Treatment of post-conflict Colombia through infographics and data visualisation

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Abstract

Colombia has been going through an important historical moment since 26 September 2016, when the signing of a peace agreement with, perhaps, one of the oldest guerrilla movements, the so-called Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), became official before Colombian society and the world. In this accelerated process to validate what was discussed in Havana for a long period of time, the media, the government and some non-governmental organisations implemented strategies to make the agreements known among the population in all possible ways: texts, audios, videos, booklets, special reports, multimedia content and infographics. The objective of this article is to present a preliminary selection and analysis of the multiple narrative forms, discourses and tools (ICT, digital, printed and audiovisual infographics, data visualisations, georeferencing and timelines) employed to publicise the process and scope of the peace agreements which, without being reductionist, facilitated the basic understanding of such broad and extensive documents. The article highlights the value of the image and especially the inherent capacity for synthesis of this type of formats to facilitate the interpretation of information and encourage the formation of a critical citizenry. The article also seeks to demonstrate the great pedagogical and documentary value of infographics and data visualisation in the news coverage of what is perhaps the most important item in the Colombian media agenda.

**Keywords:** Infographics; data visualisation; media; Colombia; post-conflict; peace

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1. The peace processes

"Peace is possible, let's prepare ourselves for peace" (OACP, 2016).

Figure 1. "Peace processes in Colombia"

Source: https://deporteyposconflicto.wordpress.com/2016/05/06/procesos-de-paz
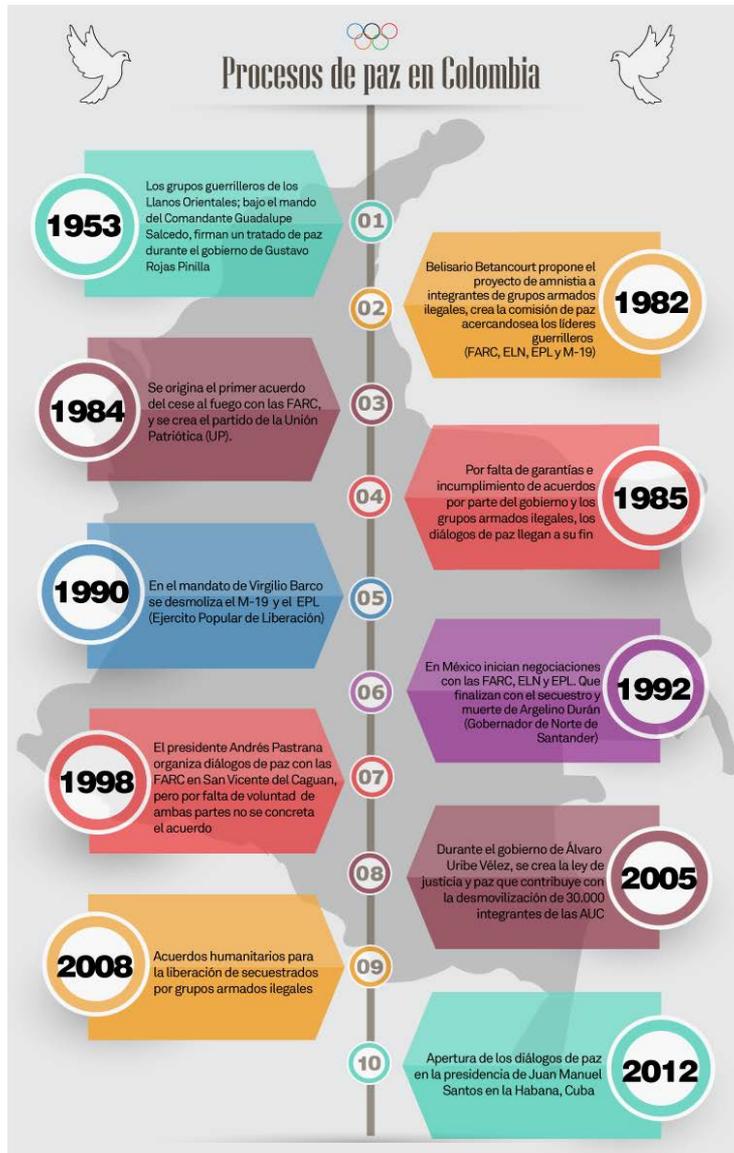
It is not the first time that a peace process is proposed in Colombia and it is neither the first time that the various actors involved in the Colombian conflict are called to dialogue. Since the beginning of the 1980s, each elected government presented various proposals that managed to achieve small agreements or negotiations with some actors. This has been documented by Villarraga (2014) in "The peace processes in Colombia, 1982-2014", whose informative and educational contributions allows us to analyse: "the government's peace policies, the events of dialogue and negotiation between national governments and guerrilla movements, the agreements and the main dynamics associated with the various peace processes" (2014: 9).

Based on the previous, we can highlight that during the past 36 years all the Colombian leaders included in their respective government agendas and plans at least one approach to the armed groups while their cabinets always included a peace advisor or commissioner.

