict era, a particular case was chosen for this study. Case studies have proven an appropriate method of qualitative research to explore current events (Schwandt, 2015) and a suitable strategy for “how” or “why” research questions that aim to “investigate real-life events in their natural settings” (Yin, 2004: xii). Through an in-depth description of the confrontation that took place in July 2017 on Twitter between former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez and journalist Daniel Samper Pizano, this study aims to illustrate how threats to journalists take shape in this social network during the country’s current political phase. This case attracted exceptional interest due to the prestige of the two actors involved and was presented in traditional news media outlets because of supportive public positions taken by citizens and media professional associations.

The former President of Colombia (2002-2010) and now Senator Álvaro Uribe Vélez is ranked seventh in the country in terms of Twitter followers, with over 4.8 million (Press Release Agency, August 24, 2017). Almost every tweet posted by Uribe is featured in the news and has a strong impact on public opinion. His great visibility on Twitter is a result of the extraordinary influence he has accumulated during his political career. While in office as President of Colombia, Uribe always received high popularity ratings, and as a Senator since 2014 he has proved to be one of the most influential politicians when it comes to persuading voters. In fact, the current president, Iván Duque, was a young and unknown politician who got elected with unprecedented voting after being publicly endorsed by Uribe.

Furthermore, a large segment of public opinion has always associated Uribe with the far-right of national politics (Cyr and Meléndez, 2016), and he is even accused of having ties with paramilitary groups (Associated Press Bogotá, 2011). During his government, senior Army officers were held responsible for executing large numbers of civilians to show “positive” results in their struggle against guerrillas and justify US military aid. Military officers

and soldiers kidnapped peasants, killed them, placed weapons on their dead bodies, and reported them as enemy combatants. The number of victims is estimated to be 3,000, according to figures of Human Rights Watch (2016); but other authors (Benavides Silva and Rojas Bolaños, 2017) estimate there were more than 10,000 deaths, dubbed as “false positives”. Also, Uribe’s brother, Santiago, was released on parole in March 2018 after being imprisoned for organizing and leading a 1990s death squad known as the Twelve Apostles. Uribe’s government was implicated in a wiretapping scandal that led to the abolition of the national intelligence agency, DAS, after revelations that it spied on Colombian Supreme Court justices, human rights activists, politicians, and journalists.

In 2015, an independent political news outlet, La Silla Vacía (Lewin and Morelo, 2015), published an article reviewing the legal status of 30 of Uribe’s closest collaborators, finding that: “10 are exempt from major problems, two died, ten have serious investigations or trials in process, nine were criminally convicted and one has strong disciplinary sanctions” (para. 2).

For his part, Daniel Samper Ospina is a journalist belonging to a well-known family in the nation’s capital, with several members involved in national political life (his uncle, Ernesto Samper Pizano, was President of Colombia between 1994-1998) and has important links to national media. Samper Ospina writes a weekly political satire column for *Revista Semana*, the most popular news magazine in the country, and has recently attracted more followers with his influential Youtube videos. He also has a large following on Twitter: 2 million followers according to information gathered from his account (Samper, October 9, 2017). Along with a small group of intellectuals, Samper has been a vocal opponent of Uribe, and because of this, he has been the target of accusations by the former President, such as the one examined here, and has received death threats from his supporters. It is not unreasonable to think that it was only because of his professional prestige that Samper Pizano dared to criticize such a powerful politician.

Worth mentioning is an antecedent to the case, the dramatic confrontation between Uribe and another highly regarded Colombian journalist, Daniel Coronell, who during the past year (2016-2017) criticized the former President in his opinion articles and reports. Public opinion has also been critical of Senator Uribe because he led the opposition party against the peace process between the FARC guerrilla movement and the government. Uribe campaigned for the “No” vote in the referendum in which Colombians rejected the ratification of the peace accord with FARC; and since then, he has taken a radical position towards former president and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Juan Manuel Santos, which has created disagreement in a broad sector of national public opinion. In other words, extreme political polarization arose in the country, with Uribe as one of its main protagonists.

Coronell filed charges for insult and defamation in 2016, after Uribe accused him on his Twitter account of laundering money and having mafia ties. This provoked threats against the journalist from anonymous social media accounts, with warning messages such as “we are looking for you, be careful.” Despite the journalist’s efforts, the Supreme Court did not investigate the case and only asked the former President to moderate his violent language. Some months later, history repeated itself.

On July 14, 2017, Álvaro Uribe posted a tweet on his account @AlvaroUribeVel at 12:55 pm, calling Daniel Samper Ospina a “child rapist” (Uribe Vélez, 2017), referring to a column published by the journalist on June 17. Two hours later, at 14:45 pm @DanielSamperO replied tweeting “Álvaro Uribe should expect the legal repercussions that will come after calling me a child rapist: his sick irresponsibility has no limits...” (Samper Ospina, 2017). This exchange generated a debate on Twitter, which produced 5,659 retweets, 11,334 likes and 3,100 comments. As a consequence, Daniel Samper’s account became a nationally trending topic. A few days later, Uribe tweeted back accusing the journalist of publishing “pornographic images including minors” in *Soho*, a print magazine Samper Ospina edited for 13 years, where the main content included photo spreads featuring nude women. Media organizations, such as The Journalist Union of Colombia (FECOLPER) and the Foundation for Freedom of Press – FLIP, denounced the former President’s accusations against Samper Ospina. Also, an open letter was written by several renowned Colombian journalists regarding the lack of evidence for Uribe’s accusations and the risk this could imply for the safety of media professionals in the country.

