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Subir las noticias al bajar del monte: El experimento de las FARC en Cuba con la televisión en línea, 2012-2016"

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### Publication Date

2019

Peer reviewed

## **Uploading the News After Coming Down From the Mountain: The FARC's Experiment with Online Television in Cuba, 2012–2016**

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Between 2012 and 2016, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) negotiated a peace agreement with the Colombian government in Havana, Cuba. Over those four years, the group experimented with media production techniques to redefine itself and access new publics. Central to the FARC's media operations was an online news program. This essay parses the aesthetics of that online broadcast and analyzes it within the context of a historic peace accord's uncertain unfolding. The FARC, I argue, has been anticipating a Gramscian "war of position" in the post-peace accord period, girding itself for a mediated form of political contestation that will absorb and refashion the intensity and tactical patterns of the guerrilla conflict.

*Keywords: Colombia, FARC, Cuba, social media, media warfare, post-conflict transition, political reintegration, Antonio Gramsci*

War is perhaps best understood as a violent contest for territory, resources, and political allegiances, and, no less fiercely, a contest for meaning. (Lepore, 1999 p. x)

If war is a contest for meaning, then now is a good time to take stock of the media war between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Marxist rebels that have been trying to seize power militarily since 1964. At the time of writing in mid-2017, the two parties are in the early stages of implementing a peace agreement, which formally ends an armed confrontation that has raged for 53 years. The disarmament of the FARC, the Western Hemisphere's oldest and most

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Date submitted: 2016-08-13

<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge the support of the following individuals for their assistance in the research and writing phases of this article: Jose Antequera Guzman, Diego Martinez, Marwan Kraidy, the participants in the Convergence and Disjuncture in Global Digital Culture symposium at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, Patricia Alvarez Astacio, Juana Davila, Anthony Olorunnisola, Sophia McClennan, Johanna Espinel Romero, and Brad Tyer. Special thanks are due to the Belisario College of Communication at Penn State University and the Center for Global Studies at Penn State University.

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formidable insurgency, signifies the end of an era—that of Marxist-Leninist guerrilla movements in Latin America.<sup>2</sup>

A historical symmetry is at play in the FARC's disarmament, for it was in Colombia that Latin America's age of armed revolution began in the mid-20th century (see Karl, 2017; Pizarro Leongómez, 2011). Fidel Castro witnessed the apogee of Colombia's partisan violence on April 9, 1948, while visiting Bogotá as a young student activist. He and the other organizers of a Latin American youth conference met Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, a populist leader of Colombia's liberal party, the day before an assassin killed him outside of his office and pitched battles erupted in the streets. Castro recounts a foretelling detail from his afternoon walking through avenues lined with burning cars, looted police stations, and smashed storefronts: "I remember leaving with a small gun, the first weapon that I put my hands on."<sup>3</sup>

It is entirely fitting that the four years that the FARC and the Colombian government have taken to negotiate a peace accord in Cuba (2012–16) correspond with the secret diplomacy and official rapprochement between the United States and Cuba. While Colombian violence helped to radicalize a 19-year-old Fidel Castro, 64 years later, the Havana-based negotiations provided a framework for the deradicalization of the FARC and its incorporation into the legal body politic in Colombia.

What the FARC's transition to politics will look like in practice is fodder for a cottage industry of think tank experts posing as futurologists. Rather than speculate about the FARC's future, I would like to suggest that the negotiating period offers an opportune prism with which to refract shifts in the group's perspective as it looks out on its uncertain political future and considers its place in a media ecology increasingly saturated by digital forms and formats.

Within this liminal period, what is particularly illuminating is the way in which the FARC has sought political legitimacy by creating its own news outlet. It was during the Havana talks that the FARC took up the tools of digital dissemination in earnest, crafting strategies to appeal to audiences beyond its militant base and experimenting with online platforms. With an eye on the future, these media experiments sought to highlight the group's policy positions at the negotiating table, counteract government propaganda, and reframe media narratives about the FARC's identity. Central to this effort is a news bulletin that the FARC posts to YouTube and distributes through social media. This article analyzes the evolution of that online news bulletin, which was first called the *Insurgent Bulletin (el Informativo Insurgente)* and then *New Colombia News (Nueva Colombia Noticias)*. The program's contents rehash long-standing tropes in the FARC's media production: highlighting double standards and logical fallacies of government rhetoric, aligning itself with social movements, posturing as a legitimate political actor, and decrying the Colombian state as hostile to its poor, rural, and dark-skinned citizens. Although a content analysis of the news program would make for an interesting article, that would be a different essay

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<sup>2</sup> Colombian political scientist Dario Villamizar Herrera (2017) has made this argument in his book *Las guerrillas en Colombia: Una historia desde los orígenes hasta los confines*. Villamizar's argument refocuses Jorge Castañeda's (2013) premature effort to declare an end to the Cold War in Latin America.

<sup>3</sup> The claim is of unknown veracity, and quite possibly could have been invented as part of Fidel's production of his own mythos ("El Bogotazo," 2014).

entirely. In what follows, I bypass questions of content to parse the FARC's experiments with style, tracing a shifting aesthetic through the negotiating period. I will argue that the FARC has sought to perform with media legitimacy (and, metonymically, political legitimacy) by imitating the semiotics of corporate broadcast news while strategically modulating the stridency of its tone. But before we turn to the bulletin itself, allow me to provide some important background for understanding the state of the propaganda war in Colombia in the 2010s.