Former Colombian President Betancur (1982-1986) "Recognised as a priority of his administration to achieve a negotiated solution of the armed conflict and, for the first time in history..., adopted a peace policy" (2014: 15); Barco (1986-1990) continued with the process, although "his peace policy included a call to institutionalisation as criticism towards the committees and delegations for dialogue and negotiations with the insurgency of the previous government..." (2014: 45); in Gaviria's government (1990-1994) "the establishment of the Constituent Assembly of Colombia... constituted a phenomenon directly related to the possibilities of peace." (2014: 83) and "In relation with the dialogues with the FARC-EP [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army] and the ELN [National Liberation Army], the government extended its peace policy in so far as it considering the acceptance of a form of international oversight for all phases of the process and a comprehensive management to agree on the agenda on the negotiation table" (2014:84).

Samper (1994-1998), for his part, in his acceptance speech stated: "I will sit at the negotiation table only when I am certain that there are real conditions for a permanent and lasting peace, as all Colombians want". (2014:101); While Pastrana (1998-2002) as representative of Casa de Nariño "considered peace as a national structural project and proposed the overcoming of the factors that generate structural violence, inequality and social injustice as the premise of a stable and definitive peace" (2014: 140); On the other hand, Uribe (2002-2010) "imposed a security policy centred on the military treatment of the conflict and its solution" (2014: 173); and Santos (2010-2018) "maintained the military offensive, but preferred to retry the political solution negotiated with the insurgency. The negotiation between the government and the FARC-EP advances with agreements on most of the items on the agenda, with important international backing and progressive citizen support" (2014: 211).

Figure 2. "Supporting women's meaningful participation in the peace process"

Source: Conciliation Resources. Available at http://www.c-r.org/es/news-and-views/multimedia/apoyando-la-participación-significativa-de-las-mujeres-en-la-paz

Peace involves both the individual and collective tranquillity of a country, and affects in some way or another the economic, political and, above all, social aspects, in the midst of a society that in the last 50 years has witnessed with fear the destruction of families, the mass migration to cities, and the

disruption of daily life as a consequence of circumstances related with the armed conflict, such as violence and illegal businesses and acts.

The peace process was supported by the traditional media, which are easily accessed by society, but also ventured into a field that has only been explored by the mass media and was, in recent years, exploited by information and communication technologies (ICT), and all the possibilities that they enable through communication networks such as the Internet. In addition, it required other languages that had been little used and implemented in the discourse of the government. Video, multimedia and especially infographics and data visualisation became important elements at a time where everyone wanted to know about the agreements, but few dared to try to understand the dense and extensive texts that were agreed upon in the negotiation table. Digital infographics and data visualisation are included in these cases at the first level of journalism as mentioned by Valero (2007), which refers to it as a new system that enables the easy development of the narrative of actions and events that can be treated more alternatively and more visually than in the traditional way.

2. Narratives to inform and educate about peace in Colombia

This is how in this accelerated process to validate the issues discussed in Havana, for a long period of time, the media, the government, the academia, non-governmental organisations and citizen groups implemented communication and outreach strategies to, on the one hand, call to the appropriation and reflection on what has occurred to up to that moment and what was proposed for the construction of a better country and, on the other hand, inform about the agreements in all possible ways: text, audio, video booklets, special reports, multimedia content, infographics and data visualisation.

Figure 3. "How many men and weapons do the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia have?"

Source: *Noticias RCN* (http://www.noticiasrcn.com/especialesrcn/conteo-hombres-farc/)
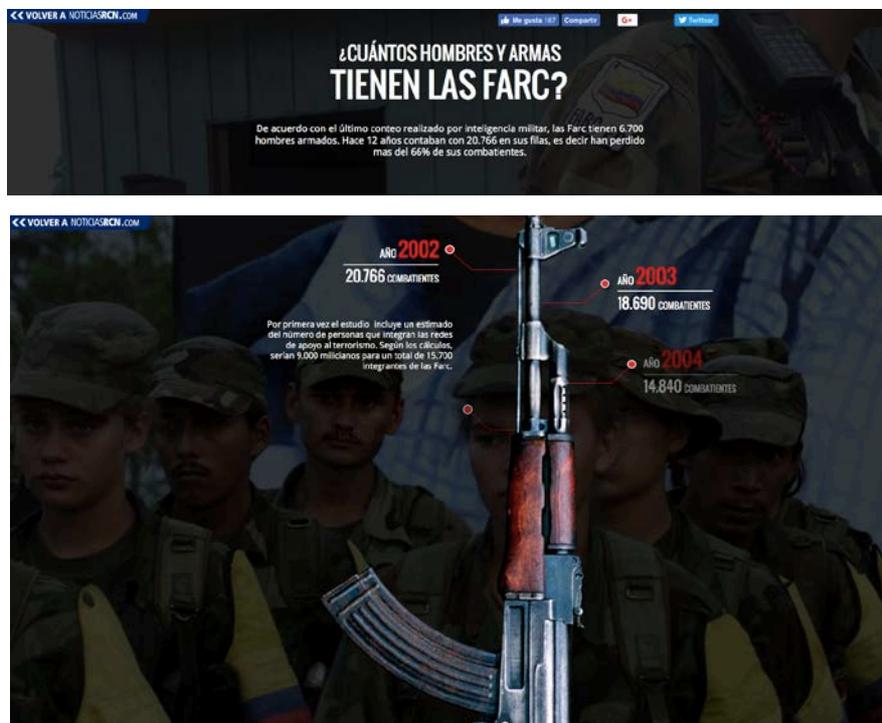
 While many contents were produced in this way, this article only presents a selection of those that rely on data visualisation tools and infographics as a way to reach the general public and assume as

