



## **Summary of the Media Dialogue Initiative**

### **Introduction**

This initiative was designed to promote debate and analysis among journalists, media directors, and editors from Colombia, Venezuela, and eventually from the United States. The Carter Center sponsored four meetings held between November 2010 and June 2011. Three of these meetings were bi-national events with the participation of Colombian and Venezuelan journalists, editors, and media directors, and the fourth meeting also included their counterparts from the United States.

The goal of these meetings was to provide a forum in which media professionals could reflect on the media's role in generating and promoting mutual understanding, in addition to helping forge and deepen the personal relationships and networks among them. Furthermore, the aim was for this type of exchange to help improve the quality of the information available to participating journalists on issues that create tension among the two countries, and to develop recommendations aimed at making sure that journalistic coverage helps to inform citizens instead of exacerbating circumstances due to politicized reporting.

Resumption of diplomatic relations on 10 August 2010 was regarded as an opportunity to enhance understanding between the two countries. Accordingly, the media, because they provide information to and play an important role in both societies, were considered important actors capable of promoting mutual understanding and, over the long term, of helping to impact the transformation of diplomatic relations.

### **Objectives and expected results**

The initiative focused on building a space for information exchange that would help achieve the following objectives and results:

#### **Objectives:**

- 1) Promote better understanding of the role of the media in relations between the countries involved
- 2) Promote more balanced coverage of issues that create tension between these countries.

## **Results:**

- 1) Deeper and better understanding among participants by establishing interpersonal relationships and professional networks.
- 2) Improved quality of information available to participants regarding issues that lead to tension.

## **Description of activities**

Summoned through a process involving several consultations were editors, media directors, and journalists from a variety of media outlets representing both the ruling party and the opposition in Venezuela, as well as representatives from a broad spectrum of opinions in Colombia. Prestigious scholars were also invited to each of these meetings.

### **1. The first Colombian – Venezuelan media dialogue**

This first meeting, held in Caracas in November 2010, dealt with two central themes: analysis and discussion of bilateral relations between the two countries and the coverage afforded by media to major bilateral issues in both countries. This meeting was designed to allow participants to exchange information, perspectives, and experiences through presentations and remarks made by experts.

Dialogue began among participants in an atmosphere of blatant mistrust. Heated discussion ignited over the relationship between the media, politics, and power in both countries. This discussion dealt with the role of journalism in building either a good or a bad bilateral relationship, and the most sensitive points of tension and crisis. Participants agreed that the vulnerability of relations between both countries was due to the vast influence of their presidents' personal popularity, involving intense disputes between them and coverage of bi-national issues often yielding to the influence of these personal attacks. There were differences among participants' views on the role of the media as to whether it should lean toward strengthening relations between these countries or concentrating chiefly on conveying reliably factual information.

Throughout these conversations it became evident that deeper understanding necessarily entailed analysis of past media coverage to thoroughly demonstrate the nature of its quality vis-à-vis major bi-national issues beyond "value judgments" and perceptions. Consequently, a decision was made to conduct an analysis of media coverage. It should be pointed out that the meeting succeeded in bringing together high-profile newspaper directors and editors from the private and public sector, even from opposing sectors within the same country, as in the case of Venezuela.

### **2. The second Colombian – Venezuelan media dialogue**

The second meeting was held in Bogotá in February 2011 and exchanges taking place there revolved around several issues, such as the role of journalists in representing reality, the relationship between information sources and quality of journalistic work, transformation of bilateral relations between the two countries, and coverage of situations in the border area.

Responding to a need expressed at the first meeting, this second meeting included representatives of various media outlets linked to the border areas between both countries. This participation opened up dialogue on considering the need to transform an approach markedly linked with decisions made in the capitals of both countries into a view more closely linked with the impact of confrontational relations on citizens living along the border. Regarding this issue, we should underscore the presence and eyewitness accounts of two media professionals from the border areas, which helped to broaden understanding of this issue.

### **3. The third Colombian - Venezuelan media dialogue**

The third meeting was held in May 2011 in the border city of Cúcuta, Colombia to analyze the reality along the border and media coverage in both countries. The nature of this meeting differed from prior meetings because of its thematic approach (the situation at the border) and because it actually took place within the social and geographical area being analyzed (the Colombian-Venezuelan border).

A local Venezuelan priest presented an overview of the difficult circumstances experienced by inhabitants of the Colombian-Venezuelan border, including those stemming from illegal fuel trafficking and urged participants to consider border problems in a comprehensive, humane fashion and not merely from the perspective of security and economics. The ensuing dialogue dealt with the quality of coverage regarding border issues and its consequences for inhabitants there.

The same day, as part of the agenda of activities, participants visited a community located along the border between Colombia and Venezuela. The visit served as a meeting place for journalists, scholars, and inhabitants, who expressed the need for entities in the region to maintain closer links to their own national media.

Journalists opened up a substantial discussion session on the issues covered, including suggestions and potential actions to improve the quality of journalistic coverage on issues of bi-national interest between Colombia and Venezuela.

### **4. The fourth media dialogue Colombian – United States - Venezuelan**

The trilateral media dialogue among journalists, editors, and newspaper directors from Colombia, the United States, and Venezuela was held in Atlanta, Georgia in June 2011. This meeting was the result of the group's conversations on the importance of dealing with the triangulation that frequently affects U.S.-Venezuelan-Colombian relations and sought to offer an opportunity for prominent journalists, editors, and media directors to share information on features of trilateral media coverage. The meeting lasted two days and alternated between presentations, commentaries, and dialogue among participants.

This meeting began with presentations made by three foreign policy experts from Venezuela, Colombia, and the U.S., all focusing on the “triangulation” of relations between these three countries, describing how this phenomenon came about, how it is undergoing modifications, and the potential risk of recurrence. As part of this panel, a journalist from each of these three countries commented on the presentation based on his/her own experience and knowledge. This

was followed by dialogue among all participants.

On day two the focus was on analysis of the characteristics of trilateral media coverage and the factors, dilemmas, and limitations influencing it. The Carter Center shared with participants the results of a content analysis it conducted on the media coverage of major issues on the bi-national agenda between Colombia and Venezuela. Approaches to performing this type of analysis were also jointly examined in order to guarantee the availability of balanced information to citizens.