### **Isolation**

Between 1999 and 2002 the Colombian government and the FARC held negotiations in "El Caguán," shorthand for a demilitarized swath of southeastern Colombia the size of Maryland. The talks began ominously when FARC leader Manuel Marulanda snubbed President Andres Pastrana, leaving him seated alone on a dais on January 7, 1999. Three years later, those negotiations ended in acrimony. On February 20, 2002, President Pastrana went on national television to decry the FARC's use of the demilitarized zone to hold hostages and traffic drugs. The implosion of talks corresponded with the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001. The confluence of events paved the way for the European Union (EU) to designate the FARC a terrorist organization, a move that gave the Colombian government leverage to stifle international solidarity. Most often this meant targeting a loose network of militants and sympathizers clustered in European and Latin American capitals, including Mexico City, Stockholm, Santiago, and Paris, while undercutting the FARC's online media presence, thereby denying the group geographical and digital space. Although the United States had placed the FARC on its list of foreign terrorist organizations as early as 1997, the Colombian government fully exploited this designation only on the heels the events of September 11, 2001, by branding the FARC alternatively as "narcoguerrillas" or "narcoterrorists" (Tate, 2015, pp. 47-55). This strategy would bear fruit for the Colombian government in the late 2000s.

I traveled to Scandinavia in 2009 to research the radical left's use of the Internet to claim media space it had been denied in Colombia. What I found was a legal battle playing out in the Colombian government's favor. In March 2009, I sat in the gallery of the Danish Supreme Court in Copenhagen as a judge read aloud the verdict of a case that had wound its way through Denmark's lower courts. *Fighters and Lovers*, a Danish collective, had openly defied EU antiterror legislation by sending the proceeds of the sale of T-shirts, CDs, lighters, and perfumes (Figures 1 and 2)—approximately \$5,000—to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and to the FARC. I interviewed one of the defendants, a young man in his mid-20s whom I will call Oscar, a few days before the ruling. He arrived to our meeting on a folding bicycle and leaned it next to the window of the café where we spoke.



Figure 1. A screenshot from the Fighters and Lovers website, taken during April 2009, featuring an interactive video game, watches, hats, and a cartoon for the group's cause.



Figure 2. A screenshot from the Fighters and Lovers website, taken during April 2009, featuring a pro-FARC T-shirt marketed by the group.

Oscar explained the group's cause marketing this way:

We are talking about principles, values which are very fundamental, but it's important for us that it doesn't get very airy and remote from the daily life of our own people, Danish people, Europeans more generally. We try to connect the political message to items that people use in their daily life, like a T-shirt, like a cap, like a lighter. (personal interview, March 22, 2009)

Oscar reached into his left pocket and pulled out a lighter. "You can have this one," he said, weaving it into the discussion naturally:

You have the opportunity with this lighter, the next time you are with somebody who smokes and asks you for a light—you can start a conversation about this issue. If you wear the T-shirt, you can't avoid this kind of discussion, especially these days, when it has been a very controversial issue here in Denmark. By producing music created by FARC musicians and Copenhagen DJs, we create a possibility for raising these issues in another environment, because it's music. Is music also a kind of terrorist propaganda? Is this illegal? (personal interview, March 22, 2009)

Within a week of our interview, I watched disappointment wash over Oscar's face as a judge read the ruling of the Danish Supreme Court. It upheld a lower court's ruling against him and his codefendants. Fighters and Lovers' brand-based resistance to EU antiterror legislation was definitively illegal.<sup>4</sup>

At the national level, too, the FARC has been hamstrung by the close ideological relationship between the state and corporate media. Before the Cuba talks began in 2012, the FARC had pragmatically scaled its media ambitions to a level reasonable for its means, focusing on shortwave radio and producing and circulating *música fariana*, or FARC music. In a country dominated geographically by three ranges of the Andes and the Amazon basin, regional radio that can transmit to two or three departments (the Colombian equivalent of states) has been one of the primary fronts in the propaganda war (Roldán, n.d.). The military, for its part, has invested heavily in radio infrastructure, and its station, Colombia Stereo, has wider coverage than corporate conglomerates such as RCN and Caracol, which have historically deemed remote populations commercially inconsequential.

Música fariana varies across regions and spans the major genres of Colombian music: salsa, vallenato, merengue, and cumbia. The lyrics romanticize the armed struggle with refrains such as, "I live the guerrilla life, carry my rifle to fight" and "learn how to sleep in the open mountain." Música fariana seeks to evoke folkloric traditions and, through them, to normalize the decision to take up the armed struggle, representing that life-changing (and often fatal) decision as a rural pastime, a fun adventure, or a valiant commitment to social change. When the group is secure enough about its dominion over a

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<sup>4</sup> For competing analysis of the Danish case against Fighters and Lovers, see Yamhure's (2008) editorial, which celebrates the outcome, in the national Colombian newspaper *El Espectador* and the FARC (2009) Web page "Resistencia," which decries it.

territory, it will host public concerts and intermix popular songs with música fariana.<sup>5</sup> As with shortwave radio, the primary audience for música fariana has been the group's principal constituency, Colombia's rural poor.

Restricted to local publics in Colombia and within a closing legal-diplomatic vise abroad, the FARC has turned to online platforms to try to get its messages out. But here, too, the FARC has struggled to cultivate a political presence. Through websites such as ANNCOL (New Colombia News Agency) and Radio Café Estereo, which incorporate in Sweden because of that country's liberal freedom of expression laws, the FARC and its sympathizers in exile have sought to circumvent the censorship that is the corollary of the FARC's designation as a terrorist organization. In the mid-2000s, however, Sweden's liberal political establishment began to move to the right as the Moderate Party (which trends conservative) proved more than a passing phenomenon. ANNCOL, the FARC's digital mouthpiece, struggled to stay online. The Colombian government's appeals to its Swedish counterpart to crack down on FARC-affiliated media began to have an effect in the late 2000s.<sup>6</sup> While the Colombian government pursued a legal-diplomatic strategy to shut down pro-FARC websites, it also honed its hacking skills with denial-of-service attacks.<sup>7</sup>