criterion the value of these tools for the exercise of rigorous research and appropriate and respectful synthesis in order to reach Colombian society easily but also profoundly.

But why using such image-dominated proposals to reach society? In this regard, Caleb Gattegno, in Towards a Visual Culture (cited by Dondis, 1992: 14), says the following about the sense that promotes the dominance of the image:

> "Sight, even though used by all of us so naturally, has not yet produced its civilization. Sight is swift, comprehensive, simultaneously analytic and synthetic. It requires so little energy to function, as it does, at the speed of light, that it permits our minds to receive and hold an infinite number of items of information in a fraction of a second".

Generally, media users read images and use their sight to scan headlines, because visual perception is always the first, the fastest, and requires less mental work than reading, because the image is a more universal code, hence our preference for visual information. "The human visual experience is fundamental in learning to understand the environment and react to it; visual information is the oldest record of human history" (Dondis, 1992: 15).

This is a possibility, some experts say, but only time will tell whether it was the most appropriate way to get to the masses involved in a complex peace process. Now let's look at some proposals from different areas and conceptions. These examples are chosen based on their investigative rigour and the domain of the visual element, evidenced in various infographics and data visualisation pieces that present the results in a very clear way.

2.1. The academia. The war goes to school

This research carried out by the Journalistic Research Unit of the Grancolombiano Polytechnic Institute was directed by journalist and professor Juliana Castellanos, who for one year and a half studied the effects of the Colombian armed conflict in elementary and middle schools. To this end, Castellanos resorted to data collection and the personal stories of people connected with the educational entities operating in different spaces of the Colombian conflict.

Figure 4. "The war goes to school"

Source: Grancolombiano Polytechnic Institute
(http://editorial.poligran.edu.co/catalog/product/view/id/361417/#.WqCelWbSHfY)
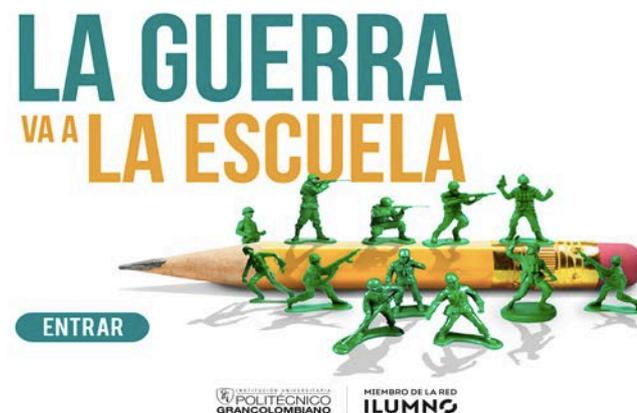
"Between the first of January of 1984 and the first of December 2015, we counted approximately 1,901,011 people who experienced a victimising event when they were of school age, i.e. between 6 and 17 years old. 4,737 minors had to leave the classroom because they were recruited into the ranks of groups on the fringes of the law. The Research Unit, led by Castellanos, endeavoured to tell this reality based on data visualisation and the dissemination of stories narrated by the protagonists." (CDR, 2018: no page).

The themes that were explored included: recruitment of children, teachers in areas of conflict, school-age victims of the conflict, budget of the conflict and, especially, lots of data.

"The central idea was to go to the digital world, not as it commonly occurred that the physical book is the digital world... and this forces us to think about it differently, but as an ebook whose wealth lies in the visual..." (Castellanos, 2016).

In "The war goes to school" you will discover special multimedia content that includes: data, geo-references, timelines, stories, images, videos and, above all, many visual, graphic and infographic narratives that bring us closer and clearly to a research that requires reflection on the situation the country is experiencing and on how little studied and visible are the side-effects of the conflict in such a sensitive environment as the educational.