The confrontation led to legal action when Samper filed an *Acción de Tutela*, an expeditious legal mechanism for the protection of the citizen’s fundamental constitutional rights. In this case, Samper concluded that Senator Uribe had spoken falsely, damaging his good name. A month later, the Supreme Court of Bogotá – Colombia’s capital – ruled in favor of the journalist and ordered Uribe to retract his statements, which he did in a press release later that week. However, according to FLIP (August 5, 2017), Uribe’s correction failed to acknowledge the mistake, because he said he had only exercised his right to express an opinion and criticize the journalist’s work. This public debate generated different opinions in favor of and against Uribe’s tweets. Public figures, media, and citizens tweeted, retweeted and mentioned other accounts taking sides in the dispute. This resulted in open polarization and a series of violent online reactions, which the present study analyzes.

This case exemplifies how any Colombian journalist or opinion leader who attempts to speak out against Álvaro Uribe is most likely to be in a situation of vulnerability. Given the fact that Uribe is considered one of the most powerful politicians of all time in the country, it is no surprise that any journalist who dares to criticize or express an opposite point of view towards his actions may feel intimidated.

A recent case illustrating the relationship between heated debates in social media and self-censorship was that of Matador, a cartoonist forced to stop using social media by death threats from a citizen who claimed his drawing entitled “Duque reflects” was offensive because it satirized the current Colombian President, portraying him as a pig. In his farewell message on Twitter, the cartoonist wrote: “Friends, due to the death threats of some followers of Uribeismo [Uribe’s followers] and the Democratic Center [Uribe’s party], I have decided not to publish anything on my social networks. If they [the violent] want to come for me, I do not have bodyguards or anything like that... I just have a pencil and my brain. To the people who follow me, a big hug” (Matador, April 2 2018).

The influence of public opinion on journalists in the country has been researched by some scholars. In their study of professional autonomy and influences of journalists in Colombia, Arroyave and Garcés (2017) found that audience feedback is a factor that strongly influences (56.6%) their news production. Nowadays most of the feedback that media professionals receive comes from social media and online forums.

On the whole, the case under study illustrates the worrisome status of freedom of expression in Colombia. Although the Constitution guarantees freedom of expression and information, opposing views are often stigmatized, narrowing the scope for political and institutional pluralism, an indispensable requirement for sustainable peace in the country.

### 5. Method

This study analyzed the content of 592 tweets, available through Scraper Data Miner on September 2017, in order to (1) identify actors involved in the dispute between Álvaro Uribe and Daniel Samper; (2) discover how Twitter users expressed positions in messages exchanged there, (3) and determine what the relationships were among those positions and the networks they formed.

We analyzed all tweets published on July 14, 2017. On this day, the user @DanielSamperO presented a trending topic reaching a significant number of favorites and retweets (See Figure 2, made using Twitonomy). We observed that @DanielSamperO’s tweet: “Alvaro Uribe should expect the legal repercussions that will come after calling me a child rapist: his sick irresponsibility has no limits...” (Samper Ospina, 2017) reached 3,100 comments, 5,700 retweets, and 11,000 likes. Therefore, we decided to select @DanielSamperO as the keyword for the next phase.

We opted in this study to concentrate on the first 24 hours after the tweet that originated the dispute: “Federico Escobar protests the offense of child rapist Samper Ospina to Antioquia, offense published in Semana” (Uribe Vélez, 2017). Previous research on Twitter argues that this time frame is ideal, since the heaviest traffic concentrates on the main content and prevents outliers and anomalies to be sampled (Yardi and Boyd, 2010).

