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Colombian journalism before 1900: collections, microfilming and digitization

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Colombian journalism in the 19th century

The first Colombian newspaper appeared in 1785, during the Spanish rule period: a simple information sheet informing of an earthquake, of which 3 copies were published. 'La Gaceta de Santafé', published the same year, could not maintain regularity either. El **Papel Periódico de la ciudad de Santafé de Bogatá**, which appeared in 1791 and was in circulation until 1796, was the first regular periodical publication in the present territory of Colombia. Between the time it closed down and the independence of the country, in 1810, another 6 newspapers were published, bringing the total of publications during Spanish domination to 9 titles.

To determine how many titles were published between 1810 and 1900 is more difficult, as will be seen in the following notes. On the one hand, republican life was accompanied by an eagerness to publish news and opinions that many considered excessive. Journalism became an essential element of public life and politics fed itself on the controversies of the newspapers. In 1836 journalistic fervor was such that it was decided appropriate and viable to establish a newspaper paper factory in Bogotá, a city with less than 30,000 inhabitants. In general, the press enjoyed reasonable freedom of speech, although it was subject to some pressure from the government and judicial procedures to avoid any possible excesses. It was only between 1886 and 1900, however, that censorship and repression held back the opposition press with some amount of efficiency.

On the other hand, newspapers emerged from many cities and small towns, printed on manual presses and with local distribution. Many of these newspapers have disappeared or their

collections are very incomplete. Numerous newspapers died out without getting past the first edition, which creates a confusing category for existing catalogues of 19thC newspapers in which loose pages and other short-lived printed sheets get mixed up with periodical publications in the strict sense.

Newspaper distribution was very irregular and editions rarely got past a few hundred copies. The first daily was the '**Diario Oficial**', which since 1864 served as an official acts register. The first private and commercial daily was **El Telegrama** which began its existence in 1886.

Newspaper collections

The National Library collections: A public library has existed in Bogotá since 1777. Its Director at the end of the 18thC was, in fact, the founder and editor of '**Papel Periódico**'. Although the library never made very active efforts to collect newspapers published in the country, the editors themselves usually sent their publications to the library. From 1832 onwards, a law established the obligation to legal deposit. This law was more closely complied with in the case of publications made in Bogotá, while provincial newspapers complied much more irregularly.

The National Libraries newspaper collections from the first half of the 19thC seem to be owed just as much, if not more, to the legal deposit laws as to the initiatives of some collectors. The most important of all was Colonel Anselmo Pineda, who since 1810 dedicated himself obsessively to collecting all publications from the country and many from Latin America and in 1852 he handed his collections over to the National Library. The catalogue of material given in that year, which included works up to 1850, was printed in 1872 and a second catalogue from 1873 added the contents of a second donation: the colonel had continued to collect all possible publications from 1850 until this date.

Other private collections were later added to the previously mentioned: that belonging to José María Quijano Otero, who had been Director of the Library, was bought in 1894. At the beginning of the 20thC, the collection of another director was added, that of José Vergara y Velasco. After this date the arrival of new titles corresponding to the 19thC has been minimal. At present the number of records of 19thC newspapers is approximately 2,200.

The National Libraries newspaper collections have been described in various catalogues. The first was published in 1855 and then the *Pineda Collection* (1872 and 1873) and some partial catalogues published in the *Public Instruction* magazine. In the 20thC the Pineda collection catalogue was reprinted (1936) and general lists of newspapers were published (1935). A catalogue of 19thC newspapers from 1995 is the most complete to date.

Luis Ángel Arango Library collections: This library was opened in 1958 and for this reason, its collection of 19thC newspapers is mostly the result of purchasing private collections. The most important was that of Laureano García Ortiz, a historian who collected from the end of the 19thC until the 1930's, a rich collection about Colombia. Purchased in 1945, it constitutes the base of this library's collection of patrimonial value. At present the number of records in this collection is approximately 1,200. Most of these records duplicate those in the National Library, although they

also often complement incomplete series. There may be about 25 titles which are not in the National Library. The majority of newspaper collections and libraries acquired have been obtained in Bogotá, with occasional regional contributions, meaning that they do not offer much variation from the National Library. Most of the new titles correspond, as is to be expected, to the last third of the 19thC when the García Ortiz collection was formed.