2.2. Non-governmental organisations. *Conciliation Resources*

With the objective of informing more people about the conflict and the possible solutions Conciliation Resources launched the website www.c-r.org/es, which provides important information about the conflict and news related to the construction of peace in the country.
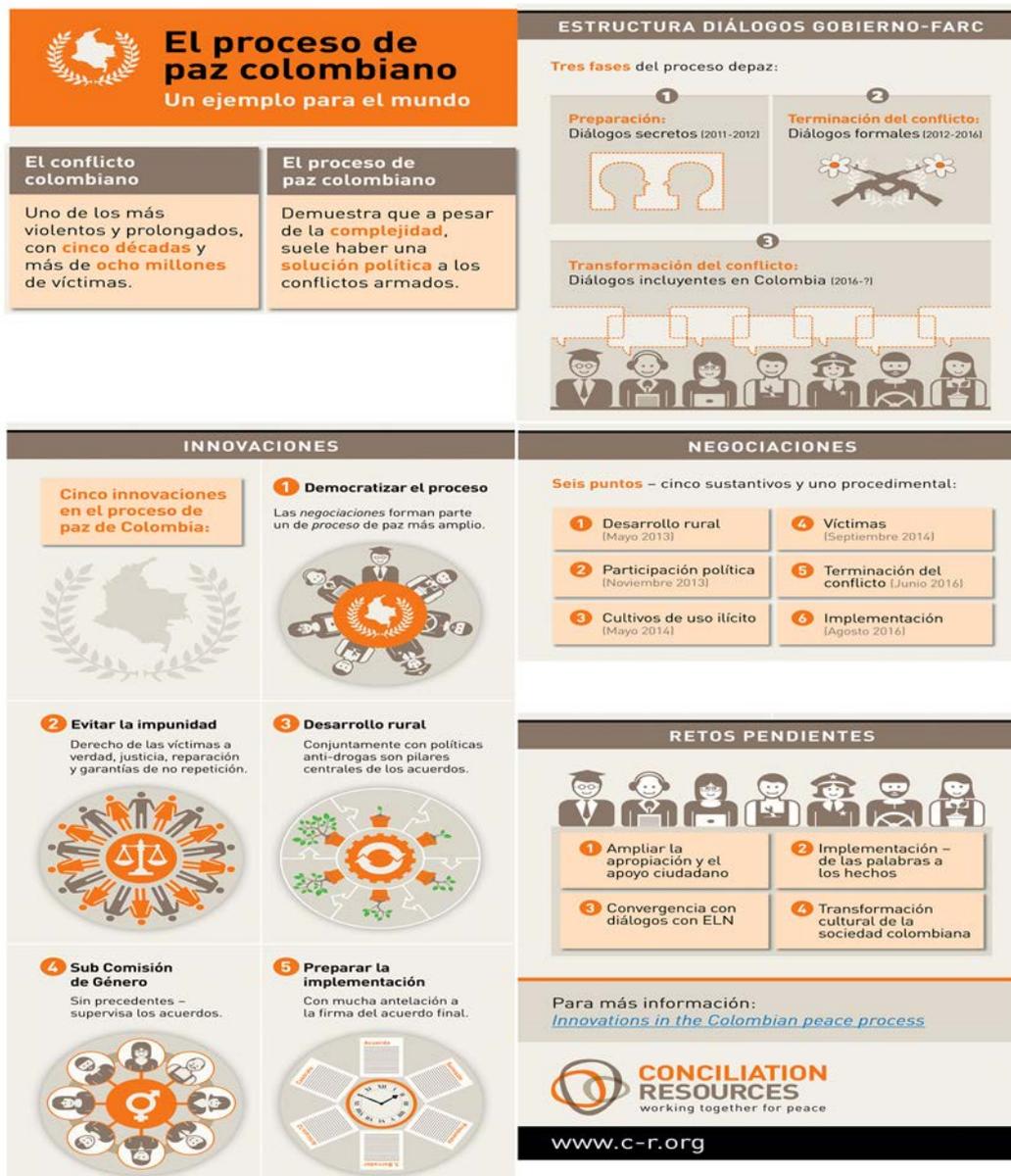
The space was created for activists, civil society, community groups and leaders interested in the experience of this entity, and has been working for more than 20 years, accompanying communities as conciliation resources to build and strengthen effective peace processes in the world.

"We believe that building sustainable peace takes time. We provide practical support to help people affected by violent conflict achieve lasting peace. We draw on our shared experiences to improve peacebuilding policies and practices worldwide." (CR, 2016)

Conciliation Resources is an independent international organisation working with communities in conflict to prevent acts of violence, resolve conflicts and promote peaceful societies, a process that is not accomplished overnight.

In Colombia, Conciliation Resources also provides support and helps people affected by conflict to contribute to the construction of a lasting peace based on policy advocacy and the improvement of peaceful environments in the world.

Figure 5. Infographic titled "The Colombian peace process"

Source: http://www.c-r.org/es/news-and-views/multimedia/infograf%C3%ADa-–-el-proceso-de-paz-colombiano

2.3. The government. The proposal of the High Commissioner

The Office of the High Commissioner for Peace was established in 1994 when the President decrees the creation of the Presidential Adviser for Peace post in 1994, which receives the level of High Commissioner and is made responsible for advising the President of the Republic on the organisation and development of the peace policy, the formalisation of dialogues and agreements with the active participation of the different sectors of civil society.