I attended a broadcast of Radio Café Estereo, a project, along with ANNCOL, at the epicenter of FARC-aligned media activism emanating from Scandinavia. There, in the basement of a middle-class Stockholm apartment, a group of men in their 40s passed around plastic cups filled with whiskey as they recorded a radio show in which they pushed back against government propaganda that extolls soldiers as heroes.<sup>8</sup> They needled the military, asking what kind of heroes—riffing on the Colombian military's propaganda—would engage in the “false-positive” scandal. The euphemism refers to revelations that military recruiters kidnapped impoverished adolescents only to dress them up as guerrillas, kill them, and present their corpses as slain in combat to collect financial rewards for their “kills.” When the radio show ended, the four commentators began to joke about when their website would be brought down again. Their page had been hacked and redirected to the Colombian military's radio station one week earlier. For

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<sup>5</sup> For a video of such a concert that has circulated in the art world, despite formal protest by the Colombian government, see Díaz's (2002) “Los Rebeldes del Sur.”

<sup>6</sup> This was the same time period during which Colombian paramilitaries began arriving in Sweden to sow fear among leftist exiles. Young paramilitary members, who arrived in Stockholm claiming political persecution, would visit social spaces of the Latin American left, such as the weekly chess matches at Stockholm's Kulturhuset (Cultural House). In hushed tones, the paramilitary members would make threatening slurs to their compatriots in Colombian Spanish.

<sup>7</sup> Hacking defies the tendency in media anthropology to analyze acts of mediation in discrete stages: production, circulation, and reception. Scholars of hacking have looked for points of crossover, and have tended to focus on hackers as agents of productive disruption. For an extraordinary ethnography of the cultural phenomenon of hacking, see Coleman (2015).

<sup>8</sup> The military's central advertising campaign is “In Colombia Heroes Exist,” which refashions the war machine-centric propaganda of the U.S. Marines for the Colombian military. See Gordillo and Federico's (2013) *Apuntando al Corazon (Targeting the Heart)*, a documentary film that describes and analyzes how that campaign and other advertising operations contracted by the military have been pivotal to the Colombian counterinsurgency.

the radical left to express its views, it needed 6,000 miles of distance from Bogotá, and even that did not guarantee that it could get its message out. The government's multipronged legal-diplomatic-hacktivist strategy to root out international solidarity with the FARC and shutter its media operations abated only during the Havana negotiations, when the government ceded the FARC political space.

I interviewed Rodrigo Granda in Havana in March 2016. Granda is a lead negotiator for the FARC and a member of the group's secretariat, its most powerful body. He has also been one of the group's most prominent diplomats.<sup>9</sup> When we spoke, Granda characterized the government position as follows: "They say we are narcoterrorists, that we don't have anything in our heads, that all we want is to accumulate money, that we live like pharaohs." He claimed that this narrative began to crack when the FARC's leadership arrived in Havana. Indeed, the political recognition implicit in the act of negotiating has meant that the FARC has regained part of the legitimacy it had lost to the government's formidable propaganda operation (for further information, see Fattal, forthcoming; López de la Roche, 2014). Granda went on to say

When we arrived to Havana, we didn't come here defeated, we came as equals with the government to talk about the huge problems of war and peace, about the changes that Colombia needs to advance as it projects strategically as a country and nation. Now, there's not a sensible person on planet Earth who thinks that we are narcos. (personal communication, March 10, 2016)

Granda's claims are exaggerated and tendentious, but they illustrate the FARC's aspiration to political recognition and its determination to undo the effects of government messaging that has portrayed its members as mercenaries motivated by greed rather than ideological grievance.

### ***The Insurgent Bulletin, An Uncanny Convergence***

The FARC's bid to expand its political credibility beyond its limited support networks hinges on its engagement with modern media politics. What is fascinating about the FARC's Havana-based media operation and its effort to reframe the narrative of the conflict is its attention to media form. Consider the research that went into the decision to base the FARC's bulletin around two presenters, male and female. Here is one quote from a three-hour interview I conducted with the FARC's director of "distribution and propaganda" (*divulgación y propaganda*), Sergio Marín, in Havana in March 2016.<sup>10</sup> Sitting near the bar in the lobby of the Hotel Palco, where journalists congregate to await press conferences and spies take note of who is meeting with whom, Marín explained how the FARC went about conceiving of the *Insurgent Bulletin's* format.

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<sup>9</sup> In 2004, Colombian intelligence agents captured Granda in Venezuela and brought him to Colombia where he was then imprisoned. French President Nicolás Sarkozy advocated successfully for Granda's release in a bid to win the freedom of French-Colombian dual citizen Ingrid Betancourt. As with all names of FARC guerrillas in this essay, I have chosen to use aliases by which they are popularly known.

<sup>10</sup> For a full transcription of my interview with Marín, translated into English, see Fattal (2016).



By law you always look to what's closest. In other words, if we are going to make a news program, how are we going to try to do it? Like the news in Colombia, in the style of RCN and Caracol. . . . For example, we start from a classic format in Colombia. It used to be very classic throughout the world but it's hardly used anymore, which is the presentation of a couple, man and woman. The man talks, the woman talks, the man talks, the woman talks, the journalist comes out, the man talks. It's hard to find this format in CNN, in BBC, or in Channel CCTV or Telesur, or in Russia Today. It's no longer the traditional format in the world today, it's been left behind, but it's the format that is still used by Colombian news, and we, of course, since it's been our culture, we've gotten used to turning on the news and seeing two presenters. (personal communication, March 16, 2016)

The FARC's concerted attention to form and format has been a rarity that the group has indulged since arriving in Havana in 2012. Previously the group had been consumed by fending off a relentless offensive by the Colombia military (that has been supported handsomely by the United States since the turn of the millennium; Tate, 2015). Marín conceded, "We couldn't combat on all fronts with the same intensity. We succeeded in resisting militarily, but we have to admit that politically and propagandistically they hit us really hard." Cuba provided the safety and protection the FARC lacked, an opportunity to concentrate its political leadership and media team in the same place, and a locus for its otherwise globally dispersed digital operations. The result has been a laboratory for experimenting with techniques of online communication.