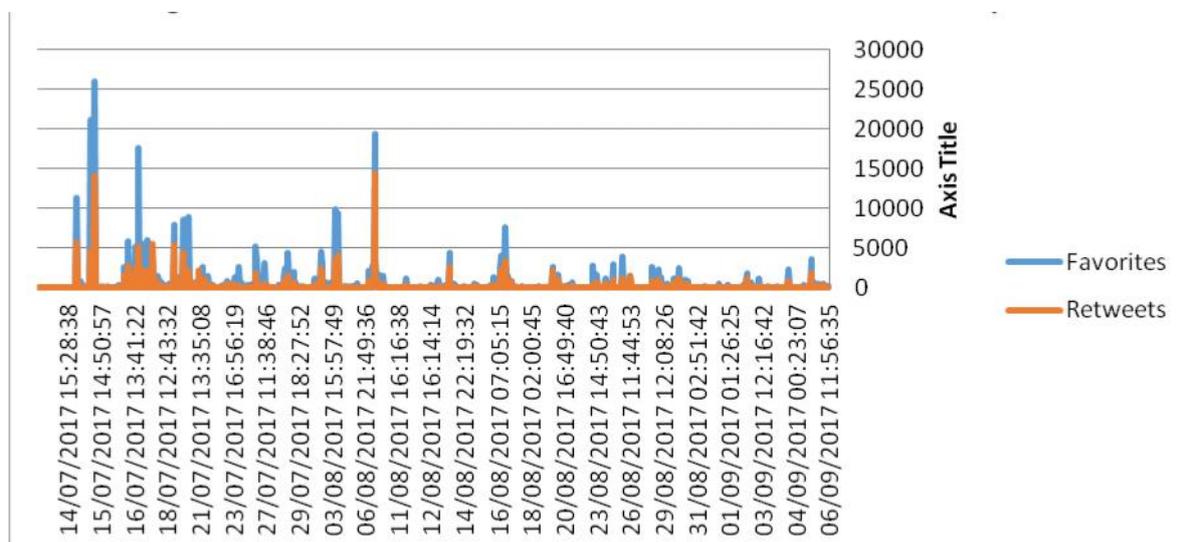


Figure 2: Twitter interaction with the user @danielsampero. Source: Twitonomy 2017.

Subsequently, the study extracted 592 original tweets and comments that mentioned @DanielSamperO, the maximum amount of content allowed when using the Data Miner Scraper tool from Google Chrome. The codebook included the following categories and sub-categories:

1. Identification of users: the authors were categorized as politicians, news organizations, journalists, individuals, other organizations or undefined. We also identified the gender of users. This corresponds to the first research question regarding which actors were involved in the dispute.

2. Polarization during the debate: we wanted to know how participants expressed their positions in the exchange of messages.

Using the definition of polarization as “the fact of people or opinions being divided into two opposing groups” (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2017), we identified parties: opinions favoring Daniel Samper and ones favoring Álvaro Uribe. Then following the definition of extremism as “the fact of someone having beliefs that most people think are unreasonable and unacceptable” (*Cambridge Dictionary*, 2017), messages with strong positions (threats, offenses, swear words, violent language) were categorized as extreme tweets. Finally, tweets trying to mediate between both groups or referring to the issue without taking sides were classified as conciliatory. The data were analyzed by two coders using an online instrument. Krippendorff’s Alpha coding agreement reached 0.65.

To answer the question on the relationship between the user’s positions and the networks they formed, we used Gephi 9.2. Firstly, the software allowed us to explore the level of closeness centrality among users with the main nodes, that is, the most often mentioned accounts. Since “closeness centrality highlights the players who will be able to contact all other members of the network easily” (Rochat, 2009:1), this type of analysis is highly replicated in social network research. Secondly, we graphed the type of relationships given by the positions expressed in the tweets. The edges in a graph were organized in different colors in order to represent relationships between users’ positions: in favor, extreme, conciliatory. Finally, the software allowed us to see the structure of the networks that emerged according to the positions expressed in each tweet. Using Gephi’s modularity function, it was possible to identify subgroups of the network. Modularity allowed us to see how “the vertices in many networks fall naturally into groups or communities ... with only a smaller number of edges between vertices of different groups” (Newman, 2006: 8577). An integrated view of all this will be addressed in the next section.

## 6. Arguments and arguing

Results of this study show that the messages exchanged on the original tweets generated by @AlvaroUribeVel against @DanielSamperO on July 14, 2017 triggered a public dispute. Over 70% of users who joined in the discourse (either tweeting or replying) were ordinary individuals expressing their own political positions (Table 1). In terms of gender, the majority were male (63%). Female participation was 21%, and the undefined group, which included institutional accounts and anonymous users, amounted to 17% (Table 2).

	Frequency	%
Citizen	455	70,7
Anonymous	107	16,6
Journalist	41	6,4
Politician	16	2,5
Organization	10	1,6
Media	9	1,4
Other	6	0,9
Total	644	100,0

Table 1: Type of user

Gender	Frequency	%
Male	403	63
Female	134	21
Other	107	17
Total	644	100

Table 2: Transmitter’s Gender

Results regarding the positions taken by Twitter users showed a polarized discussion between those favoring @AlvaroUribeVel tweets (24.3%) and those defending @DanielSamperO tweets (64.2%). The shares indicate that those who supported the journalist led the conversation. Some examples of polarized tweets are shown below:

“I reject Uribe’s slanderous and infamous tweet against @DanielSamperO. Solidarity with the brilliant and sharp journalist of @RevistaSemana” (Bejarano, July 14, 2017).

“The unpunished hate tweets that @AlvaroUribeVel usually sends. Today the vile slander tries to dishonor @DanielSamperO” (Sosa, July 14, 2017).

"In the long run, Uribe did a favor to @DanielSamperO despite how little he likes advertising" (Deleznable, July 14, 2017).

Even though they did not constitute a majority, some tweets seem to legitimize the accusations made by @AlvaroUribeVel, as the following excerpts show:

"You reap what you sow. Mr. @DanielSamperO is an offender and acts as a disrespectful person toward everyone who does not think like him" (Pérez, July 14, 2017).