The High Commissioner for Peace also directs dialogues and agreements aimed at the reintegration of members of the illegal armed groups.

Its functions include those assigned in paragraph 4;

> Facilitate the participation of the representatives of the various sectors of civil society in negotiations that in their view could contribute to the development and consolidation of the peace processes, in accordance with the instructions of the President of the Republic. (OACP, 2015)

The Office of the High Commissioner for Peace proposed various tools and materials that promote participation and above all the appropriation of the issue of peace that is in the interests of the country.

The effects were immediately felt, because its educational booklets, on each of the agreements, reached the broadest population groups, including the traditionally "marginal" sectors who now felt included and considered in the proposals.

Figure 6. "The end of the conflict", included in the booklet titled "The Final Peace Agreement. The opportunity to build peace".
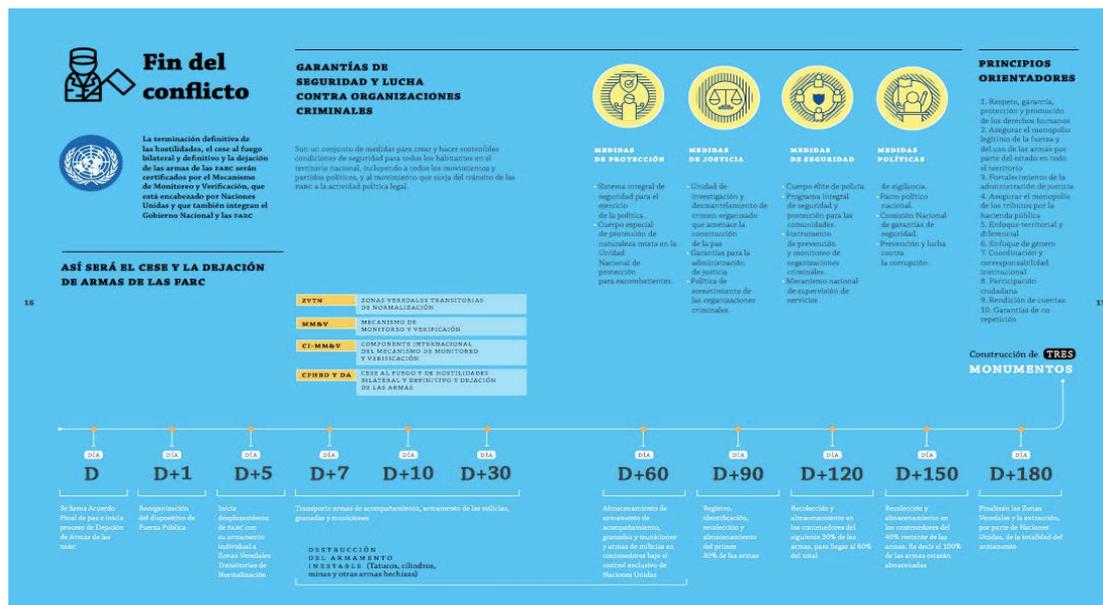

Source: http://www.altocomisionadoparalapaz.gov.co/herramientas/Documents/Nuevo_enterese_version_6_Sep_final_web.pdf

2.4. The media and their special content

It is traditional for the media to be ones to bet the most on this kind of tools considering that they retain their seal of information providers for much of Colombian society, as they are traditional, respected media in their regions in the case of the printed press, and are recognised for their trajectory in the case of the audiovisual media, while the digital media increasingly gain ground in the country thanks to their communication strategies and potential to reach the audience at any time thanks to the

communication networks and accessibility programs that the government strives to keep by implementing the digital *Plan Vive*, which facilitated access to the Internet in Colombia's rural and remote areas.

Figure 7. "The war in Colombia"