At the core of the FARC's Cuba-based media operation was a television-style news bulletin, the *Informativo Insurgente*, or *Insurgent Bulletin*. The program was distributed online. It ranged from 10 to 30 minutes in duration, and its content tacked between updates from the negotiating table, spin on front-page news in Colombia, stories that narrate the group's history, segments decrying misinformation by corporate media, a social media section that highlighted favorable Tweets, and an unabashedly politicized sports section. The segmentation of coverage mirrored imperfectly the organization of Colombian broadcast news. The stylization of the program was uncanny, "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (Freud, 2003, p. 124), in Sigmund Freud's classic formulation. For many Colombians, especially those in the portion of the country that has opposed—often virulently—the peace process, a FARC news bulletin modeled after Colombian television news is a terrifying combination of deeply familiar but assiduously managed dimensions of Colombian life: the guerrilla threat and media spectacle. The terrifying dimension of this combination is its disruptive potential. Despite the fact that the Colombian state has never monopolized violence, it has proven extraordinarily effective at controlling the flow of discursive violence—toward the FARC.<sup>11</sup> The FARC's *Insurgent Bulletin*, however, was a bid to build a platform on which it could spar with hegemonic media outlets, rather than continue to act as the media's punching bag. Within the counterinsurgency logic that has organized the Colombian nation-state for the last 50 years, guerrilla fighters were to be denied access to a microphone at all costs, and should certainly not have the luxury of posturing as anchorpeople

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<sup>11</sup> For a reflection on how this happens in the context of online video circulation on sites such as YouTube, see Fattal (2014).

(Figure 3).<sup>12</sup> In what follows, I analyze the economy of signs in the *Insurgent Bulletin*. By homing my analysis on the stylistic elements of the FARC media operation, I tease apart how the group projected an image of political legitimacy in preparation for political life after a peace accord.



**Figure 3. Anchorpeople for the Insurgent Bulletin.**

I want to suggest, following Michel Foucault's (2003) intervention in his 1975–76 lectures, *Society Must Be Defended*, that the FARC's reincorporation into the body politic will instantiate a vision of politics as war by other means, the inversion of Clausewitz's dictum. When guerrillas mobilized midcentury, they were motivated by political exclusion, so it stands to reason that the transition on the horizon promises a reverse slide on the continuum that connects war and politics. But the slider moves at a moment in which the practice of politics is not merely entangled with, but enveloped by structures of mediation, especially the global connections afforded by the Internet. As Sergio Marín, the FARC's director of distribution and propaganda, noted:

Here in the peace delegation we have guerrillas who have spent 45, 40, 35, 30, 25 years in the mountains. Of course they have the ability to understand [the Internet] or at least to try to understand what it is, but one thing is to have a theoretical idea, another thing is to live with it. (personal communication, March 16, 2016)

<sup>12</sup> It is telling that one of the male anchors, Boris, wore a uniform beneath a reporter's vest for the first few programs but then decided to remove it.

Similarly, Boris, the anchorman pictured in Figure 3, told the makers of a FARC-produced documentary, "In the jungle we simply didn't have the ability to see the magnitude of [the Internet], but here we've seen its dimensions" (FARC, 2015a, min. 39–40).<sup>13</sup>

As the FARC rebuilt its Internet presence over the course of the Havana negotiations, it highlighted a form of ideological mediation that the group's old guard is most familiar with: music. Each *Insurgent Bulletin* began with 30 seconds from the song "Life Is Struggle," composed by the FARC and attributed to its Martin Caballero Bloc, which operates in Colombia's Caribbean region, near the border with Venezuela. Over a Latin hip-hop beat, a male voice sings the lyrics:

Que es la vida sin causa y bandera / Sin desafío a imperios opresores / Sin sentir la furia  
de sus explosiones? / Selva adentro, selva adentro Sin provocar el vuelo silencioso de  
sus águilas / Que nos espían con los ojos del satélite que se desorbitan cuando pasamos  
/ Como guerreros justicieros en la rotación terrestre

[What is life without a cause and a flag / Without challenging oppressive empires /  
Without feeling the fury of its explosions? / Into the jungle, into the jungle / Without  
provoking the silent flight of its eagles / That spy on us with their satellite eyes / That  
fall out of orbit when we pass through / Like warrior avengers on the spinning earth]

The music's production quality is striking, studio-recorded and impeccably mixed. To see just how dramatic the improvement in the FARC's audiovisual production skills has been since the Cuba peace talks began, let's look at two music videos, the first from immediately after the talks were announced, and the second after nearly two years of negotiations.

The FARC released the first video on YouTube one week after the peace talks were officially declared (Paz, 2013). It was packaged along with the group's initial public statement about the negotiations. The FARC's leader, Timoleón Jiménez, otherwise known as "Timochenko," gives short statements that bookend the video. At the beginning he says, "We've come to the table without hatred or arrogance." He reappears at the end to say, "We swore we would triumph, and we will triumph."

The song's lyrics wander from topic to topic, united only by the unwieldy chorus, which repeats twice:

Voy pa' la Habana / Esta vez a conversar / Con él que me acusaba de mentir sobre la paz

[I am going to Havana / This time to talk / With he who accused me of lying about  
peace] (Paz, 2013)

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<sup>13</sup> The documentary is called *Insurgencia por la Paz* (FARC, 2015a), and the relevant parts, especially minutes 37–41, feature Boris Guevara, who worked in the propaganda commission with Sergio Marín.