"@DanielSamperO gets cocky to fuck everyone's life, and the yuppies applaud him; but when someone says he violates other people's rights, he cries and threatens" (RangerTrack, July 14, 2017).

The debate also turned extreme for both parties to the dispute. Many of the tweets (31.3%) coded under the Extreme variable expressed harsh opinions against opponents by featuring violent language, threats, and sometimes accusing the other party of committing various different felonies without offering proof. Results show that the group defending @DanielSamperO (20.9%) took more extreme positions, while those in favor of @AlvaroUribeVel had fewer extreme reactions (11%).

However, a closer look at the actors involved in the disagreement shows that those supporting @AlvaroUribeVel were fewer in number, only 71, but 63 of them featured an extremely belligerent discourse.

	In favor	%	Extremely in favor	%	Conciliatory in favor	%	Undefined	%
@DanielSamperO	226	38,2	122	20,6	32	5,4	0	0
@AlvaroUribeVel	71	12,0	63	10,6	10	1,7	0	0
Actor neutral	0	0,0	0	0,0	51	8,6	10	1,7
Total	297	50,2	185	31,3	93	15,7	10	1,7

Table 3: Tweet's positions

Some excerpts taking extreme positions against @AlvaroUribeVel are presented in the following tweets:

"Being a clown is more honorable than being a dirty politician with negative political tricks. His political strategy is one of the negative attacks. That's him" (Karina, July 14, 2017).

"Uribe was never President; he was a phony person who bought his reelection in 2006 through corruption and committed electoral fraud in 2002" (A-vita, July 14, 2017).

"@AlvaroUribeVel is a crazy old man, psycho, sick person; he is just the reflection of one part of this rotten country. Solidarity with @DanielSamperO" (Tintinago, July 14, 2017).

"@DanielSamperO what else can you expect from the leader of right-wing paramilitarism in Colombia? The patrón of evil. A person without a soul. A *para-político*<sup>1</sup> (Rincón, July 14, 2017).

"A jerk? when you speak against any Uribista, it's wrong, but when you touch them there are serious problems!! So cynical" (Sánchez, July 14, 2017).

Other users supported the former President's statements by using extreme language too:

"DANIEL Miliciano I wish the paras [paramilitaries] were here to send you to a better life" (Ortega, July 14, 2017).

"If @DanielSamperO denounces Uribe for slander, let's have all people from Antioquia and Uribe's party denounce him for slandering and bullying in social media" (Berrio, July 14, 2017).

Our findings also showed that the dispute between Uribe and Samper gave citizens an opportunity to express emotions arising from their political positions. After analyzing the users' profiles, we found that many of them described themselves as Uribistas (pro-Uribe) or anti-Uribistas. One of the users had the following description on his profile: "proudly anti-Uribista before Uribe was born" (Becerra, 2017). This shows that for some users the only motivation to get involved in the dispute was the desire to express their opposition to Álvaro Uribe Vélez.

Disagreements between anti-Uribistas and Uribistas divided the country after Uribe left the Presidency in 2008. Then the public debate between him and the journalist looked like an excuse to use this public forum to air old disputes that arose in other contexts.

In contrast, conciliatory positions in the discussion were less frequent. Tweets that did not express extreme positions accounted for only 7.1% of the total. Some of these more balanced tweets intended to mediate between the parties made ethical calls for users to remember collective values such as respect and tolerance and

<sup>1</sup> There is no simple translation of this term. It refers to a politician who defends the interests of paramilitary forces.

called on authorities to take legal action to resolve the disagreement. Accounts such as @Flip, @CIDH or @FiscaliaCol asked for institutional protection to defend the journalist's right to a good name. Others stayed out of the dispute, taking no clear position. The following tweets refer to the aforementioned:

"The worst part of the dispute between @DanielSamperO and @AlvaroUribeVel is that it generates more hatred among those who criticize and support any of them, than the hate that may exist among themselves" (Pineda, July 14, 2017).

"How can you say that? Do you have evidence that @DanielSamperO rapes children? No more hateful attacks! Please discuss and debate with arguments!" (Gurisatti, July 14, 2017).

"I dream that they will do something to stop this man's attacks. My support goes to @DanielSamperO. Nothing justifies these attacks on freedom of expression" (Pérez, July 14, 2017).

"@AlvaroUribeVel #RESPECT is a word that you don't know. I support @DanielSamperO" (Sayleth, July 14, 2017).

The next section presents some of the networks resulting from the discussion. Several diagrams were made using Gephi 9.2 to analyze emerging networks. Firstly, with the Closeness centrality feature of the software, we explored the relationship between users and the frequency with which they mentioned the main actors involved in the case (Figure 3). The size of the nodes representing each user is determined by the frequency of mentions. From the size of @DanielSamperO's node, it is evident that he was central in the conversation. @AlvaroUribeVel's node was also significant, but not the central one. As Figure 3 shows, colors derived from red are closer to the main node @DanielSamperO, while those in blue or similar colors at the periphery are more distant from him. Figure 3 also shows that other conversations took place mentioning both social actors, but were related to other topics. This can be seen on the left side of the Figure.