Source: http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/cuanto-cuesta-la-guerra-en-colombia/403122-3
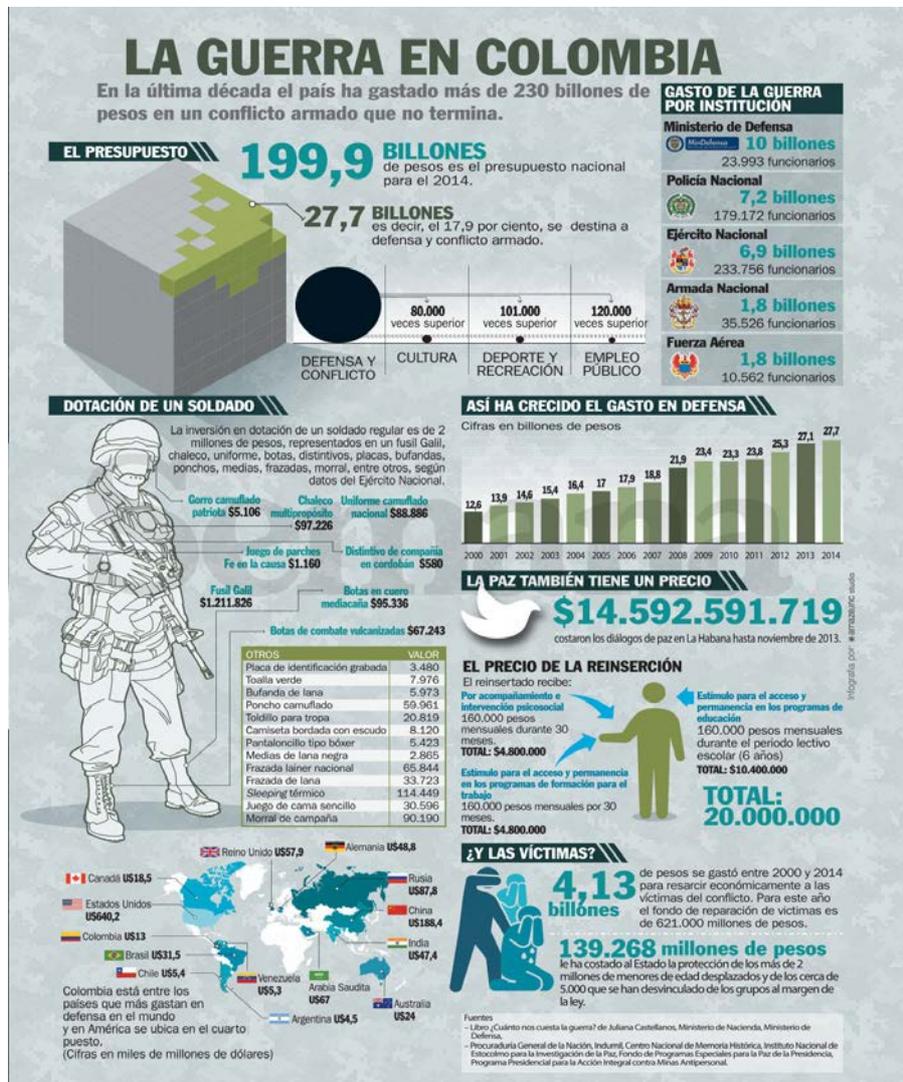
According to the 2017 Affordability Drivers Index, thanks to advances in infrastructure and Internet access, Colombia, occupies for the second consecutive year the first position among 58 developing countries, with a total score of 72.87 (85.28 in access and 58.15 in infrastructure), above Mexico (71.47), Peru (70.84) and Malaysia (68.65).

These conditions that facilitate the access of the population in general to the visual representation proposed by the media, citizens, non-governmental and government organisations contribute to the wake-up call made by Domínguez in the sense that infographics are the best way to explain complex information and for this reason people are expected to take advantage of their visual component, which can transmit much more knowledge (2002).

Figure 8. "Special transitional peace constituencies"

Source: https://www.elespectador.com/sites/default/files/static_specials/66/circunscripciones-especiales-para-la-paz/index.html

It is important to highlight, on the one hand, the national media (*El Tiempo, El Espectador* and *Semana*, among others) and their commitment to be more digital, multimedia, interactive and, on the other hand, the commitment of regional media and especially those that are independent and alternative (like *La Silla Vacía*, for example), which take advantage of their internal dynamics in news coverage and infographic artists, designers and data editors to produce great-quality information contents about the subject.

Figure 9. "Who's who in the plebiscite of Antioquia"

Source: http://lasillavacia.com/silla-blanca#silla-llena-paz
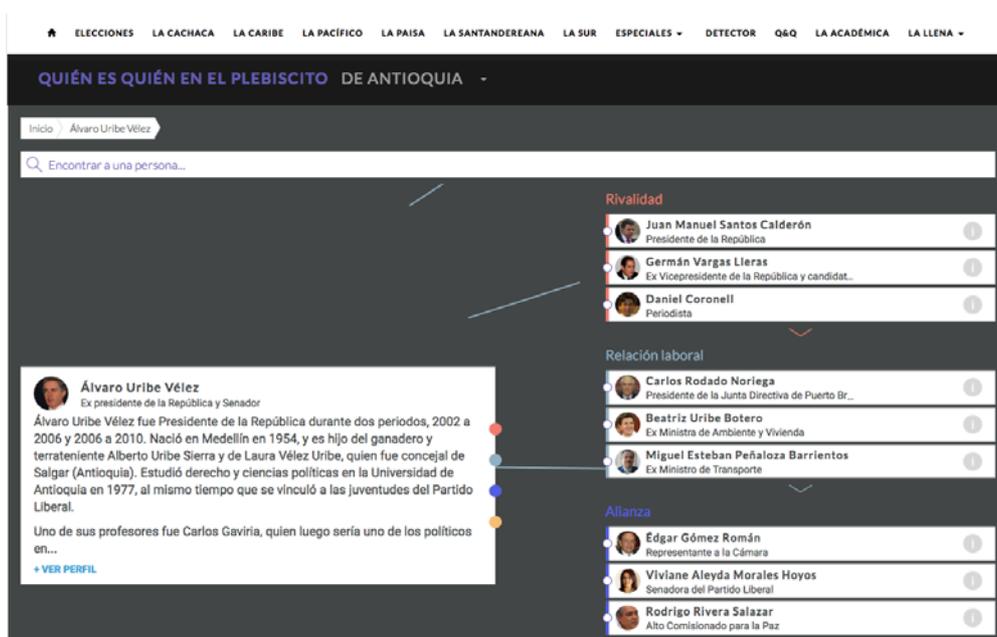
Figure 10. "Timeline of the peace dialogues"