A band of four guerrillas—two drummers, a guitarist, and an amateur rapper—plays in a field (Figure 4). The lyrics alternately extol recently slain guerrilla leaders and the group’s military prowess for persevering in the face of Colombia’s high-tech counterinsurgency. The video itself is an ode to low tech. The attempt at a rap is comical in its lack of rhythm and rhyme, and in its overzealous performance (Figure 5). The video raised doubts about how seriously the guerrillas would treat the then-upcoming negotiations. The music portion of the video ends with the four musicians changed into civilian clothes and carrying luggage, as if on their way to Havana (Figure 6).

The video was part joke, part challenge. But if the joking register intended to poke the government in the eye for being unable to defeat the FARC militarily, or to entirely control the framing of the upcoming negotiations, its success was ambiguous, since the video circulated as the butt of ridicule on social media, where the urbane laughed (with varying degrees of discomfort) at the FARC’s clumsy foray into Latin hip-hop. The production quality was so poor that it posed no significant threat to hegemonic media constructions in Colombia.



*Figure 4. Screenshot from the FARC video, “Nos Vamos pa’ la Habana Música” (Paz, 2013).*



*Figure 5. Screenshot from the FARC video, "Nos Vamos pa' la Habana Música" (Paz, 2013).*



*Figure 6. Screenshot from the FARC video, "Nos Vamos pa' la Habana Música" (Paz, 2013).*

The laughably low-tech reposted August 13, 2013 production of the earlier September 2012 video stands in sharp contrast to the hip-hop video the FARC produced in collaboration with the Cuban rap

group Cuentas Claras [Clear Accounts] in May 2014 (Paz, 2014). The chorus of that video is catchy, and goes as follows:

Pueblo Colombiano pa' la mesa / Vamos todos juntos / Sin falsas promesas

[Colombian people to the table / Let's all go together / Without false promises] (Paz, 2014)

Cuentas Claras (2017), the rap duo that claims on its website to "pay special attention to Cuban reality, always from a revolutionary perspective" (para. 1), appears side by side with Boris Guevara, who is a cohost of the *Insurgent Bulletin*, and Alexandra Nariño, otherwise known as "Tanja," a young Dutch foreign fighter celebrity who has been a member of the FARC since 2002.<sup>14</sup> The montage cuts back and forth between the foursome rapping in a studio (Figure 7) and Miguel Pascuas, one of two surviving founding members of the FARC (Figure 8). Pascuas acts the role of an oppressed Colombian peasant whose crops are being fumigated by U.S.-supported antinarcotics operations, and who is threatened by paramilitaries.

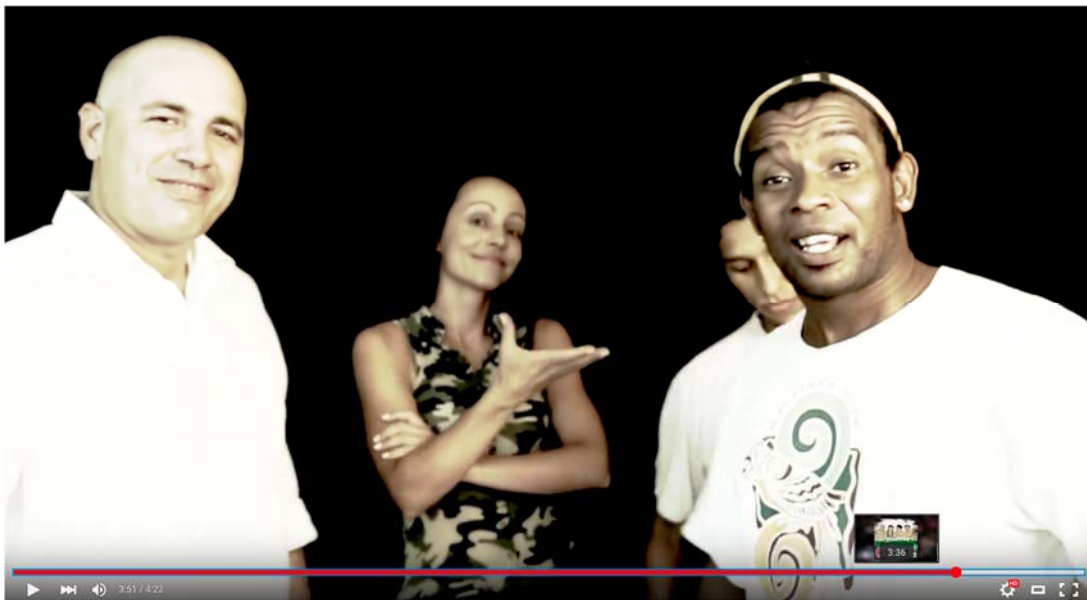


Figure 7. Screenshot from the FARC's Latin hip-hop song with Cuentas Claras (Paz, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Tanja is the FARC's highest profile foreign fighter. She often cohosts the *Insurgent Bulletin* and is frequently featured by the FARC in its propagandist materials. Leftist journalist Jorge Enrique Botero (2014) has written a biography of her.





Figure 8. Screenshot from the FARC's Latin hip-hop song with *Cuentas Claras* (Paz, 2014).