In 1980 this library put a catalogue into circulation containing approximately 900 titles from the 19thC¹. In spite of the fact that all the records can be found on the electronic catalogue, it is not easy to obtain a comprehensive, precise list due to the limitations of the present OPAC search systems which generate a large number of additional records or references that do not refer to single titles.

The University of Antioquia Collections: This university's library has a similar collection in size to that of the Luis Ángel Arango Library. According to its printed catalogue it has 1,194 records of newspapers between 1828 and 1900, which shows that the total number of records for last century could be about 1,250².

Although it has fewer complete series of newspapers from the independence period, the collection is surprising for its large quantity of records which are not found in either of the other two big libraries. On going over the titles it can be seen that those who collected them were capable of bringing together newspapers from very remote geographical regions of the country and they preserved material that for some reason have not been preserved in Bogotá. Of course this is especially true of newspapers from the end of the 19thC. An initial revision reveals that at least 300 titles mentioned are not found in the National Library which makes this collection a critical element in any preservation program.

There is no adequate document explaining the way in which this collection was made. An important part of it undoubtedly comes from the public library opened in Medellín in 1881 and which was directed by the doctor and liberal historian Manuel Uribe Ángel. The collection was received by the Library of Zea, then considered very rich, from the writer and editor Juan José Molina and probably grew through the management of its first directors. In 1916 a guide from the city of Medellín said that the library had a rich newspaper collection, including *El Semanario del Nuevo Reino de Granada*, Francisco José de Caldas' scientific journal³. However, during the first half of the 20thC both the collection and the library appear to have come to a standstill and in 1951 were handed over to the University of Antioquia. Despite this university being founded in 1867, its library seems to have been almost non-existent until the mid-19thC: in 1935 it had only 35 titles and 4 journal titles⁴.

¹ (Banco de la República, Hemeroteca Luis López de Mesa, **Catálogo general, volume 1**, Bogará, Graphic workshops at Banco de la República. s. f.)

² Uribe de Hincapie, María Teresa and Jesús María Álvarez, Cien años de prensa en Colombia, 1840-1940: indexed catalogue the existing press in the newspaper room at the Central Library of the University of Antioquia, 2^a. Ed, Medellín: Editorial Universidad de Antioquia, 2002.

³ Juan Peyrat, **Guía de Medellín**, Medellín, 1916.

⁴ "La Biblioteca de la Universidad de Antioquia: más de un siglo de historia" in the **Interamericana de Bibliotecología Magazine**. (Medellín). Vol. 16, no. 2 (July/Dec. 1993)—p. 65-84)

Other collections: Without doubt, the examination of other smaller collections would bring new findings of periodical publications not known up to now, or which we find mentions of but not copies. There does not really exist any library other than these three that is making an organized effort to search for, record, conserve and catalogue Colombian newspapers. However, the university libraries and the historical research centers have received private collections that might be very important for their contributing of regional titles.

Collections with the highest probability of contributing new copies to known titles or new titles are:

1. The Colombian Academy for History Library: Its collections are especially rich in the end period of the century and they have received gift collections from some of their members.
2. The National University of Colombia Library.
3. The University of El Valle Library.
4. The Pedagogical and Technological University of Tunja Library. Indispensable to complete the records of publications from the Boyacá region, since it manages the Boyacense Academy for History Library.
5. The University of Nariño Library.
6. The History Archives of Cauca.
7. Private collections. Some private collections are very rich in regional newspapers. The most noteworthy is without doubt that of Alfonso Harker Villamizar, which has various newspapers from the Santander region.
8. Convents and Seminaries. They would help to complete the record of ecclesiastical publications.
9. Pilot Public Library of Medellín.
10. Luis Eduardo Nieto Arteta de Barranquilla Library.
11. History Archives of Cartagena.

Conservation, microfilming and digitization:

When the stock of these three libraries is compared with the total number of 19thC publications the level of loss is considerable. The most prestigious documents, high impact newspapers have been practically preserved in their entirety. There are series of **Papel Periódico de Santa Fe** from 1791 or of the **Semanario** from Caldas, of the **Neogranadino** or **El Porvenir** at the National Library or the Luis Ángel Arango Library, although there are some tragic exceptions since there does not appear to exist any complete collection of such an important newspaper as **El Espectador**. However, the loss of provincial newspapers or marginal Bogotá newspapers was very high: there are hundreds which only have a few sample copies and there are surely many titles which do not have a copy in the collections⁵.