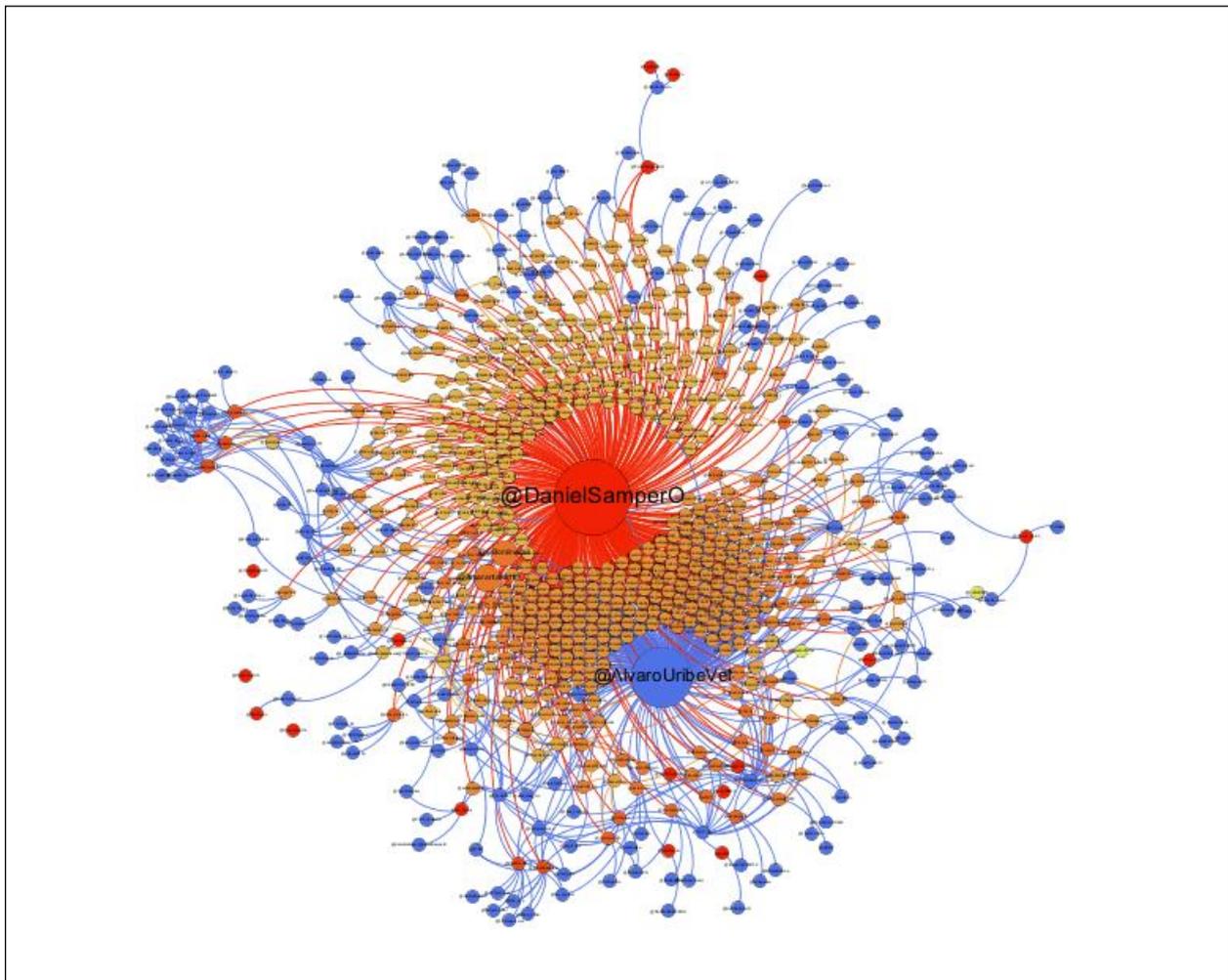


Figure 3: Closeness Centrality

Regarding the position taken by Twitter users, Figure 4 shows the relationship between those who agreed with @DanielSamperO (in red) and those who joined @AlvaroUribeVel arguments (in blue). Nodes in grey identify those who remained undefined, meaning that they did not favor any of the actors. Users in yellow represent those with mixed opinions, which means they tweeted several times, either in favor of one of the main actors or with no particular intention.

Figure 4 also presents the type of relationship among users. The edges or lines represent each tweet's position in the case. Black edges represent extreme positions, while those in grey represent polarized positions, and those in lighter colors present conciliatory tweets. Figure 4 shows that most of the users defended @DanielSamperO, tweeting in his favor without adopting extreme positions. However, the many red nodes with darker edges around @AlvaroUribeVel represent those in agreement with @DanielSamperO, who wrote using extremist language against @AlvaroUribeVel.