The rap itself covers a wide range of topics, but unlike the FARC's previous music video, now there is rhyme, rhythm, and high-end production. The flow is difficult to reproduce in English translation, but consider the following verse (emphasis added):

Como Don Quixote sin temor que me *derrote* / Que el pueblo se nos una / Que la verdad se *toque* / O es que tienen miedo que los pobres hacen *bloque*? / Que adquieren conocimiento y en un *choque* los *derroten*

[Like Don Quixote I'm fearless about defeat / Let the people unite with us / Let the truth be clear / Or are they afraid the poor rise up as a block? / That they get some knowledge and defeat them in a clash] (Paz, 2014)

The issue of disinformation in the media is woven into the song, which continues (emphasis added):

Para desatar este *nudo* / No se debe usar la ley del *embudo* / Ni utilizar la palabra de paz como *escudo* / Y mentir, masacrar y decir que es por mi culpa que no se *pudo*

Alteran nuestro punto de *vista* en cada *noticia*, en cada *revista* / Como los millonarios cambian de *ropa*, una situación *bochornosa* / Usan el periodico para desinformar y los pobres lo utilizan para *sopa*

Si yo vengo a conversar y tu me vienes a *atacar* / Oiganme pueblo, no se dejen *engañar* / El cese a fuego es *bilateral* / Pero si el falso positivo y la masacre siguen igual, entonces quien carajo esta actuando *mal*?

[To untie this knot / No you can't use the law of double standards / And don't use the word peace as a shield / And lie, massacre and say that you couldn't (do anything) because it's my fault

They change our point of view in each piece of news, each magazine / Like the millionaires change clothes, a shameful situation / They use the newspaper to misinform and the poor use it for soup

If I come to talk and you come to attack / Listen people, don't get fooled / The cease fire is bilateral / But if the false positives and massacres continue all the same, then who the hell is acting bad?] (Paz, 2014)

The stanza ends with a visceral scene pulled from another YouTube video: a member of Colombia's riot police, clad like RoboCop in protective gear, blasts a protester at close range with what appears to be a tear gas canister and then turns away as if nothing happened (Figure 9). The lyrics quoted above succinctly make reference to the fact that during long stretches of the negotiations, the FARC declared a unilateral cease-fire while Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos refused to reciprocate fully, reducing the military's offensive actions but withholding a bilateral cease-fire until the final months.<sup>15</sup> The up-tempo rhymes interlace media critique with an indictment of the state for its notorious extrajudicial false-positive killings, as well as for its complicity in paramilitary massacres.<sup>16</sup>

The FARC (2015b) considered the experience of making the video with Cuentas Claras as a pleasant process of learning from one another. The contrast between the FARC's two videos dramatically illustrates the group's learning curve. Although the two messages overlap, the music videos evoke very different sensations. The first video reinforced the image of the FARC as an anachronism, a holdout from a previous era that is ill-prepared to engage in serious diplomacy. (The FARC had been widely criticized for negotiating in bad faith during previous negotiations between 1999 and 2002.) The second video showed the FARC as modern, media savvy, and ready to engage in a contemporary form of politics that operates at the intersection with the culture industry.<sup>17</sup> In the words of Marín, the propaganda chief for the FARC's

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<sup>15</sup> This asymmetry is an expression of a power inequality on the battlefield (*correlación de fuerzas*) that translated to the negotiating table.

<sup>16</sup> On the false-positive scandal, see Human Rights Watch (2015). The literature on paramilitarism in Colombia is vast, but I would recommend the work of Mauricio Romero (2000), especially "Changing Identities and Contested Settings."

<sup>17</sup> Colombian media theorist Omar Rincón (2006) has written compellingly about how Colombia-mediated narratives serve to distract from the misery wrought by the Colombian conflict, and how narratives of the conflict exist in dialogic relation with the society of spectacle and its drive to entertain via distraction.



peace delegation, "We are absolutely certain that you can't do politics in the 21st century without impacting mass media and social networks" (personal communication, March 16, 2016).



**Figure 9. Screenshot from the FARC's Latin hip-hop song with *Cuentas Claras* (Paz, 2014).  
The title reads, "Who the fuck is acting badly?"**

Design, whether of a sound mix or a motion graphic, is a key indicator of the FARC's strategic reimagining of its place within the wider media ecology. Watching the evolution of the FARC's video news magazine over the course of the negotiations, what is apparent is the growing sophistication of the broadcast's graphics, which have become increasingly "CNN-esque" over time. Compare the design of the following two graphics of the same text, the first from *Insurgent Bulletin* no. 1 (Figure 10) and the second from *Insurgent Bulletin* no. 56 (Figure 11).

Ver la nueva versión: Días 1, 2 y 3 octubre

# La insurgencia informa

Desde La Habana, Cuba.



*Figure 10. Screenshot from Insurgent Bulletin no. 1*  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZfnFwULcLI&list=PLWgkL4QX1dO4UpyXdphgyVsJLI5viOB7W&index=1>).



*Figure 11. Screenshot from Insurgent Bulletin no. 56*  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3CXkWfmkvqQ>).

The racy red lines and floating blue platforms cast away the austerity of the earlier graphic. This is no small matter. Austerity has been a hallmark of the FARC's aesthetics and discourse. When, in January 1999, FARC cofounder and patriarch Manuel Marulanda left Colombian President Andrés Pastrana seated alone on the dais at the opening ceremony of the peace negotiations in San Vicente de Caguán, in southern Colombia, he had a guerrilla leader read a speech on his behalf. In that speech, Marulanda berated the government for stealing cows, chickens, and pigs from land autonomously controlled by peasant activists in 1964. Colombian mass media latched onto the declaration as proof that the FARC is a dinosaur that has somehow persisted from an earlier era. Now the FARC valorizes, if not fetishizes, high-tech production aesthetics. In our discussion, Marín expressed admiration for the production quality of RCN and Caracol in Colombia (his ideological enemies), and reflected on the Venezuelan-based alternative to CNN, TeleSur:

What has been the success of TeleSur? That it managed to produce television that in its content hit straight on, especially its competitor, CNN, and managed to steal audience from it. CNN has all of its high-quality paraphernalia in technical terms, and correspondents all over the world that transmit live, with attractive sets. In other words, this is a problem of experts. In this sea of audiovisual options I need to catch the attention of the viewer. If I only have content, if I have the essence but I don't share it in an attractive form, well, I'll have a very small public. (personal communication, March 16, 2016)

As a result, the FARC's media operations have come to look like those of RCN and Caracol, Colombia's two corporate broadcasters, whose television and radio stations hold a virtual duopoly on mass mediation, with echoes of CNN. The shift has not come without pushback from some of the FARC's die-hard supporters. Consider the comment by YouTube user Pepe beneath *Insurgent Bulletin* no. 55: "The new episode of the Insurgent Bulletin looks like that of the Santos government, it looks horrible to me. . . . The level is dropping" (YouTube no longer posted).