⁵ As far as I know, no attempt has been made to list disappeared newspapers: those that appear mentioned in other media and newspapers, but which do not figure in known collections. My statement comes from arbitrary pointers: there are small cities from where tens of newspapers have been preserved (/Honda, Socorro) whilst other places of equal intellectual development do not have any record (Salamina, Santa Rosa de Osos, Armenia.)

This loss was produced mostly in the 19thC. We can assume that many minor newspapers, that were not sent to the National Library, were not collected by their readers. The capacity of the three heroic collectors mentioned in these notes (Pineda, García Ortiz, Molina) was limited and many titles almost definitely escaped them. Without doubt, many collections outlived their editors and printers but we know that families in general do not value these collections, which are bulky, difficult to keep and practically unmarketable⁶. Some of them were probably recycled into cardboard or simply thrown into the rubbish bin.

Preservation in Colombian heritage libraries is on the whole adequate. Climatic conditions in Bogotá greatly favor the conservation of paper, so we can be sure that what was deposited in the National Library and the Luis Ángel Arango Library is still there. I am certainly ignoring some anomalies: climate effects in places like Cartagena or Tumaco, inadequate weeding, of which there are more or less founded rumors or researchers stealing or careless handling. Pineda himself and some National Library directors admitted that their collection had suffered losses through careless handling at the library but until we have a comparison and quantity study of titles, I tend to think that they were not too great. Neither can we ignore the contribution made many times by the pious descendents of the heroes to the disappearance of national history, systematically cutting out all mentions of their deeds from library newspapers. In other cases, relatives worried about their honor cut out and removed, for example, everything they could find about the sentimental activities of Nicolasa Ibáñez and her sisters.

Let us hope that these things are of the past. Today, originals are reasonably well kept and their transfer to an alternative format, which will reduce the use of originals and offer an almost total back-up of the newspapers' contents, is the greatest necessity.

Since 1985 the microfilming effort has been great. At the outset, through Lina Espitaleta's initiative, director of the Luis Ángel Arango Library at the time and current director of the National Library, a joint microfilming program was developed between the two main Bogotá libraries. The collections were put together into one in order to obtain a more complete series and the majority of 19thC newspapers were systematically microfilmed. In 1990 the National Library decided to suspend the program when about 1,450 rolls had been processed (which covered 19thC newspapers and some important 20thC newspapers) the master copies of which can be found at the Luis Arango Library. From that moment the two institutions continued microfilming independently and with different strategies. Whilst the Luis Arango contracts microfilming with external companies, the National Library has preferred to do it on its own for which it set up a modern microfilming laboratory in 1995. However, because of resource limitations progress has been slow. Since then a few rolls of 19thC newspapers have been microfilmed. As far as the Luis Ángel Arango Library is concerned, it is about to complete the microfilming of its own 19thC newspaper collection and now has more than 7000 rolls of newspapers microfilmed.

At the present moment, the National and Luis Ángel Arango libraries are in agreement to again develop a joint program. This program may complete the microfilming of all pre-1900 Colombian newspapers existing in their collections in a short period of time (before the end of

⁶ In foreign Archives and Libraries some new titles can be found. Some private Colombian collections found their way into university libraries in the United States, like Texas or Berkeley.

2005). The ideal thing would be to be able to coordinate the microfilming of titles that do not exist in Bogotá collections with the University of Antioquia.

To this day, the libraries have considered it right to continue using microfilming. However, some digitization programs of periodical collections are being developed. The Luis Arango is beginning the digitization of the most important cultural magazines from the 19thC. These magazines have a small format, usually smaller than A4 size, and can be processed on simple digitization equipment. The files will be kept on servers with access to researchers and in some cases will be put onto the net on the Luis Ángel Arango virtual website (www.lablaa.org). **El Mosaico** and the **Papel Periódico Ilustrado** will be the first two magazines to receive this treatment. It is worth mentioning that the main objective of this job is not conservation as the two publications I have mentioned have previously been microfilmed. Also, the Public Pilot Library, in cooperation with the University of Antioquia, will digitize some magazines from that region, for the Antioquia Virtual Library.