Source: http://www.eltiempo.com/datos/linea-del-tiempo-de-los-dialogos-de-paz-56584

Figure 11. "Infographic: 16 seats for peace will come out of here"

Source: http://www.semana.com/online-especial/articulo/infografia-de-aqui-saldran-las-16-curules-para-la-paz/532894

It is worth highlighting the educational and journalistic post-conflict campaign titled *Colombia 20/20*, which was developed by *El Espectador* newspaper, which went beyond its informative duty to provide space to open up the discussion on the construction of the country that Colombian society wants to have after the war.

Colombia 20/20 (www.colombia2020.co) is a news website focused on the post-conflict that serves as a space for dialogue to communities and authorities to submit their proposals and experiences to promote the building of peaceful societies.
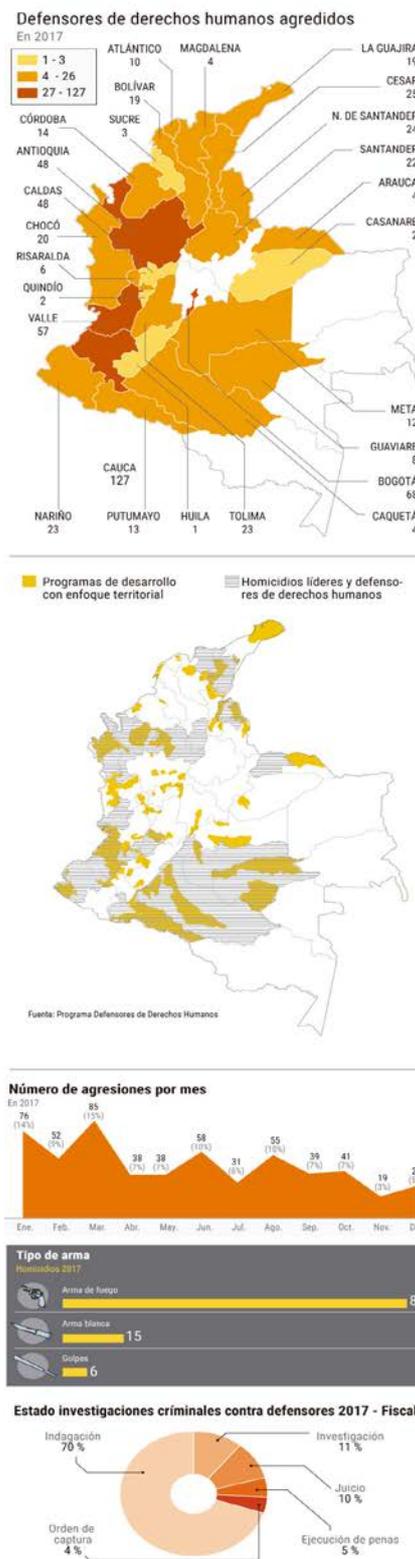
To boost the process, the website creates digital contents and summons the different actors involved in the Colombian conflict to participate in spaces that promote dialogue and the construction of the country.

Figure 12. "This is how the Monitoring and Verification Mechanism will work"

Source: https://colombia2020.elespectador.com/pedagogia/asi-funcionara-el-mecanismo-monitoreo-y-verificacion

Figure 13. "Attacks against social leaders in 70% of the territory"

Source: *El Espectador* (https://colombia2020.elespectador.com/pais/en-el-70-del-territorio-hubo-agresiones-contra-lideres-sociales)

3. More much than infographics and data visualisations

In the process of monitoring and recording other original exercise is the proposal made by *Forjando paz* ("Forging peace") a citizen group that seeks to contribute to the construction of peace in the country through actions of pedagogy, research, incidence, communication, advice and consultancy that reach different communities regardless of their characteristic features in terms of sex, age, religion or political party. The formats the group uses include the so called *pazografías*, a portmanteau that results from combining the terms peace (*paz*) and infographics (*infografías*), which in English would something like "infograpeace"

Figure 14. "Pazografías"

Source: *Forjando Paz.* Available at: http://www.forjandopaz.com/pazografias/

The *Pazografías* have strategic objectives, including: strengthen democracy by promoting citizen participation; develop community knowledge, methods, competencies and skills; and contribute to a better public understanding of the peace agreements and their implementation.