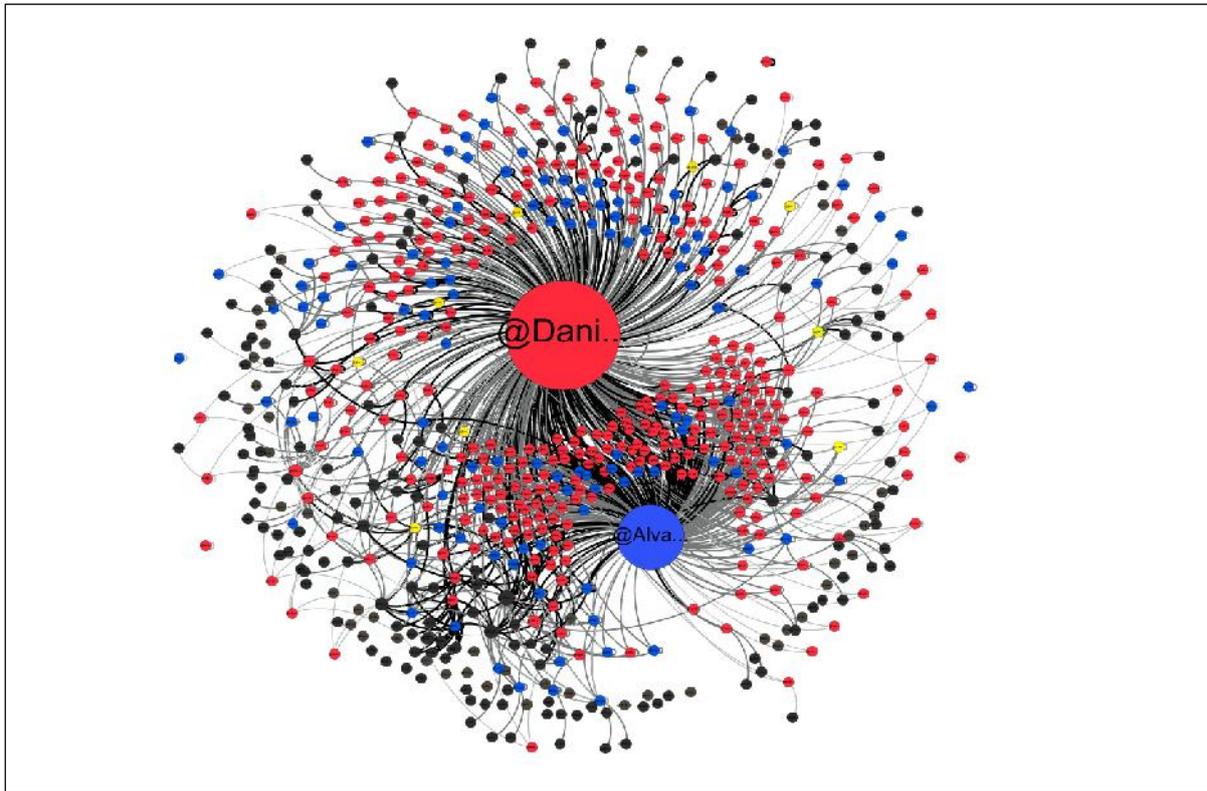


Figure 4: Interactions among tweet positions

Offering another image for analysis, Figure 5 below features the communities formed around the discussion. The most prominent community was formed by those in favor of @DanielSamperO (colored red), followed by those who expressed extreme positions against @AlvaroUribeVel (colored light green). Although @AlvaroUribeVel started the discussion by calling the journalist a child rapist, the network expressing extreme positions supporting the former President is not the most significant one. On the other hand, conciliatory networks were smaller in size, and that of the undefined users remained medium-sized. This figure also shows that fewer edges emerged between networks. This indicates that, in general, cohesion within networks was strong and individuals were unlikely to change their minds. The small grouping visible between the extreme vs. @AlvaroUribeVel and in favor of @DanielSamperO networks was formed by users who expressed more than one position.