Catalogues and control lists: The three printed catalogues make up an interesting set. In all of them a real effort has been made to include the newspaper titles in the collections, but the design of the indexes is such that search results are useless or difficult to handle.

The Luis Ángel Arango catalogue is chronological. For this reason it includes an alphabetical index of the recorded titles. Surprisingly, the alphabetical index has been divided into two large groups, worked out from the way in which the newspapers are bound in the Library. The titles grouped into a series called *Periódicos Varios* are indexed separately from the rest. In this way, the user has to look for each title in two different places. Meanwhile, an index by place of publication was not done, which is obviously useful for readers. The index cards include the editor or director's names, as well as the number of copies in existence. Newspapers are also recorded under every year they appeared, which makes it very difficult to define which are unique titles and makes it necessary, in order to find out the number of copies of a newspaper, to look sometimes at scores of years. (To this of course is added the real problem of frequent changes of titles which undergo unexpected metamorphosis, to the cataloguer's despair: when there are very few copies and many are missing, it is not always possible to know if a similar title is a simple change or a new title.

The National Library catalogue was edited without any apparent order: it follows an approximately alphabetical order, but not systematic. Because of this they have had to publish a separate volume of records: alphabetical, chronological and geographical, referring the user to the detailed index cards. At least one of these indexes could have been avoided if the publication had followed one of these orders. The indexes are very complete: they often include the editors and they have a record of copies in existence. They also indicate whether there is a microfilm of the newspaper, but they do not say which of the master rolls are in the Library or which are at the Luis Ángel Arango. Although, sometimes they say that the microfilm is more complete than the actual collection, they never specify where the copies are that were used to complete the rolls: the most probable likelihood, although there may be exceptions, is that they are also from the Luis Ángel Arango.

The University of Antioquia's catalogue has an extensive introductory study on Colombian newspapers but it does not explain why the few pre-1840 titles were not included (or before 1828, as a few titles between 1828 and 1840 are recorded, which does not seem logical that those are all the collection has). The indexes are very complete and attempt not only to fulfill the librarians wishes but also those of historians and social researchers: they describe the newspaper's character (commercial, cultural, political, etc.) its political orientation, it shows who they debate with and they provide a very ample list of collaborators. This makes this document a very useful tool. However, no one seems to think about how the records should be: the publication of the indexes is alphabetical and indicates which page to go to to find it in the newspaper. The useful ones are an analytical index of material dealt with in the newspapers, an index of editors and collaborators and an index of mentioned places. Curiously, neither was it considered useful to compile a index by places the newspapers were edited in.

These are probably the last catalogues on paper of this kind that will be published. Library catalogues mean you can retrieve information from the files but they have not been developed in a systematic way that would allow integral retrieval of 19thC newspapers. For that, the researcher intending to examine newspapers from a city or those that were published in a specific period, needs comprehensive lists that can be consulted and transformed. Of course strict cataloguing rules could be applied that would allow these lists to be obtained from the OPAC but the retrospective effort required to standardize the records is very great. For this reason I see it fitting that a simple list controlling newspapers published in the country during the last century be developed, that can serve eventually as a basis for a wider catalogue. A list that simply records titles of newspapers, place where printed, printer, dates of publication, copies in existence in different libraries, copies on microfilm, editions and facsimiles in existence and full indexes of specific newspapers. To find solutions to ambiguities it would be a good idea to include, for some newspapers, the names of the editors as well as some other additional information.

The three current lists, in the three printed catalogues, produce titles that we could call ghosts because they are just variations of the original title. An inventory of unique titles, initially from the three libraries we have discussed, but that could be gradually extended to others, would give a more precise map of the world of journalism in the 19th century.

As an initial contribution towards this effort, this communication has as an appendage a draft copy of a "Control list of 19thC newspapers and magazines, which includes all existing records of the three main collections in the country, approximately 2,800 titles. This number will get smaller as duplications are eliminated. On finding new titles, titles that had disappeared or that have copies in other libraries or collections, it could also get larger. The future is just as much as full of uncertainties as was the past.

Jorge Orlando Melo, Bogotá, May 15th, 2004.