Their format is striking because it achieves the goals of clarity, brevity, utility and especially its high pedagogical and didactic value that reinforces the theory of knowledge transmission, which refers to the power of infographic information to transmit dense contents inn a way that facilitates the appropriation of knowledge of a subject, so it is not just a proposal but an invitation to action, both individual and collective.

4. The value of the image in spreading knowledge of the agreements

The analysis of the pieces indicates that the media, NGOs, the academia, the government, each in its own way, and for this subject in particular, recovered the value of image and above all its capacity for synthesis, which facilitates the interpretation of information and encourages the formation of citizenry, graphic synthesis or synthetic visualisation, which consists of:

> "a set of properties that seek to represent reality in a complete way and develop the (descriptive, narrative or interpretive) narrative of an event, not just the visible nature. The typographic forms or calligraphies are replaced by iconic languages and infographic visualisation and visuality systems." (Valero, 2012)

Figure 15. "Havana step by step"
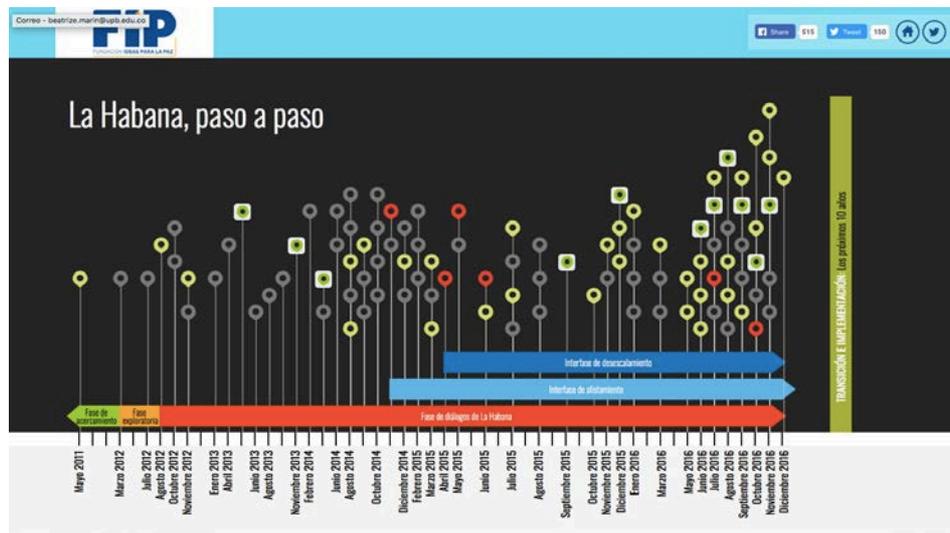
Source: *Fundación ideas para la paz.* Available at: http://www.ideaspaz.org/especiales/dialogos-habana/#

The analysis also shows the great educational and documentary character of infographics and data visualisation in the news coverage of perhaps one of the most crucial issues on the Colombian media agenda. Visualisation is represented as a widely used resource not only in the media but also in public and private institutions that use these representations to facilitate citizens' access to information: "The important information from more than a million measurements is immediately available. Visualization allows the perception of emergent properties that were not anticipated" (Ware, 2004: 3).

That is why the analysis of the different contents shows that indeed, even when their design is based on templates provided by design applications, it is evident that they do try to apply the inherent characteristics of the digital language and include to the extent of their possibilities hypertextuality, interactivity and multimedia. Moreover, they also have other not-so-obvious features with communicative intention: visuality, aesthetics, customisation and utility, for example.

The sample under analysis neither uses a single narrative form, the text. They resort to other constructions of different languages and story lines that propose different discursive forms that take advantage and appropriate the language to achieve behavioural cultural change, while simultaneously inform society of the scope of the agreements, and that without being reductionist, speculative and without subtracting value to information, facilitate the basic understanding of such broad and extensive documents as the peace agreements.

It is clear that infographics was transformed in recent years thanks to advances in ICT and "stopped being a static presentation of data to become a tool that readers can use to analyse data" (Cairo, 2008: 68).

5. Conclusions

- It is evident that the Colombian young population, which is the most likely to use computers and mobile devices because they are the generation that grew up with the technological development, is the biggest consumer of fast and detailed visual information. Although they were not the target audience of the text of the final agreement and much less the target of the calls to listen to the suggested audios, the visual proposals reached them directly.

- Meanwhile, older generations, which are less in contact with technologies and are closer to the traditional media, saw in the graphical contents a clearer choice to understand the decisions made.
- The study has shown once again the great possibilities of infographics, special interactive infographics and data visualisations thanks to their educational possibilities to understand the complex development of the Colombian peace process.
- Infographics and data visualisation tools have the ability to achieve clarification and understandings of such dense subjects as peace and can help people recognise data that are in the public domain but are difficult to understand, so that they can adopt a position towards the situations that emerge.
- Infographics and data visualisation are no longer exclusive tools for the media. They have been appropriated by different groups of citizens, the government, the academia and the private sector.
- The issue of conflict also brings closer us to a particular view of the country through infographics and encourages collaborations that aim to build related knowledge.

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