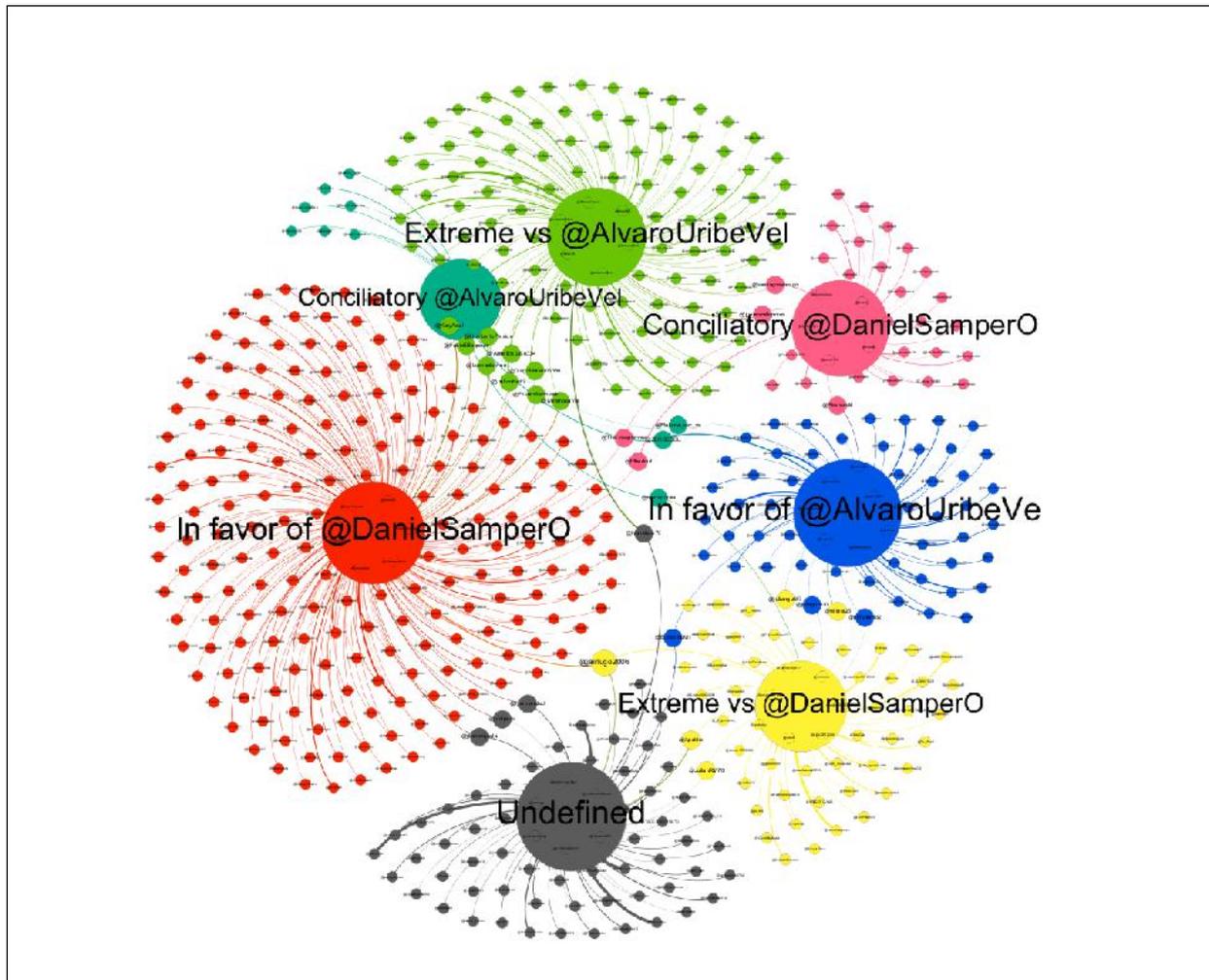


Figure 5: Community Structure

## 7. Discussion

This study examines a dispute between former President Álvaro Uribe and journalist Daniel Samper Ospina via social media. The intention was to describe how various forms of violence against journalists have emerged in the public sphere during the post-conflict era of Colombian society. Because social media are among the most often used platforms in the country, this case study focuses on how the case in question played out on Twitter. The results showed how one influential political actor's hostile treatment of a journalist caused the creation of several social networks which represented polarized positions. The tweets exchanged used some very extreme language that authors (Gagliardone et al., 2015) have found to amplify verbal and potentially physical violence against the press through such hate speech.

As others have suggested, these attacks can also harm the news production process because they may lead to self-censorship, since journalists may choose not to cover certain issues (Jungblut and Hoxha, 2016; Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring, 2016), or may refrain from investigating certain political actors (Hughes et al., 2017). Additionally, verbal aggression – such as analyzed herein – may also lead to future violent behavior (Reynolds 2009).

Our network analysis indicated, as many authors confirm (Conover et al., 2011), that one comment stimulated the creation of like-minded communities which mainly expressed opinions in favor of or against the two principal actors. This confirms the view that social media serve as echo chambers of polarized exchange and, in this case, extreme positions (Quattrociocchi, Scala and Sustain, 2016). Network analysis showed a wave of comments filled with threats, hostility, calumnies and other forms of verbal violence against each group. It also evidenced the power of social media to amplify discussions and aggression. In this particular case, other issues emerged in the

feud between groups identified as anti-Uribe and his supporters, giving both parties a chance to cloak their opinions in verbal violence against each other. During these exchanges, the participants formed strong groups and did not appear to change their political positions, reinforcing homophily (Yardi and Boyd, 2010) within each network.