In the FARC's revamped media operation, we see a concerted effort to broaden its audience. Marín made this point emphatically in our conversation:

The news bulletin is not a product for guerrillas, nor for the peace delegation [of the FARC] nor the guerrillas in the camps in Colombia. It's a product that tries to impact particular parts of Colombian public opinion that have never had anything to do with the FARC, that aren't communists, that aren't militants, that aren't revolutionary. (personal communication, March 16, 2016)

Marín detailed the FARC's ability to gather market research studies and opinions from high-end consumer marketers in uptown Bogotá. He emphasized that since 1980s, the FARC has been attuned to the urbanization of Colombia. Its urban militias, such as the Bolivarian Movement and Clandestine Communist Party of Colombia, not only help with logistics and intelligence but also keep the group in touch with city life, connections often overlooked in the rush to characterize the FARC as a rural insurgency—a characterization Marín described as a "relative truth." He spoke of the FARC's willingness to

pay an urban militant to do a master's degree that specializes on social networks, of militants bringing copies of the *Insurgent Bulletin* to high-end marketing firms in northern Bogotá to gather feedback—research that culminated in the decision to target a specific audience, 25- to 35-year-olds of the urban middle class.<sup>18</sup> Marín explained why:

For now we have a very concrete public, urban young people from the middle class, 25 to 35 years old. That's our public. That's not to be dismissed, right? In the Latin American context, impacting the urban middle class youth is half the revolution—like what happened in Cuba. That's been the Latin American experience. If you put the urban middle class youth in your pocket, you have half of the revolution figured out, at least at the level of the leaders who will guide the process. You give the popular movement a group of men and women with the techno-scientific capacity to put a historical process on their shoulders. One thing is to make the revolution with *compañeros* that come without knowing how to read and write, another thing is to be able to speak to the urban public. There's nobody better than people who come from there, right? There's nobody better to speak than those who use their own words, terms, categories, aesthetic. (personal communication, March 16, 2016)

With this and other considerations in mind, the FARC changed the name of its news program from the *Insurgent Bulletin* to *New Colombia News*.

#### Demilitarizing FARC Discourse

Over the course of the negotiations, the FARC has strategically deradicalized its language. What I have discussed in the previous section, the technical-semiotic convergence with hegemonic media forms—such as the motion graphics, the use of tablets by the anchorpeople, the microphone branded with the bulletin's name—corresponds with a demilitarization of the group's discourse. Take, for example, the shift in the news bulletin's slogan. When the FARC changed the name of its news program to *New Colombia News*, it also altered its slogan from "Breaking the Media Siege" to the less defiant "Informing for Peace."

I asked Marín about the rationale behind these changes. He responded without hesitation: "To make [the program] more inclusive." Then he launched into longer explanation.

The word "insurgency" in Colombian public opinion is very limiting, and we've noticed it. We have a page, well two strong ones, two profiles, our Twitter profile and our Facebook profile. We need to start from reality: People are scared to get close to us. Not so much for who we are but for the reprisals that the Colombian state could put into motion. People think that they might suffer reprisals or be victims if they get close to us. It's different if I share some news on Facebook that's published by a medium called *New*

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<sup>18</sup> The FARC's use of the Internet to impact urban publics in Colombia is not without its precedents. For a thoughtful reflection on the FARC's use of the Internet through time, see Trejos (2012).

*Colombia News* than if I publish something from the FARC-EP Peace Delegation or the *Insurgent Bulletin*. It's easier to propagate. (personal communication, March 16, 2016)

Sensing the strategic nature of shareability, the FARC has adapted accordingly. That is not to say the FARC does not extend its Marxist critique to the companies creating social media sites; rather, it chooses to suspend that critique. Later in our interview, Marín said, "We aren't naive, we know very well whose interests these platforms answer to. But anyway, we've been given this opportunity and we've tried to take advantage of it" (personal communication, March 16, 2016). The relative horizontality of social media and the promise of viral diffusion offer the FARC its most accessible route to other publics, or, in the bellicose argot of the *Insurgent Bulletin*, a means to break the media siege. By grasping at the tools within its reach and strategically deescalating its discourse, the FARC has very gradually begun to gain traction in the public sphere. Its broader strategy is by no means an exclusively online one, Marín explained:

This news program wasn't born expecting to compete with RCN and Caracol. We are not that naïve. Neither do we think that in the immediate future in Colombia an alternative media outlet will be able to compete with RCN and Caracol. That's another fight that will have to be won, that the alternative journalists and democratic intellectuals and progressives will have to win. Colombia needs a different television, a different media. It can't be the same conglomerates who obey the interests that we all know, that are dedicated to poisoning public opinion with their lies and psychological warfare campaigns. . . . But what can happen is that the popular movement in Colombia can generate what in Latin America has been called a communicational war or a communicational guerrilla. Maybe I can't have a huge channel, I can't have a giant radio station, but I can have 10,000 radio stations. (personal communication, March 16, 2016)

In this transitional period of the Havana negotiations and the implementation of the 2016 peace accord, the FARC is adapting its experience of guerrilla warfare to media contestation. As with guerrilla warfare, a mimesis of tactics is at play, each side immersed in an intensive study of—and dialogic engagement with—the other. The tactical and semiotic mimesis that I am documenting is but one expression of the convergence of outlaw and mainstream media in Colombia, a phenomenon entangled with the FARC's quest for political legitimation. The FARC's Cuba-based media operation was an intensive experiment in how to garner political legitimacy through a performance of media legitimacy. Still avowedly radical, the group has modulated its tone and assumed the form of its adversary in the propaganda war.

To portray itself as a legitimate political actor, the FARC must make up for historical deficits. Those derive from the group's more inhumane practices, such as kidnapping and child recruitment, and also from the government's relentless media campaigns. Marín acknowledged, "Among the various propagandistic defeats that we've had is the fact that the enemy managed to dehumanize us. The enemy succeeded in creating a matrix in which we are terrorists, assassins, delinquents, narcotraffickers" (personal communication, March 16, 2016).

It behooves the government that the FARC accumulate a minimal, if always nonthreatening, degree of political legitimacy to stave off the possibility that leaders or dissident factions will peel off and remobilize under a different name. Point 2 of the peace accord, "Political Participation," addresses this issue and includes measures to democratize the media. Section 2.2.3 of the accord, "Citizen Participation through Community, Institutional, and Regional Media," makes provisions to

- give social movements airtime on public television and radio stations to express themselves;
- dedicate a portion of the electromagnetic spectrum to community media;
- train media professionals in remote communities;
- finance content to promote a culture of peace.<sup>19</sup>

This subsection of the agreement acknowledges that meaningful political participation hinges on a democratized media ecology. In other words, the political participation of the long-excluded radical left and other marginalized populations depends on the opening of media space for nonhegemonic positions.

In Gramscian terms, these transformations in Colombia's long-running propaganda war signal a transformation from what the Italian Marxist political theorist has called "the war of maneuver" to "the war of position." Gramsci (1971) defined the war of position as a jockeying by intellectuals, organic and traditional, to set, or upset, the hegemonic frame. While the war of maneuver relies on the blunt instruments of brigade movements or general strikes, the war of position depends on cultural and intellectual production (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 88, 229–232, 238–239). By engaging media bias, rather than merely decrying or dismissing it, the FARC is positioning itself as a public within the public sphere, as opposed to a counterpublic acting from a position of exclusion.<sup>20</sup>

As with the Zapatistas' recent embrace of electoral politics at the national level, the FARC's shift toward national politics is an important reminder that such analytic categories as publics and counterpublics must be used in ways that account for their fluidity. The FARC's experiment with its online news program has been a step in from the fringes, a bid to enter a direct dialogic contest with the ideological apparatus of corporate media and the public relations infrastructure of the state. Elsewhere, I parse the FARC's curious embrace of culture industry tactics (see also, Fattal, forthcoming; e.g., it held a six-day guerrilla conference in September 2016 at which it approved the peace accord among its rank and

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<sup>19</sup> For details on these and other provisions for the democratization of the media, contra its oligopolistic form, see page 46 of the final peace agreement (Gobierno Colombiano & FARC, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> In the arcane language of public sphere scholarship, we might say that the FARC has shifted from a counterpublic, according to Michael Warner's (2002) definition, to a "subaltern counterpublic" space (Fraser, 1990), in that Fraser's term carries relatively reformist connotations. It is worth reading the FARC's tact toward unarmed politics and constitution as a legal counterpublic along with the history of Zapatismo and its gradual process of rendering its arms irrelevant in the face of other social and mediated forms of struggle. Especially stimulating in the context of this comparison is Johnston, (2000) "Pedagogical Guerrillas, Armed Democrats, and Revolutionary Counterpublics: Examining paradox in the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas Mexico. *Theory and Society*, 29, 463–505.

file and staged a massive six-day Woodstock-like event for the media). In this article, however, I have focused on how the FARC has adapted to a war of position that is increasingly playing out online.

Within the academic literature on the digital as a driver of both convergence and disjuncture, this is a story of convergence. The FARC has existed in the gray zones of free speech in the Internet age. Its censorship is often the result of social networks' terms of service and codes of conduct policed by user-reported violations—a legal regime that intersects with political determinations, such as when a group is labeled a terrorist organization. Through a multipronged offensive, the Colombian government and its allies can orchestrate waves of outrage and takedown requests, using techno-judicial pressure that includes bots, artificial intelligence, and other modes of digital disruption.<sup>21</sup> According to Boris, a central figure in the FARC's media team, the group's digital platforms receive "two, three, four attacks daily." He concedes the FARC's disadvantage:

The theory since the beginning has been trial and error, trial and error. They get us and [we think], "Why did they enter?" We try to be more agile than them. It's like in the military confrontation, no? They can give it to us in the beginning, but afterward we look at what we're doing badly. You have to correct, fix, and when they attack again you're like, "Oh, it's going to be like that"—and you start to move. It's what we call a guerrilla war, but this time virtual. (FARC, 2015a)

As Colombia's guerrilla war transitions into a war of position, a political battle for legitimacy, it is inheriting the density, intensity, and tactical patterns of the 53 years of armed confrontation that came before. What lies on the horizon is a fitful and unpredictable convergence of politics and war that might be best conceived as one long battle to determine what all the earlier battles have meant—a recursive loop from which Colombia will, one day, need to emerge.

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<sup>21</sup> To see how the right has used such tactics in Latin America, see Robertson, Riley, and Willis (2016).

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\* Links from the FARC sources are generally sporadic, but generally resurface again after a couple of months.

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