Our investigation also sheds some light on possible harm to journalistic practice, as discussed previously. The results showed that press freedom in Colombia was compromised in this case, due to the extremism evident in the opinions exchanged. Although those in favor of @DanielSamperO were the majority, individuals supporting @AlvaroUribeVel exhibited more extreme positions in their language. Such extremism even continued for days after the analyzed period: four days after the feud, John Jairo Velásquez (@Popeye\_Leyenda), a former hitman for the notorious drug dealer Pablo Escobar, decided to join the conversation by tweeting: "Daniel Samper is vomit and a despicable person. A moral hit man. Member of a damn family who did so much damage to the country" (Velásquez, July 18, 2017). The journalist immediately responded: "I hold Uribe responsible for what could happen to my family and me: his entire army is against me after his defamation" (Samper, July 18, 2017). This is a worrisome situation. In this case, the fact that an avowed former mafia hit man publicly endorses a former President, and current Senator, could have serious repercussions for self-censorship practices among journalists; all the more so, taking into account the study by Hughes et al. (2017), which found that Colombian journalists felt less confident to publish information concerning the armed forces, criminal gangs or government actors with great political influence. This case also provides some insight into how attacks on press freedom and freedom of speech originate from legitimate actors in social and political life. Hughes et al. (2017) concluded that journalists could be influenced by the State in positive ways, or some State actors can be actual perpetrators of violence against journalists.

@AlvaroUribeVel's motivation for attacking the journalist may be varied. As Lee and Shin (2012) have proposed, politicians use social media for publicity. In this case, the former President's tweets triggered political positions – in either mild or extreme language – that formed ideological networks around alignment or disagreement with his position. Conover et al. (2011) found similar results in the tendency to adopt extreme positions when similar points of view dominate social-media interactions.

The parties involved in the feud displayed the most support for the journalist and, therefore, in favor of free speech. Arendt affirms that "power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert ... [and] remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together" (1970:143). As a consequence, if people get together as a cohesive group to defend values and resist attacks from those in positions of power, they can also gain their own power to protect a profession they value, and those they regard as seeking to inform and share truth as journalists. If social media have opened new possibilities for harassing journalists (Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring, 2016), they can also be places to make visible such harassment and stop it. In that sense, it is also a responsibility of legal institutions to eliminate the impunity to denigrate others that currently characterizes many disputes on Twitter (Villafañe, 2016).

This instance shows a lack of legislation and control over social media, which may significantly affect freedom of the press. The formation of strong networks around an emotion such as hatred, expressed by Twitter users on both sides in the form of insults, calumnies, or threats, creates a climate difficult to regulate. In the long run, it may help perpetuate conflict beyond the initial dispute among the original actors. In other words, this study evidences that social media and the networks formed around them can develop into spaces dominated by anomie. Therefore, it is worth questioning what social impact results from violence in virtual spaces.

The violence and extremism apparent in the language of both parties in this study can be explained by two factors. Firstly, reaching a stable, long-lasting peace based on the accord with the FARC guerrilla movement is a challenging task for Colombian society. After all, as Arendt wrote, "peace is the continuation of war by other means" (1970:9). Jungblut and Hoxha (2016) confirmed this when they said that post-conflict societies could easily return to violence. It is very important to keep in mind the diversity of voices and topics that are heard in this extended public sphere that Twitter represents.

It is clear that Colombian society faces a crucial transitional phase. However, in the current media ecosystem, there is a similarly vital transitional period: a moment where actors other than media professionals are contesting the traditional role of professional gatekeepers. This case exemplifies how powerful social actors in Colombia abuse "the privilege to speak to a thousand minds at the same time" (Pulitzer, 2011: 41), a prerogative once reserved only for journalism.

Serrano (2016) affirms that when it comes to violence against journalism, declarations of war or peace may make little difference. As some studies have indicated, in today's Colombia, "it seems the balance of extreme pressures on journalists has shifted away from guerrilla conflict and toward sub-national fragility in the rule of law and democratic accountability" (Hughes et al., 2017: 16). Therefore, it is healthy and proactive to think – in a post-conflict era – that not all types of violence have ceased to exist.

Twitter and social media have become ideal locations for verbal violence, particularly on political issues which trigger powerful emotions (Yardi and Boyd, 2010). The consequences of this can affect both the personal lives of media professionals and society's right to information and democracy (Serrano, 2016), if journalists refrain from speaking out on similar sensitive issues in the future (Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring, 2016). The case studied shows the lack of tolerance towards the plurality of opinions held in the Colombian public sphere. The fact that one of the participants in the dispute is one of the most important Colombian politicians is worrisome because, as Craig says (2018), political pluralism is the central principle of democracy. Likewise, Bock (2018) – referring to the lack of quality, pluralism and diversity in the content of Colombian informative media, especially in local media – recognized the pressures exerted on reporters and concluded that “journalism in Colombia carries heavy chains that have weakened democracy in the country”.

Finally, bringing some of Hannah Arendt's ideas into the discussion: “the practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is to a more violent world” (1970:177). Therefore, future research might focus on analyzing similar cases and the consequences of using violent language on Twitter and other social media. Violence against a journalist is often defined only as acts that harm physically, such as kidnapping, murder, or assault. Further research could analyze how violent words in the form of threats, verbal aggression, and calumny also constitute violence against journalists that may harm the exercise of free speech. Network analysis proved to be an useful tool in order to characterize users' behavior in such forums; future studies can correlate this unobtrusive analysis with the perceptions of journalists who have suffered attacks on social media that imperil their personal safety, with potential consequences for self-censorship. Also, given male dominance in the authorship of these tweets, further research could explore the gender dimension of extreme positions shared on social media

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